

VIII. While Today Is Today

January 9/10/11, 2018

Hebrews 3:7-19

Aim: To learn from the negative example of the Israelites in the wilderness by holding firm in our faith and encouraging one another to avoid falling away.

Hughes: In the long history of this earth, no migration of any people began so well, and with such great expectations, as Israel's exodus from Egypt. It all began so well—but ended so poorly. Of the six hundred thousand men (the million-plus Israelites who began so well), only two over the age of twenty ever got to the promised land—and that was forty years later. The rest fell, disappointed corpses in the desert. The grand and terrible lesson of Israel's history is that *it is possible to begin well and end poorly*. In fact, this tragic human tendency dominates much human spiritual experience. It is this concern that haunts the writer of the book of Hebrews, as we have repeatedly seen. His fear is that the doleful fate of the generation of the exodus will be repeated in the experience of the Jewish Christians in their storm-tossed little church.

MacArthur: The warning here is to those who know the gospel, who affirm its truth, but who, because of love of sin or fear of persecution or whatever it may be, have not committed themselves to the truth they know is real. The writer of Hebrews, under the Spirit's leading, has a great concern for his fellow Jews who are in this predicament. They have heard the gospel, some of them from the mouth of an apostle, but for various reasons they hold back from commitment. Some, apparently, had made a profession of faith or had given some statement of confidence in Christ, but were beginning to fall back. They were not willing to throw their whole weight on Jesus, and as a result they became apostate. Knowing the truth, they willingly and intentionally turned away from it. To enforce the warning, the Spirit uses an Old Testament story very familiar to Jews. Moses has just been mentioned, and it is from the time of this greatest of Old Testament leaders that the story comes.

A. The Example of the Israelites (Hebrews 3:7-11)

Schreiner: The superiority of Jesus the Son to Moses the servant is not a theological abstraction. The previous text concluded with a call to stand firm until the end. Now the author continues in this vein, proceeding to warn his readers in a long section extending from 3:7-4:13, beginning with a fairly long citation from Ps. 95:7-11. The warning takes center stage: they must not harden their hearts as the wilderness generation did. The Israelites tested the Lord and resisted Him, even though they saw His gracious and saving work for 40 years. As a result, God poured His anger out on them and swore that they would not enter His rest, which is the land of promise.

1. Psalm 95

MacArthur: Hebrews 3:7-11 is a quotation of Psalm 95:7-11. The passage quoted was written probably in the time of David, but it speaks about the time of Moses. It is a moving example of the problem many Jews faced in the time of the early church. It describes Israel's disobedience and rejection of God in the Exodus wanderings.

Hughes: To set forth his concern, the writer did what preachers often do—he appropriated a passage of Scripture that eloquently framed his thoughts—Psalm 95:7-11. Every Jew knew this passage by heart because its opening line served as a call to worship every Sabbath evening in

Hebrews – Lesson 8

the synagogue: ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts’ (Hebrews 3:7-8, quoting Psalm 95:7-8). These solemn words were intoned week after week, year after year, as a call to carefully listen to the voice of God.

Bruce: Psalm 95 falls into two parts: the first (vv. 1-7a) consists of a call to worship God, while the second (vv. 7b-11), reproduced by our author here, is a warning against disobeying Him, reinforced by a reminder of what happened to Israel in the wilderness for disobedience. For Jews, it is one of the special psalms appointed for the inauguration of the Sabbath, in which it was sung as part of the temple service for the Sabbath day. The two parts should not be dissociated from each other: it is a good thing to worship God, but acts and words of worship are acceptable only if they proceed from sincere and obedient hearts.

Schreiner: It is fitting here to summarize the message of Psalm 95. The psalm begins with a call to cry out joyfully to God for His saving work in Israel. The Lord should be thanked, for He is a great God and King over all. God’s lordship over all is evident, for He is the Creator and Owner of the sea and dry land. All the earth belongs to Him; therefore, Israel should worship the one who is their Creator and Lord. Indeed He is the Shepherd of Israel and tends them as His people, promising to supply their every need as Israel’s Deliverer. Therefore, Israel should not harden their hearts like the wilderness generation did, or they will face His wrath and fail to enter His rest.

2. The Warning (3:7-9)

a) Today (3:7)

⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice...”

Schreiner: The author commences his exhortation with the word ‘therefore’ (*Διό, Dio*). Since Jesus the Son is superior to Moses, they should not harden their hearts to the message given through Him. In this verse, the author begins to quote from Psalm 95:7-11. The citation is introduced with the words, ‘as the Holy Spirit says.’ Hebrews regularly emphasizes that in Scripture God speaks to His people, and here that speaking is attributed to the Holy Spirit. This is a remarkable indication of the Spirit’s deity, for the Scriptures represent the voice and word of God, and here that word is attributed to the Holy Spirit.

Phillips: In Hebrews 3:7 the author writes, ‘Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says.’ This is consistent with the broader biblical testimony that the Bible is the product of the Holy Spirit who has taken the things of God and given them to us through human writers (cp. 2 Pe. 1:21). The Holy Spirit has given God’s Word through the Scriptures and now speaks to us by applying the Word to our hearts.

MacArthur: Here is one of the clearest testimonies in Scripture to its own divine inspiration. The writer of Hebrews is saying that the Holy Spirit was the author of Psalm 95, from which 3:7b-11 is quoted. Inspiration is the Holy Spirit’s speaking through the mind of God’s human instruments. What the psalmist said was not his own opinion or his own choice of words. When he wrote these words the Holy Spirit was speaking. That is divine inspiration. Those are the words of the Spirit of God, who is the true Author of Scripture (cp. 2 Pe. 1:21).

