

Living While It's `Today'

By Mark Jarvinen

INTRODUCTION

The epistle to the Hebrews is a masterful exposition of God's grace made known through its detailed discussion of the person and work of Jesus Christ. This letter was written by an unknown author who had been in close contact with the apostles, perhaps the learned and articulate, Apollos, as suggested by Luther and numerous others after him. It is addressed primarily to Jewish converts who were very familiar with the OT and who were being tempted to revert back to Judaism out of fear concerning their impending persecution at the hands of Rome. The Law/Gospel message of Hebrews is couched in its warnings against falling away from Christ, and its encouragement to persevere in the faith.

TEXT

¹² See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

¹⁵ As has just been said:

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion."*

*¹⁶ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. **(Hebrews 3:12-19)***

Notice that the title of this message is **“Living While It’s `Today,”** not to be confused with the sentiments expressed in the 1967 top-ten hit, **“Let’s Live For Today,”** by the **Grass Roots**, which was a message to a disillusioned young generation to simply **“find pleasure while we can”** and **“don’t worry about tomorrow.”** Today’s text is not about looking inside oneself and dropping out, but about looking to Jesus and pressing on. The heart of today’s message is found in **v. 13** –

“¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

TODAY

We need to understand the special way in which the author of Hebrews uses the word **“Today”** in **v. 13**. Is he simply saying that we should encourage each other in our faith every day? Or is he saying to simply take one day at a time? It’s that and more. The word **“today”** is being used theologically to denote the period of time between Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, and His triumphant return at His second coming. In other words, the last 2,000 + years and as many years as still remain until Christ’s second coming are called **“Today.”** The Apostle Paul says something similar in **II Corinthians 6:2** –

“‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (ESV).

In other words, **“today”** is the **“favorable time,”** the era of salvation for those whose hearts are not hardened to the call of the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Theologically speaking, **Yesterday** God sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world to pay the price for our sins. Jesus

died on the cross to take the place of sinners as our sinless, substitutionary, sacrifice, so that we could be made righteous in the eyes of a Holy and Righteous God. **Yesterday**, Christ rose from the grave to win our victory over sin and death. **Yesterday**, Christ ascended into heaven to rule over all creation. **Yesterday** was the day that God's plan of salvation was made possible. That said, **Tomorrow** Christ will right all wrongs and bring the fullness of His justice to a broken world at His second coming.

And so we live **Today** – the era between Yesterday and Tomorrow, also called the time period between “**the already and the not yet.**” We live Today, between the act of salvation and its completion. Today is the time for believers in Christ to watchfully await His return and seek to make the good news of the gospel known to the far corners of the world, beginning in our own back yards. The gospel in a nutshell, found in **John 3:16**, says –

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

This expresses God's heart of love for all the people of the world. But **John 3:17** continues to put an even finer point on it by saying -

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

To sum it all up, “**Today**” has been and continues to be the era in which all are invited to hear and answer the call of the Holy Spirit to believe in Christ and be rescued from the penalty and power of sin.

LIVING `TODAY'

As believers, living in the era of “Today,” we have our mission. It is to go into all nations and make disciples. The Jewish converts to whom Hebrews is addressed understood and shared the same mission as we do. Yet, the wait for “Tomorrow” can be discouraging. It was for them. It certainly can be for us.

The author of Hebrews takes his readers all the way back to the time of Israel’s 40 years of desert wanderings under Moses, in **Hebrews 3:15**, where he makes reference to **Psalms 95:7-8** –

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

Specifically in view here is the episode when the Israelites grumbled and rebelled against Moses due to a lack of drinking water and God instructed Moses to strike a rock with his staff so that water would pour out. In view in **Hebrews 3:17**, with reference to ***“those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert,”*** were those who waited for Moses to descend Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, but in their fear and impatience, constructed a **golden calf** to worship in the meantime. In a mere 40 days they lost heart because their leader was not physically with them. If the Israelites were discouraged, it’s not surprising that the 1st century Hebrew Christians in today’s text were also. **What about us?** If it was hard for the Israelites to endure for a mere 40 days without Moses, the very ones who had personally experienced God’s amazing deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and if it was difficult for the 1st century Christians, only a generation removed from the ministry of Christ, to endure; how much more discouraging for us who have waited over 2,000 years for the return of Christ? It’s even

harder for us to stay alert and hopeful! We need encouragement more than anyone!

