



## A Proper Fear and a Striving Faith

*Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul*

Hebrews 4:1-13 (1-3a, 11)

May 8, 2016

Pastor Nick Shaffer

---

**Hebrews is Not Proverbs...** I was thinking this week about something that came up in our home group a few weeks ago. I was thinking about how helpful and meaningful it is to be studying through Hebrews and reading it as it is – as a sermon to the particular group of people in a particular situation. Hebrews is filled with great theology but it isn't simply a theological treatise. It deals with foundational Christian truths, but it isn't a catechism or church creed. It's a sermon and it is meant to be read and studied that way. It is easy to approach the book of Hebrews in the same way as the book of Proverbs. Follow what I mean. Outside of the first few chapters, the book of Proverbs is a book of biblical maxims, of biblical wisdom nuggets that are for the most part self-contained – not really dependent upon the immediate context of the other verses for understanding. To a degree, that is the way that the book of Hebrews is often approached. Most of us have heard a message from verses 12 and 13, that we read today about the Word of God – good sermons that describe the power and work of God's Word – but that are divorced from the immediate context and miss the reason why the writer of Hebrews said those things in the first place. We do the same thing with the faith chapter, chapter 11 or chapter 12 and the admonition to "run the race that is set before us" without really thinking about the purpose behind the passage. Now that is not to say that you can't preach a good and spiritually beneficial sermon from those passages apart from preaching through the whole book of Hebrews, but it does lose some of its punch when you cherry-pick certain verses apart from the whole. It's like watching a single scene in a movie, for instance, without watching the whole thing. You can do that with a comedy, maybe, but not with, say, ***Braveheart***, right? It misses the punch.

I hope that you are seeing that. This sermon is a labor of love and concern, born of deep conviction about the worth of Christ and the truth of the gospel, a sermon written because of an abiding passion for Jesus Christ and for the church to whom the author of Hebrews is writing. This little flock of Hebrew Christians in Rome is suffering distress, pressure, testing and temptation to fall away from Jesus, to fall away from the gospel, to trade faithfulness

for compromise, to trade the gospel for another, more socially acceptable substitute, primarily a return to their old life under Judaism. The persecution, both open and subtle, the deceitfulness of Satan and of sin, is threatening to be their undoing as the people of God. The cultural climate is set against them and there is a very real concern on the part of the writer that there are some in the Hebrew congregation in Rome that are not going to make it, that they are not going to persevere to the end, that they are going to fall away from Jesus Christ, if they continue on the course they are on. They are going to lose the hope of Heaven, of salvation, and their original profession of faith is going to be proven to be false by their return to their old life. It's heavy on his soul.

Just as he pointed to the Exodus generation and the way that their hardness of heart, their unbelief and their disobedience kept an entire generation of people out of the Promised Land, the writer of Hebrews is concerned lest the same thing happen in this flock – that some would miss out on the rest that God has prepared for those who love His Son and who hold fast their confession of Christ as Savior and Lord to the very end. He desperately does not want that for them and that explains the passion and the pointedness of his words. It also explains the series of admonitions that we have seen in this book thus far: ***Pay closer attention to the gospel that you have heard; Do not neglect this great salvation; Consider Jesus; Do not harden your hearts; Take care that you do not have an evil, unbelieving heart; Exhort one another every day against the deceitfulness of sin.*** This isn't just good advice; this is spiritual life and death. They are admonitions born out of real passion for their souls.

