ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER DAILY

Hebrews 3:1–4:13

Key Verse: 3:13

“But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

Are you a loner, or do you like to be in a group? Sometimes we need to find our own way alone, but often we need the help of others. In today’s passage the author reminds us of the story of the Israelites who failed to enter the Promised Land. What happened to them is a powerful lesson for us. In getting to any goal in life, we usually need others’ help. Likewise, in getting to our glorious hope in heaven, we need our Lord Jesus but we also need the practical, real-life help of a Christian community. How can we be such a community? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Read 3:1. In this verse the author addresses his readers as “holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling.” It refers back to 2:10,11, where he said that Jesus will make us holy and bring us to glory in heaven. We all share in this heavenly calling. In 3:14 he says we “share in Christ.” In other words, those who believe in Jesus are very precious and share a very special bond. We need to see one another like this.

In verse 1 the author tells us to “fix our thoughts on Jesus.” Later in 12:2 he tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus.” In both cases he means to focus on Jesus. In Hebrews this is important. It’s so easy to get distracted. The Christmas season is here, and there are so many treasured Christmas traditions. It’s easy for the main point, the birth of Jesus, to get obscured by trees and elves and presents and family and Santa and reindeer and food and many other good things. So there’s a famous saying: “Jesus is the Reason for the Season.” Why do we need to focus on him? Verse 1 says he’s our “apostle and high priest.” “Apostle” means God sent him to us. “High priest” means he’s the one who brings us to God. We shouldn’t get engrossed in gift wrapping paper but pay attention to the actual gift inside, right? In the same way, instead of getting sidetracked by other things or people, we need to pay special attention to Jesus himself. It says we “acknowledge” him. It’s a rather weak translation of the Greek word for “profess,” meaning we confess our faith in him. After we make a personal confession of faith in Jesus, we shouldn’t forget him and try to live life on our own; we should fix our thoughts on him all the time. We should turn our thoughts away from ourselves and really meditate on who Jesus is and what he’s done for us.

To help us, in verses 2–6a the author compares Jesus to Moses. For the Jews, Moses was the greatest servant of God. In fact, God was proud of Moses. When his brother Aaron and sister Miriam criticized him and thought they were prophets too, God told them in Numbers 12:7 that Moses was special—he was “faithful in all God’s house” (Heb3:2). It doesn’t mean he was a faithful janitor or cleaning lady; he faithfully served all God’s people. Numbers 12:8 adds that Moses enjoyed an especially close, face-to-face relationship with God. How precious is a servant of God who is so close to God and so faithful in serving God’s people! We should be afraid to speak against such a servant of God. The Jews were familiar with the greatness of Moses, especially his faithfulness. So the author of Hebrews acknowledges and says that Jesus is very faithful, too (2). But he goes on to say that Jesus is worthy of greater honor than Moses. Why? Mainly he says that Moses was a “servant in God’s house,” but Jesus is “the Son over God’s house.” What does it mean to us? It’s good to be encouraged by wonderful servants of God, but it’s even better to focus on Jesus.

Read verse 6b. Being “God’s house” means we’re actually God’s dwelling place, a very special place on earth. God is everywhere, but God especially dwells in the hearts and lives of his people. Our Lord Jesus is among us and God’s Spirit is present with us (Mt18:20; 1Co3:16; 1Ti3:15). But there’s a condition. The author says: “…if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.” We get to remain as part of God’s house as we hold firmly to our confidence and hope. What are they? They are our confidence and hope in Christ, in what he’s done for us and in what he’s promised us. He’s given us the forgiveness of sins and the living hope of the kingdom of God. We need to “hold firmly” to our personal faith in his forgiveness and in his kingdom. Holding firmly is repeated in 3:14 and again in 4:14. It suggests that we all have the possibility of losing our grip on what Jesus has promised us. If we do, we’re in danger of losing our place in God’s house.

To illustrate this, the author reminds us of a famous story. Actually it’s “the Holy Spirit” who reminds us of this historic event. Verses 7–11 are a quote from Psalm 95:7b–11. It re-tells the story of how the Israelites complained when they had no water and questioned whether God was really among them or not (Ex17:1–7). Psalm 95 also mentions the forty years the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness because of their rebellion against God (Nu14:1–35). Why is this story so important? It warns us that God saves people, but his people need to continue to listen to his voice. We need to remember what God has done and learn God’s ways; otherwise, we’re in danger of hardening our hearts, testing God, going astray, and making God angry.

Read verse 12. Just as Joshua and Caleb warned the people not to turn away from God (Nu14:9), so we need to warn one another. It says “see to it.” But how can we know if someone among us has a sinful, unbelieving heart? Ultimately we can’t really know anybody else’s heart—only God can. But if we stay close to one another and really care for each other, we can tell pretty well if someone’s heart is turning away from God. Verse 12 tells us that each one of us shares a spiritual responsibility not only for ourselves but also for each other. We shouldn’t be like Cain who said, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Ge4). Instead, to really be God’s house, the community of God’s people who help each other, we need to keep an eye out for one another. We need to be carrying each other’s burdens (Gal6:2), confessing our sins to each other and praying for each other (Jas5:16). This is real Christian community. We all need such a community.

