

The Traveling Pulpit

Published By



Covenant of Grace Ministries

2704 Fairway Drive
Greensboro, NC 27408

Burley W. Moore—Bible Teacher

e-mail: burleymoore@juno.com
www.covenantofgraceministries.com

Phone (336) 292-2408

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The Lord's Day and The Lord's People Part I

“Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it” Heb. 4:1

Introduction

The English word “rest” is in and of itself a very peaceful sounding word that has a calming effect when used appropriately. We use words to communicate a thought and those words carry certain connotations with which we can identify. The word “rest” is used to speak of something peaceful, refreshing, relaxing, referring to sleep, or the cessation of works. It was Augustine that said, “Lord, thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” With those words, I believe that he describes very well the condition of every troubled soul that can only find “rest” in the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wayward sinful man may look for peace and tranquillity of spirit in every direction, but it can only be found at the feet of our Blessed Redeemer.

The 3rd and 4th chapters in the Book of Hebrews shows us something about the history of Israel describing them as earthly pilgrims seeking heavenly “rest” from the toils of life. Chapter 3 speaks of their troubles and trials under the leadership of “Moses” during their “forty years” of “wilderness” wanderings in anticipation of the Promised Land. Chapter 4 describes their journey under “Joshua” who succeeded “Moses” as they hope for “rest” in Canaan, that land of promise. The Book of Hebrews makes it perfectly clear, that even though “Joshua” led Israel into Canaan, the “rest” that they discovered there was only a dim picture of a much deeper and higher “rest” for the redeemed people of God. There were many signposts throughout the Old Testament that pointed to the eternal “rest” that God has promised for His people. The sacrifices instituted under “Moses”, the cities of refuge in Canaan under “Joshua”, and from the inspired pen of “David” (Ps. 95) point us to the ONE in Whom is found true “rest” (Matt. 11:28-30).

A Spiritual Challenge v.1

Chapter 4 begins with the words, “Let us therefore fear”, with the word “therefore” building upon that which has just been said in the previous chapter. “Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3: 7-12).

We are reminded of Israel’s failure to trust the Lord when He told them to enter Canaan and the consequence of disobedience. Actually Hebrews 3:7-11 is a quotation from Psalm 95:8-11 reminding us of Israel’s unfaithfulness in the “wilderness” and the terrible consequences. Although, the human penman of Hebrews is unknown, we’re told very clearly that it is the “Holy Ghost” Who is the actual author. By saying “to day”, God is making the story of the Old Testament Israelites relevant for us in the present. We are warned not to “harden” our “hearts” in rebellion (“**provocation**”) against God like the Israelites in the “wilderness.” God told the Israelites to enter Canaan and claim the land that He had promised to their forefathers; however, they hardened their “hearts” and refused to act in “faith.”

Their disobedience provoked God’s judgment upon them and caused all those “twenty years old and upward” (Num. 32:11-12) to die off while wandering in the “wilderness” with only “Joshua” and “Caleb” being permitted to enter the Promised Land with the new generation “40 years” later. Their disobedience meant that they fell “short” of God’s best and failed to enjoy the promised place of “rest.” In other words, their “unbelief” forfeited the promised blessing and they received everything but “rest” in the “wilderness.” God’s best for them would have been an “inheritance” of “rest” from their “enemies” (Deut. 12:9-10), but their “unbelief” cost them dearly. With that profound reminder from the pages of Hebrew history, we are admonished to “take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).

To begin with, we need to pay special attention to the fact that the writer of Hebrews addresses the “brethren.” Some believe that this is referring to unbelieving Jewish “brethren” in contrast to believing “holy brethren” mentioned in verse 1 of chapter 3. It appears that the writer of Hebrews is addressing Jews who have and have not truly believed the “gospel” by “faith.” The truth of the matter is that everyone is born with an “evil heart” (Jer. 17:9) in opposition to God and the believer must always be on guard not to allow non-believers to influence them. Throughout Scripture, believers are instructed to practice separation from the world; otherwise, they will compromise their “faith” and lose their testimony (II Cor. 6:14-18).

The life of a Christian is one of “faith” apart from which it is “impossible to please” the Lord (Heb. 11:6). As we live the life of “faith”, there will be many trials and troubles to test us along the way and for that reason we need to stay on guard lest an “evil heart of unbelief” cause us to depart “from the living God.” There are some that might declare all of the Israelites who refused to accept the report of “Joshua” and “Caleb” to be unregenerate apostates. I personally believe that many of them were unregenerate apostates who influenced those who did believe, but had a weak “faith.” Throughout Scripture we find examples of believers who at times failed in their

“faith”, such as “Moses” in the Old Testament when he struck “the rock twice” (Num. 20:11) and “Peter” in the New Testament when he denied his Lord “thrice” (Jh. 13:37-38). I also call your attention to the story of the demonic child and when Jesus called “his disciples” a “faithless generation” at which time the boy’s “father” declared, “I believe, help thou mine unbelief” (Mk. 9:14-29). The Christian life is one of growing in “grace” (II Pet. 3:18) and “faith.” Without progressing in “sanctification” (I Thess. 4:4) we also can fail our Lord simply because as long as we live in the flesh, our “faith” will not be perfected. Therefore, we need to maintain a tender and pliable “heart” that is responsive to God lest it become “evil” and unbelieving.

