

Striving to Enter Hebrews 4:1-13

We are going to continue our sermon series on the book of Hebrews and our passage for today contains a serious warning. You may have begun to realize that Hebrews is a confrontational and sometimes troubling book because it contains several different warnings that bring big questions to our minds concerning the security and assurance of our salvation. I listened to Kent's sermon from last week and I appreciate how he talked about eternal security and how a person can know for sure if they are going to be saved. Someone who is truly saved and born again cannot lose their salvation – no one can snatch them out of the Father's hands. And Kent accurately pointed to several passages to back that up.

But still there are the warnings, and though some of them warn of temporary consequences for sin that are part of God's loving discipline, others warn of eternal consequences and judgment – like the warning we're going to look at today and several other warnings we'll come across later on in Hebrews. What are we supposed to do with these warnings?

I want us to think about different ways that parents might warn their children. Sometimes they warn them of dangerous things that might hurt them. I have a stool in my garage that rolls on wheels for working on the car, but my kids like taking it on our driveway, which has a pretty good slope to it, and they get a running start and jump on it with their stomachs and cruise down the hill. When I see that, I also see bloody noses and road rash, so I give them a fitting warning: "Slow down or you're going to get hurt." There are also warnings about bad behavior and pending discipline. Our kids are normal when it comes to sibling rivalry and there can be nasty fighting and bickering at times. When that happens we give them a warning to stop or face some kind of discipline. We also warn them about how they respond to us as mom and dad. If they show disobedience or disrespect we warn them to change their behavior or they will be disciplined. There are all kinds of warnings we give our kids to keep them safe and teach them what's right and wrong. We do this because we love our kids.

Now, what would a loving parent do if they had a child who grew up believing in Jesus and expressing love for him, but then at some point decided to turn away from him in unbelief? That's a heartbreaking reality for many Christian parents

today. What should a loving parent do when they see their child beginning to turn? What kind of warning should they give them?

The book of Hebrews is written by a Christian leader who saw his beloved friends in his former church – his *spiritual* children – beginning to turn away from Jesus in unbelief. The things he taught them about Jesus and salvation through faith in him that they once accepted and believed, they were now beginning to reject. In order to rightly understand and apply the book of Hebrews to our lives we have to remember this. He wasn't writing to a group of Christians that were growing in their faith and devoted to Christ; he was writing to a people who were beginning to reject him. And if they rejected Christ, the consequences were very severe. So he points out the errors they were making and he gives them serious warnings. Warnings are gifts of grace from God to turn people back to him.

The question for us is: How should we respond to these serious warnings today? Here is where we have to be careful. In order to rightly understand them we have to examine our own lives. If you are here today and find yourself hardening your heart toward Jesus and beginning to reject him in unbelief, then the letter and the warnings apply directly to your situation. God wants to use the warning to turn you away from danger. But if you are trusting in Jesus and devoting your life to him, then portions of this letter and many of the warnings do not apply directly to your situation. You do not need to live in fear and struggle with the assurance of salvation.

You can think of warnings like “Thin Ice” signs on a frozen lake. (Picture) They are there to warn you of danger. But if you're not anywhere near the signs and not going that direction, you don't have to worry. You can be confident that you're safe. Just keep going the way you're going. But if you find yourself heading straight for the thin ice behind the warning signs, you need to change direction because if you keep going that way you're going to break through.

So the warning we're going to look at today is a very serious warning. We are going to study Hebrews 4:1-13, but the warning really begins back in Hebrews 3:7. At that point he quotes a passage from Psalm 95:7-11 as the basis of the warning and he keeps referring back to those verses in the passage we're going to study today (as you will see by the verses that are indented on the screen). That Psalm was originally written by King David as a warning to the people in his day to not be like the Israelites who came out of Egypt and hardened their hearts against

God in the wilderness. Because of their rebellion, God swore an oath to them that they would never enter his rest, and they all died in the wilderness and were not allowed to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. The author of Hebrews uses that warning as a present-day message from the Holy Spirit to his readers because they were in danger of doing the same thing – they were rebelling against God in unbelief. So where we begin in chapter 4, he is in the middle of his warning and has Psalm 95 in mind.

Read Hebrews 4:1-3a.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’”

So he refers back to Psalm 95 and the Israelites who first came up out of Egypt – God gave them good news at Mt. Sinai – they would be his treasured possession if they would obey him and keep his covenant. But that good news didn’t do them any good because they ended up turning away from God in unbelief. In the same way, God had given the readers of Hebrews good news when the apostles had taught them the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. But that message would likewise do them no good if they continued to turn away by rejecting Jesus as the Son of God. And the reason he gives goes back to Psalm 95 again – because God swore that those who turn against him shall not enter his rest. That promise was not only for the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness, but for the readers of the book of Hebrews as well. That “promise still stands,” as he says in verse 1, therefore they should be afraid that they would fail to reach God’s rest because of their unbelief.

