



## FAITH FORWARD

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
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We are continuing to wade deeper and deeper into the waters of Hebrews this morning. I hope we've been able to capture some of the author's intensity and focus on Jesus. This book is all about setting him apart and lifting him up. The writer is passionate about his topic, and like we said a couple weeks ago, his intent is not just to transmit information, but also to transform lives. So as we come to the third chapter, he pauses for a moment to press home how important it is to take these words to heart.

### **Hebrews 3:12-19**

*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, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said:*

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

*Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*

This is a strong call to stay the course, and the writer brings up a pretty sobering reality: Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean you can't develop a heart that becomes calloused toward God. Just this week, my 33 year old, healthy girl cousin, had a heart attack and had to have an emergency quadruple bypass. It was shocking. You think, "How could it happen to anybody that young?" But when doctors looked at her arteries, they were a mess.

We might think that our spiritual hearts aren't in danger, because we have prayed and asked Jesus into our lives, or because we've been a Christian a long time. But according to Hebrews, there IS danger. The life of faith is one that takes vigilance and perseverance.

Have you seen ads for that new movie, “Across the Universe” that just opened in theaters? It’s getting panned by the critics, but that doesn’t stop it from being a great sermon illustration.

What caught my attention about the movie is how the script came into being. The producers started with 33 Beatles songs. Then out of those lyrics, they created characters and their stories. Normally you would work the other way – developing characters first and then the songs for them to sing. But almost all the dialogue the actors speak is in the words of the music, which were never originally all part of one story.

What the movie producers are counting on is that viewers know Beatles music. It would be almost impossible to live in America without SOME awareness of Beatles songs. But imagine for a moment that you went into the theater with zero exposure to them. You wouldn’t make a connection to any of the references. A familiarity with the Beatles is a must if you hope to appreciate that movie. You need that as the cultural backdrop.

And there’s a cultural backdrop that is vital to understanding Hebrews. The author of the book is counting on his readers to have a certain familiarity with the songs and stories of the Old Testament. That was his starting material. Every chapter is saturated with references to the history of the Israelites. Last week we saw him quote from David’s song, Psalm 8. This week he borrows another of David’s greatest hits, Psalm 95.

But he also draws heavily from other books of the Bible. In today’s text, it’s almost as if he wrote with the scroll of Numbers open on the desk in front of him. All this talk about people rebelling in the desert. Who are these people? What do they have to do with his point? Knowing the story he’s referring to makes all the difference in understanding what he’s talking about.

So this morning, to better grasp our main text, I’d like to take you back to the book of Numbers itself. I want to spend some time with the characters the author had in mind as he wrote his letter.

In Numbers, God has delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He’s taken them on a long journey through the wilderness to the place where they are poised to enter the land God had promised to Abraham, the land of Canaan.

While they’re parked in the desert God tells Moses:

**Numbers 13:2**

*Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites.*

So Moses sends 12 spies to scout out the land. What they discover is a spectacularly lush countryside. It’s fertile farmland. You know how when you go to Eastern Washington you sometimes just have to stop at one of those fruit stands and pick up some Yakima peaches or sweet corn? These spies had to bring home some samples of the amazing produce they found. Pomegranates, figs, dates. And some of the biggest, juiciest grapes

around. The cluster they picked was so big and heavy they had to tie it to a pole and have two people carry it.

The land was every bit as good as God had promised. Only one hitch: The people there seemed to grow pretty big too. And that's what the spies told Moses.

**Num 13:26-14:24**

*They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large..."*

Right away, you can hear the doubts. It's true that the prize would be great, but we were not prepared for the scale of the opposition.

*Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."*

Don't you love his enthusiasm? Caleb was a spy just like the others. He saw everything they saw. But he had a completely different take on the same situation.

*But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored.*

Notice how they reinforced their position. At first they admitted that the land was good. Now they change their tune and even the positives are turned into negatives.

*They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."*

*That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*

Look at the change in outlook. Here's a community that was just about ready to end up in the place God had set aside for them. This is where they've been headed ever since they escaped Egypt. The end was in sight! There had to have been a lot of anticipation in the crowd. Everyone was eager to finally settle down and plant some roots.

