

Warning From The Wilderness

Series: The Supremacy Of The Son

by Steve Zeisler

A friend who is a dental hygienist told me the other day she is thinking of quitting her job because she is tired of badgering people to floss their teeth! Flossing is not particularly painful or time-consuming; the benefits are obvious. Yet we are so perverse that we need at times to be pressured to do what is best for us.

Some people have to be forced to take vacations. You know the syndrome: "My wife had to threaten divorce to make me take this vacation to Hawaii"; or, "I'm playing golf today because my doctor insisted on it." Isn't it paradoxical that we must be pressured to do things we know would be a delight to us? The very things that are most necessary in life we avoid at all costs. Jesus once said, "Come unto me all of you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." What an attractive offer! Jesus Christ himself has offered to take our burdens, heal our souls and give us rest. What could be more attractive than that?

In the passage we are going to study this morning from the book of Hebrews we find the almost contradictory statement, "Let us therefore be diligent (or, let us therefore strive) to enter that rest." We have to be commanded to consciously force ourselves to enter into the rest of God, the very rest our hearts desire, because we are so naturally inclined to run from it.

We have seen in the first two chapters that Hebrews makes a series of comparisons for discouraged Christians to remind them of the supremacy of the Son of God. Compared to the prophets who had gone before him, he is greater; he is the last great spokesman for God. He is greater than the angels; they are servants, but he is the Son. Chapter 2, verse 17 mentions another comparison; Christ's high priestly ministry which will be, after a digression, laid alongside that of the high priests of the Jerusalem temple. Chapter three begins with a reference to Jesus as *apostle* and high priest. Evidently the mention of a high priest led this author to think of Aaron (the first Israelite to hold the office) and of his brother Moses. Because Moses was the greater figure he decides to compare Jesus and Moses (as apostles of a sort) and later return to the consideration of Jesus as a superior high priest.

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

An apostle is one who lays a foundation, who begins something. That is what Moses was. He was a human leader, the instrument of God to call the nation of Israel into being and give it a sense of nationhood following slavery in Egypt. God gave the Law to Moses. It was Moses who ordered the Israelites by tribes and led them in their wanderings. Thus it was he as an apostle who laid the foundation for the nation of Israel, which is referred to here as a "house." Moses is the one who laid the foundation of the house of Israel.

But Jesus Christ is far superior to Moses because he was not only the servant in the house, he was the builder of the house. Moses was a minister, a servant, but Jesus was a Son. God, the Son, built the house as well as served in it, thus Jesus is a greater figure than Moses. The house he served, the church, is greater than the nation of Israel. The Son is greater than the servant. This is the same argument the writer used when he said that Christ is greater than angels. So the comparison is made between these two great figures, Moses and Christ.

As the author of Hebrews continues, he realizes that it will be useful to his readers to not only compare the figures of Moses and Christ, but to compare the response of the people to each of these men. How did the Israelites respond to Moses' leadership? In a word, badly. They rebelled against it and suffered the consequences. The question that arises, then, is, "How will we respond to the leadership of Jesus Christ who is the greater figure?" Do we rebel against him or have we given our hearts to him? Do we see evidence of Christian growth, of certainty, hope and obedience in our lives, or are we rebellious as those who followed Moses were generations earlier?

This author is a passionate pastor and preacher. He is no mere thinker. It is not enough to just talk about how great Christ is if we don't ask, "What will do you about it, then?" Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is worthy of all of our love and our faith. He is the source of our hope. But then comes the penetrating question, "What are you going to do about it?" Here again we find the author of Hebrews pressing home the greatness of the Son of God. As great a leader as Moses was, the children who followed him failed to heed what he directed them to do. How will the church serve Christ?

Let us look, beginning at verse 7, at the experience of the wilderness wandering of the children of Israel.

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

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But 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. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; while it is said,

"Today if you hear His voice,

Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me."

For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. 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

The comparison of Jesus and Moses in 3:1-6 ends with an uncertainty. An "if" clause is introduced in verse 6: "if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end." Verse 14 raises the same issue: "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end."

The wanderings of the children of Israel were dotted by momentary enthusiastic response to things that God was doing. But there was no long--term obedience, no real change in their character. Christians, as we have seen, serve a far greater leader, so the question before us is, will we remain firm until the end? Have our lives changed, or has our response been momentary and fleeting?

As I have tried to diet over the years, I see that I have lost the same five pounds many times over. There is

nothing very impressive about that. There is no lasting quality about my efforts at dieting. When I took aptitude tests in grade school, my teachers would report to my parents, "this child has great potential," but when the reports came out at the end of the school year the potential was often unrealized. Potential alone is no good. The question finally must be asked, what kind of person do you become? Is there any evidence that your response to Christ is a lasting one? Has your character changed? Have you honestly given over your life to the Lord? Feverish interest for the short-term is not sufficient.

