

**Record of Sermons delivered during the month of**  
**August 2018**

(added progressively after each Sunday)

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(see following pages)

## **The Peril of Apostasy**

per S Olyott

This fortnight's Bible reading is Hebrews 3:1 to 4:1 and includes a serious look at the error and threat of apostasy.

So far in our study of Hebrews we have reached this passage which divides into 3: the first verse which is **exhortation** – here the Apostle is 'stirring us up' to do something; then verses 2-6 we have **teaching** – he is telling something that many of us may not realise; and the remainder of the passage from 3:7 to 4:1 is the most serious and stern, direct and personal **warning!**

Before we begin to examine this exhortation, teaching and warning, it is well that we are reminded of what has been noted so far:

- The Apostle is writing to Jews, who have become Christians, but
- now they have become Christians they are seriously thinking about giving up the Christian Faith and going back to their Judaism.
- He's warning, throughout the letter, that when we turn away from Christ, whoever we are and whatever the reason, we turn our back on the most glorious of all and go back to the shoddy.
- In fact if we turn our back on Christ, we are turning our back on the light of the glory of God and walking into 'outer darkness'.
- The whole message of the book is – to consider and fix our eyes afresh on Jesus Christ.

There are only two alternatives for those who profess to be Christians: They are – fix your eyes on Christ; or walk out and be lost. There's no in between ground. As we found out in an earlier section, we either have the choice of making the rope tighter – the rope of faith that binds us to Christ; or letting it slip which results in slipping away.

It is to this general theme that we return this morning.

He's already said to them, “Why turn from God's last Word as 'embodied' in the Person of Jesus Christ to the incompleteness of the Old Testament. Those revelations by God through the prophets were valuable, but God had more to say than that, and He has said it, now in these 'last days', by His Son.

Why turn back from Him, to that which is incomplete. The best that the Old Testament based Jew could boast of was that the Law came through the mediation of angels. But Christ is greater than the angels: both as God and even as 'man' and a suffering, crucified man at that.

So why turn your back on Christ? To go to the inferior, the shoddy and go into 'outer darkness'.

This fortnight's first section: exhortation. (verse 3:1)

“In the light of what I have said”, says the Apostle, “Consider Jesus Christ!” The word 'consider' is a very weighty word. Think .. ponder .. contemplate .. study .. meditate .. fix your thoughts on Jesus Christ. “After all”, he says, “You're holy!”

Those who are Christians are 'holy', they are set apart for God. Set apart from others. Set apart for Him. Is this you?

You're called 'brethren'. We were reminded of this last week: Jesus Christ is the older brother and all Christians are brothers (**adelphoi** – siblings in a family).

You are people who have received a calling. You received the Gospel and it was by means of the Gospel 'calling', that you were called out for God. Becoming members of the Divine Family. It was a heavenly calling. The *effectual* call – I'll explain presently – is a continuing miracle. There are men and women who will hear the Gospel and it 'goes in one ear and out the other'. It makes no impression. Yet other people hear the same Gospel, but they 'hear' more than what they hear with their ears. They 'hear' something in their heart. It come as a Word that arrests them: changes their personality and fixes them on a new road. So that they now walk a narrow road of loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what is meant by an 'effectual' call. It actually creates faith in the heart of a person. A faith that is also a free gift.

It's a miracle! A miracle. Praise God, that could be going on this morning! Somewhere in a 'pew' there may be an unconverted man or woman who thinks, “Just another sermon”. But the Holy Spirit is working through the words of the Scriptures, which are being explained by the preacher and that man or woman, boy or girl is actually changed. Brought to believe. Given Faith. Forgiveness of sins. Clothed in Christ's righteousness.<sup>1</sup> That person who can't see it – suddenly sees it. That person who has never wanted it – suddenly wants it. A person who cares nothing for Jesus Christ – casts himself on Christ. It goes on in an instant during that sermon.

It's a miracle!

That's why it's called a *heavenly calling*. This calling is a miracle.

