

“Corinth, Today”

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Because faith is fragile, I need to pay attention – Today!

Hebrews 3:7-19

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The rest of the story

When Kevin Watkins mentioned Paul Harvey at staff meeting this week, there was a generational gulf. The old and wise (me!): “We tuned in at 8:30am and 12:30pm.” 20-somethings: “Paul who?” In between: “My cave-dwelling ancestors listened to him.”

Paul Harvey was famous for “the rest of the story.” There’s always a story and there’s the rest of the story.

Some of you know me as a teetotaler. While I’m not offended to share a meal with someone holding a glass of wine or bottle of beer, when someone’s behavior or words or – worst of all, life – is out of control due to alcohol I have a hard time with being neutral. Liquor and I are not besties. That’s my story.

Here’s the rest of the story. On both sides of my family tree, I come from multiple generations of temperance. My mother was Baptist and my father was Methodist. None of those imbibing Episcopalians and Catholics in my family tree! My grandfather, G. Barney Thompson, would walk out of a restaurant if it had a bar.

I love the name “Barney.” This is my third sermon about an ancient but anonymous sermon in our New Testament called “Hebrews.” I’ve been referring to the preacher as “Barney.” I don’t want to say ad nauseam, “The writer of Hebrews....” I want him to have a name.

Hebrews 3 is one place Barney assumes those who hear or read his sermon know “the rest of the story.” Maybe you do and maybe you don’t.

Worship and warning

In Barney's day Jewish people who did not live close enough to Jerusalem to sacrifice or worship regularly in the temple met in synagogues. In communities all over the Roman empire, ten or more Jewish men met every Sabbath to sing psalms, read the Torah, pray, and encourage each other while living in a foreign land. If they could, they would construct a worship center as a point of identity and as a depository for their scrolls.

They often had a prescribed order of worship. One of their regular readings was Psalm 95, a psalm of both worship and warning. The psalm begins, "Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD!" Why do we worship? He is a great God! He owns all creation from ocean depths to mountain peaks. We are his people!

The warning half way through Psalm 95 may come as a jolt. For Jews who had been scattered all over the empire, often the minority and often oppressed, it was important that they not forget the history of "his people." Synagogue worshipers should "hear God's voice" and not repeat the rebellion of their ancestors. God became angry with them and delayed their entry into the Promised Land for a generation.

They did not, but you might need "the rest of the story" behind Psalm 95. Centuries earlier, Moses had led the children of Israel out of Egypt with dramatic plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. God protected and guided them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night.

You would think that those who had witnessed such miracles would say, no matter what, "God's got this! Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD!" Instead, as soon as they faced a water crisis, they complained bitterly to Moses: "Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?" (Exodus 17:3, *The Message*) Moses named that place Massah-Meribah (testing & quarreling).

If the Israelites had learned their God-lesson at Massah-Meribah, that would have been great. They didn't. For two years as they moved across the desert toward their new home every crisis led to more quarreling, more testing. They bowed down to false gods. They held orgies. They kept saying Egypt was better than the desert, which it was! When they heard a majority report from their spies that Canaan was an impossible invasion, they were done with Moses, done with God. On that occasion, Moses and God were done with them. God said, "This generation has rebelled ten times, they're not going in." It would be forty years before the story continued.

That's the rest of the story. God brings them out of Egypt with great displays of power. That's not enough to sustain their promise. They wait 40 years to occupy Canaan. Centuries later Psalm 95 reminds the scattered Jews that God is the same God of creation and salvation, but they should never repeat the Massah-Meribah rebellion.

Today

Back to Hebrews. Barney preaches a sermon to some of these scattered Jews who have come to believe in Jesus as their Messiah. He quotes the entire second half of Psalm 95 – the warning not to rebel or test God. Barney uses the Greek version of the Old Testament, which translates “Meribah” to “the rebellion” and “Massah” to “the testing.” Barney knows every generation’s faith, every believer’s faith, is fragile. We can be just like God’s people before us. Their predisposition is ours as well.

Barney quotes Psalm 95 extensively, and focuses on two key words: “Today” and “Rest.” Next week we’ll see what he says about “rest.” Today, we’re on, well, “Today.”

“Today,” Barney says, “the Holy Spirit is still speaking through this psalm. Our setting and trials may be different, but this word from God is timeless.”

In addition to his Paul Harvey comment, Kevin shared a story at staff meeting that I thought might fit right here in our sermon on “Today.” Before joining our staff, Kevin worked in campus ministry at Washington and Lee University.

Our daughter’s name is Kinsey Ellen Watkins. Ellen was my grandmother’s name, but we also gave Kinsey that name because of Hebrews 3:12. Let me tell you the rest of the story.

Ellen was my grandmother’s middle name and it was also the name of a student at W&L. Ellyn grew up around the church, but did not really know Jesus. During her first week on campus she became a part of our fellowship. Intelligent and curious, for four months she asked good questions in her Bible study group.

Over Christmas break, she followed and joined those same Christian friends at a missions’ conference. She was invited and challenged to follow Jesus, and said no. She could not trust Jesus to take care of her painful family.

Back on campus in January, she didn’t want to avoid her Christian friends, but that also meant she couldn’t avoid God, who, she had decided, didn’t exist.

Ellyn took a cold winter’s walk one evening and told God (who didn’t exist) all the reasons He couldn’t exist. As she finished her walk, a thought came to her mind, as if from somewhere or someone else. A voice in her head said, “Read Hebrews 3:12.” Ellyn had never read Hebrews 3:12, let alone the book of Hebrews.

