

# “Christ is Faithful”

## The Fifth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

*Texts: Hebrews 3:1-19; Psalm 95:1-11*

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In the first two chapters of this epistle, the author of Hebrews has built a very impressive case for the superiority of Jesus Christ to all things. Jesus, who is the radiance of the glory of God, is the creator of all things. Yet the same Jesus who is God’s eternal son, now shares our flesh and blood by virtue of his incarnation. After dying for our sins and being raised from the dead, Jesus has been given the highest possible honor—he alone sits at God’s right hand. In the opening chapters of this epistle, the author has demonstrated that Jesus is superior to angels as well as Israel’s priesthood. As we now move into Hebrews 3, the author begins to make his case that Jesus Christ is superior to Moses, and more importantly, is the mediator of a far better covenant (the New Covenant) than that covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

Writing to an unknown church in an unknown city, the unknown author of this epistle is addressing the difficult situation facing the congregation to which he is writing. Many in this church were Hellenistic Jews (Greek in culture, but Hebrew in theology) who had recently become Christians. In the face of opposition from their Jewish friends and family, and even perhaps from governing authorities, many in this church had given up on their faith in Jesus Christ and returned to Judaism. The epistle to the Hebrews is the author’s very pointed warning to those remaining in the church who were considering doing the same thing. He addresses head-on the gravity of the sin of apostasy, and will continue to do so throughout this letter.

But the author does more than just warn his readers or make threats to them. In this letter he makes a very powerful case from the pages of the LXX (which Greek-speaking Jews regarded as authoritative), that even in their own Scriptures (the Old Testament) it is clear that Jesus is that one who created the angels, and that one whom the angels worship and serve. The author not only warns those reading or hearing this not to neglect such a great salvation and to be careful not to “drift away” from Jesus Christ and the gospel, but he also gives them a reason continue in the Christian faith when he describes how Jesus Christ is God’s perfect priest who offers a perfect sacrifice for sin. This perfect priest has suffered just as we suffer, and Jesus Christ has been tempted in all things, just as we have been tempted. Therefore Jesus is not only superior to angels, and to the priests of Israel, Jesus is a faithful and merciful high priest who now sits at God’s right hand.

As we move into chapter 3 of Hebrews, we find the author doing two things. First, he continues to argue for the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses (in verses 1-6), before he begins an extended discussion (which runs all the way through chapter 10, verse 18) for the superiority of Jesus (and the New Covenant) to that covenant which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

We have already pointed out that Hellenistic Jews were fascinated with angels. They also believed that Moses (not Abraham) was the central figure in Old Testament history. In light of this, the author describes Moses’ role in redemptive history, fully acknowledging the great care which Moses exercised in performing his duties as covenant mediator. No question, Moses is a significant figure who is at the heart of Old Testament religion. But now the author contrasts Moses (as great as he was, yet with human limitations) with Jesus Christ, who is the perfect priest who offers a perfect sacrifice, and serves as the mediator of a much better covenant, with much better promises.

In verse 1 of chapter 3, the author writes, “*Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.*” The use of the conjunction “therefore” (*hothen*) ties the following discussion to the author’s previous mention of Jesus’ priestly office, and his redemptive work on behalf of sinners in chapter 2 verse 17—“*Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*” What follows in verses 1-6 of chapter 3, is the author’s case as to why the priesthood of Jesus Christ is superior to that of Moses.

Notice that the author of Hebrews addresses his readers/hearers as “holy brothers,” which is yet another indication that all those who trust in Jesus Christ (Jew or Gentile) are now members of the family of God (Christ’s children) and members of God’s *ekklesia* (“church” or “congregation”). These dear ones are in God’s congregation because they have received a “heavenly calling,” that is, they have been called by God to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel. In this, we see the connection between those who are called by God, who are sanctified by Christ (set apart for God’s purposes), and who are now members of the family of God (which is the church). Church membership may be taken lightly by many of our contemporaries, but it is a major theme throughout the New Testament. From the author of Hebrews point of view, drifting away from Christ begins with indifference toward his church.

At this point, the author identifies Jesus as “the apostle and high priest” of our confession. An apostle is someone who is “sent.” In connecting the offices of “apostle” and “high priest” in a single person, the author is referring to the fact that God’s representative to us (Jesus) has been “sent” by God himself, and that Jesus in turn represents us before God as our high priest.<sup>1</sup> This is what we as Christians “confess,” about Jesus. He is eternal God and creator of all things who partakes of our flesh and blood. In his incarnation, Jesus both represents God to us, and us to God.

