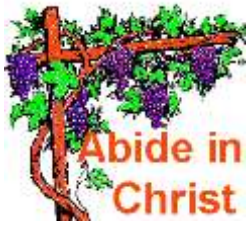


Hebrews 3:7-19



Do not Harden Your Hearts

The writer of Hebrews has made his argument that Jesus Christ is superior to the prophets, angels and Moses. There are five exhortations or warning passages in Hebrews based on the exalted glory of Christ. For the writer of Hebrews Yahweh or Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Messiah of the New Testament.

The first warning stressed the danger of drifting from the Word (Hebrews 2:1-4). In the current passage the writer warns his readers not to doubt or disbelieve the Word because of their hardness of heart.

As we study this passage of Scripture we need to keep in mind our eternal security does not depend upon us, but on the all sufficient atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ to cover all our sins (John 5:24; 6:37-39; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:29-39; 11:6; Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 1:3-6; 1 John 5:11-13). There is a personal responsibility that comes with this new relationship with Christ. He is our Lord and Master.

When we read the Scriptures we are listening to the voice of God speaking to us. God speaks to us in and through His Word.

Israel's wilderness experience (Heb. 3:7-11).

"Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, As in the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, And saw My works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with this generation, And said, "They always go astray in their heart, And they did not know My ways; As I swore in My wrath, They shall not enter My rest" (Hebrews 3:7-11). The author is quoting Psalm 95:7-11, and in Hebrews 4:7 he says David wrote it down. Here he attributes it to the Holy Spirit.

It is important to keep in mind the background of this passage being alluded to and quoted from the Old Testament. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt under the evil power of Pharaoh. God had redeemed His people and delivered them out of Egypt at the first Passover when a lamb was slain for in every home. God's mighty hand delivered the children of Israel.

Moreover, it was not God's will for the people of Israel to remain in Egypt or in the Sinai wilderness wandering around. His goal was for them to enter into their inheritance in the land of Canaan. They wandered around for forty years because they would not trust God to lead them into the land. The events are recorded by Moses in Numbers 13-14. Only two of those who left Egypt crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. The people missed their inheritance because of unbelief and died in the wilderness. Their children are the ones Joshua led across the river.

God's holiness and justice is His nature. He needs no other reason to punish sin but His holy character. The children of Israel provoked God for a forty-year period, even to the point of Moses disobeying God by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it (Num. 14:11, 23-29, 32; 20:13). As a result of their disobedience and unbelief all of the adults who had left Egypt were denied entrance to the land except Caleb and Joshua.

Israel's sin was a continual wandering away from God in their heart. The word "heart" to the Hebrews represented the center of man's personal being, and included the volition, emotions and intellect. The Hebrews perceived man as thinking with his heart. Israel persisted in going their own way instead of submitting to God's revealed will. They refused to trust in Him. They were always going astray in their hearts. They did not acknowledge God's way. "Do not harden your heart." "Harden" (*skleruno*) means to dry out, to dry up, to make hard, to harden.

The emphasis is on "today" is referred to throughout this discussion. "Today" stresses the urgency of immediate action. His readers can respond to God's offer of salvation. It is not only how you begin the Christian life but also how you end.

The children of Israel saw the works of God in the wilderness every day. They heard Him proclaim His own law, they ate manna every morning, yet they continued unbelieving and disobedient.

They "provoked" God by their disobedience. The word "provoked" (*parapikrasmos*) means "to put to test." Israel put God to rest in Exodus 17:1-7 on the account of lack of water at Rephidim. But their provocation was not limited to one occasion. It went on for forty years.

The writer uses an interesting series of words: provoked, trial, tried, testing. Instead of God's testing in order to prove the person, it is just the opposite here. The children of Israel put God to test to see what evil or good there in in Him when they put Him to the test for the purpose of approving Him. Let's see if God meets our test. It was an evil heart of unbelief like man in our day who test God with their demands.

Because of their defiant unbelief God swore they would not enter into His rest. "Rest" denotes more than just entrance into the land of Canaan.

"Rest" (*katapausis*) in the original means to cessation of activity and in this verse points to a place of blessing where there is no more striving. It is a permanent cessation of activity, or permanent rest. It is a relaxation in the presence of God knowing there is no reason to fear. The writer of Hebrews has a great interest in "rest" (Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:1, 3-5, 8-11).

For the people of Israel it was not just entrance into the Promised Land, but a rest that God promised. The generation that left Egypt did not enter into the land. Only two were allowed to enter and they were Joshua and Caleb. The next generation under Joshua entered the Promised Land and experienced some rest because they chose to trust and obey God (Josh. 1:13-15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). However, it was not a permanent rest because of sin and unbelief. They were taken into captivity by foreign rulers. After that Gentile rulers governed Israel until A. D. 70 when Rome destroyed Jerusalem. Israel will only enjoy peace under the rule of the Messiah when He returns.

God says, "Therefore, I was angry with this generation" (Heb. 3:10). The King James Version reads "I was grieved." The word means to be "wroth or displeased with." The Hebrew words being quoted mean "to loathe, spew out, reject, abhor, repudiate." They are stronger than grieved. It is a strong offence because they have offended God. They provoked Him; they angered God. I hear people make outlandish statements about God and I think, "Don't you know who you are blaspheming?"

