

Vital Supplement for Spiritual Vitality

HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY WALK THROUGH THE DESERT OF DIFFICULTIES

Fifth Installment of the series,

“Popular Promise, Uncommonly Understood ©

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Introduction: Where did the innocent bliss go? What has replaced those long summer days when we used our imaginations as children to face our foes, relinquish the enemy, & relish the victories? For some of us our ignorant bliss has been replaced with the tragedy of perils. Like an electrical, stand-up fan, reality seems to oscillate between moments of stability & that which is precarious. One moment we find ourselves loving life; it just couldn't get any better! Then one second later, we receive a phone call. In that dreaded moment, everything we hold dear has been snatched from us.

For some of us we find ourselves in a *state* of brokenness. The loss is so deep that they think we will never recover. The lively & joyful disposition has been replaced with an enduring grief; it has not only changed our outlook, but the core of our being. Giving up on God, we merely wallow in stagnation, pain, & depression.

For others it is not that something has been snatched from them, but it is an unbroken stream of deprivation. In other words, no matter how hard we have tried, no matter every attempt to move upward and onward, we find ourselves facing another set-back. Like lost in the midst of a desert we find ourselves running in circles no matter what we do. We just can't seem to get out of this quagmire. We keep coming back to the same desert Yucca plant!

Still for others, it is not that something has been snatched from us; it is not brokenness, or revolving set backs. Rather, we have become immobilized by pleasures. So intoxicated by what we possess or who we think we are we are immobilized. Perhaps unknowingly, we have become wrapped in a spider's web. While we are being intoxicated by its venom, the spider is feasting on us, stealing the best opportunities to make our lives count for something great.

Then for others, it is not the unexpected phone call, the brokenness, the setbacks, or false pleasures. We are ourselves are the problem because we have developed some really bad habits. We are our worst own enemies!

Due to some intoxicating temptations or practices, bad & deadly habits have emerged. They are shaping our character & our way of seeing and doing. Unfortunately, we are so captivated by these temptations that we can't seem live without them. Yet at the same time, we realize that the hammer could fall at any moment and expose us. But they are so dark and secretive and yet so pleasurable, we find ourselves torn. We want to escape these intoxicating clutches because they are killing us. Yet, we find ourselves drawn to them.

So, whether it is tragedy, deprivation, false pleasures, fleshly habits & sinful tendencies, is there hope for us? What is common to all these conditions is a failure to persevere in the things of God. In fact, with each of these factors, there is a desire to give up, turn away, & let go of things of God and deal with them on our own terms.

When faced with such things, how do you find yourself responding?

In 1998 I went on a 21 day study-tour of both Israel and Jordan. One day while traveling through the desert wilderness on an isolated highway, the professors we traveled with stopped the bus. After reading some Scriptures to us about our sins and struggles we may have in our own lives, they asked us to walk into this desert & find a quiet area. Once we find a spot, we were to consider the conditions of the people in the Bible who became faithless & disgruntled in contrast to those who persevered. They called on us to consider our intimacy with God and earnestly pray to Him, asking such questions as:

1. Are you truly walking with Him?
2. Do you find yourself blaming God for something?
3. Do you really want to be all that God has called you to be?
4. Will you rise up and be the faithful-servant no matter what comes your way?
5. They called us to perseverance no matter if our surroundings are as difficult and trying as the harsh desert wilderness where we had to probe our walk with God and pray.

Do you really want to change? Do you want your life to become something more than it is...to really go beyond what you ever thought possible and walk through those hot, dry, desert sands to the promised land? Are you looking for hope? Do you want God to help you, to rally help you deal with the tragedies, the deprivations, the false pleasures, and the sinful habits and fleshly tendencies that seem to haunt your footsteps? Then consider this promise of Scripture: Hebrews 4:16

“Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Notice the words “*draw near with confidence to the throne of grace,*” mercy, grace, and help in time of need.

But do we really understand this verse? How can count on something we may not really understand. To better understand what this passage states and apply it appropriately, we need to examine the context in which this exhortation, this hope is found. In summary as we will discover this morning 9 major truths to help us really understand and appreciate what this verse promises when we find ourselves in the desert of difficulties. The greater context finds pertinent expression beginning in Hebrews 3:1.

What are the nine truths to help us better understand Hebrews 4:16?

1st major truth: Though Moses was faithful, Christ is superior to Moses for Christ is God: vv. 1-6.

But consider the application the author of Hebrew makes in verse 6 explains:” *but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.*”

2nd major truth: Since you are a member of Jesus house, be faithful to Him no matter what! Evidently, the author of Hebrews is fully aware of the possibility of believers turning away from the living God when times get tough! In fact, if you look at verse 5 you will see that He includes himself as one who is susceptible to not holding fast to Christ till the end.

