

Sin's Deceit
Hebrews 3:7-15
2/25/18
Randy Lovelace

I want to begin this morning as we turn again to the Book of Hebrews in chapter 3, verses 7 to 15. Last week, we were together in looking at this call to confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ, that the preacher of Hebrews was calling these house churches to a renewed confidence in the Lord in the face of persecution and an unknown future, in the face of difficulty and trial. His reason for calling them to confidence will form as the central theme, as we are just at the beginning of this great sermon recorded for us as the Book of Hebrews. But what will form the central theme of confidence, specifically in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done and what he continues to do as the one who is our mediator to the Father, the one who is our ever-present help by the work of his Holy Spirit. He's calling them to this because of his great fear—his fear as a pastor that these people have walked with renewed strength with the Lord before. But now, they are growing weary. In fact, they are beginning to turn their backs against the Lord and refuse to believe his promises, which is why he then turns in these verses to remind them of a psalm which would have been read regularly in the temple as not only a call to worship, which it was used for here this morning—but the second half of that psalm has a remembrance of the failure of Israel. And so he uses this as an opportunity to remind them of the deceitfulness of sin and warn them of the hardness of heart that sin will lead to. And so as we look together this morning, you will see in these verses the memory of Israel's failure, sin's deceit, and a sober warning. Memory of Israel's failure, sin's deceit, and a sober warning. So turn with me then in your Bibles. Or if you do not have one, it is provided for you as you look ahead. Hear now God's Word.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“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 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.’”

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 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. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Now we ask you, O Lord, that your Word would come to us by your power, that it would come to us in our hearts, our minds, and our very existence, our very bodies, to call us to renewed confidence in Christ. But may your Word also enable us to see clearly the deceitfulness of sin—the deceit that comes to us from without and the deceit that comes from within us that will lead to a hardness of heart. Lord, I ask that you would by your Spirit turn us away from the deceitfulness of sin, that you would renew our hearts, that they would be open and ready to be renewed. But that is the work of your Spirit. It is not my work. It is no one's work except by you. So may you by your Word do this renewal in us. Renew us. Redeem us. Encourage us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So beginning in verse 7 he says “Therefore, why are we to have confidence in the Lord?” It is because as we do so, we are reminded—and he says here that the Holy Spirit says. Now, that is a present tense of that verb. So what he's doing is he's going back and he's quoting from Psalm 95, which also said, “Today, if you hear my voice.” And so it's letting us in on how Scripture interprets itself. And that is, both the work of the Holy Spirit as the one who was speaking through David, who is the writer of Psalm 95. That is one thing, that it is the Holy Spirit who guides and guided the writers of Scripture.

But also, that the word “today” is to be understood both literally and metaphorically. And that is, as long as you hear the Lord's voice, as long as you hear his Word being preached, as long as he is warning you and calling you to himself, that is metaphorically today, whether it was a thousand years ago or a thousand years into the future. In other words, the invitation to believe and to trust in the Lord and to trust in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as it goes out today this day is a day of his grace. This day is a day to be reminded of how hardened our hearts can become. But because we are hearing that, that means it is a day that can experience renewal—a renewed work of his grace and his power. And so he's telling us, it is the Holy Spirit who has spoken through the writers of Scripture. And when we hear the word “today,” it does not just mean that day. It means every day in which the calling to renewal through Jesus Christ is given is today. So today is that day. And so he goes, and he quotes Psalm 95.

What was the reason for why David was recalling the events that happened both in Exodus and in Numbers? Exodus 17 and Numbers 14. Both of these are a part of the memory that David wants to recall and now the preacher of Hebrews to a New Testament people who have been converted to Christ and following him in discipleship. He's reminding them of this story as a memory of Israel's failure, which was how it was used in David's time, and it's now how it's being used in the New Testament time. The memory of Israel's failure is a cautionary tale to call us back to renewed confidence in who God is and his promises.

