

“The Danger of a Hardened Heart”

Heb. 3:7-19

- INTRO. - The number one killer throughout the world is cardiovascular disease. 17.5 million people died of some form of cardiovascular disease in 2012. That amounts to 3 of every 10 deaths. Of these, 7.4 million people died of **heart disease** and 6.7 million from stroke.

- Greatly contributing to that, is the condition known as arteriosclerosis (or hardening of the arteries). If left unchecked, this condition will eventually restrict blood flow and will ultimately lead to death.

- And (as I'm sure you know) the heart by-pass operation is used extensively to deal with this condition. Sometimes angioplasty or stints are used to open up the arteries. Certain medicines can be used to lower high cholesterol.

- But as serious as these physical conditions may become, the Bible speaks of a much greater danger – the danger of a hardened heart spiritually. This is exactly what the author of Hebrews is concerned about in 3:7-19.

- He expressed great fear that there will be some among his audience who may harden their hearts in unbelief, and miss the salvation of God. So here we see the second of five warning passages in this book. This warning is a warning against the danger of unbelief.

- Of course, there are warning passages all throughout the Word of God. Most of those have to do with the dangers of sin – but in this case it is the danger of unbelief. It is probably right to see this warning as an attempt to push those who were right on the edge of the gospel into fully embracing Christ.

- As we have seen, this “sermon” is to a mixed audience, and among those original hearers were those who were intellectually convinced of the truth of the gospel, but had fallen short of committing themselves to Christ. As with most of the warning passages in Hebrews, this one is aimed at those who know the truth of the gospel, but have not embraced it with saving faith.

- John MacArthur says this is a lot like people on the 10th floor of a hotel when a fire breaks out. The firemen are down on the ground with a net telling them to “jump” but they hesitate. They won't jump.

- He says, “They are well aware of the danger and they know the net is their only way of escape; but they do *not* act on what they know is true and necessary. They are concerned about saving some of their possessions, or perhaps they think that somehow they can find another way out. They may be afraid of being hurt from the fall. Some might even be concerned about how they would look while jumping—afraid of embarrassment. But the point is this: simply knowing about the danger and knowing about the way out of it will not save them. If

they do *not* jump they will die. When your very life is at stake, nothing else should matter.”

- This is the serious danger of those who hang around the church for a long time but have never committed themselves to Christ. They know the gospel, they can quote Bible verses, they know exactly who Christ is and what He came to do. They know He is the only hope of eternal salvation, but they have fallen short of professing their faith in Him.

- This was (apparently) a real problem in the first century – and it is still a problem today. And, along with those who had failed to profess faith in Christ, were those who *had* done so but were *not* genuinely born again. Theirs was an empty profession of faith, but they were beginning to turn away from the faith. They were being tempted to go back to Judaism and forsake the gospel (and the church).

- So the author of Hebrews issues a strong warning here, and he employs another example in this warning. As we saw in the previous section, he pointed to Moses (and ultimately to Jesus) as a *positive* example. *Now* he is going to use a *negative* example. He is going to point to those who fell in the desert because of their unbelief.

- He is going to mention an account that his readers would have been very familiar with. It is an account that is connected with Moses because he was involved. And it is interesting to note that the Apostle Paul issued a similar

warning in 1 Cor. 10:1-11. And he concluded that passage with this statement: “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

- This is something we desperately need to learn from. This message (and warning) is just as relevant today as it was the day it was originally written. We too need to guard our hearts from becoming hardened. We too need to make sure we do *not* fall into the serious danger of unbelief.

- Now, if you examine the structure of this passage, I think you will find that it breaks into four main divisions. We see the example in vv. 7-11, the exhortation in v. 12, the encouragement in v. 13, and the encapsulation in vv. 15-19. That’s our outline, and we begin with:

I. THE EXAMPLE (vv. 7-11)

- One of the best ways to teach spiritual truth is through the giving of an example, and that is exactly what the Holy Spirit does here (through the human author of Hebrews).

- Now, the first thing I want you to notice is that (in most English translations) the text of vv. 7-11 is in a different font. That is employed to show that this is a quote from the OT. In this particular case, it is from Ps. 95:7-11.

- This passage was written during the time of David, but it was written about the time of Moses. And it was quoted here as an example for those in the time of the writing of Hebrews. So there are three different generations involved – all separated by hundreds of years.

- The account took place (historically) in the time of Moses, it was still applicable in the days of David, and it was just as relevant during the days in which Hebrews was written. In fact, it is still applicable to us today.