Hughes: As the writer uses Psalm 95, he is convinced that the warning of the opening line and the extended warning it introduces comes directly from the Holy Spirit to his hearers, and thus he introduces it in verse 7 by saying, ‘Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says...’ He understood that

Hebrews – Lesson 8

originally the Holy Spirit had warned the psalmist's hearers with these words, and as he uses it one thousand years later, it is still the Holy Spirit speaking. And for us today, two thousand years after the use of it in Hebrews, it remains the Holy Spirit's message. There is a timeless urgency to the message. We must listen to the Holy Spirit's message *today*, for it is God's message for the church in this troubled age. May we listen with all we have!

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

MacArthur: The psalmist used this story to warn his people against disbelief. A thousand years later the writer of Hebrews used it for the same purpose. Nearly two thousand more years later the warning is still valid.

Schreiner: The citation begins with Ps. 95:7: 'Today, if you hear His voice.' The word 'today' (*σήμερον*, *sēmeron*) plays a significant role in the text before us. The Spirit addresses the people of God, admonishing them not to harden their hearts today.

MacArthur: 'Today,' of course, indicates urgency. It means 'now,' not necessarily a twenty-four hour period. It refers to the period of grace, which sometimes may be less than twenty-four hours. In other words, it refers to the present moment. It is so foolish and dangerous to harden your heart. You never know how long you will have to decide (cp. 2 Cor. 6:2). God's time for salvation is always *now*. 'Today' signifies the present time of grace. Men never know how long that time of grace for them will be.

b) *Day of Testing (3:8)*

...⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness...

Bruce: 'Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah...' 'The rebellion' (so the Septuagint, followed by our author) is the equivalent of 'Meribah' in the Hebrew text, as 'the testing' is the equivalent of 'Massah.'

Hughes: Two key words in this verses help us understand what it means to harden one's heart. They are the words 'rebellion' and 'testing' in verse 8. The renderings here come from the Greek Septuagint, but the original Hebrew behind the word 'rebellion' is *meribah*, and behind 'testing' is *massah*. Check Psalm 95:7-8 as it is rendered in your Old Testament, and you will read: 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.' These words point us directly to Exodus 17 (cp. also Numbers 20).

Schreiner: The psalmist addresses his generation, admonishing them not to harden their hearts today, as the rebellious generation in the wilderness hardened theirs. The wilderness generation provoked the Lord through unbelief and disobedience repeatedly and refused to enter the land of

Hebrews – Lesson 8

Canaan when they were commanded to do so (see Numbers 13-14). Such actions signaled that their hearts had grown cold against the Lord. When they were tested in the wilderness, they resisted His admonitions and failed to believe His promises.

MacArthur: After they arrived for the ‘trial in the wilderness,’ God continued to bless them with miracles—travel direction by pillars of cloud and of fire (for night travel) and provision of food and good water. After each blessing they were satisfied only for a brief time. They soon started again to complain and to doubt God. They became the classic illustration of unbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence. God had clearly and miraculously revealed Himself; they knew that He had revealed Himself; they knew what He expected them to do; and they saw evidence after evidence of His power and His blessing. But they never really believed. Just as the Egyptians quickly go over their fear of God, the Israelites quickly got over their trust of Him. They would not commit themselves to Him in faith.

c) *Forty Years (3:9)*

...⁹ where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.

Schreiner: The wilderness generation tested God instead of trusting Him. Instead of believing God cared for them, they became convinced that He despised them. Their unbelief is astonishing since they experienced God’s gracious work for 40 years. The Lord liberated them from Egypt and preserved them from the perils of the desert for 40 years. Seeing the Lord’s gracious work and turning against Him can only be explained by a rebellious and resistance heart. They did not want the Lord to be their God.

Bruce: A later generation of Israelites was warned by the psalmist not to follow the bad example of their ancestor’s refusal to listen to God, lest disaster should overtake them in turn; and now a still later generation has the same warning impressed upon it by the writer to the Hebrews. Although the writer does not say so in so many words, it may well be that he saw a special significance in the ‘forty years’ of Ps. 95:10. We have evidence of a belief that God’s dealings with Israel, which began with a probationary period of forty years, would be rounded off at the end-time by a probationary period of like duration; and (if this epistle was written shortly before 70 AD) it was nearly forty years now since Jesus had accomplished His ‘exodus’ at Jerusalem. Hence the urgency of the present appeal to the readers to take heed ‘so long as it is called “Today”’ (v. 13).

Hughes: What we deduce from the accounts in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 is that *the hardening that took place in the wilderness was rooted in unbelief*. Many of those, perhaps most, who left in the exodus had an inadequate faith in God. It was a fair-weather, herd-instinct faith—good until the first trial, when it dissolved in unbelief. The depth of their defective belief produced one other subsidiary characteristic—*contempt/irreverence*. Hence all the railing against God and His faithful servants. Thus we understand that the pathology of a hard heart originates in *unbelief* that spawns a hardened *contempt* and a hardness that works out in sinful *disobedience*.

MacArthur: Most people do not need more proof that God is real or that Jesus is His Son and the Savior. They need to hate and repent of their sin and to commit themselves to Him. A God who is continually tested will never be accepted. The one who tests God today does so for the same reason as did the Israelites in Moses’ day—to put Him off, because they love their sin, their own way, their own plans too much to give them up to God.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

3. The Result (3:10-11)

a) God Was Provoked (3:10)

¹⁰Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.'

Schreiner: As a consequence ('therefore,' *διο, dio*) God became angry with them, for they did not trust Him or love Him after all He had done for them. Israel's problem was irremediable: 'They always go astray in their hearts.' The word 'always' (*αει, aei*) indicates that Israel's wandering from the Lord was not temporary or occasional but was the constant refrain of their lives. Defection from the Lord characterized them. Fundamentally, Israel did not know God's 'ways' (*οδους, odous*). God repeatedly revealed His saving ways to Israel, showing them His mercy and love and grace. The wilderness generation, despite seeing God's ways, did not truly learn who He is. Since they didn't know God's ways, they didn't know God.

