

The Danger of Heart Hardening (Heb. 3.7-11)

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⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, ⁹ where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works ¹⁰ for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' ¹¹ As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

Introduction

Our new section in Hebrews (3.7-11), opens with the word "therefore." What does "therefore" do here? It picks up on the warning and call to faith in 3.6b. It is to this effect: because of the warning and call to faith, *therefore*, listen to what I am now about to say. Because there is a difference between profession and possession of faith, *therefore*, listen to this next exhortation. Because, if you hold tightly to Him then you are God's building, and if you do not hold tightly to Him then you are not God's building, *therefore*, listen carefully to what the Holy Spirit says (3.7).

Interestingly, the new (expanded) exhortation that follows the "therefore" comes from the OT. The Scripture in view is Psalm 95.7-11. What the Holy Spirit says is a warning about the danger of heart hardening: **do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness** (Heb. 3.8 quoting Ps. 95.8). It is also of interest to note that this warning comes from the Holy Spirit through an OT Scripture *regarding an ancient historical event*. Our writer reaches back to the Psalm, which in turn points back to something earlier. Especially unique is the time transcending relevance of the event and the Psalm. Thus, a focal point is a classic negative example, an example we are not to follow.

If we want to identify this classic example of people hardening their hearts, we may first think of Pharaoh. However, the context here deals with the hardening of hearts of people who are *within* the church. That was not the case for Pharaoh who was the enemy of the OT church from whom Israel escaped at the time of the Exodus. The classic example in view in Hebrews 3 is the rebellious conduct of God's people in the wilderness after they left Egyptian bondage. 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 may best work forward from the history to the Psalm and then to the book of Hebrews. That leads to this fourfold outline built around the negative example: 1) the negative example in the wilderness, 2) the negative example at Massah and Meribah, 3) the negative example in Psalm 95, and 4) the negative example in the book of Hebrews.

1A. The negative example in the wilderness

You might recall from our OT study that the phrase "in the wilderness" is the Hebrew name for what we usually call the book of Numbers. If you want to find the account of the wilderness wanderings of Israel, the *fullest* account is in the book of Numbers, which begins with these words: **The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai** (Num. 1.1). Sinai is where the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (renamed Israel) received the law. Redeemed from slavery in Egypt they were now bound for the Promised Land. After spending a year at Sinai, they began their journey to Canaan at the command of the Lord and by His special direction: ¹¹**In the second year [after leaving Egypt], in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, ¹² and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai. And the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. ¹³ They set out for the first time at the command of the LORD by Moses.** (Num.10.11-13). God directed the steps of their journey by appearing before them in the form of a cloud: when the cloud lifted, they traveled and when it settled down, they camped. And the people had a goal in their journeying, they sought a place of rest (10.33): **So they set out from the**

mount of the LORD three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them.

There is something very important for us to observe about the travels of the church in the wilderness (In Acts. 7.38, Stephen refers to Israel by this phrase: the church in the wilderness). Every step of their journey was ordained by the Lord *with the purpose of testing them in order to teach them how to live on earth before the God of heaven*. Accordingly, the lack of food and drink, and the gift of the manna from heaven and the water from the rock were for their good, as we read in Deuteronomy: do not forget the Lord who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, ¹⁶ who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end (Deut. 8.15-16). The church has a divine teacher; His goal in teaching is to teach humility and to advance the church's good. Included in this "discipleship" of the church are the teaching goals of learning fear and overcoming sin: **Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin"** (Ex. 20.20).

Therefore, everything should be "hunky dory"; of any campers in the wild, the Israelites should be happy campers, but things go awry quickly. Under the guiding and caring hand of God, they face God-ordained hardships and respond with complaints: **And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes... And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at"** (Num. 11.1, 4-6). They showed nothing but contempt for God's miraculous provision of the bread of heaven.

Thus, longing to go back to Egypt, they balked at going forward into the land of Canaan. The thought of going into the Promised Land brought the church in the wilderness to tears: **Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt"** (Num. 14.1-4).

When Joshua and Caleb tried to encourage the people to go forward rather than backward (14.6-9), the people sought to stone them and they would have, but the Lord intervened with a display of His glory (14.10). At this point, the Lord says that He will strike them down and form a new nation from Moses and his descendents (14.11-12). However, Moses mediated in prayer on behalf of the people by appealing to God's promise and His love (14.17-19). Graciously, the Lord pardoned Israel while making it unmistakably clear that "all the men from twenty years old and upward" will die in wilderness while wandering for forty years; that is, all except Caleb and Joshua: **I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me. ²⁸ Say to them, 'As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: ²⁹ your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, ³⁰ not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun** (14.27b-30).

