

A WARNING AGAINST UNBELIEF

Hebrews 3:7-12

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, October 21, 2012

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (Heb. 3:12).

One of the hallmarks of Hebrews is its very high view of Scripture. As the writer exhorts his Jewish Christian audience to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of suffering, this high view of Scripture plays an important role. Over and over, he appeals to Old Testament citations, expecting his readers to take the Bible as authoritative and binding. So sure is he of his readers' estimate of Scripture, that expects them to endure persecution because of its teaching.

The writer grounds his view of Scripture on direct claims to the divine authorship of the Bible. In the opening verse of the book, he tells us that "God spoke by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1). He acknowledges human instrumentation, but emphasizes divine authorship. Now, in Hebrews 3:7, he writes, "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says." This is consistent with the broader biblical testimony, that the Bible is the product of the Holy Spirit who has taken the things of God and given them to us through human writers. The classic statement to this effect occurs in 2 Peter 1:20-21: "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit

has given God’s Word through the Scriptures and now speaks to us by applying that Word to our hearts.

Furthermore, Hebrews 3:7-8 illustrates the abiding relevance and authority of the Scriptures: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’” To show that God’s Word is “living and active,” as he will say in Hebrews 4:12, the writer emphasizes its relevance “today”. In the Scripture, he says, the Holy Spirit of God “speaks” – and we should note the present tense of this verb. The events described in this passage took place during the Exodus. Many years later the psalmist showed their applicability to his own time, probably during the reign of David. “Today if you hear God’s voice,” he says in Psalm 95. The writer of Hebrews picks up the same message, showing that God still speaks “today” in his own time a thousand years later. It was equally valid in his own era, equally authoritative and equally relevant, because it was from God, who never changes. So, too, do these same words apply to us, two thousand years after the Book of Hebrews was written: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Such is the timelessness and authority of this book, which bears to us the very voice of God.

ISRAEL’S TESTING IN THE WILDERNESS

Although this passage is timeless in its relevance, it points us back to a specific series of events that happened in history, namely, the revolts against Moses during Israel’s sojourn in the desert. The writer of Hebrews directs his readers’ attention to this situation as a terrible example of what it means to turn away from faith in God.

The previous passage concluded with an exhortation: “We are [God’s] house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (v. 6). Picking that up in verse 7, he now confronts us with an example of what the opposite looks like, a warning from the time of the Exodus: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works” (Heb. 3:7-9).

The first scenario recalled here is described in the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel had been delivered from their bondage in Egypt with a great display of God's power. Pharaoh had pursued them, but the Lord made a passage for them through the Red Sea, which then swallowed up the Egyptian army. All this is related in Exodus 13 and 14. In chapter 16, the people arrived in the desert across from the sea and immediately began complaining:

The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." *Exodus 16:2-3*

This is an expression of ingratitude and unbelief that we may find hard to fathom, until we realize that we demonstrate a similar attitude on far less pretense than starvation and thirst in a desert wilderness. Instead of trusting the Lord to supply their needs, something he had shown himself both willing and able to do, they complained against him. Even when the Lord graciously sent manna from heaven, the miraculous bread that rained down to earth, the people continued to complain and engage in petty disobedience, until they again confronted Moses in the rebellion.

Exodus 17 begins, "All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD." The writer of Hebrews tells us in verse 8 that this was a time of testing. God had delivered his people and now was testing their allegiance to him with these difficult travels in the desert. We see how miserably the Israelites failed:

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?" 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?" So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." *Exodus 17:2-4*

Again, God was gracious and he sent Moses to strike the rock with his staff, and water came out from the rock to provide for the people.

Moses then named the place Massah and Meribah, which mean “testing” and “rebellion”, the two words we see used in verse 8 of Hebrews 3, to signify God’s displeasure at his unbelieving people.

The other Old Testament passage reflected here is from Numbers 14, which records Israel’s greatest revolt against the Lord. In chapter 13, God sent out one scout from each of the tribes, twelve in all, to spy out the Promised Land in preparation for the nation’s entry. The scouts came back and delivered a sobering report: “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey... However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large... We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are” (Num. 13:27-31). Only two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urged otherwise. Joshua pleaded with people, “Do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land... the LORD is with us; do not fear them” (Num. 14:8-9). Nonetheless, Numbers 14 records a general revolt against the Lord’s rule. The people cried out that the very God who had delivered them from Egypt now sought to kill them in Canaan. They refused to obey, refused to go forth into the Promised Land, and even set out to stone Joshua and Caleb, who had stood up against their unbelief.