MacArthur: The word 'angry' ('provoked') does not simply mean unhappy or disappointed. It means vexed, wrought up, incensed. God was extremely angry with Israel's sin.

b) God Was Wrathful (3:11)

¹¹As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

Schreiner: Since Israel strayed from God, hardening themselves against Him, He swore with an oath that they would not enter His rest. The particle at the beginning of the verse ('So', *ως, os*) designates result. The Lord's wrath against His people was provoked by their continual wandering from Him, by their failure to trust and rely on Him. His anger reached a point where He took an oath, pledging that they would not enter His rest. The 'rest' here refers to the land of Canaan that was promised to Israel in fulfillment of the covenant enacted with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The text alludes again to Numbers 14. The Lord said they would never 'see the land I swore to their fathers' (Num. 14:23), and 'I swear that none of you will enter the land I promised to settle you in' (Num. 14:30). The promised would be fulfilled for a later generation, but the wilderness generation would not enjoy the land since they rebelled against the Lord.

Hughes: What was the result of Israel's hardness of heart according to Psalm 95? *Withering judgment.* Israel was debarred from the promised land, the place of God's rest. While God gave a general pardon to Israel for the faithless display at Kadesh, with only two exceptions they all died in the wilderness. The point the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to see is that it is possible to have a remarkable spiritual 'exodus' and yet fall by the way when trouble comes. This was the Holy Spirit's message to the beleaguered little church from Psalm 95, and it is his message to us.

A. The Experience of the Israelites (Exodus 17; Numbers 14)

Phillips: Although this passage in Hebrews (quoting Psalm 95:7-11) is timeless in its relevance, it points us back to a specific series of events that happened in history, namely, the revolts against Moses during Israel's sojourn in the desert. The writer of Hebrews directs his readers' attention to this situation as a terrible example of what it means to turn away from faith in God. The previous passage in Hebrews concluded with an exhortation: 'We are [God's] house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope' (3:6). Picking up that in verses 7-9, the author now confronts us with an example of what the opposite looks like, a warning from the time of the exodus.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

1. Exodus 17

Phillips: The scenario recalled in Hebrews 3:7-9 is described in the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel had been delivered from their bondage in Egypt with a great display of God’s power. In chapter 16 the people arrived in the desert across from the sea and immediately began complaining (Ex. 16:2-3). Instead of trusting the Lord to supply their needs, something He had shown Himself both willing and able to do, the Israelites complained against Him. Even when the Lord graciously sent manna from heaven, the miraculous bread that rained down to earth, the people continued to complain and engage in petty disobedience, until they again confronted Moses in rebellion.

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews tells us in verse 8 that this was a time of testing. God had delivered His people and now was testing their allegiance to Him with these difficult travels in the desert. We see how miserably the Israelites failed in Exodus 17:2-4. Again, God was gracious and He sent Moses to strike the rock with his staff, and water came out from the rock to provide for the people. Moses then named the place Massah and Meribah, which means ‘testing’ and ‘rebellion,’ the two words we see used in verse 8 of Hebrews 3 to signify God’s displeasure with His unbelieving people.

Bruce: When the Israelites threatened revolt against Moses at Rephidim, because there was no water there, He asked them: ‘Why do you rebel against Me? Why do you put Yahweh to the test?’ (Ex. 17:2)—and called the place Massah (‘testing’) and Meribah (‘rebellion’) because of their behavior. But it was not on that occasion only, but repeatedly throughout the forty years of wandering, that they ‘tested’ God, in the sense of trying to see how long His patience would hold out in face of their stubbornness of heart.

Hughes: In Exodus 17, early in their wilderness experience Israel was camped at Rephidim by Mount Sinai and ran out of water and began to quarrel with Moses. There ‘Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”’ (Ex. 17:2). And then, following God’s direction, he struck the rock and it gave water to Israel. The account concludes with this postscript: And he called the name of the place Massah [i.e., testing] and Meribah [i.e., quarreling], because of the *quarrelling* of the people of Israel, and because they *tested* the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Ex. 17:7). Significantly the word *Meribah* is used in one other place, and that is forty years later at Kadesh when Israel is again out of water and threatening rebellion, and Moses tragically strikes the rock twice (Num. 20:1-3; esp. v. 13). The point is, the mention of these words at the *beginning* and *end* of the wilderness sojourn is meant to tell us that this conduct was repeated many times during the whole period of wandering.

2. Numbers 14

Phillips: The other Old Testament passage reflected here (primarily in 3:10-11) is Numbers 14, which records Israel’s greatest revolt against the Lord. In chapter 13 God sent out one scout from each of the tribes, twelve in all, to spy out the Promised Land in preparation for the nation’s entry. The scouts came back and delivered a sobering report (Num. 13:27-31). Only two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urged otherwise (Num. 14:8-9). Nonetheless, Numbers 14 records a general revolt against the Lord’s rule. The people cried out that the very God who had delivered them from Egypt now sought to kill them in Canaan. They refused to obey, refused to go forth into the Promised Land, and even set out to stone Joshua and Caleb, who had stood up against their unbelief.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

Phillips: It was at this moment that the glory cloud of the Lord appeared at the tabernacle, and thus ensued one of the most sobering moments in all of Scripture. ‘How long will this people despise Me?’ the Lord bellowed at Moses. ‘How long will they not believe Me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? (Num. 14:11). Moses pleaded with the Lord for the lives of his people, arguing that if God struck down the Israelites now His name would be scandalized among the nations. Moses begged God to glorify Himself by forgiving the people (Num. 14:19). God did spare them, but He also punished them, as recorded in Hebrews 3:11. Quoting Psalm 95:11, the author recalls God’s terrible words, ‘As I swore in My wrath, “They shall not enter My rest.”’ The nation of Israel would enter the Promised Land, but none of this generation would be left when that happened. Instead, they would wander forty years in the desert. Only when the last of the rebellious adults had died, leaving only Joshua and Caleb, who trusted the Lord, were the children permitted to enter into the land.

