

“Do Not Harden Your Heart”

Introduction. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible is full of warning signs from God, meant to deter men from sin and thereby keep them from His wrath. The Old Testament tells us that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11), and the New Testament tells us that He does not wish for anyone to perish but wants everyone to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

Hebrews 3:7-19 is one of these warnings. At this point the epistle moves from argument to exhortation. The author has established the absolute supremacy of Jesus over Moses. Moses was a great leader, and this very fact causes the author to ponder the possibility of failure under outstanding leadership. His inference is that Christians too, like the Israelites in the wilderness, can fall short of their promised inheritance.

Many people intellectually believe the gospel. They believe its message, but they never commit themselves in obedience to the One whom that gospel proclaims. It is no favor to God, and no benefit to us, to like, admire, and praise the Bible without obeying it and living it.

I. ***The Illustration Of Israel (Hebrews 3:7-11)***

- A. The passage quoted was written in the time of David, but it speaks about the time of Moses. It is a moving example of the problem many Jewish Christians faced in the early church. It describes Israel's disobedience and rejection of God in the Exodus wanderings.
- B. "Today" indicates urgency. It means the present moment, not necessarily a 24-hour period. It is foolish and dangerous to harden your heart. You never know how long you will have to decide to obey or to come back to God (2 Corinthians 6:2).
- C. Listening to God and obeying Him are matters of will -- so is hardening the heart. Paul warns that our hearts, or consciences, can become seared and insensitive, as skin does when it is badly burned (1 Timothy 4:2). "Today" lasts only as long as there is opportunity to decide -- and as long as the conscience is sensitive to God.
- D. Israel had been in Egypt for about 200 years as slaves. After God had wonderfully provided for them by delivering them from the Egyptians and blessed them with miracle after miracle, they were satisfied for only a brief time. Unfortunately, this showed that they never really believed.
- E. Unbelief never has enough proof. Asking for more proof is simply an excuse, a delaying tactic. The people of Israel kept testing God, and the day of trial lasted 40 years (Exodus 17:1-2, 7). Nothing is more illogical or unreasonable than unbelief (John 20:30-31; 2 Corinthians 5:7). It refuses to accept the most overwhelming evidence -- simply because unbelief does not want to believe (Luke 16:31; cf. Mark 9:24).

- F. We may shrug this off, but God was extremely angry with Israel's sin. The Septuagint of this passage could be rendered, "God loathed them" (cf. Romans 2:5). Their "rest" was Canaan, where the toil of wandering would end (Deuteronomy 12:9). Later in Hebrews, for us, our rest is heaven.

II. ***The Invitation To Take Heed (Hebrews 3:12)***

- A. Based on the illustration of Israel's unbelief, an appeal is made to the readers of Hebrews not to follow this example. It is a warning against rejecting truth that is known. The judgment of the wilderness days fell on those who rejected God's word through Moses, and the warning here is to those who reject God's word in Christ (John 12:48-50).
- B. The greatest sin in the world is unbelief. It is the greatest offense against God and brings the greatest harm to ourselves. No matter how strong a Christian may have been, if they fall away, they have "an evil heart of unbelief."
- C. The decision to return will become harder and harder as your heart becomes harder and harder. If you continue to follow your evil, unbelieving heart rather than the New Testament, you will forever depart from the living God, and forfeit the rest God has prepared for you (Hebrews 6:4-6).
- D. Turning away from Jesus Christ is not rejecting a religion. Turning away from Jesus Christ is much more than rejecting historical, traditional, orthodox gospel belief. Turning away from Jesus Christ is turning away from the living God. It is turning away from life itself (John 14:6). Apostasy is the ultimate consequence of unbelief.

III. ***The Instruction To Exhort One Another (Hebrews 3:13-14)***

- A. By the grace of God, we do not just have the Bible, we have each other. "Exhort" is a form of the word used by Jesus of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16. It means to come alongside to give help. The writer is urging his readers to help their brethren by encouraging them not to harden their hearts and turn away from Christ. Much exhortation is needed to get the upper hand on sin.
- B. "Deceitfulness" means "trickery." Sin is tricky; it does not reflect truth. It always masks itself. It lies and deceives (cf. Romans 7:11). It is attractive externally, but is corrupt internally. If your heart is not melted in faith, it will be hardened in unbelief.
- C. The "old man" always tells us that sin is not as bad and that trust in Christ is not as important as the Bible says. Becoming a Christian and living righteously seems too costly, too demanding, too restrictive, too unexciting -- and, above all, unnecessary. Sin tells people that they do not need salvation. If you are ready to give up and fall away, you

stand on the edge of a potentially disastrous decision (Hebrews 10:38-39).

- D. If you believe the gospel, if you have decided to follow Jesus, then at the end of the day, the end of the year, the end of your life, your commitment has to stand. It is not enough to have made a beginning, not enough to have once known the joy of eternal hope. Everything depends on you persevering to the end (Acts 11:23:14:23; Revelation 16:15).

IV. ***The Issue Of Unbelief (Hebrews 3:15-19)***

- A. The appeal to return to the Lord without delay is repeated again. The writer pleads with his readers not to follow the example of the Israelites (Numbers 14:28-32; 1 Corinthians 10:11). They set out from Egypt with abounding confidence, yet they left their bones in forgotten graves of sand. Unbelief forfeits blessing and brings judgment (Deuteronomy 32:20). The questions of the writer are penetrating, leading to the conclusion in vs.19.
- B. The illustration and invitation and instruction are worthless apart from belief in that to which they all point. God has great blessings prepared (Ephesians 3:8). He wants to pour out these riches on us, not only in this life but throughout all eternity (Matthew 19:29). The only item required is obedient faith (cf. Proverbs 29:1; Jude 5).

Conclusion. Today God expects men to be responsive. But many people say that they cannot believe without evidence. They claim to have pragmatic, empirical minds that has to see all the facts and weigh all the evidence. But everyone lives by faith. We live by faith when we go into a restaurant and eat the food without questioning its safety. When driving down the highway, we are not in constant fear that around the next bend the road will lead us into a river where there is no bridge. We trust the people who made the highways and the people who have traveled over them before us. We live by faith almost constantly. If we can put our faith in the highway department and the people who prepare our food, we surely can put our faith in the God of the Universe. Not to trust in Him is fatal. It is within your power not to harden your heart.