



## Hebrews - Chapter Three

### Summary of Chapter Three

The chapter commences with a comparison between Moses and Jesus. Quite rightly the author commends Moses as a great leader and faithful servant over God's house, the Hebrew nation. Yet Jesus, as both high priest and Son of God is the builder and owner of the house, his church; therefore, he should be exalted to a much higher position than even the great man Moses.

The writer then turns to Scripture, quoting from Psalm 95, which gives an illustration of the failings of the people of God in the early years of God leading them out of slavery towards the Promised Land. Their lack of belief and trust in God, and their continued provocation of him through their sin and challenging behaviour, brought just punishment on the whole generation, with all but two of them dying during a 40 year period of wandering in the wilderness.

The writer uses this illustration to warn both the early and current church not to fall into the same mental trap as the Israelites, who squandered an opportunity to come into a land flowing with milk and honey, where they could have lived in God's rest. Disciples of Jesus are called to take care that they keep focused on him and not to allow themselves to be drawn away for any reason whatsoever, or they too will never enter his rest.

### **II Hebrews 3:1-10:18 - Jesus Is Superior to the Mosaic Law**

Having concluded that Jesus is superior to the mediators of the Mosaic Law, i.e. the angels, the author now establishes the superiority of Jesus to Moses himself (vv.1-6), of Jesus to the Aaronic high priesthood (Hebrews 4:14-7:28), of the new covenant in Jesus' blood to the former covenant (Hebrews 8:1-13), and of Jesus' death to the Mosaic sacrifices (Hebrews 9:1-10:18). This exposition also leads to three prolonged exhortations to Christian perseverance (Hebrews 3:7-4:13, Hebrews 5:11-6:12, and into the following section in Hebrews 10:19-39).

#### **II.a Hebrews 3:1-6 - Jesus is greater than Moses**

While Moses was one of God's most faithful servants (v.2 and v.5), Jesus is the faithful high priest and Son of God. Thus Jesus is worthy of more glory (vv.1-2, and

v.6). This leads to exhortations and warnings that will be considered further throughout Hebrews 3:7-4:1.

Although John the Baptist said of Jesus: <<**He must increase, but I must decrease**>> (John 3:30), this was intended to refer to his active role in bringing people to repentance and not in terms of the significance of what he had achieved. What the author to the Hebrews conveys in this letter is not that Moses needs to be viewed as any less than he was; a great leader and faithful servant. What needs to be recognised is just how superior Jesus is to him and all others.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,

### Hebrews 3:1

Therefore. That is, in light of Jesus' high priesthood: <<**Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people**>> (Hebrews 2:17).

Holy partners are members of the family of God (v.12), as well as: <<**Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus**>> (Hebrews 10:19), and: <<**I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly**>> (Hebrews 13:22). They are also referred to as saints or sanctified ones as in: <<**Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings**>> (Hebrews 13:24).

Heavenly elsewhere describes God's perfect order: <<**They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain'**>> (Hebrews 8:5), and: <<**Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these**>> (Hebrews 9:23), and the future life with God: <<**But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them**>> (Hebrews 11:16), and: <<**But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering**>> (Hebrews 12:22).

Heavenly calling refers to those chosen by God to come to his Son in faith: <<**For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters**>> (Hebrews 2:11), and: <<**For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant**>> (Hebrews 9:15). It is not just about being called into heaven but being called into the Kingdom of God here on earth both now and in the age to come.

Jesus is an apostle in the most basic sense of that term; that is, one who is sent or a messenger: <<**for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me**

*has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak*>> (John 12:49). There are further references to Jesus as one who is sent in: <<*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free*>> (Luke 4:18), <<*But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest'*>> (Luke 9:47-48), <<*Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me*>> (Luke 10:16), <<*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*>> (John 3:17), and: <<*Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me*>> (John 6:57).

**Our confession.** The Gospel, possibly already codified in an oral creed: <<*Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others*>> (2 Corinthians 9:13), <<*Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses*>> (1 Timothy 6:12), <<*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession*>> (Hebrews 4:14), and: <<*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful*>> (Hebrews 10:23).

The Christian **confession** is extremely important, for all believers are called to openly confess that Jesus is Lord of their lives, that they do believe he is the Son of God who came into the world, was crucified for the sins of mankind and yet was raised back to life by the power of God's Holy Spirit and now acts as a mediator in God's presence for those who call upon his name.

