

Harden Not Your Hearts

Scripture: Hebrews 3:7–19

Code: 1608

INTRODUCTION

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible warns that the wrath of God is inevitable if men continue in sin. Since God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:32), and is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9), He continuously warns men. Hebrews 3:7-19 is one such warning. God warns unredeemed men to turn to Jesus Christ before it's too late.

Many people believe the facts of the gospel, but have never committed themselves to Jesus Christ. To know the truth but not act on it brings upon a man a worse judgment than not knowing it at all. Hebrews 3:7-19 is a warning to men who know the gospel, but because of love of sin or fear of persecution have not committed themselves to what they know is true.

Don't Get Burned!

Imagine a fire in a hotel, and you're on the tenth floor. The firemen below are holding a net and yelling for you to jump. You look out the window and you wonder whether you ought to trust yourself to those firemen, but the fire is spreading rapidly, and you don't have much choice. But rather than commit yourself and jump, you're concerned with hanging on to your possessions, so you grab them and try to escape by running down the stairs. You don't make it, however, and you are consumed by the fire. Hebrews 3:7-19 is the Holy Spirit's saying, "Jump!" There is no escape from the fires of God's wrath except through a total commitment to Jesus Christ.

The Jewish people addressed in this passage had heard the gospel directly from the apostles and prophets. They were in danger of becoming what the Bible calls apostates--those who know the truth but willfully reject it. To get his warning across, the author uses an illustration from the Old Testament. Since he has just talked about Moses (vv. 1-6), he uses an illustration from the experience of Moses.

LESSON

I. THE ILLUSTRATION (vv. 7-11)

"Wherefore, as the Holy Spirit saith, today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of trial in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore, I was grieved with that generation, and said, they do always err in their heart, and they have not known my ways. So I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest."

Verses 7-11 are a quote from Psalm 95:7-11. Psalm 95 refers to Israel's disobedience and rejection of Moses while they were in the wilderness. After 400 years in Egypt, Israel was led out through a series of plagues culminating in the death of all the first-born of Egypt. God also performed miracles for Israel in the wilderness, including the parting of the Red Sea. In spite of those miracles, the people still failed to believe God. That's a classic illustration of unbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence. As a result, God judged them, and they wandered for nearly forty years in the wilderness, until all that generation died. Just as the psalmist used that as a warning to the people of his day, so the writer of Hebrews warns his readers not to do what the people of Moses' day did.

Who Really Wrote the Bible?

Verse 7 says that the Holy Spirit was the author of Psalm 95. Inspiration is the Holy Spirit's speaking through the minds of God's human instruments. When you read a verse in your Bible, you are reading the words of the Spirit of God, the Author of Scripture. Second Peter 1:21 says, "Prophecy came not at any time by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit inspired every word of the original autographs of Scripture. That's why it is such a serious matter to deny the inerrancy of the Bible.

A. The Plea

1. The meaning of "today"

This word is used frequently in this section (3:7, 13, 15; 4:7). It doesn't necessarily signify a twenty-four hour period, but rather indicates urgency. The writer of Hebrews urges those who know the truth of the gospel not to harden their hearts like Israel did. The apostle Paul echoes that thought in 2 Corinthians 6:2: "Behold now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation."

D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, was preaching in Chicago on October 8, 1871. A biographer writes, "Before him was the largest congregation he had ever addressed in the city. He concluded with a blunder that he had called the biggest in his life, one which he vowed he would give his right hand to recall. He, D. L. Moody, gave them a week to decide for Christ" (Richard K. Curtis, *They Called Him Mister Moody* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], p. 150). That night the great Chicago fire broke out and many of the people who were there were killed. Moody said that was the last time he ever told anyone to postpone a decision for Christ.

The Bible teaches the urgency of immediately responding to the gospel--you may not have another opportunity later. "Today" signifies the present time of grace while God's blessings are still available. People today need to heed the warning of the writer of Hebrews not to put off a decision regarding salvation.

