

3. The writer drew from Psalm 95 to challenge his readers regarding their own faith and faithfulness, and he made his point clear by concluding with a solemn warning: “*Look to yourselves, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God*” (3:12). Their forefathers experienced their “today” when God delivered them from their bondage and began leading them toward His rest in Canaan (Exodus 15:17-18), and they failed miserably. So much so, that of the vast adult assembly that departed Egypt (perhaps two million or more persons in total), only two of those adults entered the land Yahweh pledged to them. Now these readers were facing their own “today,” and they risked experiencing the same outcome as their forefathers; they, too, could find themselves succumbing to “an evil and unbelieving heart” in departing from their covenant God. But in their case, the situation was far more grave:
- Their forefathers had disbelieved and rebelled against the God whom they knew *from a distance* – the God who spoke to them through Moses and manifested Himself in a pillar of fire and smoke. These Jewish Christians, on the other hand, enjoyed an *intimate* knowledge of this God. Now, “in these last days,” He’d made Himself known *in person*, in the person of His incarnate Son (1:1-2). Even more, the knowledge of God was now a matter of living union with Him through His Spirit. Now, through the mediation of the greater Moses – the true Apostle and High Priest, God’s covenant children know Him as sharing in His life and likeness; they know Him as “partakers in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:1-4).
  - So also, their forefathers’ faithfulness was directed toward the God of *promise*. That is, they were obligated to believe and hold fast to Yahweh in light of the purpose for which He’d called them. They were covenant sons for the sake of God’s ultimate design for His creation, and this meant that their faith and faithfulness pertained to shadows and things hoped for, not the substance of those things. Fulfillment and substance awaited a future day, *and that day was the “today” of the recipients of the Hebrews epistle*. They lived in the “fullness of the times,” so that their faith was directed toward God who’d shown Himself faithful; the God who’d fulfilled all of His promises to their forefathers (cf. 11:39-40).

And so, the writer wasn’t drawing from Psalm 95 simply to exhort his readers to do what their forefathers hadn’t. His message was far more significant than that. It wasn’t that they were merely another generation of Israelites who were obligated to trust and obey their covenant God; their obligation of faith and faithfulness was very much greater, because it was grounded in the fact that they stood in the realization of that which their forefathers only saw dimly at a distance. And at the heart of that fulfillment was a new knowledge and intimacy with God that infinitely transcended what their forefathers enjoyed: Their fathers knew God as He revealed Himself in His word (torah); they knew Him as taken up in His life through union with the incarnate and glorified Word.

If the Israelite fathers had a sober and culpable obligation of faith and faithfulness in the context of their “today,” how much more did their descendants, whose “today” is the day of Jesus the Messiah? Thus these readers needed to own their “today,” which meant owning their obligation to guard themselves, but also to encourage one another (v. 13).

a. As those who enjoyed what their fathers only perceived in shadows, these Hebrew Christians had a more weighty obligation of faith, and so were liable to a greater condemnation; “of whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:47-48). At the same time, they shared with their Israelite ancestors the ever-present threat of *apostasy* – falling away from the living God. Since apostasy is a central theme in the epistle, it deserves some further attention.

- First and foremost, apostasy involves *departing* from God. It doesn't pertain to those who have no connection with Him, but those who do. It was the covenant house of Israel whom God charged with apostasy, not the nations around them. The Gentiles couldn't forsake Him; He'd never given Himself to them (cf. Acts 14:8-17; Ephesians 2:11-11-12).
- Secondly, the phrase, “the living God,” hints at the *idolatry* that underlies apostasy. Christians often don't make this connection, but the reality is that apostasy and idolatry always go hand-in-hand; people don't forsake God for *nothing*, but for something that seems preferable over Him as they perceive Him; something they believe will better address their interests, needs, and wants. So it was with Israel, and so it is to the present day.

By referring to God as *the* living One, the writer was implying that every other deity is “dead.” They have no objective existence (let alone transcendent existence), but exist only in the minds of those who imagine them. Men give substance and form to their images, but that substance is equally dead (cf. Genesis 31:34; Psalm 115:1-7; Isaiah 40:18-20, 44:6-20, 45:20, 46:1-7; Jeremiah 10:1-16; Habakkuk 2:18-20; etc.). Thus the expression, “living God,” underscores the essential and crucial distinction between Israel's God and all other so-called deities: He has life *in Himself*, whereas their life resides only in the human imagination (ref. Isaiah 36-37, esp. 37:15-20; cf. also Jeremiah 10:1-16; Acts 14:8-15).

- Most importantly to this context (and to Israel's history, which the writer was drawing from), idolatry and apostasy don't imply, or even necessarily involve, overt rejection of God. That sort of rejection rarely occurred during Israel's covenant life, which was plagued by idolatry. Rather, Israel's idolatry characteristically took the form of indifference, rationalization, reformulation and amalgamation. They effectively set Yahweh aside, even while holding onto Him in word and deed (Isaiah 29:13-14). Personal, circumstantial and cultural factors led the children of Israel (in whole or in part) to turn their hearts away from their God, and even to rethink and refashion Him to fit their desires and expectations. In effect, they formed Yahweh in their own image, often joining their image to the gods of the nations around them, thereby forming their own pantheon, just like those to whom they were to manifest the true God (cf. Exodus 32:1-4; Psalm 50:7-23; 1 Kings 12:25-33, 14:22-24, 22:41-43; 2 Kings 16:1-15; Isaiah 1:1-15, 29:13; Amos 5:18-27; Zechariah 7:1-7; etc.).