We are told that in the wanderings of Israel, God was angered by their "unbelief." That is a word that is repeated throughout this section. They refused to trust the power and love of God. In a quotation from Psalm 95 we are reminded. "They always go astray in their hearts, And they did not know my ways."

Verses 12 and 13 use terms that describe unbelief. Verse 12 speaks of "falling away" from the living God. The force of gravity is what holds the universe together. In our experience, pressure is always exerted on everything to fall to the center of the earth. There is also what we might call a spiritual gravity that exerts its force. If we cease paying attention to spiritual matters, that force will begin to pull us downward. We must pay attention so that we will grow upward in Christ because the natural drift in life is downward. A balloon filled with helium will float upward and rest against the ceiling. Within a couple of days, however, as the gas works its way out of the fabric of the balloon it will drift down to the floor. That is the power of gravity having its effect. If we are not aware of our capacity for unbelief, for an "evil, unbelieving heart," we too will find ourselves being pulled downward.

The prodigal son was raised in a godly, wealthy home. Confident of his own ability and importance, he had everything going for him. Taking his inheritance, he left his father's home and went his own way. Years later he awoke to find himself as a hired laborer, having fallen so far he was eating with the pigs on a farm. What a terrible descent from the heights he had once known! Here we are warned to not permit unbelief in the ministry of Christ to reach the point where such a descent ("falling away") begins for us.

In verse 13 the writer makes reference to being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Here he is talking about the trickiness, the cleverness of sin, the process by which we learn to stifle our conscience and start believing the lie. We assume we can get away with it. Deceit takes over and, like wet cement, sets up slowly over time until it eventually hardens. We recall the story of David and Bathsheba. If David had been told on that first day when he decided to give way to self-indulgence and not go to war that he would end up an adulterer and a murderer of his friend, he would not have believed it. But he made compromising choices along the way. Gradually the hardening process so overtook him he cold-bloodedly ordered the execution of his good friend. His life became one completely filled with hypocrisy.

Here again we have the warning: will we listen to the ministry of Christ who is greater than Moses, will we become what he urges us to become or will we respond in unbelief? "Take care" we are warned in verse 12. Be alert. There is no such thing as Christian cruise control. Be alert at all times. "Encourage one another," says verse 13. Look out for those around you. Take the time and the effort to know and encourage those who might be losing their way. And in verse I of chapter 4 we read, "Let us fear." Be afraid, frankly. The issues at stake are of such importance that we ought to treat them very seriously. We ought to fear failure. "Let us fear lest while the promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it."

God wants us to believe him when he offers us spiritual rest. Unbelief in that offer is what sent Israel off on forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Here Christians are being asked, "Will you enter into the rest provided by God or will you persist in unbelief?"

What exactly is the "rest" referred to here, and what does that mean for us? Let us read further in chapter 4:

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. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said,

"As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter my rest,"

Although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, " And God rested on the seventh day from all his work"; and again in this passage, "They shall not enter My rest." Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before,

"Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."

For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.

What is the nature of this rest that concerns God so much? We must recognize that the issue here is spiritual. What keeps us from resting is unbelief in what God has said. Even though Joshua succeeded in bringing the nation into the promised land, he did not give them the rest that God wanted them to have. The battles they faced were intended to train them to trust God from the heart. However, successful conquest didn't lead to Sabbath rest. The issue is a spiritual one and remains before us, "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!"

This "rest," we are told, is related to how God rested when he completed the process of creation. In six days of creative genius, God set into place everything that was, and on the seventh day he rested. Why did God rest? Because what he had created was absolutely perfect. It could not possibly be improved upon. His creation was brilliant, beautiful, matchless, perfect. So he rested. Now we too are to enter into that rest of God.

According to verse 10, our rest should consist of ceasing from works in the same way that God ceased from work when he had completed his creation. The cross of Christ so thoroughly, effectively and completely accomplished what we need for salvation there is nothing we can add to it. No matter how hard we try we cannot possibly make ourselves more acceptable to God. We cannot be more certain of a heavenly destination and eternal life. There is nothing we can add to the process of being saved, of being known by God, of becoming what Christ wants us to be.

Jesus accomplished our salvation for us. Thus in the same way that God rested following his creation of the universe, we need to spiritually enter into the rest which recognizes that what God has done for us in Christ cannot be improved upon.

Thankfulness is a key ingredient in discovering whether or not we are resting in Christ. Do we find ourselves daily overwhelmed with gratitude to God for what he has done for us? Are we filled with thanksgiving for a relationship with God that has taken us all the way through the day? Are we thankful for the certainty of our hope of eternal salvation, for the intimacy of the Spirit of God who lives within us, for the power of God which we can trust to change us? Romans I records the awful descent of man, the downward spiral of rebellion from the time when he knew God to the ugliest forms of hellish rebellion. And the beginning point of his descent was man's failure to be grateful to God. We may find the answer as to whether we have entered God's rest or not by our response to the question, do we have an attitude of thankfulness for what God has for us in Christ?