“You're holy, brethren, you've received a heavenly calling, fix your eyes on Jesus Christ.”

You'll notice that in that first verse he used the words 'apostle' and 'high priest'. The Jews had a lot of time for two people: one was Moses.

Moses was sent by God to bring the Law to the people. He was sent as an apostle. Aaron was the first high priest and the ancestor of all the priests – the Levite tribe. So here were the two great figures amongst the Jews: Moses and Aaron. Apostle; high priest.

Now says the writer of Hebrews, that in the Christian Faith in the New Testament

<sup>1</sup> (The 'righteousness of God' that Martin Luther 'discovered' as he studied and taught the letter to the Galatians. God's righteousness bestowed by grace on the sinner. Not to be earned as Martin came to realise by his previous sincere and serious efforts, which being so clearly futile that he began to hate God!)

revelation, these two offices are not in two people, but in one Person. Christ is our apostle – sent by God. Christ is our high priest – he will explain this in great length as the letter goes on.

“Instead of going back and hankering after all the days past – of Moses and Aaron – and thinking of them as your great heroes, fix your eyes on – and consider, Jesus Christ. Who is the apostle and high priest of the Faith that we profess.” Of course immediately, some of the Jews would have asked this question: “Is Christ, as high priest, really greater than Aaron?” Well he will explain this through several chapters later.

But firstly have we heeded the **exhortation**? When did we last sit down and ponder Jesus Christ? When did you last create a quiet moment and contemplate Jesus Christ? When did you last drop every thing to fix your thoughts on Jesus Christ? In pausing, remembering that He is the Apostle sent by God. The High Priest who is Himself the sacrifice, but who is now interceding as the priest in Glory. In meditating on His Deity and His humanity. That God has made His final Word through Him. When did you last sit down and ponder Jesus Christ? The exhortation of verse 1 was not only to those Jewish Christians, 2000 years ago, but to me and to you right this minute, today! The writer, here is not just giving good advice. We will find as this passage continues that he is giving us a rule upon which our whole future faith depends.

“Is Christ as apostle really greater than Moses?”

That's the point he will tackle right away. At this point in the letter.

Now then, the **teaching** of verses 2-6.

What was it that everyone remembered about Moses? It's found in verse 2 and verse 5. It was his faithfulness. He was trustworthy. God entrusted him to do certain things and he did them.

Consider Moses for a moment: if Moses had failed, Pharaoh would never have heard God's word. If Moses had never done what God sent him to do, Israel would have compromised with Pharaoh's demands. If Moses hadn't done what God sent him to do, Israel would have come to a dead stop at the Red Sea. If Moses hadn't done what God sent him to do, once they had got over the Red Sea they would have turned back to Egypt a hundred times. If Moses hadn't done what God sent him to do, Israel never would have got to the brink of the Promised Land.

The great thing about Moses was that he was faithful. What God sent him to do, he did it. He could be relied upon to do it. A great man. He was faithful in all his house. In other words, Israel (that house) was the people of God, and Moses was faithful amongst them, in the things God sent him to do.

Verse 2 again: In the same way, Christ was faithful, Christ was faithful in all the work which God sent Him to do. Did God send Christ to live a perfect life? Yes. Did He ever capitulate to temptation? No. Did the Father send the Son to die? Yes. Did He

draw back and refuse to go to the Cross? No. Did God the Father send Christ to perfectly reveal the Father and to speak words such that had never before been heard? Yes. Did Christ go through life dumb? No. Moses was faithful, and Christ was perfectly faithful to every task the Father trusted into His hands. If He hadn't been so, it would be 'all up' with me and with you. There would be no salvation for sinners this morning.

Still with verse 2: The Lord Jesus Christ was faithful and in the same way Moses was faithful. That's the order in which the Apostle put it. Two faithful people. Which one should we honour the most? Christ.