Bruce: The occasion which is uppermost in the psalmist’s mind is that recorded in Num. 14:20ff. When the majority of the spies brought back to Kadesh-barnea an unfavorable report of the land of Canaan, the people revolted against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, and were on the point of choosing a new leader who would take them back to Egypt. In response to Moses’ intercession on their behalf, God refrained from wiping the whole nation out by plague, but, said He, ‘None of the men that have seen my glory, and my signs, which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers, neither shall any of them that despised Me see it’ (Num. 14:22ff.). Therefore, instead of invading the promised land at once and taking possession of it, the people remained in the neighborhood of Kadesh-barnea thirty-eight years, ‘until the entire generation, that is, the men of war, had perished from the camp, as Yahweh had sworn to them’ (Dt. 2:14). Of those who were already full-grown men when they came out of Egypt, none except Caleb and Joshua survived to enter Canaan, the ‘rest’ or home which God had prepared for them.

Hughes: For the psalmist who wrote Psalm 95, the apex of this hard-heartedness came in the events recorded in Numbers 13-14: Israel’s catastrophic unbelief at the border of the promised land, in Kadesh-Barnea, when the twelve spies returned from their forty-day mission with conflicting recommendations. The only thing they could agree on was that the land was rich in grapes and pomegranates and figs—truly flowing with milk and honey (Num. 13:23, 24, 27). The majority (ten out of twelve) said the land was untakable (Num. 13:32-33). That night unbelief was rampant in Israel. All the people wept. Speaker after speaker called for deposing their leaders and returning to Egypt (Num. 14:1-4). Everyone talked about stoning Joshua and Caleb, who dared to believe God would give them the land (Num. 14:10). But then God answered (Num. 14:10-11) and indicted the hard hearts of Israel.

3. The Application

Bruce: The New Testament bears witness, in a number of places, to a primitive and widespread Christian interpretation of the redemptive work of Christ in terms of a new Exodus. The death of Christ is itself called an ‘exodus’ (εξοδος, *exodos*) in Luke 9:31; He is the true Passover, sacrificed for His people (1 Cor. 5:7b), a ‘lamb without blemish and without spot’ (1 Pe. 1:19). They, like Israel in early days, are ‘the church in the wilderness’ (Acts 7:38); their baptism into Christ is the antitype of Israel’s passage through the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1ff.); their sacramental feeding on Him by faith is the antitype of Israel’s nourishment with manna and the water from the rock (1 Cor. 10:3ff.). Christ, the living Rock, is their guide through the wilderness (1 Cor.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

10:4b); the heavenly rest which lies before them is the counterpart to the earthly Canaan which was the goal of the Israelites (4:1ff.). The moral implications of this typology are pressed upon Christian readers by more than one New Testament writer: Paul tells the Corinthians that the record of Israel's rebellion and punishment in the wilderness has been preserved 'for our instructions,' lest we should imitate their disobedience and be overtaken by comparable judgment (1 Cor. 10:6ff.); Jude similarly draws practical lessons for his fellow believers from that fact that 'Jesus, having saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe' (Jude 5). This typology was familiar to our author, and quite probably to his readers as well; he uses it, therefore, to warn them against giving up their faith and hope. After his fashion, he bases his argument on a passage from the Psalter, which he expounds in the light of the historical record.

Phillips: What is the relationship between those distant events and the trials being endured by those early Jewish Christians, or by us today? The writer of Hebrews demonstrates an understanding of the Christian life that is common to the New Testament, comparing the exodus to the present life of faith. Like the Israelites, every man or woman who has come to salvation in Christ has been delivered by God from the house of bondage—in our case, the slavery that was our bondage to sin. Also, like Israel of old, we are headed toward a land of promise. We journey to cross the Jordan River, which is rightly compared to our passage through death, after which we enter into our heavenly inheritance. Additionally—and here is the point that is so relevant to our passage—just as the Israelites endured a passage of testing in the desert, so too is this present life a time of testing. This is the time in the wilderness, the time of difficulty and often of sorrow and pain. We are not now living in the Promised Land but in the wilderness, and the sooner we realize this, the better. This helps answer questions like 'Why does God allow things to go wrong in my life?' or 'Why are things so hard?' The answer is that today is the day of testing, and the day of our rest is yet to come.

Schreiner: The old covenant is obsolete, but the OT Scriptures continue to be the living voice of God. Both the readers addressed in Hebrews and we must hear God's voice with faith. We should beware of hardening our hearts against God. A rebellious person puts the Lord to the test, showing that he doesn't know God since he doesn't know God's saving ways.

B. The Exhortation to the Hebrews (Hebrews 3:12-19)

Schreiner: The author applies the message of Psalm 95 to his readers in verses 12-19. They must be watchful lest a heart of unbelief surfaces in them, leading them to apostasize and to fall away from God.

Phillips: The writer of the Book of Hebrews was a pastor. His concern in writing this grand exposition was a pastoral one, and we see this most clearly in passages like this one (3:12-19). His purpose is not merely to set forth doctrine, valuable though that is, but to apply his teaching and to bring it to bear with force upon his precious readers so they will persevere in faith through hard times. The thought of losing even one of this flock through unbelief is enough to motivate his strong exhortations. This emphasis accounts for the repetition of the writer's chief theme in Hebrews 3: 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion' (3:15; cp. 3:7-8). The rebellion he speaks of is that recorded in Exodus 17 and Numbers 14, when the Israelites refused to trust the Lord during their desert trials, after Moses had led them out from

Hebrews – Lesson 8

slavery in Egypt. Drawing from that example, the writer of Hebrews warns his readers not to fail, especially when we have the risen and exalted Jesus Christ as our leader through this world.

Hughes: The writer, having raised everyone’s tension with the warning from Psalm 95, now proceeds to give personal exhortations meant to allay disbelief. The opening and closing verses of this section, verses 12 and 19, mention that subject.