It was at this moment that the glory cloud of the Lord appeared at the tabernacle, and thus ensued one of the most sobering moments in all of Scripture. “How long will this people despise me?” the Lord bellowed at Moses. “How long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” (Num. 14:11). Moses, pleaded with the Lord for the lives of his people, arguing that if God struck down the Israelites now his name would be scandalized among the nations. Moses begged God to glorify himself by forgiving the people. “Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now” (v. 19).

God did spare them, but he also punished them, as recorded in Hebrews 3:11. Quoting Psalm 95, the author recalls God’s terrible words, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” The nation of Israel would enter the Promised Land, but none of this generation would be left when that happened. Instead, they would wander forty years in the desert. When the last of the rebellious

adults had died, leaving only Joshua and Caleb, who trusted the Lord, were their children permitted to enter into the land.

OUR TESTING IN THE WILDERNESS

What is the relationship between those distant events and the trials being endured by those early Jewish Christians, or to us today? The writer of Hebrews demonstrates an understanding of the Christian life that is common to the New Testament, comparing the exodus to the present life of faith. Like the Israelites, every man or woman who has come to salvation in Christ has been delivered by God from the house of bondage – in our case, the slavery that was our bondage to sin. Also, like Israel of old, we are headed towards a land of promise. We journey to cross the Jordan River, which is rightly compared to our passage through death, after which we enter into our heavenly inheritance. Additionally – and here is the point that is so relevant to our passage – just as the Israelites endured a passage of testing in the desert, so too is this present life a time of testing.

This is the time in the wilderness, the time of difficulty and often of sorrow and pain. We are *not* now living in the Promised Land but in the wilderness, and the sooner we realize this the better. This helps answer questions you may have had, questions like, “Why does God allow things to go wrong in my life?” “Why are things so hard?” The answer is that today is the day of testing, and the day of our rest is yet to come.

Every Christian is sure to be tested in this life, trials will manifest the reality of our faith, or the lack thereof. A.W. Pink writes:

Testings reveal the state of our hearts -- a crisis neither makes nor mars a man, but it does *manifest* him. While all is smooth sailing we appear to be getting along nicely. But are we? Are our minds stayed upon the Lord, or are we, instead, complacently resting in His temporal mercies? When the storm breaks, it is not so much that we fail under it, as that our habitual lack of leaning upon God, of daily walking in dependency upon Him, is made evident.¹

KNOWING GOD’S WAYS

¹ A.W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1954), 169.

We saw the difference between Joshua and Caleb’s testimony and that of the ten unbelieving spies. Similarly, your profession of faith will be either proved or disproved by our response to trials. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “Trials... have a tendency to distinguish between true religion and false, and to cause the difference between them evidently to appear.”² Knowing this is crucial to the exhortation that makes up these verses: “Do not harden your hearts.” Isn’t that a temptation? Things go badly, you experience trouble, you become afraid, and how easy it is to blame God, to complain, to doubt his power and love and care. But do not follow the Israelites’ example: remember God’s saving works which demonstrate that he does care, that he will deliver you. Make it your goal to glorify God through faith before a watching world, even and especially in the context of difficulties and trials.

A complaining spirit is always an indicator of unbelief, as we plainly see from this Old Testament example. If we grumble about God’s handling of our affairs it must surely be because we doubt his wisdom or his goodness, or even his power to lead and protect us -- in short, his worthiness to be trusted as our God. Douglas Wilson explains, “Complaint is the flag of ingratitude, and it waves above the center of unbelieving hearts – ‘when they knew God, the glorified him not as God, neither were thankful’ (Rom. 1:21, KJV)”.³ The apostle Paul warned the Philippians about this attitude, writing, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning” (Phil. 2:14), and “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

Complaining is a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem. If we grumble and complain, if we rebel and revolt, it indicates a very poor knowledge of God. Indeed, this was exactly the Lord’s diagnosis of Israel, as we see in verse 10: “They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.” This was the same complaint God made through the prophet Isaiah: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isa. 1:3).

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 21.

³ Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson: *Angels in the Architecture* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 80.

How remarkable that these Israelites did not know God, after all they had seen and heard and received from his hand! How could they not have known his ways? The point is that while they had enjoyed God's *works*, they had not reflected on *him*. They were interested in what God did for them, but not in God himself. We are reminded of Jesus' great prayer to the Father in John 17, where our Lord said, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3). Salvation is not a matter of knowing God's blessings – after all, many people who do not know God know his blessings – but it is a matter of knowing him, understanding his character and his ways, and more and more trusting him in all things.

