

# Hold fast to Jesus

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today's reading is taken from Hebrews chapter 3 verses 7 to 19. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.

On the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for 40 years. Therefore, I was provoked with that generation and said, they always go astray in their heart.

They have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

As it is said, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. For who were those who heard and yet rebelled?

[ 1 : 31 ] Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for 40 years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest? But to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Morning, everyone. Happy New Year. Lovely to see people again. And for those who don't know me, my name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the lead pastor here. And a very warm welcome indeed.

And especially today, as we start this new series of Sunday mornings in the book of Numbers. You may be confused that we've had a Hebrews reading, but hopefully that will become clear.

Let me pray for us. Let's pray and ask for God's help in understanding his word this morning. Amen. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

[ 2 : 40 ] Heavenly Father, we praise you for this amazing privilege that we have. Every time we open the Bible and read your word, that we are hearing your voice, the voice of the living God.

And we pray therefore this morning, please might we be tender-hearted and not hard-hearted. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, keep a finger, if you have it, in Hebrews. If you don't, don't worry about it. And then turn to the book of Numbers on, well, in my version of the Church Bible, it's page 129.

It's the third book of the Bible. So, sorry, fourth book of the Bible. So, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and then Numbers, page 129.

Amen. Many of us will, I guess, have read and loved John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

[ 3 : 44 ] It's a book that's regarded as one of the most significant works of theological fiction in English literature. It was first published in 1678.

And it's an allegory of the Christian life. The main character is called Christian. And the plot centers on his journey from his home city, called the city of destruction, to the celestial city, heaven itself.

In the first part of the book, Christian puts his trust in Jesus Christ. He leaves his burden of sin at the cross. And thereafter, he journeys through fear, temptation, distraction, guilt, shame, worldliness, deception, and despair to his destination.

Well, we're starting a new series, as I said, in the book of Numbers, through the course of this term, and then after Easter. And like the Pilgrim's Progress, it's a book about the Christian life as we journey through this world to our final destination, to heaven, to the new creation itself.

It's a wonderful book. It's a book full of warnings. And it's a book full of encouragements. All designed to ensure that if we are trusting in Jesus, we get to our final destination.

[ 5 : 13 ] Now, if you've been coming to Grace Church for a while, you'll know that our pattern is to preach through and to teach through whole Bible books, rather than just preaching different passages from different books each week.

The reason we do that is because God has given us the Bible as books. So 66 different books make up the one book, rather than, for example, in the form of an encyclopedia, you know, where you kind of look up your topic, that kind of thing.

What's more, preaching through whole books helps us to understand the context of each individual book, which, of course, guards us against misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

It also stops us focusing on our favorite passages, the ones that we kind of perhaps naturally turn to and appreciate the most, or ignoring the parts of the Bible we would rather not hear.

That, of course, is always the temptation, isn't it? The temptation to make God in our own image and to believe in a God who thinks just how we think, rather than, of course, him being the one true living God and changing our lives and thinking in accordance with what he says.

[ 6 : 31 ] Now, Numbers is a big book. I guess for many of us it's unknown. In fact, for me it's been largely unknown for most of my Christian life, I think.

I guess some of us might have heard of and remembered and kind of thought about and read things like Balaam and his talking donkey. We'll come on to him later.

Or the bronze serpent lifted up on a snake. But I guess I'm not the only one who has probably never heard the book of Numbers preached. Well, if we're looking in on the Christian faith, I'm conscious that first reading, Numbers can seem very far removed from life in London in 2023.

And therefore, for both of those reasons, really, so whoever we are here this morning, what I want us to do this morning is really to get our bearings and to see the big issue of the book.

And then next week we'll be diving into it in more detail. So firstly, let's think about geography. Geography. Have a look at Numbers, chapter 1, verse 1.

[ 7 : 47 ] The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt.

Now, whenever, I guess whenever we pick up a book, we want to know, don't we, what it's about. We want to know what's going on. And I guess what we often do is we'll look at the introduction of the book and then we'll look at the conclusion of the book and how the book ends.

Unless, of course, it's a detective novel or a whodunit, in which case you might not want to spoil the ending. Although, I guess some of us do want to spoil the ending. We do want to read the end before we start.