1. Negative Warning (3:12-13)

a) *Don’t Fall Away (3:12)*

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

Schreiner: The words addressed to the wilderness generation and David’s own generation are applied to the readers of the letter. The author is concerned that the readers will fall prey to unbelief so that they would fall away from God. The HCSB captures nicely the imperative which begins the verse: ‘Watch out’ (*βλεπετε, Blepete*). The warning is addressed to believers, to the brothers and sisters in the church (or churches) receiving the letter. No member of the church is exempted from the warning. The readers must guard their hearts and be vigilant so that their hearts do not turn toward evil. Unbelief—the failure to trust in God and to believe His promises—is the essence of an evil heart that refuses to trust in Him (Num. 14:11). Lack of trust leads to failure to obey.

Bruce: The judgment of the wilderness days befell the Israelite who rejected Moses. But just as Christ is greater in glory than Moses (v. 3), so the loss incurred in rejecting Christ is greater even than that incurred in rejecting Moses. The rebels in Moses’ day missed the promised blessing of entry into an earthly Canaan, but latter-day rebellion would forfeit the greater blessings of the new age. It was ‘an evil heart of unbelief’ that prevented the generation which witnessed the Exodus from enjoying the ‘rest’ they had hoped to attain in Canaan; our author urges his readers to take heed lest such a heart be found in any of them.

MacArthur: Based on the illustration of Israel’s unbelief in the wilderness, an appeal is made to the readers of Hebrews not to follow this example. It is a warning against rejecting truth that is known. The judgment of the wilderness days fell on those who rejected God’s Word through Moses, and the warning here is to those who reject God’s Word in Christ. ‘Brethren’ is not a reference to Christians, as is ‘holy brethren’ in 3:1. It refers to racial brothers, unbelieving Jews, as the term does throughout the book of Acts. [DSB note: this seems to be a bit of a stretch].

Phillips: We are well advised to heed the exhortation in verse 12. If the Israelites were condemned for forgetting Moses, how much greater will be the charge against those who forsake Jesus Christ, a far greater mediator and God’s own Son. As the writer of Hebrews put it: ‘How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation’ (2:3), as that revealed in Jesus Christ?

Schreiner: An evil heart of unbelief results in apostasy, in abandoning the living God. Numbers 14 recounts how Israel refused to trust in God and failed to enter the land. In Num. 14:9, as Israel stood at the crossroads determining whether to obey the Lord or not, Joshua and Caleb exhorted them not to ‘rebel (*αποσταται, apostatai*) against the Lord’ (14:9). The author of Hebrews, recalling that event, makes a similar plea to his readers, summoning them not to repeat the error of the wilderness generation.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

Schreiner: Apostasy is the consequence or result of an unbelieving heart. Apostasy captures well the meaning of the word used here (*αποστηναι, apostēnai*). The author warns them against departing from God (HSCB), about the danger of falling away (ESV), about forsaking Him (NET), about turning away from Him (NIV). Such turning away is not a temporary deviation but a rejection of God's lordship.

Hughes: 'Fall away' means to willfully apostatize. Such turning away incurs a huge penalty. Because Christ is greater than Moses, the loss incurred in rejecting Christ is greater than the loss in rejecting Moses. The rebels in Moses' day missed the promised blessing of entry into earthly Canaan, but rebellion against Christ forfeits the even greater blessings of eternal life. To turn away from 'the living God' is a huge mistake. The author of Hebrews does not think this is a remote possibility for his suffering little church but a real and present peril. If we are wise, we will share the same regard for our souls.

Bruce: 'Falling away from the living God' is a more positive activity than the English words themselves might suggest; it denotes rebellion against Him. When the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea repudiated the leadership of Moses and Aaron, they revolted in effect against God, who had appointed these two men to be their leaders. And for Christians to repudiate the apostle and high priest of their confession, similarly appointed by God, would be if possible even more outrageous revolt against the living God. A relapse from Christianity into Judaism would be comparable to the action of the Israelites when they 'turned back in their hearts to Egypt' (Acts 7:39; cp. Num. 14:3); it would not be a mere return to a position previously occupied, but a gesture of outright apostasy, a complete break from God.

b) *Do It Today (3:13)*

¹³*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.*

Phillips: We turn to the remedy for unbelief contained in this passage. This remedy comes in the form of two exhortations, one that relates to ourselves and one relates to others. First, the writer warns, 'Take care, brothers,' a command that is rightly taken as 'Watch out' (3:12). To this he adds, 'Exhort one another every day' (3:13). This is an excellent instruction for us today. We are to exert a watchful guard over our own hearts and come alongside others in the church to exhort them to do likewise. The Greek word for 'exhort' is *parakaleō*. The prefix *para* means 'to come alongside,' and the verb *kaleō* means 'to call out.' The picture, then is we are to come alongside one another daily, exhorting one another in the practice of Christian faith.

MacArthur: 'Encourage' is from the Greek *parakaleō*. The root meaning has to do with coming alongside to give help. The writer is saying to the believers among those to whom he is writing, 'Get alongside each other and help each other.' They are especially urged to help their unbelieving Jewish brethren by encouraging them not to harden their hearts but to accept Jesus as the Messiah. 'Deceitfulness' means 'trickery' or 'stratagem.' Sin is tricky; it seldom appears as it really is. It always masks itself. It lies and deceives. When a person becomes spiritually hardened, he rarely is aware of it. He can hear the gospel of Jesus Christ time and time again and not to respond.

