

“The Root of Unbelief”

Hebrews 3:7-19

The author of Hebrews uses the example of the Exodus to warn believers who are wavering in their commitment to Jesus. He notes that most of the people who were freed from Egypt did not finally enter the promised land. They died in the wilderness because of their unbelief (He 3:19). And when we turn back and read the story of the Exodus we find there is no mystery as to what type of unbelief it was: every time a problem arose they refused to trust God. They doubted His love for them, His plans for them and His faithfulness to do what He promised. So as the journey progressed they grew increasingly bitter. In their minds God became their enemy. Every time He put them in a situation where they would need a miracle their response was to grow angry rather than pray. Apparently they expected to be marched straight to the land and to have it handed to them with no opposition. Therefore when difficulties did arise they saw each obstacle as God's failure to care for them. In time they became so suspicious of Him they concluded He hated them and wanted to kill them. And it is this sad generation of people that the author holds up in front of us as a warning. The unmistakable reason he does so is because it must be possible for Christians to do the same thing. We too can harden our hearts along the way and not enter the promised land. This is why we need to again take a careful look at this passage.

A. Israel's Example (Ps 95:7-11)

- 1) (v 7) Today: in this season of grace (Lk 4:18-21; Isa 61:1, 2); while you still have the capacity to hear My voice (Mt 13:13-16)
- 2) (v 8) Don't harden: don't silence the inner voice of the Holy Spirit who's calling you to repent
- 3) (v 8) Don't respond to trials like Israel did: angry and accusing
- 4) (v 9) Don't forget the miracles I've done for you
- 5) (v 10) It's possible to so harden yourself that you cross a threshold: “they always go astray in their hearts” (the flame is extinguished; Mt 25:8)
- 6) (v 11) This happens to people who refuse to learn God's “ways” by walking in faith
- 7) (v 11) If you don't keep “resting” in Christ, you won't enter God's eternal rest

B. Overview of Reasons People Harden their Hearts

Over the course of the book of Hebrews at least six reasons are given. People are:

- 1) Unwilling to suffer persecution
- 2) Unwilling to walk in faith when trouble arises
- 3) Unwilling to rest in Christ: returning to earning salvation through works
- 4) Unwilling to trust in the power of Christ's blood: shame causes me to withdraw from God
- 5) Unwilling to feed: neglecting spiritual nurture
- 6) Unwilling to submit to the teaching of Christ's apostles: deceived by false teachers

C. The Root of Unbelief

The Exodus was particularly an example of people who were unwilling to walk in faith when trouble arises (see #2 above), so this is the warning we will look at today.

- 1) Doubting the goodness of God
 - Genesis 3:1-6
 - This is the main goal of the devil. If he can sour our attitude toward God he has us on the road to rebellion.
 - I take control of my life because I don't trust God
 - Sin is trying to steal the good things God is trying to give us.
 - Jeremiah 29:11 “‘For I know the plans I have for you’ says the Lord, ‘plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’”



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2) Doubting the faithfulness of God

- Numbers 14:22-38
- Will He do what He promised?
- Notice: God tests us and acts on what we do, not His divine knowledge of our hearts.

So, when God spoke to Israel it was not “united by faith in those who heard” (Heb 4:2). The “seed” did not penetrate into their hearts and grow (Mt 13:19).

D. Atrophy

God not only points out the problem in Israel’s heart, He also explains why their hearts had become like this. He says simply. “...they did not know My ways” (v 10). What was it that Israel didn’t know and why didn’t they know it? Apparently, that generation expected a promised land to drop in their lap. They didn’t expect:

- 1) To have to be changed personally (from slaves to warriors)
 - 2) To step out in obedience before seeing God’s miracles
 - 3) To face many opponents determined to prevent them from receiving God’s promise
- They had not learned by experience the faithfulness of God.
 - Faith is not learned overnight. It is built by innumerable steps of obedience and then by observing God’s answer.
 - It is built over time by many small steps of faith: each obedience increases our capacity to take a bigger step. Each disobedience increases our fear and deafens our spiritual ears.

Lessons:

- 1) The life of faith is not optional, it is required for all who wish to know His ways and maintain a tender heart.
 - Hebrews 11:6 “without faith...”
- 2) Hearing God’s word brings a danger: it produces either obedience or disobedience, softening of the heart or hardening.
 - This is why Jesus taught the crowds in parables: to prevent the further hardening of hard hearts (Mt 13:10-13; Lk 8:10).
- 3) Every step of faith opens new potential: you stand on a new level looking at a new assignment which is tougher than your previous assignment.
 - The reward for faithfulness is a greater challenge.

E. Conclusion

God calls every believer into the “wilderness” which is the season between Egypt (slavery) and the promised land (heaven). To successfully move from point A to point B we must walk in faith, otherwise the difficulties we face will harden us to God until we doubt the very essentials of our salvation. Clearly it’s possible to die in the wilderness without reaching the promised land, but it’s not easy. It takes a stubborn, willful refusal to obey God while allowing a hostile mistrust to grow.

F. Application

What do you and I do when:

- 1) A crisis occurs: pray? accuse?
- 2) God speaks: obey? delay?
- 3) God is silent: seek? continue?

G. Question

Name a time when you had to step out and obey God before you saw His answer. Was this hard to do? What effect did it have on you?