What does Canaan represent for Christians today?

The Canaan rest is a representation of our present rest as we claim it by faith in Christ (Heb. 4:3, 11-13; Matt. 11:28). Jesus Christ had redeemed us by shedding of His blood. He purchased us (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom. 5:6, 8). But that is not all. We have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God and the power of God. The Land of Canaan represents for us our spiritual inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:3, 11, 15-12; Col 1:13-14). Crossing over Jordan is not a picture of death and entering into heaven as a lot of gospel songs teach. We are in a spiritual war. Canaan was a place of battles, including defeats. It is not a good illustration of heaven. There will be no wars nor rumors of wars in heaven. The battle will have been won. How sad that many Christians will not step out by faith and claim their spiritual inheritance in Christ. They do not enjoy the fullness of God's blessings in their Christian life.

The Christian's rest is not just going to heaven, but to enjoy all that God has promised us in our union with Christ. All true Christians will go to heaven and receive many blessings (Heb. 4:9; Rev. 14:13). There are rewards or blessings reserved for those who continue to trust and obey God such as crown of righteousness, crown of life, crown of glory, etc.

Warning against unbelief (Heb. 3:12-19).

"Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, while it is said, 'Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.' For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:12-19).

The people of Israel who died in the wilderness were mostly redeemed believers. They died as believers, and did not lose their salvation. The problem is they failed to enter into the blessing that could have been theirs if they had trusted Him. They failed to trust in the Lord and He allowed their enemies to defeat them.

The danger for the Jewish people in the wilderness was to apostasy, departure from God, not failure to come to God in saving faith. The rebellion consists of departing from a living, dynamic God. The Hebrew Christians are tempted to reject the revelation God gave through His Son. This would be even more tragic because Christ is the final word from God. Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).

Every believer needs to be cautious against unbelief and deceitfulness of sin. A son may leave home and journey to another place to live, but he does not cease to be a son. Even though we are partakers of the heavenly calling we can only partake of all that God has provided for us to enjoy by persevering daily in the Christian life. We can lose the privilege of partaking with Christ all that He has in store for us if we stop trusting Him. We began the Christian life by faith and we live it daily by faith. The children of Israel failed to receive the blessings of God because they did not trust Him.

"Take care" picks up where the author left off in verse seven. The author stresses a constant keeping a watchful eye open, consider, contemplate, and look at carefully. He presents a searching warning for each believer to examine his own spiritual condition. The spiritual problem is unbelief. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." Wrong behavior results from wrong

thinking. "Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

"Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." The word for "falls away" is *aphistemi* "to apostatize", literally "to stand away."

"The root of unbelief is the original depravity of our natures . . . There is such an impotency in us by nature, that no man of himself, by his own strength, can believe, can come to Christ. None can believe except they are specially taught of God (John 6:44, 45). Men in a state of nature neither can nor will believe the gospel," wrote John Owen.

There is an unbelief that consists in a rejection of the truth of the gospel. An unbelieving heart causes a person to depart "from the living God." The words "departing" or "falls away" (*apostenai*) signifies "turn away from, forsake, apostatize from." The idea is not depart, but "standing off from, to step aside from." It "is not merely unbelief, but disbelief, refusal to believe describing a evil heart marked by disbelief" (A. T. Robertson). This is the word from which we get the word apostasy which is a departure from and repudiation of one's position. The individual has renounced his former professed belief and is now totally opposed to what he believed before. There was pressure being applied to these Hebrew Christians to fall away or depart from their faith in Christ. There was the temptation to return to the Levitical sacrifices and absolutely reject the atoning sacrifice of the Anointed of the Lord. Our writer calls this apostasy from the living God. For him it is impossible to turn back from the highest revelation of God in Christ and possess true saving faith in God.

The kind of heart the Israelites in the desert is plain. "A wicked heart of unbelief in apostatizing from the living God. The source of the problem is "wicked unbelief." There is the danger of doubting and disbelieving God's Word. Sin is the master of deception. The end of sin is not seen at once. The trouble of unbelief is always in the heart. It dulls the heart and our thinking becomes blunted and insensitive.

How tragic to give merely an intellectual assent to the Lord Jesus Christ, and have no saving knowledge of Him.

What is the solution to such temptations? The writer encourages his readers to "encourage one another day after day" (v. 13). He wants them to encourage one another, not castigate or criticize. *Parakaleite* is literally to call to one's side in order to encourage. Encourage one another every day.

"We have become partakers of Christ" is a present state as a result from a past action. When we were spiritually regenerated we became sharers of the very life of Christ. "We have become" (*gegonamen*) perfect tense partakers of Christ is the same idea in verse one when he says the believer shares in the heavenly calling. We have a vital union with Christ. We share in

His life. The question is not is a person retaining salvation based upon persistent faith, but the possession of salvation as evidenced by a continuation of faith. The perfect tense in the original reaches back to the past and speaks of the present standing. Was there a time in the past and as a result they were partakers of salvation in Christ? If they have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ they will persist in that faith to the end of their lives, despite the persecution which they are enduring.