2. The menace of a hard heart

Verse 7 also says, "If ye will hear his voice." Hearing God is a matter of your own will, and there is always a danger of hardening your heart, as Israel did. Paul said it is possible for one's conscience to become seared, as with a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2). The Greek word translated "seared" means "burned," and when skin is severely burned and scar tissue forms, it becomes insensitive. When I was in college, I was thrown out of a car going about seventy-five miles an hour and I slid about 100 yards on my back. As a result, I had third-degree burns over sixty-four square inches on my back, and the scar tissue that has resulted is insensitive--it's been seared.

There is danger that someone who hears the gospel repeatedly but rejects it will develop a seared conscience and no longer be sensitive to what God is saying to them. That is why the writer of Hebrews urges his readers to respond today to the gospel, and not harden their hearts. The time to respond to Jesus Christ is when your heart is soft and your conscience is convicted, lest you end up with the kind of hard heart that Proverbs 29:1 warns of. The Spirit of God pleads with men not to harden their hearts, but to respond to Christ.

B. The Pictures

1. Israel at Meribah

The "provocation in the day of trial in the wilderness" (v. 8) refers back to an incident described in Exodus 17:1-7: "All the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, after their journeys, according to the commandment of the Lord, and encamped in Rephidim: and there was no water for the people to drink. Wherefore the people did strive with Moses, and said, give us water that we may drink. And Moses said unto them, Why strive ye with me? Wherefore do ye put the Lord to the test? And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Why hast thou brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? They are almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thy hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah [which means trial or tested], and Meribah [which means striving], because of the striving of the children of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, is the Lord among us or not?"

Although God had just delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt through a series of miracles, parted the Red Sea to allow them to escape the pursuing Egyptian army, and given them manna to eat, they still doubted whether God was among them. That's the character of unbelief--it never has enough proof. People who have had their questions answered but keep on demanding more proof give evidence that they are unwilling to act on what they know to be true.

The writer of Hebrews warns his readers not to harden their hearts like the people of Israel did when they got thirsty at Meribah and Massah. It is a serious matter to put God to the test. Jesus rebuked Satan with the words, "Thou shalt not put the Lord, thy God, to the test" (Matt. 4:7). Despite the overwhelming evidence, Israel failed to believe God's promise; they would not take the step of committing themselves in faith to God.

2. Israel at Kadesh-barnea

According to Hebrews 3:9, Israel kept putting God to the test for forty years, not just at Meribah, but all the way through the wilderness. Numbers 14 tells us how it all began. Israel was camped at Kadesh-barnea, and spies were sent ahead into the land of Canaan to spy out the land. When the spies returned and reported the strength of the inhabitants of the land, the Israelites failed once again to believe God. As a result, God declared that none of men of that generation (except Caleb and Joshua, who had believed) would enter the Promised Land: "All those men who have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put me to the test now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swore to give unto the fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it" (vv. 22-23). God had given the Israelites evidence of His ability to lead them into Canaan, and since they refused to believe Him, He did not allow them to enter the Promised Land.

The unbelief of Israel stands as a warning for all men. Just as Israel had sufficient evidence of God's faithfulness in their day, so we have sufficient evidence that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Savior of mankind. He died on a cross for our sins and rose again three days later. Unbelief in the face of such overwhelming evidence is tragic indeed.

3. Israel in the wilderness

Hebrews 3:10 continues the account of Israel in the wilderness, "Wherefore, I was grieved with that generation, and said, they do always err in their heart, and they have not known my ways." The Greek word translated "grieved" means more than just unhappy. It means God was aggravated, vexed, displeased, or angered. The Israelites thought they could go their own way and do their own thing, but they couldn't. Sin is deceiving--it calls darkness light, bitter sweet, bondage liberty, and wrong right.

"They" in verse 10 is an inclusive term: it refers to the entire generation that died in the wilderness. It was totally and habitually evil. That's why I don't think Hebrews 3:7-11 refers to believers who are "out of fellowship." People who constantly, habitually follow evil are unbelievers. Deuteronomy 9:7 describes the Israelites as having been rebellious against the Lord from the day they left Egypt.

