

“For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard” (Hebrews 4:2).

When we read the history of God’s people in the Old Testament, we should be careful to read it with the intention of learning from their mistakes. The well-known saying, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it,” is very appropriate in this matter. God did not give us the Bible to satisfy our curiosity or fill our heads with information. Rather, God gave us His word so that by His grace we can know Him and do His will. Thus, the stories in the Bible are inscribed for us to either imitate examples of the faithful or avoid the pitfalls of those who failed to believe the word of God. If we do not learn from their mistakes, then the word of God is of no use to us.

Now, the author of the letter to the Hebrews says something to the same effect. He recalls the experiences of the wilderness generation as examples for us to avoid. Because they did not obey the voice of God, they were not able to enter the promised land. It is astonishing that of the multitude that Moses led out of Egypt, only two persons of that generation, Joshua and Caleb entered the promised land (Num. 14:26-30). Why did the majority fail to enter the land? The simple answer is because of unbelief (Heb. 3:19).

Someone may ask what does the experiences of the wilderness generation have to do with us today? Again, the apostle Paul reminds us that “these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Now, the specific lesson which the author of the letter to Hebrews wants us to learn about the wilderness generation is this: Faith is necessary in obtaining God’s promises. He says in Hebrews 4:2 “...but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.” What a tragic commentary! They were deprived entrance into God’s rest because of unbelief. Unfortunately, this situation is not uncommon today. How then can we avoid missing God’s promised rest? How can we profit from God’s word?

The key to answering this question is found in the meaning of the verb “united” (Hebrew 4:2). The word can also be translated as “mixed together” or “blend” or “commingle.” It implies a mixing of two things. When we mix corn and peas, they remain separate from each other. Mixing wine and water, however, is different. They blend together and form a compound. This is the import of the word “united.” It is the blending of God’s promises and faith. God’s promises do not profit us if we do not receive them by faith.

Promise plus Faith equals Profit (Promise + Faith = Profit).

Promise minus Faith equals No Profit (Promise – Faith = No Profit).

From all this we can infer that it is insufficient for a person to be merely familiar with God’s promises without mixing it with faith. We ought not to read promises such as “Do not fear, for I am with you with you” (Isa. 43:5) and yet wallow in anxiety. Or the assuring words, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” and yet complain about our limitations. If we would profit from God’s word we cannot exclude faith. It is the vehicle that takes us into the realm of God’s promises. It is the means by which we can be profited from the word which we have heard. We must allow ourselves to be united to it by faith. Even if we reckon that we do not have sufficient faith, we should not be discouraged; that’s not a good reason for us to stop reading the word. For Scripture says that “Faith come by hearing, and hearing the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). And that in itself is profitable!

HYMN: FAITH IS THE VICTORY (John Yates, 1891)

1. Encamped along the hills of light,
Ye Christian soldiers, rise,
And press the battle ere the night
Shall veil the glowing skies.
Against the foe in vales below
Let all our strength be hurled;
Faith is the victory, we know,
That overcomes the world.

Refrain:

Faith is the victory!
Faith is the victory!
Oh, glorious victory,
That overcomes the world.

2. His banner over us is love,
Our sword the Word of God;
We tread the road the saints above
With shouts of triumph trod.
By faith, they like a whirlwind's breath,
Swept on o'er every field;
The faith by which they conquered death
Is still our shining shield.
3. On every hand the foe we find
Drawn up in dread array;
Let tents of ease be left behind,
And onward to the fray.
Salvation's helmet on each head,
With truth all girt about,
The earth shall tremble 'neath our tread,
And echo with our shout.
4. To him that overcomes the foe,
White raiment shall be giv'n;
Before the angels he shall know
His name confessed in heav'n.
Then onward from the hills of light,
Our hearts with love aflame,
We'll vanquish all the hosts of night,
In Jesus' conqu'ring name.