Well, Numbers begins at Mount Sinai, chapter 1, verse 1. In the second month of the second year, after the Lord God rescued his people, the Israelites, from Egypt. Grammatically, the book starts mid-sentence, which makes the point that Numbers is a continuation of what has gone on before. So, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus. A continuation of how in Genesis, under Joseph, God's people had gone down to Egypt. How over time they'd been enslaved.

[ 9 : 03 ] How God had promised to rescue them and bring them to himself. To belong to him as his people. And then to take them to the land that he had promised to give to them.

Egypt was the superpower of the day. It was also the anti-God power of the day. And so God brings judgment on Egypt. The ten plagues.

He then rescues his people. With Moses leading his people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, he takes them to Mount Sinai.

It's a Mount Sinai that he then meets them. He gives them the law. That's the rest of Exodus. He then gives them the sacrificial system. That is Leviticus.

And at the start of Numbers, Numbers chapter 1, verse 1, they are still there at Mount Sinai. And yet, as I said, Numbers is about a journey.

[ 10 : 03 ] It's why I call this sermon series For the Journey. So keep a finger in Numbers chapter 1 and turn to the end of the book to chapter 36.

And the final verse, chapter 36, verse 13.

Let me read it. These are the commandments and the rules that the Lord commanded through Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.

It's now 40 years later. And the Israelites, they are no longer at Sinai. But instead, they are on the very edge of the promised land.

About to cross over the Jordan into the land itself. It's why back in chapter 1, verse 1, the original Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is simply in the wilderness.

[11:10] Because that's where God's people were as they embark on this journey from Mount Sinai. It's going to take them through the wilderness to the very edge of the promised land itself.

In other words, Numbers is placed. I've tried to capture it there on the outline and it's on the screen as well. Numbers is placed between salvation accomplished. They've been rescued from Egypt. And salvation completed. They haven't yet entered the promised land. Now let's just stop there and pause for a moment.

Because that is of the most enormous significance. Because it is just where you and I are today if we are followers of Jesus Christ.

We've been rescued from sin through the death of Jesus on the cross. We no longer belong to Satan's kingdom. But to Jesus' kingdom.

[12:11] But we haven't yet reached our final destination. The new creation. In other words, can we see what the book of Numbers is about?

It's about the Christian life. It's about the Christian life as you and I travel through and journey through the spiritual wilderness that is life in this world.

To our destination. The new creation. As we face all the same things that this Numbers generation faced. Sin, temptation, battles, sickness, broken relationships, misunderstandings, pain and tears.

To our final destination in the new creation. Well that's geography. Let's think about maths.

Now I imagine that some of us are put off by the very title of the book of Numbers. Because we're not numbers people. And we are not maths geeks.

[13:13] And by the murmurings in the room. I suspect those who are not numbers people probably outnumber those who are numbers people. And yet of course numbers can be very exciting, can't they?

So you know we might get excited about exam results. We might get excited about sports numbers. The numbers of runs.

The numbers of goals. Or stock market numbers. Or salary check numbers. Well the reason the book of Numbers is called Numbers.

Is because there are two censuses of God's people. Which provide the structure of the book. Have a look at chapter 1 verses 2 and 3. Where Moses is told.

Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel. By clans. By fathers houses.

According to the number of names. Every male head by head. From 20 years old and upwards.

[14:16] All in Israel who are able to go to war. You and Aaron shall list them. Company by company. It's a census of the generation of Israelites who left Egypt.

All those of fighting age. And we're told the number in each tribe. Now we'll look in more detail at that. As we go through chapter 1 next week. But flick over the page.

And in verse 45 we're given the total number. Verse 46. Sorry. Total number. 603,550. Now the second census.

Turn on to Numbers 26. The second census comes in Numbers chapter 26.

And verses 1 and 2. Let me read them for us. After the plague. The Lord said to Moses and to Eliezer.

[15:14] The son of Aaron. The priest. Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel. From 20 years old upwards. By their fathers houses. All in Israel. Who were able to go to war.

And once again. We're told the total number. In verse 51. 601,730. Now what's the difference between those two censuses?

Well they're a generation apart. They are 40 years apart. The first census is the first generation. Those who left Egypt.

And one of the things we'll see through the book. Is how they grumbled. How they complained. How they rebelled. They're a generation marked out by unbelief. And in response.