The illustration closes with a powerful statement in verse 11: "So I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest." That is a reference to Canaan, the Promised Land. It implies resting from wandering and toil. Because the Israelites sinned and continued in unbelief, God decreed that that whole generation would die and only their children (who had not rebelled) would go into the land. Note that verse 11 says that God swore an oath. When God makes an oath to Himself, it's a binding oath. The wilderness generation had reached the limit of God's patience.

Even the generation that did enter Canaan failed to fully enter God's rest. God told them to destroy the Canaanites, who were an especially vile people. The Canaanites were so evil that they buried live babies in jars in the walls of every building they built. God wanted them destroyed and was

planning to use Israel as His instrument of judgment. But instead Israel moved in with them, and consequently never knew the rest God had planned for them. The fate of the wilderness generation is a graphic illustration of how God treats those who know the truth but harden their heart.

II. THE INVITATION (v. 12)

"Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

On the basis of the illustration in verses 7-11, the writer of Hebrews invites his readers to respond to the truth and not fall away. "Brethren" is not a reference to Christians; when the writer addresses Christians, he refers to them as "holy brethren" (eg., 3:1). Verse 12 is addressed to fellow Jews. He warns them that if they reject Christianity, they are departing from their God.

A. The Depravity of Unbelief

The greatest evil in the world is unbelief. It is the worst sin you could ever commit because it could keep you from salvation forever. These non-Christians were on the verge of faith, and may even have claimed to be Christians. They would never have admitted to being openly against Christ, but they were. No matter how close you are to faith in Jesus Christ, if you never commit yourself to Him, you have an evil heart of unbelief. Your punishment will be all the more severe because you have departed from what you knew to be the truth. Hebrews 6:6 says of such people, "It is impossible to renew them again to repentance" (NASB). When a person hears the truth of Jesus Christ, acknowledges that it is true, and then turns his back and walks away, there is nothing more God can do.

B. The Departure of Unbelievers

"Departing" (Gk., *aphist[ma]emi*) means "to stand afar off from" or "to stand apart from." Those who depart wind up standing apart from God as doomed apostates. Note also that verse 12 refers to God as "the living God." To reject Jesus Christ is not to reject a form of religion or a creed; it's to walk away from the living God.

III. THE INSTRUCTION (vv. 13-18)

"But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end, while it is said, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. For who, when they had heard, did provoke? Did not all that came out of Egypt by Moses? But with whom was he grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom swore he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?"

"Exhort" (Gk., *parakale[ma]o*) refers to one called alongside to help. The noun form of this verb is a

name given to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). The writer exhorts his readers to get alongside each other and, urging one another to turn to Christ. I'm not ashamed to beg people to come to Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul said, "We beg you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

"Deceitfulness" refers to trickery or stratagem. Sin is tricky: it frequently masks itself. Men may become hardened by it without even realizing it. They hear the gospel of Jesus Christ time and time again but don't respond.

A. The Decision of Men

Hebrews 10:38-39 gives us the decision all men must face: "The just shall live by faith; but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul." Either you believe and are saved or you are damned. Sin would try to deceive us into thinking that falling back isn't that bad, or that the price is too high to be a Christian. It would try to tell us that we're self-sufficient, and can make it on our own.

1. Those who make the right choice

Verse 14 gives us the mark of those whose faith is genuine: "We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end." The greatest proof that someone is a believer is if he continues in the faith. People sometimes ask me about someone they know who used to attend church, and claimed to be a Christian, but now has fallen away from the faith. My reply is the fact he left proves he was never saved to begin with. The true branch in John 15 remains attached to the vine. Hebrews 3:14 repeats the thought of verse 6, which says we are of the house of Christ if we remain confident to the end.