ENCOURAGE

And there is encouragement for us. What are we called to do in the meantime, while we wait? We go back to v. 13 –

“But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

What does it mean to encourage one another? It means to inspire, to give hope, to lift up, to give courage. We encourage one another in the faith when we focus on Jesus and share the grace He gives to us.

One day, a well-known pastor received a letter from one of his pod-cast listeners from another church, who wrote:

“The preaching in my church has been very laden with the Law and heavily moralistic for quite some time. Week after week the preaching is “do this” and “don’t do that.” I leave feeling condemned, with no power to overcome my lack of ability to obey. I find myself spiritually depressed and have no desire to attend church. Why are so many pastors scolding their people today, instead of giving them the life-giving gospel? I can testify that preaching only the law actually leads to more lawless living. When mainly law is preached, it leads to the realization that I can’t ever expect to follow it, so I might as well quit trying.”

In a follow-up comment, this pastor wrote to his listener:

“We make a big mistake when we conclude that the law is the answer to bad behavior. In fact, the law alone only stirs up more of such behavior. This isn’t to say that the Holy Spirit doesn’t use both law and gospel in our lives and for our good. But the law and gospel do very different things. Thankfully, it is the gospel (what has been done for us in Christ), not the law (what we must do and not do) that has the last word in our lives.”
(Sermon Central).

We all need encouragers in our lives, not only in the words they speak, but in the actions they demonstrate. A prime example from Scripture comes from the life of **Barnabas**, whose name means **“Encourager.”** In **Acts 15**, Paul suggested to Barnabas a return visit to all the towns where they had preached the gospel previously. Barnabas wanted to take along young **John Mark**. Paul did not think it wise, since John Mark had earlier abandoned them in their missionary work. Barnabas went to the mat for young John Mark, even to the extent of parting company with Paul. Barnabas and Paul decided to each go their separate ways in their missionary work. Barnabas saw potential in John Mark, which bore itself out in the man who later wrote the Gospel of Mark.

Has anyone ever gone to the mat for you? It happened to me as a young 19 year-old, who after my first year of Bible School in Los Angeles, had a desire to serve on a summer gospel team, but was deemed too immature. Two second-year students went to the mat for me with the president of the school and the team leader, and I was ultimately accepted on the team. That summer turned out to be life-changing for me, an important step of preparation for God’s call on my life into vocational ministry.

Now, fast-forward 45 years, to a time almost two years ago when Martha and I attended the funeral of my friend, Skip, in PA, where I previously had served as pastor. During the service, I gave a tribute to my friend, and afterward a woman approached me and asked, **“Do you remember me?”** Although she looked familiar, I couldn’t make the connection. Then she said:

“Over a decade ago, you came to my home to minister to my husband when he was near death. Both my husband and I had

been struggling with drug and alcohol abuse. I just wanted to thank you today for the kindness you showed to us that day, and for how your message on the day of my husband's funeral pointed me to Jesus. I just want you to know that I'm trusting Christ today. I went back to school and became an addiction counselor with the county and I have you to thank."

That's the power of the gospel at work and the encouragement it brings to those who place their trust in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In closing, remember that as we share together what we have in Christ, we'll be mutually encouraged to ***"hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first"*** (v. 14). Because of our sinful human nature, we tend to accentuate the negative. We tend to take our blessings for granted and then almost expect things to go wrong. From the perspective of the old nature, the glass is always easier to see half empty than half full. But in Christ we have every reason to be positive, regardless of our circumstances. Paul writes in **Philippians 4:13** – ***"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*** God has Kingdom work for each of us to accomplish. He has a purpose for each of us to fulfill here on earth. But the good news is that it's not all on us to perform it. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened and encouraged. In the strength of all that we have in Christ, we can encourage each other to hold firm and stand fast as long as it is called Today. **A-men.**