

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 4, Hebrews 3:1-4:13: The Dangers of Distrust

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The next major segment of Hebrews 3:1 to 4:13, centers around the author's reflections on Moses and the Exodus generation that went out from Egypt with Moses and how the examples of these figures inform our thinking about Jesus, the Son, and our thinking as those who now follow the Son in a new Exodus of our own from this temporary material realm to the divine realm. In these chapters, we can observe a rather distinctive argumentative flow. In 3.1 through 6, the author shifts his attention from topics pertinent to the comparison of Jesus with angels to a comparison of Jesus with Moses.

And, as we shall see, this is a rather sensible second step in the author's ongoing comparison of Jesus with important figures in the mediation of the First Covenant or the Old Covenant. In 3:7 to 19, the author launches into a lengthy exhortation built around the story of the wilderness generation or the Exodus generation, first as this is remembered in Psalm 95 but told much more fully in Numbers chapter 14. The author examines the story for the dynamics of divine promise and human faithlessness at work therein, with a view to warning the hearers about the similar dynamics at work in their situation, urging them then in 4:1 to 11 not to make the same disadvantageous, ultimately self-destructive choices as the wilderness generation did on the very threshold of entering Canaan.

Finally, the author brings this segment to a close in chapter 4, verses 12 to 13, with a brief word of warning about the power of the Word of God and, therefore, the importance of responding to this word correctly. In 3:1 to 2, the author begins to compare Christ and Moses. Whence, holy brothers and sisters, partners of a heavenly calling, consider the apostle and high priest of our confession, namely Jesus, who is faithful to the one who appointed him, even as Moses was in all his house.

As the author begins this segment, he first addresses the addressees with a kinship term, brothers or brothers and sisters, and with a purity term, holy, holy brothers and sisters. Both of these are important components of Christian identity in the first century. We might still be accustomed today to speak of our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, even to address them as brother or sister.

Hopefully, we have not lost what was really important about this identity, namely a level of deep commitment one to another such that because we are related by the blood of Christ, we are now going to extend to one another the love, the care, the support, the concern that natural siblings, when they're acting their best, extend to one another. Also, the label holy is a subtle reminder of the social boundaries that

God himself has set around the audience. They have been set apart from the rest of humankind by virtue of their coming to Christ and receiving the purifying benefits of Christ's death on their behalf.

They have become a set-apart people, as well as a new kinship group charged with supporting one another along this journey. They are also partners of a heavenly calling. This is something that the author has been introducing subtly into his sermon all along.

He speaks of the hearers as those who are about to inherit deliverance in 1:14, and as the sons and daughters who are themselves being led to glory in chapter 2, verse 10. He keeps before the hearers the greater destiny that awaits them because of their association with Christ and reminds them that greater honor is possible for them because of that relationship than would ever be possible apart from Christ. In the main clause of chapter 3, verse 1, the author urges them once again to consider Jesus.

The author is, even here, continuing to set Jesus before the eyes of the congregation, filling their view with this one focal point as they contemplate the courses of action open to them in their situation. Looking at the sun changes their orientation to the present moment. If they allow their gaze to be simply distracted by their present circumstances, which are at best lackluster and at worst degrading, the direction of their internal drive will be disconnected from Christian commitment and repositioned toward rehabilitation in the eyes of their neighbors.

If Jesus keeps filling the field of their vision, however, their focus will be on what Jesus has done for them, on the obligation they owe this great benefactor, on the honor of Jesus, and therefore the honor that is due to Jesus in their every action. Thus, this strategy becomes a very important part of the author's means of addressing the pastoral needs of his hearers. He introduces Jesus here in a very distinctive way as the apostle and high priest of our confession.

We are not accustomed to thinking of Jesus as an apostle. Jesus has apostles. How, then, is Jesus himself an apostle, a messenger, an envoy? But then we remember that the author of Hebrews is very interested in Jesus as the one in whom God's ultimate word was delivered.

