

(Devotional #11) The Life of Faith: Hebrews 3:7 – 4:16
The New Testament's Treatment of the Meribah Incidents

OPENING SCRIPTURE READING:

*“Do not harden your hearts as at **Meribah**, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested Me, (when) they tried Me, though they had seen My work. For forty-years I loathed that generation, and I said, ‘**they are a people, who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways.**’ Therefore, I swore in My anger, truly **they shall not enter into My rest**” – **Psalm 95:8-11.***

*“**For there remains a Sabbath Rest for the people of God**” – **Hebrews 4:9.***

In our last devotional we looked at two passages¹ in the Old Testament that record the stories of two generations of Israelites, both of whom were tested by God at a place called Meribah. Psalm 95² recounts the stories and events of a people, who failed to experience the blessings God has in store for those who walk before Him in faith, as Habakkuk exhorted all believers to do by his words: **“THE JUSTIFIED SHALL LIVE BY FAITH”** (**Habakkuk 2:4^B**).

Today we are going to see how the writer of the Book of Hebrews applied the lessons we learned last week from the Meribah stories. For the Israelites, ‘*God’s Rest*’ was the Promised Land, but for Christians, it is something even better.

Notice in **Hebrews 3:7** the word ‘**TODAY**’ – (“**TODAY** if you hear His voice.”) You can think of this as ‘**A CONTINUOUS DAY**’ – i.e., what the author of Hebrews said in **HIS** day, and the quotation he cites from **THE PSALMIST’S DAY**, still is pertinent to Christians in **OUR DAY**.

Lesson #1 – The Truth of God is timeless; it has application throughout the ages, and it is as valid for us ‘TODAY’ as on the day it was first revealed.

What is it we are to hear? (***We are to hear God’s voice.***) What is God’s voice saying to us today? (***He is proclaiming the Eternal Promises of the Word of God.***) For instance, in times of trial, testing, temptation, and fear, the voice of God is saying³:

Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the Righteous to be moved – Psalm 55:22 – and ... Cast your cares upon Him, for He cares for you – 1 Peter 5:7

‘**Today**’ always speaks of the present – ***the ‘Right Now.***’ The words ‘**hear**’ or ‘**see**,’ present us with a choice. If we choose to ignore the Word of God ‘**today**,’ it will become easier to ignore it ‘**tomorrow**.’ When the Word of God is ignored, we risk hardening our hearts. A heart that is indifferent to the Word of God is a heart that has been hardened by perpetual unbelief.

For many years, aviators believed it was impossible ‘**to break the sound barrier.**’ I am not sure it is possible to ‘**break it**’ in a literal sense, but it certainly is possible ‘**to exceed it.**’ And just as those early pioneers of the sky saw the speed of sound as a barrier, Christians on occasion may come up against ‘**a faith barrier.**’ And this is the purpose of studying Meribah and the New Testament’s Commentary on it⁴ ... to learn how ‘**to crack the faith barrier**’ that prevents us from experiencing life in God’s perpetual Sabbath Rest.

¹ The two passages that record the Meribah incidents are Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13

² Hebrews 3:7-11 is a New Testament quotation of Psalm 95:8-11

³ See also Isaiah 41:10, Proverbs 3:5, 6 and Psalm 37:4, 5

⁴ Hebrews 3:7 – 4:17

Verses 8-9 – “**Do not harden your hearts like your fathers did at Meribah.**” A hardened heart is the obstacle that prevents us from experiencing God’s Sabbath Rest. Hardening of the heart is the result of *habitual unbelief*. It is the result of man’s *failure to believe the Word of God*.

There is a pattern God uses in the realm of faith that is repeated for every believer: (1) God makes a promise that He reveals to us in His Word; next (2) He demonstrates in acts of history that He always keeps His Word; and then (3) He puts us in a set of circumstances that challenge our faith. In essence, God is saying, “*You have trusted me for your salvation, and as a result of your faith in Christ, I have adopted you into My family. Now will you trust Me for your daily needs?*”

Lesson #2 – Just as man must choose faith over unbelief ONCE at the time of our salvation, believers must choose faith over unbelief CONSISTENTLY over the course of our lives.

