

Hang On!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 May 2003

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of May 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Hang On and is based on Hebrews chapter 3 verse 7 through to chapter 4 verse 11.

Amen.

Whether it's a lack of petrol, a lack of rain, a lack of intellect, a lack of discipline, a lack of capital or a lack of expertise. But what about for the Christian?

Let's pray. O God, we pray that you will speak to us in this word and that your word may fall on receptive hearts and ears and minds so that not only will we believe it and trust it, but we will keep on doing so to the very end of our lives.

Amen. One of the most awful things I could imagine would be to take a child to the shopping centre. You are asking for trouble if you take a little child to a shopping centre.

[1 : 47] I do not understand why anyone would want to take a child to a shopping centre. Because throughout the shopping centre there is every distraction, every glittering window that seems to beckon to every child to enter and to taste and buy of the various enticements that that shop sells or offers.

Every sweet tempts, every lolly tempts, every shop seems to have hidden treasures to entice. And then suddenly for the little child in the shopping centre, the next step is one step too many.

Tired, tired, cranky, tearful, shouting, screaming, stop, sit down, no further. Who on earth would want to take a child to the shopping centre?

But you take a Christian through life and sadly too often it is similar to that. Because throughout life every temptation seems to beckon from the sidewalks of life.

Every enticement, every glittering promise beamed around in neon lights to attract us, to entice us to what is offered. But not only the temptations and the enticements, it seems that every fear, every pressure, every struggle, every expectation that is heaped upon us that seems to contribute to that one step too many.

[3 : 15] Stop. And we stop as Christians. Attracted by the temptations, giving up because of the fears or the pressures or the expectations on us.

You see, it is so easy for the Christian in this life to lose sight of heaven and to give up and to stop the Christian faith.

In some respects, life is like walking through the arcade of crazy mirrors that you see at Luna Park or the various theme parks around the place. You know the mirrors, you stop in front of it and you look so overweight.

No, that's a real mirror. But then you move on to the next mirror and it makes you look so slim and you think, wow, I like this mirror. I like the reality that is being portrayed by this mirror that makes me look as though I should be modelling some sort of underwear or swimwear or something.

Am I really that slim? I'd love to believe the reality that this crazy mirror is offering before me. Life's like that. It's like walking through the arcade of crazy mirrors that distort reality and tempt us to believe the false reality that the mirror is portraying for us.

[4 : 23] And the fundamental reality that is distorted by life as we walk through its arcade of crazy mirrors is there is no heaven. It's a myth.

It's a pipe dream. It's not reality. The crazy mirrors of life are telling us, this is it, folks. Eat, drink, be merry. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

This life is the reality. This life is all there is. Carpe diem, seize the day. Live for today. Forget about tomorrow. It may not even happen.

Today's what matters. Live for this day. We can't know what the future will be like. We can't know what heaven will be like. It's probably just a figment of imagination made up by some philosopher or guru sometime.

But this is real. Touch it. It's there. Live for it. That's what matters. After all, a bird in the hand is worth more than trusting in a heaven that may be just too far away to be true.

[5 : 28] Pie in the sky when you die. Yes, it's easy for the Christian to give up heading for heaven. It's easy for the Christian to lose sight of an eternal reality.

It's easy for the Christian to be sucked into believing the distorted realities of the crazy mirrors of life and think this is it. There's nothing more.

And so not every Christian. And so not every Christian lasts the distance to heaven. When ancient Israel left Egypt under the leadership of Moses, 1400 years before Jesus, 3400 years ago before our day, their goal was the promised land of God.

The land that is now fought over by Palestinians and Israelis. The land of Canaan, as it was then called. A land described by God as a land flowing with milk and honey.

A land that was almost paradise in its provisions of bounty and beauty. An idyllic land, an idyllic land, God's own land, the land where God himself dwelt, his own sanctuary.

[6 : 37] A land where God would guarantee victory for his people as they would enter it. Where he guaranteed protection from their enemies and a bounteous supply of all you could ever wish for and dream for.

That was their goal. And as Moses led the Israelites out from slavery in Egypt, through the miraculously parted waters of the Red Sea into the wilderness, Israel chickened out.

They got to the border of the promised land and then became fearful. They sent in spies into the land, one from each of their 12 tribes, to check out the land.

