

## Bible Study – Hebrews chapter 3:7-19 The Danger of Disbelief

In our last study, we see how Jesus is superior to Moses, one of the greatest men in Israel's history. Moses accomplished a lot in his lifetime for Israel: leading them out of Egypt to the Promised Land, giving God's Law for their righteous living, and caring for them during their entire journey, to name a few. As great as he was, we see how much greater Jesus is, being creator and king and ruling over all things.

In today's study, we will look at the warnings of disbelief and the continued encouragement to persevere in the faith.

### Read Hebrews 3:7-19

The writer is warning its readers not to turn away from God and displaying unbelief in his Word and promises. He uses the example of the Israelites and their disbelief at the first entrance into the Promised Land at Kadesh Barnea and their resulting punishment as a warning.

**Q.** Read Psalm 95. Verses 8-11 are a subset of Psalm 95 (v. 7b-11). What was Israel's act of rebellion at Meribah and Massah (cf. Exodus 17:1-7)? What was their act of rebellion at Kadesh Barnea (cf. Numbers 13-14)? The author talks about 'rest'. What does this look like (cf. Genesis 2:2; Revelation 14:13)? What was the intended rest for the nation of Israel at that time (cf. Joshua 1:13-15, 21:43-45)?

- Psalm 95 talks about Meribah and Massah.
  - Cf. – Exodus 17:7 – Meribah (meaning quarreling) and Massah (meaning testing) are where the Israelites thirsted for water
  - The act of rebellion is testing the Lord, saying “Is the LORD among us or not”, calling into question of God's existence and leading of His people
  - Though it seems like the issue was water, the real issue is that there was doubt and disbelief that God would provide for them and that they would die in the wilderness
  - It is also the attitude of the Israelites: grumbling and quarreling with Moses, to the point they wanted to stone him. After having witnessed the power of God at their Exodus and defeating the armies of Egypt and crossing the Red Sea, there is still doubt and unbelief in the minds of the Israelites that the LORD God would care for them.
- Another reference to Meribah, in the context of the passage in Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3:7-11, is in Numbers 13-14, where it is also known as Kadesh Barnea, which can also be referred to as Meribah Kadesh (cf. Numbers 27:14; Deuteronomy 32:51; Ezekiel 47:19; 48:28)
- At Kadesh Barnea, two events can be in focus here, but the context of the passage shows the second example is to be studied
  - **Numbers 20** – When Moses and Aaron strike the rock for water instead of talking to the rock. Also, Moses states that he is the one to provide the water (cf. Numbers 20:10) rather than the LORD God himself
  - Their act of unbelief and lack of reverence before the people is what kept them out of the Promised Land
  - **Numbers 13-14** – 10 of the 12 spies give a bad report regarding their chances of defeating the inhabitants of the Promised Land, and thereby convince the Israelites to not enter the Promised Land, though God was on their side and to defeat their enemies so they could possess the land that was promised to their forefathers. Their failure to believe that God would deliver them resulted in their desert wanderings for the next 38 years.
  - Further, the people lost heart and rebelled
  - They “raised their voices and wept aloud”, grumbling against Moses and Aaron, saying “if only we died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to fall by the sword?” (cf. Numbers 14:1-2)

- The latter one is in focus because of their refusal to believe in God's deliverance for his people.
- **"Rest"** means to cease from labour or to stop working (cf. Genesis 2:2; Revelation 14:13)
  - **Genesis 2:2** – God resting from his work of creation on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, enjoying everything that he had made with his hands
  - **Revelation 14:13** – The saints who have perished during the last days, that they may have rest from their labors.
- For Israel, rest meant the enjoyment of all that God had promised the Israelites when they had successfully completed their task of taking possession of the Promised Land, not just entering the Promised Land.
- The nation of Israel were sojourners during the exodus from Egypt. Now that they have come to the Promised Land, a land they could call their own and no longer being nomads.
- The next generation of Israelites did enter the Promised Land and experienced rest there because they chose to obey and trust God and therefore subdued the Canaanites.
  - **Joshua 1:13-15** – The charge given to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half tribe of Manasseh, to help their brothers achieve their rest in the Promised Land before they can go back to their land, just east of the Jordan where they can enjoy their rest.
  - **Joshua 21:43-45** – Once Israel drove out all the inhabitants of Canaan, they were given rest and protection from every side, as none of their enemies could withstand them.

**Q.** The act of disobedience by the Israelites serves as a warning to the readers of the book of Hebrews (see also 1 Corinthians 10:6-11). Can a Christian harden their heart? If so, what can cause their heart to be hardened and what does it look like? What is the effect of a hardened heart? What are some practical ways for Christians to prevent their hearts from being hardened?

- **Leader's Notes** – Perhaps define the term "hardening of the heart" which is as follows:
  - *The inability to perceive and understand the Word of God or what is right and wrong*
- **1 Corinthians 10:6-11** – A warning by Paul to those in Corinth (and to us as well) to learn from the example of the Israelites in the Old Testament. Specifically, we are to avoid the following:
  - Do not be idolators (v.7)
  - Not indulge in sexual immorality (v.8)
  - Not to put Christ to the test (v.9)
  - Not to grumble (or to complain about something in a bad-tempered way) (v.10)
- The simple answer is yes, a Christian can harden their heart
- This is the reason for so many warnings in the New Testament (and in the Old Testament to the Israelites) because if it was not possible, then there wouldn't be a need to issue a warning about this act
- The following ways can cause our hearts to be harden
  - Sin, especially continual and unrepentant sin
  - If we don't confess our sins, it has a cumulative and desensitizing effect on the conscience, making it difficult to even distinguish right from wrong.
    - The sins don't even need to be 'major' ones (e.g. murder, adultery, theft), but can be white lies or small things that may not garner attention.
  - Paul talks of a 'seared conscience' (1 Timothy 4:1-2), especially in false teachers who draw away those who are in the faith.
    - **1 Timothy 4:1-2** – Some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, by liars (false teachers) whose consciences are seared
  - Pride can also harden our hearts (cf. Obadiah 3-4)
    - We see examples of foreign rulers (e.g. Pharaoh of Egypt, King Nebuchadnezzar)
  - Setbacks and disappointments can cause our hearts to be hardened. When trials come, we may crumble as we do not look to God for our strength and guidance.

