

“OUR HOPE: JESUS LEADS US IN”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 3:7-4:1

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "Today if you hear His voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw My works for forty years. ¹⁰Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know My ways.' ¹¹As I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

¹²Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end, ¹⁵while it is said, "Today when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

¹⁶For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, were not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. ^{4:1}Therefore, while the promise of entering His rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it.

Have you ever wished you could have heard one of the great apostles preach? Someone like Peter, or John, or Paul? If so, Hebrews, which begins like a sermon and ends like a letter, offers a superb specimen of first-century preaching. Even though we can't say as an absolute certainty who wrote this book, one thing is sure: he was a magnificent pulpiteer.

He gives us an excellent example of the kind of sermon first-century Christians heard when they went to church. He begins by accentuating the authority of scripture. He has no competence to speak in and of himself. The text he is about to tackle was spoken by the Holy Spirit (3:7).

Next, he reveals himself to be a Bible preacher. The authority with which he speaks is derived from the authority of scripture about which he speaks. He realizes what his hearers need is not the word of men but the word of God. So, he takes a text. In this instance, it is from the ninety-fifth Psalm.

Using this particular Old Testament passage in this church setting, he reveals something else about his pulpit ability and understanding: he is aware of the importance of instant identification with his hearers. Being Jews, his people immediately recognize the incident to which the ninety-fifth Psalm refers. By drawing upon their background and tradition for illustrations, he's able to catch and keep their interest.

This is a device all Jesus folk should master. The most effective sermon is that in which one man is the preacher and one man is the audience. We would all benefit from using this approach to personal witnessing. If we can use illustrative material out of the background of the person to whom we're witnessing, we will be more effective.

Some years ago I was in Augusta, Maine, leading a horse and buggy version of what is now called Project Winsome: a national training program designed to help laymen more effectively communicate their faith. A Winsome Way to Win Someone.

When we arrived at the home of the man upon whom we were to call, my partner and I found him busily remodeling his house. He was hot and sweaty. Tired. Happy to have us call. It gave him a good reason to sit in his rocking chair for a few moments of rest.

Now, there are three things involved in making a decision for Christ. One, a realization of spiritual need. Two, a belief that Jesus Christ can satisfy that need. Three, a willingness to let Him do it. With the first two steps the man had no problem. He realized he was a sinner. He believed Jesus was the Savior. But he was having difficulty letting Jesus into his heart.

I was led by the Spirit to point out that when he decided to remodel his home, he needed certain kinds of building materials. He readily agreed. Obviously, he had found a lumber company which was happy to supply his building material needs. This he also acknowledged. However, I reminded him, until he made a decision, picked up the telephone, called the lumber yard and said, “Send me so many two-by-fours and a dozen sheets of wall paneling,” their ability to meet his obvious need would be frustrated.

“You could sit in your rocking chair and rock till your house fell down,” I continued, “and though you had a need they were qualified to satisfy, the need would go unmet because you failed to let them do for you what they were equipped to do.”

“The same thing is true in becoming a Christian,” I added. “You have a spiritual need. You believe Christ can satisfy it. But nothing will happen until you decide to let Him be your Savior. In fact, sir, realizing your need, and believing Christ can satisfy it, you can sit in your rocking chair and rock until you die. But unless you decide for Christ, you’ll die and go straight to hell!” I’ll never forget his reaction. Throughout the entire conversation he had kept the rocking chair in motion. When he saw the spiritual application of the lumber yard illustration, he suddenly stopped rocking, looked me in the eye, and said with great earnestness of heart, “Dr. John, tell me what to do. I want to put in my order for Jesus right now!”

It was a great moment. He experienced a glorious conversion. People had been calling on him for years. He had admitted his need and his belief in Christ. But, he always pled for more time to think about it. On this particular occasion, the Holy Spirit used an illustration out of his own situation to help him see he could no longer enjoy the luxury of delay.

