

Hebrews 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 3 Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house.

For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

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, and we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting and our hope.

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.

[1 : 1 2] Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil and believing heart leading you to fall away from the living God. 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.

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. 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? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. Hebrews has presented Christ in his exalted relationship to God and over the angels, chiefly in the first chapter.

In chapter 2, his relationship to mankind was explored, as the one who fully partakes in our condition, and after his humiliation, is lifted up as our representative, our champion, our deliverer, and our high priest.

[2 : 2 4] Chapter 3 now continues to speak of Christ as our high priest, especially in the first six verses, which speak of his status. This is followed by an exhortation from Psalm 95 verses 7 to 11, until the author returns to the theme of Christ as our high priest at the end of chapter 4.

Thomas Long observes a sort of theology of the church in miniature in the opening line of this chapter. As brothers, we are one, bound together in the family of God.

We are holy, set apart by God. We are apostolic, formed by the message of the great apostle, Jesus Christ himself, which is then passed on to his ministers. The author begins by comparing the faithfulness of Christ and his calling to the faithfulness of Moses, before proceeding to contrast the stature of these two figures.

Moses is an extremely important figure in the Old Testament. He's the paradigmatic leader. He's the great leader of Israel during the Exodus. Moses' relationship to the Lord was unique in the Old Testament.

Exodus chapter 33 verse 11 reads, Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend. The author references one of the key passages concerning Moses in Numbers chapter 12 verses 6 to 8, where the Lord speaks to Aaron and Miriam concerning Moses, who is described as the most meek man on the face of the earth.

[3 : 47] And he said, Hear my words. If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

Moses was made as God both to Aaron, in Exodus chapter 4 verse 16, and to Pharaoh, in Exodus chapter 7 verse 1. Moses saw the Lord's back and entered the very presence of the Lord on Mount Sinai.

Moses was regarded as a lower sort of God by the Israelites, who sought to replace him with the golden calf when they feared that he had died. He intermediated for the entire people, bearing and leading them before the Lord.

In Sirach chapter 45 verses 2 to 5, we have a sense of how Moses was viewed by other people of this period. He made him equal in glory to the holy ones, and made him great to the terror of his enemies.

[4 : 53] By his words he performed swift miracles. The Lord glorified him in the presence of kings. He gave him commandments for his people, and revealed to him his glory. For his faithfulness and meekness he consecrated him, choosing him out of all mankind.

He allowed him to hear his voice, and led him into the dark cloud, and gave him the commandments face to face, the law of life and knowledge, so that he might teach Jacob the commandment, and Israel his decrees.

There were various legends about Moses circulating at this time, and many early Jewish Christians would wonder where Jesus might stand relative to Moses. The point is not to diminish Moses, so much as it is to elevate Jesus.

Behind both this chapter and chapter 1, we might perceive many of the speculations that occurred about various figures of the heavenly courts. We should also probably consider the place of Deuteronomy chapter 18, verses 15 to 19, and the expectation that this represented.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers. It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die.

[6 : 10] And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. Jesus is much greater than Moses, though. Playing with the concept of Moses' faithfulness in God's house, in Numbers chapter 12, the author of Hebrews explores different aspects of that concept, the concept of the house.

Long uses the illustration of the jewel that is turned, so that the viewer can see different facets. The author starts by exploring the concept of the house as a physical building.

Moses is part of the house, but Christ is the builder of the house. Now a different facet is seen. The house is the household. Moses is the faithful servant and steward, but Christ is the son who is over the entire house as it belongs to him.

Finally, one further aspect is seen, as we ourselves are identified with the house. We are the household of the son, and we are the building that he is constructing. His glory says something about our elevated status as his people too.

[7 : 26] We are the people of Christ, as Old Testament Israel were the people of Moses. The author has both compared and contrasted Moses and Christ. Now he develops this point by relating a warning given on the basis of the failure of the wilderness generation led by Moses, in Psalm 95, to his hearer's situation in the first century AD.

