

Hebrews 3:7-19
“Failing to Enter the Promised Rest”

Introduction:

The previous passage (3:1-6) concluded with a conditional statement that defined the essential quality of those who are genuinely a part of God’s family (i.e., “*God’s house*”). He had written that one was a part of God’s family “*if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end*”. The implication from this conditional statement is that those who over time do not continue to hold fast to their confidence and hope in the Gospel are not a part of God’s family. This statement also implies an important practical truth, that one can be deceived about one’s actual standing before God, that one can think he or she has received eternal salvation, when in truth, one has not.

Those implications are so serious, they required the author to elaborate on how this truism related to those to whom he was writing. In doing this, the author first quoted a portion of a Psalm that gave a commentary on a previous time in Israel’s history. That period in Israel’s history was one in which a large number of Israelites demonstrated by their actions that they had no real faith in their God. The author cited what happened at that time to demonstrate a living example of the spiritual principle contained in the conditional statement of verse six. From there the author warned his readers not to make the same mistake that this previous generation of Israelites made.

I. The Exhortation to Past Generations: (vs.7-11)

As the passage opens, the author of Hebrews exhorted his readers to hear what God said to a previous generation. He wrote “*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says*”. These words were his way of introducing his next quotation of Scripture, and the portion of Scripture he quoted was Psalm 95:7-11, and that quotation takes up the rest of verse seven and goes through verse eleven. In his introduction of that quotation, the author began with the conjunction “*therefore*”. This conjunction indicates that what follows represented a conclusion that the author was drawing from what he had written in the previous verses, and this is the grammatical evidence that the author was elaborating on the conditional statement he made in the latter part of verse six. It is informative to recognize that the quotation was referred to as something that was said by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the author later reveals to us that David was the human author of the Psalm that He quoted here (4:7). This makes it clear that the author was equating the words of the Old Testament that David wrote as something that was inspired by the Holy Spirit, making it literally the word of God Himself.

The author of Hebrews chose to quote this portion of Psalm 95 because it contained God’s assessment of a former generation that was faced with a similar choice to the one facing his readers. In essence the choice was whether they would stay loyal to God or depart from Him in the midst of a time of spiritual testing. The author wanted his readers to see that in a sense history was repeating itself, and he

wanted them to learn a valuable lesson from the failure of that previous generation of Israelites. It was his intention to help them see the terrible consequences that would befall them if they failed to continue to put their faith in God.

Since Psalm 95 was written by David, it was written hundreds of years prior to the epistle to the Hebrews. Yet, this author used the present tense to indicate that the Holy Spirit was speaking directly to his readers through that quotation. This teaches us that the Bible is not just a written record of what God said at some point in the past, it is the living word through which God actively speaks to every generation of His people. The quotation itself can be broken down into three parts:

- The first part is centered in the warning not to allow their hearts to be hardened (vs.7-8a)
- The second part offers an example or illustration of a generation that did allow their hearts to be hardened (vs.8b-9)
- The third part confronts the reader with the judgment faced by that previous generation of individuals with hardened hearts (10-11).

In this portion of the Psalm David was referring to the failure of Israel at Kadesh Barnea which led to their 40-year wanderings in the wilderness. Far from being an ideal period in Israel's history, it was an era marked by tragic loss and defeat.

The actual quotation from Psalm 95 begins in the second half of verse seven, where we read, "*Today, if you will hear His voice*". David's admonition to his fellow Israelites was something they needed to respond to "*today*", meaning it was a matter of immediate urgency. And the appropriate response necessitated that they hear the voice of God. This short statement was expressed in the form of a third-class conditional clause. This sort of conditional clause refers to something that is uncertain, a condition that one might or might not fulfill. Therefore, David (and by extension the author of Hebrews) were expressing that there was uncertainty as to whether or not the Israelites would hear God's voice. The Greek term translated as "*hear*" implies more than simply audibly hearing something, it refers to listening and taking heed to what is said.