There is no such thing as ‘*Christian cruise control*.’ God wants us to experience ‘*a perpetual Sabbath*.’ We can think of this ‘*Sabbath*’ as ‘*Resting in Grace*.’ It marks the end of trying to earn God’s favor through human effort⁵, and instead it is *resting in confidence in the Word of God*. When God ‘*rested*’ after His acts of creation, He was not resting because He was tired. He was setting an example of how to live by faith.

Verses 10-11 – Israel failed to trust God even though for forty-years He had provided food (*quail and manna*) and water ... and even the clothes and sandals the Israelites wore did not wear out! Israel had ample evidence of God’s faithfulness to His Word, but even Moses failed at Meribah.

Verse 10 is telling ... Not only did Israel not trust the Lord, the Holy Spirit reveals, ‘**THEY DID NOT KNOW HIS WAYS.**’ *How can WE KNOW GOD’S WAYS?* Well, what are ‘**HIS WAYS**’? “*His ways*” means **DOCTRINE**; the teachings of the Scriptures! *The ONLY way we can know God is by means of revelation. God has revealed Himself to us through His Word, and if we do not know His Word, we cannot take advantages of His Promises.* It is important to remember in the Bible, ‘**THE HEART**’ is ‘**THE SEAT OF THINKING**⁶,’ *not the seat of the emotions.* This is why verse 10 associates “*hearts going astray*” with “*not knowing.*”

The first Passover was celebrated in Egypt on the night God enacted the tenth plague that killed the firstborn son of every household not protected by the blood of the Passover Lamb. (*Israel saw this supernatural act with their own eyes.*) The next day was the most significant event in Israel’s history, the Exodus. The people followed Moses out of Egypt into the Sinai Desert. And when Israel stood on the shore of the sea with the Egyptians closing in behind them, Moses said, “**DO NOT FEAR; STAND BY AND SEE THE SALVATION OF THE LORD WHICH HE WILL DO FOR YOU TODAY**” – **Exodus 14:13.**

God split the sea that day and the people passed to safety on dry ground, but the Egyptian Army was drowned. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, when Israel stood on the border of the Promised Land, the Word of God came to them through Moses to advance and take possession of the land. But they refused because they were intimidated by the fortified cities, and they were afraid of the giants, who inhabited Canaan. When they were asked to face adversity, fear overcame Israel and the people did not enter into the rest of the Promised Land. Because of this, for forty years that generation wandered aimlessly in the desert.

⁵ Cf. also Hebrews 4:10

⁶ See 1 Kings 4:29 (“*Breadth of Mind*” in the NASB, and “*Breadth of Understanding*” in the NIV, is correctly translated in the KJV as “*Breadth of Heart.*” The Hebrew text indicates that the heart is the seat of “*understanding.*”) See also Matthew 9:4 and Mark 2:8.

The consequence of Israel's faithLESSness is given in verse 11: "***They shall not enter into My Rest.***" This does not mean that generation of Israelites ... and Moses ... did not go to heaven. But it does mean they did not know the peace and the perpetual grace-rest of a life grounded continually in trusting their Heavenly Father for day-to-day, moment-by-moment rest.

Verse 12 contains a warning: "***TAKE HEED BELIEVERS ... THAT THERE NOT BE IN ANY OF YOU AN EVIL, UNBELIEVING HEART THAT FALLS AWAY FROM THE LIVING GOD***"! What happened to Israel can happen to you and me – we too can become 'hard-hearted.' To say, "***this could not happen to me,***" is to set yourself up for certain failure⁷.

Notice, God says it is **EVIL** to have an unbelieving heart. There is nothing worse than having someone you love, not believe you. I can't think of anything worse than that.

Lesson #3 – When we trust the Lord to provide for the details of life, especially when we are under duress, we exchange our strength for His.

To 'wait on the Lord' means to 'keep trusting' – 'To gain new strength' means 'to exchange our weakness for God's complete sufficiency.' Isaiah said: "***THOSE WHO WAIT FOR THE LORD WILL GAIN NEW STRENGTH; THEY WILL MOUNT UP WITH WINGS LIKE EAGLES, THEY WILL RUN AND NOT GROW WEARY; THEY WILL WALK AND NOT GROW TIRED***" – **Isaiah 40:31**. We are told in business, 'always keep pushing forward.' But a life of faith is characterized by *standing still*.

