

Winnable War Hebrews 4:11-16

Introduction

One of the most unpopular wars of American history was the Vietnam war. When you look at the history of it, the cause of helping protect a people from being overrun by a brutal communism was noble enough. But because of the political complexities there was never a formal declaration of war. It was called "a police action." There was a lack of necessary equipment, of clarity of what victory should look like, or even of a clear strategy to achieve it and of who our allies should be. Those rescued from being slaughtered when the Viet Cong invaded and took over as American troops moved out—we have persons in our own congregation like that—are deeply grateful for the soldiers who risked their lives to save them. But for many Americans, they watched in horror as a whole generation of young people gave up their lives for what seemed a lost cause, in part because it was so poorly defined. And when the troops came back home, the unpopularity of the war at home meant that many of them suffered further abuse from their countrymen after having risked their lives for the cause of freedom. We have a number in our own congregation who experienced not only the horrors of war but also the disapproval of

their countrymen. There have been attempts to do better at honoring these men and women who sacrificed so much while others of their contemporaries dodged the draft or left the country to avoid having to go.

The politics of war is often confusing and frustrating. Congress is debating now whether we should pull out of Afghanistan or not, twenty years after the events of 9/11—or whether we should have been there at all. The Taliban have been weakened and kept at bay for a time, but some fear that pulling troops out will strengthen terrorism and make the sacrifices of those who died there seem meaningless.

Wars like these seem to share the dubious distinction of being "*unwinnable wars.*"

Sometimes we can feel that way about the spiritual war we believers face. The longer we live, the more tragedies we know about personally. The defections. The tragic falls. The uncovering of long-standing sin among those who once served as teachers and leaders. Whole families drifting away from the faith and the company of those who believe. The relentless pressure of the culture to reshape truth to fit the times. The intimidation, the mocking, the sense of failure can all overwhelm us and make us feel we are in a losing battle.

Over time we realize just how weak and broken we actually are. The main reason we haven't fallen to certain sins is that we never were exposed to heavy temptation or easy opportunity in those areas, or the fear of being caught held us back from pursuing the sins our hearts have sometimes craved.

So when Hebrews calls us to hold fast to Christ, to fight for belief, obedience, and tender hearts, we can look at the enemies around us and within and despair that we will make it, that we will enter God's rest. The obstacles seem too great. But the writer of Hebrews says, "No, this is a winnable war for you."

This morning we want to explore why it is.

11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. **12** For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. **14** Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to

sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

1. The Battle We Must Fight (11)
2. The Account We Must Give (12-13)
3. The Mediator We Must Have (14-15)
4. The Privilege We Must Use (16)

1. The Battle We Must Fight (11)

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

“Let us” is not just a suggestion as it sounds in English. It’s actually a plural command for all of us who profess to be believers.

“Strive”—to be in a hurry; to concentrate your energies on a goal (Rienecker)
Reminds us of the call of Hebrews 12 to run with endurance the race set before us, laying aside the weights and besetting sins, looking to Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith.

Illus: traveling, trying to reach your destination by nightfall. You aren’t so prone to stop here and there on the way and fritter away your time. You have a strong sense of being on a journey with an important

destination. In this case—entering God’s rest dictates your choices along the way. What matters most to you determines what you do.

True not just of travel but of life in general. There are priorities in our lives that will never be fulfilled like they should be if we don’t align our actions to getting them done.

If you don’t spend quantity and quality time with your spouse, how do you expect to keep your relationship strong?

If you don’t spend quantity and quality time with your kids, how do you expect to disciple them?

If you don’t spend quantity and quality time with God, how do you expect to walk with Him through the day?

If you don’t spend quantity and quality time with other members of the body of Christ, how do you expect to build one another up in the faith?

What’s most important has to drive the cadence of our lives. We must strive to make it so. Our fighting for it shows what we hold most valuable.

If entering God's rest tops the list, then we must and we will fight for it. Because we are going to face pushback:
So that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

We are sinners by birth and by choice. Even if we are born again and are trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, the flesh kicks against our allegiance to King Jesus.

Calling for us to look out for one another, not just for ourselves.

"Fall"—reminds us of the forty years of wilderness wanderings when an entire generation, except for Caleb and Joshua, who believed, fell in the wilderness. Their physical deaths resulted from their spiritual deadness of unbelief. Unbelief and hardness of heart toward God and His promises drove their disobedience.

"The same sort of disobedience"—the Israelites in the desert became a perpetual reminder of the folly of rebelling against God and the goodness He promised them.

Whenever we choose to disobey, we may think we've been wise, we may think we'll be happy, but it is the path of disillusionment and self-destruction. God's plans for you are

good. You reject them, and you're left with the opposite of good.

Would you—or those who know you best—characterize your patterns of life as “striving” to enter God’s rest?

Or are you floating along, assuming you will grow in grace just because time is passing. You can get older without getting wiser.

The best defense is a good offense (sports).

2. The Account We Must Give (12-13)

¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Alive and active—“alive” stands at the beginning of the sentence: Alive! is the word of God. We don't stand in judgment of God's Word; it stands in judgment of us.

Active—God created everything out of nothing with His Word. He said it, and it was so. All His Word is that way. *Choose to disbelieve if you want to, but the Word is not dependent on you. You are dependent on it. God's Word will either save you or judge you.* It is an

energizing force from the Ever-Living, All-Powerful Creator of reality. You are not “master of your fate. You are not captain of your soul.” (William Ernest Henley). That’s poetic fiction written by a rebel who now knows better.

John 15:3

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

John 15:22

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

The Word of God has a way of piercing our souls, of working down into the crevices, revealing what is actually there, discerning how we are really thinking, what we really desire, our motives and true intentions. God convicts us not just of what we’ve said and done, but of our very thoughts, our deepest desires. Because God sees that deeply His Word probes that deeply. Nothing is hidden.