And they came back and said, yes, it is a good land. Here are the grapes from the Valley of Eshkol to show you how bounteous it is. But it is full of people. It's full of armies and cities that are protected.

We don't really think we want to go in there. These are ferocious giants who live in this land. And so Israel chickened out when it heard about the enemies who lived in the land.

[7 : 41] And as a result, God condemned the people of God, Israel, to 40 years of punishment in the wilderness so that that generation would die out. And eventually it was their children who went into the land.

Not every one of God's people lasts the distance to see the fulfillment of the promises of God. Not every Israelite who came out of Egypt actually arrived in the promised land of God.

Distracted along the way, they disobeyed God. They murmured against him. They didn't trust his promises to them. And for them, the crazy mirrors of life distorted reality. And they thought the giants and the armies and the fortified cities and the land were so threatening that their God could do nothing about it.

But their God in the face of such enemies was impotent, couldn't fulfill his promises. And they listened to the human voices of despair and not to God's voice.

And they chickened out, believing instead the distorted reality of life. Well, 400 years after those events, 1000 BC, give or take a little bit, David was the king of Israel.

[8 : 49] They were now well and truly settled in the land, fairly secure in the land, though from time to time there were enemies around about. King David, amongst many other things, wrote Psalms, some of the Psalms we read in the Bible.

And in one of his Psalms, he recalled those events when Israel chickened out of arriving in the promised land. And he wrote that Psalm, recalling those events, because his own generation in the land was in danger of making the same mistake.

Not about chickening out of going in the land, they're already there. But about being sucked into the distorted realities of life that seem to suggest God is not powerful, God won't keep his promises, live for today.

That's what matters. And then again, later still, another thousand years through history, to the time in the next generation after Jesus lived on earth.

Some Christian leader, we don't know who, wrote a letter to a group of Christians, we don't know where. And he quoted that same Psalm of David, that referred back to earlier times from David, to the time when Israel refused to go into the promised land of God.

[10:05] And that Christian writer, the generation after Jesus, saw that his own generation was in the same predicament as David's generation a thousand years before, as Moses' generation 400 years even earlier than that.

In danger of being sucked into the distorted realities of life, that God was not powerful, that his promises would not be realised. For this writer, that Jesus would not return, that heaven was not a reality.

Because he saw that his generation were vulnerable to living for today, drifting away and giving up on the Christian faith. And add 2,000 years onto that again.

So we've gone from Moses 400 years to David, 1,000 years to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, and now 2,000 years on to today, to us. God's word is still a warning to us because we are in the same predicament.

We too are vulnerable to giving up on the promises of God, to drifting away from the Christian faith, to doubting in God's word, and not lasting the distance, to the promised goal, not of land on earth, but of a heavenly land, promised for us.

[11:19] You see, God's word is still a warning to us today.

We are in danger of giving up, of drifting away from faith, of doubting the promises of God, of not lasting the distance to the promised realities of heaven.

Don't be like Israel in the wilderness and chicken out and doubt God's word. Don't be fearful. Don't disobey the commands of God.

Don't distrust his promises to us. Don't harden your hearts in the face of God's word. Don't fail to finish. Don't fail to arrive at God's promised destination of heaven.

And that's what the opening verses that we heard tonight from Hebrews 3 are all about. Read them again in page 972 in the Bibles. Hebrews 3 verse 7.

[12:41] Quoting Psalm 95. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, present tense, still speaking to us even today. Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, referring back to the time of Moses, where your ancestors put me to the test that they'd seen my works for 40 years.

Therefore, I was angry with that generation. And I said, they always go astray in their hearts and they have not known my ways. As in my anger, I swore they will not enter my rest.

This passage shows us how serious the sins of unbelief is and how dangerous it is. It was a problem for ancient Israel in the wilderness, a problem for David's generation 400 years later, a problem for the readers of this letter 2,000 years ago, and a problem for us today as well.

Don't fool yourselves and think, I'm lasting the distance. Don't kid yourselves and think it's easy to last the distance. If it was difficult for Moses' generation and difficult for David's generation and difficult for the writer to the Hebrews' generation, it is surely just as difficult for us to last the distance as Christians.