In modern western society this is a relatively easy thing to do, although there is a great need for it to be undertaken truthfully and not done for show. However, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and in some countries today, to make such a confession could lead a person into persecution, for it was either viewed by the authorities as a threat to their power and political system, or it was viewed by other faiths, especially Judaism, as blasphemy.

<sup>2</sup> was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also 'was faithful in all God's house.'

### **Hebrews 3:2**

**Faithful.** Jesus and Moses fulfilled their God-appointed roles (v.5), <<*but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom for ever, and his throne shall be established for ever*>> (1 Chronicles 17:14), and: <<*Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people*>> (Hebrews 2:17), as already noted.

Although Jesus is superior to him, Moses still receives significant respect: <<**Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord**>> (Numbers 12:7-8), which elevates Jesus all the more.

For the Jews, God's house was initially the tabernacle and subsequently the Jerusalem Temple, which was seen as God's dwelling place on earth, although Paul came to disagree with this thinking: <<**The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things**>> (Acts 17:24-25). The writer to the Hebrews, like Paul, recognised that God's true house was a community of people, the church.

<sup>3</sup> Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. <sup>4</sup> (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) <sup>5</sup> Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. <sup>6</sup> Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.

### Hebrews 3:3-6

More glory. Despite Moses' great faithfulness in following God's redemptive plan in the Exodus, in recording the law, and being an exemplary leader of the Hebrew nation, i.e. Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, Jesus is superior, for he was faithful over God's house as a son. Moses could do no more than the role he was called to and he completed his work with honour. Jesus was called to an even greater work and he completed that with even greater honour.

The builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. This analogy shows that Jesus as the Son of God, who was also actively involved in creation: <<**but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**>> (Hebrews 1:2-3). It also shows that he has a privileged place in the household of God, while Moses remains a servant in that household. The writer also reminds his readership that the builder of all things is God, for not only was he the architect and builder of all creation, he sustains and renews all things as well.

To testify to the things that would be spoken later. As well as a great leader of the nation, Moses was also called to be God's prophet: <<**Moses continued, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him**>> (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Christ is first mentioned here in Hebrews. This title is the Greek equivalent of Messiah, meaning 'anointed one' <<**You have loved righteousness and hated**

wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions>> (Hebrews 1:9). The name Jesus first appeared in Hebrews 2:9.

We are his house. Like other NT building metaphors for the church, this speaks to the corporate identity of the church as God's own abode; that is, it is within a community of believers.

What is so typical of Jesus is that he has chosen to build his house with materials mostly unsuitable for the job. His house is not flawless yet it has great beauty and strength in its foundation: <<Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?'>> (Matthew 21:42), <<So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone>> (Ephesians 2:19-20), and: <<Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame'>> (1 Peter 2:4-6).

If we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope introduces a series of exhortations and warnings. Given this confident message of hope, the Christian life involves endurance.

Knowing that the Kingdom of God is a reality means a believer can be bold in living and acting on that basis, and can make sure and confident claims about it. This isn't a recipe for arrogance, using the Gospel as an excuse for the kind of pride which covers up a believer's own insecurities. Rather, it's a matter for cheerful celebration, knowing that the Gospel and the hope that it brings has nothing to do with their own achievements, and has everything to do with God's love and grace.

## II.b Hebrews 3:7-4:13 - Warning: a rest for the people of God

The contrasting of Jesus and Moses in vv.1-6, now transitions to a comparison of their followers' responses. The followers of Moses failed to enter God's promised rest due to their disobedience and unbelief. So the author exhorts the followers of the superior Son of God to be careful not to repeat this pattern by failing to enter even now, as a foretaste, into God's future, end-time rest.

### II.b.i Hebrews 3:7-19 - The failure of the exodus generation

The author describes the failure of the exodus generation to respond faithfully to God's redemptive work. Their failure then becomes the negative example for the exhortations of vv.12-14 and Hebrews 4:1-13.

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,  
‘Today, if you hear his voice,  
8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
9 where your ancestors put me to the test,  
though they had seen my works<sup>10</sup> for forty years.  
Therefore I was angry with that generation,  
and I said, “They always go astray in their hearts,  
and they have not known my ways.”  
11 As in my anger I swore,  
“They will not enter my rest.””

### Hebrews 3:7-11

**Therefore.** In contrast to Moses’ faithfulness (vv.1-6), the author refers to the people of Moses’ day, citing Psalm 95:7-11. Hebrews attributes this psalm to the work of the Holy Spirit, thus emphasising the authority of the words, which is something that appears elsewhere in the NT: <<*David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”*>> (Mark 12:36), <<*Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus*>> (Acts 1:16), and: <<*it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things?”*>> (Acts 4:25).