At the beginning of chapter 2, after he had demonstrated the supremacy of Christ over the angels in chapter 1, he had delivered a warning to pay closer attention. If rejection of the law given by means of the angels came with such punishment, how much more rejection of the message of Christ?

The logic of the quotation of Psalm 95, after his argument for the supremacy of Christ over Moses, is much the same. The author will return to unpacking the character of Christ as high priest after this mini-sermon. But here his point is to drive home something of the practical import of the supremacy of Christ over Moses.

Within the passage that follows, he will especially work with the key hook words of today and rest. As he has connected and contrasted Moses with Christ, the author is now able to relate Old Testament scriptures concerning Moses and his people to the situation of the recipients of the book.

It is worth noting the way that such typology serves the task of preaching, by placing Christians into clear analogical relationships with former groups of God's people, and enabling words delivered to them to speak directly into our present situations too.

[9 : 01] Paul does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, where he employs the cautionary example of the Israelites. Verses 6 to 11 of that chapter read, Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and 23,000 fell in a single day.

We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Psalm 95 emphasises the urgent importance of hearing the word of the Lord. This was also the point stressed in chapter 2 verses 1 to 4. The term today is one that he returns to on several occasions.

Today stresses the urgency of the message, and the danger of failing to respond to it. Sin hardens us. Those who delay their response will find that their capacity to respond diminishes over time.

[10 : 15] Before long, we might have closed our window of opportunity, and become insensitive to the message. If you hear God's truth, respond immediately. Do not delay.

Do not let that slight twinge of conscience that you feel be the last dying embers, of a grace that you have long sought to quench, and will soon utterly extinguish. Nothing matters more than this.

In the hardening that the author describes, we might also remember the cautionary example of Pharaoh, who progressively hardened his heart to his own utter destruction. The progressive yet almost imperceptible character of such developments are particularly significant for the author of Hebrews.

We must take care for this reason. Our own hearts are treacherous. They can betray us. And sin can outwit us. We must be vigilant and be on our guard.

The danger of falling away from the living God is real. One of the ways that the Lord preserves us as his people is through such serious warnings. It is imperative that we heed them.

[11 : 18] In verse 6, the author wrote, And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting and our hope. He makes a similar statement in verse 14.

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. Both of these are rather surprising statements. They seem to make one's current status dependent upon future perseverance.

However, this may not be all that strange. Future actions can definitely change the past in certain ways. The meaningfulness of our past sacrifices, for instance, depends largely upon what becomes of them.

If we abandon past commitments, the past actions made in service of those commitments are emptied of their meaning, and our past selves can be betrayed and robbed. Our current participation in Christ is a participation in hope.

It is anticipatory. The meaning of my current participation in Christ depends largely upon whether I will persevere in it or not. If I abandon it, my current participation is also robbed of much of its force.

[12 : 24] I will have betrayed my current self and deprived myself of the sure hope that I currently found my faith upon. The Israelites, of course, had the promise of entering into the rest of the promised land.

They ventured out into the wilderness to receive it. However, by abandoning their faith, they robbed themselves of the promise, and emptied their former decision to follow Moses and the Lord out of Egypt of its meaning, by not following through with it.

They ended up going out into the wilderness to die. Later events can poison past ones, as anyone who has experienced a bitter divorce or betrayal can testify. Memories are curdled.

Sacrifices are made in vain. Years of our lives devoted to a particular cause can be wasted. As participants in Christ, we currently have in our hands the most precious treasure of all.

We must be careful never to reject it, because our current possession of it depends greatly upon how we persevere in it or not. Chapter 3 ends with the author recapitulating the story of Israel's unfaithfulness in the wilderness as a cautionary tale for Christians.

[13 : 30] Their story did not end well. While the author of Hebrews is confident of much better things for his hearers, he wants them, as the people of Christ, to learn from the example of the people of the lesser Moses.

He will develop this sermon further in the chapter that follows. A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament do we see Christ compared and contrasted with Moses?