



HEEDING THE WARNINGS OF HEBREWS

Second Warning: Don't Doubt The Word!

Dr. Deane J. Woods

The sentence remains with me, as if it were spoken yesterday:

"Students, the heart of the problem can always be traced back to the problem of the heart!"

These memorable words were spoken by one of Australia's finest - my beloved principal, lecturer, mentor and friend, Dr. E.G. Gibson.

'Ted' (or 'Doc' as he was affectionately known amongst those closest to him), was encouraging his protégés in one of his stimulating, well-attended Theology classes. Holding his Bible high above the lectern, this doyen of Australian evangelical scholarship, Church leadership and Christian education continued:

Never doubt the Scriptures! They are God-breathed. These canonical writings are forever the criterion of truth, for they bear witness to Him who is Truth, Jesus Christ our Lord. Neither man's mind - sullied by the Fall - nor the consensus of modern scholarship must ever usurp the high place of Scripture. God's Word is the final court of appeal in all matters of faith and practice!

Illustrating his point further, the renowned academic shared his broken pastoral heart concerning the sorry outcomes of believers who started well in their Christian walk, but who sadly had gotten sidetracked along the way through 'drifting' from the Scriptures.

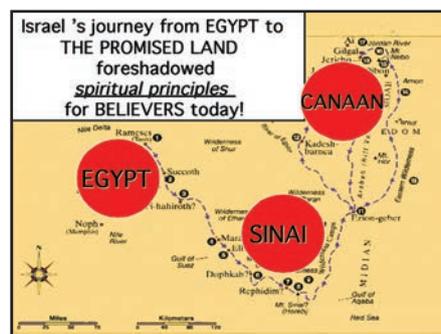
"Once you start down the road of 'drifting' from God's Word", he opined, "the next steps are inevitable: you begin to 'doubt' it and then you 'disobey' it!"

In Hebrews chapters three and four, this same problematic issue of 'doubting' is addressed. It follows the First (exhortatory)⁽¹⁾ Warning in relation to 'drifting' from God's Word in 2:1-4. The specific text relative to 'doubting' God and His promises stated it in these terms:

*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of **unbelief** in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.* (Heb. 3:12-13, emphases added).

The author is here applying a spiritual principle taken from the illustrative history of the Children of Israel.

Redeemed out of the bondage of Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12), they rebelled in the wilderness of Sinai and 'hardened their hearts' (Heb. 3:8, 15; 4:7). They failed the



test of faith at Kadesh Barnea (Cf. Num. 13-14) with the result that God's judgement came upon them, both temporally and spiritually:

*"So we see that they could not enter in (to the Promised Land) because of **unbelief**".* (Heb. 3:19, emphasis added).

What exactly is this Second (exhortatory) Warning in Hebrews 3:1-4:16 saying? Simply this:

As co-sharers with the Apostle and High Priest of their confession, Christ Jesus (the Head of God's Household), believers must acquire their 'salvation rest' by a persevering faith!

The writer⁽²⁾ of this exhortatory epistle (Cf. 13:22) urged his Jewish believer audience to avoid the

pitfall of Israel's disbelief. They doubted God. They doubted His promises. Consequently, they sinned through disobedience and failed to enter His "rest". He wanted his believing compatriots to go on to maturity (6:2) in the Messiah rather than return to the foreshadowing rituals⁽³⁾ of Judaism, now fulfilled in Him.⁽⁴⁾

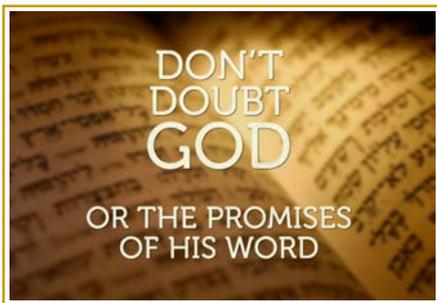
Three exhortations are therefore given to all spiritual Pilgrims to enable them to acquire their 'salvation rest': **(1) LET US TAKE HEED (3:12) ... (2) LET US FEAR (4:1) ... (3) LET US BE DILIGENT (4:11)**

What a treasure trove of blessing awaited these second generation Hebrew believers⁽⁵⁾ if they would but learn from their forefathers' history and heed these exhortatory words. The same is true for believers today as they refuse to doubt God's Word and by faith appropriate the spiritual principles regarding 'rest' revealed in this meaty⁽⁶⁾ portion of Scripture.