- The essence of the warning is, “Don’t do like the unbelieving Jews in the wilderness. Don’t harden your heart. Don’t fall into the same trap they did. Instead, today, if you hear ‘His voice’ (His truth concerning the gospel) embrace it with saving faith.”

- But let’s back up and look at it in detail. Notice, first of all, how he introduces this quote (verse 7). He says, “Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says...” This book minimizes the *human* author and highlights the *divine* author.

- We know this is *true* of *all* Scripture, but this verse contains one of the clearest declarations of the divine inspiration of the Bible. The writer of Hebrews is proclaiming that the HS is the author of Psalm 95.

- In other words, the Psalmist was *not* just giving his own opinions – he was revealing God’s truth. He was writing from the mind of a man but from the inspiration of the

Spirit of God. When he wrote these words, it was God Himself speaking.

- That is true of *every* part of God’s Word. 2 Peter 1:21 says, “...for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

- John MacArthur says, “The HS was involved in the writing of every word of Scripture. That is why it is sin in the first degree, and opens the floodgates to every kind of heresy possible, to deny the absolute verbal inspiration of Scripture.”

- So this warning is directly from the Spirit of God, but what is the warning? “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...” That’s the basic message. Of course, he is going to go on and give an example of some who did *not* heed this message, but that is the primary concern – don’t allow your heart to become hardened to God’s Word.

- He is going to *repeat* this basic warning three times in this chapter and once in the next chapter. The word “today” is used to express urgency. It means “now.” It implies the idea of, “while you have opportunity.” You can’t always count on tomorrow – you’d better respond today! Any time God confronts the human heart, it is always an urgent moment!

- ILL. – Early in his ministry D. L. Moody would end his sermons by saying, “Go home and think about what I have said.” But one night in Chicago he told his audience that, and the next day the Chicago fire broke out. Many who had been in his audience died in that fire, so Moody made a vow to the Lord that he would always (from that time on) demand that people respond to the gospel immediately.

- The Bible declares, “now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’...” It is foolish (and dangerous) to put it off. It is even *worse* if you harden your heart. You never know how many opportunities you will have to respond to the gospel – or whether you will even have another one after today.

- Just think about that word “today” (and how it is used in this passage. Ron Phillips writes, “It was *today* in Moses’ day. It was *today* a thousand years later when David wrote Psalm 95.”

- It was *today* when the author of Hebrews wrote this message in the first century – and it is still *today* as we sit here this morning. It is still this day of grace called *today*. But today is the only day you are guaranteed of. So whatever you do, don’t harden your heart. Don’t respond with unbelief.

- You see, listening to God and heeding His Word are matters of the will. And so is hardening your heart. You can choose one or the other. In fact, the idea of hardening

implies a willful rejection – and yet, the Bible seems to indicate that it is also a progressive process.

- Paul warns that our hearts (or consciences) can become seared and insensitive, the same way skin does when it is badly burned. Scar tissue replaces that skin with a surface that has very little feeling.

- And in the same way the heart can become hardened. A person’s heart becomes a little bit harder every time he says no to God’s voice. And in the context of Hebrews that means the hearing of the gospel. And if that rejection goes on long enough, that person’s *today* will be gone. Their heart will become so hardened that they can no longer respond in saving faith.

- Literally, the word “harden” means “to dry up, to become hard or stiff.” Once it reaches that place of full hardening, it is no longer pliable, no longer sensitive to the voice of God.

- John MacArthur says, “‘Today’ lasts only as long as there is opportunity to decide – and as long as the conscience is sensitive to God. When a person’s ‘today’ is over it is too late.”

- Listen, you can stand right on the verge of receiving Christ, but if you hesitate, if you say “I’m *not* ready,” if you say, “I need more proof (more evidence),” if you say, “I think I will wait a little bit longer” – your today may slip away from you. Your opportunity may pass.

- By the way, the word “heart” in Scripture does *not* refer to the emotions. *That* was spoken of as the “bowels.” No, the “heart” was a synonym for “the inner man.” It is the Greek word “kardia” from which we get the English word “cardiac.” It appears more than a thousand times in Scripture.

- *We* would probably equate it more with the “mind,” but it had to do with that ability to choose. It had to do with willful devotion or unbelief.

- But notice that this is connected (by the author of Hebrews) with something that occurred in the history of Israel. The KJV uses the word “provocation” (which is a word that literally means “bitterness”). Some translations have the word “rebellion.”

- Look at v. 8, “Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness...” Israel became the classic example of unbelief and hardness toward God.

