

## The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 10    November 27, 2016

### The Wages of Disobedience and Unbelief

Hebrews 3: 7-19

#### These Things Were Written for Our Learning    vv. 7-11

In our last lesson, we looked at Hebrews 3:1-6 and saw the comparison of Jesus to Moses, and Jesus' superiority. However, we should also have picked up on the central theme of "faithfulness", because now the author shifts to an underlying theme of "unfaithfulness"; a citation of the OT at Psalm 95:7-11, in order to contrast unfaithfulness with faithfulness by demonstrating the wages of unfaithfulness in that "*they shall not enter my rest.*"

The 2 sections are connected by "therefore" again, and once again, as an OT passage is cited, we are reminded that this is God's Word – specifically the Word of the Holy Spirit. This is significant, as all the foregoing OT quotes have signified that the author considers all of Scripture to be significant to every generation, not just the generation extant when the Psalm was recorded and sung. 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches that "all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof and correction and for training in righteousness...", that we might be thoroughly equipped as God's people, and that is the intent here of the author of Hebrews.

In vv. 8-11, the author virtually quotes Psalm 95:7-11 verbatim ( very minor variations ). So, we should look at this Psalm to see the context, and so understand why it is being quoted here. Read Psalm 95. The first 7 verses extol God's greatness, His worth-ship. Note vv. 1-2: Let's praise Him, sing to Him, make a joyful noise to Him! Why? Verse 3: He is a great God and a great king over all gods. In vv. 4-5: He is the great Creator who holds the whole world in His hands, and then, again in v. 6: Let's worship and bow down to Him – our Maker! [ cf. Rev. 4:9-11 ]

Then, the passage cited in Hebrews 3:7-11 follows as vv. 7-11 in the Psalm, and is sort of a warning passage, using the example of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness. The first example in v. 8 is of Israel '*hardening their hearts*' as at Meribah. Although there is some question about the reference to Meribah here, the most likely candidate is Exodus 17:1-7. Here, early into the journey towards the Promised Land, at Rephidim, the people camp. Note v. 1c: "*but there was no water for the people to drink.*" They then complain to and argue with Moses over this, and Moses goes to God. God tells him what to do, which he does in vv. 5-6, and water comes gushing out of the rock! ( This is the first of 2 episodes like this – the end one being found in Numbers 20, which occurs near the end of the wanderings in the wilderness, on the very threshold of the Land ). The Psalmist connects this episode ( one of many where Israel complained or grumbled against Moses and God ), and by Moses' words, names the

place where this event occurred: “Massah” ( testing ), and “Meribah” ( embittered ). In v. 9, it is said, “*because they put Me to the test.*”

In Numbers 14:22-23, we see a culmination as God judges them for His command to enter the Land, as most of the people sided with 10 of the 12 spies who recommended not entering, showing their complete lack of trust in God, and thus hard-hearted rebellion. Only Joshua and Caleb sided with God and said ( Numbers 13:30 – 14:6-9) Note God’s reply to the people in 14:11. It is at this point that the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness is to begin. The purpose is stated in 14:26-38.

Psalm 95: 10-11 carries on in this vein, and refers to the 40 years and presents the result for most of them in v. 11. These people did not know God or His ways. They had seen God in action – redemption against all odds, the plagues and the Red Sea, the pillars of fire and smoke, the water from the rock, and yet they refused to trust Him, and thus notice Heb. 3:10 – “*they always go astray in their hearts...they have not known My ways*”, therefore, they did not know Him!

Hebrews 3:11 & Psalm 95:11 are virtually parallels. God’s wrath against His people was as a result of their constant rebellion against Him. They refused to rely on Him and at every chance / every test they chose to follow their own wicked hearts and minds. They complained because they had no food, and He gave them Manna. They grew tired of Manna, and he sent them quail. They grew to hate Moses and Aaron, and at one point, even Miriam and Aaron themselves rebelled against Moses. Moses went up to get the Law on Sinai, and in his absence, the people, led by Aaron, fashioned a golden calf idol to worship. Time after time, the people were rebels, and yet, time after time, God acted in great grace, but then, when the people sided with the 10 spies who feared entering the Land, God had had enough! Verse 23 in Numbers 14 is what both Psalm 95:11 and Hebrews 3:11 are alluding to. Moses even intercedes for the people in vv. 11-19 ( Nu. 14 ), and God pardons them, but also judges those who rebelled on purpose. Joshua and Caleb, and all from the nation who were under 20 years old ( v. 29b ) would enter the land, but the rest would not. They would die in the wilderness over the next 40 years. Even Moses, whose sin at the second occasion of a rock giving water ( Num. 20:1-11 ) was disallowed entrance into the Land, but he was allowed to see it – Deut. 34:1-4; as predicted in Num. 20:12.