As the quote continues, we read that David warned the Israelites, "*Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness*" (vs.8). The imagery of a hard heart conveys the idea that one's heart cannot be penetrated, and it relates specifically to a person being resistant to the word of God. This hardening is understood to be a deliberate choice and thus by choosing not to hear the Word of God, the individual takes full responsibility for his/her willful refusal to hear what God is saying to them. David then made reference to the generation of Israelites who experienced the exodus, using them as an illustration of those who chose to harden their hearts against the word of God. The reference to "*the rebellion*" was meant to call to mind a specific and pivotal rebellion that this generation of Israelites engaged in while they were in the wilderness. Though some interpreters think that the reference to "*in the day of trial*" refers to a different event in Israel's history (a second episode of significant failure), there is nothing in the context to suggest that David or the author of Hebrews had two different events

in mind. Instead, these are two ways of referring to the same event. Referring to it as “*the rebellion*” focused on Israel’s specific sin, while the reference to “*in the day of trial*” characterized the context of the overall event from God’s perspective. The event in Israel’s history that David was referring to was Israel’s refusal to enter the Promised Land after hearing the negative report of the ten unbelieving spies (Num.14). That particular moment in Israel’s history was a particularly appropriate one for the author of Hebrews to cite for two reasons. First, it was an example of unbelief leading to a choice to refuse to continue following God. Second, that unbelief took place among a group of people who had witnessed unprecedented miraculous interventions by God. God had clearly and miraculously revealed Himself to be the one true God. The Israelites had acknowledged and embraced what God had revealed about Himself. The Israelites knew precisely what God expected them to do. They had seen evidence of God’s power and His blessing being manifested on their behalf. Yet in spite of all of this, the reality is that their choice not to trust Him at that point demonstrated that they never truly had faith in Yahweh at all.

The quotation then continues with the words, “*Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years*” (vs.9). The designation “*where*” refers to the wilderness as the location where the trial took place, specifically at Kadesh Barnea (Deut.1:19). It was there that the exodus generation are said to have done three specific things. First, it is said that they “*tested Me*”. Since the entire quotation is framed as a recording of God’s audible voice, the pronoun “*Me*” obviously refers to God. The meaning of the Greek word translated as “*tested*” conveys the idea of examining something to discover the truth about it. It was used in both a positive and negative sense (testing either to determine something was truly what it claimed to be, or testing to determine that it wasn’t what it claimed to be). Later, when God used Moses to instruct a new generation of Israelites in God’s Law, it was stated clearly that it was forbidden to put God *to a “test”* (Deut.6:16). To do so was sinful, because the only reason to test God was because one did not believe what He said about Himself. This reveals that the exodus generation put God to the test to make Him demonstrate that they could trust what He said about Himself. And thus, the choice to test God was an expression of unbelief. It is best to conclude that this testing was done in the wilderness prior to the day of rebellion. Because in verse eight, “*the day of trial*” refers to God’s test of Israel, while verse nine speaks of Israel’s testing of God. Therefore, God was referring to the number of times that the Israelites demanded God act supernaturally to meet some need that they had at the time, like when they demanded He supply them with water (Ex.17). Second, God said the Israelites “*tried Me*”. This is actually a poor translation of the Greek word in Hebrews. The word is better rendered as “*prove*”, because it refers specifically to a test that vindicates someone, a test that demonstrates that someone or something is genuinely what they or it claims to be. The idea here is that repeatedly God had demonstrated His reality and power to the Israelites prior to their arrival at Kadesh Barnea. Third, God said the Israelites “*saw My works forty years*”. This can’t refer to what happened prior to the rebellion

at Kadesh Barnea, because the forty-year wandering was God's punishment of Israel because of their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. Therefore, here God was referring to the consequences of what took place because of that rebellion, and how ironically it further demonstrated the reliability of what God said He would do.

