

Hebrews

Chapter 3

Jesus Greater Than Moses

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, 2 who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. 3 For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. 4 (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) 5 Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, 6 but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

3:1–4:13 An exposition of Ps 95:7–11, stressing Christ's superiority over Moses and warning against disobedience and unbelief. (CSB)

Steadily the author has been advancing the argument that Jesus is superior to anyone and anything. Now he turns to the OT figure most significant in Jewish history and thought. It is very difficult for a Jew to think of anyone greater than Moses. Even the NT refers to Moses' greatness, mentioned him some 80 times, more often than any other OT figure. But great as Moses was Jesus was far greater. As a result, to forsake Jesus would bring results far more terrible than to forsake Moses. What a warning for those Jewish readers being tempted by persecution to do just that. (PBC)

3:1 *holy brothers* – All people God the Father has adopted through faith in His Word (Jn 1:12–13). No one can, by his own power, make himself holy. But God calls people to share in His gift of holiness (cf 1Pt 1:15). (TLSB)

heavenly calling. The invitation that comes from heaven and leads to heaven. (CSB)

SOFTLY and gently the apostle draws them to Christ by calling them “holy” and, as it were, flattering them. Here he teaches us that we should not preach Christ with fury or with a tempest of words. Indeed, Christ can be preached in no other way than peacefully and calmly. For roaring talk pertains to the Law, as has been pictured in Ex. 20:18, where the hearers were terrified by the sound of the trumpet, the darkness of the mountain, and the fire of the lightning. Likewise in 1 Kings 19:11 ff., where, after the wind, after the earthquake, and after the fire, there came “a still small voice,” and there the Lord was. Therefore the Law should be revealed with thunderbolts to those who are foolish and stiff-necked, but the Gospel should be presented gently to those who are terrified and humbled. Therefore Is. 42:1, 3 says about Christ: “Behold, My Servant.... A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench”; that is, He will prefer to console the timid and the afflicted. (Luther)

consider Jesus – Serious attention was necessary; careful, constant study of Jesus. The use of the personal name immediately focuses attention on His work on earth, the mission God became man in order to fulfill. (PBC)

apostle. Means “one who is sent” (see notes on Mk 6:30; 1Co 1:1). Jesus repeatedly spoke of himself as having been sent into the world by the Father (e.g., Mt 10:40; 15:24; Mk 9:37; Lk 9:48; Jn 4:34; 5:24, 30, 36–38; 6:38). He is the supreme apostle, the one from whom all other apostleship flows. (CSB)

high priest of our confession – A new way of speaking, but one that comes from a Hebrew idiom and expresses the matter with remarkable fitness, since our whole work is a confession, as Ps. 96:6 says: “Confession and beauty are before Him” (that is, in His church), “holiness and magnificence are in His sanctification.” And Ps. 111:3: “Confession and magnificence are His work.” The meaning of these verses is expressed in Ps. 145:5: “They will speak of the magnificence of the glory of Thy holiness, and will tell Thy wondrous works,” which states that everything they say and do is praise, confession, magnificence, and sanctification, with which they praise, confess, glorify, and sanctify Thee. Yet all this is Thy work in them, as Ps. 8:2 says: “Out of the mouth of infants and of sucklings Thou hast fashioned praise.” Likewise Is. 43:21: “This people I have formed for Myself; they will declare My praise.” Therefore Christ has on the cross the title King of the Jews, that is, of the confessors. This confession is understood as a confession not only of sins but also of praise. Indeed, the confession of sins and of praise is one and the same confession, unless it is the confession of those Jews who are named for Judas Iscariot, that is, the confession of those who are despaired of [כֶּרֶךְ, that is, wages]. For that is the true confession with which a man gives the glory to God with regard to righteousness, wisdom, virtue, and all works but gives nothing to himself except sin, foolishness, and weakness, and that with a true mouth, heart, and work. And in this statement the apostle distinguishes confessions, yes, even possessions. For with respect to the world it would be appropriate to say that God is Lord or King of lands, rivers, cities, beasts, etc. For such possessions do not consist in confessions or words but in things. Furthermore, the synagogue also had its own confession, namely, that of Moses, because it dealt with the physical wonders by which it was redeemed from the weakness, poverty, and toil of Egypt. Therefore the apostle speaks of “our,” that is, a new confession, because we believe, declare, and confess other wonders, namely, redemption from spiritual weakness, toil, and poverty. Therefore Moses is the apostle of their confession, but Christ is the Apostle of our confession. Therefore Chrysostom interprets “of our confession” to mean “of our faith.” Yet in his interpretation there seems to be a metonymy, that is, the use of one thing for that of another associated with it, namely, of “faith” for its own work, which is confession, just as the grammarians take “Mars” as a term for war, “Minerva” as a term for the arts. (Luther)