Get the Message Clearly

The preacher to the Hebrews was a master in the art of reaching back into the history and tradition of his people for illustrations. In chapter 1, he did so by referring to the prophets and

angels. Later, by mentioning the law and Moses. Now he does it by referring to the Israelites' failure to claim the promised land, as we'll see in a moment.

Furthermore, he demonstrates keen sensitivity to the anxieties, preconceptions, prejudices and apprehensions of his people. He doesn't try to bludgeon them into agreeing with him, even though he has the knowledge to do so. Instead, he meets them where they are, in order to expand their spiritual understanding. By acknowledging the Holy Spirit to be the author of the ninety-fifth Psalm -- part of the Old Testament they dearly loved and upon which they were reared -- he builds a bomb shelter, defusing their anxiety so they can better hear what he has to say.

When he gets into the body of his sermon, as we shall see, he gives his audience a combination of timeless truths and present-day applications. He makes great statements of fact which have stood the test of time and are as true in one period of history as another. But he is not content to stop there. He insists upon showing the relevance of those truths. This is a preacher who is not satisfied to merely proclaim Bible facts, however true those facts may be. He insists upon what I call the “so what?” element of preaching. How does this affect me, preacher? In my situation? Where I live, work or play? So, he's careful to include a number of present day applications.

You see, the purpose of preaching is not to denounce sinners, but to announce God's deliverance from their sin! Lots of churchgoers feel they have not been preached to unless they have been preached at. They go to church for a kind of verbal spanking. Unless the pastor fans the fires of hell and holds their toes to the flames, they feel they've been deprived.

There are a number of reasons for this kind of attitude, not the least of which is many people are psychic masochists. They have a subconscious need to be punished. If they have a preacher who is a sadist and subconsciously went into the ministry to satisfy his need to punish, you've got quite a match. A sadist in the pulpit and masochists in the pews! And it's sick!

The element of judgment is real. But, if you read your Bible correctly, you'll see it is never

judgment for judgment's sake. It is always judgment meted in love!.

A preacher was fired from his pulpit because he constantly told people they were going to hell. They secured a new preacher and the people loved him. When asked what the new preacher talked about, a member of the congregation said, "He tells us we're going to hell." "What's the difference? Didn't your other preacher do the same?" "Yes," came the answer, "but the first fellow sounded as if he enjoyed it. When this pastor talks that way, we know it's coming from a broken heart."

One night I heard a most gifted preacher speak on hell. It was a stirring sermon. But right in the middle he stopped and said, "Boy, am I enjoying this!" I thought to myself, that's sick! How any man could enjoy preaching on hell is beyond my comprehension. In twenty-five years I've preached on hell twice. Each time I did so with an aching heart.

Jesus said He had come to proclaim good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives. He didn't deny the fact they were poor. Or that they were captives. They had real needs. But His emphasis was upon deliverance. And He commissioned His disciples to do the same.

The gospel is Good News! That's what the world is longing to hear. Only real neurotics go out of their way to hear bad news. It's the Christian's joyful job to proclaim deliverance from sin, not to denounce sinners. That's what the beloved pastor to the Hebrew Christians does: he proclaims good news about Jesus, the deliverer!

Now, I've taken time to write about this man as a preacher because all Jesus folk preach in one way or other. All of us are communicators. As Christians, we should be thought of as Good News folk. Not denouncing sinners, but announcing deliverance from their sin. Doing so with enthusiasm and joy.

Our author's mention of Moses (3:1-6) illustrates the deadly danger confronting Christians who

wander in the wilderness of spiritual immaturity, failing to claim the inheritance which is theirs in Christ. To drive home his point, he quotes from the ninety-fifth Psalm, which reads, “*Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness. When your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. For forty years I loathed that generation, and said, “They are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways.” Therefore I swore in My anger, “Truly they shall not enter into My rest”* (Psalm 95:7-11).

