
The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Completing Well (Part 1)

Hebrews 3:7-19

12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...

I begin this morning with a history lesson. It is a story that I know you have heard before. It is a story that I trust not only each of the adults, but also our children are well acquainted with. But while you may well be familiar with this history, perhaps it may be said that we are so well versed with this story that we really do not grasp its magnitude, its wonder and its lesson to us. I am speaking of the overall accounting of the exodus of Israel and her eventual coming into the promised land.

In all of the history of mankind, there has truly never been an accounting of a group of people who began so well in their journey and yet finished so poorly. Remember that the whole thing began at midnight with Israel all safe and secure in their homes, having the pleasant smell of roasted lamb all about. At this time, a mighty and terrible messenger of God was making way through the land of Egypt - the destroyer, who was striking down all of the firstborn of Egypt, both man and beast. Through the night then one could hear the mournful cries and wails that arose from every Egyptian house (Exodus 12:29-30). This would be the very night that 430 years of bondage would end.

Remember the stubbornness of Pharaoh, who had repeatedly played a game of "yes" and "no" with Moses, saying that the people could go to worship the Lord in the wilderness and then recanting on his word. But this time was different. After all the plagues and now with the loss of his own child, Pharaoh beckons Moses and not only commands that he and his people leave, but also begs that they would, even asking Moses to bless Egypt. So, as the sun began to rise, the children of Israel made way out of Egypt. We are told that there were some 600,000 men, along with the women and children. And so easily some 1.5 million or more Israelites made their trek towards the desert along with their livestock and belongings. The Israelites were not leaving Egypt with their proverbial tails between their legs however. Rather, this was a proud processional with each family leaving in order with their tribal divisions (Exodus 12:37, 41, 51). And in addition, the Egyptians themselves were giving to Israel all that they asked for and so, they plundered Egypt.

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But as if this were not miraculous enough, as the children of Israel entered the wilderness a most incredible pillar of cloud towered above them, leading the way. As they followed the cloud by day, Israel was taken aback again when, as night fell, that pillar of cloud became a pillar of fire that continued to light the way. Only in my mind's eye can I imagine the power and terror of the sight of that fire against the backdrop of the star-filled night sky.

But the newborn and miracle filled journey was still with more anticipation and powerful displays of the almighty God. For Pharaoh, reeling from what he had done in letting Israel go, took up a vain pursuit to retrieve his slaves. In due time the mighty army of Egypt itself had penned Israel up against the Red Sea. From all appearances, Israel would soon be taken back to Egypt as captives once again. But wait – that mighty pillar of cloud and fire that once led Israel now moved behind her, protecting her from the army of Egypt, giving light to Israel but darkness to the Egyptians (Exodus 14:19-20). What a sight to see that powerful pillar proceed over the peoples of Israel. But God was not done displaying His mighty power yet, for then Moses stretched forth his staff toward the expanse of the Red Sea and God brought forth a driving east wind that must have howled as it created a dry path on which Israel might make their continued escape. But stubborn Pharaoh could not get a clue that all the might of Egypt is accounted as nothing in light of the power of the Almighty God. So Pharaoh took his army in pursuit of Israel and in all likelihood, apart from divine intervention, Pharaoh would have bagged his prize. But again, he failed to consider what he was up against and as the last Israelite made his way out from the dry path of the Red Sea, Moses again stretched forth his staff and in the sight of all Israel, the army of Egypt was engulfed and crushed by the power of the returning waters (Exodus 14:23-31).

As a result of all the miraculous displays of God on behalf of Israel, Miriam, the sister of Moses, along with all the women with tambourines and dancing broke forth in song, singing:

***I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted;
The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation...***

The picture of Exodus 15 is nothing short of an all out celebration, one in which there was no want of enthusiasm, joy and hope for the future that awaited the children of Israel. This was the start, the beginning, the inauguration of the journey of Israel. Their hopes and dreams of soon coming into the Promised

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Land, to dwell in and worship the LORD their God in was soon to come. They were looking forward to the rest promised by God.

But what began so wondrously; what started with the spectacular; what looked to be such a glorious journey and life would end so badly. Remember the 600,000 men of fighting age that came out of Egypt, each of which most assuredly hoped and longed for the promised land)? Only two of these 600,000 would ever see the land and that would not be until forty years later. The other 598,000 men along with others would feed the desert with their decaying corpses.

Now what is there to learn from all this? I submit to you this lesson – that ***just because you begin well does not mean you cannot end poorly***. Is this not a truism of humanity? How often are projects, efforts and relationships started with the highest of hopes and the best of intentions only to fall to the wayside?