Because this is what we confess as Christians ( Jesus is sent by God as the final high priest and is the object of our faith), the author is reminding his audience that when they first became Christians this is the Jesus in whom they placed their trust (believed) and in whose name they were baptized. Nothing has changed since these people first made their confession. So, if Jesus is all of these things, and people in this church have already identified themselves with Jesus through faith, and died and rose again with Jesus through baptism, what has now changed? What reason is there to drift away and neglect such a great salvation? There is none!

As that one sent by God (“the apostle”) and that one who represents us before God (high priest), Jesus has demonstrated that he is faithful, as the author puts it in verse 2. Jesus “*who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house.*” There are few people in the Old Testament who are both God’s representative to the people, and the people’s representative before God. One of them was Moses, and the author is recalling to mind the words of Numbers 12:7—“*. . . my servant Moses . . . is faithful in all my house.*” Moses was not only sent by God, he served faithfully as the people of Israel’s covenant mediator and intercessor before God. No doubt, Moses is the key figure in Israel’s history, and no doubt, he was faithful as the chief steward of “God’s house,” which, by the way, is not a reference to the tabernacle (and later the temple), but to the people of God.<sup>2</sup>

But as great as Moses was, the reality is that Moses is inferior in both his person and his office to Jesus,

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 91.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 92.

the great high priest (who is fully God) who offered the perfect sacrifice (because he partakes of our flesh and blood). As we read in verses 3-4, “*For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.)*” Jesus now sits at God’s right hand and possesses a glory and honor greater than that of any human being. As that one who calls the people of God to faith, who has offered himself as a propitiation for the sins of God’s people (turning aside his wrath), and who is the sanctifier of God’s house (God’s people), Jesus is vastly superior to Moses, or anyone else, for that matter. Whereas Moses was covenant mediator for Israel, Jesus (who created all things) is covenant mediator over all the house of God (the multitude of those redeemed which cannot be numbered, and which includes both Jew and Gentile).

In making this point, the author is once again emphasizing the fact that the old covenant (in all of its aspects), while given by God, and suitable for his purposes (which is to foreshadow a new and better covenant), is necessarily inferior to that New Covenant of which Jesus Christ is administrator. This can be seen in Moses’ relationship to Israel as spelled out in verses 5-6a. “*Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son.*” Yes, Moses was faithful—as faithful as humanly possibly given human sinfulness and limitations. Moses was a servant among the people of God (God’s house), and in exercising that prophetic aspect of his office, was pointing the people of Israel ahead to a greater mediator (Jesus), one who offered a perfect sacrifice for sin, and who himself was not a sinner as was Moses.

So, *if* Moses faithfully presided over the house of God (the people of Israel) as Jews believed, then it is clear that under the New Covenant, the people of God include all those who are Christ’s and therefore, members of his church. And those who are truly Christ’s, must persevere to the end of their lives in faith. As the author puts it to his readers, “*and we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*” This is a warning to this church that members of God’s house must hold fast to that one (Jesus) in whom they have placed their trust. Although, Jesus is at God’s right hand and we do not see him, we must remain confident in the hope that Jesus will indeed accomplish everything he has promised—the biblical basis for hope. And we should boast (express confidence) in this hope.

Notice that the author does not issue these warnings in a vacuum—“you better persevere, or else!” While he does not soften the gravity of the sin associated with apostasy, the author repeatedly and powerfully reminds us of who Jesus is, and what he has done for us, therefore giving us a renewed basis for faith, as well as a basis for hope and a reason to boast. Remember too that the warning to persevere carries no power to obey it. Telling people to persevere or else, often leads to people giving up on Christ, because they inevitably tire of warnings when there is no promise of the gospel creating within them a desire to persevere. Ironically, a stern warning without the promise of the gospel crushes faith (just like the law crushes us if not followed by the preaching of the gospel). In fact, faith in the gospel promises is absolutely necessary if someone is to even desire to persevere to the end in faith.

But by preaching Christ to us—reminding us who Jesus is (the eternal son of God), and reminding us of what Jesus has done for us (offered the perfect sacrifice), as well as the fact that Jesus cares for us (both in the knowledge that he himself has suffered and was tempted), and that Jesus calls into his family through the gospel—the author does not leave us under the condemnation of the warning. Displaying the person and work of Christ to us strengthens our faith and gives us both a reason and the strength to persevere. But the warning to persevere still must be heeded by those who dwell in God’s house.