Christ is entitled to far more honour than Moses. Why? He's entitled to far more honour than Moses, just as the architect is entitled to more respect than the building which he makes. (verse 3) You may admire a beautiful building, but the architect who designs it is entitled to far more honour. (verses 4 & 5) God has built everything – including the 'house' of Israel. Moses was only a servant in that household. Christ is the Son and the heir who rules over the household. Go back to the 'bad old days' (as some consider it). Here is a household: of family and servants. There is one servant who is particularly outstanding. But there is a son who is the heir and who's over all the household. Who is entitled to the most honour? It is the son!

Christ sustains the same relationship to His people as a son to a household. Whereas Moses was only a servant in the household.

You ask, "What is the household, please?"

He tells us in verse 6. Christ is a son over His own house. Whose house are we? <sup>6</sup> ... *if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope, firm to the end.*<sup>2</sup> There is a company of people in the world whose confidence and faith, never fails (*firm to the end*). There is a company of people in the world who never cease to 'joy' (or boast) in the hope which is in their hearts. There is a company of people in the world who believe – and who keep believing. That company of people is the household of Christ!

Look at verse 6 again! Whose house are we? IF we hold fast the confidence and our joy (or boast) in our hope – firm to the end.

That sentence in verse 6 would have greatly surprised the original readers. And perhaps it surprises some of you this morning. Especially since when I read it I emphasised the word 'if'. You're only Christ's if you keep on, in the Christian faith. You're not a Christian unless you keep on. Right to the end. That's what the Apostle is saying. It surprises many people when they hear that. You're not a member of God's household, of Christ's household. Unless you believe and keep on believing right to the end.

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote(3) of the ESV translation added.

That's obvious when you think about it. But sometimes, when people hear it, they think, "This can't be right." It doesn't seem to match up with other things that they have heard – at 'first sight'.

When you believed – truly believed. You didn't just receive a new record in heaven. When you believed. When you truly believed, you received the other blessing of the Gospel as well. Which is a new nature – while you are here on the earth. If you really do have a new nature – if you really do – you can never be the same as you were before. If you have a new record and a new nature, then once you begin to believe – which is the key 'mark', a continuing 'mark' of a 'new creature' – you will believe. Believe and continue believing. And so the proof that you really are a Christian will be that you maintain your faith and go on in your faith to the very end. But if somewhere along the line your faith peters out and proves to be a temporary thing. This will prove that there never really was a change in you. It will prove that you never were, really, 'born again'! It will display that you never really were 're-generated'.

The proof then that you are a Christian is that you continue to the very end.

The only guarantee that you have that you are in His house – that you are a Child of God – is that you go on consistently in the Christian faith till your very last breath is drawn.

So. We have had the **exhortation**: to consider Christ.

And the **teaching**: we must continue in the faith to the end.

Clearly then what follows is the warning of verses 3:7 to 4:1. For which we will need to gather our strength and resolve to encounter next week. In the meantime you can do nothing better, than to: Consider Christ.

[2338]

**May it please God that all present, through Jesus Christ, shall have life through His Name.**

## **The Peril of Apostasy – Pt 2**

per S Olyott

Last week, in studying the first part of this passage, we have had the **exhortation**: to consider Christ. And the **teaching** that we must continue in the faith to the end.

Persevere!

Now we come to the severe **warning** of verses 3:7 to 4:1.

The writer is now going to tell the Hebrews (and us) that if you do not go on ... and on ... in the Christian faith you are not Christ's. He does this by referring to Psalm 95:7-11 – by coincidence in this chapter of Hebrews – verses 7-11.

This Psalm teaches that when the people came out of Egypt, their entrance, eventually, into the promise land, depended on their obedience. The fact that all of them who came out of Egypt, except two, perished in the wilderness, was not an accident. They did not go into the promised land! (Except Joshua and Caleb).

Why not?

Because in the wilderness, they rebelled against God. They didn't continue as they had begun. God was angry with them as verses 7 – 11 make plain. God swore that they would never *enter into His rest*.