LET US TAKE HEED

The word used in Hebrews 3:12 in the original Greek text underscores the thought of 'Beware!' (so, in NKJV, in the sense of 'be on the look out', or 'keep awake ...'. The question then becomes: *Beware of what?* Verses seven to eleven give the answer. Believers are to look back at Israel's redemption story out of Egypt and learn spiritual lessons from it. God's will for His people was to 'Go on! Get Out! and Get in!' (Cf. Deut.6:23), but only two (Joshua and Caleb) of an estimated two million redeemed Israelites experienced the fullness of their inheritance of 'rest' in Canaan. No wonder God was not pleased with the majority (cf. 1 Cor. 10:3-5)! The message is abundantly clear: 'Beware' of the sad history of Israel's "doubting God's promises" and "disbelieving" His Word.

The Children of Israel had been redeemed, saved by the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12), they saw His "work" for a generation, but



they did not know His **“ways”** (Heb. 3:9-10 which quoted Psalm 95:7,9). They “wandered in the wilderness” mumbling and grumbling – a veritable ‘funeral train’ in the desert, defeated and headed for temporal judgment in death (3:17). No wonder God swore in His wrath that they would not enter into His **“rest”**! (Heb.3:11).

Twice here, the author said that they failed to demonstrate faith in their utterly dependable God. Instead, they evidenced “disobedience” (Heb. 4:6,11). What a sad and sorry example for us all (Heb. 4:11).

As the word for “disobedience” in the original text connotes, they were *“not persuaded”*. These redeemed Israelites were of two minds – their way *versus* God’s way. Theirs was the way of doubt and its life-style manifestation – disobedience. God’s was the way of faith and obedience. Their self-centred choices led to inevitable temporal and spiritual consequences. They died in Sinai’s wilderness! They didn’t get into Canaan! They didn’t experience God’s intended rest! We need to note this well: By God’s gracious, redemptive provision, they were out of Egypt, but ‘Egypt’ was not out of them! Their thought processes were dominated by the pleasures of the ‘old life’. (Cf. Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:22). Their testimony was one of “(remembering) the fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic” (Num. 11:5). Ian Thomas put it this way: “Fish – in the desert? Imagine that! Cucumbers – twelve inches of indigestion! Melons – 95% water and 5% pips!; Leeks, onions and garlic – things that speak for themselves!”⁽⁷⁾

So there is a lesson for all believers here. We must ‘take heed’ of Israel’s sad history of ‘doubting’ God and His promises. It is all too easy to succumb to this same sin of unbelief. Furthermore, we must always remember that sin is deceitful (3:12-13). It robs the believer of God’s joyous, victorious **“rest”**. My discipler – now with the Lord – was right: **The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart!**

Having seen what God **does say** on the matter, a timely note of warning needs to be sounded regarding what these words **do NOT say**. That only Joshua and Caleb entered the Promised Land as against the vast majority whose “bodies were strewn in the wilderness”⁽⁸⁾ does not allow

the conclusion that a saved believer can be ‘lost’. On the contrary: Scripture is certain on that fact – *once saved, always saved!*⁽⁹⁾ We need to note the words used here very carefully. The text says: “... lest there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief **in departing from the living God.**”. The expression “in departing from ...” in the Greek means literally to “stand back from” the living God. That is, a redeemed believer can “stand back from” [walking] with God. To use the transliterated form and meaning of the word, he can **“apostatize”!** This is to be understood in the sense that he can be out of fellowship with God, but his ultimate relationship with God eternally is not thereby jeopardized. How come? Because, ultimately, one’s salvation is based solely on the finished work of Christ! Salvation is of the Lord (Ps. 3:8; Cf. Jn.4:22) and is a free gift. It becomes personally operative on the basis of the gift of faith alone. It can never be lost if one is genuinely born again. How could a believer ever be unborn? Rewards, however, are gained. ‘Works, words and ways’ faithfully exercised in God’s way of faith will be rewarded, eternally. By the same token, they can be lost through faithlessness and consequent disobedience to God in this life. Remember Saul? He lost his crown (and the kingdom) through disobedience! (1 Sam 15:22; Cf. Rev. 3:11) And what shall we say about the factious Corinthian believers referred to in 1 Corinthians 11:30 (“For this reason many of you are sick and some have died”), or the searching words of the apostle John in 1 John 5:16b: “There is a sin (leading) to death ...”?