And it is the same passion that I have for you and for me – that we would not fail to enter God's rest because of hardened hearts and unbelief. It is a danger for us, who have heard the gospel and heard it repeatedly, to be drawn away by the temptation to find our lives and our identity, our worth and our rest in earthbound things, and to maybe sprinkle it with a little spirituality and religion. We can find ourselves giving our lives to finding the perfect spouse, the perfect family, the perfect job, crafting the perfect reputation, pursuing the perfect body, crafting the perfect appearance, pursuing the perfect level of approval and affirmation by the world, pouring ourselves into the perfect earthbound pursuits and baptizing them with Christian terminology, with a waning or only vague consideration of Jesus Christ, spending all of our energies and efforts, for what is ultimately worthless – neglecting and ultimately disregarding any life in Christ, and so forfeiting what is real life for a house of cards that ends in ultimate loss – the loss of heaven. The temptation is real to play loose with the gospel of grace, to be distracted and to regress, to embrace other passions, and turn in our hearts from the worth of Jesus Christ. And yet, Jesus said, ***“For***

***what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*** (Mark 8:36–38, ESV)

That is why we need this book; it's why we need these admonitions, because the stakes are that high. God forbid that the Lord should say of any of us, ***“They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.”*** ***As I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.”*** (Hebrews 3:10–11, ESV) The writer of Hebrews wanted everyone in the congregation to whom he was writing – I want everyone in our congregation to whom I am preaching – to persevere to the end, not to be distracted, not to compromise, not to fall away in your hearts, but to enter the eternal rest of God. The rest of God – that is what the writer of Hebrews is going to be talking about in this text today – a text that is a further exposition of Psalm 95 from which he quoted in chapter 3:7-11 – and so before we go any further, I want to give some definition to this word, rest.

**What is the Rest of God?** The rest of God, or God's rest, the way that the writer of Hebrews is describing it, is nothing less than the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the power, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout the life to come in eternity, that is the gift of God through persevering and lasting and enduring faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. In other words, this rest is nothing less than eternal life. Let me say that again. The rest of which this text speaks is nothing less than the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the power, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout the life to come in eternity, that is the gift of God through persevering and lasting and enduring faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. This is nothing less than eternal life. This is what he desperately wants for the Hebrews and it is what I desperately desire for every one of us.

This rest is illustrated for us by the Promised Land. The Promised Land, for the nation of Israel, whom the writer of Hebrews is using as an example, was to be a place where the Israelites could rest from their slavery and bondage, from war and from wandering, and could enjoy the blessing and the presence of God. But the scope of the promise of entering into God's rest goes far beyond the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land. The eventual entering of the Promised Land, by the children of the Exodus generation that died

in the wilderness, was the fulfillment of God's promise of rest but only in a narrow, earthly sense. There is another, ultimate rest for the people of God. The author uses this picture to teach us that the church marches on its own Exodus towards the ultimate rest – the glory of eternal life with Christ in the presence of God the Father – a rest that we can and should be enjoying even now, that will shape our lives and our faith, even now, if we really long for it. Do you see that? Are you with me, beloved? Again, the rest, of which this text speaks, is nothing less than the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the power, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout the life to come in eternity, that is the gift of God through persevering and lasting and enduring faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. There is nothing that any of us should desire more. There is nothing that should shape our lives more than the hope of this rest. And for that reason, the writer of Hebrews says, there is a proper fear that we should have.

**A Proper Fear (1)** The author of Hebrews 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.” (Hebrews 4:1, ESV)*** While it may seem strange to our ears, there is a proper fear in the Christian life, a fear that will keep us faithful, a fear that will motivate vigilance in our spiritual lives. What the preacher of Hebrews is getting at is this: Be fearful that in this age in which you hear the promise of rest, the promise of eternal life with God in Christ, that in the face of testing and of distraction, that any of you should not believe and press on in that faith to ultimate salvation.”

What is the idea here? Are we to live in continual fear that that true faith in Christ is not enough, that His blood may not be sufficient to atone for our sins and give us forgiveness, that God is just looking for any opportunity to cast us away? Of course not. The goal of this instruction is not craven fear, paralyzing fear and morbid introspection. It is a healthy fear that causes a vigilant and instant response. Let me give you an illustration to show you what I mean, an illustration of one of the worst spankings that Jake ever got growing up. When I first pastored Radford Baptist Church, we lived in a parsonage that was on the main road – Radford Church Road. It was a country highway and people flew up and down that thing. We had a fence that went across the front of our yard, but I had the talk with all of our kids. “Do not go near the road. Do not cross the road unless you are holding our hands or you are in the red wagon (we used to pull our kids to church in a little red wagon). You can die in the road. It is a dangerous place.” Well, one day after church let out and we were talking to everyone, Jake and his buddy, Aaron – they were just little guys – decided that they were going to cross the road to our house and go play on the swingset. I happened to look and I

