

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (v. 12).

F.F. Bruce comments, “For God’s word – that word which fell on disobedient ears in the wilderness and which has been sounded out again in these days of fulfilment – is not like the word of man; it is living, effective and self-fulfilling; it diagnoses the condition of the human heart...; it brings blessing to those who receive it in faith and pronounces judgment on those who disregard it.”

On the functions of this “two-edged sword”, he notes, “It would indeed be precarious to draw any conclusions from these words about our author’s psychology... That the word of God probes the inmost recesses of our spiritual being and brings the subconscious motives to light is what is meant...”

Nothing is hidden. All is laid bare. Finally we don’t stand before Moses or Joshua, but before God himself – and you can’t “pull the wool” over God’s eyes!

- We need strong leadership – and we can be thankful to God for good leaders. What are the dangers of elevating our leaders to a position which is only rightfully God’s?
- God sees and knows our hearts. Do we find that comforting or disturbing? Why?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

2. Sure Leadership

Reading: Hebrews 3.1-4.13

No matter how much we pride ourselves in our ability to think and act independently we all seem to end up following someone or another. Well, at least all the other people do!

When it is young people following the latest music style or fashion, we just call it “peer pressure” – almost inferring that doesn’t carry over into adulthood!

Then an election comes along and we are unmasked – even if we don’t recognise it! The main issue, they tell us, isn’t policies, but leadership. As I said, we all seem to end up following someone or another. We have been let down so many times that the issue is: where can we find a leader whom we are safe to follow, who won’t end up leading us astray, who will be utterly reliable all the time...?

The elders of Israel came to Samuel, asking for a king to lead them. Samuel wasn’t pleased and brought the matter to the Lord. The Lord told him, ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you...’ (1 Sam. 8.7-8).

In the final sense, the Lord is the one we are to follow. The passage we study today is about two very significant leaders of the Israelite people – Moses and Joshua. Great as they were, their leadership wasn’t perfect. The greatness of their leadership is seen in their humility before the Lord.

- Reflect for a moment on “leadership” in our society. Do you agree that we all end up following someone or another? Why do you think this is so?
- To what extent do we value humility as a quality of good leaders?

Greater than Moses

Read: Hebrews 3

Moses was a great leader of the Israelite people. The Hebrews had been a collection of tribes – the children of Israel – who went into Egypt to escape the ravages of a seven-year drought. A reluctant starter, Moses answered the call of

God to leave the security and comfort of family life in Midian to negotiate (?) the release of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. As he led them through the wilderness, they began to become a nation.

Moses led them to Mount Sinai where he had heard the call of God through a burning bush. Here the Lord revealed to him the principles for living which are enshrined in what we call the Ten Commandments.

Moses led them to the edge of the Promised Land. He had been a good leader who looked to God for wisdom, but he wasn't to be the one to lead them into that land.

Moses was rightly remembered and honoured. The first five books of the Bible are known as the books of Moses. We hear David telling Solomon to walk in God's ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements "as written in the Law of Moses" (2 Kings 2.3).

In the New Testament, we hear Jesus quoting Moses. But notice John 1.17 – "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

In today's reading we see the comparison and contrast between Jesus and Moses – Jesus "was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has a greater honour than the house itself... Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house... But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house" (Heb. 3.2-3,5,6).

F.F. Bruce comments that "great as Moses was, his status was inferior to Christ's... the old economy, inaugurated by Moses, is inferior to the new order introduced by Christ. Moses was a household servant exalted by virtue of his outstanding faithfulness to the post of chief administrator of God's household; but Christ, the Son of God, through whom the universe was made and to whom it has been given by his Father as his heritage, is founder and inheritor of the household."

- As we noted in the first study, Hebrews "seems to have been written to Jewish Christians – possibly living outside Palestine – who have experienced persecution and are under intense pressure to revert to Judaism." Their temptation was to hold on to Moses and lose Christ. But how are we to view Moses – and "all that Old Testament stuff"? Is "God's house" in v. 2 the same as "God's house" in v. 6? Does that mean we belong to the same household as Moses? Reflect on what it means that Jesus is greater than Moses.

Hebrews then quotes Psalm 95.7-11 which is a reflection on some of the events of the Exodus from Egypt (especially Ex. 17.1-7). It has been suggested that some early Christians saw the ministry of Jesus as a new Exodus. So – "See

to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily..." (vv. 12-13).

A Sabbath-Rest under the New Joshua

That generation of "sinful, unbelieving" people in fact died in the wilderness. The divine oath was fulfilled – "They shall never enter my rest." But this leads on to the next theme.

Read: Hebrews 4.1-13

The name "Jesus" comes to us from the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua." Note, for example, 4.8 (or Stephen's speech in Acts 7.45) in the KJV where "Jesus" clearly refers to the Old Testament Joshua. The name itself means "the Lord saves". This was an apt name for Joshua, though its full significance is only realised in Jesus. The word of the angel to Joseph – "you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1.21).

So what is this "rest" that those people didn't enter? Hebrews is saying that it isn't just the Promised Land – "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day" (Heb. 4.8). Joshua could lead them into the Promised Land – a difficult and dangerous feat – but couldn't give them the promised "rest". The promise of entering his rest still stands (v. 1).

Again in v. 2 we notice that the Old Testament revelation isn't set aside. These people also had the gospel preached to them, "but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith." In the previous study we noted John 5.39-40. Jesus went on to say, "Your accuser is Moses on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me..." (vv. 45b,46).

The issue in Hebrews is also faith. The logical outcome of Jewish faith is to believe in Christ. To fail to do so is disobedience.

Verse 9 speaks of a "Sabbath-rest" for God's people. It is participating in God's rest – resting from "our own" work. That doesn't mean loafing around doing nothing. But it does mean is that the work of salvation is complete. None of us can earn it. It is a free gift. It doesn't need to be repeated, but is here to be believed and received.

- Reflect on Heb. 4.9-11. How are we to "make every effort to enter that rest"? In what way is it helpful to think of "faith" as "resting" on the completed work of Christ?

The Word of God

Today's reading ends with more about that "sure revelation" which was our theme in the first study.