The quotation continues further with the words, "*Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.'*" (vs.10). The Greek word translated as "*angry*" means to feel strong irritation because of what someone has done, and thus to be provoked to the point of anger; it also means to loath, to be burdened down with grief, to be exhausted, to be indignant. Though the English translation preserves the sense of the Old Testament quotation, the demonstrative pronoun which the writer of Hebrews employs, which is translated as "*that*" in the NKJV, should actually be rendered "*this*". The point of making this observation is so that we will understand that the author of Hebrews worded this part of the quote to make it clear that he was applying the quotation to his own readers. Therefore, the idea was that God was angry not only with the exodus generation, but also with the generation in David's time (when Psalm 95 was written), and finally also with the Christian Jews to whom this letter was written. The idea was that all three generations of Israelites were guilty of the same sinful posture before God.

God's indictment "*they have not known My ways*" reveals an ignorance of God's intent behind His commandments, guidance, and providential control that characterized the sin of which all these generations of Israelites were guilty. Though the children of Israel in Moses' time saw the miraculous events and circumstances that God accomplished through him, and though the Christian Jews had been converted by hearing the stories of the countless miracles performed by Christ, both failed to have true faith in God. This had resulted from their inability to understand God's character and purposes through these things; they did not understand God's nature or why He did the things He did. The author's choice to use the word "*always*" means that Israel's wandering from God was not temporary or occasional but was the constant pattern of their lives. For the Hebrew mindset, thinking is a function of a person's heart. Thus, Israel is characterized as having minds that continually turned aside from God's revelation and wandered down paths of their own choosing.

The quotation concludes with God's pronouncement "*So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest'*" (vs.11). The particle at the beginning of the verse "*so*" designates result; therefore, it was God's anger at the continual sin and unbelief of the generation of Israelites in the wilderness that caused God to make His oath. The idea here is that this disobedient generation lost the blessing of entering into the Land; which was the ultimate purpose of their deliverance from Egypt. In the statement, not entering God's rest refers to how the Israelites at the time of Moses did not enter into the Promised Land. The idea of rest is introduced here because David's concern in his Psalm, and the author of Hebrews' concern had nothing to do with whether or not their readers would enter Canaan. Thus, the word "*rest*" refers to something that encompasses what all three generations should

hope to enter. The Greek word translated as “*rest*” refers to bringing something to an end, or stopping something, to cease or discontinue from something. It does not convey the idea of leisure or relaxation per se. The author of Hebrews made reference to “*rest*” eleven times in chapters three and four. The author’s use of the word points to a place or a state where one enjoys the blessing of God. It is where there is no more striving, and no more fear. The implication in these chapters is that the “*rest*” represents where our journey with God is taking us, and thus, for the Christians reading this letter, it was a reference to the sphere of salvation. Because of what is written in these verses, it has been traditional for Christians to interpret the Promised Land as a type of heaven.

II. The Exhortation to the Present Generation: (vs.12-15)

Having finished his quotation of Psalm 95, the author now turned His attention to apply the instruction of the Psalm to his readers. In verse twelve he wrote, “*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*”. The imperative “*beware*”, followed by the negative particle and then a second verb in the indicative mood, introduces a sharp warning. This demonstrates that the writer was apprehensive that the community might falter in its response to the promise of God, just as the wilderness generation had. The author was warning the Hebrew Christians to beware of presuming upon their status under the covenant (as their ancestors had). The author seems to have learned from experience (as the apostles had) that it was a real temptation for Jews to presume that because they were the covenant people, they need not have any fear that they would come under God’s judgment, no matter how little they obeyed God’s word. This thinking tended to undermine the potency of the warnings given to them that they were just as accountable for their sins as the Gentiles were. The words “*lest there be in any of you*” were employed to emphasize that no one can ignore God’s word without paying the penalty for doing so, including those who were ethnically Jews, and those who professed to know Christ.