“Rest” for Israel was life in the Promised Land – Beulah Land. For the readers of Hebrews, it is heaven, as in Heb. 12:18-28. The things cannot be shaken = rest.

**Watch Out! Take Care!**

**vv. 12-14**

Verse 12 begins our second of 5 warning passages in Hebrews. This warning passage will last until Heb. 4:13, but with this lesson, we are looking at it only up to 3:19. The HCSB tells us to “Watch out” in place of the ESV’s “Take care” – in either case, a strongly worded admonition.

What we are to watch out for is that we do not allow an “*evil, unbelieving heart*” to grow within us, “*leading us to fall away from the living God*”. In vv. 7-11, the citation of Psalm 95:7-11, which we just looked at, the author examined places where Israel did just that by allowing that very thing to take place in them. The result for them was that “*they did not enter His rest.*” In 3:16-19 below, look at how this is summarized for us, and as we’ll see near the end of this lesson, the author concludes that disobedience equals unbelief!

We all recognise that Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that “*the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can understand it?*” This is not the only place the heart comes up regarding our belief or faith. Proverbs 4:23-27 tells us to “guard or keep our hearts”, and numerous OT passages in the Psalms [ 40:10; cf. 119:11; 49:3; 51:10; 66:18; 95:8; 139:9-11 – just a sampling ]; the prophets, more – in Jeremiah [ 7:24; 9:14; 11:8, etc. ]; and then the NT exhorts us to guard our hearts and feed on God’s Word in order to allow it to steer us without veering, into righteousness.

Once again, as we saw in our first warning passage [ Heb. 2:1-4 ], it is directed at those in the church – believers, “*brothers*”, “*any of you*” - so that no one who claims Christ is exempt from the warning. We must all take these warnings seriously and not brush them off to mean unbelievers, or to be talking only about heavenly rewards. Numbers 14:11 expresses the essence of what this warning is saying. Despising God, failing to trust Him, not believing His promises, even when the evidence for who He is, is stacked up before our lives time and again, is a sure sign that our hearts are far from Him.

Lack of trust leads to failure to obey, and makes it easier for the untrusting person to be led in a direction that appears to offer a more likely result of pleasure, safety, comfort, or whatever you are searching for that you believe God can’t or won’t supply to you. This is what ‘*leading you to fall away*’ means.

The word we use theologically is ‘apostasy’. ‘Apostasy’ captures perfectly the meaning of the Greek word here interpreted as “falling away” (ESV), “forsaking Him” (NET), “departing from God” (HCSB), “turning away from Him” (NIV). This is not referring to a temporary wandering off the path, but is a rejection of His Lordship!

Philip Hughes points out that the “unbelieving heart” here is not a heart that has not yet come to belief, but a heart that departs from belief; a heart not firm in faith, the evil nature of which is displayed in a willful act of apostasy. Note:

“It is far more serious to commit apostasy after professing belief than never to have come to faith. The same predicament is defined by another apostolic author when speaking of those who have “forsaken the right way” and “gone astray”; For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandments delivered to them.” ( II Peter 2:15, 20ff; cf. Matt. 12:43-45, and especially Heb. 6:4ff and 10:26ff. ).”<sup>i</sup>

This is why the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95 in the preceding paragraph. This is what God's people, Israel, did. Israel's problem in the OT, and judging by the problems of modern times believers too, is idolatry. Something or someone is luring us away from God, and something in us is allowing it to happen. Whether it's because of perceived, promised pleasures of sin or a response of spiritual lethargy, we depart or drift away from God – the true God – to smaller 'gods', baubles that attract us – cf. Rom. 1:18-32. This passage of Paul's, although to a major extent describing unbelievers, also gives us more than a glimpse of the folly of idolatry by using the phrases: "suppressing the truth" ( v. 18 ), "although they knew God" ( v. 21 ), "exchanged the glory of God for images" ( v. 23 ), "they knew God's righteous decree" ( v. 32 ). This was the pull being exerted on the converted Jews in Hebrews, and if we are honest, the same pull is being exerted on those of us who profess to trust and follow Christ.

It is not a foregone conclusion ( v. 13 ) that believers will apostatize; in fact, in keeping with the viewpoint I indicated I would follow with regard to the warning passages, we must see this as the means God uses to protect His people from apostasy, by revealing to us the vacuous and utterly perilous nature of it. As well, He shows how to fight against the tendency to fall away from the faith, and this, in part, is what follows in vv. 13-14.

