

When We Don't Believe

Introduction. Phil LeMaster, a denominational preacher in Kentucky, was writing about an experience he had in his work. He said, "It was nearing Christmas, and I received a phone call from a man who needed to talk to a counselor. I met him at my office, where he told me his tale of woe. A decade earlier he had killed his wife in a fit of anger, was convicted of manslaughter, and spent several years in prison. He and his wife had a daughter who was in the custody of his in-laws. He had not seen her since the crime. Now, as Christmas neared, his heart ached. Tears streaming down his face, he lamented, "I could pass her on the streets of this city and not even know who she was." What he remembered most about their session, however, was what he said when he first walked into his office. Dramatically raising his arms, he said, "Now, preacher, let's just leave Jesus out of this, OK?" As he sadly went his way that day, Mr. LeMaster thought, "That's the whole problem. You've left Jesus out of everything."

Beginning at Hebrews 3:7, the book moves from argument to exhortation. The author has established the absolute supremacy of Jesus over Moses. Yet 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. In 3:7-4:16, the text will show what happens when unbelief takes over, no matter where someone is spiritually.

I. The Catastrophe Of Unbelief (3:7-19)

- A. Today God is speaking through a greater someone than Moses, and today God expects men to be responsive. The implication is that it is within the power of man not to harden his heart (2 Chronicles 36:11-13; Acts 28:23-29).
- B. Although there were a number of separate incidents of rebellion, the author is referring to prolonged obstinacy (Numbers 14:22). All through the 40 years of wandering the people persisted in their stubbornness. Because of their habitual waywardness, they shut themselves out of their promised inheritance (Deuteronomy 12:9-10; Psalm 106:24-25).
- C. The danger of apostasy is always present, and for the readers of the epistle the danger is extremely great. There is a definite progression: sin to a hardened heart to unbelief to apostasy.
- D. Every day is a day for mutual encouragement. We need to encourage while we still have a chance. We need to be closely knit with one another to help one another (Romans 12:10, 15; Ephesians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 3:12; 4:9-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:3). Brethren who are loved and cared for have attempts by other brethren to encourage and help if there are problems. Sadly, sometimes pure and brotherly overtures are resented by those who need help.
- E. Sin is deceptive (Proverbs 7:21-23). It is attractive externally but corrupt within; it appears to be wise, but it blinds mankind to truth; it offers promises of gain, but it leads to ruin.
- F. A partnership with Christ began in the past and continues in the present (cp. v. 6. "whose house are we"). Christians have to hold on to the confident assurance they had when they started their heavenly journey (Revelation 2:10). But we cannot feel overly secure (1 Corinthians 10:12).

- G. The people of Israel did not put their trust in God (Numbers 14:1-4). They set out from Egypt with abounding confidence, yet they left their bones in forgotten graves of sand. They could not enter because of their sin (Deuteronomy 32:20).

II. *The Consequences Of Unbelief (4:1-10)*

- A. There is no break in the argument. Drawing on the example of the Israelites who failed to enter God's rest, the author shows that the divine rest is still left open. Their good news consisted of the divine offer of a land of rest and plenty. As in the parable of the sower, the trouble was in the hearers, not the message (Luke 8:11-15). The main thrust is plain enough — it is not enough to hear the message; it must be acted on in faith
- B. The rest is God's rest. It is His not only because it comes from Him but because He Himself entered into it when He finished the works of creation (Genesis 2:1-3). He continues in that rest, but it does not mean He has ceased from activity (John 5:16-17).
- C. God's rest is the sense of accomplishment, completion, and satisfaction of a job well done (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The rest still remains because it is unfulfilled. Joshua only gave a temporary rest which really did not satisfy. God still wants to share His rest; the disobedience of some does not void His generous intentions. As God in the beginning entered His sabbath, they too will enter theirs if they do not give up (Matthew 11:28-30; Revelation 14:13).

III. *The Cure For Unbelief (4:11-16)*

- A. We have to be zealous and make every effort (Ephesians 4:3; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 1:10). The author here speaks very urgently. It is very easy to follow bad examples (1 Corinthians 10:6-11). We have to remain firm.
- B. The word of God is poetically personified with all the attributes of God, with whom it is identified in v. 13. The word of God is not a dead letter, it has to be heeded. It is energetic and powerful (Isaiah 55:11). It is able to lay open like a surgeon's scalpel and see the secret parts of men's lives. It can see unbelief. It can judge the sincerity of real motives, and its judgment is infallible. Before God, everyone is naked and exposed, stripped of every possible concealment.
- C. Verses 14-16 serve as both a conclusion of this section and an introduction to a discussion of the priesthood of Christ. The designation, Jesus the Son of God, is significant because it joins together the human and divine natures of the Christian high priest.
- D. Frailties, both physical and moral, are characteristic of men and Jesus knows the full intensity of sin because He never gave in to sin. Like men physically, He was unlike them in always resisting sin (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 1:9; 7:26).
- E. By virtue of Christ's priesthood, we now have access directly into the presence of God. The exhortation to "draw near" strikes one of the doctrinal keynotes of the epistle, for the religion of Christ is the religion of access to God. The way to God, so longed closed, is now open (Hebrews 10:19-24). You can come as you are regularly and often. It is not a judgment seat (cp. Luke 9:56; 19:10).

Conclusion. So we conclude a great section of exhortation and encouragement. Pay attention to the all-powerful message of God's word and remember that you are always within the scope of the divine gaze. Labor to enter God's rest and do not turn away because of unbelief. The Israelites met a tragic end, not because God failed to love them or because the message was faulty, but because their heart was hardened. Let God's word penetrate and take seed in your heart today.