saw them over there having a high old time, all by themselves. In mid-conversation, I turned on a dime and went across the street and gave them both a serious spanking. To use the old southern phrase, I beat the fire out of them. It was scary and serious – so much so that Aaron avoided me at church for about a month afterward and we were best friends with his parents.

Now why would I do that? Because I wanted to make sure they understood the life or death nature of that road. They could have fun on the swingset; they could have fun in the front yard or the backyard; they could enjoy all of that, but when they got near the road, I wanted them to be scared almost to death in order to keep them from death. That fear was intended to keep them playing in places where they did not need to fear at all.

That is the idea of the fear of unbelief and the nature of this warning. It is not to keep you living in fear all the time, frantically chewing your nails and acting neurotic, but when your devotion to Christ begins to slip, when persecution causes you to think about falling away, when hardship begins to cause you to doubt God's faithfulness, when your passion for Christ is replaced by inordinate passion for other things, when you begin to stray and become careless, when your heart begins to harden – this warning is intended to make you fear that your faith in God may be slipping away and to drive you back to Jesus Christ. To say, "whoa, what am I doing?" Your life is to be a life of faith in Christ and this proper fear arises when faith starts to weaken and its purpose is to drive us back to faith. Do you see that? If that healthy fear is absent, if conviction is lacking, so too will spiritual vigilance be lacking, and ultimately real, saving faith. That's what the writer of Hebrews is getting at.

Now, don't misunderstand, Christians are saved only by faith in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our salvation. However, God uses means, like this warning and the illustration of the Exodus generation, to maintain and preserve that faith. We are saved through faith, but we must keep on believing. To fall away, to lose our passion for Christ, to become consumed with earthbound pleasures and to treat Christ with a cavalier, take-Him-or-leave-Him mindset, to ignore the Word of God is place ourselves in the very real danger of forfeiting the promise of eternal life.

And here is the thing about this. Again, I want you to notice the corporate and personal nature of this warning. The subject of the sentence is plural – it is "us" who should fear,

while the object is singular – lest any of “you” should fall away. Look, the point is this. Each one of us must realize this: “I have a stake and responsibility for my own salvation, but for my professing brothers and sisters as well.” We have a responsibility to keep our faith in Christ vibrant and real, but also as Simon Kistemaker comments on this passage: **“We ought to take careful note of members who may be drifting from the truth in doctrine or conduct and the pray with them and for them. We are constantly looking for spiritual stragglers.”**

When I was at the Naval Academy, every so often we would have “company runs.” I hated them – at least the running part. I loved the camaraderie of them but not the actual running. I’m not a runner. I do not have a runner’s body. I like weightlifting, not running. Anyway we would have these company runs on Saturday mornings, groups of 120 or so, out running around the Academy grounds. You could get a good sense of the camaraderie of each of those companies by how they ran. Some companies, by the time the run was over, would be spread out over hill and dale. But other companies, the good ones, would be tight and together. Every so often, you would see someone in one of those companies begin to fall back, to falter, and about that time, someone who was a really strong runner would peel off out of the main pack and run back to the straggler and encourage them and exhort them – okay yell at them – and get them to speed up and get up with the pack so that we could all cross the finish line together. He didn’t run back there and start falling back with the person. He would run with him back to the main company. It’s a great illustration of the spiritual truth of Galatians 6:1-2, **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”** (Galatians 6:1–2, **ESV**) Do you see? The goal is not, “forget everybody else, as long as I make it to the end.” That’s the perspective of a shriveled heart. No, the goal is, “let’s all cross the finish line together, all of us, with no one missing.” It’s all of us together.