So what was it, this memory of Israel's failure? Well, first it was a refusal of Israel to believe both in God's promise and his provision. In verse 12 of this passage, you'll see the word “unbelief.” “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart.” This is a Greek word, which literally is the word *apostasia*, which we get the word apostasy. It is a turning from a confidence in God and declaring a refusal to believe him. This is what happened with Israel in Exodus and in Numbers. They had been witnesses—literally experienced God's redemptive power and salvation through being released from Egypt, leaving it far more powerful and far more enriched than they entered it. They had experienced walking through the Red Sea and watching that same sea drown their enemies. They had heard the promises of God as they had gone to the other side, that he was going to provide them with a land which was Canaan, which was referred to as his rest.

They had heard this promise. They had seen the destruction of their enemies. And yet in both Exodus 17 and in Number 14, they are grumbling against Moses. So much so that in Numbers, they said, “We are ready to stone Moses, Joshua, and Caleb.” Why? Because they were declaring that God was about to give Israel victory, but they refused to believe it. They were being given good news. Yes, God has promised us the land of Canaan. But it's full of really big people. But that ain't nothing to God. He's got this. He will get this. And of the twelve spies, only two believed in God's promise and provision. The other

ten did not believe it, and they spread the rumors in Israel. And they began to grumble. Even though they had actually witnessed God providing them water from a rock, they still refused to believe.

This is the memory of Israel's failure. Let me be clear. It is not a memory of the fact that Israel sinned. We all sin. This is not a reminder that we are sinners. It is a reminder that sin left unaddressed will cause a deceitfulness that will lead to a hardness of heart that isn't a doubting of faith or having trouble trusting God. No, it is a declaration. You are not going to do what you say you will do. You are not who you say you are. It is a refusal to believe God. This is Israel's failure—a refusal to believe in God's promise and his provision. Please, hear me say this to you. This is not a lack of faith problem. Because all of us have a lack of faith. Let's get in line. We never believe fully and one hundred percent confidently that God is going to do what he's going to do. This is not an issue of a lack of faith. It is not an issue that we are struggling with trust or that we wrestle with doubt. No, it is a refusal and declaration that God is not God. "We know better. How dare you do this to us, God? We've got it from here."

But here is the application for which the preacher of Hebrews is seeking to make. You see, Israel at the time of going through the Red Sea—now they are waiting on the outskirts of Canaan. That was called the wilderness. Now, this wilderness began as a place where God would form them spiritually, which is precisely what the preacher of Hebrews is seeking to promote: a growth and understanding and faith in and trust in who God is, a trusting in his grace and his mercy. So the wilderness first began as a place where the people of God were strengthened, encouraged, and tested in the best possible sense of that word. But when they began to not just doubt, but when it began to be an absolute refusal that God will do what he says he will do, the wilderness became a place of punishment. And the wilderness formed a space in between being released from slavery and just before they would enter the promised land that God had given.

And so the preacher of Hebrews is saying, while not perfectly parallel, there is a lot to be drawn from Israel's situation in the wilderness. A person who becomes a Christian believing in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ has, according to the Scriptures, been freed from the slavery to sin and the devil. It's not that it's not present. We've been freed from its slavery. And we've not yet fully seen the redemption that will come through the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ when the resurrection of the body will be experienced and sin will be completely undone.

So we are, in a sense, in our own wilderness. But that wilderness is not a place of punishment. It is a place of spiritual formation. And in this wilderness, much like Israel, we find ourselves following a greater Moses. Moses was to lead the people and be a mediator between God and his people. Jesus, who is the greater Moses as we've learned from last week, has led us out of the exodus, the exodus out of the slavery to sin by his body and his blood on the cross. And he promises us a rest—a rest which is not just a literal land. No, it means enjoying salvation with him eternally in a renewed heaven and a renewed earth. But that rest is meant to be in perfect relationship of a redeemed relationship between us and God.

So Jesus, who is the greater Moses, is leading all Christians, as it were, in this wilderness awaiting his return, awaiting our experience of being in the Promised Land of his presence. And in this wilderness, we face the very same trials and temptations. And so the preacher of Hebrews is saying to them, "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'" And it comes to us, because today is the today of God's redemption and grace. And he's reminding us in the wilderness, in this place of spiritual formation, in this place where we await the full recognition and realization of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord in a renewed heaven and a renewed earth—do not harden your hearts as Israel did in its rebellion.

