

# Hebrews

Series 1

## Lesson 4

### “Hebrews Chapter 3”

**Objective:** To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.

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**Materials:** The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

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#### Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God's people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God's word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

Hebrews 3:1-6 is the first subsection in the second major section of this letter. This second major section deals with participation in the house of God and with the rest along the way (3:1-4:16). In order to understand our current subsection (3:1-6), it is critical that the wider context of the larger section is recognized. The larger unit puts forward a challenge to the readers to participate in the house of God and in the rest along the way. This exhortation is then powerfully connected with following Jesus. This larger section can be read in two ways: when the focus is christological (upon Christ), then the focus is on the role of Christ as a good and faithful High Priest. When the focus is on the faithfulness of the readers (how believers respond), the challenge is more focused on their response and they are challenged to be faithful to such a great High Priest. Both elements are there in the writing, but it seems more likely that the intent of the author was more fully directed toward challenging his readers to be faithful rather than simply challenging them to have a correct view of Christ and His role. The Old Testament examples of Moses and Joshua are given as models to aid the readers in understanding the nature of the faithfulness that is

being advocated.<sup>1</sup> The focus then is toward directing the audience away from error and apathy rather than simply correcting their theology. This means that the practical aspect of this writing takes precedence over the merely theological.

The first verse of this new section begins by highlighting once again Jesus Christ as the faithful High Priest, but new elements are added regarding the nature and glory of this priesthood in this section. In addition, the readers are identified here for the first time as “holy brothers” (ἀδελφοὶ ἅγιοι).

“Brothers” was a title seen earlier as that used by Jesus for those who have been sanctified (2:11) and those with whom he shares a likeness (2:17). Here that title is elevated with the addition of the adjective “holy” to “brothers.” This is an indication of the “heavenly” nature of their calling. This was also a concept that can be seen frequently in early Christianity (cf. Matthew 22:14;<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> **For many are called, but few are chosen.** NRSV

Romans 1:7;<sup>3</sup> 8:28, 30;<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:4;<sup>5</sup> Colossians 3:15;<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 1:15-16<sup>7</sup>). This “calling” is very much like that of Israel as described in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> The writer is indicating that this is a calling into a “heavenly” partnership, with one another and not simply as individuals called by God. The emphasis here is that they are called to be together in sharing this great calling. They are called upon to become actual partakers of this calling rather than recipients only. It requires action and commitment on the part of those “called” by God.

Notice that the calling of Jesus is highlighted here with him being designated as an “apostle” (ἀπόστολον), and as a “high priest.” As one designated by these roles He answered His calling and as verse 2 will make clear was “faithful” (πιστόν). Before we leave verse 1, it is important to notice that it is in the “confession”

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<sup>3</sup> **To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** NRSV.


<sup>4</sup> **We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**<sup>30</sup> **And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.** NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> **There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,....** NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> **And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.** NRSV.

<sup>7</sup> **Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct;**<sup>16</sup> **for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”** NRSV.

<sup>8</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 82-84.



of the readers that Jesus has been designated as these things. Here the writer reminds his readers of this fact. It may be the case that the author was aware of some confessional formula that spoke of Jesus in these terms that this was in mind as he wrote. If such a confessional formula did actually exist, it may be the case that the author is seeking to draw their attention back to it to it by amplifying it here.<sup>9</sup> They are being reminded of where they have been in the past, perhaps when they were new to the faith and of what they will have said, thought, and conceived. Just as in a wedding ceremony where vows, and promises, are made it is often good to remember those vows and promises as time goes by. It is easy to become distracted and to forget those foundational things and to focus on the minutiae of the moment rather than the critical things that we understood at the beginning of our Christian journey.

The word “apostle” is not one that we often use today and perhaps never use outside of a church context. Instead today a word that we would possibly be more likely to use would be the word “ambassador.” William Barclay retold a story that was

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 84-85.

reported by several ancient historians, including Polybius, Diodorus, and Livy, which illustrates the fact that an ambassador, or an apostle is someone imbued with the power and the authority of the one sending them:

