

Hebrews 4A (2014)

Robert Robinson was an English clergyman who lived in the 18th century. Not only was he a gifted pastor and preacher he was also a highly gifted poet and hymn writer. However, after many years in the pastorate his faith began to drift. He left the ministry and finished up in France, indulging himself in sin.

One night he was riding in a carriage with a Parisian socialite who had recently been converted to Christ. She was interested in his opinion on some poetry she was reading: Come thou Fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing thy grace, Streams of mercy never failing, Call for hymns of loudest praise.

When she looked up from her reading the socialite noticed Robinson was crying.

“What do I think of it?” he asked in a broken voice. “I wrote it. But now I’ve drifted away from him and can’t find my way back.”

“But don’t you see” the woman said gently, “The way back is written right here in the third line of your poem: Streams of mercy never ceasing. Those streams are flowing even here in Paris tonight.”

That night Robinson recommitted his life to Christ.

- Robinson’s experience is a good example of how a Christian falls away
 - If we concede to disappointment or discouragement, or if submit to the desires of our flesh, we can slip back into a life ruled by our flesh
 - Our faith is still intact, in that our knowledge of Christ as Lord and Savior never leaves
 - But in our behavior, we depart from the commands of Christ
 - We are departing from the life of obedience to Christ, though we can never be separated from the love of Christ
 - This was Robinson’s experience
 - But it is the kindness of God that brings us to repentance, and God was certainly good to give Robinson the opportunity to repent and return

- The Lord never left Robinson, even though Robinson tried to run from God
 - That's the security we have in Christ, that even when we are faithless, yet He remains faithful
- For the unbeliever, however, there is no such rescue promised
 - When an unbeliever is exposed to the truth, considers it for a time and then falls away during a time of testing, there is no tether holding them to the Lord
 - They have no relationship with the Lord
 - Perhaps they will eventually come to embrace the truth, as the Lord permits
 - But unless and until they come to understand the truth of the Gospel, their temporary interest in Christ or Christianity buys them nothing
 - This is why the writer says in v.14 that becoming a partaker (*metochos* - companion) of Christ will lead to a holding fast our confidence until the end
 - This is the central concern for this writer in his second warning
 - That among us in the Church may be those who have not truly embraced Christ as Lord
 - And yet they continue to congregate with us
 - For their sake, the writer asks us to encourage one another, seeking to build everyone up, and ultimately to lead everyone to a saving knowledge of Christ
 - But the sin of unbelief has a hardening effect on a heart
 - Time is running out
 - And that's why the writer continues to emphasize hearing the Lord's voice today
- And if someone fails to hear the Lord's voice, there is a certain outcome awaiting them for their unbelief
 - And that leads us to the consequence of the warning at the end of chapter 3 and into chapter 4

[Heb. 3:14](#) For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,

[Heb. 3:15](#) while it is said,

“TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,

DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”

[Heb. 3:16](#) For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?

[Heb. 3:17](#) And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

[Heb. 3:18](#) And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?

[Heb. 3:19](#) So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

- The writer wanted to offer the church an example of their nation’s past to illustrate both the possibility and the seriousness of some within the group failing to believe
 - So he returns to the experiences of the Israelites in the desert
 - He asks a series of questions to cause his audience to consider the consequences of unbelief
 - His questions are all focused on the “who” of that time in the desert
 - First, he asks who provoked God when they had heard?
 - Those who heard are the Israelites, who heard the Lord’s call through Moses to leave Egypt
 - They saw God’s miraculous powers in the desert
 - They received the covenant, and heard the word of the Lord
 - But who was God angry with 40 years? Again, with those same people
 - They angered God in their sin, disobeying the word of the Lord time and again and demonstrating a lack of faith
 - And so they Lord declared they would all die in the desert
 - Finally, the writer asks who was denied entrance into the promised land?

- That very same generation of Israel never entered the Lord's rest, that is the land of Canaan
- His point is that those who began the journey with Moses didn't make it to the destination
 - A start doesn't guarantee a finish, if that start begins in the wrong way
 - In the case of the Israelites, from the beginning they provoked the Lord
 - And in the end they were denied entry into the land that the Lord promised to Abraham's descendants
 - But how could the Lord deny something He promised?
 - Paul explains how in Romans

[Rom. 9:6](#) But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;

[Rom. 9:7](#) nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

[Rom. 9:8](#) That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

- The promises of God are obtained through faith
- We must believe in those promises before God assigns them to us
- In the case of that generation of Israel, their unbelief in God's promise of a good and prosperous land disqualified them from receiving that promise
 - The writer says they nation was not able to enter the land because of unbelief
 - Just attaching themselves to Moses wasn't enough
 - Just hearing the word proclaimed wasn't enough
 - Being witness to wondrous displays of God wasn't enough to grant entrance into God's promises
 - The test of entrance was belief in those promises

- Things haven't changed for the church, as the writer points out in chapter 4:1

Heb. 4:1 Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it.