C.H Spurgeon, in a quote [ part of which I cited in an earlier lesson on the warning passages ] is very clear in support of this position, although his comments here are taken from an exposition of Hebrews 6:4-6;

If God has put it in, he has put it in for wise reasons and for excellent purposes. Let me show you why. First, O Christian, it is put in to keep thee from falling away. God preserves his children from falling away, but he keeps them by use of means...There is a deep precipice: what is the best way to keep anyone from going down there? Why, to tell him that if he did, he would inevitably be dashed to pieces. In some old castle there is a deep cellar, where there is a vast amount of fixed air and gas, which would kill anybody who went down there. What does the guide say? "If you go down there you will never come up alive." Who thinks of going down? The very fact of the guide telling us what the consequences would be, keeps us from it. Our friend puts away from us a cup of arsenic; he does not want us to drink it, but he says, "If you drink it, it will kill you." Does he suppose for a moment that we should drink it? No; he tells us the consequences, and he is sure we will not do it. So God says, "My child, if you fall over this precipice, you will be dashed to pieces." What does the child do? He says, "Father, keep me; hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." It leads the believer to greater dependence on God, to a holy fear and caution, because he knows that if he were to fall away he could not be renewed, and he stands far away from that great gulf, because he knows that if he were to fall into it, there would be no salvation for him."<sup>ii</sup>

Thomas Schreiner adds this: "Hebrews does not call on us to doubt our inheritance of God's sworn promise in order to heed God's urgent warning against falling away and perishing without hope of renewed repentance. God uses warning and consolation or threat and promise together to secure us in the way of salvation."<sup>iii</sup>

Later on, in Hebrews 10:19-25, the author tells us to hold fast, to draw near ( cf. also James 4:7-10 ), to not waver, and in vv. 24-25, he reveals an important aspect of our fellowship with one another in the community of the church. We are to encourage one another ( as we see ‘the day’ approaching ). And so, here in 3:13, “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’...” We must guard our own hearts, but equally important is that we are to try to guard our fellow believer’s hearts too. Note the words of Caleb and Joshua in Numbers 14:6-9 from the passage we looked at earlier, as they attempt to talk sense into those who desire to rebel against God.

The author puts a lot of stress on “today”. In fact, he quotes Ps. 95:7c above in v. 7, and here in v. 13 he uses ‘today’, and in v. 15, 4:7 he quotes it again. His point appears to be this: the day of final rest has not yet arrived, so there is time to exhort and encourage and to respond in kind to fellow believers. You have not yet passed the point of no return just because you’ve considered walking away. The temptation is not the sin. The sin is found in responding to the temptation in an ungodly way.

He then adds the result of this warning if it is not heeded – “*that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*” John MacArthur comments on the meaning of ‘deceitfulness’:

“Deceitfulness means “trickery” or “stragem.” Sin is tricky; it seldom appears as it really is. It always masks itself. It lies and deceives ( cf. Rom. 7:11 ). When a person becomes spiritually hardened, he is rarely aware of it. He can hear the gospel of Jesus Christ time and time again and not respond. My father often used the well-known expression, “The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.” If your heart is not melted in faith, it will be hardened in unbelief.

The old nature constantly suggests that sin is not as bad and that trust in Christ is not as important as the Bible says. Becoming a Christian seems too costly, too demanding, too restrictive, too drab and unexciting – above all, unnecessary. From one’s own perspective, he does not seem so wicked. “I take care of my family, I am a helpful neighbor and a good citizen. I’m not perfect of course, but I’m not evil either. My life has room for improvement, but it doesn’t need ‘saving’. So the thinking goes. This is what the sin nature deceitfully tells men about their need for salvation.”<sup>iv</sup>

Martin Luther says, “It is rightly called the deceitfulness of sin, because it deceives under the appearance of good.”<sup>v</sup>

Verse 14a: “*For we have come to share in Christ...*” – ( or the NET, “partners with Christ” ) – begins the conditional statement that is v. 14. MacArthur offers, “The greatest proof of salvation is the continuance in the Christian life. The true believer stays with Christ.”<sup>vi</sup>

See JN 8:30-31; 15:5-6 & I JN 2:19. Possessors of Christ’s salvation remain with Him, abiding in Him, while mere professors will at some point walk away ( or walk away in their hearts, yet remain in the church as hypocrites ).