Think about this! They had had a marvellous deliverance: blood was shed; of all those plagues – they were spared. Then the slaying of the 'first born' – but they put themselves under the blood on their doorposts. They were spared! They came miraculously through the Red Sea. They had their needs supplied – manna and quail and water bursting from the rock. They received a divine Law at Sinai. They were protected from their enemies. Shoes didn't wear out. Clothes didn't wear out. The Shechina<sup>3</sup> glory went in front of them. They had many experiences of God. Experiences of the Holy Spirit.

But they didn't enter into Canaan!

They could have said to themselves, "I'm on the way to Canaan!" But they didn't get there. They could have said, "A wonderful changes has taken place in my life!" And it had! But they didn't get there. They could have said, "God has acted for me – I've seen God work in my own life." But they didn't get there.

That's what Apostasy is.

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3 The Shekhina(h) (Biblical Hebrew: שכִּינָה šekīnah; also Romanized Shekina(h), Schechina(h), **Shechina**(h)) is the English transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "dwelling" or "settling" and denotes the dwelling or settling of the divine presence of God.

Starting out: experiencing real experiences of God, but never arriving at God's Canaan. His promised rest.

<sup>12</sup> *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* “Beware, beware,” says the Apostle, “lest the same thing happens to you. Beware lest you fall into the same neglect and disobedience.” He uses here the words: “unbelieving hearts”. The word in Greek that is translated *unbelieving*, doesn't just mean not to believe, it means obstinacy that springs from unbelief. It has in it the concept of rebellion.

That's what happened to them in the wilderness. They ceased to take God's Word seriously. Then they resisted God's Word. Then they actually rebelled against God's Word. God in His anger swore that they would never enter into His rest. “Beware,” he says, “lest that same evil heart takes hold of you.”

And this applies to professed Christians who depart from the the living God.

The way to avoid this happening is in verse 13: Daily exhortation by one another. Sin is deceitful. Sinful things can look attractive, when they are not. Sinful things can look better when they are not. Sinful things can look more glorious – more pleasurable, when they are not. Don't be caught out by the deceitfulness of sin. It's so easy to become hardhearted and to build up a resistance to God's Word. Don't fall into it but help each other. Tell each other to go on and on. <sup>13</sup> ... *exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today”, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*

Because he goes on to say, in verse 14, that we only benefit from what Christ has done as long as we continue. Only as long as we hold on. It's only as long as we make progress, that we benefit from what the Saviour did.

He's saying that they are to put their lives right. And in verse 15 he's not saying put your life right tomorrow. He doesn't say that there is a special celebration or conference or Lord's Supper, coming up soon so you might sort your life out when that comes. No! (Verse 15) the time to put your Christian life right and resolve that you're not going to go backwards, is 'today' and every 'today'.

Whenever apostasy begins it begins one day. God doesn't call you to live 'yesterday' or 'tomorrow' but 'today'. He hasn't even called you yet to live this afternoon. The time to make up your mind that you will not walk out on Christ. The time that you will make up your mind to fix your thoughts on Christ: is now. The whole secret of perseverance lies right here in the present. It's about what I do now. As long as it is called 'today', don't harden your heart as they did in the rebellion.



Verse 16: “How was it in ancient Israel? Some of them heard and they didn't like what they heard. There was murmuring. Then complaining. Then rebelling. They started seeking alternative leadership (last week's OT reading, for example). They started expressing dissatisfaction with God's Providence. They wanted to go back to where they were before. They started looking over their shoulder, to how the Egyptians were getting on. They started thinking less about Canaan than where they had been. They started getting fed up with the difficulties of the spiritual pilgrimage. Murmuring when things became hard and wishing they weren't hard. They kept thinking about the things they were missing. Which they used to have before. Eventually God slew them!