Christians can never lose their salvation, but they can lose their testimony and develop “wicked ways” (II Chron. 7:14). “Peter” was so confident in the flesh that he would never fail his Lord, but he learned that he needed a power beyond himself to keep from denying Him (Jh. 13:38). The truth of the matter is that Christians do sin, but it’s impossible for them to sin and escape God’s “chastisement” (Heb. 12:5-11). A genuine believer cannot lose his salvation; however, we do sin, but at the same time, we cannot be at home in the realm of sin (I Jh. 3:1-24). The difficulties that come into our lives reveal the condition of our hearts, just like the Israelites that we read about in Hebrew history. Eventually, the patience of God was exhausted with them and the sentence of judgment was pronounced. A similar story is told in the New Testament when “Ananias” and “Sapphira” lied to the Holy Spirit and died (Acts 5). Also, Paul gives a warning before partaking of the Lord’s Supper that “a man examine himself” for “many” were “weak and sickly” and even died in the Corinthian church because they had not judged their own sin (I Cor 11:27-32). There are various views on the “sin unto death”, but from the context of First John, I believe it’s referring to believers who can commit it (I Jh. 5:16) and furthermore, I submit that is what many of the Israelites did with “an evil heart of unbelief.” When the writer of Hebrews said, “take heed, brethren”, he is saying basically the same thing that Paul declared when he wrote to the Corinthians (II Cor. 13:5).

The “generation” that came with “Moses” out of “Egypt” are the ones who had to die in the “wilderness” rather than enjoy “rest” in Canaan. “For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. But with whom was he grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom sware he that they should not enter into this rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (Heb. 3:16-19). Those who had witnessed deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the ten miraculous plagues, the opening of the Red Sea, the drowning of Pharaoh’s army, and the events at Mount Sinai are the ones who led the nation into “unbelief.” Their “unbelief” prevented them from entering into the Promised Land where they could enjoy God’s “rest” simply because God does not give “rest” to rebels. Canaan “rest” is so called because it was a place that terminated their “wilderness” wandering and trials. As we see from history, it was not a place free from conflict, but Canaan “rest” meant that God fulfilled His promise to them and His work of bringing them into this land ceased.

The lesson that we learn from those Israelites brings us back to Heb. 4:1, and should cause us to “fear, lest” we “come short” of “entering into his rest.” To begin with, we need to notice how the writer of Hebrews says, “let us” as he includes himself in this warning because no person is beyond the possibility of spiritual failure. “Fear” is not necessarily a bad thing, depending upon the nature of it and the object to which it is directed. We ought to have a reverential “fear” of

Almighty God and at the same time be fearful of the consequences in offending Him. Just because the “generation” of Israelites that “came out of Egypt” failed in “unbelief”, didn’t mean that God abandoned His “promise” of leading Israel into Canaan, because with time He fulfilled that “promise” in the next generation.

The “rest” referred to in Canaan is merely a feeble picture of the eternal “rest” that believers have in Heaven. However, the “promise” that God has “left us of entering into his rest” is steadfast and sure. We need to note that the source of this “rest” is “his rest”, a “rest” than can only be granted the sinner from God. The matter before us today is for sinful man to examine his “heart” to see if he will “come short” of receiving that “promise” because of his “unbelief.” Every time that we sin we show “unbelief”, but to resist sin is to demonstrate “faith” in the ultimate standard that God has established for His people. While living in this body of flesh, there will be times when we sin and exhibit “unbelief” the result of which should be repentance before our Holy and righteous God. God is so very patient with His people, but as we learn from the Israelites, God’s patience does have it limits and we as His people don’t need to play games with “unbelief.”

A Ministry Update

In this edition of “The Traveling Pulpit”, you will find Part One of a two-part series entitled, “The Lord’s Day and the Lord’s People.” As I have sometimes done in previous issues, I am printing a message that I preached at the Tri-State Particular Baptist Fellowship held at Beacon Baptist Church in Burlington, NC, this June. The subject assigned to me takes us to the book of Hebrews and concerns God’s “rest” that He has promised to His people. I trust that it will be a blessing to those who have “ears to hear” (Matt. 11:15).

In my last ministry update, I spoke of having a lot of “irons in the fire.” These past several months have been the busiest since my retirement from the pastorate. I’ve never been good at multi-tasking and the older I grow the worse I am at it. I’m continuing to give thought to my upcoming booklet on “Godly Servants” simply because I see a great need of it in today’s church. I appreciate your prayers for me that I’ll address that subject pleasing to the Lord. As always, “thank you” for your prayers on behalf of this little ministry and for all the faithful contributions. Because of His Sovereign Grace.....BWM

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