This was the point of the opening paragraph of the sermon and also the initial exhortation in chapter 2, verses 1 through 4. This is also in keeping with the author's emphasis throughout on the importance of responding to the words spoken by God in the sun. Of course, Jesus as high priest is a topic that the author will develop at length, first in chapter 5 and then in greater depth in chapters 7 through 10. The author goes on in chapter 3, verse 2 to say that Jesus was, in the quote, faithful to the one who appointed him, even as Moses was faithful in all of God's house.

In this verse, the author is recontextualizing words from Numbers 12 verse 7 and thereby inviting that older text into conversation with what he is now saying in this sermon. He has deferred a keyword from Numbers 12:7, however, namely servant. He will bring that out in just a few verses as the punchline of this comparison that shows Jesus' superiority as a son to Moses as a servant.

Numbers chapter 12, verses 6 and 7, spoke about Moses' more direct access to God and God's more direct communication with Moses than was the case with other prophets to whom God only spoke mercy in dreams and visions. In the context of Numbers, Moses is commended as faithful in or entrusted with all my house. This, again, is an appropriate point of comparison because, as the author began the sermon, the son is the bearer of a more reliable and faithful word than any of the prophets who gave only partial indications of God's plan.

This comparison is not intended in any way to put Moses down. Comparisons in ancient speeches often solely served the purpose of elevating the subject of the speech. A speaker would choose noble figures with whom to compare the subject of his or her own praise, and Moses is famous in the tradition as a vehicle for God's word being spoken.

Moses is also famous as a mediator for the people, and he is often a successful mediator if we remember those instances in which Moses basically threw himself down between the people and God, imploring God's mercy on their behalf. God also reinforced the word spoken by Moses on many occasions in the Pentateuch. This all works together to reinforce the major point that the author is making, namely, that Jesus has greater value as God's envoy, with his own message needing to be heeded and that Jesus has greater value as a mediator between God and the people.

Hence, the opening focuses both on Jesus as an apostle and as a high priest, as a messenger and as a mediator. The starting point of this comparison is the faithfulness of both figures to God. Jesus, to the one who appointed him an envoy and high priest, and Moses appointed in his own capacity.

As the analogy develops, we will see the point of differentiation that the author introduces to show the superiority of Jesus in this instance. Namely, his superior placement as a son over the household rather than merely a servant within the household, and thus Jesus' closer placement to the ultimate head of the household, namely God. The author proceeds in verse three to talk about the greater honor that belongs to the son.

As he writes, this one is worthy of greater honor than Moses to the extent that the one who builds the house has greater honor than the house. Every house is founded

by someone, but the one found all things is God. Yes, Moses is honored, but the son is honored even more.

To make this point, he constructs an analogy that may strike us as somewhat odd. Jesus is to Moses as a builder, as a house, and as God is to all creation. This analogy probably works for the author and the hearers because of their shared convictions about the role of the Son in creation.

Jesus, as a son, participated in the building of the house, not creation in general, but the body of the faithful from every age and place within which Moses only served. Therefore, by virtue of his greater being as divine son and his greater role in the household as co-creator, the son enjoys greater honor. Then, as the author continues, Moses, on the one hand, was faithful in all his house as a servant for the purpose of a witness to the things that would be spoken later, but Christ was faithful as a son over his house, whose house we are if we hold on to the boldness and the boast of our hope.

The term from Numbers 12:7 that the author did not introduce earlier in this paragraph is the term servant. In Numbers, we read, not so with my servant Moses who is faithful in all my house. The author wanted to defer that to this point to make clear the distinction between Moses as a servant in the house and Jesus as a son over the house.

As heir of that house, Jesus stands in a position over the household and, therefore, has greater status than a slave or servant within the household. The author rounds this out by reminding the hearers that we together constitute this house that God has built. In so doing, he has reminded the hearers of the honor that they enjoy by virtue of their own faithfulness toward Jesus, namely being adopted into the household of God and thereby sharing in the glory and honor of their senior brother, Jesus.

