

So Close and Yet So Far

A good portion of the third and fourth chapters of Hebrews is taken up with a discussion of Israel after they were delivered by God from Egyptian bondage. Paul uses their wilderness wanderings to illustrate the need for Christians to be faithful unto death. The disobedient Israelites were not allowed to enter into God's rest in the land of Canaan. Paul warns, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God." (Hebrews 3:12). Many of the Israelites provoked God in the wilderness by sinning against Him. Paul notes, "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19) and then he again warns, "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it." (Hebrews 4:1). After additional exhortations along these same lines, the great apostle urges, "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief ('disobedience' in the alternate rendering, mg)." (Hebrews 4:11).

Think about Israel during this time in their history. They had seen the great power of God in Egypt. Standing on the banks of the Red Sea, Moses cried out to the people, "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord." (Exodus 14:12). The Lord had cared for them daily in their walk toward Canaan, providing them with water (Exodus 17:1-7) and food (Exodus 16:11-15). Yet for all of that care they had enjoyed by the grace of God, many of them did not make it into the land of Canaan. Numbers 14 informs us that they were right there at the border. They could have gone in. Twelve spies went into Canaan to look it over. They found it to be a beautiful land filled with everything they would ever need. Ten of the spies came back and said, "We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we." (Numbers 13:31). The faithless attitude behind this discouraging report spread like wildfire among the Israelites. Soon many of them were suggesting mutiny against Moses and Joshua and Caleb, the two men who had confidence that God would deliver them safely into the promised land. Because of their disobedience, these children of Israel, though standing at Canaan's very threshold, were not permitted entrance. God said to them, "Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness, and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me. Doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun. (Numbers 14:29-30).

At what point in our lives may we as Christians stop serving God and still find ourselves pleasing to Him? Can we excuse ourselves from faithfulness to the Lord based on the weight of life's challenges or even advanced years? Do we have God's approval to lay down the armor of the Christian at a designated time prior to death and cease fighting the battle against Satan? Paul's illustrations and comments in the aforementioned chapters in Hebrews clearly indicate that we cannot and must not stop short in our obedience to God.

This same apostle wrote some familiar words near the end of his life. Remember now, this was written as his life was coming to an end. "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." (II Timothy 4:6-8). Paul only laid down his sword when his lifeless hands could hold it no more.

After delivering a parable that illustrated the need for persistence, Jesus asked, "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). He was wondering out loud who would have the determination to fight against the world and stand with God all the way up to the point of death.

Many Christians fall away for one reason or another (Luke 8:4-15). They are so close to finishing their course. All they need to do is strap on the shield of faith and the rest of the Divine battle garb and they could "stand against the wiles of the devil." (Ephesians 6:11-18). Why any Christian would give up the hope, peace and spiritual blessings the Lord provides is difficult to understand. As Paul said to the wavering Galatians, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Galatians 5:7).

Dear Christian friend, your life is brief (I Peter 1:24). Whatever you are allowing to stand in your way of faithful service to God shall soon pass. You are closer to eternity now than you ever have been (Romans 13:11). Don't quit now!

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