The author specifically warned his readers about the danger of having “*an evil heart of unbelief*”. The Greek word translated as “*evil*” refers to that which has a bad nature or condition; and is frequently used in an ethical sense to indicate something that is wicked by God’s evaluation. In warning against an “*evil heart*” the author clearly means more than they are in danger of engaging in accidental or superficial sins. Rather, an evil heart is one inclined to rebellion against God. The author further elaborated on the condition of heart that his readers were to guard against. They were to resist having a heart characterized by “*unbelief*”. The idea is not that it is a heart that has never believed, but one that has believed to a certain extent and has since rejected that belief. The author further indicates in this warning that unbelief is both the root and the fruit of an evil heart. The author was conveying that one cannot have a genuine faith that does not lead to obedience, nor is there any sort of genuine obedience to God that does not stem from faith.

The author then went on to observe that an unbelieving evil heart manifests itself in “*departing from the living God*”. The Greek word translated as “*departing*”

refers to leaving or withdrawing from somewhere or someone. In this case the word is used in a metaphorical sense. Because it is not related to leaving a place physically. He was referring to a person no longer holding to the same convictions that once defined them. He was referring to committing apostasy by no longer remaining devoted to God. This turning away is not passive, but a deliberate disobedient choice; the antithesis of drawing near to God (10:22). Turning away from Christianity is more than simply turning away from a religion. Since Christianity is rooted in both a relational context and in historical truth, it is turning away from the living God and the life He instructs us to live.

The author of the letter stressed the heinousness of this turning away by pointing out that it is from the “*living*” God. This is a rebellion against an actual existing deity and not against an abstract dead belief system. In using this title, the author was not so much emphasizing that the God of the Bible is the genuine God, but in this context was rather emphasizing the certainty of the retribution that will befall the unfaithful in light of whom it is they were rebelling against.

In contrast to allowing oneself to be overtaken by evil and unbelief, the author advised his readers to pursue the spiritual antidote, “*but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*” (vs.13). One preventative measure against the tendency toward unbelief is a spirit of mutual concern and admonition among the Christian brotherhood. Exhortation in essence means cheering one another on lest the world’s depressing outlook on life overwhelm us, or its fascination with pleasure obsess us. It involves looking intentionally for opportunities to speak an uplifting word to one’s fellow believers. Exhortations are loving admonitions meant to illuminate the presence of temptation and sin in the life of a fellow believer. That this is to be done daily makes it clear that this is something believers need on a regular basis. Christian fellowship therefore is very important. Genuine fellowship can build people up in the faith and it can form a strong bulwark against sin and apostasy. It is certain that apostasy would be much less common in our day if believers were to faithfully follow this admonition.

The author expressed that this ongoing exercise of exhortation is to be done “*while it is called 'Today'*”. The word translated as “*while*” simply means “*as long as*”. Like many ancient Jewish interpreters, the writer points out that the psalmist’s exhortation for “*today*” was still valid in his own generation. And therefore, the sense of the author’s instruction is that his readers were to keep on exhorting one another as long as there was opportunity to make a difference by doing so. Also, the repetition of the word “*today*” reminds the reader that there is an urgency to this instruction, and therefore it is not something that should be neglected but immediately put into practice.

The phrase, “*lest any of you be hardened*” is the beginning of a purpose clause, indicating why mutual exhortation is so important. The word “*hardened*” is used metaphorically here to convey once again the idea of being resistant to input from others (in this case, specifically from God). It is an admonition not to be stubborn, or obstinate, refusing to take in what is said and to allow it to have influence. This

is the key word from the quotation of the Psalm, and it lays out for the reader what it is that he or she needs to continually guard their heart against. The remedy then for such hardening is for believers to engage in mutual exhortations, wherein we remind one another about what is true and good. The author also adds that the hardening is through the “*deceitfulness of sin*”. The deceitfulness in view here is that which is rooted in trickery or a stratagem; it deceives by masking or distorting one’s perceptions of reality. Sin can blind individuals to the danger before them. It can lead someone to mistakenly think they are safe when they are actually in mortal danger. Another way in which sin can be deceitful is that it can come disguised as something permissible, legitimate, or even beneficial. If one pays attention to the precise wording in this verse it becomes clear that the author was admonishing his readers in this context to direct their exhortations particularly toward a specific sin (i.e. “*this*” sin), the sin of departing from the faith.