The author also, however, introduces the conditions of continuing to enjoy this honor and the hope that attaches to it, namely the hope of glory. He writes that we are his house if we hold fast to the boldness and the boast of hope. Boldness in the epistle to the Hebrews represents the Greek word *parrhesia*.

This is a word with a variety of meanings, and the author of Hebrews probably draws on several of them over the course of his sermon. He urges boldness toward God but also boldness toward neighbors rather than being cowed by them into silence about their allegiance to or their connection with Christ or cowed by them into submission such that they desert the Christian group. *Parrhesia* is a word that was frequently used in Greek political discourse to talk about frank speech or the freedom of speech that citizens enjoyed in a city.

It was what was at stake when a tyrant conquered a city and sought to impose his will. Would the citizens maintain their parrhesia and speak to the tyrant out of their native freedom or would they be cowed into submission and say whatever the tyrant wanted to hear so as to preserve their enjoyment of temporary well-being? This will be applied by the author to the situation of the addressees for whom society has taken on the role of the tyrant. Will they allow society's attempts to shame or bully them to squash their bold expression about what Christ has done for them and about their hope in Christ? The Greek word also appears in this verse.

This word indicates a claim to honor or a boast again reminding the hearers in the face of their neighbor's contrary claims about their honor that their association with Jesus has indeed given them a valuable claim to honor, which they would be foolish to relinquish. The comparison between Jesus and Moses in Hebrews 3:1 to 6 leads the author naturally to consider how the people responded to the word that God had spoken through Moses and thus to develop the failure of the wilderness generation as a negative example that his own addressees must be careful not to imitate in their present situation. The author approaches both the example and the exhortation through Psalm 95.

The second half of the psalm refers to the wilderness generation's failure and already uses their example as a basis for an exhortation to pay attention and respond well to what God is doing. And so the author writes, therefore just as the Holy Spirit says today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion as in the day of testing in the desert when your ancestors tested me and they saw my works for 40 years. Therefore, I was angry with that generation, and I said they are always going astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways as I swore in my wrath they shall not enter into my rest.

If we compare the way the author of Hebrews presents the text of Psalm 95 and the way we likely read Psalm 95 in the Old Testament of our English Bibles, we are likely to notice a few slight differences. This is because the English translators of our Bibles translate the Old Testament directly from a Hebrew text but the author of Hebrews draws on the text of the Psalm as found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was used by Greek-speaking Jews since the second or third century BC. It is this Greek translation that became the primary form in which early Christians throughout the eastern Mediterranean also knew their Old Testament scriptures.

In the Hebrew text, the psalmist actually refers to three different incidents in which the Exodus generation stumbled in their response to God. The incident at Meribah, where the wandering Hebrews complained against God and Moses because of the lack of water, is described in Exodus 17:1 to 7. Then, the incident at Massa where they complained a second time about the lack of water, as we read in Numbers 20 verses 2 to 13. Then, finally, the incident at the threshold of entering into Canaan

where the people rebelled rather than moving forward to take the land as recounted in Numbers 14.

The Septuagint version essentially makes the first two events, sorry, but essentially masks the first two events by virtue of translating the place names Massa and Meribah as ordinary words, embitterment, and testing. Thus, the whole passage can now be read as a reflection of the single episode recounted in Numbers 14. That story from Numbers 14 is probably familiar to many listeners.

At the threshold of entering into the promised land, the people of the Hebrews decided to send spies into the land to see what they were going to be up against if they tried to take Canaan as God instructed. They select one spy from each of the 12 tribes, and when the spies return, 10 of these spies say there's no way we can take the land. The inhabitants are strong.

Their cities are well fortified. We're not going to succeed. Two of the spies, however, Joshua and Caleb, said that the land was good.