Heb. 4:2 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.

- We should tremble at the thought that there might some among us who possess the same kind of evil, unbelieving heart
 - We aren't merely trembling for their sake, though certainly we have concern for their eternal future
 - But remember the consequences impacted all Israel
 - When the unbelieving element in the group disobeyed God, the Lord placed the entire nation under judgment
- So we should be concerned if our congregations are long-term refuges for unbelievers
 - We certainly want them to visit, to inquire, to listen to the word and to consider what they hear
 - But if our gathering can be a comfortable place for the unbeliever to hang out indefinitely, then we should fear the Bible says
 - The word of God is intended to create a response in the hearts of those who hear it preached properly
 - And that response will either be to fall upon our knees in repentance seeking His forgiveness and mercy
 - Or it will lead us to run away in disobedience, stubbornness and pride
- But the one thing we cannot permit is for unbelievers to remain unchanged in our midst
 - To do so is to risk angering the Lord
 - It means departed from the mission of the church, our very purpose for being
 - And it also suggests we're not presenting the word of God in a true and forthright manner

- We've created an environment where the world can feel comfortable in the church
- Some churches have made this mistake today, labeling their approach to the gathering as "seeker-friendly"
 - And though they do what they do with the best of intentions, nevertheless they are paving a road to destruction
 - They have designed an experience that appeals to unbelievers in the hope that bringing them into the gathering will have a positive impact
 - But rubbing elbows with believers does not – by itself – bring about saving faith
 - If hanging around the people of God or even God Himself was a means to saving faith, then how do we explain Israel in the desert?
 - Christianity doesn't "rub off"
 - It doesn't enter a heart like air entering lungs
 - You don't absorb it or learn it through a socializing process
 - Perhaps in the early stages of someone's interest in the faith, a socializing period can be useful to building bridges
 - But sooner than later, if we hope to see someone come to faith in Christ, we must present the message of the Gospel from the testimony of the Bible
 - That's been this writer's point throughout this example of Israel in the desert
 - In v.2 the writer says those who provoked God experienced all the same things as the rest
 - They rubbed elbows with Moses and the rest of the Israelites
 - They walked the same walk, they heard the same word
 - But it didn't profit them because it was not united with faith
 - The Greek word for united can mean mixed together

- They weren't experiencing what they encountered through a lens of faith
 - They only experienced in a fleshly sense, which did them no good
- That has to be our concern as well, should we afford safe harbor to someone who lacks true saving faith
 - It might feel good to us in some sense, but it's doing no one any good
 - No one is profiting
 - They don't profit because without faith, it's impossible to please God
 - And we don't profit, because we haven't served the purpose of the church
 - We haven't pleased our Lord
 - The writer has been emphasizing that the stakes for those who provoke the Lord in disobedience to the Gospel are very, very high
 - He's described the penalty for unbelief to be not entering the rest of God
 - We know that for those in the desert, the penalty was not entering the Promised Land
 - But the writer also indicated that this is a penalty still being experienced by those who reject Christ today
 - Notice in v.1 the writer says the promise of entering the Lord's rest still remains today
- How can the penalty for failing to believe be the same today as it was in the time of Moses?
 - After all, the Israelites eventually did enter the Promised Land under Joshua
 - So what exactly does the writer mean when he says those who remain disobedient in their unbelief are in jeopardy of not entering His rest?
 - The writer goes forward to explain

[Heb. 4:3](#) 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.

[Heb. 4:4](#) For He has said somewhere concerning the seventh day: “AND GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY FROM ALL HIS WORKS”;

[Heb. 4:5](#) and again in this passage, “THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.”

[Heb. 4:6](#) Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience,

[Heb. 4:7](#) 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.”

[Heb. 4:8](#) For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that.

[Heb. 4:9](#) So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

[Heb. 4:10](#) For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.

- In v.3 the writer defines what he means by “entering rest”
 - Using the Israelites as a negative example, the writer demonstrates that those who have believed (in God’s promises) enter into His rest
 - Once again, he quotes from Psalms 95 where the Lord Himself equated Israel’s disobedience with forfeiting entering rest
 - But now the writer wants us to understand that God wasn’t speaking about entering Canaan, at least that wasn’t His only meaning
 - So with a series of comments from the Old Testament, the writer explains what it means to be denied God’s rest
 - First in v.4, the writer refers to the Creation account
 - As we all remember, the Lord took a day at the end of Creation to rest
 - The Lord rested in the sense that ceased the creation process
 - And in that sense, the Lord’s rest has never ended