- I mean, think about it, God had clearly revealed Himself and his will to that generation. They had seen (with their own eyes) His incredible miracles and they knew what God had promised them – a land flowing with milk and honey that He promised to give to them.

- And yet, when they were only 11 days away from the Promised Land, they rebelled (in unbelief) and ended up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Why? Because they chose *not* to believe God. They would *not* commit themselves to God in faith. That entire generation died in the wilderness.

- But what we need to understand (here) is that this is referring to a specific incident that took place in the history of Israel. In the Hebrew text of Psalm 95, the words are correctly translated by the NASB. Ps. 95:8 says, “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness...” Meribah means “rebellion” and Massah means “testing.”

- One Bible scholar points out that this refers to Exodus 17:1-7, where (at Rephidim) the people complained to Moses because they had no water. At the Lord’s command, Moses struck a rock and water came forth.

- Of course, this was the place where Moses himself sinned against God, because he was supposed to speak to the rock, but in anger he struck it instead – but Ex. 17:7 says, “...he named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us, or not?’”

- So this seems to be where the whole idea of provocation – rebelling against God and putting Him to the test – comes from. But going back to Heb. 3, verse 9 seems to

widen this out a little bit more. Look at Heb. 3:9, “Where your fathers tried *Me* by testing *Me*, and saw My works for forty years.”

- *Here* the author of Hebrews points to the entire 40-year period as a time of testing God. And this is quoted from the Septuagint, which seems to indicate they put God to the test and found Him to be totally trustworthy.

- The problem is – unbelief never has enough proof! Over and over again God demonstrated His faithfulness to them, but they chose *not* to believe Him. They kept asking for another sign.

- But think about it, they had seen the miracle of the 10 plagues in Egypt. They had walked across the Red Sea on dry ground. They had (daily) witnessed the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They had seen with their own eyes the incredible presence of God on Mount Sinai. They had seen God bring forth water from the rock. They had eaten the manna that God miraculously provided for them every day. But after all this, they would still *not* believe.

- By the way, many people today are no different. There are those who say, “If God would just do some miracle and show that He is truly God, then I would believe in Him.” No they wouldn’t. God has already proven Himself over and over in history – and He has provided the greatest evidence possible in the resurrection of Jesus

Christ from the dead – one more miracle would *not* convince them.

- MacArthur says, “Nothing is more illogical and unreasonable than unbelief. It refuses to accept the most overwhelming evidence—simply because unbelief does *not* **want** to believe.”

- Of course, Jesus made this very clear in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man (in hell) wanted Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his 5 brothers, but in v. 31 we read, “But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’” Unbelief will *not* be persuaded by miracles. No amount of evidence is adequate for those who choose *not* to believe.

- But there seems to be one other key point in the history of Israel that depicts this whole provocation of God, and that was in Kadesh-barnea. The account is recorded in Numbers 14:20ff. It describes the sending of the spies into the Promised Land and the evil report they brought back.

- The majority of the spies (except for Joshua and Caleb) reported that the people of Canaan were like giants and they were like grasshoppers in their sight. This caused so much fear among the Israelites that they wanted to appoint a new leader to take them back to Egypt.

- The Lord was so angry over this that He was determined to wipe them all out, but Moses interceded, and God concluded (in Num. 14:22-23), “Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.”

- All of that generation died in the wilderness except Joshua and Caleb. None of them entered God’s “rest.” So Psalm 95 was written to warn a later generation *not* to fall into the same trap – and the author of Hebrews quoted it to warn his own generation (and really, all future generations).

- So the events at Kadesh-barnea may have been in the mind of the author of Hebrews here. But going back to the text, notice vv. 10-11, “Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know My ways’; as I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’”

- The word “angry” (there) does *not* mean simply unhappy or disappointed – it means “vexed” or “incensed.” It means extreme anger and disgust. But notice the reason for this: “They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know My ways.”

- Again, this is a heart issue. They did *not* know His “ways” because they did *not* want to know His ways.

They had more than enough evidence of the existence and unlimited power of God – but they refused to believe Him.

- The “rest” in this context had to do with entering into the Promised Land – but as we will see in the next chapter, it is clearly used (by the author of Hebrews) as a symbol of salvation.

- And if they had more than enough evidence to respond in faith, we have even more. We have, not only the witness of the mighty works of God in the OT, but we have the witness of the NT. We have the evidence of the resurrection. So there is no excuse for anyone today who would harden his heart in unbelief. (Pause) But in v. 12 he moves on to:

II. THE EXHORTATION (V. 12)

- Look with me at v. 12, “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.”