**On one occasion the king of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, invaded Egypt. Rome desired to stop him. Rome sent an envoy called Popillius to tell Antiochus to abandon his projected invasion. Popillius caught up with him on the borders of Egypt. Antiochus and Popillius talked of this and that for they had known each other in Rome. Popillius had not the vestige of an army with him, not even a guard, no force at all. Finally Antiochus asked him why he had come. Quietly Popillius told him that he had come to tell him that Rome wished him to abandon the invasion and go home. "I will consider it," said Antiochus. Popillius smiled a little grimly; he took his staff and drew a circle in the earth round Antiochus. "Consider it," he said, "and come to your decision before you leave that circle." Antiochus thought for a few seconds and then he said: "Very well, then. I will go home." Popillius himself had not the slightest force available—but behind him was all the power of Rome. The ambassador was clothed with the authority of the empire from which he came. So Jesus came from God, clothed with all the power of God. All God's grace and mercy and love and power**

**were in His ambassador, His *apostolos*,  
Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>**

In verse 2, the emphasis is upon the fact that Jesus “was faithful to the one who had appointed Him.” The comparison then is made to Moses who was also “faithful in all of God’s house.” This is intended to act as a challenge to the readers. Moses acted in some sense as a prototype of what it meant to be both faithful, and to act, as God’s agent in carrying out His will and His mission. In the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Exodus 3:10, Moses is described as “being sent” (ἀποστείλω) by God to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. This verbal usage of the root of the word “apostle” may have made it much more likely that Moses would be seen as one “called” and “appointed” by God in the way described by the writer in Hebrews. Moses was held in especially high regard by those of Jewish origin. A connection is being made in the minds of the readers between Moses, who was foundational in developing a distinct people for service to God, and the role of Jesus who also is one sent to do something very much the same. Just as Moses was “faithful,” so also was Jesus faithful.

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<sup>10</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Daily Study Bible series (Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, 1955), p. 24.

Despite the fact that a comparison is made between the faithfulness of Jesus and that of Moses, they are not in fact considered to be equals in many other ways. Jesus is worthy of “more glory” than Moses. The care with which the author treats Moses in this discussion reflects the dilemma and the opportunity created by the primacy of Moses in the Jewish tradition. The readers would have been very familiar with the account of Aaron and Miriam’s challenge to the uniqueness of the position of Moses with regard to God (Numbers 12<sup>11</sup>). God confirmed the unique position of Moses in comparison to that of Aaron and Miriam in this encounter and made it very clear that they were in fact not the equal of Moses in this relationship.<sup>12</sup> This contrast and comparison between Jesus and Moses in Hebrews takes on whole new dimensions when the backdrop of the challenge of Aaron and Miriam is seen. It is highly likely that this is exactly what would have come to the minds of the original readers. In this comparison, Moses who was considered to be

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<sup>11</sup> **While they were at Hazereth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); <sup>2</sup> and they said, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it. NRSV.**

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 86-90.



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the closest human being to God, and yet Jesus is found to be “worthy of more glory than Moses.” This is a tremendous statement with regard to the authority of Jesus.

The reasoning for this state of affairs is then set out: the glory of Jesus is based in the fact of who He is; He is the builder of the house rather than just a servant within the house (verses 3-4). The nature of Jesus, as the Son of God, meant that He was completely different from Moses. Not only is He a Son, but He is also the Son who actually built the house being discussed in Hebrews. At verse 6, the writer makes it clear that this house is not simply some physical structure, this is the house made up of the people of God. There is also a challenge issued to the readers stimulating them to “hold firmly” to the hope that we have. He seeks to remind them, and us, that our calling is a heavenly calling. We see here that a major function of this writing is to be an exhortation, a warning. This is not intended to be a writing that is simply an intellectual exercise, it is a call to action, to live as the house of God.

The writer of Hebrews has been proving the supremacy of Christ, then at verse 7 (quote from Psalm 95:7b-11) he moves on

from expressing the greatness of Jesus and lays out the exhortation for which he has been preparing his audience. He clearly assumes that he has made his point, and as a consequence of making that point he now can now move on with the challenge to the danger that he sees as looming above his audience. The current audience is in danger of making the same mistakes that the Israelites made in the wilderness; the mistake of hardening their hearts and of rebelling against God. The people of the exodus were challenged in a “testing” of their faithfulness to God and even after forty years of seeing the power of God daily, living because of the power of God, they failed the test. Because of this rebellion, God was angry with that generation. They just did not get it, and they would not give their hearts to God. They failed in their understanding of God and His ways. Because of this continual failure they made it clear not only that they did not know God, but it was not in their heart to strive for that knowing of God.