It was ripe for the taking, and God would certainly be faithful to God's promise. The people believed the majority report. They accused God of bringing them out to the desert to kill them there, and they began making plans to elect a new leader to replace Moses, who had led them down this path, and to go back to Egypt and negotiate some sort of peace with the Pharaoh and return to their old lives.

God interpreted this as a blatant act of distrust, dishonoring him and even going so far as to accuse God of ill motives. So God swears in his anger that this generation will not enter. Only Joshua and Caleb will enter from that generation, along with the children of those rebels who would indeed finally taste the good things that God had promised.

We can read these words in Numbers 14:30, and it is to this oath that Psalm 95 verse 11 specifically refers. So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest. Returning to our sermon, the author of Hebrews introduces some essential and strategic elements by approaching the story of Numbers 14 through the text of Psalm 95.

The Psalm text emphasizes once again the importance of heeding the word that God speaks and walking in line with it. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. The hearers of the sermon are directly exhorted to heed the word of God that they have received in the Son.

And that stirs in their own hearts as they listen to the sermon rather than harden their hearts against what they heard from God in their own encounter with the Holy Spirit and the living Christ for the sake of returning to their neighbor's acceptance

and esteem, the equivalence of a return to Egypt. The Psalm also introduces a primary example of how not to respond to God's promises and why it is so foolish a choice to respond poorly because the wilderness generation, of course, lost out on the benefit that God had planned to give them all along and ended up fulfilling their own worst fears for themselves as the whole generation did indeed drop dead in the desert over the next 40 years. After reciting Psalm 95, the author goes on immediately to look more closely at and apply the episode of Numbers 14, the rebellion of the Exodus generation, to the situation of his own audiences.

Watch out, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any one of you a wicked heart of distrust turning away from the living God. But rather, keep exhorting one another daily, as long as it is called today, in order that no one of you might be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, for we have become partners with Christ if we hold fast the first part of the substance of our hope firm until the end.

Just as it says, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. As the author opens this exhortation, he reminds the hearers of the importance of looking out for one another in the faith. He tells them all with a plural imperative: watch out, all of you, lest any one of you experience a wicked heart of distrust.

The perseverance of the one is the purview of the many. This is part of an ongoing strategy that the author displays to encourage the congregation to become a strong social base of support for individual perseverance in discipleship. He also again calls them brothers and sisters, reminding them that their primary affiliation now, their primary family now, is to be found in each other, the family that God has gathered together around the Son.

He warns them against the danger of a wicked heart of distrust that manifests itself in turning away from the living God. In so doing, the author draws upon a well-known cultural, moral topic, which is, in fact, a lack of virtue in ourselves that fails to recognize the virtue of another. Failing to recognize God's essential trustworthiness is not a judgment upon God.

It's a judgment upon ourselves and our moral failure. Thus, a heart of distrust in God is a heart of viciousness, of wickedness itself. The author warns them instead to keep encouraging one another daily, again emphasizing the need for social reinforcement of individual commitment.

And he brings in another word from the psalm here, as long as it is called today. This was the starting point of the psalm quote: today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. However, in the way the author uses it, as long as it is called today, the author subtly reminds the hearers of the eschatological expectations that have come along with the Christian gospel.

There will not always be a today, so one had better make the best use of this day to prepare for the last day, the day that is approaching ever nearer, the day of Christ's return, and the day of accountability before him. What is the operation of this sin that threatens to deceive the hearers, to harden the hearers? In their particular setting, sin is that impulse or that voice that draws them away from what God promises toward what the world can offer. It is that impulse to cease paying the price of fidelity toward God, of gratitude toward the son, because of a desire to gratify oneself with the good things that this life can provide.

Specifically, in their case, the honor and respect of their neighbors once more and the benefits that can come from re-establishing those social networks. This is a strategic way for the author to color those impulses. This is not weighing two equally potential alternatives, two equally valuable alternatives.