So, having shown us the glories of Jesus Christ, the author of this epistle now issues a second warning to Christians in this church to persevere. One way in which the difference between Jesus and Moses can be

seen is in the fact that the people of Israel (the so-called “Exodus generation”) were disobedient and did not enter the land of promise because of their failure to persevere in faith in the promise God made to Abraham, which still stood, even after God made his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. Therefore what follows in verses 3:7-4:13 is an extended argument designed to do two things.

First, in recalling to mind this particular episode in redemptive history, the author is able to warn his readers not to be like Israel and reject the promise, fall away, and come under the covenant curses, as happened to that generation of Israelites who left Egypt, journeyed to Mount Sinai, and then wandered in the wilderness for a generation, where most of them died. The second thing he is able to do is contrast Moses’ priesthood with Jesus Christ’s much greater priesthood. In other words, the author not only warns his hearers about the necessity of persevering, at the same time he shows the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses. Not only is Jesus a better mediator of a better covenant, the author will now show that Jesus leads the household of God in a new and better Exodus.<sup>3</sup>

In verses 7-11 of Hebrews 3, the author makes this case by citing the second half of Psalm 95 (vv. 7b-11, and part of our Old Testament lesson) which is a warning to the people of God not to disobey him as Israel did while in the wilderness. The Jews often used this Psalm (especially the first half vv. 1-7b with its emphasis upon the worship of YHWH) in the synagogue as part of their liturgy to celebrate the arrival of the Sabbath day (Saturday). Christians followed suit and have used this Psalm from the earliest times (especially verses 1-7) as a call to worship on the Lord’s Day. The reading of Psalm 95 is a prominent feature of the Book of Common Prayer.

The author cites from Psalm 95, while declaring to his hearers that these words are given by the Holy Spirit (who is God). *“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘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.’”* Hellenistic Jews knew these words by heart, reciting them or hearing them often in the synagogue. But they are about to have the tables turned on them when these words are applied to them—not as a history lesson about ancient Israel’s worship of YHWH, but as a warning about their own future outcomes.

In this citation from the last half of Psalm 95, the author of Hebrews is using these same familiar words to make the point that drifting away from Christ, neglecting his gospel, avoiding God’s household (Christians assembling together for worship on the Lord’s Day), amounts to the same kind of behavior recounted in the last half of the Psalm—when disobedient and unbelieving Israel engaged in the rebellion at Meribah (Exodus 17). Those in this church who rebel against God and commit apostasy put God to the test just like Israel did in the wilderness. They provoke his wrath. They bring the covenant curses down upon themselves. And as a consequence, they will not enter God’s rest, just as the “Exodus generation” wandered throughout the wilderness of the Sinai desert.

For the people of Israel, God’s rest was experienced in observing the Sabbath as a day of rest from physical labor. But this day of rest was also tied to Israel’s entrance into the promised land, which was overflowing with milk and honey, and which served as a type of heavenly blessings and our eternal rest. For the author of Hebrews the “today” of Israel’s rebellion, has become the “today” when the people of God begin the new Exodus through faith in Jesus Christ. Now, the question is facing his hearers is, “will

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 96.

those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ and are baptized, hear God’s voice through the preaching of the word, or will they harden their hearts and rebel against God like Israel did by renouncing Jesus Christ?” “Will the people in this church persevere in faith or rebel against God?” The author ratchets up the pressure on his hearers by forcing them to make a decision. The “today” of decision is at hand!

That this is the case becomes crystal clear in verse 12, where the author lays out this warning in no uncertain terms: “*Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.*” If Jesus is greater than Moses, then the curses associated with rejecting the son of God as covenant mediator are much greater than the covenant curses which resulted from Israel disobeying Moses.<sup>4</sup> Those who rebelled against Moses in the desert did not enter Canaan and were forced to wander through the Sinai desert for forty-years—an entire generation. But those who rebel against Jesus Christ and renounce him will miss out on every blessing which he has secured for his people. Apostasy is no small thing. The price is very high.

Apostasy not only has temporal consequences (people remove themselves from the preaching of the gospel and the means of grace), but as the author points out, apostates fall away from the living God. Apostasy stems from an unbelieving heart which rejects the promises which God graciously makes to us in Jesus Christ. Unbelief embraces the erroneous notion that God will reward us because of our good works. But what good works do we have? Unbelief desires for God to look upon our hearts and see our “good intentions.” But who among us does not have a heart filled with evil intentions? To even think this way is to miss the very essence of the blessing/curse principle which is that God demands perfect obedience from us to every stipulation of the law in thought, word, and deed.