God says to them. You will never enter the land. You'll wander. In the desert. In the wilderness. For 40 years. And you will die. The second census.

[16:15] The chapter 26 census. Is the next generation. The generation which then held on to God's promises. Which trusted God's promises. And did indeed go on to enter the land.

Now that is the structure of the book. Two censuses. Two generations. One unbelieving. The other believing.

Which means you see that numbers as a book begs the question. Which of those two generations are we going to be like? The first generation.

Or the second generation. And the New Testament. As it looks back on the book of Numbers. Makes it crystal clear. That that is indeed.

The big issue. So. Let's go back to that reading. Which we had from Hebrews. Hebrews chapter 3. Page 1205.

[17:17] Now the writer's of Hebrews identifies the key lesson.

Where to learn from numbers. In verses 7 to 11. It's a quote from Psalm 95. Which is the Old Testament commentary. On that first generation.

In numbers. It's a psalm that rejoices. That God is Lord and King. Over the whole of creation. And yet also rejoices. And is amazed. That this great and awesome God.

Has chosen a people. To belong to him. To be his people. As the psalm puts it. For he is our God. And we are the people of his pasture.

And the sheep of his hand. In fact if you're here this morning. And you're looking in on the Christian faith. And you want a succinct summary. Of what it is to be a Christian. It is to know this awesome creator God.

[18:20] The one true living God. As your shepherd. The Lord Jesus himself. Describes himself. As the good shepherd. Why wouldn't you want to be shepherded.

By someone like that. And yet the psalm continues. And it's this that is then quoted here. In Hebrews chapter 7. Let's pick it up from verse 7.

Therefore as the Holy Spirit says. Today if you hear his voice. Do not harden your hearts. As in the rebellion. On the day of testing.

In the wilderness. Where your fathers put me to the test. And saw my work for 40 years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation. And said.

They always go astray in their hearts. They have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath. They shall not enter my rest. What is God's verdict?

[19:19] On that first generation. Who came out of Egypt. They heard his voice. Verse 8. But they hardened their hearts. Verse 9.

They tested God. With their unbelief. Verse 10. God's verdict on them. They have not known my ways. Verse 11. They didn't enter.

The promised land. And yet this is no dry and dusty history lesson. Because there is a punchline for us. Verse 12.

Take care brothers. Lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart. Leading you to fall astray. From the living God. If you know Hebrews.

You'll know. It's all about the danger of drifting. From Jesus. Look back to chapter 2. Verse 1.

Therefore we must pay closer attention.

[20:17] To what we've heard. Lest we drift away from it. In other words. Genuine Christian faith. Is always faith that perseveres.

And keeps going. After all. Didn't the Lord Jesus. Tell the parable of the sower. Remember the different kinds of soil. That the seed fell on.

Representing the different sorts of people. The different kinds of responses. There are to hearing God's word. The first. The seed is snatched. The second.

And third. The seed seems to respond well. To start with. But then. Those who hear the word. Fall away. Either because of trials. And testing. Or the cares of life.

It's only the fourth seed. That actually produces. A harvest. As Jesus himself comments. As for. That's in the good soil.

[21:12] They are those. Who sharing the word. Hold it fast. In an honest and good heart. And bear fruit. With patience. Genuine Christian faith.

Is always. Persevering faith. It holds on. To God's word. And Hebrews 3. Like the parable of the sower. Reminds us.

That it's quite possible. To be part of the visible. Church. Of God. In other words. To be. At Grace Church Dulwich. On a Sunday. And yet.

For God's verdict. To be verse 9. They have not known my ways. Now is that not a terrible. Verdict. As verse.

As verse 16. Puts it. That numbers generation. Had huge spiritual privileges. They were led out of Egypt. By Moses. They appeared to belong to God.

[ 22 : 09 ] As his people. And yet. Verse 17. With whom was he provoked. For 40 years. Was it not with those. Who sinned. Whose bodies fell.

In the wilderness. And to whom did he swear. That they would not enter his rest. But to those who were disobedient. So we see. They were unable to enter.

Because of unbelief. It's funny isn't it. The way in which people. Will sometimes talk. About the fact. They've drifted away from Jesus. And they'll say something like. I've lost my faith. You know. In the same way. That you might talk about. The fact that you've kind of.