What I speak of by relating this short history of Israel and the lesson we must learn from it is the very concern of the author of Hebrews concerning the status of many of his readers. Only the exodus that the author of Hebrews speaks of is of far greater importance and significance than that the physical exodus of Israel. But just as not all who began the physical exodus of Israel did not make it to the promised land, so too, not all who begin a spiritual exodus from sin will make it to heaven. Is this because Christians can lose their salvation? No, rather it is to say that there are many who are in the church, traveling with those who have been and continue to be genuinely transformed, experiencing the blessings and benefits that God bestows on His people, while they themselves have never truly gotten past the seemingly impressive and often dramatic experiences they look back to when they supposedly came to Christ. How can we know if we are truly heading toward the Promised Land or if we are just wandering aimlessly in the desert waiting to die? That, in part, is the very issue addressed by our text. This section of Hebrews serves as the second of seven warning passages. The first was back in 2:1-4 and was a warning against spiritual drifting. This warning passage is concerned with the issue of disbelief and its dangers.

This morning then let us break this warning passage of Hebrews 3:7-19, dealing with disbelief, down into three more specific or applicational warnings.

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I. A Warning To Listen To (3:7-11)

A. Israel's Past (3:7-9)

We begin first of all with the author of Hebrews calling attention to Israel's past. He starts with the words, "Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says..." to remind his readers that before them are not the words and opinions of men long dead and buried, but rather is the message of the living God. It comes directly from the Holy Spirit Himself. In short, what we read here is the Holy Spirit's message. It is important to note here the divine inspiration that the author attributes to Psalm 95. He sees this text as having been given to the Psalmist by the Holy Spirit some 1000 years prior to his using it and the truth is that it continues to be meaningful and relevant today because it is given by the same timeless Holy Spirit to the Church to consider, even some 2000 years after it was first placed here in Hebrews.

After settling then the divine origin of the text, the author does something quite interesting. He quote from Psalm 95:7-11. What is truly interesting here is that every Jew was well-acquainted with this passage and knew it by heart because it was the call to worship used in the synagogue every Sabbath evening. The words, "**Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...**" was heard Sabbath after Sabbath, week after week, and year after year. It was a regular reminder to remember to listen to the voice of God.

The rest of the passage calls attention to how Israel did not listen to God even shortly after the beginning of their journey, just after God displayed His miraculous powers. It is a reminder of Israel's past failure to heed the voice of God.

Now I would like you to note two key words in verse 8 as they will help explain well the dangers of disbelief. The two words are "*provoked*" and "*trial*". These are good translations of the meaning of the Greek words, however, if you read the Psalm 95 passage, you will see that the original words were actual places in the Exodus experience of Israel. The places are called Meribah and Massah. The text in Psalm 95:8 actually reads:

Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness...

These two words then, Meribah or "provocation, rebellion or quarrel" and Massah or "trial or testing" actually give us a clue as to what it means to harden one's heart. All this then takes us right back to an incident recorded in Exodus 17, please turn there. And what was the issue in Exodus 17? The issue was

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that the people had run out of water and they began to quarrel with and provoke God through Moses. Look at how Moses responds in verse 2 – “***Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test God?***” There are our two words. After this, Moses, at the direction of God, strikes the rock and it brings forth water. However, Moses calls the place Meribah and Massah in verse 7 saying that the people quarreled or rebelled and tested the Lord by saying (here it comes), “*Is the LORD among us, or not?*”

It is important also to note that the word Meribah is used one more time in Israel’s Exodus account. This usage was at the beginning, but turn with me to Numbers 20 where we have a scene toward the end of the Exodus. In Numbers 20 Israel is again out of water and it again ready to rebel against Moses. So, what does Numbers 20:13 tell us:

Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contented with the LORD, but He proved Himself holy among them.

So then, we have a picture of Israel’s failure at both the beginning of the journey as well as at the end of it. Those who started the journey in Egypt with joy and hope, as soon as the initial glory of the situation wore off, cried out, “Is the LORD not among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7). You see, the faith they took with them out of Egypt was inadequate. To be sure it might have been hard, if not impossible, for those with a genuine faith to then see them for who they were. But get just beyond the thrill of seeing what God can do and being faced with the reality of a long, hot journey in the desert and such persons began to reflect the shallow inadequacy of their faith.

So then, what we learn from all this is that at the root of a hard heart is the issue of unbelief. These that died in the wilderness, who died while even on route to the Promised Land, had a deficient and defective faith. How can you know if you may possess such a defective faith. We must note what such unbelief produced in these unbelievers. You see, unbelief will eventually create contempt and despising.

The ultimate picture of this is seen in the events recorded in Numbers 13-14. Here we have the account of the sending of the twelve spies into the Promised Land. You of course know the result. Upon their return, the only thing that these twelve could agree on is that the land had good fruit and flowed with milk and honey (Numbers 13:23-24, 27). But the majority, the ten, thought somehow that they were sent to see if they, that is Israel, could take the land. They had forgotten the mighty power of God displayed for them at the beginning and throughout the exodus. The two spies however, that is Joshua and Caleb,

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yet had faith in the power of God to help them succeed in taking possession of the land. These two believed in the power and mission of God, while the other ten gave a bad report and demonstrated their disbelief.

And what then was the result of their disbelief? According to Numbers 14:1-2 we read this:

Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or that we had died in this wilderness!”