These four and a half verses from Psalm 95 (quoted in Hebrews 3) link together two incidents out of the wilderness wanderings of the ancient Israelites. The first, the water from the rock incident, is found in Exodus 17. If possible, take time to read verses 1-7. I want you to see the sweep of scripture and gain the hope which comes from realizing God has been at work from the very beginning, is at work today, and will go on working until history closes.

The Israelites were in the wilderness. Running short of water, they were getting uptight. They bitterly attacked Moses for leading them out of Egypt, where at least they had enough water to drink. Because of the bitterness of their attack against Moses, who was God’s man and stood for God in that congregation, the place of their rebellion was called Meribah (meaning “provocation”), or Massah (“temptation”). This is the historical background to the mention of “*the trial in the wilderness*” (Hebrews 3:8), and the provocation (3:15), when the people of Israel “hardened their hearts. . .and tempted (God)” (3:8,9).

The second incident is from Numbers 13:1 through 14:32. The children of Israel reached the border of Canaan. They sent twelve spies to case the countryside. After a good hike through the promised land, they came back with plenty of evidence proving it to be a land “*flowing with milk and honey*” (Numbers 13:27). But it was populated by “giants” ten of the twelve spies reported. They made us look like “*grasshoppers*” (Numbers 13: 32,33). There isn’t a chance in the world Israel can claim her inheritance, they said.

Once again, the people rebelled against their leader and sighed for the security of Egypt. Despite assurances and appeals as to God’s loving protection and leadership, they refused to go forward. As a result, they perished in the wilderness.

Now, these are not the only occasions when the chosen people tempted God. Or tried to see how far they could push Him. They are selected examples of the kind of mind-set or attitude of distrust and disobedience which turned the children of Israel into spiritual dropouts.

Don’t repeat their mistakes, the writer of Hebrews infers. Don’t fail to trust and obey God. Don’t be like that whole generation of the Jews who, on their way to the homeland -- headed for rest and fulfillment -- were waylaid by fear, inferiority feelings, guilt, and hostility, perishing short of the blessings God had planned for them.

What a pathetic sight the wilderness wanderers paint on the easel of our mind! Here were the people of God. His chosen children! Those to whom God had given tremendous promises. Wearily wandering in the wilderness. Hopeless and homeless. Falling one by one. Doomed to die in the desert. Their bodies buried in unmarked graves. Their bones bleached white by the desert sun. How sad! How terribly, terribly sad!

Don’t Miss the Application

Based on Israel’s mistakes, this writer to the Hebrews tells his fellow Christians: there’s a promised land awaiting you. It’s a land of blessing in the here and now. It’s a land of reward in the future. Don’t blow it because of fear born of faithlessness. Don’t lose it because of guilt born of sinfulness. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey!” Believe God’s promises. Act upon them. Trust Jesus, not only to lead you out of your Egypt, but into your Canaan, with all the blessing God has for you.

What are the present-day applications we might draw from this passage, lessons as meaningful to us as to those folk to whom the book of Hebrews was first written? I came up with ten.

I. There Is A Canaan For Contemporary Christians.

“*While the promise of entering His rest remains, let’s be on guard lest we lose it as they did*” (4:1 paraphrase). Using Old Testament language, and applying it to our Christian experience, we can say the Christian life is a new and better Exodus. Led by a new and mightier Moses. Jesus Christ! Through whom a new and sweeter relationship has been formed. The relationship existing between Christ and his bride. The church!

Under the guidance of Jesus, the Christian’s great deliverer, a new and better journey has begun. Toward a new and grander land of promise, the Canaan of abundant living, here and now. For, God not only wants His children out of the Egypt of sin; He wants them in the Canaan of abundant living.

And it isn’t a long way! From Horeb, where the Israelites began, to Kadesh-barnea on the border of the land of Canaan, was an eleven-day journey (Deuteronomy 1:2). A symbolic way of saying the abundant life is not all that difficult. It isn’t far from Egypt to Canaan. There is a wilderness to cross, but we have God’s promise of safe passage if we trust and obey.