So the writer of Hebrews is saying, “Let the fear of unbelief and missing the rest of God in Christ, and the conviction of the Spirit and unsettledness of soul that comes with sin and cooling passion toward Christ, move us to repentance and faith, and to closer following of Jesus. Let that fear of unbelief in our professing brother or sister whom we see slipping or drifting away from Christ move us to exhort them to faith, lest they fail to reach the rest of God in Christ -- the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the power, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout eternity, in this life and throughout the life to come in eternity, that is the gift of God through persevering and lasting and enduring faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord.

Let the proper fear of unbelief keep us securely in a place of faith where we do not need to fear at all.”

Now, here’s where the deceitfulness of sin will whisper, “Isn’t this a little overboard? Isn’t this a little melodramatic?” Or, as they say, “Is it really all that?” And the resounding answer to that whisper is an emphatic “Yes!” It is all that and more. Nothing is more important. And we can’t ignore this because, like the Exodus generation,

**We Are Without Excuse (2)** He writes, **“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, ESV)** Let a healthy and proper fear of unbelief, and hardening and falling away lead us to greater faithfulness and obedience to Christ, because we have no excuse before God if we fail to believe the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. We have heard the good news, just as the Exodus generation has -- the promise of rest in God through faith, so we have no excuse for unbelief, just as the Exodus generation had no excuse.

Think about this with me for just a moment, because what the writer of Hebrews is saying here is pretty big. When we think of OT individuals like Moses, Joseph, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elijah – we ask, and I have received this question – “Were the OT people saved the same way as we were saved?” But that is not the way that the writer of Hebrews would frame that question. The question is not “Were they saved like us?” but rather, “Are we saved in the same way that the OT people were saved?” And the answer to that is “Yes.” We are saved in the exact same way as they were saved, by faith, by belief, by trust. The difference is that we believe in the fulfilled promises of God in Jesus Christ and they believed that the promises of God would be fulfilled. Salvation has always been a matter of faith. **“(Abraham) believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6, ESV)**

We think of the gospel as a NT term, so what “good news” did the people in the OT hear? Let me give you an example. We read in Exodus the way that God described Himself, saying, **“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”**”

**(Exodus 34:6–7, ESV)** The writer of Hebrews says that the Israelites had heard the gospel – the good news – not the fullness of it in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, but they heard the promise that God is merciful and gracious, a God of forgiveness and faithful love, who forgives sins and promises life to those who trust in Him but will not clear the guilty who refuse to believe. They simply had to believe the promise of God, believe in Him and in His character, but they didn't and that unbelief was not a matter of their words – they said the right things –it was a matter of their actions that revealed the true character of their hearts.

That's what the writer of Hebrews was getting at when he says: ***the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.*** Those who fell away and failed to enter the Promised Land did so – the message, the good news of God, did not benefit them – because they were not united by faith with those who listened, with those who actually believed. In this context, he's specifically pointing back to Kadesh-Barnea, to the moment we looked at last week when the nation was on the edge of going into the Promised Land, when the majority of the spies said it was impossible, and when Joshua and Caleb spoke to them the truth – that God would be with them, that the Land was theirs for the taking. All they had to do was to trust the promises of God and personally act on that faith. The good news was of no value to them because they did not share the faith of Joshua and Caleb, who had listened to the voice of God. Another way this phrase is translated is that “they did not mix the message with faith,” and that lack of faith was revealed by their refusing to act on the promises of God. Do you see that?