- b. Thus the writer had *unbelief* in mind when he referred to the “deceitfulness of sin,” and the hardening that this sin nurtures manifests itself in idolatry and apostasy (vv. 12-13). Thus unbelief is an *active*, malignant disease, and not merely a passive state. Indeed, unbelief is the very essence of sin and disobedience, and so the root of every sinful and disobedient act (ref. vv. 18-19).
- c. It might have seemed to the epistle’s readers that these concerns were overblown, if not unfounded. They’d committed themselves to following God and His Messiah as obedient children and disciples. Even the writer acknowledged as much, identifying them as his brethren in faith (3:1, 12). Why, then, would he fear for them and their well-being and warn them so sternly? The answer is revealed in the fact that he included himself in his warnings: *No disciple of Christ, no matter how knowledgeable and resolute, can ignore the threat of unbelief.*
- Even true sons are capable of waywardness in faith and practice; indeed all of God’s children fall short in their faithfulness (Philippians 3).
  - But the writer also recognized what Jesus and His apostles warned of: There would be some in the household of faith who’d prove to be false children – pseudo-sons whose departure from Christ would demonstrate that they had never really partaken of Him (3:14; cf. 1 John 2:19; also Matthew 7:21-27; Mark 13:1-13).

The issue here isn’t open rejection of Christ, but the apostasy – sometimes gradual, and often unnoticed – that can follow upon one’s embrace of Him. The writer chose to cite Psalm 95, not just because his readers were Jewish, but because it spoke powerfully to the point he was making:

*It wasn’t Gentiles, or even those on the margins of Israel’s life that fell into unbelief, but the very sons of the covenant – the redeemed children of Abraham who’d personally experienced God’s mighty power wielded on their behalf and His unwavering faithfulness to His covenant and its promises (3:16-17).*

Yet for all of that, the Israelite people still didn’t trust Him (ref. Exodus 6:1-9, 13:17-14:12, 16:1-3, 17:1-7) – not even after He’d bound Himself to them at Sinai and showed them mercy when they fashioned an idol in His name. Nor did they return to Him as they watched their countrymen fall in the desert, or even when He at last brought their children to the threshold of the promised land (ref. Exodus 32:1; Numbers 11:1-20, 12:1-10, 13:1-14:24; cf. Psalm 78 and Ezekiel 20:1-26).

Forty years of struggle and suffering in the wilderness saw the exultant Song of Moses sung at the Red Sea transposed into a new song of foreboding and woe; the children’s delighted celebration in song was replaced by a dirge that lamented an unfaithful people whose incorrigible rebellion held out only the promise of wrath and desolation (cf. Exodus 15:1-21 with Deuteronomy 31:14-32:33).

Despite God's pledge to bring Israel into His rest, and His enduring faithfulness in carrying them toward that goal through great adversity and opposition, the nation largely failed to obtain it; of the vast multitude of adults that departed Egypt filled with joy and eager expectation, only two crossed the Jordan into Canaan forty years later. The balance of that generation perished in the wilderness, never obtaining the promised rest of dwelling with Yahweh in His sanctuary land. And the tragedy was that they perished, not because of circumstances they were unable to endure, but because of what their covenant Father could not endure (3:17-19).

- d. The epistle's readers knew this story well; it was a theme that filled Israel's scriptures and was written on the minds and hearts of every Israelite in every generation. Israel's continual failure to fulfill its identity and calling pierced the heart of every Jew, but these Hebrews were privileged to see Yahweh fulfill His promise to raise up His Servant to accomplish what Israel could not (Isaiah 49:1-13, 53:1-55:13). They had embraced Jesus in this way, but now, circumstances were pressing them to lose sight of this vision and soften their conviction. They were in danger of losing their grip on what they'd embraced and been assured of; they were in danger of "falling away from the living God" (3:12-14).

This background is crucial for grasping the writer's meaning, for many have taken his warnings as support for the idea that Christians can lose their salvation. They point to the fact that he directed them to *brethren* in Christ, and even included *himself* in them. Why would he issue warnings to Christians (which he surely believed himself to be) about falling away, if that's not a possibility? And wouldn't he go on to speak about just such a situation (ref. 6:1-6)? But the reality is that the writer was simply affirming what the apostles taught – what Jesus Himself had insisted upon. And that is that the ones who've actually partaken in Him endure to the end (Matthew 10:22); they hold fast to Him as the One whom they confess and are assured of. But they endure, not because of their personal resolve (though not apart from it), but because they've become one with Jesus, taken up in the life of God by the Spirit. Those in the Messiah cannot be separated from the living God any more than the Son or Spirit can.

But it is equally true that people can embrace Jesus with a very real passion, conviction, and sincere commitment, and yet eventually depart from Him, whether overtly or only implicitly. Jesus spoke of this phenomenon (Matthew 13:20-21), as did Paul, Peter, and John (2 Timothy 4:9-10; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 2:18-20). Such individuals can manifest a sincere faith and obedience, such that only their departure reveals their falseness. Indeed, their falseness may not even be evident to *them*, until it is finally uncovered.

And so, while it is true that those in Christ can never be lost, *their salvation plays out in time and space*. What is known to God is certified to men at the end. God pronounces the verdict of justification when a person embraces Christ in Spirit-enabled faith, but it is the last day that vindicates this verdict (Romans 2:1-10). So it is that Jesus' disciples must "work out their salvation with fear and trembling," striving in the Spirit's provision to "take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of them." They must trust and not waver, holding fast their confidence with the assurance that it will yield great reward.