Now Hebrews revealed this truth in terms of the possibility of believers not sharing their inheritance “in the Kingdom” when the Lord returns to rule the “world to come” (Cf. Heb. 2:5 and compare 1:8-12; 12:25-19, noting 10:23). Fellow Pilgrims: “There remains therefore a (Sabbath) rest for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9)! As chapter four, verse one will go on to state, we should “*fear lest God’s promise having been left for us, any of (us) should seem to come short of it!*”

So what specific way of God did our author stipulate for his readership, if they are to avoid losing their reward? They must exercise one of His spiritual principles: “*exhort one another*”. What a practical application! Believers are to encourage their fellow travelers – spiritually, and by implication, practically. It must be done continually for the text says: ‘daily’, and the verb used is in the present imperative tense implying “... keep on doing this!”⁽¹¹⁾ The day of opportunity is presently before us. Therefore, keep up the good work of edification and encouragement in this present day of grace at every opportunity, at all times! A personal word, a phone call, a card, or an email is all that it takes. Do we do it?

Our author has given the reason why this particular way of God must be appropriated. He said in Hebrews 3:1a that we have become “partakers” or “companions” or “co-sharers with” the Christ, The Messiah. He is the “Apostle and High Priest of our confession”. (Heb. 3:1b). Now in verse fourteen, he repeated the term and stated that this is so “*if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end*”. Is the issue of eternal salvation – the security of the believer – again under question? On the surface, it may seem so. Some commentators have made much of this ‘conditional’ aspect as if one can remain saved only as long as he believes. However, the original text does not allow this interpretation. Notice the words carefully: “For **we have become** partakers of Christ, **if ...**”. Advocates who argue that a believer can lose his salvation, do so by stressing the “*if*” clause as it occurs *in English*. But when the whole sentence is understood from the Greek text, no such view is warranted. The word for “*if*”⁽¹²⁾ here is a special term used with a verb in the Subjunctive Mood in what grammarians call “a Third Class Condition – Future More Probable construction”⁽¹³⁾. It connotes an expected positive outcome. The point is clear. The author trusted his readership to appropriate exactly what he is exhorting

them to do: **trust and obey God’s promises** and so become the beneficiary of God’s promised blessings – now and in the future! To do so would see God’s Word being effectual. They will not “*harden their hearts*” (as their forefathers did!) while it is said “Today” (verse 15) for they would persevere in their faith “*to the end*”. Thus, **on-going, persevering faith on the part of believers would be the means of acquiring their “salvation rest”.**

LET US FEAR

Based on what he has just said, the author next proceeded to apply his exhortation. He wrote:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.

For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.



For we who have believed do enter that rest
... (Hebrews 4:1-3)

What does all this mean? First, God's promise is that of **rest**. Second, those who have believed do, in fact, enter that **rest**. Third, it is possible for believers "to have come short of it". Fourth, the word of promise by which the reality of entering into this **rest** can become ("unprofitable") – that is, nullified so as to become ineffectual. Fifth, this latter aspect is caused when the truth of God's promise is "not mixed with faith".

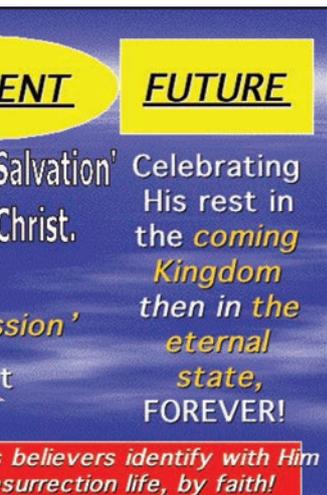
Without a clear understanding of what our author meant by "entering His rest", neither his original readership nor believers today would have caught the impact of his exhortatory appeal. There are three nuances of "rest" here. They relate to past, present and future aspects of the term. Observe *two* associated, though entirely different nuances as he used the Greek word "katapausis" (**'rest'**), as in putting down heavy baggage that was being carried, on nine separate occasions

in this passage⁽¹⁴⁾. A *third* allied, though equally separate concept is added by using an entirely different word for **rest** in verse 9. That word is "sabbatismos" ('sabbath rest') and – note it well! – is found only here in the New Testament!

Understood aright, these three inter-related and inter-dependent facets

of **rest** (and their subcategories) clarify what it means to be a Christian and at the same time motivates believers to faithfulness to the Lord and His ways right now, and in the end, to share as His companions in the coming Kingdom!