Thus, we have a picture of Israel in the wilderness. Not surprisingly, these same attitudes were present in the particular event that the Psalmist cites, an event which took place at Massah and Meribah *before* the people arrived at Sinai. So, let us not consider that event.

2A. The negative example at Massah and Meribah

You know that there were two significant issues for Israel: food and drink (the basics that we all worry about at one time or another). Although God showed them His power in the defeat of the Egyptian army and in the awesome crossing of the Red Sea, they were unwilling to receive His testing and to submit to His loving care. Thus, we have the narrative in Exodus 17 that reveals what happened at a location with two names: Massah and Meribah.

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why

do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" (Ex. 17.1-7).

Naming the place where an event occurred is purposeful; it stands as a fixed point of reference for instruction. Meribah means contention and it refers to the quarreling and grumbling of Israel. Massah means testing and it indicates that in the church's disobedience to God's testing, the people tested God. To test God is to prove Him, to prove what will happen if we rebel against Him. As when we say, "You are testing my patience and it is running out." They tested God's authority, justice, and patience; they stirred up God's just anger and judgment for their sins, for their contention.

This summary of the key historical event (in the context of the forty years of wandering) allows us to turn now to the Psalmist's perspective.

3A. The negative example in Psalm 95

It turns out that the conduct of Israel throughout the forty years of wandering is epitomized in their conduct at the beginning. Consequently, Psalm 95 refers to this specific event (95.8) in relation to the entire time in the wilderness (95.10).

There are some distinctive things emphasized in the Psalmist's perspective.

1) He speaks to the people of God in his day

The Psalmist spoke to his generation hundreds of years after the Exodus and warned them not to follow in the footsteps of the unfaithful generation in the wilderness; do not follow the negative example (95.8). Here, the discipleship and nurturing model reoccurs in the shepherd and sheep model: **For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand** (95.7a). This is a warning to the church based on the conduct of the church many years earlier.

2) He warns about heart hardening

Clearly, the Psalmist summarizes the contention, the rebellion, the grumbling against the authority of Moses, and the complaining against God *as heart hardening* that leaves the people in ignorance: **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"** (95.7b-10).

What causes God to loathe our conduct? Loathing is a mixture of anger and grief. The KJV has "I was grieved" and the NIV has "I was angry." The ESV captures both of these ideas by using the word "loathed" for angry and disgusted grief. In a word, hardening your heart to the voice of God, to the voice of loving care, direction, and testing is what causes God to loathe your conduct. It is a matter of the heart and at its core heart hardening means to oppose God's authority by opposing the instruments of His authority. We will say more about that when we get to the application in the book of Hebrews.

3) The Psalmist explains the goal of rest

As we noted earlier, Israel journeyed from Egypt toward the goal of rest (Num. 10.33). The Promised Land was the place where they would find rest. However, it was not simply a physical place in which they would have literal rest from weary traveling through the desert. Granted, they journeyed to the literal land of Canaan, but the land was a theological symbol that represented entrance into rest with God in His rest. The Lord therefore says about the hard hearted Israelites that they will not enter into "my" rest: **Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest"** (95.11). Entering into the land involved entering into God's rest in symbol of the rest

that He promised for the end of history and that God's people experience every day by faith and every week on the Sabbath by faith. The fact that rest in the land involved fellowship with God in anticipation of the eternal Sabbath rest is something that the writer of Hebrews will tell us about in chapter 4. Before he explains the connection to the eternal Sabbath, he applies the Psalm to the church. To that we now turn.

4A. The negative example in the book of Hebrews

We have already been reading and working with this Psalm, but now we should consider what the writer to the Hebrews does with it.

⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works ¹⁰for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' ¹¹As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

If you put this quotation back to back with the Psalm, it is practically verbatim. Nonetheless, there is something additional here in Hebrews 3. The writer tells us that the Psalm is an exhortation by which the Holy Spirit warns us about the danger of heart hardening. It is the Holy Spirit who is admonishing us in the words of Psalm 95

The exhortation first comes in the quotation of the Psalm to the readers of the book of Hebrews (then and now, them and us); that is 3.7-11. Then it comes in the direct address of the readers in 3.12-14. In this message, we are concentrating on the exhortation in the words of Psalm 95. We might call this part one in the application of Psalm 95 (part two is in 3.12-14).

Bottom line: because it is the Holy Spirit who is exhorting us and warning us about heart hardening, then we need to perk up our ears and listen very carefully to this serious warning: **the Holy Spirit says, "Today...⁸do not harden your hearts"** (Heb. 3.7-8). This is another way of stating the warning in Hebrews 2.1; **therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.** It is another and more forceful way of reiterating the warning clearly implied in Hebrews 3.6b: **And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.**

Concluding Applications

At this point (before we consider 3.12-14 next time), we can apply this text in a very personal way. The Holy Spirit has some things for you to hear and absorb into your life for He speaks to you **"Today"** and says, **"Do not harden your hearts."** From the words of Psalm 95 based on the conduct of the OT church in the wilderness, He has some specific things to say to you about how heart hardening occurs and how to avoid it. It seems straightforward to conclude that you harden your heart by complaining before God, quarrelling with others, and opposing authority.