- Hardness of heart can also be manifest itself as a disinterest in Christ and his word and prayer and worship and missions and living for the glory of God. The fleeting pleasures of this world are more attractive than the things of the Spirit.
- The hardness of heart will no longer focus on what God wants for our lives. The focus is now on self and what the world offers for our happiness and pleasure. This where the deceit of sin can trap us and bring us to a terrible end (to be explored more in the next question).
- Hardness of heart does not happen immediately, but rather small steps that culminate into something larger, which may not be recognized unless you are looking for it.
- How can we practically prevent our hearts from being hardened?
  - Recognize the effect that this spiritual disease has on us
  - God will help us to see our heart's condition when we ask him (cf. Psalm 139:23-24)
  - Asking for forgiveness when we do sin (1 John 1:9)
  - The studying of God's word (cf. Psalm 119:9-11)
    - Not just hearing it, but doing it as well (cf. James 1:25)
  - Romans 5:3-5 – rejoice in our sufferings as it leads to perseverance, then to character, then to hope. Knowing that God is in control and for us to depend on him, especially in times of difficulty

**Q.** What are the “deceitfulness of sin”? Give examples of what it may look like. The writer instructs believers to exhort each other every day. What do you think the term ‘today’ is meant to imply? What are some practical ways we can exhort each other? What do you think it is meant “we have come to share in Christ”? How is this an encouragement to hold fast to our confidence in Jesus Christ?

- From William R. Newell, he describes how sin deceives us
  - Delayed judgement
  - By appearing harmless
  - By hardening our consciences
- The following can also be sin's “deceitfulness” or deception:
  - The false promise of fulfillment when committing the act, which may temporarily satisfy our desire at the moment, but would be found wanting and empty
  - Relying on one's own righteousness and wisdom – when we feel we know what is right and act upon it, not drawing back to what God has commanded
  - That we cannot be enslaved by our ‘small’ or ‘insignificant’ sins
- The term ‘today’ implies immediacy, that the matter needs to be taken up with great urgency and not to be delayed. Essentially, it needs to be dealt with right away and not to be ignored.
- Some are the following ways we can exhort each other
  - Meeting regularly for mutual encouragement
  - Encourage walking with God daily, through the reading of his Word and prayer
  - Two people who may be struggling in their walk or with life, to see that example in each other as evidence of authenticity and encouragement that you are not the only one going through this struggle
  - Open our lives to one another in an authentic way, as a way to build trust with others, so you can earn the privilege of speaking to each other in an honest way
  - Have 2-3 trusted brothers or sisters whom you can confide in, similar to how Jesus had his inner circle (e.g. Peter, John, and Andrew)
- “We have come to share in Christ” may mean the blessings and treasures that we have as part of our inheritance as believers.
  - The blessings could be earthly or heavenly
- This can be an encouragement to Christians to show that their striving and faithfulness will be rewarded in the end and that it is not a fruitless endeavour.

**Q.** In verses 16-19, what is the writer trying to emphasize to his readers? Why is it important not to lament or wish for things from this world? How can this warning be an encouragement for us?

- What the writer is trying to show here is that the Israelites got what they wished for, when they lamented that it would be better to die in Egypt or the wilderness than at the hands of the giants in the Promised Land (cf. Numbers 14:1-3).
- We also the people who were delivered from oppression, were also denied from entering what was promised to them through their forefathers.
- Also, because of unbelief, they were not able to enter the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey and being able to enjoy its bounty.
- If Christians fail to believe that Jesus has defeated and will continue to defeat our enemies (1:13-14), we too will fail “to enter” into all the blessings that can be ours in heaven.
- We need to continue to trust and obey (cf. Proverbs 3:4-5), just as the Israelites should have done.
- *“A heart of unbelief is an evil heart. An evil heart of unbelief is at the bottom of all our sinful departures from God; if once we allow ourselves to distrust God, we may soon desert him.” – Matthew Henry*
- This warning can be an encouragement to us, in that God wants us to live our best lives now so that we can enjoy him fully when we meet him in heaven. This example shows what happens when we don’t obey, thereby showing that faithfulness and perseverance will not go unrewarded.

“Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it” – Sir Winston Churchill

The writer is exhorting the readers of Hebrews to learn from the example of the Israelites from history, specifically the generation that was called out of Egypt and to inherit the Promised Land. It was their unbelief in God’s ability to care for them that caused them to suffer and not find the ‘rest’ that was promised to them.

The writer gives this example as a warning to the Jewish and Gentile believers at the time, but it is also applicable to Christians today. This is so they can learn from the past and not repeat the same mistakes as the Israelites of the Old Testament. We are to be vigilant, every day, to guard our hearts that it not become hardened, which would draw us away from living a godly and sanctified life. At the same time, we are not alone, and this shows the importance of belonging to a local church so we can draw encouragement and support from the body of Christ. As the writer encourages us to exhort one another every day, let’s make this a daily habit to lift up our brothers and sisters.