But what led to their rebellion? What was it? It was sin's deceit. And this is why he quotes, "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.'" Well, that came because Moses appealed to God not to utterly destroy them, which is what he was about to do in the

wilderness. And Moses said, “Don’t, because our enemies will say, ‘See? God is not the God you said he was.’” So the Lord said, “No, I will have mercy on them. But this I know: they will not enter the land of my rest. They will die here in this wilderness.”

And though he says, “Therefore, brothers, lest there in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” Meaning, leading any of us to apostatize—refuse to believe that God is who he says he is. But please note, this ought not to bring out the fear that somehow, unbeknownst to us, we can somehow lose our salvation. That is not what is on offer here. What is being talked about is it is very possible to be in the presence of God’s people, to hear his promises, and even begin investigating and even begin believing on them. But if sin is allowed to come in, we can become hardened to its ways and refuse to walk in His ways, and we will turn, literally, in unbelief.

But the warning here is still the same for everyone: sin’s deceit. So what is it? It is, first, this is what it looks like. First, it looks like unique blindness. Sin’s deceit has a very unique blindness that it inflicts, and this is what it looks like. It offers the good, accentuates the good, but blinds us to the consequences that it will cause. Sin is so persuasive and always convincing of its promise of pleasure and satisfaction—or just one or the other, which I’ll get to in a moment. But it is so utterly good at being able to say, “This is so sweet,” but refuses to demonstrate the bitterness that will follow.

And in a film that’s been nominated for best film this year, the movie *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri*, feature Frances McDormand playing the character of Mildred Hayes. Mildred Hayes is a woman who is utterly broken because her daughter had been murdered. And what seemed to her to be absolute inaction on the part of the police, she decides to take it into her own hands. And what seems so tasty, so righteous, is she takes up the cause of revenge in her own way in drawing and trying to inflict pain to enact—to cause action, to cause something to happen to find the murderer of her daughter. And when you’re in this with her, you’re thinking—and I don’t want to give it all away, but you can see this through the trailer—it is so righteous. And you’re like, “Yes.” It seems so satisfying to stick it to the man. But the problem is, she fails to see, but becomes aware, that while revenge may seem sweet at the moment, its consequences will reap pain that we cannot fully describe—pain not only on herself but upon others.

Sin is absolutely the best lawyer you will ever face. And they will convince you that this is so good. Take and eat. Sin gives a unique blindness. Secondly, it thrives in isolation. You see, when sin becomes allowed to exist in our lives, it begins to deceive us in such a way that we begin to close ourselves off to others who might give us wisdom that leads us away from its deceit. You see, sin thrives in isolation from frameworks, from ideas, from the Word of God, from people who will counsel us to flee and to run. It creates its own little community with others who will agree, who will accept, who maybe even will encourage, who will help cover up. But it will lead us away from those who might lead us and encourage us to flee to life. Sin thrives in isolation. It thrives in private places. The most deadliest of sins is not always visible. It is creeping. It is quiet. And it seems to lead us to a place of wisdom. Think of pride. Pride is acceptable. Pride isn’t always obvious. It comes in many different kinds of clothing. But it can lead us away from leaning and looking towards others for wisdom and depending on ourselves. It thrives in isolation. So does all forms of temptation and sin.

But not only does sin’s deceit have a unique blindness that it gives, and not only does it thrive in isolation—hear me when I say this: it will always be reasonable. You deserve this. It’s been a long day. It’s not that bad. I mean, it’s not technically stealing. Everybody does it. Just this once. I’ll go for forgiveness, but just this once. It won’t happen again. It’s just me; it won’t hurt anybody else. God understands that. It’s being offered to me. Everybody else has it; why can’t I participate? Sin is always reasonable in convincing us that we can give into it, that it can somehow then—and here’s the crazy thing. We convince ourselves that if we just give ourselves to it a little bit, that somehow we have the upper hand, that we’re somehow appeasing that desire in that moment by giving into it, because by giving into it, then we won’t be as susceptible to it and we’ll defeat it next time. Because we know, really, what’s up.