We are called to be faithful no matter how difficult life becomes. Moses was faithful. Jesus was faithful.

1. When you are hit hard, persevere through it.
2. When you are so frustrated by the little things, persevere through it.
3. Do not be a coward when you immediately come across difficulties!
4. Realize that some tensions and difficulties are designed to grow us. Therefore, we should not be so quick to placate certain tensions in our lives.
5. Lastly do not give into compromise when faced with false pleasures. As I have said to you before, false pleasures are meant to take you away from God.

6. It is so easy to do something you would not normally do when you are away from accountability. Be faithful! Why? None of us are above duplicity. Consider these words from Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sins which so easily ensnare us, and let us run with the endurance the race that is set before us, (vs. 2), looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We need to be faithful! Faithfulness in our fidelity to our Lord! Faithfulness in the commitments we have made! Faithfulness in marriages! Faithfulness in what God has called us to do! Four times in verses 1-6 we see the word “faithfulness.”

What does Christ-like faithfulness look like?

1. Faithfulness is staying on course no matter how painful the circumstance becomes or how tempted you are to call it quits.
2. Faithfulness is sincere or transparent consistency.
3. Faithfulness is a refusal to compromise.
4. Faithfulness is forgiving wrongs that have been committed against you, no matter how painful they wrongs are.
5. Faithfulness is always being available and present-no matter what!
6. Faithfulness is being true to your word!
7. Faithfulness is serving God on His terms.

In view of the author’s appeal to be faithful, consider this third truth, which is disclosed in verses 7-19:

3rd truth: Beware of the possibility of unbelief!

But what is unbelief? Unbelief is refusing to trust God. Why is unbelief a real possibility for the believer? Sufferings that you & I experience can lead to discontentment. Discontentment gives way to hardening, and like the Jews who wandered in the desert it will eventually give way to open rebellion. See that is what sin can do! Once you fail to trust God in the midst of your pain, your difficulties, etc., a hardening of the heart occurs through the deceitfulness of sin. The hardening of the heart can take hold of you because of the entrapping nature of sin. Hardening generates a lack of trust in God. So real is this possibility, he says in verse 12, “*Beware brethren!*” Or your translation might say, “*take care, brethren.*”

Are you falling away from the living God? Perhaps some of you this morning are “*wandering in the wilderness*” of defeat and unbelief; you have been delivered from Egypt, but you have never crossed into Canaan to claim your inheritance in Christ. The Jews were redeemed, yet most of them died in the wilderness! Is this a matter of “losing salvation”? No, not at all! Rather, dying in the wilderness is losing one’s life of victory and blessing because one refuses to trust God with their circumstances. Let me put it this way: What causes this heart of unbelief? Verses 7 and 15 reveal it is due to “*not hearing God’s voice.*” Verse 13 says it is also allowing ourselves to be “*deceived by sin*” (vs. 13).

What are indicators if you are falling away in your intimacy with God?

1. You are not surrendering your will to God in the choices you make;
2. You are not a person who seriously seeks God out. You may offer a nod to Him, but when it comes down to it, you don’t trust Him.
3. You no longer believe in His promises.
4. You are not serving Him on His terms.
5. You are not consistently searching and meditating on the Scriptures.
6. You are not consistently praying.
7. You are allowing yourself to be deceived by sin.
8. You are blatantly ignoring God’s commands or rationalizing why you are exempt from them.
9. You are not hearing God’s voice.
10. You are not observing what He is doing all around you.
11. You are pursuing sin;
12. You are ignoring confession of sin and repentance.
13. You do not value the vital importance of corporate worship.
14. You are arrogant and prideful.
15. You are grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit’s ministry in your life.
16. God is no longer beautiful to you... other “things,” “people,” or “ideas” are. For some it is sports. For others it is sexuality. For others it is the preoccupation of “important matters.”
17. You are becoming desensitized to sin...finding certain sins to be tolerable.
18. You are laughing at or participating in activities that inflame sin rather than which reflects the holiness and beauty of the Lord.
19. You are beginning to mock the choices of faithful believers.
20. You are becoming cynical of the commands of Scripture.

But consider the consequence if we allow ourselves to become hardened: “**We will die before we actually die.**” Adapting a phrase I once heard by Dr. Howard Hendricks, don’t will die before you actually die!