More often, however, the sort of unbelief which eventually leads to the type of apostasy taking place in the church takes different form. It is not rebellion as much as it is indifference. We also see this form of unbelief present among those Israelites in the wilderness of the Sinai desert but who preferred going back to slavery in Egypt to walking by faith in promises which were as yet unseen. To put it another way, these people would rather gratify the sinful desires of the flesh now, then deny themselves and live in hope of heavenly blessings yet to come. God’s people are hereby warned to “take care” that this does not happen to us. This is why the author goes on to say in verse 13, “*but exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*”

Christians are to “take care” that this not happen. This requires diligence on our part. But Christians are also to encourage one another with the promises of the gospel. The good news is that Christians live in an era of redemptive history with much greater promises than Israel did. The “today” in which we live is characterized by a much greater high priest who offers perfect sacrifices, who sanctifies us, and who includes us in the family of God. Therefore, we are to encourage one another with the glorious reality of the things done for us by Jesus Christ. To put it in more practical terms, we must attend to the preaching of the word. We must receive the sacraments which strengthen faith and confirm God’s promises. We must bear one another’s burdens, pray for one another, and comfort those among us who need comfort. And, the author says, we must encourage one another with the promises of the gospel.

We must do this because we are all sinners with sinful hearts. Every one of us are prone to becoming hardened in our sins, and if we are not careful, our own sinfulness will deceive us. Like plants shriveling up in the heat for a lack of water, so too faith can shrivel up and diminish. And then we will drift away and neglect such a great salvation (which Jesus Christ has accomplished for us). Therefore, since we live

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 99.

in the “today” of God’s salvation let us not neglect those wonderful things Jesus has done for us.

Again, the author not only warns us to be careful, he offers us a reason to persevere. As he states in verse 14, “*for we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*” Through faith in Christ, we share in all his benefits—not just some of his benefits. ***If indeed*** (the condition which must be met) we are truly Christ’s, the we will hold this confidence in him and his promises to the end. The reason why those who are truly Christ’s will hold this confidence in God’s promises to the end and be saved, is because Christ holds us. In 1 John 1:5-2:2, we read of Jesus sitting at the father’s right hand praying for us, ensuring that our faith does not fail. In John’s gospel (6:40), we read, “*for this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*” Those who are truly Christ’s will hear these warnings, heed them, and persevere. Jesus Christ will ensure that we do. God’s elect must persevere to the end to be saved. But God’s elect do persevere to the end! This his how we make our calling and election sure!

In verses 15-18, The author again returns to the Old Testament, specifically the words of Psalm 95, and to the account of Israel’s rebellion as recounted in Exodus 17 and Numbers 14. He writes, “*as it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?’*” Jewish Christians knew the story of Israel’s rebellion. Now they are exhorted not to repeat it in their own lives.

The reason why Israel came under God’s judgment in the wilderness is very straight-forward and spelled out in verse 19. “*So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.*” The Israelites grumbled about the presence of the Canaanites in the land God promised them. They doubted that God could drive them out. They griped and grumbled about the manna God provided. They were so hard of heart that they would have gladly exchanged heavenly food for the spinach and okra of Egypt, even if that meant returning to slavery and building Pharaoh’s cities without enough straw to make the bricks. Those in the church receiving this letter should have immediately made the connection between Israel’s behavior in the wilderness (which brought down God’s wrath), and the danger of neglecting so great a salvation, as some in their midst had already done, and others were presently doing.

What, then, should we take away from this section of Hebrews?

**W** First and foremost, the lesson for us is to always keep the promises of the gospel before our eyes. We need to be continuously reminded that Jesus is greater than Moses, and the mediator of a better covenant. Yes, Moses was faithful over God’s house, but he could not save Israel from its own unbelief. Yes, Christ is faithful. But he can truly save his people because he is a better priest and his promises are rendered certain by his death, resurrection, and ascension to the father’s right hand.

Therefore, we need to take seriously the warning about how unbelief can overtake us, if we drift away from Christ and his people and lose sight of God’s promises. Losing sight of the gospel promises and then becoming indifferent to them, is the germ of unbelief. And that is why we must keep the promises of the gospel constantly before our eyes. God’s prescribed way to restrain our unbelief is through the preaching of the gospel to us, by participating in the sacraments, and with responding with grateful hearts to God’s promises with prayer. The good news is that Christ is faithful, even when we are not.