And please understand this. I do not believe at all that this is merely talking about the reality of what I believe the Scriptures teach, and I believe that Satan is like a lion, as it says, prowling around, seeking who he may devour. Satan does tempt us, absolutely. We live in a world, as in *Pilgrim's Progress*, of Vanity Fair where everything is offered to us. Around every corner, around every website link, there is something there for us. In every conversation, in every conversation, there's something that we are being tempted to oftentimes in life. But I will tell you, that is not just what he is talking about. Satan, who is a fallen angel, is a created being. Therefore, he is not all-knowing. He is not all-powerful. And he is not all-present.

Because the real sin's deceit is convincing us that sin only comes and temptation only comes from the outside. But the reality is, it's not what goes into a person that makes us unclean; it's what comes from within. Sin's deceit and its reasonableness is often brought on by our own inner lawyer and defense attorney. My problem often is not what comes to me from the outside; it's the desires that war from within—Romans chapter 7. And let me say with the most profound words likely every spoken by Winston Churchill, depicted in the film *The Darkest Hour*: "How many dictators must be wooed, appeased—Good God, given immense privileges—before we learn you cannot reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth?" We cannot reason with sin. We must call it what it is, name it for what it is, and cry out to someone else, some people around us, and ask for help. Because sin in its reason will lead us to death and not life. It cannot be reasoned with. We must, by God's grace, run for our lives—which is why this text simply says, "As long as it is today, encourage one another. If you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

And indeed, because of sin's deceit, its unique blindness, its thriving in isolation, its reasonableness in trying to convince us that we can play with it for a while—the problem is that when it begins to take hold, it does ultimately lead to a hardened heart. And the hardened heart for which he is speaking is a heart that comes to the end of itself and says, "I do not need God, thank you very much. It was good while it lasted. I've got it from here. I've got what I need. You are not God, and you will not fulfill what you say you will fulfill." This is a hardened heart. This is the ultimate conclusion of the deceitfulness of sin, and it is what leads to apostasy, a turning away, a declaration. And as God's Word says to us here, as he did to Israel in that generation in their refusal to believe, in their declaration that God is not who he says he is, he says, "You will not enter my rest."

If we want to give into sin's deceitfulness, let us be honest and say, "Today is the day. I'm going to give into it, and I'm going to stop coming to church." Let's be honest. Let's not play around. The choice is here before us. We either take the grace and mercy and the covering of sin that is ours in Christ Jesus to walk with him in dependence upon him by his grace, or we simply say, "It's not true." He is inviting us, because today is a day of his grace. And so I invite you who do not believe to a place that will teach you something about your sin and your desires which I bet you never thought of, which is to me one of the best arguments ever put forth in the English language. So to you I offer this from C.S. Lewis. He says:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. [C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*]

To those of you who do not believe and who are wondering about the gospel of Jesus Christ, I will tell you that the joy that is on offer in relationship with him will demonstrate to you that all temptation and all sin and all the joys promised in its reasonableness that it has said will never amount to even a measure of the joy that is ours in Christ Jesus. Because our desires are too weak. The Holy Spirit can open

our minds and our hearts to imagine what a renewed life in Christ can be like, and that grace can be experienced today. Because today is the day of his grace. Come and believe upon him.

To those who are fellow believers and Christians who have professed faith in him, I call on you as I say the Holy Spirit calls upon me. May the Spirit this day make us aware of the places in which we have begun to try to reason with sin, where we have given into its deceit. We may not even be aware of how we're trying to isolate ourselves from others or from his Word. Friends, today is a day of renewal and grace where we can confess our sins not only to the Lord, but confess them to someone else. And ask them to pray with you, to walk with you. Because this is what he offers us: he offers us mercy and newness. May we not give in to its deceit. May the Lord by his grace renew us all. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But through Christ alone there is redemption and renewal. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would forgive us for any way in which we have toyed and tried to negotiate with sin, where we have failed to see that, indeed, our being in the grips of sin leads us away from your grace and will only lead to greater hurt and brokenness. Father, I ask that by your Holy Spirit that everyone who can hear my voice would know the power of your mercy and your love, which can give us salvation and grace today. Father, I pray that you would open our eyes that we might see crystal clear the deceitfulness of sin and the hardness of heart to which it can lead. And may you enable us this day to take your offer of joy through the promise of the Gospel. Do this, we ask, by the power of your Spirit. Fall fresh upon us. In Jesus' name. Amen.