

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part thirteen

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THE HEARING OF FAITH - WHY YOU MIGHT NOT BELIEVE WHAT YOU THINK YOU BELIEVE

Hebrews 4:1-2 - "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. [2] For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."

You can tell this is one of those passages the translators had a difficult time transposing into English. The difficulty is found in the last part of the second verse. The **ESV** says those judged by God as faithless missed God's promised blessing because **"...they were not united by faith with those who listened."** This is also the translation route taken by the **NIV**.

The key idea in these two verses is translated slightly differently in the very literal **NASB** - **Hebrews 4:1-2** - "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. [2] For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, **because it was not united by faith in those who heard.**"

Take note of the **"it"** in that last phrase in **verse 2** - **"...because it was not united by faith in those who heard...."** That **"it"** is the **"word they heard"**. So what the **New American Standard Version** makes more vivid is the idea that the failure of Israel to enter the promised land was due to their **not combining the message they heard - not hearing the word - mixed with faith**. This is also the translation route taken by the **KJV**.

The **ESV** says the God's judgment on the people was due to their failure to **fall in line with** the faithful twosome of Joshua and Caleb in trusting God. These rebellious people didn't **copy** the faith of Joshua and Caleb when they heard the word from the Lord. And the price they paid was severe. They all died in the wilderness, being barred from the promised land.

Either way the thrust of the warning in **all** English translations is six hundred thousand people heard good news - heard the word of the Lord - and **didn't benefit** in any way from hearing it. They didn't respond in faith to the command to trust God and enter into the promised land. They listened to the negative report of the ten spies rather than the promise of blessing from God. They died under God's judgment in the wilderness instead of entering into their promised rest. And the reason is - says our writer of Hebrews - they didn't mix their hearing of the word with faith.

I just wanted you to get a sense of what it's sometimes like to lay out the direction of a text like this. Because we believe in **verbal** revelation from God **words** have to be studied carefully. Words matter. We don't honor Jesus or the work of the Holy Spirit by being **lazy** in our study of the words in our Bibles. And sometimes that takes a lot of work. But it's **holy** work.

Let's establish this central point with certainty. We have two slightly varied translations of the last phrase of **verse two**. We shouldn't be ashamed this occasionally happens. In a few cases there is no **easy** way to transpose the original languages into English because some Greek words have **no** exact equivalent in English. In other cases a single Greek word can have **multiple** possible meanings in English and a choice has to be made.

But either way there is a central point in our text that stands. Those people who perished after hearing God's promise perished because they didn't **receive God's word mixed with their faith**.

That's what today's text is all about. In one translation the problem was the failure of the unbelieving to **mix their own faith with what they heard** - **4:2b NASB** - **"...the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."**

In the other translation the unbelievers **failed to copy the faith of the faithful - Joshua and Caleb** - **4:2b ESV** - **"...but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."**

The end result is the same. Those people who died in the wilderness received no benefit from God's word because **they didn't mix the hearing of God's word with faith the way Joshua and Caleb did**. This is the key point in all translations. The word of God brings no benefit without the **hearing of faith**. That's what today's text is all about. That's our subject of study and application.

1) **THERE ARE TEXTS THAT SPEAK WITH A BOLD JARRING VOICE. LET THEM SPEAK WITHOUT EDITING THEM TO FEEL MORE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE**

This is not a subtle text. There is a very stern **warning** leading into today's text. The **"Therefore"** at the beginning of **verse 1** draws our thoughts back to the **four verses preceding**:

Hebrews 3:16 - 4:1 - "For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? [17] And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? [18] And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? [19] So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. [1] **Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.**"

Now, why should we care about those followers of Moses who were destroyed in the wilderness for rejecting God's word at Kadesh about entering the promised land? What does this have to do with us right now in this sanctuary?

The same question could be raised about our writer's lengthy quote from **King David** in **Psalm 95**. Why should the people in King David's day care about those same followers of Moses? Why does King David use those same wilderness people to warn the nation of Israel to continue to take God's word very seriously? Why, long after the children of that wilderness generation had actually **entered** the promised land, did David, in **Psalm 95**, still draw his nation's attention back to that punished generation and their rebellion?

I'm just laboring here to set our eyes on something so striking about this text. The same sin is being placed for consideration in **four** different settings. And there **has** to be a reason for this.

