

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." ¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Introduction

Our text for today (Heb. 3.12-19) deals with the hardening of hearts of people who are *within* the church. In view in Hebrews 3 is a classic example: the rebellious conduct of *God's people* in the wilderness after they left Egyptian bondage on the way to the Promised Land. The writer to the Hebrews takes the perspective of the Psalmist in Psalm 95 and speaks of **the rebellion and the day of testing in the wilderness** when the Israelites put God **to the test ... for forty years** (Heb.3.8-10). Therefore, we have layers of perspective (perspective on top of perspective), and to get our bearings on the danger of heart hardening, we worked forward last time from the history to the Psalm and then to the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews, there is an exhortation about the danger of heart hardening.

The exhortation first comes in the quotation of the Psalm to the readers of the book of Hebrews (to readers then and to his readers now, to them and to us). That is what we have in Hebrews 3.7-11. Now, in our text today, 3.12-19, the preacher directly addresses his readers with the quotation from Psalm 95 in mind. He continues to warn about the danger of heart hardening and he tells us what to do about it. We might call this part two in the application of Psalm 95 (part one was 3.7-11). My title is "The Dangers of Heart Hardening and What to do about it" and the title gives the two main points of the outline.

1A. The Dangers of Heart Hardening

He speaks of a number of intertwined dangers that go under the umbrella of heart hardening: judgment, unbelief, and apostasy.

1) Judgment

The danger speaks to things radically important to the safety and well being of our souls. Accordingly, the text builds again (as earlier in 3.7-11) on the historical event that happened at a location with two names, Massah and Meribah. We know which event is in view from Psalm 95: ⁷ For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹ when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. ¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." ¹¹ Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." (7-11). Note how the Psalm warns of the danger of heart hardening along with the following consequences: if we harden our hearts and go astray in our hearts, we put God to the test (we try His patience), we ask Him to look at us with loathing (that is, with angry grief and disgust), and we stir up His wrath.

The writer of our letter (this letter to us from the Holy Spirit, Heb.3.7) also warns us of the danger of heart hardening and of its consequences based on the wilderness event. We know this is the case because he gives the cautionary about being hardened in 3.13 and 15 (**that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin...**¹⁵**As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion"**). Again, note the consequences that the preacher cites in Hebrews 3.16-19: (¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief). Heart hardening provokes God (3.17). It stirs up His wrath

(3.11) and causes Him to confirm His judgment with an oath (3.18). The judgment is that heart hardened people will not enter into rest with Him in His rest *just as* the sinful Israelites did not enter the Promised Land. Indeed, their bodies literally fell to earth in death in the wilderness, outside the circle of God's rest. Clearly, the danger of heart hardening is inseparable from judgment. The danger is truly great against the backdrop of its consequences: dying in the wilderness of this fallen world without hope of entry into the Promised Land of heaven's glory.

2) Unbelief

Another danger is unbelief. Thus, the writer warns by saying "lest" (for fear that, in the troubling case that) **there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart** (3.12a). We might think of unbelief as some kind of mental activity of denying that such and such information is true. That idea of unbelief is just as incorrect as thinking that believing is merely a mental activity in which we affirm that something is true. Instead, of being something informational in orientation, this context shows that unbelief is much deeper (as is its opposite). Unbelief is a matter of the heart, which is who you are at the depth and center of your being. The heart is the inner you from which all your thoughts and actions arise. Thus, unbelief is the other side of coin of disobedience. Note how this is true in 3.18-19: ¹⁸ **And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?** ¹⁹ **So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.** The disobedient did not enter the Promised Land, that is, they did not enter because of unbelief. If you have an unbelieving heart, if you are unbelieving at the depths of your being you will show it in disobedience and God characterizes your heart as evil (3.12a, **Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart**). The KJV translates helpfully here; it has: **an evil heart of unbelief** in 3.12a. The heart, the person at center of his being is evil because of unbelief, which correlates with disobedience. Thus, the writer warns ("lest") about the fear that **there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart**.

Before we leave this point we should consider the audience to whom our writer speaks when he says, **in any of you**. This danger could occur among you, among the brothers and sisters of the church family for he began by addressing them with the endearing term of **brothers**. He addresses the entire church with the concern that some among them may have "an evil heart of unbelief."

3) Apostasy

The word apostasy comes from the Greek that lies behind the phrase **to fall** in 3.12. The evil unbelieving heart is the root that leads to the troubling fruit of apostasy. The fall involves departure **from the living God**. What we have here is *a step beyond* having an evil heart of unbelief. This is something to which unbelief leads, namely, falling away from the living God. Well, the unbeliever is not *with* God so how can he fall *away from* God? We get perspective for an answer when we recall that unbelief includes disobedience (3.18) and rebellion (3.15).