Lost your umbrella. You know. An accident. It was just kind of. One of those things. That happens. But Psalm 95. Would help us.

[ 23 : 03 ] Would encourage us. To think very differently. They heard God's voice. Verse 8. They saw God at work. Verse 9. They had the opportunity.

To know God's ways. Verse 10. And yet. Their hearts were hardened. In other words. Turning away from God. Is not a passive process.

It's not something. That just kind of. Happens. It's an active thing. It's something. We choose. To do. Yes.

It may start with drift. After all. That's. That's the language. Of chapter 2. Verse 1. It may start with drift. At which point. We may in a sense. Be unaware of it. But it ends.

With actively. Turning away. Hardened. By sins. Deceitfulness. And just as you don't.

[ 23 : 59 ] Suddenly lose. Faith. You don't. Suddenly. Kind of. Wake up. With faith. Either. I think that's so often. The way. Which our culture. Thinks about it. You know. Like a sort of. A winter infection.

You suddenly. Wake up one morning. You've. You've. Sort of. Got a sore throat. You've got a cold coming. No. Faith comes. From hearing. God's word. The Bible. So.

If you're. Interested. In the Christian faith. If you're. Interested. In finding out. More about Jesus.

Then do. Keep coming. Keep coming. Sunday. By Sunday. Or.

Read. One of the. Gospel accounts. Of Jesus. Life. For. Yourself. So. Then. I wonder. If we can begin. To see. What the big warning is.

Of the book of numbers. Well. It's verse 12. Take care. Brothers. Lest there be. In any of you. An evil. Unbelieving.

[ 24 : 54 ] Heart. Leading you. To fall away. From the living God. That's going to be. The big warning. What's going to be. The big encouragement. For us. As we look.

At the book of numbers. Well. It's there. In verse. 14. Sorry. Verse 13. But. Exhort one another. Every day. As long as it's called today.

That none of you may be hardened. By the deceitfulness. Of sin. It's to hold on. As verse 14 says. For we've come to share in Christ.

If indeed. We hold our original confidence. Firm. To the end. It's to hold on to Jesus. Just as. Christian does. The character.

In the pilgrim's progress. That's what numbers. Is going to help us to do. Both by heeding the warning. Of that first generation. Who didn't get to the promised land.

[ 25 : 50 ] And by heeding the encouragement. Of that second generation. Who did get. To the promised land. So then. How do we do that? How do we heed.

The. Both the warnings. And the encouragements. Of the book of numbers. Well. The writer of the Hebrews. Tells us. Firstly. Verse 12. We need a right attitude.

To God's word. A right attitude. To God's word. Take care brothers. Lest there be in any of you. An evil unbelieving heart.

Leading you to fall away. From the living God. There are some things in life. Aren't there. Which frankly. We can afford to be careless about. You know. A few scrapes.

On the car. Perhaps dropping one or two. Marks in an exam. Perhaps getting a bit of paint. In the wrong place. Doing a DIY project. Sure at the time. They can seem like a big deal.

[ 26 : 45 ] But actually. They're really not. In the long run. Something we cannot. Afford. To be careless about. Is the state. Of our hearts.

Because it's the state. Of our hearts. That determines. How we respond. To God's word. The Bible. Now you and I. Hear the voice of God.

Every time we open the Bible. As verse 7 here. That tells us. Psalm 95. Is God the Holy Spirit. Speaking. As is all of scripture. Whenever we open the Bible.

On our own. In our growth groups. Our small group. Bible studies. When we're gathered here. Like this. On a Sunday. As we listen to a sermon. It's not something. We should ever take lightly.

Because we are hearing. The voice. Of God. The Holy Spirit himself. Speaking to us. Now I say that. As much to myself. As to anyone.

[ 27 : 40 ] We shouldn't take it lightly. As we hear the Spirit. Addressing us. Speaking to us. Directly. Which means of course. That our response.

Reveals the state of our hearts. So let me ask. How healthy. Is your heart. You see. A believing heart. Isn't. Simply one that.

Agrees with what the Spirit. Says in the Bible. I think that's our temptation. To think. Yes. I've agreed with what is said. Why. You know. I agree with what. With what the Bible says here.

No. A healthy heart. Is one. That actually. Is changed. By the Bible. And lives it out. In other words. A heart. Will. And life.