Many of you have experienced this very phenomenon. A verse in your devotions pierces you to the roots. A phrase from a sermon strips away the façade, breaks down the barriers, and brings you face to face with God.

Exposed—picturesque but rare term; to bend back the neck, as a warrior might grab the hair of an enemy exposing his throat for the final stroke; or as a wrestler might grab the throat of his opponent, rendering him powerless

Psalm 139:1-3

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me! ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ³ You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Proverbs 21:2

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart.

Jeremiah 17:9-10

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? ¹⁰ "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

This level of exposure can be frightening. When it comes to any sin, we naturally seek cover. We are used to putting our best foot forward, putting on a good face, letting only a very few if anybody at all know where we really are and how we're really doing. But God knows completely. You may fool

everyone else on the planet. You may fool yourself. But you can't fool Him.

Receive the Word of God with open heart and willing mind. Let it do its work in you. It reveals what is really there, so make the changes you need to. Pray for this growth in wisdom and the power of the Spirit who gave the Word.

So how in the world do we imagine we will actually enter God's rest when He knows our hearts this deeply? Unbelief, disobedience, hardness of heart—we can be justly charged with all three. What hope do we have?

3. The Mediator We Must Have (14-15)

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

The high priest was a mediator between man and God. He entered the Holy of holies once a year on the day of atonement to make blood sacrifice for his own sins and then the sins of his people.

Jesus is our mediator, our high priest.

1 Timothy 2:5-6

⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Jesus has not entered the earthly tabernacle or temple, but into heaven itself. And He does not mediate for us just once a year, but all the time.

Hebrews 7:25

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews 9:24

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Hebrews 10:19-22

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled

clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Because Christ is our mediator and advocate, we must hold fast what we have privately believed in our heart and publicly confessed with our mouths.

Romans 10:10

For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Christ never established a priesthood, other than the royal priesthood of all believers that make up His church. He is our continuing High Priest. To add other rituals and sacrifice, to add other priestly mediators is to defy the finished work and supreme priesthood of Jesus. He is the priest we need, no other.

He is the Great High Priest—the God Man. The Son and the Sacrifice. But He is not distant and aloof, untouched by our struggles. He is not like the pagan gods of the Greek Stoics, whose main attribute was apathy toward humanity. He is fully God, but also fully man, yet without sin.

“Sympathize”—literally, together to suffer or to suffer with. So it’s not just that Jesus psychologically feels bad for us, but that He actively participates with us in our suffering.

You are a member of His body. If my foot hurts, I hurt. If my hand hurts, I hurt. If you hurt, Jesus hurts.

He suffers with us in our weaknesses, our infirmities. And though He without sin, He knows better than anyone the effect even the smallest sin has on us. "Sinlessness alone can properly estimate sin" (MacArthur, 113). We take to sin like fish to water. A fish doesn't even know he's wet.

Jesus to Saul, Acts 9:4-5

⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Paul in Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

Jesus is more loyal to you, more understanding of you, more steadfast in His love for you, more effective in His help of you, than anyone else in all the world, including the closest and best of your family and friends. In fact, He knows us and the full dimensions of what we face far better than we ourselves do.

Lean on Him. Follow Him. He's your Good Shepherd, your Advocate and Friend. In steadfast love for you He laid down His life for you. He claims you as His own before the Father's throne. Don't try to go it alone.

4. The Privilege We Must Use (16)

16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

"Confidence"—boldness, freedom of speech (as experienced by the apostles when they were filled with the Spirit to preach the gospel)

Throne—Christ rules all things; Who better can fix your problems?

Ancient world—few could enter the presence of a king (cf. Esther); a king had to give you permission to be there. The King of the Universe has granted permission to one set of people—those who come through the Mediator Jesus Christ.

Throne of grace—favor undeserved; reminds us of the mercy seat in the Holy of holies; because of the blood of the atonement, undeserved forgiveness could be rendered to sinners

Christ has accomplished the work of propitiation, satisfying the righteous wrath of God against us as sinners.

To find mercy—compassionate help rooted in steadfast love for sinners

To find grace to help—favor, goodness far greater than I deserve, indeed often the very opposite of what I deserve

In time of need—at the exact time I need it; God matches His help to my need in the very season, moment I need it. It is “timely help.” (Bruce, 87)

We do not sense it to be there all the time. God has a way of showing up when all seems lost. When the rescue comes, it is unmistakable that He alone did it.

Times of trials and temptations. Interventions to pull us back from the precipice, to retrieve us from the pit, to comfort us in our pain and sorrow.

What a privilege!

Make time for prayer. Make it a constant pursuit. Maintain an awareness of His presence with you all the days. Talk to Him throughout the day as you would the closest of friends.

Conclusion

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Discussion Questions:

1. What experiences have made you feel at times that the spiritual war you face as a believer is unwinnable?
2. In what ways does having an overarching goal to your life (entering God's rest) help you and your fellow believers avoid bypaths of disobedience and strengthen your mutual pursuit of God's promises and will?
3. What positive encouragement do you gain from knowing God's Word is alive and active, piercing into your soul and discerning innermost thoughts and intentions?
4. What warnings do you take from knowing God's Word works that way?
5. In what ways does it encourage and strengthen you to know Jesus Christ your High Priest is not only great, interceding for you in heaven, but is also good, suffering with you in your weaknesses and your battle against sin?

6. How does it affect your heart toward Jesus to know He knows you so closely and is with you through your deepest trials, understanding them and you better than anyone else?
7. What would boldness in prayer seeking timely help from the throne of grace for your every need look like in your daily life? How can you take better advantage of this deep privilege?