When Jesus entered the home of Mary and Martha, he found it perfectly suited to his needs. He began to teach, and Mary sat at his feet to listen to what he had to say, while Martha busied herself "with preparations." Finally in his loving way Jesus said to her, "Martha, Martha, all this is unnecessary. I have something to offer you in what I have to say, and Mary has chosen the best part. She believes that I approve of her, and she is learning from me. Won't you allow my approval of you to be enough?"

Let us think further about the experience of the wilderness wanderings. When the Israelites left Egypt under Moses' leadership, they became a very religious people. They cheered with enthusiasm when the Law was given. They instituted the Levitical priesthood called for in the Law. They set the tabernacle at the center of the great wandering band of millions and carried out the sacrifices that were described. They followed the cloud by

day and the pillar of fire by night. But what they would not do was have their attitude changed. Throughout all forty years of wandering they grumbled and inwardly resisted what God was doing for them. Their hearts had not changed. They complained and moaned. Underlying all the activity there was anger at God for what he was doing to them.

Then there was their refusal to fight giants. When the spies returned from the land with the news that there were giants there, their courage melted. Although God had told them that his power was sufficient to give the giants into their hands, they turned and ran away, refusing to fight.

Those same two issues tend to be true of us as well. We may be very religious and very involved, but underneath there is a spirit of complaint and grumbling, a refusal to be thankful--and that makes all of the outward activity a sham. And secondly, many of us refuse to fight our giants. We go to meetings, listen to broadcasts, buy books and jump through spiritual hoops, but when it comes down to facing deep--seated resentments, habits that have gripped us, bitternesses, and deep and controlling patterns of sin in our life--our giants--we refuse to fight. We don't believe that the power of God is sufficient to face them.

So the warning comes back, "Look at what happened to the nation that had an inferior servant to the one we have." Moses was not as great as Christ, and look at the results of the nation's unwillingness to listen to him. We should be afraid to refuse the invitation of Christ, "Come unto me and find rest." Are we willing to enter into the rest of God so that by his Spirit we become thankful for what we have been given, rather than angry about what we don't have, so that we are willing to fight giants in the strength of Christ rather than run from them? These are very serious issues.

Here is a letter Ann Landers received last week:

I used to do the dishes until I watched my wife get up and rinse them again and restack them "the right way." I used to put the dishes away. Then I would watch my wife pull everything out of the cupboard and put them away "properly." I used to put the groceries away. The next time I opened the refrigerator the groceries would all be back "where they belonged." Every time I put a cup down she washes it. Maybe I am not finished with it yet, but she never asks. If I make a sandwich she stands next to me. I cut the tomato and she wipes up the juice. Finally I got sick of staying home on Friday nights. I go out by myself to the movies and bars and concerts. My wife stays home to dust the ceilings and wash the walls. Her parents let me know what a holy hard--working woman she is. The preacher tells me a good housewife is better than rubies. I asked her to go with me to a marriage counselor. She says, "If you have a problem, you go." I've thought about divorce, but the lease is in my name. I am 23 and feel 100. Nobody understands what it is like to live like this except me and the dog. She puts Clorox in his dish.

Much effort is being expended to build a marriage, but it is having exactly the opposite effect of what is intended, producing weariness and inclining this husband toward divorce.

At times we run desperately, we work hard, but yet refuse to believe that God has accomplished what we need in Christ. When we refuse to appreciate him, and miss the joy of a relationship so desperate are we to get on with it, we will find ourselves like the woman in that letter. We are too busy for a love relationship, too busy for power that comes from him instead of power that is generated by us. We are unwilling to believe that he cares as much as he does and that he is as committed and as faithful and as effective as he is. Jesus reserved his deepest anger for the effort-ridden unbelief of the Pharisees that accomplished a thousand things but never trusted or glorified God.

Verse 11:

Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there

is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

We need the Scriptures to learn what fools we are. We are capable of kidding ourselves and thinking we are accomplishing what God wants but doing the exact opposite, unless the Word of God pierces us with truth. We need to hear and think and be persuaded by the Scriptures lest in our unbelief we refuse to receive what God wants to give us.

And we need to be aware that the God with whom we have to do looks at our hearts. He is not interested in energy expended if it has the effect of saying to him, "I don't believe you." He penetrates to the very core, to our hearts. That is what he wants--our hearts. He wants us to believe him, to appreciate him, to trust him to fight giants. As with Israel of old, if we do not listen to our Leader, although we may seem religious, we will find that we have separated ourselves from God because of unbelief.

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