The second part of the conditional sentence reveals the condition ( 14b ); “*if we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*” IOW – from today to the day of the Lord –

perseverance. Throughout the average normal life, there seems to be all sorts of reasons to leave Christ's side. We all experience doubts ( or we are lying ); when grief or intense suffering comes, when a dream is shattered by circumstances beyond ( or even in ) our control, when we see a beloved Christian friend fall into grievous sin, or a trusted Pastor reveal a sinful secret , or a church splits over some foolishness, or...well, we all know the drill don't we?

Doubt is not always a faith killer [ it can trigger introspection, and strengthen our resolve ], but we need to recognise the potential danger of it ( cf. [James 1:5-8](#) ). Os Guinness, in an excellent book, "God in the Dark", makes many good points regarding doubt. Here are a few of the more memorable ones;

"The true relationship of faith and doubt is closer to that of courage and fear. Fear is not the opposite of courage, cowardice is. Fear, in fact, need be no final threat to courage. What courage cannot afford is recklessness. Take a mountain climber, a Grand Prix racing driver, or a person conquering a devastating disability. Each one has a courage that controls his or her fear and subdues his or her emotions so that risks are made responsible and commitments in the face of danger are carefully calculated.

It is the same with faith and doubt. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, unbelief is. Doubt does not necessarily or automatically mean the end of faith, for doubt is faith in two minds. What destroys faith is the disobedience that hardens into unbelief."<sup>vii</sup>

"The problem arises when we still believe our presuppositions, even though they are wrong.

Give yourself a simple test. Think back to some crisis in your life ( a moment of shock or time of stress or failure ). What did your attitudes then show you of your real view of God? Or think back to some deep personal concern and the way you brought it to God in prayer, In situations like those, we see our real views of God. What faith is asking always reveals what it is assuming. What faith says in a situation is an expression of what it sees behind the situation. If it asks confidently, it is because it assumes correctly. Other motivations may pull us out of line this relationship between assuming and asking, but at its purest, faith is strong or weak, advances or retreats in direct proportion to what it assumes.

If we say we believe God is there and that he loves us, then the beliefs we presuppose in practice are out of line with the beliefs we profess in theory, and we are bound to doubt God eventually. This is why living faith is better tested in crises than in creeds, in failure, rather than success. Sometimes the way we act shows up our beliefs as little better than the hazy notions of an unbeliever. One minute we are reciting the most orthodox creed and the next minute we are practicing a pathetic view of God that would do no credit to a pagan. As Oswald Chambers writes, "Faith by its very nature must be tried, and the real trial of faith is not that we find it difficult to trust God, but that God's character has to be cleared in our minds."<sup>viii</sup>

"Other people have a concept of God so fundamentally false that it would be better for them to doubt than to remain devout. The more devout they are, the uglier their faith will become since it is based on a lie. Doubt in such a case is not only highly understandable, it is even a mark of spiritual and intellectual sensitivity to error, for their picture is not of God but an idol."<sup>ix</sup>

Throughout the NT, we are reminded that perseverance is necessary for true faith to endure. Virtually every warning passage ( even those outside of Hebrews ), is a warning to persevere; many passages that talk about those who will not enter God's kingdom, are negative warnings to persevere and some verses just flat out tell us that – as does Heb. 12:14. But we are not alone in this endeavor.

Alongside perseverance by the saints is God's preservation of His own, and there again, many verses tell us this – Ps. 138:8; Eccl. 3:14; Isa. 46:4; Jer. 32:40; Rom. 11:29; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 4:18; JN 6:37-40; 10:27-29; Rom. 8:29-30, etc. He sanctifies us and He causes us to persevere – JN 15:16; I Cor. 1:30-31; Gal. 3:1-16; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12-13; I Thess. 5:23-24; Heb. 13:20-21; I JN 1:2-29; Jude 24-25. But we must not fall into the trap we've all heard articulated, "let go and let God". No, instead, we must take the attitude of Paul, as expressed in Phil. 3:3b-11.

## Disobedience and Disbelief

vv. 15-19

The repetition of Ps. 95:7-8 here simply serves to emphasize the author's main point by restating the OT point, but at the same time, demonstrates that the 'today' of about 65 AD, and subsequently, because it is recorded for us who are reading it in 2016, is also 'today'. Do not imitate what God's people did as recorded in those OT passages already examined.