2. The Christian Life Is A Walk And Not A Stand.

From time to time I talk to people who are concerned about their standing in Christ. They wonder whether or not they’re saved and bound for heaven. Frankly, once we’ve received Jesus as Savior we should forget about our standing, and concentrate on our walk! Some Christians are so concerned about their standing, they do nothing but stand! They’re still standing in the same place they’ve been standing in for the past five, ten, fifteen or twenty years. But the Christian life is not a stand, it’s a walk!

The Israelites were out of Egypt. They were safe. But they were not in Canaan! Like a lot of contemporary saved-sinners, they were “saved,” but unsatisfied. They had lost sight of their objective: to claim the promised land. That could only happen if they stopped standing and

started walking! Whenever one is learning to walk he's bound to stumble. Don't be defeated or surprised if it happens to you. God isn't! He knows the ease with which new as well as seasoned walkers trip and fall.

A while back I watched a highly competitive track meet involving former and potential Olympic stars. In several of these events seasoned athletes stumbled and lost their stride. One world champion actually fell in the middle of his race. What happens in the field of athletics can happen in the Christian life. Seasoned saints can and do stumble. I don't claim to be a seasoned saint, but I stumble. I've stumbled in the past. I stumble now. I'll stumble in the future.

Satan is the super-adversary. His timing and technique are flawless. He knows the precise periods and areas of our vulnerability. But, while he may knock us down, he need not knock us out! There's hope and help in Jesus, who not only leads us out of Egypt, but if we'll let Him, leads us into Canaan.

3. There's A Difference Between Falling Down And Staying Down.

The reason the Israelites failed to reach the promised land is because they became habitually distrustful and disobedient. They were always going astray in their hearts (3:10). What's more, knowing their vulnerability to stumbling, to being tripped up by sin, they didn't do their spiritual homework. “*They did not know (His) ways*” (3:10).

Over in Leviticus 4-6, we have what I call the “broken record” theme. Notice the many times it says, “*and he shall be forgiven.*” Over and over again that theme is repeated. It begins in Leviticus 4 when the priest is told to bring a bull without blemish as an offering for the people's sin. That's an expensive offering. But as you read along, you discover an amazing thing. Because atonement is for our sake, not God's, the grace of God accommodates itself to the circumstances of the sinner.

As individual factors dictate, the offering is graded down. It begins with a bull without blemish. If the person in question does not own a bull, he can bring a male goat. If he can't afford a male

goat, a female goat will do. Or a lamb. On and on the downgrading of the value of the offering goes, until at long last, if the person is too poor to bring two pigeons or two turtle doves, all he needs is a tenth of an ephah of flour, which is a bit more than a handful.

From the very beginning God, who opposes sin, has been on the side of sinners! He is concerned about our salvation. He doesn't make it hard to be saved. To come to terms with Him. To find atonement. To be at one with Him. His grace accommodates the last and the least of the lost, until finally we discover we don't even need two turtle doves! Or a handful of flour! All we need is Jesus!

This is the message the writer of Hebrews is trying to nail down for his fellow Jewish Christians. In essence he says: don't make the mistake of your forefathers who fell in sin and were satisfied to stay there. There's a difference between falling down and staying down. Don't be like them and fail to know the way of God which leads to forgiveness and cleansing. He has made a provision for your stumbling. That provision is Jesus only. Not Jesus plus two turtle doves here, or a foreskin there. In Christ you are liberated forever from any contemporary counterpart to the old sacrificial system. Or circumcision. Or other provision. There's a Canaan for sinner-saints today. You can gain it through a walk with Christ. And, if you stumble in the walk, stand up and start again.

4. Do It Yourself Religion Is Doomed To Failure From The Very Start.

“So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief” (3:19). The problem of the Israelites was faith-less-ness. Because of their unbelief, they were unable to function. They were actually incapable of operating at a level anywhere near their full capacity.