Priests in the OT offered sacrifices, but they also revealed God’s will through their teaching. In the NT, God sent apostles to speak on His behalf. Jesus is the High Priest and Apostle who fully reveals God’s will and fulfills both testaments. (TLSB)

The joint title “the apostle and high priest” also focuses on that work of the God-man Christ. Apostle used only here of Jesus in the NT, involves the thought of mission, referring to one who is commissioned for something. God had sent His Son as the authorized envoy to speak for Him and carry out His will. High priest refers to the sacrificial nature of His mission as we have already seen in 2:17 and will see again later in greater detail. (PBC)

3:2 A comparison of Christ and Moses, both of whom were sent by the Father to lead his people—the one to lead them from bondage under Pharaoh to the promised land, the other to lead them from bondage under the devil (2:14–15) to the Sabbath-rest promised to those who believe (4:3, 9). The Sabbath-rest may be heaven, though many hold that it refers primarily to the salvation-rest of Christ’s redemption. The analogy focuses on faithful stewardship. (CSB)

Jesus' superiority to Moses was not a matter of faithfulness. Both were faithful in carrying out their assigned tasks. In Numbers 12:7 God Himself said of Moses, "He is faithful in all my house," Moses poured out his life in service to the house of Israel, God's chosen OT people. He even offered to have his name blotted out of God's book in exchange for them. Nor can anyone doubt Jesus' faithfulness to the one who had commissioned Him apostle and high priest. In John 17:4 on Maundy Thursday evening He could say to His Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave Me to do." (PBC)

appointed him – The Father's will is that His Son should reveal the fullness of His grace (cf Ac 3:20). (TLSB)

just as Moses – Greatest OT example of a faithful leader. But Jesus surpasses Moses as the faithful leader in worship and in life. (TLSB)

God's house – People of Israel, the household of faith in Moses' time. (TLSB)

3:3 *the builder ... has greater honor than the house.* Jesus is the actual builder of the house (or household), whereas Moses was simply a part of it. (CSB)

The creator has more honor than what is created, because what is created depends on the creator for existence. Jesus is the creator of Moses and Israel and is worthy of more honor. Luth: "Whatever Moses ordered at God's command he did only in view of the Christ who was to come. Thus the people were to be prepared for the personal rule of Christ, who was to dwell among them as in His own house.... Moses and the priesthood count for nothing, compared with Christ. They are under obligation; and since He is the true Lord, they must hand over the keys to Him and serve Him" (AE 13:305). (TLSB)

The point of comparison was not faithfulness, but position. No one would give to any house, no matter how grandiosely built and furnished, more honor than that given to the builder. Moses was only part of the house of Israel. Jesus as God was the builder of that house, just as He is the builder of everything. (PBC)

3:4 *every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.* Jesus is here equated with God, making it beyond question that Christ is greater than Moses. (CSB)

All creation owes its being and daily life to God. (TLSB)

3:5–6 *a servant in all God's house ... a son over God's house.* The superiority of Christ over Moses is shown in two comparisons: (1) Moses was a servant, whereas Christ is a son, and (2) Moses was in God's house, i.e., a part of it, whereas Christ is over God's house. (CSB)

This phrase refers not to some slave who serves because he has to, but to a free servant who serves because he wants to. He was a faithful servant as shown by the refrain running through Exodus, "According to all the Lord commanded, , so did he" His greatest service was testifying to what would be said in the future. In John 5:46 Jesus explained what this meant when He told the Jew of His day, "If you believed in Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about me." (PBC)

The house spoken of is described in Ephesians 2:20-21 as the "household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the

whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” All believers of OT and NT are part of this glorious house, built on and ruled by the Son. (PBC)