Does this "apostasy" mean abandoning one's faith and his salvation? Is such a person condemned forever to hell? The context of the passage of Scripture does not teach this. Canaan is not a picture of heaven, but of the Christian's present spiritual inheritance in Christ. They miss the blessings of their inheritance today and suffer the chastening hand of God.

Our vital union with Christ is the principle and measure of all spiritual satisfaction and expectations. "Our union with Christ, our participation of Him, consists in the inhabitation of the same Spirit in Him and in us, and the work of this Spirit given unto us is to form Christ in us, whereby our union is completed," observed John Owen.

Steadfastness and consistency in believing is the evidence of union with Christ.

The Scriptures are very clear that true believers cannot lose their salvation (John 6:39-40; 10:27-29; Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:35-39; Phil. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:3-5).

"If we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end" (v. 14). The solemn reminder is that those who have "become partakers of Christ" will continue in faith and will not apostatize to Judaism. The believer never ceases to believe He rests his complete trust in Christ. The "if" clause does not tell us that we will become sharers of Christ ultimately if we hold fast long enough, but we can recognize the true sharers of Christ by their consistent faith.

The argument of the author of Hebrews is that those who are hardened bear evidence that they are not and have never been true believers. On the other hand, the true believers do not become hardened in unbelief. The true believer will examine his heart to make sure that he is a genuine believer. If there is no true evidence of faith and obedience then there is good reason to doubt they have ever been saved.

The author in vv. 15-19 is quoting Psalm 95:7-8. A whole generation perished under the wrath of God because they would not believe in God's promises. The people who came out of Egypt by the mighty hand of God were the very ones who refused to believe Him. God's anger was against those who sinned. There was no excuse because they saw the mighty hand of God that delivered them. Moreover, it was forty years of unfaithfulness.

"Whatever we consider in sin, God principally considers the root and spring of it in unbelief. Unbelief is the immediate root and cause of all provoking sins. . . Unbelief deprives men of all

interest in or right unto the promises of God. . . . No unbeliever shall ever enter into the rest of God," writes John Owen.

Is the implication that Christians who do the same will not enter heaven? Some have taken that view. On the other hand, the New Testament teaches that all who believe in Jesus Christ will go to heaven because we saved by simple faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christ plus what equals salvation? The Bible teaches we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. Nothing else. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus made it very clear that the true believer has eternal life and will not perish. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:27-30). The apostle Paul taught the same great truth. "These whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified." (Romans 8:30). Moreover, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord (v. 39). The wonderful truth is God will glorify us just as he has justified us and is now sanctifying us. Salvation is of the Lord, not man. Rest does not equal the Promised Land or heaven, but the inheritance that God wants us to enjoy in the Promised Land or heaven. Another way of stating this truth is justification and sanctification are not the same doctrine. If you mix the two you will have a wrong interpretation. We are justified by faith instantly by the declaration of God. We are sanctified positionally, progressively and finally when we see Jesus in heaven.

To equate the inheritance only with heaven results in inconsistent interpretation. Some of our hymns have poor theology. Crossing the Jordan River marked the beginning of God's testing of the new generation of Israelites. He tested the previous generation in the wilderness. Each generation has its own tests.

One of my seminary students, Phil Slaughter said accurately, "If you are saved you are always saved." So the correct question is, Do you have eternal life? You either have it, or you don't.

There was no excuse for Israel. God's presence was with them leading and providing for them daily. God's faithful servant Moses gave them leadership. They saw the demonstration of God's presence daily. They simply refused to follow God's leadership. They knew God's will and disobeyed Him. They missed the blessings of God and one by one died in the wilderness desert. That does not mean that those who died in the wilderness were eternally lost because they did not find their rest in the Promised Land. They were spiritually saved, just like Moses who appeared at the transfiguration of Christ.

The only option is to repent and trust Him for His saving grace. This is why we have such a great High Priest.

The beginning of backsliding from Christ, and the ways of the gospel are secret, deep, and hardly discoverable, being open and naked only to the all-discerning eye of Christ. The omniscience of Christ and His all-searching and all-seeing eye is an effectual means to preserve the soul from destructive entrance into backsliding suggest John Own. "The all-seeing eye of Jesus Christ is a great preservation against backslidings in profession."

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

God still appeals to men to enter into His rest. It is more than entering into the Promised Land. His appeal is that you right now through faith enter into the Sabbath rest, the very rest of God.

We must take God's offer of eternal life today because there is no guarantee of a tomorrow for any of us. Today, while you have a chance, receive Christ as your savior. This is still God's today. Enter into His rest today before it is too late.

Trust and obey. Mix the promises of God with faith.

There is no greater time than right now. Many people think that we live in a day when God is no longer at work as in former ages. But the truth is He is just as much at work today as He ever was. God is the same today as He was yesterday, and the age before that. God is the same forever.

Crossing over into Canaan for the Christian today is not a picture of going to heaven, but our spiritual inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:3, 11, 15-23).

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