The author then went on to explain why his readers should be motivated to engage in mutual exhortation, “*For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end*” (vs.14). In writing “*we have become*”, the author of the letter used the perfect tense of the verb and thus signified that the readers had already become and consequently were already partakers of Christ. Therefore, the wording indicates that the author was not speaking of what would be true if the readers held on to their confidence, but rather what he assumed was already true of them, and which was to be evidenced by their endurance through temptation. In other words, ongoing faithfulness does not secure one’s salvation; it merely gives evidence of one’s salvation. The provisional nature of the conditional clause stressed that it was not certain that every one of his readers would in fact demonstrate that they were genuinely redeemed.

The specific evidence of genuine faith referred to here is to “*hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end*”. The Greek word translated as “*hold*” can mean to hold back, hinder, suppress, or restrain; but can also mean to take possession of something, to confine it, or keep it; and finally, as it does here, to hold fast to something, and thus retain it or be faithful to it. The Greek word translated as “*confidence*” refers to the basis or support for something. It thus can also refer to the assurance one has that something or someone is what it or he or she claims to be. The Greek word translated as “*steadfast*” refers to that which is firm, steady, valid, guaranteed, secure, reliable, or certain. This term was used in business or legal contexts to refer to the stability of a contractual relationship. Thus, it refers to something upon which one can depend. Therefore, the entire phrase is an exhortation to stay committed to the same assured confidence in the Gospel that one had when they were first redeemed, and to maintain that commitment throughout one’s lifetime. For as this author will observe later in this letter, “*without faith it is impossible to please God*” (11:6). This is true because only faith keeps the believer in a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

In this verse, the author was repeating the warning of verse six, the warning that this entire passage elaborates upon. This informs us that this was the author’s main point in this passage, to warn his readers to hold on to their faith. In making

this point, the author was teaching the same basic idea that was taught by the Apostle John in his first epistle. He was asserting that those who in the end depart from the faith, were never really part of the redeemed community (I Jn.2:19).

The author of Hebrews tied this exhortation and the spiritual truism behind it to the warning given to the unbelieving and rebellious wilderness generation, “*while it is said: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’*” (vs.15). In this exhortation the readers were being exhorted to be pliable, attentive, and eager to do what the Lord commands. They of course were encouraged to do this as the proper alternative to following the destructive pattern of the wilderness generation of Israelites. The Israelites of the exodus generation, through their unbelief, rendered themselves morally and spiritually incapable of possessing their inheritance; having been blinded by their immediate lusts and fears. The author was simply warning his readers not to make the same mistake.

III. The Lesson to be Learned from the Past: (vs.16-19)

In verses sixteen through eighteen, the author continued to drive his point home with a series of rhetorical questions; “*For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey?*” These rhetorical questions demonstrate how an outward façade of belief can be maintained while the heart is still unrepentant, and therefore unredeemed.

The first question is an allusion to Numbers chapter fourteen and the rebellion at Kadesh. The staggering idea is that it was those who had been witnesses to the extraordinary events of the exodus who were the ones who chose not to obey God. The rebellious nature of that Israelite generation was the same at the end of the wanderings (Num.25) as it had been at the beginning (Ex.17). Even though God gave them four decades to learn from their sin and seek His forgiveness and grace, they chose not to repent and continued in their rebellious posture before God. The author’s purpose in his first question was to demonstrate that the warning of this passage is applicable even though they were followers of Jesus Christ. Because just as the Israelites started their journey with God and did not finish it; so, that generation of Jewish Christians were contemplating doing the same thing and thus needed to know they would experience the same fate if they made the same choice. The fate of that generation of Israelites also demonstrated that following along with the majority is no guarantee of safety.