3:5 *testify to the things that were to be spoken* – Again one sees a Hebraic way of speaking. For in this way God calls His Word and His preachers witnesses. Ps. 81:8 says: “Hear, O My people, and I will call you to witness.” The Latin language cannot express this verb adequately with one word. But the meaning is this, that in the future I will speak a Word in your [singular] midst or among you [plural]. (For the Hebrew has “I will call to witness in you.”) This Word will not be a manifestation of things at hand, but it will be a testimony of things not seen. Therefore it is necessary for you to hear what you will not be able to see or grasp. For thus Christ says in John 3:11: “Truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony.” For in this passage (Ps. 81:8) both verbs, namely, “hear” and “I will call to witness,” are used independently. This means that you shall be the hearer, and I will be the Preacher. For what Christ has said about heaven and the life to come is grasped only by hearing, since it transcends not only all understanding, be it ever so deep, but also all capability of desiring, be it ever so extensive. Therefore the testimony of the Lord is the Word of faith, hidden wisdom; it is understood by children. Is. 53:1 also calls it something that is heard. There we read: “Lord, who has believed what we have heard?” This means the Word we cause to be heard by preaching the Gospel. (Luther)

And surely the Word of God is most appropriately called a testimony. For just as in legal disputes whatever judgment is passed on the basis of the reports of witnesses is arrived at by hearing alone and believed because of faith, since it cannot be known in any other way, neither by perception nor by reason, so the Gospel is received in no other way than by hearing. And for this reason the apostles are called witnesses of Christ, as Is. 43:10 states: “Truly you are My witnesses, says the Lord, and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He.” Thus Ps. 122:4 also says: “To that place did the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, Israel a testimony.” In my opinion this ought to have been translated as follows: “To that place did the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord as a testimony to Israel.” For since the Hebrew has “to Israel,” or “for Israel,” in the dative, and “testimony,” in the ablative case, it should, according to our texts, be taken as “for a testimony,” as Christ says in Matt. 10:18: “You will be brought before kings and governors for My sake, as a testimony before them and the Gentiles.” The same thing is now true when the apostle says that Moses was “a servant to testify to the things that were to be spoken later,” that is, to be a witness of God in the things that were spoken through the angels. (Luther)

A servant does the will of the master without necessarily knowing what the master has in mind. But God the Father makes the fullness of His will known through Jesus the Son (cf Jn 15:15). (TLSB)

3:6 *Christ...over God's house* – Jesus knows the will of the Father and speaks with His full authority. (TLSB)

we are his house. The house is made up of God's people, his household (see Eph 2:19; 1Pe 2:5). (CSB)

We share in all the blessings that God wills to give us. With Jesus the Son, we are heirs of the Father (cf Rm 8:17). (TLSB)

Chrysostom says: “He who sorrows in tribulations, he who falls, does not glory; he who is ashamed, he who hides himself, has no confidence.” From this it is clear that “glory” is used here

for glorying or boasting, which the Greek text also has, namely, καύχημα. For in Greek “glory” is called δόξα, which means opinion, renown, glory among us. Therefore κενοδοξία means “empty glory.” Thus the Hebrew word כבוד means “glory,” and גאון means “glorying.” Thus Ps. 24:8 says: “Who is this King of glory,” that is, כבוד. And in Ps. 89:17 we read: “For Thou art the glory (that is, גאון, or “glorying”) of their strength,” which means “Thou art their strength, of which they glory.” But these words are confused in a strange manner, even though there is no small difference in the matter itself. For “glorying” is taken more in an active sense, but “glory” is taken in a passive sense. For “glory” is the opinion of us, that is, the opinion of others about us; but “glorying” is our opinion about ourselves. If it is in ourselves, it is empty; but if it is about us in Christ, it is genuine, as the apostle says in 2 Cor. 10:17: “Let him who glories, glory in the Lord.” Therefore we accept Chrysostom’s distinction between “confidence” and “glory” in our hope. According to him, “confidence” is characteristic of one who has the courage to take up the cross of Christ, just as diffidence is characteristic of one who flees from the cross of Christ and is ashamed of it. “Glory,” on the other hand, is characteristic of one who makes progress and triumphs; but complaining or sadness is characteristic of one who fails and falls down. Thus Rom. 5:3 says: “We glory in tribulations.” But the apostle says this here because he had called us the house that Christ “builds” (Heb. 3:4, 6). The construction, however, is nothing else than tension, pressure, and in every way the cross and the sufferings that are in Christ. Therefore he wants us to know that if we are to be built and constructed, we need firm confidence and the glory of hope in Him, lest we fail and suffer worse destruction while the building takes place. (Luther)

if, indeed, we hold fast our confidence...our hope. † If we persevere in the faith and cling confidently to our hope of salvation. (CSB)