Whether their distrust led to disobedience, as some commentators say, or disobedience led to distrust, as others argue, is irrelevant. The result is the same: incapacitation! These people became spiritual, emotional, even physical cripples. “*They could not go in*” (3:19 paraphrase). Perhaps it was due to fear born of faithlessness. Or guilt born of sinfulness. Or a combination of

both. In any case, they were crippled.

Similarly, because of unresolved guilt, there are cripples today. They are failing vocationally. In their marriages. In their relationships with other people. In their personal lives. Mark it down: sin in any form vitiates the human spirit. It makes us incapable of being and doing all we should.

It was not an arbitrary or capricious act on God's part that kept the children of Israel out of the promised land. Nor is it God's fault if you and I miss out on our contemporary Canaan. Jesus has led us out of Egypt. He wants to lead us into the promised land of abundant living. If we refuse, we shall stay in a state of spiritual limbo. Saved, but unsatisfied. Not really enjoying it. On the other hand, if we let Him, He'll lead us from glory to glory, and victory to victory, until Canaan is ours.

5. The Minority Was Right.

This is what I call the Hebrew preacher's Sunday punch. Twelve spies went out. Ten came back with a bad report. There is no chance of our taking the land, they argued. It's a good land. The Jordan valley is plush. The hills of Lebanon are lush. The grapes, pomegranates and figs are fantastic. But we can't win.

Only two of the twelve spies wanted to proceed with the invasion at once. They took a vote and the majority won. But the minority was right. The majority was wrong. As a result, they paid a terrific price. Their carcasses rotted in the wilderness.

The Jewish Christians, to whom this book was first written, immediately got the point. They were a distinct minority in their day. They lived in a Jewish community. They came from Jewish families. The majority of their friends were Jews. Their families were Jews. Their religious and governmental leaders were Jews. They themselves were Jews who had come out of Judaism into the freedom of Christ. The pressure from their peer group, families, religious and governmental

leaders was fantastic. They were a tiny, apparently inconsequential, minority. But this man’s message of hope got through to them. The minority had been right in the past. Perhaps the minority is right now. We must stand firm. And many did.

This is a principle we would do well to follow today. Often someone justifies his behavior on the premise, “Everybody’s doing it.” Everybody’s living by the playboy philosophy. Everybody’s smoking pot. Everybody’s chipping the corner off the cube of truth so it will roll in their favor. Or, “Everybody’s not doing it.” Everybody’s not walking with Jesus. Everybody’s not in church. Everybody is not being a faithful steward of his time, treasure and talent.

The writer of Hebrews would have us hear the message he proclaimed to those first-century Christians: the appeal to “everybody” is nonsense. Fallacious. Without validity. Wrong is wrong, even if everybody’s wrong. And right is right, if nobody’s right.

In the case of the Israelites, the minority was right. Whether or not there were more than just Joshua and Caleb who believed God, I don’t know. The Bible doesn’t say. It seems impossible that out of a million or more people who had witnessed the power of God there were just two who believed. If there were more, they were silent about it. They didn’t stand up for their convictions. And only the good Lord knows how history might have been changed had they spoken out.

Perhaps this reference to two out of a million-plus is the Bible’s symbolic way of declaring how few there are who ever trust and obey God to the point of rest and blessing. We look at some dear, saintly Christian and say, “She’s one in a million,” not realizing how terribly close to the truth we may be.

One in a million! How many abundant-life Christians do you know? How many Jesus folk do you know who are not only out of Egypt but in Canaan? Living with joy and victory?

One in a million? It may be pure symbolism. Certainly it's something to think about. And, while you're thinking, consider Jesus. He is our hope.