1) Heart hardening occurs by complaining before God

Repeatedly, we hear people of the OT church grumble and complain as they face the trials that God brought their way for their good. If they lack water, they complain. If they lack food, they grumble. When God gives them manna from heaven, they complain and grumble with disdain and disgust. On and on it goes in the history of Israel in the wilderness.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit tells us in the words of Psalm 95 that grumbling and complaining is how the people of the OT church hardened their hearts in rebellion against the Lord as they went astray in ignorance of the ways of God despite what went on before their very eyes in the display of God's love, power, and glory.

The Holy Spirit is telling you that if you grumble and complain about the circumstances in life that surround you by God's plan and providence, then you step onto the dangerous path of heart hardening. You are drifting away from the things you have heard and you run the risk, on one hand, of becoming very seasick out there in the open sea or, on the other hand, you run the risk of perishing in the wilderness of your sins like the Israelites who died in the desert and did not enter into God's rest.

2) Heart hardening occurs by quarreling with others

The quarreling spirit marked the rebellious OT church. They quarreled with each other, with Moses, and ultimately with God. Quarreling is a great sin and a hallmark of unbelief because it is the conduct of the fool: **It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling** (Prov. 20.3). Therefore, observe carefully the kind of sins that quarreling is associated with: **Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy** (Rom. 13.13). When you engage in quarreling, you harden your heart. When you get into shouting matches, what the Bible calls clamor (Eph. 4.31, **Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice**), you harden your heart.

The Holy Spirit is telling you that if you quarrel about the circumstances in life that surround you by God's plan and providence, then you step onto the dangerous path of heart hardening. You are drifting away from the gospel you profess and you run the risk, on one hand, of facing painful consequences out there in the open sea. On the other hand, you run the risk of perishing in the wilderness for your sins like the Israelites who died without entering into rest with God. Mere profession of clinging to Christ is not enough: where is your heart?

3) Heart hardening occurs by opposing authority

Perhaps, the most important lesson that you should take home from the events in the wilderness is the lesson of submission to authority. Repeatedly, the people of the OT church opposed the authority of Moses. And God viewed that opposition as rebellion against Him and against His authority. The people sought to stone Moses and he replied with meekness, but the opposition to Moses provoked the anger, disdain, disgust, displeasure, and judgment of God. Therefore, He swore in His wrath that these people who were members of His church would not enter into rest with Him in His rest.

The Holy Spirit is telling you that you harden your heart when you oppose the authority of pastoral leadership. The Holy Spirit is telling you that it is a serious matter how you respond to God appointed authority over you (as Heb. 13. 7, 17 indicates). This helps us understand how opposing pastoral care quenches and grieves the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 5.12-22; Eph. 4.29-32).

Therefore, we have a principle here that relates to all authority figures that God has appointed such as pastors, employers, governors, husbands, parents, and so forth. If a husband (who has authority in the home over his wife by God's appointment) refuses to submit to his pastor, then he hardens his heart against the Lord when and where that comes to expression. If a wife (who has authority in the home over her children by God's appointment) refuses to submit to her husband, then she hardens her heart against the Lord whenever wherever this lack of submission comes to expression. If a child refuses to submit to his mother or father, then he hardens his heart against the Lord whenever and wherever this lack of submission comes to expression.

The people of the OT church had the knowledge of God at their fingertips, but they died in ignorance and unbelief. They had the blessings of the people of God; they went along for the ride and they received many blessings from the Lord because of their attachment to the people of God, but they did not learn the lessons He taught them. The teaching was there, but their hearts were not in it, so they missed all the lessons. This hardening of heart stirs up the anger of God, and though He exercises much patience, eventually, He will say, "enough is enough; it is time for you to give an accounting and to face the consequences of your sins."

Without question, refusing the authority of God is actually the big sin in the experience of the OT church. The people of God who were baptized into Moses (1 Cor. 10), and thus, who came under his authority, opposed God by opposing His representatives. Hardening is the effect of this kind of conduct. This is dangerous ground and the end of this path is death. Therefore, we have the serious warning from the Holy Spirit: **Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness.** Instead, of hardening your heart, turn away from complaining and quarreling with those in authority over you; submit, humbly submit to the Lord Jesus and cling to Him for dear life by submitting to your husband, your pastor, your parents, and so forth, for your good and the glory God.