This is not listening carefully to the words of our neighbors or our family members who are now alienated from us. The impulse to defect from the Christian group is, in fact, the working of sin's deceitfulness within us. Whatever voices this power of sin uses to work its seductive magic upon us.

The author goes on to say that we have become partners with Christ if we hold on to the first part of the substance of what we're hoping for firm until the end. This saying in 3:14 immediately recalls what the author had just said in 3:6. We are his house if we hold on to our boldness and our boast of hope. The status that is enjoyed as fellow heirs with Christ, as partners of the son, is a status that has conditions.

It is not the beginning of the Christian journey that conveys God's reward, but the perseverance in the journey and the arrival at the end of the journey that allows one to enter into God's reward. This is something the author wants to impress mightily upon the hearers. They must keep going and not desist if they hope to arrive at the promised salvation, namely entry into God's eternal homeland.

In 3:16-19, the author formulates a series of questions and answers that highlight some of the particulars of the wilderness generation story in Numbers 14. Who are those who, having heard, rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt with Moses? Who are those with whom God was angry for 40 years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? About whom did he swear that they would not enter into his rest, except with those who were disobedient? And we see that they were not able to enter because of distrust. The author has woven language from the Numbers 14 story to cement that connection.

In so doing, he has highlighted two major deficiencies in the wilderness generation that he hopes will not also manifest themselves in his congregation. The first is disobedience. The Lord had indeed commanded the people to go into the land, but

they disobeyed because of their fear of the resistance that they would encounter moving forward.

The second is distrust. As God complains in Numbers 14:11, how long will this people not trust me? Trust and distrust are words that often occur in the context of discourse about patron-client relationships. A client must trust and have faith in his or her patron to deliver the help that is needed.

A patron must trust his or her clients not to bring dishonor upon that patron by the way the client will act within the context of that relationship. The author highlights these two things as primary vices for the hearers to avoid in their situation. They must not fail to trust the promises that God has given, and they must not fail to obey to walk in line with those same promises.

The author thus uses Exodus and entrance into Canaan as a framework for the narrative of the audience and their situation. He wants them to see themselves at the same threshold of entering into the land that was promised them. He uses Numbers 14 as the most appropriate scriptural story to present an analogy to their situation.

Will they fall short at the very threshold of entering into the divine realm, or will they press forward boldly? Will they master the impulses toward disobedience and distrust and so be able to cross over where their spiritual forebears had failed? In the fourth chapter of Hebrews, the preacher continues to show the addressees how they stand in a situation analogous to that of the wilderness generation. He begins with an appeal to their emotions, inviting them indeed to be afraid. Let us be afraid then, lest while a promise to enter into his rest remains, someone among you may think to fall short.

Such appeals to emotions, such as the appeal to fear here, were common elements of the ancient art of persuasion. These ancient speeches and sermons were not meant merely to be cerebral, logical attempts at argumentation but to involve the whole person of the hearers, including their emotions. As Aristotle recognized and wrote in his textbook on rhetoric, people make different decisions based on what emotional state of mind they're in at the moment.

The author wants his hearers not to be afraid of their neighbors or their circumstances, or what they might yet need to endure because of their commitment to Jesus. He does not want them to be afraid of failing to receive what God has for them because somewhere along the way, they decided to defect from that relationship with the Almighty. The promise to enter into God's rest here is, for the author, something quite different than the promise to enter and possess the land of Canaan.

The author will go on to demonstrate this as chapter four unfolds. Here, suffice it to say that the author essentially regards the oath of Psalm 95 verse 11, and I swore in my wrath they would not enter my rest, to be referring to something different from, though linked with, the oath of Numbers 14.30, where God had said, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you except Caleb and Joshua. The oath in Numbers 14 refers specifically to Canaan, but the author of Hebrews regards the oath of Psalm 95 verse 11 to refer to a different land of promise, the land of God's own dwelling in heaven beyond the visible heavens.