Watch out! Some have lost their place in this glorious house as the author will show directly. “Courage” is that feeling of confidence which allows words to flow freely. Such subjective courage is nothing without the objective “hope of which we boast.” The word for “boast” refers to the cause for boasting, not the act. “Hope points out the cause and content of our boasting, lifting our eyes of faith to what we have and ever will have in that superior Christ Jesus. (PBC)

A Rest for the People of God

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ 11 As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” 12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 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. 14 For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. 15 As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” 16 For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

3:7–11 This quotation from Ps 95:7–11 summarizes the inglorious history of Israel under Moses’ leadership in the desert. Three time periods are alluded to: that of the exodus, that of the psalmist and that of the writing of Hebrews. The example of Israel under Moses was used by the psalmist to warn the Israelites of his day against unbelief and disobedience. In a similar way the author of

Hebrews applied the psalmist's warning to the recipients of this letter. The warning also applies today. (CSB)

Cites Ps 95 and alludes to the rebellion of God's people in the wilderness—esp Nu 14, where the people refused to enter the Promised Land after spies brought back a disheartening report. (TLSB)

3:7 *the Holy Spirit says.* The Scriptures, written by men, were inspired by the Holy Spirit and are His words (cf 2Tm 3:16). (TLSB)

3:11 Luther: “We wretched men have lost that bliss of our physical life through sin, and while we live we are in the midst of death. And yet, because the Sabbath command remains for the church, it denotes that spiritual life is to be restored to us through Christ” (AE 1:80). (TLSB)

3:12 *lest there be in any of you an evil...fall away from the living God.* To turn away rebelliously (lit. “to become apostate”) from God is to turn away from life and to choose death, just as did some of the Israelites who came out of Egypt. (CSB)

This is all about the refusal to trust in God's promises. It alludes to Numbers 14, where the people refused to trust that God would give them the Promised Land. (TLSB)

Unbelief is always a heart problem, one that deals with the inner being. And unbelief is always serious because it rejects Christ's salvation. PBC)

The unbelieving heart against which the author warns each of his readers is one “that turns away from the living God.” It is not a matter of casual drifting but of deliberate desertion by hearts which once heard and believed, but then cut themselves off from the living God. Were any of the readers inclined because persecution's heat to rebel against Jesus by turning back to Judaism? Let them be warned! To turn away from Jesus is to reject the living God. In John 5:23 Jesus said, “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him.”

Hebrews 10:31, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The sacred writer, having inserted this quotation with its warning lesson, takes up the thread of his argument once more, in driving home the moral of the story: See to it, brethren, lest there be in any one of you a wicked heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. The earnest anxiety of the writer is apparent in the entire structure of the sentence, which, incidentally, is contracted as if he had written in great agitation. They should see to it, they should take heed, lest perhaps, by any bad chance, there might be in any one of the readers a bad, wicked, evil heart, caused by a condition of unbelief. For this condition would show itself in departing from the living God. The Lord is the Author and Source of life; not only is He able to come to the assistance of all people that are in need, but He is the only One that can transmit and keep the one true life in the hearts of those that are His own. Should a believer, therefore, scorn and spurn the fellowship of God by departing from Him and His life, he would have only himself to blame for the final damnation which would come upon him. (Kretzmann)

the living God. God actively sees into the hearts of all people and makes a just judgment (Heb 10:30b–31). (TLSB)

3:13 *exhort one another every day* – All of them needed constant encouragement from one another. Sin can be so violently deceitful. It disguises its horrible purpose, dilutes its poisonous

tastes and in the end utterly destroys. Did the sin of turning from Christ back to Judaism seem not so serious, perhaps even prudent in face of persecution? “Watch out,” the author warns,” that is sin’s deceitful course and can lead to hardened hearts.” “Help each other watch out,” the author also urges, reminding his readers that no believer exists as an island. Christian faith and spiritual health are not just matters between a man and his God. They are of vital concern among fellow believers. Gathering together in local congregations is more than advisable; it is necessary so that we can “encourage one another daily.” (PBC)