That is in tune with. And shaped by. The Spirit. Here's a question to ask. When was the last time.

[ 28 : 36 ] You were changed. By the Word of God. When was the last time. You were changed. Actually changed. By the Word of God. Not just agreeing with it.

But changed by it. Or are we sort of selective. In our hearing. And in. Our obedience. A right attitude.

To God's Word. But secondly. A right attitude. Towards each other. Verse 13. But exhort one another. Every day. As long as it's called today. That none of you.

May be hardened. By the deceitfulness. Of sin. You and I need each other. To exhort each other. Every day. To keep holding on to Jesus.

Rather than hardening. Our hearts. So often we're blind. Aren't we. To the things. Which to others. Are painfully obvious. Before we were married.

[ 29 : 33 ] I lived in a house. Which was largely. Furnished with family. Cast offs. The living room. Had this. Kind of sofa. Which was. Well. Resplendent in a sense.

In kind of orange. And brown. Sort of swirling. Patterns. And I was completely oblivious. To the issue. Until a friend of mine. Came.

And came around for a coffee. And he said to me. That my living room. Had all the ambience. Of a dentist's waiting room. Well. Once I got married. Things quickly changed.

You won't be surprised to hear. But life can be like that. Can't they? You know. Things which we just don't see. We're blind to them. And yet they're completely obvious. To other people.

Which means. If we're to hold on to Jesus. We need each other. Because we can so easily. Deceive. Ourselves. Into thinking that things are fine.

[ 30 : 29 ] When actually. They are not fine. One of my great addresses. At Grace Church. Is to look back. On people. Who. Seem to have put their trust.

In Jesus. Or seemed at one stage. To have been following Jesus. And yet. They always remain. Kind of semi-detached. If you like. From church.

And from church family. You know. Perhaps they came. When. They didn't have other things on. Or perhaps they came. More regularly. But in a kind of. Fairly semi-detached.

Way. Essentially. Trying to live the Christian life. On their own. But as verses 12 and 13. Remind us. That is the way.

To drift away. You cannot live the Christian life. On your own. That's why our growth groups. Are so vital. We need each other. They are the natural place.

[ 31 : 25 ] To encourage one another. And exhort. Each other. I hope you can see. What the writer of the Hebrews. Is saying here. It's far more than simply having. Some Christian friends.

Who we get on with. And who we enjoy chatting to. Over a cup of coffee. On Sunday mornings. Now we need to be actively. Exhorting. And encouraging each other.

So we are not. Hardened. By the deceitfulness. Of sin. That is precisely. What the first numbers generation. Failed to do.

Because actually. I think one of the most sobering things. And we will see this. As we go through numbers. One of the most sobering things. Is that they rebelled. Against God. Together.

So together. They refused. To enter the promised land. Together. They grumbled. And complained. Together. 24,000 of them. Worship the false god. Baal.

[ 32 : 21 ] Together. They wanted to go back to Egypt. Together. They rebelled. Against the leadership of Moses. Together. In other words.

Do we love each other enough? Do we long for each other. To endure to the end enough. That we are willing to exhort. And encourage. One another. To rebuke each other.

Or do we just chat over a cup of tea or coffee. About the holidays. Or sport. Or the kids. Or work. Or whatever it is. I wonder if we can see how important this is.

If we can't yet. Then the book of numbers. Will I trust. Convince us. Today. Today. If you hear his voice.

Do not harden. Your hearts. There is so much. At stake. This isn't just a command for us. As individuals.

[ 33 : 20 ] But a corporate command for us. As a church. We need each other. If we're to avoid. Hardening our hearts. You and I have a responsibility.

To ensure that we heed. The warning. And take the encouragements. To heart. Let me lead us. In prayer. Let's pray together.

For we have come to share in Christ. If indeed. We hold our original confidence. Firm to the end. As it is said today. If you hear his voice.

Do not harden your hearts. Heavenly Father. We thank you for. The Lord Jesus. Thank you that he is indeed. Supreme.

Thank you. That he is the shepherd. Of all those who trust in him. And we pray. Heavenly Father. Please would you. Help us to. Encourage one another.

[ 34 : 25 ] To hold on. To our original. Confidence. In him. And we ask it. In his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.