Likewise the writer of Hebrews is saying to us, “If you do not believe the promises, believe and act on the Word of God, live a life of faith in Christ, orient your life around Him as Savior and Lord, make Him your chief treasure, no matter what you have heard, it will be of no benefit to you. You will miss the rest of God.” You can attend church, you can have been baptized by me in this church, can listen to the gospel as it is being preached, hear the truth of the Word of God, you can know that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of sinners, that He suffered and died in order to pay the eternal penalty of sin for you, enduring God's wrath in your place so that you could be forgiven, but if you have not put your personal trust, your personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and act upon that faith by surrendering yourself, and living and persevering in your faith for the glory of Christ, then it is of no benefit to you at all. No matter how you may have started. On the contrary, all of those things minus personal faith puts you in grave danger. It is hearing and receiving the Word of God, acting on it and believing in Jesus Christ personally – the evidence of that real faith clearly seen in your life,



real fruit, lasting fruit – that you lay hold of the promise of the rest with God, eternal life that starts now, the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the power, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout the life to come in eternity. True faith is proven by a life of faithfulness – not perfection, that’s not what I am saying – but real, persevering faithfulness – by a faith that is more than facts. That’s why the author of Hebrews says what he does at the beginning of verse 3 and then in verse 11.

**The Message + Striving Faith = Rest (3a, 11)** Look at how the writer of Hebrews says this: **“For we who have believed enter that rest...” (Hebrews 4:3, ESV)** Then, later in this passage, he writes: **“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4:11, ESV)** Now why do I put these two verses together back to back. It is to make clear the point that the writer of Hebrews is making this morning. The gospel message, joined with striving faith equals rest. We think of faith and striving as opposed to one another, but they not. Faith is not passive. It is not simply a matter of intellectually believing a set of facts. We have to remember that in a world that says you can believe all sorts of things without acting on them. Faith, in Scriptural terms, is an act of the will, a surrender of the soul, an active thing. True faith in Christ always translates into action, into endurance, to striving. The word for “striving” here is a word that means “to work hard” or “to apply yourself diligently.” Now hear me when I say this. Striving is not what saves us. Faith, absolute trust in Jesus Christ is what saves us. We cannot add to what Christ did to save us. We cannot work for our salvation. We have nothing to offer God in that regard. It is not striving that saves us. But faith in Christ is active and it leads to endurance and acts of faith and obedience to the One whom we say that we trust. It is an engagement of the whole soul. Faith is active.

Drawing upon this illustration of the Exodus generation, what the writer of Hebrews is getting at is this – they left Egypt but they never made it to the Promised Land because their “faith” wasn’t real, it gave out. But that cannot be us. We, too, have yet to arrive at our “Promised Land,” however, we press on. We keep believing. We pay closer attention to the gospel that we have heard; We do not neglect this great salvation; We consider Jesus; We do not harden our hearts; We take care that we guard our hearts from evil unbelief; and we exhort one another every day against the deceitfulness of sin. In other words, we strive to enter the rest. Think about the lesser things to which we give the best of our energies and passion – vacation, working out, lawns, etc. And yet, it is this striving to enter God’s rest that is of the greatest worth and importance. As Peter says it, **“For this very reason (because of God’s precious and great promises), make every effort to supplement your faith with**

***virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:5-8, 10-11, ESV) --*** entrance into the rest of God in Christ -- the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the power, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout eternity, that is the gift of God through persevering and lasting and enduring faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. True faith strives to lay hold of Christ and the rest of God.

This is not a denial of God’s grace, not a denial of the necessity of God’s grace to both open our spiritual eyes to our sin and our need, the necessity of God’s grace to make us see and understand the gospel, the need of God’s grace to give us faith to trust in Christ and so be saved, the need of God’s grace to make us persevere – not at all. It is instead a description of what real faith looks like. This is not a denial of grace, but it is a rejection of passivity, a rejection of some kind of “what will be will be” mentality, a rejection of laziness and apathy. Strive to enter God’s rest.

For what are you striving?

***Pay closer attention to the gospel that you have heard; Do not neglect this great salvation; Consider Jesus; Do not harden your hearts; Take care that you do not have an evil, unbelieving heart; Exhort one another every day against the deceitfulness of sin.***

---

© West Salem Baptist Church, 2016

Permissions: You are free to reproduce and distribute this material but you may not alter its contents in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. If you are posting online, a link back to this original document is preferred. Anything beyond these guidelines will require prior approval by West Salem Baptist Church.