Christians addressed here may have gathered daily in their homes for prayer. (TLSB)

as long as it is called Today. See 4:7. This is still the day of divine grace and opportunity to trust God, but it will not last indefinitely. (CSB)

The sacred writer, therefore, continues his warning on the positive side: Rather admonish one another every day, so long as that period endures which is called “today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceit of sin. This is one of the functions of their calling which Christians should be glad to take upon themselves, to exhort, to admonish one another, to spur one another on in sanctification. It is a kindness which is not a mere matter indifferent, but whose manifestation is required by the duty which Christians owe one another. Sanctification in every Christian congregation is a matter calling for constant vigilance, for the practice of love which must be carried on daily, day after day. For now is God’s great Today, now is the time of grace, now is the time that He wants us to listen to His wonderful invitation to the heavenly meal. So long as God still issues His pleading call, we should take heed to pay attention to it quickly; for we do not know when this time of grace may come to an end. And there is always the danger of being hardened by a neglect of the Word in time. Sin is present in so many pleasant and deceitful guises, and the devil is so unusually proficient in his ability to make the greatest defections from the will of God appear as mere innocent pastimes, that it requires the most vigilant care on the part of every Christian lest he become callous to the pleadings of the Word of God and become a prey to eternal death. Sin in heart or life blinds a person to the beauty and the meaning of God’s wonderful offer of salvation. (Kretzmann)

deceitfulness of sin – This is the refusal to trust God and is coupled with a refusal to accept what is true. An unbelieving heart will willingly accept deception. (TLSB)

3:14 *to share in Christ.* To belong to him and participate in the blessings (cf. v. 1). (CSB)

We are fellow believers and partners with Christ. (TLSB)

hold our original confidence firm to the end. Salvation is evidenced by continuing in faith to the end. Such perseverance reveals those who share in Christ (see note on v. 6). (CSB)

That God, in Christ Jesus, forgives sin. This phrase may be the call to holiness and the hope of future glory given in Baptism. (TLSB)

Believers share so much in Christ and have so much more waiting for them. All that the heaven-sent Savior offers is ours “if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.” What a firm, confident stand those readers had when first brought to faith. How sad if any were now to turn out like the rocky soil of Mark 4:16-17, where the seed of faith “lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.” (PBC)

To the observance of this vigilance we should be inspired also by another consideration: For partakers of Christ we have become, if we but hold firm the beginning of our confidence to the end. Cp. v.6. This is a thought which is often brought out by the Apostle Paul when he warns the Christians against carnal security, and by Peter, when he bids us make our calling and election sure, 2 Pet. 1, 10. We must never lose sight of the fact that by our conversion we have partaken and are now partaking of Jesus Christ, of all the blessings and gifts which He has earned for us by His redemption. This fact, however, puts us under the obligation of remaining in His grace, of keeping unto the end at least that amount of firm confidence in His redemption which is the essence of faith. So sure must the believer's confidence in His Lord be that it will withstand all attacks until the end, till it will be beyond trial and temptation, finally triumphant, in the presence of Christ. Firmness, confidence, faithfulness, are required of all disciples of the Lord Jesus. (Kretzmann)

3:15 The inspired author here defines and justifies his use of the word “today” in connection with his warning to all believers to remain steadfast to the end: in that it is said, Today when you hear His voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation (at Meribah). (Kretzmann)

Luther says, “Since we have begun happily, just as they had – let us fear, lest by defecting we abandon ‘the beginning of the substance,’ as they abandoned it and deserted.” (TLSB)

3:16–19 The argument is pursued with a series of rhetorical questions. The important truths are that the people who failed to enter Canaan were the ones who had heard God's promise concerning the land and that they refused to believe what God had promised (v. 19)—an action described as rebellion (v. 16), sin (v. 17) and disobedience (v. 18). Consequently, God in his anger closed the doors of Canaan in the face of that whole generation of Israelites (Nu 14:21–35). First-century readers of Hebrews faced a similar danger spiritually.