If you are not growing in your knowledge of God, your understanding and appreciation of his ways, let this be a warning to you. We are to be students of God's character, learning what God is like through the circumstances of our lives and especially through the Bible, and growing in our love for him. How is God manifesting his power and grace? Can we look back and discern his once-hidden wisdom, his goodness, his patience, his holiness and love? This is the way to worship him, and indeed, the way to keep our sinful hearts from hardening.

Let me put it another way. What should you be looking for when you read your Bible? There is nothing more important than for you to study God himself. "What does this Scripture tell me about God, about his character and about his ways?" "How can I know him better and trust him more?" The attributes of God is one of the most vital of all subjects, for to know God is to trust him and to worship him with both awe and gratitude. Charles Spurgeon was right when he said of the study of God:

It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity... But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continuing investigation of the great subject of the Deity."⁴

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon: *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 1, 1855 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), 1.

When God is filling our thoughts, we learn to rejoice even in our trials. Indeed, we discern that trials are given to draw us nearer to him. Donald Grey Barnhouse observed this saying: “How wonderful that when we are blinded by tears, we can nevertheless see our God. In fact, our tears become crystal lenses through which He is magnified; and in the midst of suffering we realize the greatness of His power and the tenderness of His love.”⁵

If you want the gifts while having no real interest in the Giver, then you will not persevere through the trials of this life, when circumstances turn against you and God’s blessings are seen only with eyes of faith. If you resent the challenges God sends, then when the hot sun beats upon your back, when your throat becomes dry and weary, what was said of those ancient Israelites will be said of you as well: “They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways... They shall not enter my rest” (Heb. 3:10-11).

Israel complained all through their forty years in the desert, never learning God’s ways despite mercy after mercy. Over and again they complained and rebelled about the same old things. All the while God’s pillar of fire guided them, the manna fell from heaven, water came forth from the rock, and even their clothes and shoes did not wear out as the Lord cared for them. Still, as the writer of Hebrews summarizes in verses 9-11: “Your fathers put me to the test and saw my works 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.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

We are well advised, therefore, to heed the exhortation with which our passage concludes: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (v. 12).

JESUS’ PATH THROUGH THE DESERT

Verse 1 of chapter 3 told us to fix our thoughts on Jesus, our Apostle and High Priest. The Israelites should have fixed their thoughts on Moses, who served as their mediator before God. They

⁵ Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1956), 4: 89.

should have focused on him in their trials, or rather God's saving work revealed through his ministry. After all the great and mighty works they had seen, Moses was worthy of their trust; he was a fitting object of contemplation in their trials.

But if the Israelites were condemned for forgetting Moses, how much greater will be the charge against those who forsake Jesus Christ, a far greater Mediator and God's own Son. As the writer of Hebrews put it [in chapter 2, verse 3]: "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation" as that revealed in Jesus Christ?

Isn't it interesting that when we read the account of Jesus' life we find him, too, sent into the wilderness for a period of trial. Matthew 4:1 tells us, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." How significant that he went there for forty days – the very length of time Israel was tested and yet failed. When we study the devil's temptations against Jesus, we find that they correspond to the failures of Israel. He did not complain about lack of food but satisfied himself with faith in God. Whereas Israel tried the Lord, Jesus Christ, the true Israel of faith, replied to Satan, "It is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Mt. 4:7). Whereas Israel rebelled, Christ refused to turn his heart away from God. He reproved the devil, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Mt. 4:10). In the wilderness of his temptation, Jesus walked in Israel's steps, succeeding where they had failed.

What this means is that Jesus has walked ahead of us to clear the way. He has blazed the trail of victory through perfect obedience for our salvation. Though we often fail, he did not. Through faith in Christ our failures are hidden in his victory; our faithlessness is garbed in his obedience. His righteousness is presented on our behalf, and now his power is made available to us in the Holy Spirit. This is why Paul insisted, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Will we make it through this desert life, safe across Jordan to the Promised Land ahead? We will if we trust ourselves to Jesus, relying on the strength he gives to all his pilgrim people. He is the shepherd of his flock, and if we follow him, looking to him in faith and relying

on his provision, we will find “goodness and mercy all the days of our lives,” and “will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6).