- I believe the use of the word “brethren” (here) is in distinction from the use of “holy brethren” in 3:1. This seems to be referring to unbelieving Jews here. And (as I said) these are likely those who are intellectually convinced of the truth of the gospel, but have *not* yet made a commitment to Christ. This makes the most sense for all the “warning passages” in Hebrews.

- He is warning them *not* to have an unbelieving heart. He is warning them *not* to fall short of saving faith. Listen, no matter how close a person is to receiving Christ, if he fails to do so, then he will end up in the same place as the worst of sinners.

- The phrase “living God” is intended to differentiate between the true God and idols. And he employs this phrase to express the fact that the true and living God is the very same God the Israelites rebelled against in the wilderness.

- Notice the author of Hebrews refers to “an evil, unbelieving heart.” The word used for “evil” (here) is only used twice in Scripture, and it is the strongest word for evil that can be used. This is how God sees an unbelieving heart.

- That was the heart the Israelites exhibited at Kadesh-barnea, as they were unwilling to trust God to fulfill His promise of entering into His “rest.” And it is the same heart of unbelief that can keep someone from entering into the salvation of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Thirdly we see:

III. THE ENCOURAGEMENT (vv. 13-14)

- Look with me at vv. 13-14, “But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called ‘Today,’ lest any

one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...”

- The word for “encourage” (there) is the Greek word “parakaleo,” which is a word that is used by Jesus to refer to the HS. It essentially means “to come alongside” to give help or aid.

- As long as it is still “today” – as long as it is still in the age of grace when sinners can repent and believe in Christ – the genuine believers are to come alongside those who have yet to make that commitment, and admonish them to do so.

- And here we are told what it is (specifically) that hardens hearts. It is the deceitfulness of sin. The sooner we learn that sin is always deceptive, the better off we will be. Sin is never what it promises to be. It is always like the bait that lures the fish to its death.

- Sin will eventually harden the heart toward God. And it’s interesting, but Eccl. 8:11 gives some critical insight into this. It says, “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.”

- When it appears that men are getting away with sin – and there is no immediate punishment for it – they come to the conclusion that they will never have to answer for it. And as Ron Phillips puts it, “The more one sins the

easier it becomes to sin, until the heart and conscience are hardened.”

- The deceitfulness of sin hardens the heart and brings about the judgment of God. Those who are wise will safeguard their hearts, and make sure they do *not* fall into this deadly trap.

- Now, I dealt with v. 14 earlier, so I won't dwell on that. Of course, it refers to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, and it is saying that those who “hold fast the beginning of [their] assurance firm to the end” are those who are truly born again, and they will never fall away from the faith.

- I dealt with this thoroughly in v. 6. But there is one final section in this chapter that runs from v. 15-19, and here we see:

IV. THE ENCAPSULATION (vv. 15-19)

- In vv. 15-19 we find a summary of the main point the author of Hebrews is making. Look with me at v. 15, “while it is said, ‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.’ For who provoked *Him* when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt *led* by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?”

- Stop right there for a moment. Who was it that provoked the Lord in the OT? It was the first generation that came out of Egypt (led by Moses). What happened to them? They sinned and (as a result) their bodies fell in the desert.

- They were *not* allowed to enter into God's “rest.” They were *not* allowed to enter into the Promised Land. By the way, the word “all” (in v. 16) *obviously* does *not* include Joshua and Caleb. And (in fact) the Bible tells us that this included all those who were 20 years old or above (Num. 14:29).

- But we have to remember that even Moses sinned, and he was *not* allowed to enter God's rest either. He was *not* allowed to enter the land of promise.

- Now, v. 19 gives us the final conclusion. Here we see the main point. Look at it, “And *so* we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.” I don't know if that applies (necessarily) to Moses, but it certainly *does* apply to the rest of Israel. The issue was “unbelief.”

- Now, we are going to see a lot more about that word “rest” in the next chapter. It is used 10 times in these two chapters. We're going to see some special nuances of that word, but here we are told that the *opposite* of entering God's rest is unbelief.

- It is the element of belief or unbelief that determines if a person will enter into God's rest or *not*. It is all about saving faith. And it is all about the heart. So the question is, "Do you have a believing heart or an unbelieving heart? Has your heart become hardened to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you allowed sin to deceive you? Are you falling short of the salvation of God?"

- The fact that Joshua and Caleb were *not* among those who fell in the wilderness indicates that it is an individual decision. Each person must decide if he will believe or disbelieve. Though others may miss the salvation of God, you don't have to. You can believe God. What will you do today?

- PRAYER