- Even now the Lord is “at rest” from Creation, because the creation process ended on Day 6 and has never restarted
- But thousands of years later, the Lord declared that disobedient Israel wouldn’t enter into His rest
 - The rest of the Lord has already begun and is everlasting at this point
 - So the only way someone can never enter into God’s rest is if they never enter into His presence
 - And that’s exactly the meaning of the Lord’s threat
 - Those who were disobedient and unbelieving in the desert were being denied entrance into the Lord’s presence in Heaven, where He is at risk
 - Therefore, the writer says an opportunity remains for “some” to enter into the Lord’s rest
 - Not all enter into His rest, His presence
 - By faith, some will enter into the Lord’s rest
 - Some are like those in the desert
 - They had good news preached to them, but still they failed to enter because they disobeyed what they heard
- And the Lord wasn’t just talking about denying them entrance into Canaan, the physical promised land
 - The writer proves in vs.7-9 that the rest God was describing was a euphemism for entering into His presence, into salvation
 - First, the writer quotes from the Psalms again when David called Israel to enter into the Lord’s rest “today”
 - But by the time David wrote that psalm, the nation of Israel had already been living in Canaan for many generations
 - So if entering rest merely referred to the physical land, then David wouldn’t have still been calling Israel to enter the Lord’s rest
 - The nation had already entered long before
 - Notice the writer makes that conclusion in v.8

- He says that if entering rest merely meant entering Canaan under Joshua, then we wouldn't have had David repeating the call to enter centuries later
- So the writer concludes in v.9 that there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God
- The concept the writer is expressing here is deep and incredibly meaningful for all believers
 - The writer is explaining that the word rest in the Bible is a word God uses to describe entering into salvation by faith, which leads to our glory in God's presence
 - That rest is God's rest
 - It's a rest He makes available
 - It's not a rest we earn
 - It's a rest He earned by His work, and He invites us to join Him by faith
 - When we have faith in His promises, we enter into His rest
 - This is a Sabbath rest
 - And since that rest is the Lord's rest, it last perpetually
 - Just as the Lord rest perpetually because He will never return to the work of Creation, likewise we will enjoy a perpetual rest by our faith
 - We do not work our way to salvation; we rest in the work God did on our behalf through Christ
 - The land in Canaan was merely a picture of that eternal rest
 - When the nation of Israel disobeyed in the desert, they were demonstrating their lack of saving faith in the promises of God
 - So the Lord denied them entrance into the physical promised land to demonstrate His displeasure with them
 - But in the process, He was also creating a picture of where unbelief leads

- It prevents us from entering God's rest, His presence, His salvation
 - We will be left with our own work, which will never produce last eternal rest
- That's why David said so many years after Joshua that Israel should still be seeking to enter God's rest
 - Everyone should be seeking to enter the Lord's presence
 - For as long as today is called Today
 - For as long as the Lord continues to hold back His judgment and allow us the opportunity to know Christ and be saved
 - We should seize that opportunity to enter His rest
 - As the writer says in v.10, that the one who has entered the Lord's rest is the one who has rested from his works, just as God rested from His works
 - The day you receive Christ as your savior, you cease from your works
 - You enter into the Lord's Sabbath rest
 - The rest that the Lord commemorated by giving Israel a day to rest in each week
 - That weekly rest that Israel enjoyed under the Law was a memorial of the Lord's rest
 - You and I enter into the Lord's rest, the perpetual rest, when we accept Christ as Savior
 - That's why we can say now that we are not required to observe a weekly rest on one day of the week
 - Because we have obtained something far greater by our faith in Christ
 - We have entered into God's perpetual rest, a rest that lasts every day of every week
 - A rest we enter by faith alone, and not by our own works
- That's the rest the writer wants all his readers to enter

- As he says in v. 11

Heb. 4:11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.

- The Greek word for diligent means to make every effort
 - We should make every effort to bring everyone with us into the rest of the Lord
- Or simply put, we should be working as hard as we can to make sure everyone in our church truly knows the Lord
 - As the writer said earlier, let's encourage everyone to remember the Lord's kindness and mercy in the face of Christ
 - Continue speaking the Gospel and expecting a response
 - Solicit testimonies, encourage believers to be baptized
 - Don't let anyone fall through the cracks
- And at the same time, let's be realistic in our expectations
 - Not everyone may be willing to make the trip with us
 - Some will remain disobedient, unrepentant and unbelieving
 - What are we to do with those?
- The one thing we can't do is find a way to make them feel comfortable in their unbelief
 - We can't soften the Gospel or make excuses for their lack of repentance
 - We can't make unity a higher priority than truth
 - We can't make their participation in the congregation a higher goal than their partaking in Christ
- Let's not allow anyone to follow the example of the Israelites in the desert
 - A people who saw miraculous things around them and heard marvelous revelation of God
 - And yet they turn away and followed their flesh...