First, there is the actual event - the rebellion of those followers of Moses at **Kadesh** where they refuse to hear God and go into the land. **Second**, our Hebrews text quotes at length **Psalm 95**, where **King David** refers his nation Israel back to that rebellious wilderness generation with the very same warning. Then **third**, the writer of Hebrews uses his letter to refer **his New Testament Jewish audience** back to back to that same wilderness generation. And then, **fourth**, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **we today** are being called to remember the very same rebellious wilderness generation yet again.

So we have the **rebellion itself at Kadesh**. Then we have **King David referring back to it** in his warning to Israel. Then we have the **first readers of Hebrews** being referred back to it as a warning to losing their standing in grace. And finally we have **the church today** - under the direction of the Holy Spirit - being referred back to it yet again. **This is truly a unique text we are studying**. It's like time travel through the same sin over and over in different historic settings.

What is going on here has everything to do with our first point of study. **There are texts that speak with a bold jarring voice. Let them speak without moral editing**. Refuse to **soothe the sharp edges off these texts**. Allow the Holy Spirit His own voice even in texts that jar our own sensitivities.

And the jarring point of today's text is the writer of Hebrews clearly intends we see a **parity - a similarity - a link** - between **what can happen to us** if we hear God's word without mixing it with faith **and what actually happened to that rebellious generation at Kadesh** when **they** heard God's word without mixing it with faith. There will come **similar consequences** if we don't hear God with a mind and heart of faith.

The entire passage makes no sense unless this is true. There is a danger of not hearing the word with faith for you and for me. And we aren't being asked to accept that with no evidence. We are being given an **example** of a previous group who did the same thing. And we're very pointedly shown what happened to them.

That this is the point of the whole text isn't left open for debate. Our writer **tells** us this is his intention - **Hebrews 4:2a** - **"...For good news came to us just as to them...."** Notice, there's an **us** and there's a **them**. And we are being **coupled** in this second verse. **They** received **"good news,"** but didn't hear it with faith. And **they** received judgment. **We've** received good news too. Let's make sure **we** don't hear it the way **they** heard it or **we too** will face stern judgment. That's the whole point of this passage.

In the very next phrase our writer is going to punch his point home. He's going to tell us what makes all the difference

between *benefitting* from what God says and *perishing without hope* after hearing what God says.

But first he sets the table about the importance of what he's about to say. He wants to get us all ready to *care* about what the *hearing of faith* is. He wants us to study the *hearing of faith* with a sense of proper *urgency*. He wants to somehow take all of us here today who might not think it matters that much whether we're bothered about this or not on Sunday morning, and have us *feel the weight* of what he's about to say.

He's probing for ways to make me *care* about the hearing of faith. He makes it very clear he's not out to *soothe* me with this text - **Hebrews 4:1** - "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, *let us fear* lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it."

It's almost a bit startling to call back to mind some very well known Bible passages where our minds almost skip over the repeated emphasis on the command to "*fear*":

Romans 11:20 - "That is true. They [Israel] were broken off because of their unbelief, but you [Gentiles] stand fast through faith. So *do not become proud, but fear*." So Paul doesn't want the Gentile believers to become presumptuous or flippant about their standing in grace. Faith is not a *carnal confidence to continue in sin because God is gracious in Christ*. These Gentile Christians are to hold their faith *carefully*. Not *casually*. They are to *fear*.

Philippians 2:12 - "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation *with fear and trembling*...." Paul wants these Christians to resist confusing grace with laziness. They are to apply God's grace to their sinful lives with fear and trembling.

1 Peter 1:17 - "And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, *conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile*...." Peter adds the idea that this command to walk in fear isn't just for the odd occasion. This mind-set is the *normal condition of the entire time of our exile in earth*. Salvation is *wonderful* and *free* beyond telling, but it is *serious* and *eternally critical* at the same time. Peter commands these Christians to conduct themselves with *fear*.

2 Corinthians 7:1 - "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, *bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God*." Here Paul reminds us there is no way for *holiness* - without which, the Bible says, no one will see the Lord - there is no way for that holiness to be completed in my life without obeying God's command to walk in *fear* before Him.

So our writer of Hebrews is only reiterating the common urging of the New Testament when he says, "*Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it*"(4:1).