Consider the enclosed graphic carefully. **Rest** for the believer in its past, present and future aspects. In the past, God rested from His works "on the seventh day" (cf. Heb. 4:4). This was His 'sabbath rest'. His "works were finished from the foundation of the world" (verse 3c). But did Israel enter into this **rest**? The author told us that they did not because of their doubt. God's promises were not believed as they journeyed to the Land of Promise. As a result, God swore in His wrath that they would not enter in to His **rest** (verse 3b). Canaan's rest was available to them, but only two (Joshua and Caleb) literally entered into it. Moreover, "those to whom (this message) was first preached did not enter in to that rest" because of disobedience, though



"some" did (verse 6). Interestingly, the text stated that Joshua did not enable Israel to enter in to it (verse 8). Further, of what did David speak when he later wrote, "Today" ... if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts"? (verse 7). The next two columns in our diagram show the answer!

In the second column, you will notice that believers have entered their 'salvation rest' in Christ. They have trusted in His complete, efficacious, once-for-all finished work on the Cross. All those who have believed have entered into the *positional* reality of a sins-forgiven, saved-forever relationship with God. They have been reconciled to Him through the atoning blood of Christ, Israel's Messiah. As verse ten said: "For he who has entered His rest has himself ceased from his works as God did from His". This is eternal rest, indeed! As Augustus Toplady expressed it in that memorable hymn, *Rock of Ages*:

Nothing in my hands I bring
Simply to Thy Cross I cling
Foul, I to the Fountain fly,
Wash me Saviour, or I die.

Based on that salvific work of our Lord Jesus Christ at Calvary, believers are to continually *submit to His Lordship* in their daily walk with Him. This 'submission rest' best describes the lot of those believers who, in identification with His death, burial and resurrection, enter in to the **rest** He gives in life's daily experiences. That is, they thankfully and rejoicingly participate in the "trench-warfare" spiritual victories the risen Lord gives in the every day walk with Him. By "abiding" in Him, they "abound unto every good work" in Him as they exhibit the "saving life of Christ"⁽¹⁵⁾. He enables His companions to experience His rest daily as by faith, they allow Him to live His resurrection life through them. In this manner they "grow in grace and in the knowledge of their Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) as they "go on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1ff) and manifest growing Christ-likeness (2 Cor. 3:18 – 4:6). Daniel Whittle summed up all these truths in his life-changing hymn, *Dying With Jesus*:

Dying with Jesus a death reckoned mine,
Living with Jesus a new life divine
Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine
Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.
Refrain:
Moment by moment I'm kept in His love,
Moment by moment, I've life from above,
Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine
Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.

The third aspect of **rest** connotes the future aspects of the believer's salvation. They remain in prospect as the fulfillment of God's promised Word. Our author puts it in these terms:

There remains there a rest for the people of God! (Hebrews 4:9)

It must be remembered that the author of Hebrews **always** uses the term for 'salvation' (Greek: *soteria*) with the understanding of its **future** aspect⁽¹⁶⁾. What he refers to in chapter 4, verse 9 is therefore the 'future rest' reserved as the 'inheritance' for believers in the coming Kingdom and then in the Eternal State, forever! No wonder he went on further to say in what some scholars have described as the "Key Verse" in Hebrews:

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Emphasis added)

All this obviously leads to the third and final exhortation relative to not doubting God's Word.

LET US BE DILIGENT

Read the text of Hebrews 4:12 carefully. Meditate upon it prayerfully. May we all apply the exhortation, personally:

"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience." (Hebrews 4:11 – emphasis added)

These words exhort us strongly to make every effort in the enduring pursuit ensuring we will enter in to that **rest** God has promised. We must leave no stone unturned in order that we will experience the yet-to-be realized 'inheritance' that God has promised **faithful** believers. Ours is the responsibility to avoid everything that would cause us to "drift" from God's precepts, "doubt" His promises or "disobey" His principles. To do so is to "fall"⁽¹⁷⁾ – not in the sense of losing salvation – but "falling" (short) of all that God is and all that God promises, now and in the ages to come.

Do you identify with the words of Jean Piggot's song?

Jesus! I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.
Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee,
And Thy beauty fills my soul,
For, by Thy transforming power,
Thou hast made me whole.
Refrain



Jesus! I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.