Then the report comes back. Things look tough. Anticipation turns to fear. We can't do this. Then fear turns into despair. This is hopeless. Then despair turns into anger. God is going to let us die. Then anger turns into rejection. Let's get out of here. God has failed us, let's strike out on our own. They are headed down a bad path.

The people of God want to give up being the people of God, all because they don't believe God could actually come through on his promises and take care of them.

*Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them."*

*But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.*

Stoning them! Here is this great inspiring speech, calling the people to keep going, to keep trusting. But the crowd won't hear of it. They are furious enough to try to kill Joshua and Caleb.

Joshua and Caleb weren't just being optimistic. They had faith in God, and the people who had chosen fear over God got angry when they were confronted with truth. They chose to protect and defend their fear and disobedience. That's why their reaction was so strong – it was self preservation. They have those hardened hearts that the author of Hebrews referred to.

That's the last straw as far as God is concerned. He is fed up with the way these people treat him. In spite of all he has done for them, they still don't believe he will do the next big thing for them. Moses intercedes for them and asks God to forgive them.

*The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times -- not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.*

*But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it."*

That's the story behind the story. Now you know who the author of Hebrews had in mind when he talked about "the rebellion." It was the Israelites who turned down the chance to enter the promised land, to grab hold of all God was ready to give them. And for our writer, the experience of the Israelites serves as a metaphor for the Christian experience.

That was how all the apostles viewed Israel's history in Scripture. Paul told the Corinthian church specifically that

### **1 Corinthians 10:11**

*These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.*

We read about this story and shake our heads. "Those Israelites were sure dumb. Can you believe how shortsighted they were? How anybody could see God do so many miracles and then turn their backs on him is a mystery to me."

But then the writer of Hebrews throws a bucket of cold water on us: This could be you, he says. You could fall into the same trap.

In Amsterdam, there are some condos that are a little unusual. Because they are actually built on a bridge that spans the Eastern Harbor. People are living between two points on the map. Remember that game as a kid where you used to try to hold your breath when you went over a bridge? I think I'd be holding my breath the whole time I lived in one of these condos, hoping the supports didn't give out.

The Christian life is one that is lived on a bridge. On one end of the bridge is what God has done for us. That's where we've come from. Just like the Israelites were rescued out of Egypt, through Jesus, God has rescued us from our past and our sin. The other end is eternity with God. But we haven't reached our final destination yet. We're not experiencing heaven on earth – we're still slogging it out. We're in between places. And like those Israelites, we're getting closer to the promised land and we stand on the edge of seeing what God has for us. But we're still on the bridge.

Hebrews sounds an urgent cry to keep headed in the same direction and not take the route the Israelites did when they were so close to the finish line. Take a look at the first sentence again from our Hebrews text:

*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*

What's unsettling about this whole section is the question it raises for people. Can a Christian lose their salvation? Can I sin so badly that God refuses to take me into heaven? I thought believing Jesus died for me meant that God has forgiven me and getting to heaven doesn't depend on me being good.

Let me be absolutely clear: Salvation depends on God alone and not us. He DOES forgive us – based on Jesus. In fact, now that we know the story from Numbers we can see that this isn't about forgiveness. God told Moses he forgave the Israelites, in spite of not letting them into Canaan. He wasn't destroying them for their sins – he was giving them what they wanted. Did you catch that? They didn't think God could take them into the land, they didn't want to try going into the land, so God didn't take them into the

land. But he still forgave them. In Romans, Paul talks about God giving people over to their own devices. He stops fighting us, but he doesn't stop forgiving us.

I think when we get too caught up in wondering about the theoretical possibilities of losing our salvation, we miss the author's point, which is this:

**Faith is a lifelong journey – not a one-time prayer.**

The Christian calling is one that involves trusting God over and over and over again. Each morning brings new crises where we will choose to either live a life based on fear or a life based on faith. We can have hearts that are soft and responsive to God, or hearts that are a closed wall. It doesn't matter how long I have been following Jesus, there will always be the risk that I might rebel against God on some level.

So you might say "What's the use? If it's that hard, if I'm always in danger of messing up, why even try?" Because, as Caleb put it, "the land is EXCEEDINGLY good." In the Hebrew, that word for exceedingly is repeated back to back in the text. It's exceedingly exceedingly good. It's extra extra great. What God has ahead of us is so far beyond what we could dream up that Paul says our current problems are nothing in comparison.