We aren't really used to being called - commanded - to *fear* in our more culturally trendy faith. "*Let us fear*" - *all of us*. This is a *good* fear. Don't shy away from this fear. Cultivate this fear. It's hard to make those statements fit comfortably in our heads. We've pretty much removed the response of *fear* from our concept of *grace*.

That's why I'm saying there are times when an honest dealing with the words of a text like this go *against* our sensitivities. Let this text strike your mind with bluntness. *Let the actual words of the Biblical text re-create proper categories of thought in your mind*. This is what the Bible calls being "*renewed in the spirit of your mind*" (Romans 12:2).

2) HEARING THE WORD WITH FAITH - YOU MIGHT NOT BELIEVE WHAT YOU THINK YOU BELIEVE

Hebrews 4:2 (ESV) - "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard *did not benefit them*, because *they were not united by faith with those who listened*."

Hebrews 4:2 (NASB) - "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard *did not profit them*, because *it was not united by faith in those who heard*."

I've already addressed the different translation issues in this verse. Yet the central point is the same in each of them. These first hearers of God's instruction at Kadesh were *none the better* though they heard God speak. In fact, they were *much worse*. They brought great judgment on themselves. And the reason for this - whichever version you want to use - is they

didn't receive the word from God with *faith*.

The different way of translating and restating this same truth is they didn't *copy* the faithful response of Joshua and Caleb. In each version those initial listeners were *without faith* when they heard God speak. *They didn't mix faith with their hearing.*

So here we are. *What is the hearing of faith?* And the related question is, *how can I know I believe what I'm hearing from God's Word? What test shall I apply?* That's where we're going as we wrap up. We'll just start unpacking what I consider one of the most important ideas in the New Testament about the *hearing of faith*. We'll take a whole teaching on it next Sunday.

Here's the launching point - **Hebrews 11:1** - "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Faith turns the factual events and statements from God's Word into object of *intense hope* - "*...the assurance of things hoped for...*" This is what the old King James was driving at when it translated with that familiar word "*substance*" - "*...faith is the substance of things hoped for...*"

This is what the hearing of faith does. It gives actual *substance* - not in a physical sense because most of the objects of our faith either happened long ago (the Incarnation, the cross, the resurrection), or are promised in the future and are yet to come (the Second Coming, the resurrection, the new creation of heaven and earth, peace on earth, etc).

Faith can't give any of these past or future events *physical* substance right now. The substance faith gives all these things is *moral* substance. Faith shapes present ambitions and values by the way it *hopes in* and *longs for* and *aims at* these realities "*not seen*" as of this moment.

Here's the important caution from our text. *Many professing Christians do not believe that they think they believe. New Testament faith is not admitting the factuality of some Scriptural statement or event. You don't believe something in the New Testament sense of "faith" just because you agree it is true.*

I only have time for one example. There are many in the Scriptures. Consider the common expression of "*believing in the cross of Jesus Christ.*" When does a person *believe* in the cross of Christ? At what point is there living *faith* in the crucifixion?

Is it when I say I *believe* Jesus died on the cross for my sins? That's certainly a Biblical fact. It's absolutely true. Does acknowledging - agreeing with this - constitute New Testament faith in the cross?

I don't think so. The writer of Hebrews says faith in something like the cross gives *substance* to that past event and turns it into a *present moral ambition*. And we're not left to *guess* how that faith in Christ's cross will manifest itself. The New Testament *tells* us what *substantial, hope-filled* faith in the cross of Christ looks like:

Galatians 2:20 - "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Galatians 5:24 - "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

Neither of these texts is describing a *mental* process. They are giving *moral substance* to the event of Christ's cross. This is bringing the bare factual event of Christ's death and *giving it substance* in my present experience. This is what the hearing of faith *is*.

And here's why this matters so much. Without this kind of *present tense, moral substance creating faith* in the cross of Christ Paul predicts what the disastrous results will be with pin-point accuracy. People will simply continue in the same old sins, all the while *believing* in the cross, falsely presuming they will be covered by make-believe grace:

Romans 6:1-3 - "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? [3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were

baptized into his death?"

Faith puts us **into** the events of Christ. Remember, New Testament faith isn't just acknowledging something to be true. It's giving **present moral substance** to past and present events in Christ Jesus. Faith isn't just **knowing** the truth. It's **receiving** the truth. But that's for next Sunday's study.