He was grieved with them 40 years. (Verse 17) It was the corpses of those people – who wanted to go back and thought of the things they had missed, caring very little now for obedience to God and the former glories of following the Shechinah leading of God – it was those people God was provoked by. It was their corpses which littered the wilderness. All the way from the Red sea ... past Sinai ... through Kadesh-Barnea right up to the very borders of the 'Promised land'. They buried then one by one until there was only the two left. It was this rebellious, disobedient people to whom He pledged (verse 19) they would never enter into the “Promised Land'. And they didn't. Their children did but they didn't!

They didn't get to the place they wanted to go. They didn't arrive at the place they had set their hearts on. Who would have thought when they set out – came through the Red Sea. Who would have thought that only two of that company would eventually arrive. Who would have thought that the very God who spared them, would have been infuriated by their love of themselves; the love of what they had left behind; their hardness of heart towards His Word; their rebellion, disobedience and complaints? Who would have thought that that same God would have slayed them? But He did!

“Therefore”, says the Apostle in Chapter 4 verse 1, “fear!”

There's a 'promised rest' awaiting believers. Held out to you is the Glory of heaven. The promise held out to believers is the celestial city. When we came to Christ we came afraid of hell and longing for heaven. When we came for cleansing in the blood, we came believing that when we were cleansed in His blood we would at last come to the dwelling place of God. Our thoughts on eternal issues. The desire to be acquitted at the judgement, and be embraced finally by the Lord and to enjoy Him even in this life. We longed for that eternal destination: “Therefore fear.” he says, “lest having set out on that journey, you don't make it and you fall short.” Because the peril of apostasy is not theoretical, but real.

Now as we close it's important that we define in our minds a few clear things about apostasy. It is not a popular subject. Perhaps too threatening to some. Yet there are many references to it in the New Testament. So not only is it a real threat, it is important to be aware of it.

This passage explains what it is, how it happens and how it can be prevented. Therefore we crystallise this teaching for our own souls' good.

- What is it? Verse 6. It is the failure of not holding fast to the end. Verse 14. Not holding the beginning of our confidence, steadfast, unto the end. That is: not continuing as you began. (More detail<sup>4</sup>)

Apostasy is ceasing to go forward. Going backward. And it starts in the heart and end up in Godlessness.

- But fortunately for us this passage and in fact the whole letter gives us a preventative to apostasy.

We should give the following points our careful attention;

- Recognise that there is no salvation without perseverance.

Verse 6 makes that plain. 6 ... *we are his house if ...* . Verse 14 <sup>14</sup> *For we have come to share in Christ, if ...* .

You must continue in the Christian faith. If you were ever to stop then you will go back. There are only two ways you can't stay 'on the fence'. Those who stop are in God's reckoning already gone back. Unless they urgently repent now.

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4 Alternatively it is described in verse 12: falling away from the living God.

There are men and women who don't continue as they started. They stop: they slow down. They stop: they turn round and they seek the 'other way'. The result is (verses 6 & 14) they are not recognised as belonging to Christ. The result is (Chapter 4:1) that they don't enter into the 'promised rest'.

Note specially that apostasy only happens to people who appear, in the first instance, to be believers. The sad truth is that many may have seen close friends, apostatised. You may consider someone you thought of as a close Christian friend. They may have led others to Christ and been a great encouragement to many in the church. It appeared to happen suddenly to us that the person became less keen ... not keen ... then departed off the scene all together. Very often what they become is worse than they ever were before they claimed to be a Christian. An even lower standard than they had in the first place. Our hearts are shocked and saddened and we experience a sense of dread and fear. As we should, because apostasy is a reality.

- How does apostasy happen? Mercifully it doesn't happen to all, but it does happen. (verse 8) <sup>8</sup> *do not harden your hearts ...* and verse 10, <sup>10</sup> ... *'They always go astray in their heart; ...* . Verse 12: <sup>12</sup> *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, ...* . Verse 15: <sup>15</sup> ... *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts ...* .

Apostasy appears to happen suddenly, but it starts, well before, in the heart. It starts in the 'inner person'. Right down where none can see.