Because this is such a real possibility, for none of us are immune to the hardening of the heart whereby we refuse to trust God, we are called to do something in verse 13 that expresses genuine community, sincere, transparent love for one another: *13 but exhort one another daily while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.* **Thus, verse 13 reveals a fourth truth: Remedy for unbelief is daily exhortation from one another.** Verse 13 calls us to exhort one another daily!

What does daily exhortation look like? It is investing in each other’s life to the extent that we are aware of one another’s frailties, needs, and problems... that we can genuinely call upon one another in love and friendship to receive truth and live accordingly in a way that is God-honoring. In other words, we have to go beyond the foreign and familiar and pursue the relational. Daily exhortation includes the following:

1. A sincere mutual concern for one another;
2. We will not be afraid to admonish each other as brothers in sisters in Christ;
3. We will encourage one another daily;
4. But this exhortation also reveals something we tend to ignore but many of us long for in our hearts: Developing intimate relationships. Once again, how can exhort each other if we do not truly know each other?

But the consequences of hardening and open rebellion are not the only consequences. Verses 16-19 introduce an incentive why we should continue to be faithful by trusting God, exhorting each other every day because of the real possibility of not trusting God with our daily affairs: The loss of blessing. Earlier in verses 11 and 18 we are introduced to the rich Hebrew idea of “rest.” In fact, just in chapter 4 alone we will see the word “rest” used twelve times but not always with the same meaning. It is here that the writer warns his readers. In chapters 3 and 4, five different nuances rests, all of which are related in God’s plan:

1. The rest of salvation (Hebrews 4:3, 10);
2. The rest of victory in the midst of trials, symbolized by the Promised Land of Canaan (4:11); It is a state of peace. We can liken it to the “overcomer” in the Book of Revelation.

3. The future eternal rest, the heavenly rest (4:9);
4. God's Sabbath rest of Gen. 2:2 and Hebrews 4:4, 10;
5. Canaan, the rest for Israel after wandering for forty years (3:11):

The exhortation here is for the people of God to trust Him in spite of difficulties, as did Joshua and Caleb, and move into the promised rest. Canaan is a symbol of the life of blessing and battles, progress and victory, that we have in Christ as we yield to Him and trust Him. It is that present rest that we have even in the midst of trials and testings. This rest neither Moses nor Joshua could give. The writer quotes Ps. 95 and reminds the readers of Israel's hardness of heart. Wiersbe writes:

In fact, this is the basic theme of Hebrews: Let us go on to maturity, overcoming the enemy and claiming our inheritance in Christ. Let us cross Jordan (die to the old life, Rom. 6) and claim the presence inheritance God has planned for us (Eph. 2:10).¹

So, we are introduced to a fifth truth: Be faithful so that you may enter into full rest, that is, experience all that we can inherit!

Chapter 4 reveals that God promised Israel rest (vs. 1), but Israel failed to enter into that rest (vs. 6). The promise still stands since Joshua did not give them spiritual rest even though they received national rest (cf. Joshua 23:1). In fact, this promise is still open because David speaks about it in Psalm 95. Thus, "*There remains therefore a rest for the people of God*" (v. 9). He relates this rest to God's Sabbath rest (vv. 4, 10); that is, it is a rest of satisfaction, not a rest after exhaustion. **A rest of satisfaction!** Consider God was not exhausted but satisfied after creating the world in Genesis 2:2. In other words, this rest is the "Sabbath of the soul." Said differently, this is the "rest of faith" that Jesus promises in Matt. 11:28-30.

Come to Me all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. (vs. 29) take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS (vs. 30): For my yoke is easy and My burden is light.

In Matthew 28:11 "rest" refers to salvation; this is the gift of eternal life that we receive in the open arms of faith. The "rest" of 11:30 is what we find day by day as we take His yoke and surrender ourselves to Jesus Christ.

¹Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1992). *Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament* (682). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

To be sure, the author of Hebrews is not merely explaining to us that this rest is still available. He is exhorting us to fear the real possibility of losing this full life of rest and victory. This fear is wrapped up in the real possibility of not being faithful to Christ.

What does faithlessness look like?

1. If you are not surrendering your will to him in how you live and the choices you make, your heart is hardened.
2. If you are joyless in your walk with God, you are succumbing to unbelief.
3. If you are defeated in your walk you have been attacked by sin. In some interesting way it has twisted your priorities you are not walking with God, but against God.
4. If you are not being used by God, serving Him on His terms, you have succumbed to this besetting sin of unbelief.
5. The Jews were bought by the blood and covered by the cloud, yet most of them died in the wilderness! I repeat, "Don't die before you actually die!" Don't lose your inheritance! Live for what matters most!

What is the key to entering into God's rest in the moment-by-moment choice we make in life?