Verses 13-15 contain the exhortation to encourage each other in times of trouble. The support of fellow Christians during times of testing can protect both the one being tested, and the one doing the encouraging, from falling into sin. When was the last time you made a phone call to encourage someone going through a difficult time – perhaps, a divorce, or a financial crisis, or an unexpected illness? Reaching out to touch fellow believers not only shields them from unbelief, but it also strengthens your faith as well. This may not mean quoting Romans 8:28 to the troubled; it may simply mean standing with them and saying nothing. (*I wonder where Aaron was in the few minutes before Moses struck the rock in Numbers Chapter Twenty.*)

Now as we move into Hebrews Chapter Four, we are warned not to miss the blessing of a life grounded both in faith and rest. One writer titled Hebrews Chapter Four, "***How to be Happy Though a Christian.***" We know at some time in our lives, **God is going to put us (like Israel) in the desert with no water.** If someone has told you it is easier to be content and happy as a Christian, they told you an untruth. It is easier to be happy (***though temporarily***) as an unbeliever. Unbelievers already are right where Satan wants them ... they are not under the pressure Christians are asked to endure. But there is a Sabbath – **A DIVINE REST** – available to us that unbelievers cannot know – and Hebrews warns us not to miss out on that blessing.

Generally speaking, believers in every dispensation are encouraged not to fear. But there is one realm in which we are told to fear – Hebrews 4:1 reads: "***LET US FEAR.***" We are told to **FEAR NOT ENTERING INTO GOD'S REST** – His Perpetual Sabbath Rest. This is not heaven; this is 'the peace that passes all understanding'⁸ **NOW**.

Lesson #4 – Israel received promises; we have received promises. Israel failed to mix those promises with faith; we are warned not to follow Israel's example – Hebrews 4:2-3.

Notice Hebrews 4:2 – We are told Israel failed because the people did not combine the truth of God's Word with faith. Two elements are necessary to do what Habakkuk told us to do: 'LIVE

⁷ Take note of how Peter fell into this very trap: cf. Luke 22:34; 22:54-62

⁸ See Philippians 4:7; contrast this with Isaiah 48:22.

BY FAITH. It takes both the Word of God and belief on the part of those who hear it. When we believe the Word of God, irrespective of our circumstances, we enter into God's Sabbath – His Rest (**Hebrews 4:3**). This requires knowledge of the Word first, then belief on our part. Christian faith (*first*) is in Jesus Christ, then it is perpetually in the Word of God. We are to keep on believing the Promises of God throughout our lives.

The concept of *Resting in God's perpetual Sabbath* is grounded in the Creation, and there are examples in the history of Israel that confirm it. **Verses 4-9** cite Genesis 2:3, Psalm 95:11, Psalm 95:7-8 ... and also, we read of Joshua (*perhaps referencing Joshua 22:4*). The name, Joshua, is the Hebrew equivalent of the name, Jesus. Joshua brought Israel into the Promised Land, but the Conquest (*Rest in the Land*) only foreshadowed the work of Jesus Christ, in whom we have true Sabbath Rest.

God asks us to believe His Word. Belief is subsumed any time Scripture speaks of faith. '**To believe**' always is a transitive verb. A transitive verb must have both a subject and an object. In Acts 16:31⁹, **the subject** of the verb, '**to believe**' is any member of the human race. **The object** of the verb is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how we believed when God saved us. But when we read in Habakkuk, "**THE JUSTIFIED SHALL LIVE BY FAITH**" (**Habakkuk 2:4^B**), **the subject** is the believer, and **the object** of our faith is the Word of God.

Verse 12 describes the Word of God in very powerful terms. It is the remedy to the '*falling away*' mentioned back in Chapter Three¹⁰. *{There is a lot to unpack in verse 12, and rather than take the space allotted to me in this devotional, I have written a Supplement that will be attached to the Newsletter. You can read it separately if you wish}* ... but for our purposes here, suffice it to say that the Word of God is the power-source for entering into a life of faith. The living Word becomes an instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit to strip away what is false and unveil what is true.