Once more the author warns his readers about hardening their hearts. With the series of hard-hitting questions he drives home his point. “Who were they who heard and rebelled?” Not people were ignorant or had never experienced God's wondrous works and ways, but “all those Moses led out of Egypt.” With whom was he angry for forty years?” Not with those who didn't know any better or were innocent, but “those who sinned.” God's anger is not capricious or hasty. (PBC)

Forty years of rejection and rebellion by those who had richly experienced divine providence was the cause of all those graves dotting the desert. “And to whom did God swear that they would never enter His rest?” To people who had no excuse whatsoever, to those who knew better and yet disobeyed, refusing to believe. Can any reader miss the point? “So we see,” the author concludes, “that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.” What robbed that generation of Israel of rest both in the earthly and heavenly Canaans? The answer is, “Unbelief.” Will the consequences be any less severe for those who would turn away from the superior Jesus today? (PBC)

So much seems to be demanded of those first readers and of us today. The race of faith is to be all out all the time; the course on which it is run is hazardous and obstacle filled; and it never lets up! How can we do it? How can we hold out? Fix your thoughts on Jesus,” the author urges, “the apostle and the high priest whom we confess.” Let that superior Jesus and His Word be the sure basis of our confidence. God rest our faith not on what we are, but on what Jesus is: not on what we do, but on what Jesus has done. Then our journey in life's wilderness, unlike Israel's, will have both a good beginning and a good end. (PBC)

3:16–18 God’s people formerly missed out on what He had promised through their acts of unbelief. The writer highlights the fact that those who have experienced God’s goodness should persevere in faith. God will punish those who sin and they will lose their rest and inheritance. (TLSB)

3:16 Ps. 95, 7. 8. This present day is the time of which we may be sure; we know that the Lord’s grace is being proclaimed to us now. It is now, therefore, that we should heed the Lord’s warning and make the most of the present opportunity. For the dangers attending an insolent testing of God’s patience are such as to make salvation a matter of chance and gambling: For some, having heard, yet provoked Him; was it not all that had gone forth from Egypt through Moses? Although all the children of Israel that went forth from Egypt heard the Word and will of God, yet they deliberately and maliciously challenged God’s government and set about to embitter and provoke Him. And, unfortunately, there was not much choice among the rebellious people; they were all guilty of this provoking conduct, all the men that left Egypt under the leadership of Moses. It was not a case of having a few exceptional sinners to deal with, the whole mass of the gloriously rescued people whose faith had “carried them through between the threatening walls of water and over whom Miriam sang her triumphal ode,” were in the same condemnation. (Kretzmann)

3:17 The sacred writer, drawing another lesson from the incidents in the wilderness, asks: But with whom was He angry, exasperated, forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? It was not a matter of change of mind, of foolish caprice on God’s part, nor was it lack of power to carry out His promise to the children of Israel. But their conduct provoked His anger, their sins challenged His punishment, the result being that all the men of twenty years and over that had left the land of Egypt sank into forgotten graves in the wilderness. That was God’s punishment upon them because of their sin. (Kretzmann)

3:18 The author, therefore, concludes his series of rhetorical questions by asking: And to whom did He swear that they should not enter into His rest unless it was to them that believed not? Not disobedience primarily, but unbelief, which was the cause of the various outbreaks against the Lord, caused the punishment to strike them. Moses freely and frankly told the people this very fact, Num. 14, 28-35. God finally affirmed with an oath that He would pour out His punishments, having the soundest reasons for vindicating His course of action. (Kretzmann)

3:19 They did not reach the Land of Promise, they did not enter into the blessings of rest and peace which the Lord had promised to obedient, believing children. The conclusion of the sacred author emphasizes just this one point: And we see that they could not enter in on account of their unbelief. They could not reach their goal, the end of the way, because at the bottom of their entire unruly conduct lay the refusal to believe in the Lord, their God, with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind. Their example should have its proper effect upon the Christians of all times. Every attention to sin with its deceitfulness, every shrinking from conflict in the interest of the Lord, endangers the faith, if it does not outright pluck it out of the heart. Our trust in God, to be of the right kind, must be centered in the promises of Scriptures and not permit itself to be moved from this foundation. There is too much at stake to make light of the matter or fatuously to rely upon a safe solution in the future. Today the Lord is calling; today we should give heed. Tomorrow may be too late. Our Mediator is in every respect greater than Moses, but for that very reason we should cling to Him in all humility of heart. (Kretzmann)

God was willing to give His people rest, but His people were unwilling to receive it. People’s unbelief – their lack of confidence in the promises of God – rendered them incapable of experiencing the blessings that flow from trust. (TLSB)