In the second rhetorical question we learn that God’s anger was directed against those who sinned in the specific way that this passage speaks about. Recognizing this protects us from the false conclusion that God’s anger is aroused in this same way toward any manifestation of sin in the life of believers. There is also emphasis here upon the extremely long time that particular generation of Israelites lived under God’s wrath (40 years-i.e. the years of wanderings). The strength of the warning is also seen in the Greek word chosen to refer to the bodies of the dead Israelites. The author refers to the bodies as “*corpses*”. The Greek word refers to

carcasses (stressing the idea of the decay that takes place after a person dies). Also, the Greek word translated as “*wilderness*” refers to a deserted portion of land in contrast to cultivated or inhabited land; in this case the uninhabited desert that the Israelites passed through during their wanderings (the word itself does not refer to any specific type of wilderness). The language depicts a tragic and bleak scenario.

In regard to the third rhetorical question, the Greek word translated as “*swear*” means to make an oath. Thus, it means to solemnly affirm, promise, or threaten to do some particular thing or things. The specific oath referred to here expressed God’s promise that there would be no additional chances for those Israelites after their rebellion at Kadesh. God’s patience had been exhausted because of their continual disobedience. The cause of their recalcitrance laid deeper than a wrong attitude or wrong behavior; it was rooted in a will that would not trust in or submit to God.

It is reasonable to ask about the implication the warning in this passage has for our understanding about God’s final assessment of Moses and Aaron. Both of them died outside of the land of Canaan just like the vast majority of their countrymen. And they were both guilty of serious sin. Does this reference about the judgment upon the unbelieving include them? The answer is no. Though it is true that they both sinned, their lives as a whole were never characterized by unbelief. In many ways Moses and Aaron were very different from the large body of unbelievers who publicly resisted God, provoked Him for forty years, and displayed an obstinacy of unbelief which brought upon them the anger and curse of God. There is nothing in this passage that hints that Moses and Aaron should be grouped in with the generation as a whole, and thus it is best not to do this.

The author closed the chapter with the following words, “*So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief*” (vs.19). The same verb (here translated as “*see*”), was translated as “*beware*” in verse twelve. This word then was used to open this passage as an imperative warning, and here at the closing was used to summarize the author’s conclusion.

The words “*could not enter*” refers to the specific failure to take the Promised Land on their own initiative (Num.14:40-45), after having been denied entry by Yahweh. The author does not say that this Israelite generation did not enter the land, but that they were not able to enter it. Sin is self-defeating, and unbelief prevents us from entering God’s rest. There is an implicit warning in this verse that the same sort of unbelief might characterize his readers just like it had those Israelites of so many centuries before. Every person lives by faith every day without thinking of it as an unreasonable thing, such as depending upon things to be safe or true without testing everything ourselves each and every day. Therefore, the only question is whether or not we believe that the Gospel is one of those things we can truly believe in.

Conclusion:

In Charles Dicken’s book, “A Tale of Two Cities”, we read, “*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times*”. With these words Charles Dickens was

characterizing the contradictions that existed at the time of the French Revolution. In one sense, the nation was experiencing a time of wealth, privilege, and optimism. However, in another sense the nation was also experiencing terrible poverty, oppression and despair. There is a parallel to this in the stories of the Israelites who experienced the exodus, and the Jewish Christians to whom this letter was written. For both, it was the best of times. For those who experienced the exodus, they saw God manifest Himself in unprecedented ways. For these Hebrews, the long wait for the Messiah was over, He had come, and He had initiated a new age of incredible blessings. However, it was also the worst of times for both. Because the trials they went through revealed that their faith in God was merely superficial. Instead of being fortified by the amazing things that happened in their lifetimes, they responded to their trials with fear and unbelief.

The application to the reader is clear. Each one must examine himself or herself in times of trial to determine if we truly believe in the Gospel or not. We must ask ourselves what we will choose. Will we choose to submit to His Word, or will we choose to rely on our own judgment. The reality is that we must recognize that making the wrong choice will result in being lost forever. Therefore, we must heed the admonition in this passage to fight against unbelief by exhorting one another to continue to believe, reminding one another why we can and must believe. The goal is to resist deception and hardness of heart, and to cling tightly in faith to God.