What then does the move *away from God* look like? Is he saying, "Be careful, you may manifest unbelief by running away as an atheist or in some overt denial of the living God"? That could be part of what is at stake here, but surely it is much more subtle than that. He specifies his concern: going away from the living God involves being hardened *by the deceitfulness of sin* (¹² **Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.** ¹³ **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**). It seems that this is a picture of the church family in its "profession." Leaving it may occur, but it often does not occur. What does occur is hardening. There may often be people *within* the church that move away from the living God in apostasy or revolt, which is just to say that they are on the path of heart hardening. What do they look like on this path? They complain, grumble, quarrel and oppose authority (God given authority and God's own authority).

People like this may continue to claim they are believers (I am saved no matter what I do, no matter what anyone says). Apostasy is to fall away from what you profess; it is to fall away from the hope that is in Christ. This is distinct from "falling away from your professing" by now not professing. It means to fall away from the living God you profess to trust, while you profess

to trust in Him. People who fall away are near to God by their baptismal entry into His family. They are part of His family as visible church members. They stay in the family, but they travel the path of hardheartedness.

For any of us who claim the name of the living God, whenever we grumble, complain, quarrel, and oppose authority (as did the church in the wilderness), we step on the path that leads away from God. There, we walk with our backs to God, and the end of this path, if we stay on it, is death in a wasteland outside of Eden, outside of paradise, outside of the Promised Land, and outside of rest with God. There we walk in the dark on a road that leads to destruction. There are many serious dangers associated with hardheartedness. So, what are you to do about it?

2A. What to do about it

What are you to do about the dangers of heart hardening? You have the answer in 12 and 13-14: **¹²Take care, brothers...exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.**

1) First, you must remain on alert

“Take care” (be careful; pay attention closely; look, see), open your eyes and watch for the dangers of hardness of heart that may surface. What then are you to focus on in this watchful style of life? You must be alert to the danger of revolting against the living God, which implies that when you turn your back on Him we do so to worship and serve the creature in some way rather than the Creator. You must guard against this remnant sin of rebellion and autonomy. If you have a heart of belief, a good heart that is called good because it is a believing heart, then you will be very careful about heart hardening sins that are back turning sins. If you are the Lord’s in truth, you will fear this kind of back turning. Based on the historical event that the writer applies here, you will see how evil it is to complain, grumble, quarrel, and oppose authority as a member of God’s church. This brings us to the second thing to do.

2) Second, you must exhort one another

A powerful subtly lurks in the shadows of heart hardening: it is the deceitfulness of sin. This raises the question: “What is the solution that helps you deal with sin and its deceitfulness that may be present deep in your hearts and cloud your vision?” The solution may surprise you as to its simplicity. You would probably not even get close to the solution if it were up to you to figure it out. The solution is that you need the perspective of other believers on your thoughts, attitudes, and actions. In astoundingly simple terms, the solution to a profound problem is mutual exhortation (**exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today”, v. 13**).

A present opportunity presents itself; namely, we live in the “today” of God’s warning and His provision of the way forward. The solution involves a daily taking up of the present opportunity (while it is called “today”). “Daily” refers to a regular, continual, ongoing practice of one anothering exhortation. At times, this may be literally every single day. This is the time of decision and action before it is too late and judgment falls.

To exhort is to call out to, to call to one’s side, to call out for help, to invite, to appeal to, to comfort, encourage, to urge, console, cheer up, to implore, request, and conciliate. It has a range of usages that reflect a wide variety of interactions between people. This may include critique and correction, but that is only implicit in the language. Exhortation presupposes circumstances such as trials and difficulties that may discourage and dishearten. Thus, it presupposes various things that we all need to deal with in trying and challenging circumstances.

This is reciprocal. That is, you *all* face things in which you need the counsel, help, encouragement, guidance, comfort, and companionship of others in a common cause before God. Sometimes you may call out for help by calling someone to your side. Sometimes you may ask for help; other times you may be asked to give help. Moreover, sometimes you may not want to receive help and other times you may not want to try to be helpful; you may lack courage.

For example, I may hesitate to go to Chicago to encourage my Baptist friends to try to find ways to show Christian love regarding baptisms different from their own. I want to go sensing the need to entreat them in this way, but I hesitate, I lack courage, I feel weak. Then, in regular interaction with the church family, many of you give me a word of encouragement about this and I feel stronger in my resolve to go and do this work.