We are just as vulnerable to drifting away and giving up on the Christian faith. So, verse 12 says, take care. Take care. Take care because you're in a vulnerable situation.

[14:12] Take care because you're in danger. Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. It's the heart that's the problem.

We've got to take care of our spiritual heart. We've got to take measures to lower the spiritual cholesterol level in our heart. We've got to listen to God's voice above the clamour and dim of the voices of our world round about us that are projecting towards us all these distorted realities and say that heaven doesn't exist.

We've got to pray to God that His Spirit will guard our heart, that our heart will be open and receptive to the word that God still speaks to us through the words of the Scriptures.

But this is not just a matter of self-care. It's not just a matter of you, Ross, and you, Paul, looking after yourselves in the privacy of your own life.

It is about mutual self-care. That is, we're in this together. We're vulnerable together. And it's not just me looking after me and you looking after you, but us looking after each other.

[15:21] As verse 13 says, But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

For we have become partners of sin.

We're to be observant of our fellow Christians in the world in which we live. To provoke each other to good works, to encourage each other along in the Christian walk, that we finish together the Christian race and arrive together in heaven.

We're to look out for those who are drifting in faith, loosening the ties to church life and Christian fellowship and Bible reading and prayer. And the reason why we are to do this for each other together is because sin is so deceitful.

Remember Adam and Eve in the garden? How easily deceived they were into thinking that the fruit of that forbidden tree was good for them? Sin is deceptive.

[16:55] Sin tricks us and deceives us into thinking that it is good for us, whereas in fact it is bad and evil. You see, sin deceives us into thinking that if we ignore our Bibles, we're okay.

Sin deceives us into thinking that we can get by without praying. Sin deceives us into thinking that I don't need to go to church. Sin deceives us into thinking that my Christian life is mine privately. It's not your involvement, your concern. I'll look after myself, thank you very much. Sin deceives us into thinking along those sorts of lines and sin deceives us into thinking that heaven is not an ultimate reality indeed.

Sin deceives us into thinking that we're on track, we're going okay. Sin is the crazy mirrors of life distorting reality and making us think that in fact falsehood is true and good.

And the reason why we're to care for each other is because sometimes we see the deception of sin, the clouds in others' eyes and they might see it for us as well.

[18:01] Don't turn a blind eye to your neighbour's sin. Don't leave them to fail to finish the Christian race. Don't kid yourself and think, well, they're wallowing in sin here but it's their responsibility, not mine.

Don't leave each other to fail to arrive in heaven. As verse 12 and 13 say, Well, this warning to ancient Israel in Psalm 95, used by the writer to the Hebrews for his readers, is a severe warning. The heart of the problem was unbelief. Unbelief encouraged by the deceitfulness of sin. Unbelief that manifests itself in disobedience and rebellion, as was the case of ancient Israel in the wilderness.

Verses 15 to the end of chapter 3. As it's said, Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. Now, who were they who heard and yet were rebellious?

Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? Yes, it was. That generation of Israel. But with whom was God angry for 40 years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

[19:38] That's who it was. And to whom did God swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they are unable to enter because of unbelief.

We might expect him to say disobedience. But it's disobedience that comes from unbelief, from believing falsehoods, not truths, from believing distorted realities, and not the promises of God. They did not believe that God would or could keep his promises to deliver them safely into this glorious promised land. They believed in the sight of the enemies and the fortified cities in the land that God was impotent and or unreliable to keep his promise.

They believed that the enemies would win. They believed that God was faithless. They believed that God had brought them into the wilderness to die. They've been sucked in by the crazy mirrors of our world and its distorted realities on offer.

And it's to that same in our world. We live in a world that is trying to tell us falsehoods all the time about this life and about eternal things.

[20:52] There's every competing voice in our world to say, why believe in God? I mean, just look at this world. How on earth can you believe in God when we're at war with Iraq, when there's all this SARS devastation, there are bombs in Morocco, there's a drought in Australia.

Look at this world. How on earth can you believe in a sovereign, loving God? That's the distorted, crazy mirrors that our life throws up at us. And so we're tempted to be deceived by that, to doubt the promises of God, the ability of God to keep his promises.

The warning is very clear, as it was for ancient Israel. Don't unbelieve the promises of God. Don't be sucked in by the deceptiveness of the distortions of our world's views.