The author continues to develop the analogies between the hearer's situation and the wilderness generation in their moment of defection as the author continues to write, for we also received good news just as they did, but the word of the report did not benefit them since they were not joined by faith with those who heard or those who heeded. The author continues to recall elements of the story of Numbers 14, specifically the distrust that Joshua and Caleb's good reports about the land of promise met with among the ancient Hebrews. Since the bulk of the wilderness generation was unable to join themselves in trust with those who were prepared to heed and obey God's word, namely Joshua and Caleb, they fell short of the destination that God had set for them.

The hearers, of course, would recognize that the good news that came to them was the good news about Christ, the gospel. The challenge that the author poses here is an implicit one. What will be our response to the good report we have received? Will it meet with trust, and therefore, will it lead us to press forward in response to this good news or this good word? The author continues to go to the hearers to identify themselves as people who will, in fact, move forward in trust in the following verse.

We who believe are the ones who are entering into rest. He wants the hearers to see themselves in that description. We, the ones who believe, the ones who exhibit trust, so that they will continue to invest themselves fully as if the promises that they have heard in connection with Christ are fully reliable and can be advantageously acted upon.

As the sermon progresses from here, the author enters into a somewhat convoluted argument on the basis of scripture to answer the question, what is God's rest? And how can we be sure that this rest, this promise to enter into rest, still stands before us? The author continues with his exposition. Just as he said, as I swore in my wrath, they will not enter into my rest, even though his works had come into being from the foundation of the world. Psalm 95 speaks of entering God's rest, which takes our preacher to Genesis 2, verse 2. For he says somewhere concerning the seventh day, and God rested on the seventh day from all his works.

We see here at work a rabbinic or really a pre-rabbinic Jewish interpretational strategy, whereby a keyword in one verse leads the interpreter to the same keyword

in another verse. Here, that keyword is rest. These two verses are then used to interpret one another.

The implication that the author draws from these two texts operating together is that human beings are invited not just into the geographic realm of Canaan but also into the place of God's rest, the place where God rested after creation, the place that lies in the realm beyond creation. The Exodus generation was barred from this because of their distrust and disobedience. But God renews the invitation to a new generation of hearers through the Psalm text, as the Psalm exhorts this new generation not to harden their hearts to what the Spirit is saying, and thereby to avoid the fate of the Exodus generation.

Our author, therefore, concludes that it remains for some to enter into this rest. The author is engaging in an interpretation of scripture that depends on the chronology of scriptural utterances. The fact that the Psalmist, whom the author of Hebrews naturally links with King David, would say something about a promise to enter God's rest centuries after the historic people of the Hebrews made it into Canaan indicates for the author that there is a much greater place of rest, a place of promise beyond that small geographic parcel of land that was the concern of historic Israel.

The author continues since. Therefore, it remains for some to enter into this rest, and the first ones, the former people having been evangelized in effect, did not enter on account of disobedience; again, God establishes a certain day. Today, as David says, after so long a time, as he said, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken after so many days about another rest.

These verses employ an argument from the contrary. If Joshua had, in fact, by taking people into Canaan, given them God's promised rest, what would be the point then of the Psalmist talking about entering God's rest if you heed God's word and don't harden your heart? Therefore, the author concludes in Hebrews 4:9 that a Sabbath rest remains for the people of God. The author believes that he has established the fact that a future rest still awaits the faithful, and now he calls it a Sabbath rest in keeping with his identification of this future rest with that realm of God where God rested from God's own works at the conclusion of creation.

The author wraps up this section for the one entering into his rest has also himself rested from all his works, just as God rested from God's own. Now, this verse has generally been read as a statement about anyone who enters into God's rest, but it's worth considering that the author has in mind a very specific person who has entered God's rest, namely Jesus, the only individual who has entered into the realm of God's rest by virtue of his ascension through the heavens into God's very presence. This Jesus has also indeed rested from his own works, as the author will go on to explain in chapter 10, verses 11 to 13.

