

Today If Ye Hear His Voice

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: Heb. 3; 4:1.

Everything in God's purpose is bound up with our hearing His voice. I want to point out that the translation needs to be kept very accurate here. Unfortunately the Revised Version does not maintain its tradition of improvement at this point, and it should not be: "... if ye shall hear his voice". It should be: "... if ye will hear his voice". If you look at that very carefully you will immediately detect the difference. If we say: "... if ye shall hear his voice" we put the onus on God, when really the onus is not upon God. The context makes it perfectly clear about having heard the Good News, and it is: "If ye will hear his voice". God has spoken, the voice of God has sounded, and it is sounding today, and it is a matter of whether we will hear.

The force of that "will" is suggested by the earlier part of chapter 4. "*Let us fear therefore, lest haply, a promise being left of entering into his rest, any one of you should be deemed to come short of it.*" There is a tremendous emphasis upon our responsibility in relation to the voice of God. It is not that God will not speak, but that, God speaking, we shall not hear.

The word "consider" in the first verse of chapter 3 is a very strong word. Our simple English word there does not convey the force of the original language. The word really means "attentively consider". It implies giving a fixed and prolonged attention to the matter. So you see that the atmosphere of this part of God's Word is all that which suggests to our heart the necessity for attention.

In such an atmosphere there is this word: "... if ye will hear his voice". That means that we have to apply ourselves to hearing what the Lord is saying. It is a matter of application, of will to hear His voice. Everything hangs upon that, as the whole context shows. All the promises of the land, all that which was presented to Israel as God's great and glorious purpose to which they were called, were lost to that generation; and the implication is that they missed it all because they would not hear His voice.

That carries us to a very serious consideration. What was the voice to be heard? What was the voice saying? What was it that the voice was carrying with it? What was it that they would not hear? What was it they did not earnestly apply themselves to hear? If you look closely into the forty years' history in the wilderness, you will see that everything called for application of heart, of mind, of will to understand. It called for close attention, because that which the Lord was doing with them had a meaning which was not too obvious, did not lie on the surface, could not be grasped instantly by any superficial glance. The dealings of God with them, the ways of God with them, contained a voice, a call, a message, a meaning, and it therefore required that they should earnestly attend to and apply the will, say, in effect: This means something more than we can see at a glance; we want to know what God means by this! There is a voice in this that is deeper than can be discerned by the outward ear; there is an inward ear required for this: there is something here to be seen which cannot be seen by the natural eye! The inner eye needs to be opened to see what God means by this! And because they would not take that attitude, adjust themselves in that way, they missed everything. They simply took things as they saw them, and allowed them to become mere happenings, mere events, judged by how those things affected their own personal interests, natural, earthly good. Chapter 3, verse 1 is the key to the whole thing. "*Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling*" - "*Today, if ye will hear ...*".

A heavenly calling! That puts a new complexion upon everything. What is the heavenly calling? A calling from above to glory and honour. How does the letter begin: "*For not*

unto angels did he subject the inhabited earth to come, whereof we speak. But one hath somewhere testified, saying, What is man, that thou makest mention of him?" "But we behold ... Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour." Thou dost make mention of Him. *"Wherefore, holy brethren, partners in a heavenly calling";* a calling from heaven of glory and honour in association with the Son of Man, in relation to the inhabited earth to come. It is dominion with Christ that is in view. And today God is dealing with us in relation to that, and there is a heavenly meaning in God's dealings with us.

Now go through Israel's history. Not long after they had come into the wilderness they found themselves short of water, and they murmured against Moses and against the Lord. In effect they said, We have been brought out here to perish! That is taking the earthly point of view. There are two ways of viewing that. They could look at it like this, and say, At least we had water to drink in Egypt, but here we are with no water to drink, and if we were going to perish we might as well have perished in Egypt! They could have taken another view, and said, Well, the Lord marvellously delivered us from Egypt; marvellously brought us through the Red Sea when it stood up like walls on either side; marvellously overwhelmed our enemies before our eyes, and wiped them out. He can surely provide water in a wilderness! It depends whether you look up or down, whether you murmur or whether you triumph.

Later they found themselves without anything to eat. Here was another chance for them to take one of two attitudes. They could take the downward attitude and say, Now we are going to perish in the wilderness; we are going to die of starvation out here. We have been brought into a trap, all resources have been kept from us, and now this is the end of everything! They could take the upward look and say, God, who provided water, will surely provide bread in the wilderness! Deliverance would have come from heaven, if they had seen the heavenly aspect of things.