She listened. She read Hebrew 3:12, “Be careful brothers that your unbelieving heart does not lead you away from the living God.” Ellyn was undone. God spoke to Ellyn. She would later tell me she had thought she might become a Christian, if all her intellectual objections were answered.

She had more unanswered questions, but she also knew for sure there is a living God who can and does speak to people. That God loved Ellyn and spoke directly to her. Ellyn's whole life changed with that walk and with Hebrews 3:12. We named our daughter Ellen to remind us of the Living God who speaks Today.

A checklist

I love that story for many reasons, among which is that it's a story of God at work Today. It's easy to forget in our comfortable, rather static small town church life that stories of great conversions and transformations of lives and communities are only from yesterday.

Barney's use of the present tense, "As the Holy Spirit says" (7, emphasis added) and then his repetition of "Today" in this passage calls us as individual Christians and churches to listen to what God is saying right now, and to do so by listening to Scripture.

It's tempting to launch from this passage (as well as others in Hebrews) into one of Christianity's favorite debates – "eternal security" aka "perseverance of the saints" or "once saved always saved." I'm not going to resolve that one today, for two reasons. First, Barney doesn't resolve it in Hebrews – not in chapter 3 or anywhere else in Hebrews. For his purpose in his time, he wants us to live in the tension.

Second, either a "yes" or "no" answers to the question, "Can you lose your salvation?" can be misleading, even dangerous. If you answer "yes," you're limiting the power of God to hold his own and you're making salvation itself dependent on our works. But if you answer "no," you promote spiritual laziness among Christians and, perhaps even more dangerous, you promote unhealthy judgmentalism. You say things like, "Well, he hasn't lost his salvation. He was never a Christian in the first place."

So let's not go there. Instead, let's go where Barney goes. Verses 12-14 give us a checklist for "Today." The primary purpose of this sermon we call "Hebrews" is to keep believers in the fold. So far he's done so by comparing Jesus to successively greater spiritual giants – the prophets, angels, and Moses. Jesus is greater than all, so why would you abandon him?

If Jesus is the greatest and our greatest need is to remain faithful to him, let's not engage in a theoretical argument about whether we can lose our salvation. Barney gives us a simple agenda for "Today." Any day we call Today this is our checklist.

1. *Attend to your heart.* "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, *unbelieving* heart that turns away from the living God" (12).

The tenses are interesting in verse 12. Literally, "...lest there will ever be (future) an evil heart of unbelief that falls away (aorist) from the living God. At first this looks

like a warning that at some point in the future you might suddenly fall off the faith cliff. That's not what he says. The verb "see" is present. Keep looking, keep paying attention, keep your focus on what's happening in your heart. The risk of losing my salvation is a debate we'll never be able to solve. The result of a debate like that is it obscures a more important issue – my own heart. Are there seeds of rebellion, bitterness, provocation because I have been testing God?

A heart check is a daily thing, if not much more often. What's the state of my heart right now? Toward other believers? Toward unbelievers? Toward God? Is my heart getting softer or harder? Like the song from Casting Crowns says, "People never crumble in a day. It's a slow fade."

2. *Encourage someone else.* "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (13).

The second point in the daily checklist is not about you. It's about the awareness that God has designed the body of Christ to be interdependent. When my grandparents and parents were missionaries, the work that George and Kathy do hadn't even been conceived. Everyone was responsible for their own heart. Mission organizations have now learned that's a problem, constantly a potential problem. George and Kathy's are needed for member care so that even missionaries are not "hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

I've dubbed the writer of Hebrews "Barney" as a shortened form of "Barnabas" – one of the credible theories of who first preached the sermon we call Hebrews. Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement," according to Acts 4:36. My wife Linda studied the Greek word for encouragement back in Bible college. She has also lived that word. It can mean to encourage, exhort, or comfort. It's "coming alongside."

Ask yourself every day, who needs encouragement from me today? If you wait until tomorrow, you might be part of their "slow fade." Somebody needs motivation, rebuke, blessing, prayer.

3. *Decide to finish well.* "We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end" (14).

Finishing well is personal for me as a pastor. I want to talk about it because I want to be OK talking about it. I want you to be OK talking about it. Finishing well is personal for me as a husband as well. I want my wife to be as happy she married me on the day one of us has to say goodbye to the other as she was the day we said, "I do."

But "finishing well" in this text is not just about a job or a marriage or a child or any other project. It's about following Jesus. Because faith is fragile, I must pay attention.

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It's about following Jesus. Because faith is fragile, I must pay attention. The going will get rough.

N. T. Wright tells a great story about a hike in England with a group that included a Kenyan who wasn't expecting the cold. In the end, the mountain peak was worth the effort, but there was a lot of grumbling along the way.

F. F. Bruce wrote, "To begin well is good, but it is not enough; it is only those who stay the course and finish the race that have any hope of gaining the prize."

So the decision to finish well also has to be a daily decision. I can get overconfident, like the hare in Aesop's fable. I can become discouraged on any given day. I can get tired. I can listen to the wrong voices.

I plan to write these three words in my journal as a daily checklist.

- Heart
- Encouragement
- Finish

Somebody asked me this week if "the rest of the story" behind our web site URL is Hebrews 3. No, but it should have been. Every time you log on to our web site or send an email to a staff member, it should be a reminder to ask what's the state of your heart, today.

This is a word from God to Moses' generation, to the psalmist's generation, to Barney's generation, and to Corinth, Today.

God has done incredible things at Corinth in the past. I'm convinced only better things are in the future of this church. But you and I have to focus on Corinth, Today. It's all we have.

I wonder what it means to ask Paul Harvey's question in the moment. It's one thing to tell a story and then ask, what's "the rest of the story."

What will be the rest of your story? That may well depend on what happens Today. Amen.