Chapter Four concludes with the mention of Jesus as our Great High Priest. At this very moment Jesus is seated in the place of honor, at the Right Hand of God the Father, and He is advocating for us. We are told to '**hold fast (to) our confession.**' In other words, '**You have trusted Jesus for your salvation; now keep on trusting Him for everything else.**' He understands the frailty of the human race, for He Himself is a man. Jesus stood strong on the Word of God when He was tempted in the Wilderness¹¹. He is our example of resting in the Grace and Sufficiency of God. Therefore, draw near to Him (*in prayer*); learn about Him (*from the Word of God*), and trust Him ... for in Him you will find mercy and grace sufficient to meet every need.

⁹ "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

¹⁰ Cf. Hebrews 3:12 (NASB: '*falling away*' / NIV: '*turning away*')

¹¹ Luke 4:1-13; see also Devotional #6

Supplement to Devotional #11 – The Life of Faith

EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS 4:12 – {This verse is complex and treating it with any degree of adequacy in the context of a short devotional is not possible, so I have prepared this supplement as an add-on to be considered separately.}

*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart – **Hebrews 4:12***

God asks us to believe His Word. Belief is subsumed any time Scripture speaks of faith. ‘**To believe**’ always is a transitive verb. In every case, a transitive verb must have both a subject and an object. In Acts 16:31¹, **the subject** of the verb, ‘**to believe**’ is any member of the human race, and **the object** of the verb is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how we believed when God saved us. We placed our faith in the finished work of Jesus, and as a result, God imputed to us the very Rightness of Christ Himself (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). This salvific act is by Grace-alone through Faith-alone (**Ephesians 2:8-9**) and is a free gift that cannot be earned by human performance.

When we read in Habakkuk, “**the Justified shall LIVE BY FAITH**” (**Habakkuk 2:4^B**), **the subject is the believer**, someone who has been **JUSTIFIED**, a sinner who has placed his faith in **the correct object, Jesus Christ**, and therefore is the recipient of forgiveness and redemption through the death of Jesus on the cross ... **but salvation is not what Habakkuk is talking about**. The prophet is addressing how believers are to live **AFTER** they have been **JUSTIFIED**. After salvation, we are to live by faith ... *the same faith that resulted in our salvation ... but the object of our on-going faith has changed ... this time the object of our faith is the Word of God* – and it is the Word of God ... the Scriptures ... that are described for us in Hebrews 4:12.

Hebrews 4:12 describes the Word of God in very powerful terms. There are **FIVE COMPONENTS** of the Scriptures mentioned in this one verse:

- (1) **The Word of God is ALIVE (living)** – The Greek term translated ‘**living**’ is ζάω (‘zao’). It appears as the first word in the sentence, so it occupies *the emphatic position* in the sentence. This means we are to give special attention to it. ‘Zao’ is written as a Present Active Participle. *This means the Word of God is habitually at work.*
- (2) **The Word of God is EFFECTIVE (energetic)** – The Greek term is ἐνεργής (‘energes’), from which we get our word ‘**energy**.’ This word means ‘**operational power**.’ The Word of God is ‘**divine operational power**’ in action. When God through the prophet Isaiah tells us, “*The Word that comes out of My mouth will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it*” (**Isaiah 55:11**), this is why. The Word of God **ALWAYS** accomplishes the purpose for which it was spoken.
- (3) **The Word of God is SHARPER THAN ANY TWO-EDGED SWORD.** The significant Greek term used in this phrase is ‘**sword**’ (μάχαιρα – machaira). To understand what this means, we have to know something about the weaponry that was in use during the time of the Roman Empire.
 - There was a type of sword introduced first by the Thracians known as a **ROMPHAIA** – This was a large, heavy weapon, usually five or six feet long. It had a large, double handle and was too large to fit into a scabbard, so it was slung over the shoulder. As you

¹ “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”

can imagine, the time and strength required to leverage this weapon over one's head, and then swing it in the desired direction, rendered the swordsman vulnerable to a counter-attack because the size and weight of the Romphaia caused the soldier wielding it to be off-balance much of the time. Plus, the Romphaia only had one cutting edge. It could do great damage when it hit its target, but a swift opponent could duck or sway out of the way of such a massive weapon. ***The key thing to remember is this: the man wielding a Romphaia often was off-balance after swinging the sword, rendering him vulnerable to a counterattack.***