Heed the Exhortation

We have discussed five present-day applications of the truth that the land of Canaan which God promised to Old Testament Jews, is symbolic of the abundant life God promises to New Testament Christians. Have these thoughts shaken you up a bit? Spurred you on to measure up to what Jesus expects of you? Then heed the exhortation in the remaining five. To give you a memory peg on which to hang these, I have selected words beginning with “H.”

1. Hear.

“*Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today if you hear His voice . . .’*” (3:7a). The Bible tells us faith comes by hearing(Romans 10:17). The solid summons of Hebrews 3:7 is that Christians' must learn to properly hear, that is, really listen to what God is saying to us in Christ so our faith will be strong. And God is speaking today. Notice the use of the present tense, “*says*” in verse seven. God, who in the past contrived in any number of ways to get His message through to the world, is still speaking. Today He is speaking through Someone greater than the prophets. Greater than the angels. Greater even than Moses. This greatly increases the importance of our hearing what God is saying to us through Jesus.

Hearing the good Lord involves more than just reading the Bible. Or going to Sunday School. Or attending a preaching service. Or being exposed to the sound of the still, small voice. Really hearing involves sensitivity, so one is able to apprehend, appropriate and apply what he hears to his daily life.

When our author uses the word “*hear*,” he is informing all of us saved-sinners it's possible to be so calm, cool and casual in our attitude toward Christ that what God is saying to us through Him

goes in one ear and out the other. As a result, we are not able to apply in daily life the hope which is ours in Christ.

2. Harden Not Your Heart

There are many reasons for sharpening our hearing. Not the least of these is that the right kind of reception goes a long way toward producing the right kind of application. Really hearing what God is saying to us in Christ will help keep us from hardening our hearts against His molding, shaping, directing, guiding action in our lives.

“Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness” (3:8). Everything in nature has a body. Everything in nature possesses physical characteristics which distinguish it from everything else in nature. The body of a carrot is different from the body of an onion. The body of granite is different from that of gold.

Many things in nature also have a soul. Among these are man and animals. The soul consists of mind, emotion and will. Man, in addition to body and soul, has a spirit. This is his true self. And, it distinguishes him from the rest of creation.

The word “*heart*” (3:8) refers to that middle part of our being, the control center of our lives. Our soul. Our mind, emotion and will. The application is this: unless we sensitize ourselves to the voice of the Spirit, our physical being may make some sort of mechanical or reflex response to auditory stimuli, but our inner being, our soul, misses it. As a result, our spirit, or true self, is not touched. Our ear picks up what God is trying to say, but our mind does not grasp the wonder of it. Our emotions do not give warm response to it. Our will does not respond with appropriate action.

Every day God speaks. Every day we have the option to hear and obey or hear and ignore. If we ignore with any kind of consistency, we put ourselves in terrible peril. Repeated resistance can

harden into the habit of resistance. Like the Israelites of old, we wind up existing in the wilderness instead of living in the promised land.

You may be familiar with the phrase, “hardened sinners.” These dear, deluded folk pose a particular challenge to the Christian Church. But rarely, if ever, are hardened sinners as rigid, callous and recalcitrant as hardened saints! In fact, there is no more difficult or depressing task than trying to bring hardened saints to repentance again. The book of Hebrews says it is almost impossible to do.

Hardened saints. Backsliders. Inactive church members. Religious dropouts. Whatever you choose to call them, they are the curse of Christianity. The cause of much heartache on the part of God and the servants of God. Thus, it is with loving urgency the scripture says, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (3:8, 15).

God has only two ways of dealing with hardened saints. Chastening on earth. If this does not bring them to their spiritual senses, He has one alternative left: judgment in heaven. That doesn’t mean they die and go to hell. They die, go to heaven and meet Jesus with empty hands. How tragic! So, “harden not your hearts.”

The Christian life is not easy. It is a most trying, rigorous experience. There are many difficulties, disappointments and discouragements along the way. But don’t let these make you cynical.