So this is a very stern warning and a reason for them to fear because of what they were doing. The author is using it to plead with them to turn back to faith in Jesus. If they rejected him, they would not be allowed to enter God’s rest.

Now, at this point the author anticipates that an argument could rise up among his readers that would nullify the warning he just gave and it had to do with their understanding of what was meant by the phrase “God’s rest.” If you look at the example of the rebellious Israelites that is being used, “God’s rest” would appear to be the land of Canaan. When they turned away from God, God swore to them

that they would never enter his rest, which at that time meant they would never enter the land of Canaan. And they didn't. They died in the wilderness. But after that rebellious generation died, the next generation did enter Canaan – they entered “God’s rest.” And besides a period of 70 years of exile in Babylon, the Israelites had been there ever since – including the people the book of Hebrews was written to. They were still in Canaan and therefore thought they had already entered “God’s rest,” and if that was the case the warning we just read would have been meaningless.

If Amy and I were out with the kids and we had just finished going out for ice cream, if one of the kids started acting up, how effective would it be if I warned them: “You need to change your behavior or you won’t get any ice cream”? That warning would be meaningless because they already had what I was threatening to take away. The author of Hebrews knew that’s what the people he was writing to might think. They already thought they had entered “God’s rest.” But there was something more that was at stake, and there was a deeper meaning behind “God’s rest” than the land of Canaan that would make this a very serious warning and he begins to explain that in verse 3.

Read Hebrews 4:3-5.

For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’” (and then he begins to explain the deeper meaning...) although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.

⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵ And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.”

So to explain the deeper meaning behind “God’s rest” he points all the way back to the foundation of the world. What did God do after the six days of creation when all his works of creation were complete? Genesis 2:2-3 says it like this: “*And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.*” ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” This seventh day rest is the deeper meaning behind the phrase “God’s rest.” It is a spiritual rest, a blessed, seventh-day rest that he set apart and made holy from the foundation of the world. We refer to this spiritual rest simply as “heaven.”

Forrest Clark passed away two weeks ago, and when we held his memorial service here yesterday we grieved, but we also rejoiced. Why? Because Forrest was trusting in Christ for salvation and when he died his spirit was set free from his body and he went to be somewhere. Where did he go? He went to be in the presence of the Lord. He went to heaven. He went to "God's rest." And that is where he is right now. *That's what's at stake* in the warning in Hebrews 4. The consequence of turning away from Christ wasn't only about not entering Canaan, it was about not entering heaven. And that's an extremely serious warning.

But there was still hope for them and that's what the author tells them in the next few verses.

Read Hebrews 4:6-10.

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience,⁷ again he [God] appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

The good news for the people Hebrews was written to is that God's rest is still open for them to enter if they would turn back to Christ. And because of that and because the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness did not enter, God, in his mercy, had David write the words of Psalm 95, not only for the people in his day, but for the readers of Hebrews as well. By his grace, he gave them the warning so that they would no longer harden their hearts. If they would turn the other direction and put their faith in Christ, they would enter God's spiritual rest of heaven. So it wasn't just about entering the land of Canaan with Joshua; it was about entering God's spiritual rest of heaven. And the way into that rest would still be open to them if they would heed God's warning and turn to Jesus Christ. There was still great hope, and because of that he calls them to repent.

Read Hebrews 4:11-13.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.¹³ And no creature is

hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

So he calls them to turn from their unbelief and strive to enter God's rest by turning back to Jesus Christ in faith as God and Savior. He makes his appeal by the power and authority of the Word of God that he just preached to them from Psalm 95 – the Word that he knew was living and active and would bring conviction deep in their hearts and turn them back to Christ.

What should we do with this warning today? (Picture) I think we need to treat it like a "Thin Ice" sign that says: "Don't harden your heart against Jesus or you won't enter his rest." If you're not anywhere near that sign and not going that direction, you don't need to worry. This warning isn't directly for you. It's a reminder to not go that direction, but if you're trusting in Jesus Christ and striving to live for him, you have nothing to fear. You can be confident that you will enter God's rest and you can rejoice in the certainty of your salvation.

But if you are heading toward the warning sign and you see that you have been hardening your heart against Jesus and turning away from him in unbelief, then this warning is directly for you. You need to turn around. Don't keep going out onto thin ice. For those who turn around there is great hope. It doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done in the past, just turn around! The promise is for you today – Jesus died for you, and if you turn to him and put your faith in him for salvation and leave your life of unbelief behind, you will be saved! And the entrance to heaven will be open to you.