



November 7, 2017

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

Hebrews chapters 2 and 4 both talk about Jesus being able to help us in areas of temptation. 2:18 *For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* 4:15 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* The word for temptation in Scripture is a curious word because it holds two different meanings. It can refer to something that is desirable and attractive, threatening to seduce into sin. This is what we tend to associate with temptation. But it can also refer to a testing or trial. This would be something that is difficult or hard. So, it is often translated as testing or trial, but it is the same word for temptation. When a word has two different meanings, we look for the connection between them. Both can cause someone to turn away from God. Either toward something that attracts them away from obedience to God or something that is perceived as too difficult that is required in obedience to God. And both are tests of devotion. Will our devotion to God withstand that temptation or trial?

People have a much easier time believing that Jesus experienced tests and trials. But if he was tempted in every respect as we are, then he must have experienced the desires of seductive temptation as well. And this means that to be tempted is not sinful, it is human. Do we believe that or do we believe that we are already sinning when we experience the desires of temptation? That God is already disapproving of us because we have these desires? That cannot be true since Jesus was tempted. The desire of temptation is not the sin. It is choosing to fulfill that desire in opposition to God that is the sin.

Chapter 3 identifies the readers as those who share in a heavenly calling. How often do we think about our salvation, our relationship with God in Christ, as a calling? What is implied by that depiction? Calling implies a purpose that is not yet fulfilled. We are heading toward something rather than possessing it. This is how Paul talks about his own faith in Phil 3:12-14 (*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*) Also, calling implies the need for a response. We participate in the fulfillment with that response. The need for an appropriate response is a major concern of the writer of Hebrews. The warning from 2:3 about not neglecting so great a salvation takes on more meaning when we think about neglecting a calling rather than a possession.

Our participation in this calling is the reason why Hebrews has disturbing conditional statements about our spiritual status. 3:6 *we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.* 3:14 *For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.* Do these if statements mean that we can lose our salvation? This is an important doctrinal issue, but we did not explore it because the writer of Hebrews is not addressing that question. This question comes from viewing salvation as a possession. The writer of Hebrews wants readers to pay attention to their response to the heavenly calling on their lives. From Psalm 95, the phrase "*Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion*" is cited three times in the space of 20 verses. This is a real warning to people who should consider themselves vulnerable to falling away just like the Israelites in the desert.

For the Israelites, their hardened hearts led to disobedience that disqualified them from entering God's rest, the Promised Land. But the real root of their hardened hearts is not disobedience or sin, it is unbelief. In 3:12 the evil heart is an unbelieving heart. And v 19 states very clearly, they were unable to enter because of (not sin, not disobedience) unbelief. Hebrews will have a lot to say about faith and the importance of faith in later chapters. So, we will look at this much more in depth in the future. But recognize how crucially important belief and unbelief are to the fulfillment of our calling. The Israelites did not believe that God would enable them to overcome the giants in the land. So, they did not obey when he told them to enter the land. From 4:1-2., the good news did not benefit them because it was not united by faith with those who listened..

Why do the Israelites lack faith... why do they fail to believe? Has God not given them enough reason to believe and to put their trust in Him? Quoting Psalm 95 v 3:9 says they saw *my works for 40 years*. Manna, water from a rock, daily guiding by a pillar of fire and cloud, the parting of the Red Sea for crying out loud, is this not enough to trust that God will overcome the giants in the land? Perhaps it is not the 40 years that is the problem, but the 400 years before that, 400 years of affliction and crying out to God. We can see how that might lead to a hardening of heart. And that might also be true for us. What is experienced in your past as the absence of God that is keeping you from belief, from trusting in Him in the present, even when He has given you reasons to trust Him? This is something to bring into a healing prayer session.

How do these warnings passages make you feel? Are you confident that you are not like the Israelites? Or do passages like this make you feel anxious and disturbed? How do you think the writer of Hebrews expects you to feel? Note how the Word is presented in 4:12-13. Isn't this a presentation of the living and active word that is designed to speak against self-confidence? That self-confidence is based on a shallow assessment of yourself? The Word that goes deep leaves us all naked and exposed and the presumption is that we will discover that we are weak. It is from that place of need that we are to look to Jesus as our High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses. We become the tax collector in Luke 18 (*Lord have mercy on me a sinner*) and not the Pharisee who trusted in himself that he was righteous.

This is an example of what is counter intuitive about the Christian life. We want to feel strong and competent in ourselves. But it is when we feel weak and needy that we are more connected to Jesus because we need Him. We might hate these warning passages because they make us feel inadequate, but that is actually the best way for us to feel because we then look to Jesus and not ourselves to be justified. That is of course if we do go to Him instead of shrinking back out of shame mixed with pride.

The risen Christ's words to the Laodicean church in Revelation 3 is a prime example of how dire warnings of impending judgment that may humble us are actually an invitation to intimate fellowship with our savior who longs to be with us, even and especially when we are wretched, pitiable and poor. Hallelujah what a savior! There is nothing for us to fear with these warnings, unless our confidence is in our righteousness rather than the righteousness of Christ. We simply need to open the door and invite Him into our weakness. 2 Cor 12:9 "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*"

Pastorally Yours,
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