- The **ZEPHOS** – Think of a really large dagger! A Zephos had no cutting edges ... it was a sword with a sharp point used only for thrusting ... but from either side, it was completely ineffective. The Zephos-bearer had one shot at the enemy. If he missed, like the soldier with a Romphaia, he was vulnerable to a counterattack. And an experienced enemy knew exactly how he was going to be attacked by the Zephos, allowing him to adjust appropriately.
- The contribution of the Persians was the **AKINAKES**. This weapon was more 'SHOW' than 'GO.' It can be described with one word: '*Dull.*' It had a beautiful ornamental, bejeweled handle! But it was nearly worthless in battle.
- The last weapon I will mention before describing the Machaira is the **DOLON**. A Dolon was effective primarily because of the benefit of surprise. A Dolon could be hidden in a staff or some other object, then produced at the right moment to dispatch an opponent. And this might work well for assassinating someone, but when an army charges the enemy, it is a given the soldiers have weapons ... so the one advantage the Dolon offered ... surprise ... did not offer any advantage in a battle.

Now, enter into this world of weaponry, the **MACHAIRA**. The Machaira was a small weapon – it was a very short sword, but it was very effective, and because of this, it was a favorite weapon of the Roman Legions. It was not intimidating in appearance like the Romphaia; it was not quite as good at piercing as the Zephos; it was not beautiful like the Akinakes; and it did not carry the element of surprise like the Dolon. But while the Thracian Soldier was struggling to raise the Romphaia or regain his balance after swinging such a heavy weapon, the Roman with his Machaira could dispatch his opponent before the Romphaia could be put in a position to strike.

The Machaira was a double-edged sword, so it could be swung one way and then the other, delivering two strikes, one in either direction, a definite advantage when fighting against the Zephos with no cutting edges. Since beauty in battle is irrelevant (*as is a weapon hidden in a staff*), I'll not mention again the Persian Akinakes or the Dolon.

The advantages of the Machaira were many: It was short and light. The man with the Machaira was never off balance. The mass of the sword was such that its weight never rendered the fighter unstable, and quick strikes from any direction were easy and effective. Also, it had a sharp point and two sharp edges. It is hard to believe no one had thought of sharpening both sides of a sword but that was the nature of the times. The Romans were able to devastate their enemies with the Machaira and this is why it is such a perfect metaphor for the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12.

Like the piercing tip of its point, like the two sharpened sides of its blade, like the swiftness enabled by the weight and balance of the Macharia, every word, verb tense, and term in the Scriptures has a purpose. Every part of the Bible is available for us to use in our battles, whether

against Satan himself or just trying to deal with the details of life. When we use God's Word, we are never off-balance. The Scriptures orient us and stabilize us in a world that is unstable and disoriented. It is impossible to remain in balance spiritually if our worldview is influenced by what we read and see from our secular society. We must rely instead on the Scriptures for a proper spiritual orientation.

(4) The Word of God **PIERCES** into the immaterial part of man – to the soul and human spirit. The Greek term is 'διικνέομαι' ('diikneomai' - 'to penetrate through a three-dimensional object'). The Word of God, like a sword, cuts deeply into the immaterial part of man. But it goes where no doctor's scalpel can go. Ask a doctor to cut into the soul of a man ... he cannot do it. Ask him to dissect the soul – he is helpless to do so. But the Word of God does both. A physical knife can separate the bones and marrow, but it cannot penetrate so as to separate the immaterial parts of man – but the Word of God can. Only from Scripture do we know that man, created in the image of God, is a tri-partite² being. Plato came close in *The Republic* (suggesting mind, emotion, and the appetites) but only by the Word of God do we know that man is Body, Soul, and Spirit.

(5) From the Bible alone the thoughts and motives of the heart are skillfully judged. The Word of God 'judges' ('κριτικός – kritikos') in a manner we cannot do ourselves. We always see ourselves better than we are. Spurgeon once said something to the effect of ... ***“Do not be upset when men speak evil of you, for you are far worse than either you or they can possibly know”*** (paraphrased from memory). Since God knows every part of us, and since the Scriptures reveal to us our inner-most motives, and since as promised in verse 14, we have a great high-priest in the Lord Jesus Christ, the proper response to all this is to draw near to God by believing His Word, and by prayer, so that His Power becomes our power in times of need.

² Consisting of three parts