The Israelites lost sight of how worth it the struggle was. They slid into everything the writer of Hebrews warned against. But what does that look like? What's the evidence of a heart that's starting to harden? If that's happening to me, I want to know what to look for. If we take the Israelites as a case study, we can see it began for them by

**Starting in the wrong place**

The spies put all their attention on the potential dangers and the impossibility of what they were supposed to do. It was humanly and tactically impossible to even think about beating these enemies.

But by starting with the obstacles, they neglected two very important truths. They completely ignored **God's promise**. God specifically said, "I'm giving you this land." And he was totally aware of who already lived there. In fact, it was his idea to send spies in the first place. He didn't say it would be easy, but he did promise it.

So often, I want God's promises for me, but I don't want anything in the way of me reaching them. I want to know God will always provide for me like he promised, but if he asks me to part with some of my money and trust him, I'm not so sure. I want to know that God is the God of all comfort, but I don't want to experience hardship to learn that. So instead I do what the Israelites did and start with all the reasons why I shouldn't do what God is asking.

The second thing they neglected was **God's presence**. Not only had God said he would give them the land – he was going to go with them on their quest to claim it. He would be right there to fight for them. In only seeing their enemies, the Israelites forgot about their ally.

That's why the response of Joshua and Caleb was so great. "We'll swallow them up. Their protection is gone. The Lord is with us."

How many blessings have we missed out on, just because we thought the struggle depended on us? We've got the Lord Almighty on our side. Do you need to hear that today? No battle is going to be too much for him to handle.

That's one point at which the Israelites began to get off track. We can also see warning signs in how they **misremembered the past**.

For starters, they completely **ignored God's track record**. This is the generation of Israelites that saw the ten plagues in Egypt. They walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. It wasn't their parents or grandparents telling them tales from the past – this was their own history. What they had seen God do with their own eyes.

It doesn't even come into the equation as they look toward the future. All that God had done doesn't seem to carry any weight with them for how they face what lies ahead.

But their misremembering doesn't stop there. They also **dreamed of a yesterday that wasn't**. Suddenly, Egypt looked like the promised land. Living in slavery sounded more appealing to them than facing the dangerous times ahead. It just goes to show you how terrified they were. Egypt had been horrible and oppressive. They were slaves there! They had been beaten down. Pharaoh had been killing their children. But the Israelites managed to reimagine it in their minds as being "the good old days."

Any time the Christian life seems hard, it's easy to look back to the good old days and think, "You know, life wasn't so bad back then. At least I didn't have to deal with this." We didn't have to struggle with a temptation because we could just do whatever we wanted. We didn't have to face some of these fears or give up these sins or wait for God to do something.

The past starts to look better than the present. That's where the writer of Hebrews says we have to be on guard against "sin's deceitfulness." It presents itself as something that it's not.

The Israelites started in the wrong place, they misremembered their past and they also

### **Sought their own solutions**

What's the first thing they say? "We're going back to Egypt." What's the second thing they say? "Let's pick a new leader." They take the situation into their own hands and try to develop a way out on their own. That's where their complete lack of trust in God showed the most.

Do you ever try to take charge of your own life? I would say that most of the time, I would rather choose my own solutions than God's. They always seem safer. He may want me to be honest with someone when I'd rather pretend there's nothing to say. He may want me to spend time with someone when I'm way behind on what I want to get done. Hello – doesn't he realize there's a task that needs to be finished?! He may want me to talk to someone about him when it would be a whole lot easier to talk about sports. And for me, that's saying a lot.

These are indicators of unbelief creeping into our hearts. When we start at the wrong place and can only see problems with following God, when we misremember our past and forget what God has done, when we start looking desperately for our own solutions, we're on the slippery path toward rebellion.