Let us be diligent in such matters as: First, there is a danger in being deluded into believing that this God of the Bible is the God of love and could not bring temporal judgment on His disobedient people. Always remember that He is a just, holy and righteous God whose immutable attributes are never inconsistent with each other. Secondly, it must be remembered that the God of the Bible is the God who will judge *all believers* works, words and ways at the Bema Judgment Seat (1 Cor. 3:10-16; 2 Cor. 5:9-10), and *all unbelievers* at a different place and at a different time – the Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). How sad is the fact that believers can lose their rewards in eternity, though still being “saved so as through fire” (1 Cor. 10:15b). Rewards can be lost because of doubting God and His Word and therefore to live in this life, disobediently!

The Warning Passage ends with the reason why the readership then, and us today, must acknowledge the “word of God”. It is “*powerful and sharper than any two edged sword.*” It can “*pierce even to the division of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*” (Heb. 4:12). Once again, Doc Gibson’s insightful words resound in our ears: “**Students, the heart of the problem can always be traced back to the problem of the heart!**” It is only by His Word that we can discern spiritual and moral truth in the most fundamental way. Nothing will escape God’s all searching eye in the final analysis, for every one is ultimately accountable to Him! (verse 13).

Realizing that we have a compassionate High Priest who has conquered all and passed through the heavens, we should therefore “*hold fast our confession*” and in time of need (when the temptation is to doubt God’s Word), “come boldly to the throne of grace that we may find mercy and grace that will help us “in the nick of time”!

To be sure, the Second (exhortatory) Warning passage of Hebrews is like a Box Car freighted with golden nuggets of spiritual truth. May we understand and appropriate its eternal message which we have summarized in this way:

As co-sharers with the Apostle and High Priest of their confession, Christ Jesus (the Head of God’s Household), believers must acquire their ‘salvation rest’ by a persevering faith!

To put it even more simply and directly:
DON’T MISS THE KINGDOM REST!



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ENDNOTES

1. The inclusion of the word “exhortatory” is deliberate. In Hebrews 13:22 we read that the author intended his epistle to be understood in this way, for he said that it was a “brief exhortation”. The five “Warning Passages” (2:1-4; 3:1-4:16; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-39 and 12:14-29) are to be therefore read in this vein.
2. The authorship of Hebrews has been debated over the centuries. Some argue for Pauline authorship (so the KJV); Luther thought it was Apollos; Hodges suggested Barnabas, one of Paul’s missionary companions. Such was the debate in the early centuries that one of the Early Church Fathers wrote: “God alone knows who wrote (Hebrews)”. Whoever it was is not our main concern in this series of articles. The main point is to expound the sacred text of Scripture!
3. Note chapters 8 and 9 in this regard, esp. 8:4ff.
4. See Hebrews 9:23-28
5. Refer to Hebrews 2:3-4 where this is implicitly stated.
6. In this regard, consider the author’s sentiment expressed in Hebrews 5:12.
7. Major Ian Thomas, *The Saving Life of Christ*, p.27.
8. So the Greek word *katestrothesan* in 1 Corinthians 10:5 literally implies.
9. Consider such passages as Jn. 6:37; 10:29f; Rom. 8, esp. vss. 1-17, 31-39; Hebrews 6:13-20, to cite just a few that justifies this claim.
10. The Greek word used here is *sabbatismos*. Significantly in this context, this is the only occasion where the term is used in the New Testament!
11. Note the form of the verb, ‘exhort’: *parakaleite*
12. The word is “*eanper*” in Greek, and is followed by a verb in the Subjunctive Mood. The term for “if” in Greek is more regularly “*ei*” or “*ean*”.
13. There are four categories of Conditional sentences in Greek: First Class (which assumes the condition as true [for the sake of the argument] [Cf. 1 Cor. 9:11]; Second Class (a condition that is contrary to fact [Cf. 1 Cor. 2:8]); Third Class (which has two forms: a. Present General and b. Future More Probable – as used here in Hebrews 3:14) and Fourth Class (meaning Future less Probable. Cf. 1 Pet. 3:14). It is rare in the New Testament
14. See Hebrews 3:18; 4:1,3 (bis),4,5,8,10 and 11.
15. This expression is the title of Major Ian Thomas’ book, referred to above in note 7.
16. Consider carefully the occasions where “salvation” (Greek: *soteria*) is used in Hebrews: 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9 and 9:28. All refer to the future aspect of God’s deliverance for His people.
17. This word is used in Hebrews 3:17 relative to the Israelites in the desert and in 4:11 where it referred to the possibility of believers who in not applying what the author has been warning will also emulate their Hebrew counterparts.

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