The point of the author in vv. 15-19 is to show how easy it can be to slip into idolatry and unbelief and disobedience. Here, an entire nation of people was led out of bondage ( a rescue for which they had prayed and cried out for ) in a miraculous way. They saw God through Moses and Aaron bring Pharaoh to his knees, a wealth transfer as a "parting gift" to them, the Red Sea miraculously parted for them and then closed back on their pursuers, were led by a pillar of fire and smoke, were given water out of a rock, and on and on the blessings flowed, yet even with as great a leader as Moses, a mere remnant was finally led into the Land, having taken 40 years to get to a place which had been mere days or weeks away from Egypt when they fled. These are the last people anyone would expect to rebel against this God, especially so early into the journey!

The message then, here in Hebrews, is that those who turn away from Jesus Christ will not be spared either if they rebel against Him. Paul, in I Cor. 10:1-14, makes a similar plea to the church at Corinth.

In v. 17, the writer calls attention to the word "sinned". Their rebellion had a simple name, and was not as noble as a fight for independence such as took place in 1776 in the USA, or William Wallace's army fighting against British royal tyranny in Scotland; but Israel's rebellion was of a much baser sort – it was sin, plain and simple. It was evil & wicked and deserving of eternal punishment.

The temporal aspect of the punishment lasted 40 years, long enough for the generation of sinful rebels to die off – cf. Num. 14:26-35. Notice too vv. 36-38 – almost immediate death by plague for the 10 unfaithful spies. Also note the wording of Heb. 3:17; “*With whom was He provoked for 40 years?*” As you examine the OT record, the 40 years were punctuated by rebellion, grumbling, & complaining the entire time...as they died off. Repentance was found only among those of the remnant of those who had been 20 years old or less when the people rejected the Land on the advice of 10 of the 12 spies.. The answer to the question, also in v. 17 is, “*Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies (corpses – NKJV or carcasses – KJV) fell in the wilderness?*” This is a far cry from Psalm 115:16 which tells us that “*precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His saints!*” Note also Ezek. 18:30-32. “*I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.*”

John MacArthur helpfully comments here;

“Do you know why God took the lives of certain people in the Bible? It was not because they were more sinful than anyone else; it was because somewhere along the line, in the long process of grace and mercy, God had to set some examples to make men fear. He turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt, not because she did something worse than anyone else ever did, but because she was to be His example. I Corinthians 10 cites some OT people who were destroyed, and v. 11 says, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction.” The highway of history is paved with God’s mercy and grace. But there are billboards all the way along, posted so that men may know that God at any moment has the right to take their lives.”

God is gracious, but don’t confuse His mercy with justice. God is not unjust when He acts in a holy manner against us. Don’t ever get to the place that you are so used to mercy and grace that you abuse it by going on in your sin.”<sup>x</sup>

Here in v. 18 is a Q & A so that the reader will grasp the significance of Israel’s sin and register how that has implications for their own life, even though the ‘rest’ being entered into is not the same. “The rest from which Adam and Eve were excluded was that of fellowship with God in Eden; the rest forfeited by the rebellious generation of Israelites was that of the Promised land, and the rest denied to apostates from the Christian faith is that of the eternal Sabbath of the new heavens and new earth ( Rev. 2:6; 22:1ff ).”<sup>xi</sup> Cf. Matt. 25:34,46.

Those who did not enter were those who were disobedient – blatantly so – time after time, in unrelenting sin. Then v. 19 closes the passage out by equating disobedience with unbelief, i.e., a lack of faith. True faith inevitably results in obedience – cf. I JN 5:2; 2:3-4.

Schreiner comments, “The defect of the wilderness generation is described as hardness of heart ( 3:8,13,15 ), testing God ( 3:9 ), going stray ( 3:10 ), rebellion ( 3:15-16 ), sin ( 3:17 ), and disobedience ( 3:18 ).”<sup>xii</sup>

Apostasy, at its root is unbelief after having seen the truth. Perseverance is the result of testing God and His promises and believing Him ( cf. 2 Peter 1:5-11 ).



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<sup>i</sup> Philip E. Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1987, pp. 145-146

<sup>ii</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, cited in Tom Schreiner & Ardel Canaday, The Race Set Before Us, IVP Academic, 2001, p. 203

<sup>iii</sup> IBID, p. 203

<sup>iv</sup> John MacArthur, Hebrews, Moody Press, 1983, pg. 93

<sup>v</sup> Hughes, p. 148

<sup>vi</sup> MacArthur, p. 93

<sup>vii</sup> Os Guinness, God in the Dark – The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt, Crossway, 1996, p. 28-29

<sup>viii</sup> IBID, p. 62-63

<sup>ix</sup> IBID, p. 65-66

<sup>x</sup> John MacArthur, Truth Matters, Thomas Nelson, 2004, pp 20-21

<sup>xi</sup> Hughes, p. 154

<sup>xii</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 131