It starts with 'hardening'. That is a resistance that builds up against God's Word. The Word of God which formerly was received with gladness is no longer received this way. What God has said, which once came to the heart with keenness, is no longer keenly felt or welcomed. A resistance, that wasn't there before. Not the openness to the Word of God that had once existed. Sin starts to seem attractive as verse 13 tells us.

Things that God forbids start to look inviting.

Then comes provocation through rebellion (verse 8 & 16).

Having started to build up a resistance to God's Word the person, starts complaining about some of the things that God says in His Word. Resulting in expressions of dissatisfaction with the Christian life. Criticises the way God does things. Restless murmurings leading to 'pointing the finger' at God. Unbridled, deliberate sinning becomes habitual. (verse 17)

All this characterises 'unbelief' and disobedience. (verse 12 & 18)

The outcome is obstinate rebellion, such that what God has said no longer matters. What God commands is left undone. What God forbids is deliberately done. The dictates of the person's life are entirely what they want to do. What God says doesn't come into their reckoning. The person has closed his eyes to Jesus Christ and His magnificence. Shuts out all consideration of His Cross; resurrection; judgement and coming again. Tries to shut Christ out of his life and walks away. In doing so he walks to his damnation. The mercy of God has been discarded ... leaving only God's justified wrath.

- Understand that apostasy is a real threat. It's no good looking at others who fail and find reasons in their personality and temperament that explains their slipping away. It can happen to anyone. There are those who once said. "It could never happen to me!". It has happened to them. Some have been prominent Gospel ministers. Verse 12: <sup>2</sup> *Take care, brothers, lest there be in **any of you** an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* Verse 13: <sup>13</sup> *But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", **that none of you** may be hardened ... .* Chapter 4 verse 1: ... *let us fear lest **any of you** should seem to have failed to reach it.*

The Apostle didn't say that there were certain classes of people who were exempt from this danger: it could happen to any one who claims to be a Christian.

Realise then that without perseverance you will be lost and it can happen to anyone. Therefore 'fear!' Holy fear – one who has faith trembles at God's Word. Of course there great consolations in the Gospel, which are so great they break our hearts with joy, but they must be married to a holy fear.

Paul had such a fear: " ... having preached to others, I myself shall become a caste away". (1Corinthians 9:27)<sup>5</sup> Even this Apostle didn't consider himself exempt.

So 'fear'. But not a fear of terror. But a fear that weighs up the realities and knows what the situation is. Taking the required action.

- Verse 13, makes it clear that apostasy is very much linked with not being connected with a fellowship. Continuing in the Christian life is very much linked with being joined in a fellowship with other Christians. It was never the intention of God that anyone should become a Christian and lead the Christian life on his own. It is a narrow road that leads to eternal life, but it is God's intention that we should lead it with others. Christians in the New Testament, joined churches and found their spiritual life – invigorated and strengthened and helped to continue – in the church.

Christians should join together in the church to be 'pastors' one of each other. Keep their eye on each other. So that as long as it's called 'today', we exhort one another to continue in the Christian life. Doing everything we can to strengthen one another.

Carry with you again verse 1:<sup>1</sup> *Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ... .*

When people open the Word of God and see Christ. When they quietly meditate and pray until they catch a glimpse of Christ. They throw in their lot with a church, but only one where they see Christ. Where people pray together around the throne of Christ, living their Christian life with Christ filling their vision. Those are the people, and those alone, who continue in the faith.

God's not made it hard to persevere. He's given us a 'file-leader'.<sup>6</sup> If we walk the way

<sup>5</sup> But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 6 on page 5 of Sermon for 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2018

the 'file-leader' walks and we never let Him out of our sight, keeping close to Him, we find that the road He takes, is the road that takes us safely to heaven. But the moment we lag a little bit behind and He goes out of our sight or we turn away and look at something else, but not at Him: then all other pathways end in 'night'.

*<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.*

[2219]

**May it please God that all present, through Jesus Christ, shall have life through His Name.**

**Delivered Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018**  
**Delivered Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2018**