I'll be honest with you – not a day goes by when I'm not guilty on some level of at least one of those faults. Which means this could be a very scary and discouraging message. Except for the fact that the author of Hebrews has one more thing to say:

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

It's still TODAY! This is my now, people! If I have failed, I don't have to despair, because it is still today. Now is my chance. This is the time to pick up the pieces and move on, to start fresh. Today is the day. There is hope in that, and there's an urgency. It's not a change we can put off any longer

The story about the Israelites would be depressing, if it weren't for Caleb there in the middle of it. While Israel gave us the negative demonstration of what unbelief looks like, Caleb shows us what the writer of Hebrews had in mind as the example of faithfulness.

Caleb's example of faith shows us

### **Full-force pursuit of God**

Think of a police chase. A full-force pursuit would be all available units racing after the target, sirens blaring, no holds barred. It wouldn't be one lone cop tooling along at the speed limit, stopping for a break at the donut shop.

Caleb was not one who just sort of dabbled with God. God himself described Caleb this way:

### **Numbers 14:24**

*...my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly...*

He didn't hold anything back. I was talking with someone this week who has felt their whole adult life like they've been holding back, and now for the first time in their life they feel like they are finally free to quit worrying about what anybody else thinks and just love God.

That's what I want – to have a different spirit like Caleb, one that wholeheartedly jumps in to follow God.

### Secondly, Caleb modeled **Courageous Encouragement**

You can hear it in every quote we have from him. “Come on. We can do this. We'll swallow them up. The Lord's with us – not them.” He is constantly bolstering spirits, even when it was a risky thing to do. That's exactly what the author of Hebrews said we need to strive for:

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

This summer I kind of got hooked on the reality show Fat March, where a group of 12 overweight people walked 570 miles from Boston to Washington D.C. Even for someone in great shape, it would have been a tough workout. But time and time again, one person would fall behind and be on the verge of quitting. Then one of the trainers would drop back and walk beside them, talking them through the pain, saying, “You can do it. Just a few more miles.”

Eventually, the other team members caught the spirit of things, and they would drop back themselves, jeopardizing their own ability to finish, just to support another team member and make sure they made it together.

We were never designed to walk alone. If you isolate yourself, if you don't stay connected to other Christians, you dramatically increase your risk of becoming less open to God. And if we see other people pulling back or dropping out of sight, we have a responsibility to reach out and help them, to support and encourage them. Just a phone call to someone we know is going through a hard time. How hard is it to email a Scripture verse to somebody you know could use it? What if I'm the only one who knows how somebody else is really doing? Too often we hesitate to intervene, feeling like we would be intruding or overstepping our bounds. And sometimes my attempts to reach out to people have completely bombed. I've stumbled all over myself, not always saying the right thing. Who cares? Too much is at stake. The hour is short, but it's still today, and we need to act while there's still time.

Finally, Caleb had **Staying power**. He was ready to do what was necessary. He hadn't gotten too tired to try anymore.

My favorite quote from Caleb comes from the book of Joshua. Flash forward to when the Israelites are FINALLY getting ready to take the promised land. Caleb is still alive and he's talking to Joshua when he says this:

### **Joshua 14:7-12**

*I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my*

*brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly. So on that day Moses swore to me, 'The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly.'*

*"Now then, just as the LORD promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said."*

Isn't that fantastic? Even a lifetime later, Caleb was still ready to fight the fight. That's staying power. He lives out what we said at the very beginning: Faith isn't a one time decision. It's a lifetime commitment.

God has so much in store for us. I want to say with Caleb, "Give me the hill country. Take me where you promised." The writer of Hebrews invites all of us to closely examine our own hearts and see if we're on track to grab hold of it. As you do some personal reflection of your own, ask yourself:

**Where is my danger zone right now?**

Circle where you think you currently have the most trouble: Starting in the wrong place (focusing on the obstacle rather than God); Misremembering your past (forgetting what God has already done or reimagining life without him); or seeking your own solution.

Take a moment to talk to God about any struggles or failures you're having.

**Second, what is my target zone?**

Circle what you'd most like to see God work on in you right now: Full-force pursuit (have I been half-hearted?); Courageous encouragement (is there someone I can be building up right now?); or staying power, that lifetime commitment to Jesus.

The point of this section in Hebrews is not to weigh us down with guilt and tell us we're not doing enough. The point is to keep us looking to Jesus, who has already done it all. Our author said,

*We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.*

Our confidence is in him, not ourselves. As long as it's Today, that's right where we're supposed to keep it.