The issue of God's promised rest did not expire with the generation that came out of Egypt. The next generation arrived in that land, sure.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Otherwise, the Bible would well have ended in the early chapters of the book of Joshua, when the people finally arrived in the promised land, conquered their enemies, settled and had some initial rest at least.

[22 : 09] But indeed, the promise of promised land points to a greater promise that still stands today. For the promise of land in the Old Testament was a promise of rest, of harmony between the people of God, in the place of God, under the rule of God, and in the presence of God.

And that promise still stands. It's not exhausted by the Old Testament, and it's not done away with because of the failures of the Old Testament people of God.

And so that's the thrust of the first part of chapter 4 in the letter to the Hebrews. The promise still stands. An even more glorious promise because God promises us not the land of Canaan where Israel and Palestine are fighting today, a land that if you go there to visit, sadly doesn't flow very much with milk and honey, but rather with enmity and blood.

The promise is of an eternal land, an eternal promised land, of an eternal heavenly land, no less real for being heavenly.

Indeed, rather, it's the ultimate reality over and above this earth on which we live now. Therefore, chapter 4 begins, while the promise of entering God's rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

[23 : 40] That is, we are to last the distance and to encourage each other to last the distance and to arrive at God's promised rest, heaven itself.

Take care because don't take it for granted that we'll last the distance. We're in a similar position to ancient Israel.

Our task is to arrive in heaven as theirs was to arrive in the land. For indeed, the good news came to us just as to them.

But the message they, ancient Israel, heard did not benefit them because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest just as God has said, as in my anger I swore they shall not enter my rest, though his works were finished at the foundation of the world.

The rest, you see, is not simply the land of Canaan, but the ultimate purpose for which we were made, to enjoy an eternal rest with God. That's why God made the world in Genesis 1 and 2.

[24 : 48] For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, and God rested on the seventh day from his works. And again in this place it says, they shall not enter my rest, since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.

Again God sets a certain day, it's still open, you see. Today, saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. That is, the promise was not exhausted by the land of Canaan, but was in fact an eternal, lasting, heavenly rest. So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God. For those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his.

That's heaven. The perfect rest. In the presence of God, under the rule of God, in the place of God, are the people of God who last the distance and rest from their labours.

[26 : 02] We are holy partners in a heavenly calling. That's where we're called from and called to. As Paul, as the writer, began chapter 3 by saying, we are holy partners in a heavenly calling.

Jesus, our great high priest, has gone there before us, opening the way so that we too may enter that eternal rest of heaven where Jesus now is seated at the right hand of God, awaiting our arrival. Therefore, chapter 4, verse 11, let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

What a tragedy not to finish the Christian race. What a disaster to pull up short of the eternal finishing line.

What a catastrophe to veer off spiritual course in the home straight as we're approaching heaven. What madness to become spiritually deaf to God's voice and heart of heart against His word.

[27 : 16] What foolishness to allow ourselves to develop spiritual cardiac problems that mean we fail to last the distance and arrive in heaven and yet so easy.

So easy to tire of Christian faith. So easy to be enticed by the allurements of our world. So easy to give up under the pressures and expectations and fears of our world and society.

how easy it is to be sucked in and believe the distorted crazy mirrors of life that tell us heaven is not there. This is it. Live for today. So fix your eyes on the glory that awaits you in heaven.

Keep yourself on course. Look up to Jesus enthroned in glory beckoning us calling us to keep on in the Christian race and to arrive at last in heaven and receive our rest.

Look ahead to shaking off the shackles of sin and evil and all the corruption and decay of this world that we may finally arrive where Jesus our great high priest now is.

[28 : 29] Let us strain forward with every sinew that we may arrive at the finishing line and receive that eternal goal of heaven. Throw off everything that is hindering you from completing the Christian course that you may finally breast the finishing tape and arrive in the presence of Jesus himself.

Renew your zeal. Renew your energy. Give up being flagging in zeal but be carried by God's grace to that final and eternal destination.

again God sets a certain day today saying in the words already quoted today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts.

So take care my brothers and sisters that none of you may have an evil unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God but exhort one another every day as long as it is called today so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

that none hold on all you you have now obey to us to a moment that you have come back your background and hear it it you you have come up to tune right got head