Phillips: Christianity is not an individual but a team endeavor. So if we do not know the nature of our fellow believers' struggles, and if we do not share ours with them, then we will never be able to follow through with this command. The result, in that case, will be that people among us will fall prey to sin. Therefore, we are commanded to be watchful for just these things in the

Hebrews – Lesson 8

body of Christ, thereby ensuring that none of us falls away because of sin's deceitfulness. As long as it is 'today'—that is, this present age of testing, with opportunities and dangers like the ones the Israelites faced—we must watch out and exhort one another daily in the things of the faith. Specifically, we must watch for the 'deceitfulness' of sin. We must exert a watchful care against enticing but misleading teachings that deceive the mind. But it gets worse, for the Bible goes on to say that our very hearts are deceitful (Jer. 17:9; cp. Eph. 4:22). I cannot even trust my heart, the Bible says. My desires are not trustworthy. And the wise man comes to realize that this is so—that the things we long for are often foolish and vain, if not outright idolatrous—and therefore he seeks the scrutiny and exhortation of brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Hughes: Having given solemn warning, the author now promotes encouragement. Think how different it might have been for Israel if they had daily encouraged one another instead of falling to negativism and grumbling and quarreling. Isolation, and particularly isolation from the mutual encouragement of the body, is a dangerous thing. In isolation we are 'prone to be impressed by the specious arguments which underline worldly wisdom. When you are alone and unaccountable, it is tempting to take the easy course instead of the right one. We are to encourage each other daily, not just on the first day of the week.

Schreiner: Falling away from God can be prevented if believers encourage one another daily. Encouragement can stave off a spiritual hardness incited by sin's deception. Encouragement and exhortation, the author believes, are a community project and a mutual endeavor. Believers should gather together, as the author says later (10:25), to strengthen and encourage one another. They should be reminded of the goodness of God and the dangers of unrepentant sin. Occasional encouragement does not suffice. Instead it is needed daily. The author pauses to highlight the word 'today' from Ps. 95:7. The day of final rest has not yet arrived. It is still 'today,' a day when mutual exhortation and encouragement are needed. Every day matters to the author. There is no such thing as a routine day without significance.

Bruce: Let them be vigilant therefore, and encourage one another with might and main to be steadfast in their faith, during the present time of probation. While this time lasts, each succeeding day is a fresh 'Today' in which they may heed the psalmist's warning to hear the voice of God and render Him heart-obedience. The exhortation to mutual encouragement was wise: in isolation from fellow-believers each individual among them was more liable to succumb to the subtle temptations which pressed in from so many sides, but if they came together regularly for mutual encouragement the devotion of all would be kept warm and their common hope would be in less danger of flickering and dying. In a fellowship which exercised a watchful and unremitting care for its members the temptation to prefer the easy course to the right one would be greatly weakened, and the united resolution to stand firm would be correspondingly strengthened.

Schreiner: The author explains why constant encouragement is necessary. He does not want the readers to be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Again the importance of each individual to pay heed is underscored in the words 'none of you.' No one is exempt from the warning given here; everyone needs encouragement. The word 'hardened' (*σκληρυνθη, sklērynthē*) is taken from Ps. 85:8, reflecting the sin of the wilderness generation. A calloused heart no longer hears the admonition of God. Such a heart steels itself against the stabs of conscience that bring one back to God. The means of deception is the deceitfulness of sin. Sin may blind the readers to the danger before them. They may mistakenly think they are safe when they are actually on the

Hebrews – Lesson 8

precipice. Advice, correction, and encouragement from others are the means by which the deception of sin can be unmasked.

Phillips: From deception grows hardness of heart—such was the fate of the Israelites who came under God’s wrath. Christian fellowship, including prayer, Bible study, and meaningful friendship, is a great bulwark against sin’s deception; in such company the arguments of sin lose their force, and we are strengthened in faith and obedience. Our goal is to persevere to the end and enter into God’s rest, and our strategy is mutual watchfulness. What a worthy cause that is!

2. Positive Encouragement (3:14-15)

a) Hold Firm (3:14)

¹⁴*For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*

Schreiner: The author explains that the readers must not fall away or be hardened by sin’s deception, for they share in Christ truly only if they hold their confidence until the end. The ‘for’ (*γάρ, gar*) connects verse 14 to verses 12-13, indicating that the final rest will be granted only to those who persevere to the end. The word rendered ‘companions’ (*μετοχοι, metochoi*) by the HCSB is better translated as ‘partners’ (NET) or as those who ‘share in Christ’ (ESV, NIV). The word is used elsewhere in Hebrews of Christ’s partners (1:9; 3:1) and of those who share in the Holy Spirit (6:4) and in discipline (12:8). Verse 14 should be interpreted similarly to 3:6. Indeed, the same verb for ‘holding on’ (*κατασχωμεν, kataschōmen*) is used in 3:6 and 3:14. Believers share in Christ if they hold firm the confidence they exercised in the beginning until the end. The term *υποστασεως (hypostaseōs)* means something like ‘confidence’ or ‘hope’ in some instances in the OT (Ps. 39:7; Ez. 19:5), and the same meaning is possible in Paul as well (2 Cor. 9:4; 1:17). The parallel with 3:6, where believers are exhorted to retain their ‘courage and the confidence of our hope,’ functions as a close parallel, lending support to the notion that confidence is in view here. The author calls upon the readers to hang onto their confidence until the end, for such perseverance is necessary to share in Christ.

Bruce: Again the paramount necessity of perseverance is stressed: only if they kept their original confidence firm to the end could they be truly called partners of Christ. The meaning of the phrase ‘partners of Christ’ is probably not that of participation in Him (as in the Pauline expression ‘in Christ’), but rather that of participation with Him in His heavenly kingdom—the unshakable kingdom of 12:28. To begin well is good, but it is not enough; it is only for those who stay the course and finish the race that have any hope of gaining the prize. The Israelites made a good beginning when they crossed the Sea of Reeds and praised God for their deliverance, but the good beginning was not matched by their later behavior.

Hughes: I am a convinced Calvinist. I believe true Christians persevere—‘the perseverance of the saints.’ And I believe what the Scriptures say here: ‘For we have come to share in Christ [perfect tense: our belief began in the past and continues], if we indeed hold our original confidence firm to the end.’ If we do not persevere, we are lost (cp. 1 Jn. 2:19).