When the spiritual going gets tough, the spiritually tough get going. God’s testing can make or break. You decide the outcome. There is nothing you can do to stop most things which happen to you. But, there is everything in the world you can do about your response to them after they occur.

Caleb and Joshua’s experience is a superb example. They were outvoted. Along with the

mistaken majority, this correct minority had to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Nevertheless, they stayed firm and fast in their faith. They did not succumb to self-pity and cynicism. They had heard God’s voice. Had wanted to obey God’s voice. But, when denied the opportunity to do so by a distrustful, disobedient majority, they did not become hard and bitter. They remained warm and responsive to what God was doing in their lives. Sensitive to the lessons God could teach them in the wilderness. In the end, they enjoyed the privileges and blessings of the Promised Land.

3. Heed.

“*Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God*” (3:12, KJV). The more obvious reference is to the sin of disbelief. But Hebrews 3:7 through 4:1 is not a collection of individual sentences. It is a single statement. Sweeping in its implications. Thus, the danger we must heed involves not only disbelief but delay.

Repeatedly we are urged to take action today. “*Exhort one another daily, while it is called today*” (3:13, KJV). “*Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts*” (3:15a). The emphasis is always on today. Not tomorrow. Tomorrow may never come.

In Christ, God has spoken His final word to the world. If we do not heed what God is saying to us in Christ, God has nothing left to say. You and I are living in the ultimate period. The last “now” of time. The final and critical “*today*” of salvation. This is the decisive hour. Failure to heed God’s last, best word bears terrible consequences. It means missing an opportunity which will never come again.

Tomorrow is Satan’s today. He doesn’t care how good or great your intentions are provided you don’t act on them today. So, the danger you and I as saved-sinners must heed is twofold: the danger of disbelief and the danger of delay. “*Today*” -- while you still have the opportunity -- give God the trust and obedience you should give Him. Then you can begin to experience and

exhibit the vitality, vibrancy, freedom, and joy which are the norm for Christians.

So often we get the reason for trust and obedience reversed. We think it's for God's sake, when in reality it's for our sake. If you go to a doctor for diagnosis, he pinpoints your problem and says, "I can cure you if you obey my instructions." The obedience he requires is not for his sake as doctor, but for your sake as patient!

Similarly, the purpose of our learning to trust and obey God is not to placate Him, as if He were some sort of adolescent potentate we need to keep "buttered up." It is to liberate us. To free us. To deliver us from the incapacity which results when we do not trust and obey.

Are you persuaded there are further blessings and release in Christ than you have yet experienced? Do you long to possess these? Well, what God asks will produce what you desire. He asks that you heed Him. That you trust and obey Him. If you do what He asks, you will have what you desire: happiness in Jesus. It's just that simple. "Trust and obey."

4. Help One Another.

To say, "It's just that simple," is not to say it's easy! I, personally, have found the Christian life to be a constant struggle between the "old man" who wants to serve Satan, and the "new man" who longs to serve Jesus. The devil, our adversary, is a dirty fighter. He will use anyone or anything to undermine us. So we need to stick together. To help one another daily.

"But exhort one another daily, while it is called 'today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13, KJV). The word "exhort" comes from the same root source as "paraclete" meaning comforter. One of the names of the Holy Spirit. So, when we are told to exhort one another, the Spirit is saying, help or comfort one another.

The exhortation must not be a preaching at, or putting down, of our fellow saved sinner. We are

to lift each other up. Encourage. Strengthen. Comfort our Christian brother or sister who may be under the devil’s gun.

Our previous word, “*heed*,” means: recognizing the danger, we must take sin by the throat. This word, “*help*,” means: since we’re all in danger, we must take our fellow sinner-saint by the hand. Often, I’m sorry to say, we reverse the process. We take sin by the hand and our comrades by the throat! That’s a shame. Our individual struggles are tough enough without having to hassle our brothers and sisters, too.

So we need one another. We need the insights and encouragement which come from regular contact and interaction with other spiritually turned-on people. Chapter 10 exhorts us, “*And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near*” (10:24,25). Be aware of the danger of isolationism.