**Harden your hearts as in the rebellion.** Almost immediately after God had led his people out of Egyptian slavery, heading towards the Promised Land, the Hebrews started to grumble about almost everything. God repeatedly showed them signs and wonders, i.e. though they had seen my works, yet they asked for more rather than trust him. After only about six weeks, God allowed twelve men to enter the land and explore it. On their return, ten of them said that it was too difficult a thing to take the land, failing to trust in God, i.e. your ancestors put me to the test, and therefore that whole generation was to remain wandering in the desert because God was angry with that generation, and it would be the next generation that would be allowed to enter the land.

The forty years they then spent in the desert are referred to by the psalmist as the day of testing in the wilderness.

**Therefore I was angry with that generation.** This is a reference to the righteous wrath of God, something he holds in check for long periods of time but which he must eventually vent if he is to retain his righteous and holy status. This also shows that God is willing to demonstrate his emotions just as humans do, although God is always just in displaying his.

They always go astray in their hearts is a warning to the modern church as well who have come to know God but get drawn back into the ways of the world and neglect the one who should be the focus of all that they are and do, something God takes exception to: <<***But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first***>> (Revelation 2:4).

They have not known my ways refers initially to the Jews who appeared to be religious but did not keep to God's laws: <<***The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote***>> (Isaiah 29:13). Today it is more likely a reference to those who go to church but are not truly disciples of Jesus: <<***They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!***>> (2 Timothy 3:5 NLT), using church more like a social club. To such people God is still saying: they will not enter my rest, either in this life or in the one to come. This was a promise that God gave with an oath, as in my anger I swore, and his promises can be relied upon: <<***For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!"***>> (2 Corinthians 1:20a).

Psalm 95 is a great call to worship and praise. It opens with a lively invitation to sing and make a joyful noise. It celebrates the fact that Yahweh is a great God, the king of all possible gods. He is the rock of salvation, the creator of heaven and earth; he is the shepherd and people are the sheep. A believer's response ought to be to fall down and worship him; but with v.7, the mood changes. The Psalmist, writing many centuries after the Exodus, warns that a new day is dawning in which it will matter decisively whether or not the people who hear this call to worship obey it or not. God had warned the people in the wilderness that, if they grumbled and rebelled and put him to the test, they wouldn't be allowed to enter his 'rest' - in other words, to find their settled home in the Promised Land. In the same way, says the Psalmist, people now are facing a choice: either worship and serve this same God, or run the risk of missing out on the eternal 'rest' which is promised.

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

### Hebrews 3:12-13

Drawing on several key words in Psalm 95, Hebrews warns against allowing the unbelief of an evil, unbelieving heart to cause one to turn away, Greek *apostēnai*, which also means 'fall away from', 'forsake', or 'apostatise from': <<***The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away***>> (Luke 8:13), and: <<***Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons***>> (1 Timothy 4:1).

Scripture seems to teach us that one of the greatest sins in God's eyes is unbelief. Apostasy and hypocrisy are right alongside. God can forgive human weaknesses and failings but he does call on all people to believe in him.

The writer's counter to this danger is to encourage personal commitment, i.e. take care, although the Greek word *blepete* can also mean 'be on your guard', and to call on the church to walk together in mutual encouragement, that is, exhort one another every day.

The author is clearly calling for believers not to fall by the wayside as the Hebrews subsequently did in the desert, for they were meant to be examples of the later Exodus for all mankind that was yet to come in their day but is now here. Paul was in full agreement: <<*These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come*>> (1 Corinthians 10:11).

As long as it is called 'today'. From the perspective of God's saving plans for world history, the church lives in a special moment in which the Lord has come, spoken, and gone, and believers await his return; therefore, faith is called for in this hour, and mutual exhortation sustains and strengthens faith.

Israel had lived a long time in the expectation that the Messiah would come to restore their community and reputation to its former status as God's special people. They were living for 'tomorrow' when that would finally come to fruition. With the coming of Jesus that day had dawned and now can be called 'today'. However, this was not just a special day or age for the Jews, this was the day that the world had waited for since Adam ate the fruit!