2. Those who make the wrong choice

First John 2:19 says in reference to those who depart from the faith, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us." I've met too many people who made an initial commitment to Christ but turned out not to be for real. They're never at prayer time, they've no desire to witness or read Scripture, and they never talk about the things of God. They lead a worldly life-style, yet they claim to be Christians. Despite their claim, they give evidence that they never were real to begin with. Jesus says of them in Matthew 7:22-23, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out demons? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

B. The Decision of God

In verse 15, the writer repeats for emphasis the injunction of verses 7-8. He then goes on to add in verses 16-17, "Who, when they had heard, did provoke? Did not all that came out of Egypt by Moses? But with whom was he grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?" God was angry with the whole generation of unbelieving people, and sentenced them to wander until they died, never entering into His rest. Verse 18 says, "To whom swore he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?" The principle is

clear: unbelief brings about tragic consequences.

IV. THE ISSUE (v. 19)

"So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief."

Verse 19 is the crux of the passage. Those who fall short of salvation do so because of unbelief. God's blessings are available to those who take hold of them by faith. Some people claim they can't live by faith--they have a pragmatic, empirical mind that has to have all the facts. However, everyone lives by faith. You live by faith, when you go to a restaurant, that the food is fit to eat. We live by faith when we drive. No one drives in constant fear that their lane around the next bend turns into a forty-foot-high concrete wall; we trust the people who make the highways. When crossing a bridge, you don't expect it to go out half-way and then end. If you can put your faith in the highway department and the people who make your food, you can certainly put your faith in the God of the universe. You'll never enter God's rest unless you commit your life to Christ. Continuing in unbelief will inevitably bring the judgment of God.

A. The Warning of Jude

Jude said, "I will, therefore, put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not" (Jude 5).

B. The Warning of the author of Hebrews

Hebrews 12:25 says, "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spoke on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven." Moses was the one who spoke on earth, while Jesus was the One who spoke from heaven. If those who refused to listen to Moses failed to escape judgment, how will those who refuse to hear Jesus escape?

C. The Warning of Solomon

Solomon gave this warning in Proverbs 29:1: "He that, being oft reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." To harden yourself against God is to bring unavoidable judgment upon yourself. I urge you to heed the words of the Holy Spirit in Hebrews 3:7-19 and not harden your heart.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why does God warn men?

2. True or false: Those who know the truth of the gospel and reject it will be judged more severely

than those who have never heard.

3. What are two reasons some people don't commit themselves to what they know is true?
4. What is an apostate?
5. Why does the writer of Hebrews quote from Psalm 95?
6. In your own words, how would you define inspiration?
7. What could ultimately happen to someone who continues to reject the gospel?
8. Why was God angry with the wilderness generation?
9. True or false: The generation that entered Canaan--in contrast to those who died in the wilderness--fully entered God's rest.
10. Is verse 12 addressed to Christians or non-Christians? Defend your answer.
11. What is the worst sin you could commit?
12. What is the greatest proof that someone is a Christian?
13. How could you respond to someone who said he couldn't live by faith?

Pondering the Principles

1. Israel's experiences in the wilderness are an example of behavior to avoid. The Bible has much to say about the power of example. It warns us against following bad examples (Lev. 18:2-3; Eph. 4:17) and encourages us to follow good ones (Heb. 12:2-3; James 5:10). What kind of examples are you following? Are you patterning your life after worldly people or godly people? What kind of example are you setting for your spouse, your children, your friends, your fellow employees, and other believers? Can you say with Paul, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1, NASB)? Begin today "in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity [to] show yourself an example of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:12, NASB).
2. Do you know someone who professes to be a Christian, but has walked away from God? On the basis of what you've learned in this chapter, how would you evaluate him? Begin to pray for him, and ask God to give you an opportunity to share with him the warning of Hebrews 3:7- 19 and the boldness to confront him with the consequences if he continues to forsake the faith.
3. Despite all that God had done for Israel in miraculously delivering them from bondage in Egypt, and in sustaining them in the wilderness, they still grumbled against Him at Meribah. Do you find

yourself concentrating on what God has done for you and being thankful, or on what He hasn't done for you and becoming a grumbler? If you struggle with being a grumbler, memorize 1 Thessalonians 5:18 and Philippians 2:14.

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