

**SUNDAY 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2023.**

**The Promise of Heaven.**

**Scripture: Hebrews 4:6-13 and  
Matthew 11:28-30.**



Have you ever considered the meaning of verse 31 of Hebrews chapter 4: *<sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

Everything we do, everything we say, even our dreams are not hidden from God. One day each of us will have to face God and account for everything we have done and said, even things we may have forgotten. Disturbing thought, isn't it? Yet, God is a forgiving God, so long as our repentance is genuine, and He will know if it is not.

The reading from Matthew is Jesus speaking. He had been to several towns where his miracles had been performed and they had not repented. His words, recorded in Matthew 11:21 to 24 are harsh:

*<sup>21</sup> "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup> But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. <sup>23</sup> And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you*

*had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. <sup>24</sup> But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."*

Jesus was sent into the world by God, his Father, so that humankind could receive salvation and redemption. Jesus came into the world to die on the Cross, a terrible painful death to take on the sins of the world, for sinners, those in the past before He was born, those among whom He lived, and those who would be born after His death and resurrection. That includes us today and those yet still to be born until the day of judgment.

In the text of Hebrews there is the couplet:

*"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*

This comes from Psalm 95 which reads from verse 7b to 11:

*Today, if only you would hear his voice, <sup>8</sup> "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup> where your ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"*

Meribah and Massah are places mentioned in the Book of Exodus. The Israelites were extremely thirsty and quarreled with Moses about the lack of water (Exodus 17:2). Because of their thirst, they

grumbled against Moses and asked, “*Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?*”

Moses brought this problem to the Lord, and the Lord enabled Moses to strike the rock so that the Israelites would have water and know that God was with them (Exodus 17:4–7).

Because of their grumbling and testing of God, Moses called the place Meribah, which means “quarrelling,” and Massah, which means “testing”

Not only did the Israelites demonstrate doubt in God’s provision, but they also tested Him because of their complaints and distrust.

The Israelites had forgotten what God had done for them and their hearts had been hardened. A hardened heart is as useless as a hardened loaf of bread.

This place in the Sinai Desert was not the only place or time that the Israelites were rebellious and complaining. Their attitude meant that they would be fated to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all had died., except for Joshua and Caleb, the only two among them who were faithful to God.

Now there was Jesus.

The subsequent history of the Israelites or Hebrews was to be times of being faithful and times of being rebellious which meant worshipping idols instead of the one true God, our Father in heaven. God, at times, responded with righteous anger and yet did not renege on His plan to save humankind. He still loved humankind and His punishments were inflicted in righteous

anger, only after His patience had finally run out. Yet He always forgave and relented with restoration.

The ultimate in restoration was to send Jesus into the world.

One of the themes of the Old Testament is God dealing with chosen individuals. There was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There was Joseph and Moses. There was David and Solomon and all the prophets, many of whom were killed to silence them. The final prophet recorded in the Old Testament was Malachi who prophesied around 430BC. That means there was silence from God through the prophets for over 400 years.

Malachi's final words were: <sup>5</sup> *"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."*

Malachi was, of course, speaking of the Day of Judgement however the words were tempered by the prophesy of Elijah coming first. Who was Elijah?

He was probably the most famous and dramatic of the prophets and was active 875 years before Malachi. It was Elijah who confronted King Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, defeating 400 priests of Baal in a public confrontation. That can be read in 1 Kings 18. Elijah did not die. As 2 Kings 2:11 tells, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared, and Elijah was taken to heaven in a whirlwind.

Now, around 430BC, Malachi raises the name of Elijah, and then falls silent. God did not speak to his people for over four

centuries until a prophet came, wearing clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts with honey. It was John the Baptist, sent to prepare the way for the Lord, the voice of the one calling in the wilderness.

God's silence was broken. The long awaited for Messiah was coming but not as people expected. The Messiah did not come to confront the world on horseback as a military leader. He came bearing a message of love.

The prophets of the Old Testament are recorded as mostly remonstrating with kings, false prophets and those who could be considered Jewish gentry, the upper classes. Jesus certainly did confront and criticize the Jewish leaders of that time; however, his message was more for those in need. That does not mean the leaders were not in need; they certainly were for theirs were the sins of pride, arrogance and contempt and they were so full of pride that they could recognise it within themselves.

In last month's sermon was included a list of 21 groups of people to whom Jesus turned his attention as mentioned in the Gospels. Here is the list again: the poor; the blind; the lame; the crippled; the lepers; the hungry; the miserable or to put it another way. those who weep; the sinners; the prostitutes; the tax collectors; the demoniacs or, again, putting it another way, those possessed by unclean spirits; the persecuted; the captives; all who labour and are heavy-laden; the rabble who know not the law; the crowd; the little ones; the least; the last; the babes ; the lost sheep of Israel.

it is these people to whom the Matthew text is directed:

*<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

These are words of invitation and welcome to all those on the list. They are words that resonate down the centuries to all in the world today. They are words of love and love is what God and Jesus have for us. It is that love that God set in motion the plan for our salvation and redemption all those millennia ago when humankind first rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden. It is for that love that Jesus suffered death on the Cross and resurrection. It is for that love that those of us who accept Jesus as our Saviour, repenting of our sins, that we receive the Holy Spirit within us.

But we also must act to keep the Holy Spirit with us.

Simply because we say Yes to Jesus, repenting of our sins, does not mean that it is done and dusted. We are humans. We are not made perfect. We will sin again, often unwittingly and unintentionally, and this will be seen by God.

Again, let us remember the words of verse 13 of Hebrew 4:

*<sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

There will be some who fall away from God after repentance. Some will find it too hard, especially if there is opposition from family and friends, once it is known that someone has accepted

Jesus. I have mentioned before the young Christian woman whose family makes when she mentions church. There will be others who are more unpleasant. So, some who believe will fall away, not strong enough to resist pressure.

The writer of Hebrews mentions this in verse 4:6 – *<sup>6</sup> Therefore since it remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience,*

Hebrews verse 4:7 says: *<sup>7</sup> God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”*

Today refers to any day when we might sin; when we might deny God and Jesus and turn away from our salvation. It is a recognition by God of our frailty and of the temptations around us and there are many temptations that surround us.

Today, if you sin, then today is the day you must repent and seek forgiveness. Not to do so is rebellion.

When that today is, only God knows. It may be tomorrow or next Sunday. It may be in 25 or in 50, or in 100 years’ time. It may be centuries or millennia away. Only God knows but, we must all be ready. As Matthew 24: 40 –42 states: *<sup>40</sup> Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>42</sup> “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*

Let me repeat what Jesus said in Matthew 11:28–30: <sup>28</sup> *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

They are comforting words, yet we also need to heed the words of John 14:16 – *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

We must give our hearts fully to Jesus, fully repentant of all sins, fully committed, fully being aware that, at any time, we may be taken, whether dramatically as the final judgement comes or simply when it is time for us to pass from life to death.

We must all ask ourselves where we are now on the path to receiving the promise of heaven. If not, what must we each do to change this? Ask yourselves and pray about it.

I will end with a prayer. *O merciful God, you have made all people and you hate nothing you have made, nor desire the death of sinners, but rather that they turn and live: have mercy on all who have not known you, or who deny the faith of Christ crucified; take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt for your word; and so fetch them home, blessed Lord, to your fold, that we may be made one flock under one shepherd. Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, world without end. Amen*