So that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Just as had happened with the Jews in the early days of the Exodus, the writer recognised that there were some in the early church who were in danger of failing to realise that these promises of God were real and that all they had to do was to have faith by placing their trust in God. Instead, some would test him through continued sin, while others would wish for the 'good old days', slavery in Egypt for the ancient Hebrews and slavery to sin for the Christians.

The main problem with which Hebrews is concerned, and with it the main deceit, is the question of whether or not disciples continue to follow and trust Jesus, or whether some will be content to drift, with their initial belief fading away to a memory and their hope dissolving along the way.

<sup>14</sup> For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

#### Hebrews 3:14

For we have become partners of Christ. The evidence of the Christian truly partaking of Christ's salvation involves endurance to the end.

The condition if only has been understood in various ways. Some have argued that the condition if indicates that true Christians can lose their salvation. Scripture is clear, however, that true believers cannot lose their salvation, as evidenced in: <<*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand*>> (John 10:27-29), and: <<*just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love*>> (Ephesians 1:4), supported by many other Scripture passages, such as: <<*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,*

*nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord>> (Romans 8:38-39), <<I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ>> (Philippians 1:6), and: <<Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time>> (1 Peter 1:3-5).*

Verse 14 should be understood in connection with v.13, as is indicated by the linking word for, Greek *gar*. That is, v.14 is linked to the exhortation not to become hardened in unbelief and sin. Thus the logic of the argument is that those who are hardened or who become hardened (v.13), give outward evidence that they are not, and never have been, genuine believers who 'share in Christ', because genuine believers do not become hardened; instead they would normally persevere; that is, they hold on to their original confidence, firm to the end.

Of course, Scripture also encourages believers to pray for and seek to bring back any who have fallen away: <<you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins>> (James 5:20), and: <<If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one – to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that>> (1 John 5:16), in the hope that they will turn back. Still, this passage should be viewed as a sober warning, intended as a means that God uses to keep Christians resolved in faith and obedient until the end.

The ongoing experience of perseverance results in confidence and assurance that one does in fact become a partner of Christ. This verse then provides a grave warning to everyone who claims to be saved; that is, to examine oneself carefully to be sure that one is in fact a genuine believer, because if there is no evidence of perseverance in faith and obedience, then there is real reason to doubt that such a person has ever been saved.

<sup>15</sup> As it is said,

‘Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’

<sup>16</sup> Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? <sup>17</sup> But with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup> So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

## Hebrews 3:15-19

Today, if you hear his voice is a clear reference to those living in the church age who have accepted the message of the Gospel. It continues with the warning do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. This is a warning to all disciples to guard their spiritual lives, to ensure they are following the teachings of Jesus and keeping their eyes on him, no matter what is happening in their lives. It is not about religious duty, attending church, reading the bible, or praying. All those will occur naturally for those who are focused on having Jesus at the centre.

In addition to comments made on vv.12-13 and here, a further consideration of the use of 'today' is that those who have not yet accepted the Gospel should do so 'today', for tomorrow may be too late!

By quoting Psalm 95:7-8 again for emphasis, the author draws several points from the failure of the Exodus generation as recorded in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 14:20-38. They had witnessed God's salvation in the Exodus; in fact, they had left Egypt under the leadership of Moses, which means that they had personally witnessed many of God's mighty miracles. Yet in spite of this, they had responded in disobedience and unbelief. The result was their death and consequent inability to enter into the rest of the Promised Land. The parallel structure in vv.18-19, stresses that disobedience flows from unbelief.

Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? It was acknowledged that God had tested his people to show them that they were totally reliant on him for all things: <<*He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*>> (Deuteronomy 8:3), and yet the people continually provoked God by trying to test him, such as the time when they received water from the rock at Meribah: <<*The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'*>> (Exodus 17:2-3), as alluded to before. In fact, the people had started grumbling against God before they had even reached the Red Sea and continued to do so for the entire 40 years that God sustained them in the wilderness, a fate they had brought upon themselves for a lack of trust in God.

The warning is clear. Those who stop trusting in Jesus and follow the ways of the world, despite the knowledge they have received through the Gospel, will pay a heavy price for such decisions as they choose to make. This includes those who continually grumble about the work of the local church or the things they perceive God is not doing in their own lives, rather than celebrating what the church and God are doing.

Tom Wright speaks of those who stop believing in the promises of God: 'That's the ever-present danger which faced Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and which faces us today as well. Once you stop believing either in the God who called you, rescued you and guides you, or in the future he has promised you, you may simply go round and round in the wilderness and never get anywhere'.