MacArthur: If we really believe the gospel, if we have committed our life to Jesus Christ, then at the end of the day, the end of the year, the end of life, our commitment will still stand. The greatest proof of salvation is continuance in the Christian life. The true believer stays with Christ (cp. Jn. 8:31). When someone departs from the gospel, backs away from the faith, we can only conclude that this person never believed (cp. 1 Jn. 2:19). Staying with the Lord marks the difference between possession and profession.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

Phillips: The first lesson is that *a good beginning does not ensure a good ending*. These people had seen the great miracles in Egypt, and especially the parting of the Red Sea. Yet when they experienced hardship, they turned away! Even the most impressive of beginnings does not ensure perseverance in faith. Here we see how little we can rely upon emotional experiences that we had at the inception of our Christian life. Many people rely on a particularly emotional even in the past—a time when they prayed a certain prayer, or a revival when they walked down to the altar. But none of us will ever have an experience as vivid as that which this generation of Israelites had, yet their good beginning still could not take the place of daily trusting in the Lord in a long walk of faith.

Phillips: Some will object that this conflicts with the Bible's teaching of eternal security. The Bible tells us that all who genuinely trust in Christ can be confident in His complete sufficiency as our Savior. Jesus said of His own, 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand (Jn. 10:28). But we need to remember that Judas was in His company at that time, and because he lacked faith, the promise was not for him. If we want assurance of our salvation, then our faith must persevere under trial. The Israelites in the exodus were safe so long as they walked with God in faith. The same will be true for us; as we trust in Jesus, we can be sure of our salvation.

Phillips: It is perseverance that tests and proves and demonstrates the fact that we are truly joined to Jesus Christ. Note, however, what it is we are to hold until the end: 'our original confidence.' Of what are we to be confident? Not our own works or strength, but the power for salvation that is in Jesus Christ. It is our 'original' confidence, namely, the very message of the gospel that saved us in the first place. This is what we need to persevere to the end. The gospel is not merely a message we need to hear only once, at the beginning of the Christian life. The gospel that makes us Christians—the good news of our crucified and risen Lord—also keeps us in the faith. SO let us diligently and obediently proclaim the gospel to one another, that none of us might be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

b) Do It Today (3:15)

¹⁵*As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

Hughes: Even a slight lessening of confidence is a warning. We must 'hold our original confidence firm to the end.' Perseverance is not a foregone conclusion. So the author of Hebrews next warns us, again repeating the words of Psalm 95:7-8, 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.' Brothers and sisters, if we hear His voice, we must do something now.

Schreiner: Verse 15 restates the main point in verses 12-14 by citing again Psalm 95:7-8. The words 'as it is said' introduce the OT citation and tie the quotation back to verses 12-14. The call to remain faithful to the end still echoes 'today,' according to the author. If the readers have heard God's voice, then they should not harden their hearts against the Lord and should continue to listen to Him. The readers are enjoined to be pliable, attentive, and eager to do what the Lord commands. They should not imitate the wilderness generation, which hardened themselves against the Lord and resisted His instructions so that they failed to enter Canaan.

Phillips: Second, we learn here *how dreadful it is to become hard-hearted toward God*. The meaning of the terminology is obvious. A hardened heart is the opposite of a tender heart, one that is easily penetrated by the Word of God, is easily impressed by its teaching, is moved by God's love, and is touched and won over by God's great redemptive works. It is a dreadful thing

Hebrews – Lesson 8

to be hardened in heart toward God, for then His Word sits upon the heart without penetrating, until before long it is plucked away, never to be grasped, never to be loved and believed. This is how Jesus described it in His parable of the four soils (Mt. 13:4, 19). Perhaps the most frightening example in the Bible is that of Pharaoh. Despite the most forceful demonstrations of God's power and the clearest expressions of God's will, Pharaoh would not yield but stubbornly resisted to the point of his own destruction. How terrible that these Israelites, the very people who saw Pharaoh's example and escaped from his oppressive rule, followed his example! They, too, were hard in heart after all that God had done. We see, then, why such a heart is called evil or sinful in verse 12, for it turns away from the living God.

Phillips: There is an important insight here, namely, that unbelief is at the root of all sin. Specific sins are like rotten fruit hanging on a bad tree. But this is not the real problem; it is not the disease, just the symptom. If we are greedy or hateful or selfish or dishonest, that is just evidence of dead and rotten things deeper inside. Bad fruit grows on a bad tree, just as sin grows from our sinful, corrupt nature. But deeper still, there is a root system to every tree; that is most important of all. Unbelief is the root system that feeds the whole rotten tree of sin. Notice that lack of evidence is not the cause of unbelief. The Israelites had all the evidence anyone could ever want, but because their hearts were hard the evidence did not produce faith. Likewise, people today do not reject Jesus Christ on philosophical grounds but on moral grounds. They reject God's Word because they have a greater love for sin, and their love for sin requires hardness to God's Word. The philosophy comes later; it is only the fruit of hardness to God's Word and love for sin. This is what we find with this generation of Israelites; a hardening of heart that the writer earnestly desires us to avoid.

3. Old Testament Exegesis (3:16-19)

Schreiner: The author engages here and in the next several verses in an interpretation of the OT. In each verse he cites from Psalm 95, which he quoted extensively in 3:7-11, provided a commentary on the meaning.

a) *Who Rebelled? (3:16)*

¹⁶*For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?*

Schreiner: He begins by citing Ps. 95:8, asking who heard God's voice and rebelled against what He commanded. The author provides the answer. It was the entire generation led by Moses who left Egypt. Remarkably, the same people who saw God's signs and wonders in Egypt, who witnessed Pharaoh being brought to his knees, and who experienced freedom at the Red Sea rebelled against God. They heard God speaking to them and knew His will but refused to do what He commanded (see Num. 14). Perhaps there is a hint here of Christ's superiority to Moses in that those who were freed through Moses never entered the land. Jesus gives His people rest and a better rest than Moses as well. Still, the main point is that if Israel didn't escape punishment when they disobeyed the message given to Moses, then those who turn against the message of Jesus will not be spared either.