The key is found in verses 11-13: The power of Scripture. The Word of God judges us, penetrating our most innermost parts and exposing us for what we really are. **In fact, here we discover a sixth truth: If we want to receive our full rest, then let us allow God's Word to probe, judge, and expose us.**

Why should we seek to meditate on God's Word? Verse 14 gives us a seventh truth: We will give an account of our lives to God! Why bring up the fact that everything we are and do will be laid bare before God? Why remind us here that we will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ where we must give an account to God for lives when he is talking about the power of God's Word. Perhaps it is because the Holy Spirit uses the Word to evaluate us in the now in order that we may adjust ourselves accordingly in view of the future judgment. It is like a coach telling me what I need to do before I hit the big leagues. But perhaps Christ will also use the Scripture to evaluate our lives. Therefore, it is wise to allow God's Word to evaluate us so that we may change accordingly before the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; 2 John 8).

But verse 14 also offers **an eighth truth: Hold fast to your confession, that is, your testimony of faith in Christ and your faithfulness to live for Christ so that you may receive your promised blessing.** Don't wander in the desert. If you do, then you will lose your testimony. If you placed your faith in Jesus Christ, then live like one by allowing God to live through your life. Show forth the power of God in the choices you make by trusting in Him! Unbelief robs you of God's very best!

Verse 15: offers an eighth truth: Jesus Christ is your Sympathetic High Priest: You are not alone! Jesus suffers with our weaknesses! Jesus who is our High Priest has been tempted in every way, just as we are. He was tempted with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Though He was without sin, He could feel it each attack from the enemy from the outside in. "It may indeed be argued, and has been, that only One who fully resists temptation can know the extent of its force. Thus the sinless One has a greater capacity for compassion than any sinner could have for a fellow sinner."² With such a High Priest, we can now come to fully understand verse 16:

What is the application to these eight truths? Hebrews 4:16:

"Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Because of the real possibility of falling away, not living a Christian life surrendered to Christ whereby we lose our rest, that is, our victory in the now, and our full reward in the future, when you are under siege by sin, when you are harassed by temptation, hemmed in, or are under severe pressure, then you go to the throne of grace and you can fully expect to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. In other word, when you find yourself walking in the desert of difficulties, you boldly approach the throne of grace. In other words, you get on your knees and you pray!

This is our ninth truth: When you go to God in prayer in time of need, He will minister to you! With such a High Priest, you are able to approach the throne of grace with confidence!

²Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures* (2:790). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

You are not approaching a throne of judgment! You are approaching a throne of grace. So, when you feel the temptation to compromise, to give in, go to him in prayer... appear before His throne.

With such a High Priest, you are able to appear before God Himself. You are not appearing before an angel who will deliver the message on your behalf. You are not giving it to someone who may let you down. You are going before God himself.

With such a High Priest, you are able to fully expect to receive His mercy, that is, God's help, and find grace. When the author uses grace, He is using it to mean that He will exert His holy influence upon your soul to strengthen you!

Finally, when the passage says, "to help in time of need," the bottom line is that God will show up! He will show up in the nick of time.

In conclusion:

Are you faithful? If you were to be brutally honest, are you walking in victory? Are you experiencing God's rest in the now? Are you living for eternal rewards or are you living for what you can gain here? God is calling each of us to a different task, to a different path, and then offers us the capabilities to walk that path: the Scriptures, the daily exhortation one another; the power of the Holy Spirit, the privilege of praying before His throne of grace, and that we have a Sympathetic High Priest on our side! God also gives us incentives: an honorable testimony of faithfulness, the opportunity to invest in the lives of others, the promise of rest both in the "now" and in the "future," the knowledge that He sees all, and the opportunity to go before the Almighty, and opportunity to follow hard after our Sympathetic High Priest.

All too often we are walking in a desert. The sand dunes seem endless and sun is scorching. Many in our church have endured a lot these past couple of years! Some of you have been hit hard! Some of you are dealing with some really tough stuff. Others of you are compromising! We should not be surprised giving the frailties of this world and deceitfulness of sin. Sin will harden your hearts

So, are wandering in the desert? Aimless and lost, not where you want to be? Are you dissatisfied with what you have become? Have you forgotten who you are in Christ? Then why are you ignoring God and losing out on the rest He has for you? Do you not see that He is the sole oasis? He is the

spring from which refreshing and cool waters flow! Even in your desert, He offers to guide you like a cloud by day and fire by night. All you have to do, because of what Jesus Christ has done for you, is boldly approach His throne of grace and mercy and grace will come over you to meet all your needs! Come to Him all who are weary and He will give you rest!