In all of this, there is an appeal made to a familiar story in such a manner that this is not just a story from the past, but it is expressed in a manner calling them to recognize that they are in

danger of being those that fall in the wilderness. This is an ongoing story, it is the story of humanity. God has in the past reached out to His people, and He continues to reach out in order to get them to understand His nature and His pursuit of relationship with them. In that relationship, like all relationships, it is necessary for both parties to seek relationship. One side (in this case God) can pursue relationship, but the other side must at some point also seek that relationship in order for it to actually work. As in a marriage, there are things that are required of both people in order for this to be a real marriage. There are promises (vows), and they are more than just words they are backed up by actions, when marriage is genuine. In our relationship with God it is necessary for us to express our covenant faithfulness through our obedience and our efforts to give our heart and soul to God.

The real overt exhortation begins at verse 12 with the words “take care” (Βλέπετε) not to have an “evil, or unbelieving heart.” Such a heart as this is a rebellious heart, one that turns away from God, one that breaks covenant with God. You can sense the great angst in the words of this author as he expresses

his concern on a level that sees great danger ahead for his audience. He seeks to warn them like the lookout of a ship who sees rocks ahead and calls out for urgent action to avoid disaster. As a part of this exhortation, at verse 13, there is a desire for his readers to act as people who warn (exhort) one another. He calls them not to be self-centered and into what might be described as navel gazing. He challenges them to be looking out for one another, to challenge each other, to not allow one another to become hardened by “the deceitfulness of sin.” Sin has an affect and that affect is that with continual exposure it causes the heart to grow hard (calloused). The challenge here is given not only because the other way is not the way of Christ, but is also the way that leads to death and destruction, as the author will make clear in what follows.

The immunization to this consequence of exposure to evil and sin is to hold firm to our “first confidence.” In this is the basic message of God, the Gospel, that God sent His Son to deliver to us the message of life and truth. He not only told us the way, he demonstrated the way, in order for us to restore and maintain our relationship with God. The writer does all of this while at the

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same time challenging us to continue in our confidence not just some of the time, and for a season, but all the way to the end.

The focus here is not to indict us to some form unrealistic perfection that is not possible, but to challenge us to have hearts of faithfulness that will be filled with a passion and a love for God that continually draws us toward Him. We are to hold onto the passion, confidently, all the way to the end. We “have become partners (μέτοχοι) of Christ.”


At verse 15, the author of Hebrews quotes once again from Psalm 95:7b-8 and exhorts his audience to “hear his voice” while it is still today. There can be no delay, there is an urgency in this admonition; the danger is real and immediate. Failure to hear the voice of God is equated with hardening the “heart” (καρδίας). This is what Israel did when rebelled against God in the wilderness. The author returns once again to the story of Israel in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt. It is a foundational story in the annals of Israel. It was in this crucible that God created a people for Himself. Even though that people started the journey well by actually leaving Egypt and following God into the wilderness, they did not arrive at the desired

destination. Their bodies fell in the wilderness. They broke covenant with God by being a rebellious and contentious people that would not follow the leading of God, they sinned. In sinning they failed in their calling to not only begin the journey to the promised land, but to carry that journey forward all the way to the end, to the rest of God. This story is more than just a report about what historically happened to Israel, it can all too easily become our story too as it could become the story of the original readers of Hebrews.

So often we love to tell the story of how the River Jordan was split and Israel victoriously entered into the promised land, but the reality is that only two of those that were over 21 when they left Egypt actually entered into the promised land. The rest, perished in the wilderness, because of their unfaithfulness to God. This fact should cause us to contemplate carefully not only how we ran the race yesterday, and how we will run it today, but also how we will run it each day until the race is finished (we enter God's rest). This is a challenge to walk in belief and not in "unbelief" (ἀπιστίαν). Their unbelief (that of those who left Egypt) was expressed in their disobedience and meant that they

died in the wilderness. The hopeful days of the departure from Egypt were replaced with the reality of death in a land that was not their own, a land that was inhospitable, desolate, and seen as a place where evil spirits haunted every corner of that desolation. This warning should give all of us pause as we contemplate our lives. Are we walking in obedience, in covenant with God? Are we continuing the journey as we began the journey, with an exuberance, and a passion that expresses the belief of our heart? Those who failed to maintain such focus, such belief, and failed to act in obedience toward God, those who “sinned” (τοῖς ἁμαρτήσασιν), their bodies fell in wilderness. The reason that they failed to enter God’s rest was due to their disobedience, their unbelief.