But we should ask ourselves here: Why does a person’s heart become “sinful” and “unbelieving,” so much so that he or she is ready to turn “away from the living God”? There might be many reasons. It might happen simply due to spiritual laziness over time. The less we struggle spiritually, the more likely we are to have sin and unbelief grow in our hearts. But sometimes our hearts become sinful and unbelieving when we don’t get what we want, or when we encounter some difficulty, like when the Israelites experienced the hardship of having no water. Hardships can easily make anyone sinful and unbelieving. When we experience hardships, it’s so important not to turn *away* from God but to really turn *to* God.

How can our hearts be protected? How can we keep turning to God? Read verse 13. We need to be encouraging one another “daily.” This word “daily” seems to be important. Even a few days left on our own, and we can get lost and go astray. Why is that? It’s because the world’s influence on us can be so strong. The world can actually pull us away from God. Our Lord Jesus said “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things” can choke out the word of God from our hearts (Mk4:19). The world can even influence us with the spirit of rebellion against God (Eph2:2). It especially says here that “sin’s deceitfulness” can “harden” us. Sinful desires can deceive us into thinking that sin is good, or that there’ll be no bad consequences (Ge3:4,5). To avoid falling into this thinking, we all need to be struggling against our own sinful desires first, and then encouraging one another also.

What does it mean to “encourage one another”? It means both love and warning. In Greek it’s the word “paraclete.” Our Lord Jesus used this word to describe the Holy Spirit (Jn14:16; 16:7; cf. 1Jn2:1). He’s also called our Counselor, Comforter and Advocate. It tells us that as we’re filled with the Spirit, we can be like the Spirit; we can come alongside one another to counsel, comfort, help and warn each other. The Bible calls encouragement one of the spiritual gifts (Ro12:8). But here, we’re all called to encourage one another daily. In Acts there was a man named Joseph, who, when he became a Christian, received a new name, “Barnabas,” which meant “Son of Encouragement.” He encouraged the believers when he sold a field he owned and brought the money to the church (Ac4:36). But it wasn’t just one epic act; later Barnabas encouraged Saul after his conversion, when no one trusted him (Ac9:37). And he continued to encourage new believers to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (Ac11:23). His encouragement came at crucial moments. Likewise, we need a sense of timing of when to encourage a fellow believer.

And this passage tells us more about spiritual encouragement. Read verse 14. Here encouragement means helping others to hold their original conviction firmly to the end. Verse 6 says to hold firmly to our confidence and hope. So encouraging means reminding one another of our shared faith and hope in Jesus. This world can be so hard because of endless demands and problems and because people can sometimes discourage us. But when we think of our hope in Christ, we’re greatly encouraged to keep going.

What’s our hope in Christ? The verses from Psalm 95 mention God’s “rest.” In fact, in today’s passage the word “rest” is repeated eleven times (3:11, 18; 4:1,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11). God promised the Israelites to have rest from all their enemies in the Promised Land. Likewise, God promises those who believe in Jesus that they will have eternal rest in heaven. When we work hard, we really hope we can have rest. But we find that in this world there’s no true rest—just endless struggles and problems. 4:1 says that “the promise of entering his rest still stands”—meaning it’s still available; God is still offering it to us. 4:6 says that “it still remains for some to enter that rest.” Read 4:9. God wants to give his people rest from all the struggles and labor of this cursed world. He calls it “his rest,” and he really wants to share it with us. When we remind one another of the hope of his rest, that’s real encouragement.

But who gets to enjoy God’s rest? Read 4:3a. It’s only for those who have believed. And this belief is not a one-time, static thing—we need to keep on believing what God has promised us. For this point the author emphasizes the word “Today” in Psalm 95. Read 4:7. It’s “Today” because each day we need to believe it. Faith has to be part of our daily living. Verse 2b says we have to share the faith of those who obey God. In this passage, faith is repeatedly equated with obedience, and unbelief with disobedience (3:12,18,19; 4:2,3,6,11; cf. Ro1:5). If faith is the same as obedience, what should we obey? In the quote from Psalm 95, it says, “if you hear his voice…” It means we need to learn to obey God’s voice, God’s word. That’s what faith is—it’s not to just think something; it’s to actually obey his word. As we learn to respond to God’s voice “Today” with practical obedience, we gain the hope of entering his rest in heaven. This is another form of encouragement—helping each other learn to obey God’s voice “Today.” We tend to give others human advice based on our own ideas. That’s not really encouragement. But when we carefully listen to God’s voice in the Bible “Today” and share it with others, it’s the best encouragement.

Read 4:12,13. Here the author concludes with two things: God’s word, and God himself. God’s word is like a mirror. Often we don’t even know what’s really going on in our own hearts. But as we read the Bible humbly and honestly, it shows us the thoughts and attitudes of our heart. It rebukes us and shows us what we need to repent of. It goes deep. It tells us that the best encouragement is based on the word of God. It’s also encouraging to remember that God sees everything. Nothing is hidden from him. Everyone is accountable to him.

Read 3:13 again. May God help us build such an encouraging spiritual community among us, so that we all can fix our thoughts on Jesus each day, obey him, and live with the hope of entering God’s rest.