In the lack of water, and in the lack of bread, and in every circumstance, no matter what it was — and the circumstances were numerous — adversity, want, hardship, weariness - there was a heavenly resource, but it required a heavenly faith, a heavenly aspect, a heavenly look. God was speaking in it all. What was He saying? In the absence of water, in the absence of bread, in these various and numerous situations, where nature and the world could make no provision, God was speaking, and He was saying continually through the forty years: I am your resource! I am your portion! I am your life! I am your strength! I am thy sufficiency! I have brought you out here, not to let you perish, not to make you the victim of circumstances, but to teach you that for you earthly things at best could never be satisfying and finally your life, but in Me you have that which will not only maintain you here from stage to stage, but will be your everlasting portion, and bring you at last into My whole fulness. God was seeking to say, Here is another circumstance in which you can make a new discovery of Me, but if you look at the circumstance itself you will go down! If you listen to My voice in the circumstance you will make a discovery, and that discovery will become your deliverance, your life.

In His mercy they did make discoveries, but they never allowed the discoveries which they made to be permanent lessons. When every fresh trial came they forgot the Lord, because they were so centred upon their own interests. They could not, they would not, escape from themselves. As a thing came up before them they immediately regarded it in the light of their own present personal interest. Here is a bit more trial! That is a new blow! That is one more trouble to add to all my troubles! That is one way of viewing things. There is another view. They could have said, This is another lesson the Lord is trying to teach! What is the measure of the Lord that this trial will lead into if taken hold rightly, if viewed rightly!

That land to which they were going was a great type of Christ in heaven, over the other side on resurrection ground, and they were brought through these trials in order that they might learn how now to live a heavenly life on the earth, by heavenly resources,

here in the wilderness. But so set were they upon their own comfort, their own enjoyment, their own pleasure and satisfaction, that they could not detach themselves to listen to the voice; and because things were always regarded in a personal light, from the standpoint of personal interest, when troubles came they hardened their hearts against the inner voice.

It was, "Today"! What a tremendously impressive word that is, viewed in this light. Today! What does that mean? That text has been almost always used for Gospel sermons, and we do not do wrong in making an appeal by it to the unsaved, because the truth applies that there is a Today! when God's voice is sounding to the unsaved, and God does not offer a tomorrow. This word is: "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts!" His voice heard in your heart will not give you a tomorrow. Let this day go, and you have no tomorrow for responding to His voice and doing what you have failed to do now in the presence of the voice with the heavenly calling. That is quite true.

But this text was never written for the unsaved, with all its value and application to them. It was written to the Lord's own people, and it is tremendous when you hear such a word to the Lord's people. That says to us that to-day God is speaking, in adversity, in trial, in suffering, in affliction, in all manner of difficulties into which He Himself has allowed us to come. He has brought us out into a place where all nature is cut off from us, where we are helpless in ourselves, and He allows us to come into the fires of trial and difficulty, and in them all He says, My voice is the voice of a heavenly calling, the voice which is calling you up, ever higher, to know your heavenly resources, to know what there is for you in Christ even here, in order to prepare you for that dominion over the inhabited earth to come, for glory and honour with Him Who is now crowned with glory and honour. We are become partners with Christ, if we hold fast.

"Today, if ye will ...". What does that say to me and to you? It says, Here is a trial, a difficulty; here is an adversity, a sorrow, a suffering. How am I going to view it? Am I going to say, Oh, more trouble! One thing after another! Or am I going to say, Yes, more trial — we feel it — and yet always some new knowledge of the Lord, some new discovery, I must hear the voice in this! It is going to lead into some greater fulness, where we have never been before. Harden not your heart. In other words, do not become bitter because of the trial, the difficulty, the suffering, but listen! The Lord is speaking, this is a great 'Today'! I venture to say that when this 'Today' is past, and all that it was intended to mean to us, and we see its meaning, we shall be sorry that we did not adjust ourselves more wholeheartedly to what the Lord was saying to us here in the very difficulties into which He brought us. We shall say, Oh, if only I had been more attentive and less self-occupied, I should have seen that in that particular experience the Lord was speaking to me, but it came and it went, and I regarded it as a bit of suffering and no more, and it led to nothing. It may be even that I became bitter, I rebelled and I hardened my heart because of the suffering.

God forbid! "*Today, if ye will hear ...*". Wherefore, holy brethren, partners in a heavenly calling, today if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.