In this context in Hebrews, the concern is with the deceitfulness of sin. The deceit has to apply to how we harden our hearts when we grumble, complain, quarrel and oppose authority because this conduct matches the rebellion in the wilderness (3.15). The tendency when deceived is to minimize how grossly wrong it is to quarrel, yell in anger (the shouting of clamor). We blame others as Israel blamed Moses; instead of submitting to the God-given authority of Moses, they blamed him, opposed him, and sought to stone him. We are deceived and cannot see our own faults because we are consumed with complaining and grumbling about the faults of others.

Sin is difficult to face and hard to see; we hide ourselves behind our backs (Augustine). The solution is imperative: we must face the battle with sin in a joint way helping one another. Sin is tricky, so, we need honesty in facing it. For that we need an objective outsider to help us see more clearly. We need the help of others for this.

How does verse 14 move this exhortation along?

At first, it seems like a problem text, but on closer inspection, verse 14 is an encouragement to duty (to the duty on the table) by emphasizing the hallmark of a believer: **14 For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.** The problem here is that it sounds like we have something (participate in it and partake of it; we are partakers of it) if we keep it. If we keep it or hold fast to it to the end (of our journey), then we are partakers. This cannot mean that we become partakers of Christ in the future. There is something *wrong* with thinking that one becomes a Christian (in union with Christ) *at the end of the journey* upon entry into glory.

So, what kind of conditional is this? It is a necessary conditional. In other words, you must hold on to the end if you are a partaker of Christ. It is not causal: holding on does not cause us to be Christians. Holding on implies that you are a partaker with Christ and not holding on shows you are not a partaker.

The implication is that *those who are sharers are people who hold on to the end*. Being sharer is sufficient for holding on to the end because holding on is necessary for being a sharer.

What the writer accents is the requirement or duty of holding on constantly to the end. It is necessary, and he puts this necessity in the light of the fact *that this is what partakers in Christ do*. Thus, if I claim to be a sharer then I must be about this business of holding on day by day all the way to the end. *In particular application, I must be about the business day by day of giving and receiving encouragement, entreaty, counsel, help, guidance from the brothers and sisters of the church family.*

Another way to get the point of 3.14 is to emphasize the matter of evidence. Holding on is the evidence that one is a partaker because that is what partakers do. In other words, listening to this warning from the Holy Spirit (3.11), paying much closer attention to what we have heard (2.1) is where the truth lies; it is where the reality is, where the rubber meets the road of the Christian walk. As you know, the proof is in the pudding; it is in the active eating of the pudding.

Conclusion

There is a call to perseverance in this text. You must persevere to the end if you are going to enter into eternal Sabbath rest. At the same time, the text indicates that since persevering (holding fast to the end) is necessary to being a partaker of Christ, *then being a partaker guarantees that you will hold fast firm until the end*. These truths (you must persevere and you will persevere) are not contrary to one another; they, however, they do have a paradoxical relationship. Thus, we may have difficulty trying to logically inter-relate them. How they

dovetail may be difficult to discern, but God knows their interconnectedness fully. These truths come to us from Him, so we must accept them both. What we have is both duty and promise; we must take up the duty squarely and industriously, and as we face great difficulties, we must rest in the foundation of our hope and of our confidence: the gospel promises of God's effectual saving love. Importantly, this is objective: look to the foundation of your faith, not to your faith.

On the extremely practical side of things, the solution to heart hardening that Hebrews presents is a case in point of one anothering love. Again, the solution pure and simple is to exhort one another regularly, even daily. The daily aspect is extremely important for husband and wife in building a godly marriage.

One anothering exhortation is vital (for both church and home), but like anything, we can over do it. Some people take this as a license to kill; that is, to kill the inner spirit of others by shooting them with bullets of negative criticism. These bullets often arise from censoriousness, the opposite of love. We all need balance. The preacher's solution is not a call for a psychological circle for venting in the name of straight talk. In other words, the preacher is not calling us to be a firing squad *standing in a circle* with each one using live bullets!

The balancing point in general is to remember that this solution is a case in point of one anothering *love*! True discipleship learning is others oriented: we prove our discipleship by our demonstrations of love (Jn. 13.35). Balance is wise and loving; may the Lord grant it to us for our good and His glory.

May we fall down before the majesty of the living God in due recognition of our sinfulness and need; may the Holy Spirit impress on us the radical need that we have of one another and of one anothering exhortation; may He teach us how to receive admonition as well as give it; and may He teach us how to do these things with great wisdom for the glory of our great high priest, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, amen.