Every priest stands daily while serving and offering the same sacrifices frequently, but this Jesus, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at God's right hand, waiting through the time that remains until his enemies are set as a footstool beneath his feet. Christ's priestly work is accomplished, and therefore, he's able to sit at God's right hand instead of remaining standing as priests whose work is incomplete must do. The rest that is spoken of in Hebrews 3:7 to 4, 11, then, is not to be identified with anything pertaining to the visible material world.

It is the place where God lives, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, and where we will also enter the removal of the created impermanent realm. This is the hope that the author holds before his audience, urging them not to repeat the mistakes of the wilderness generation. In 4:11 through 13, the author now rounds out the second major segment of this sermon that began in 3:1, a segment that has been given coherence by the author's focus on Moses and the Exodus generation as models for how, in effect, not to respond to God's word and promise.

In this concluding appeal, the author writes, therefore, to let us make every effort to enter into that rest so that no one of you might be seen to fall by the same pattern of disobedience. The author is, thus, resetting the audience's focal point on what to seek to attain based on how the Numbers 14 story has given him an interpretative framework for looking at the addressee's own situation. The author wants them to focus their ambitions, above all else, on entering into the divine realm and making it across the threshold from this temporary material creation that is destined for destruction into the abiding realm of God's very presence.

The author elevates this as the reason why they need to give their best efforts and guard against those deficiencies of distrust and disobedience that hindered the wilderness generation's ability to cross their geographical threshold into the promised land of Canaan. Their pattern of disobedience is not to be imitated. The author, in giving us a plural hortatory subjunctive, lets us make every effort.

And then, in a purpose clause, turning toward a singular subject with a singular verb in order that no one of you again brings an emphasis upon the investment that is required by the whole body of Christ if each individual in that body is going to persevere to the end. We are repeatedly called to watch over and watch out for one another in this sermon. We come at this point to a pair of verses from Hebrews that may be among the most famous in the book.

I wasn't much given to scriptural memory in my upbringing, but one of the few verses that I was encouraged to memorize in Sunday school was, in fact, Hebrews 4:12 to 13, which I had always taken as something in general about the word of God, about the scripture in general. For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, discriminating to the point of the division of soul and

spirit, joint and marrow, judging the desires and thoughts of the heart. And there is not any creature who is hidden before him, but all are naked with their throats laid bare before the eyes of him with whom is our account.

These famous verses are offered as a rationale for adopting the mindset and the course of action that the author announced in chapter 4, verse 11. Let us make every effort to enter into that rest, lest anyone of you fall short, falling into the same pattern of disobedience. The danger of falling short is amplified by these verses about the power of the word of God.

And these verses are actually far more menacing than my Sunday school teachers led me to believe as I memorized them. The word of God has been thematic in the sermon up to this point. It has been heavily stressed in the opening four verses of the sermon, again in chapter 2, verses 1 through 4, the opening warning of the sermon, and then in the quotation of Psalm 95, verse 7, in Hebrews 3, verse 7, and then frequently throughout 3.7 through 4.7. Mention of the word of God is always connected with the danger of failing to give that word due attention and response.

Hebrews 4, verses 12 and 13 fall into that pattern. It underscores the appeal to the hearers in 4:1 to be afraid of hardening their hearts against God's word, of not responding with grateful obedience to the help that God has shown and the promises that are yet to be received from God. The image that is incorporated here, especially in 4:13, is that of a defendant hauled before a judge whose eyes can penetrate to the soul and, therefore, the guilt of this defendant.

The addressee's vulnerability before God's all-piercing scrutiny is thus brought to their attention. Further, the Greek participle in the original text, usually simply translated as laid bare or exposed, actually refers much more fully to the condemned criminal whose throat is exposed to the executioner's blade. Those who know Greek can see most of the word *trachea* in that Greek participle.