Hughes: Point: Everyone who died in the desert had begun in the glorious exodus and its great expectations.

Hebrews – Lesson 8

b) *Who Provoked God? (3:17)*

¹⁷*And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?*

Schreiner: Verse 17 continues the pattern of quoting from Psalm 95 with commentary. Here the author cites Ps. 95:10. He asks with whom was God angry for 40 years. The emphasis here is on the extensive period of time during which the wilderness generation faced God's wrath. Their rebellion had consequences in history. The author of Hebrews answers his own question. The Lord was angry with those who sinned. The word 'sinned' calls attention to their evil, to their refusal to carry out what the Lord commanded. Israel was called to enter the land and refused to do so since they feared death if they submitted to God's command. The consequences were disastrous. As a result of their sin, the wilderness generation died in the wilderness (cp. Num. 14:29, 32). They sinned against God because they feared death, and they experienced death because they didn't do what He mandated. They didn't die in the land of promise but in the wilderness. They didn't experience God's favor in the land but His wrath in the wilderness.

Hughes: Point: the men who angered God for forty years were those who did not believe He could provide for them, though they had left Egypt with great hope. This is a warning that high hopes will not suffice—there must be belief.

c) *Who Did Not Enter Their Rest? (3:18)*

¹⁸*And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?*

Schreiner: The full impact of their sin is explicated in this verse. Here the author merges together the question (with words from Ps. 95:11) and the answer into one sentence. He poses a question so that the readers will grasp the significance of Israel's sin and see its implications for their own lives. The wilderness generation didn't enter the rest promised in Canaan. They didn't experience the promise of the land pledged to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Despite being delivered from Egypt with signs and wonders, they never made it to Canaan. Indeed, God swore on an oath that they would not enter the land. God's swearing relates here to judgment, not salvation. The oath indicates God's anger over Israel's disobedience. The oath indicates there will be no second chance for Israel. God's patience was exhausted since they disobeyed Him in the wilderness repeatedly. Their disobedience constituted blatant rebellion, and hence they were banned from the land.

Hughes: Point: Here unbelief leads to an action, as it always does.

Phillips: Third, the writer of Hebrews forces us to face *the reality of God's wrath against sin*. In verse 17 we learn that God was 'provoked' with those who sinned in disbelief. In verse 18 we read that because of their attitude God swore that they would never enter His rest. In both instances, we see God's wrath against sin. Many people today consider wrath to be an inappropriate response for God to make toward sin. God should be more like us, they think; He shouldn't take sin so seriously. But, unlike us, God is perfectly holy and therefore His wrath burns against sin. When we speak of God's wrath, we do not mean God throws a temper tantrum in anger; rather, God's wrath is His deliberate response in judgment toward sin and sinners. As J. I. Packer explains, 'This is *righteous* anger—the *right* reaction of moral perfection in the Creator towards moral perversity in the creature. So far from the manifestation of God's wrath

Hebrews – Lesson 8

in punishing sin being morally doubtful, the thing that would be morally doubtful would be for Him *not* to show His wrath in this way.’

Phillips: Because of their unbelief and subsequent sin, this entire generation of Israelites, the very people God had redeemed out of Pharaoh’s grasp, died in the wilderness. We often hear that God punishes the sin but not the sinner, but look at the contrary evidence here. It was not unbelief that died and left its bones upon the desert sands; it was the unbelievers themselves. So also will God cast unbelieving sinners into the fires of hell—not merely their sin but the unrepentant sinners themselves. God’s wrath was deliberate, not erratic; persistent, not fleeting.

d) Application (3:19)

¹⁹*So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.*

Hughes: The three sets of questions present the descent of hardness of heart: from *hope* to *disbelief* to *disobedience*. Thus, the writer concludes: ‘So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.’

Schreiner: The author concludes by explaining the reason Israel didn’t enter God’s rest: unbelief. The defect of the wilderness generation is described as hardness of heart (3:8, 13, 15), testing God (3:9), going astray (3:10), rebellion (3:15-16), sin (3:17), and disobedience (3:18). Here the author identifies it as unbelief, forming an envelope or inclusio with 3:12 where the readers are warned about having an evil and unbelieving heart. The author, as will be evident throughout the letter and especially in chapter 11, believes faith and obedience are inseparable. Faith and obedience can be distinguished from each other because they aren’t the same entity. Still all true faith inevitably results in obedience. The wilderness generation failed to put their trust in God’s promises. Consequently, they rebelled, sinned, and disobeyed. Apostasy at its heart is unbelief, and perseverance becomes a reality when one trusts God and what He has promised.

Bruce: It was unbelief, faithlessness, then, that kept them out of the promised land. They had enjoyed God’s delivering mercy in the Exodus, and had heard Him speak when He gave the law at Sinai; but those initial experiences did not keep them from dying in the wilderness, or guarantee their safe arrival in Canaan. The moral must have been plain enough to the recipients of the epistle. For they too had experienced the redeeming power of God; they too had the promise of the homeland of the faithful to look forward to; but one thing could prevent them from realizing that promise, just as it had prevented the mass of the Israelites who left Egypt from entering Canaan—and that one thing was unbelief.

Schreiner: The warning addressed to early Christians still applies today. Believers should be vigilant so that unbelief does not begin to invade our hearts. One of the marks of the church should be daily mutual encouragement so that we aren’t hardened by sin. Such encouragement means believers know one another and share struggles. Perseverance until the end is necessary for salvation. When we read about the wilderness generation, we see what happens to those who disbelieve and disobey. They failed to enter God’s earthly rest. How much more terrible is it to fail to enter the heavenly rest.

For next time: Read Hebrews 4:1-11.