The implication is clear; if the readers continue in the direction they are headed they too will meet with the same fate as the Israelites did whose bodies fell in the wilderness. The purpose of the writer of Hebrews is to provide warning of what is ahead in order that they might not destroy their lives on the rocks of sin, disobedience and unbelief. That is a challenge not just for those first readers, it is also a challenge for us today. Will




we be faithful to our heavenly calling or will we be disobedient and faithless? The consequences are laid out clearly here and will be developed even more fully as the writer proceeds with his exhortation.



# Synopsis

As we take up this chapter it is clear that the danger seen by the writer of Hebrews is neither distant nor slight. He perceives the danger faced by his audience to be of tremendous urgency and of ultimate consequence (life and death). He chooses to highlight the nature of Jesus' witness by contrasting the ministry, relationship, and authority of Moses, with that of Jesus. Both of these great men served in the house of God, but one also built that house (Jesus). Because of His role as builder Jesus is due greater honor than Moses. In this chapter the author also equates Jesus with God if we read carefully. His role as a Son and as a Builder means He should be heard as more authoritative than Moses.

After making this point, the writer goes onto the primary focus of his exhortation in this chapter. He challenges his audience by reminding them of the story of the exodus and those that started out faithfully on that journey, but failed to complete it. They were disobedient, and unfaithful to God, and so they failed to receive what God had promised them. They broke covenant with God. The challenge given here is to hear the voice of God, to continue the journey through to the end. The challenge here is to



be obedient, faithful, and to persevere in sincere devotion to Christ. Disobedience and rebellion against God had a consequence for those that left Egypt and the same holds true for those who began following Christ. The writer here challenges them to continue to believe and to demonstrate that belief by living in covenant faithfulness with Christ and with their fellow believers. He does all of this with a sense of urgency and importance that relate to how he perceives the consequences of failure.

# Questions

1. How would you describe the term “heavenly calling” as it relates to people living in 21st century America?
2. Why do you think it is important to have Jesus as our High Priest?
3. What do you think God wants His people to do differently than the rest of the world? Why?
4. What do you think it would be like to have a conversation with God?
5. What are some ways that honor and glory are expressed in our world today?
6. What do you think it means to be a faithful servant of God today?
7. What are some signs of “unfaithfulness” toward God?
8. What are some ways that both Moses and Jesus expressed faithfulness toward God? What can we learn from this?
9. What are some ways that we hear the voice of God today?
10. What do you think it means to “enter the rest of God?”
11. In what ways do people express unbelief?
12. How should we “exhort” one another?

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13. What do you think it means to become a “partner” with Christ?
  14. How would you define sin?
  15. How does “disobedience” relate to “sin?”
  16. How would you sum up the message of this chapter in a single sentence?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to recognize that the writer of Hebrews expects his audience not only to know Scripture, but also to have a high view of its stories as more than mere stories. He expects his audience to be Christians who have professed a faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior. It is important to recognize that he perceives that his audience is in great danger of falling in the wilderness.

## **Where is God in these words?**

Notice how the writer quotes from the Psalms in such a manner that demonstrates his belief that God is the person speaking these words. He also expresses that the calling given to these Christians is the expression of God Himself. It is hard to avoid the implication that the words and reasoning being given by this author are being given as the words of God. What is your view of Scripture as expressing the “words” of God? What do you think are some of the affects that God’s words should have on us today?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

As we read the words of this ancient text it is all too easy to focus on seeing this as applying to a long dead people and as not speaking directly to us and our situation. One of the reasons this writing has been preserved and passed down through history is that some in each generation recognized that the message was for them. The message given here still challenges people to live like Jesus and to answer the heavenly calling. What are some ways that you were reminded of that calling as you read this chapter?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

The word of God continually calls us into relationship with Him. It calls us to a covenant of faithfulness, hope, and ultimately too, of rest. Life can be exhausting and rest is hard to obtain. So often we seek rest in all of the wrong places and in all of the wrong things. We were created for relationship with God and with each other. The writer of Hebrews reminds us powerfully of this using the ancient Hebrew Scriptures and challenges us to finish our race all the way to the perfection of our calling, to be like Jesus. We are called to be faithful, obedient, and people who honor our calling by becoming what God intended us to be. How do you do this?