As long as life lasts, we will be doing battle with the devil. We will not survive the battle if we go it alone. We need to love and help each other daily. This focuses our attention upon the complexity of modern life and the irrelevance of traditional churchianity. For how can we help one another when we don’t know each other? If you attended worship last Sunday, did you know the person sitting to the right or left of you? How about the person sitting in front or back of you? Do you really know your fellow Sunday School class members? Not just their names, them! The persons who wear those names. Probably not. Reason? In Sunday School, as in church, we tend to hide behind a mask of pretense, never venturing beyond the safe level of our intellectual discussions of Bible facts.

Do you know what it is to bear another’s burden? Or, to have someone help bear yours? How many times has there been a breakdown of your ministry as “*helper*” (1 Corinthians 12:28b) because you didn’t know the person next to you needed help?

I stopped at a coffee shop recently. A chap came in. We got to talking. In the course of the conversation I asked a casual question about his family and discovered his son had been gone for the better part of a week. They didn't have the slightest idea where he was and were deeply distressed over the boy's involvement in the drug scene. Had I not asked that casual question, I could never have gotten under that man's burden with him.

We live in little mental cells. Isolated from each other. Hurting for help. Not knowing how to get or even give it. That's why I find participation in a small group to be absolutely vital.¹ It involves risk, to be sure. One makes himself vulnerable. But in a healthy, Spirit-led small group there is a healing force found nowhere else. Such clusters do not take the place of Sunday morning worship. Or Sunday School. Or prayer meeting. They complement these, providing something the others do not provide: the acceptance, approval and affection essential to full-orbed spiritual maturity.

If we take the book of Hebrews seriously, we must and will find a contemporary way of fulfilling the command to “*help one another daily*” (3:13). A command as unavoidable as that to “*go into all the world and preach the gospel*” (Matthew 28:19). Or “*be born again*” (John 3:3). Or “*teach*” the saints (Matthew 28:20). Or fulfill other categorical imperatives of scripture. This is not an option. It is a command. “*Exhort [help] one another daily.*”

5. Hang Tough.

“*For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; for who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, were not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?*” (3:14,16).

The people who missed the promised land weren't vicious sinners. They weren't social outcasts or ugly criminals. They were a bunch of common folk who fed each other's fears instead of each

other's faith! They had much evidence of God's mercy right from the start. But, because they failed to hang tough, these for whom God had prepared so much, possessed so little. They came to a sad and sobering anticlimax.

God's grace had opened the way to the promised land. God's intention was for all the people to enter. God's power was available to every last one of them. But it was effective only to those who put their trust in God's power, and obeyed. Part of their problem was a short memory. They didn't remember the days of old. Their generation had witnessed more mighty acts of God than any generation before them, but they acted faithlessly because they failed to remember the victories of the past.

A sober warning to us. We, too, have witnessed more mighty acts of God than any generation in history. We have the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to remember. Two thousand years of church history to ponder. Many periods of renewal when God has broken through in joy and power. We must be on guard lest we, too, act faithlessly, failing to remember those moments when God has been close and real.

“Yesterday home runs do not win today's games.” But remember, yesterday's home runs may inspire the necessary confidence to hit another homer today! So, hang tough. Hold fast your confidence in Christ. Feed your faith in the future by remembering all God has been and done in the past. And, while you're at it, keep open to what He's doing today.

Today, not tomorrow, today! Hear what the Spirit says. Harden not your heart. Heed the ever-present danger of disbelief and delay. Help one another. Hang tough. And with it all, remember the sum total of these is: Hope. The Christian life is a walk, not a stand, so in trust and obedience walk with the Lord Jesus. Jesus, who leads us out, praise God! And, if we let Him, will also lead us in!

Notes

1. For information regarding small groups in your area contact Faith at Work, 279 Fifth Avenue, New York.