The author places the addressees before God naked with their throats pulled back, awaiting the stroke of the word that is sharper than any two-edged sword, in order to reinforce his contention that distrust and disobedience toward God are really the greatest dangers facing the audience, not the dangers of their neighbor's rejection that have already convinced a few of them that drawing back from commitment to the Christian group is advantageous. Hebrews 3:1 to 4:13 accomplishes several important steps in the author's rhetorical strategy for moving the hearers closer to the response of fidelity that he wants to see enfolded in their midst. For one thing, he has used repetition of the phrase, entering my rest or entering God's rest throughout this entire block of material as a way of impressing upon the hearers this movement forward into the divine realm and into their eternal inheritance as that which should occupy their attention most fully.

The fact that this phrase is repeated within this section no fewer than eight times is a textual representation of how much they themselves are to occupy themselves with entering into God's rest and making sure they don't fail in that pursuit. This passage has also, again, outlined very clearly for the hearers the opportunity and the danger in their present moment. The opportunity is that of moving closer to entering God's rest.

The danger is falling back into a place where they'll encounter God as judge because of their distrust and disobedience. The author intends to carefully lay out opportunities and dangers to replace other potential identifications on the part of the audience of opportunities that they might pursue and dangers to avoid. In particular, the few members of the congregation who have already stopped coming out to worship together with the Christian community have clearly identified that the opportunity of the moment is to regain our place in the society of our neighbors, and the danger to avoid is throwing away the rest of our natural lives because of our commitment to this foreign superstition that has grown up in the midst of our city.

To the extent that the hearers accept the author's reframing of the real challenges of the moment, they will keep living or return to living out of their commitment to God and Christ, to their commitment to the Christian group, its witness, and its practice. This portion of Hebrews also continues to challenge Christians in every generation down to our own. It highlights for us the dangers of spiritual sclerosis, that hardening of the heart to God's word against which the author warns.

This hardening can happen in many ways. One of the most common and insidious is what happens as we allow, after our initial fervor in coming to Christ, we allow the voices around us, whether of our family, our friends, our associates, even impersonal voices like the voices of advertisements and political propaganda, to replace our passion for God and life with God with a renewed interest in acquiring and enjoying the things of this life that may or may not be evil in themselves, but insofar as they distract us from heeding and responding to God, represent a tremendous danger. And, of course, there is the hardening that occurs as we commit ourselves afresh to fulfill our own agendas for our lives, to fulfill our own desires, and to do our will before the will of God.

The author would have us remain vitally aware that this is a great danger to our souls, and we must stay on our guard. In this process of being on guard, he reminds us of the importance of our fellow Christians if we are to keep responding to God's word and avoid spiritual hardening. Sin is deceitful.

The author knows this, and a person who is deceived often can't think his or her way out of that deception. He or she needs others who can see how that person has come under the sway of impulses and logic that are not from God and help him or her disentangle himself or herself from the same. So, the author reminds us again

that religion is not a private matter, contrary to what Western societies especially promulgate.

Investing and maintaining one another's focus on God and steadfastness in faithful practice is necessary. It's part of what it means to become a Christian and a part of the Christian family. The author also reminds us of our accountability before God now and hereafter, which trumps all other accountabilities that we might sense.

I refer here to the lesson of Hebrews 4 verses 12 and 13, reminding us that our ultimate accounting is with God before whom no one is hidden, before whom all are exposed with their throats laid bare. This word, while indeed posing a threat, also offers a word of liberation to believers. In drawing our attention to the God to whom we must render an account, the text also proclaims our liberty from the many lesser judges who operate by other standards.

It is not the standards or expectations of parents or secular peers, it is not the prejudice that we are taught from birth, and it is not the standards of living promoted in advertisements and shopping malls, but God's values and vision alone that claim our allegiance. We are less inclined to drift away if we keep our focus on ordering our thoughts, our steps, and our ambitions so as to be found pleasing to him with whom is our ultimate account.