They sought to replace Moses and find a leader to take them back to Egypt, back to bondage. Their unbelief revealed itself in contempt toward Moses and even toward Joshua and Caleb as Numbers 14:10 says that the congregation was ready to stone them.

Then again, although seemingly with impatience, I see the LORD appear in patience in verse 10. But notice what the LORD asks Moses in Numbers 14:11 -

How long with this people spurn [hold contempt] Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?

These were people who had undoubtedly seen all that the LORD had done. There was no disputing the miraculous events of Israel's sojourn. Before them daily they had the pillar of cloud and nightly the pillar of fire. Day after day they had been fed by the hand of God the quail and the heavenly manna. These were obvious partakers of the blessings of God, but only on their own terms and for their own benefit. It would only be a matter of time before their unbelief turned to contempt and irreverence.

And just how does contempt reveal itself. From our account we can note a couple of things, the first of which is negativism. Remember what the ten spies reported to the congregation of Israel in Numbers 13:33, “*and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their own sight.*” When we look at life and all it entails from our own human perspective, we truly seem to be nothing more than lucky cosmic specks of dust spinning around on an insignificant planet, orbiting around a smaller than average sun, all encompassed by a vast, immense and cold universe. All we have is to live for now so why be concerned about anything that seeks to put rules, limitations or preventive measures on our freedom to do, to act and be what we like. Let us then eat,

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drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Such is the attitude of the unbeliever. Unbelieving Israel thought that living in slavery in Egypt was better than dying in the wilderness, never believing God for the Promised Land.

Negativism can be subtly hidden by a façade of what I call pseudo-joy. There are certainly pleasures on this earth, some of which are to be enjoyed, others which are expressly forbidden. But the truth of the matter is that this earth ultimately has nothing for me. All I really need lies above. God is to be the strength of one's life, the joy of one's heart and the pursuit of one's endeavors. Do not allow yourself to put off God or put down God's people who pursue Him with their whole hearts. For such the Exodus is a trek to the Promised Land which they know in their hearts will be a far better place with far better joys than what so many others in the church are settling for. And not only are they settling for something less, but the tragedy is that even while they pretend to know the LORD, they will in the end hear those soul shattering words, *"Depart from Me you workers of iniquity, I never knew you."* (paraphrase of Matthew 7:23).

Now related to negativism is grumbling. In Numbers 14 the people are recorded as having grumbled four times. The word for "grumbled" here carries the idea of speaking against or speaking down. It is an act of rebellion because it often seeks to belittle and make light of someone else unjustly. To grumble is to self-justify one's negative attitude. It is to say that although my heart and actions are wrong, they are justified because I don't like what someone is saying or doing. When someone grumbles against God or another, it is an indication of unbelief. I don't believe that that person, or that God has my best interest in mind, so I grumble. I don't believe that my boss appreciates me, so I grumble. I don't believe my spouse loves me, so I grumble. I don't believe my faith amounts to much, so I grumble.

Grumbling and negativism are two tell-tale signs that one's heart is either hard or becoming hard. Pray, dear one, pray that God would not allow you to stay in such a state. For while the grumbling, negative heart may well have seemingly impressive joys outside that which disquiets them, the truth is that such a heart is hardening and is awaiting nothing but the sickness and very judgment of God. A judgment which follows in Hebrews 3:10-11 and which we will look at next week. But suffice it to say that the judgment of verse 11, "not to enter" the rest of God should be a warning of sobering contemplation. Do not think that it could not be you, dear one. For self and Satan are clever deceivers and have lulled many into a dangerous state of complacency.

Do not simply depend upon ever-fading past experiences as your assurance of salvation. The mercies of the Lord are new every morning, says the prophet Jeremiah. The heart that is not experiencing in the present the

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mercies and life-transforming power of God is a heart that ripe for hardening and is a heart prepared for the devastating judgment of God.

If we are to complete well; if we are to enter into glory with more joy than when we were first brought to Christ, then we must learn to hear the voice of God today; we must learn obedience today. We must long for it. We must desire to please our heavenly Father daily with our lives. May this be our heart, may this be our goal; and may this be our joy. Let us learn from Israel's past so that we do not repeat such stubborn, stiff-necked attitudes.

Prayer (Adapted from "Valley of Vision – Heart Corruptions)

O God, may Your Spirit speak in us that we may speak to You. We have no merit, let the merit of Jesus stand for us. We are undeserving, but we look to Your tender mercy. We are full of infirmities, wants, sin; You are full of grace.

We confess our sin, our frequent sin, our willful sin; all our powers of body and soul are defiled: a fountain of pollution is deep within our nature. There are chambers of foul images within our beings; we have gone from one odious room to another, walked in a no-man's land of dangerous imaginations, pried into the secrets of our fallen nature.

We are utterly ashamed that we are what we are in ourselves; we have no green shoots in us, nor fruit, but thorns and thistles; we are fading leaves that the wind drives away; we live bare and barren as a winter tree, unprofitable, fit to be hewn down and burnt.

Lord, do You have mercy on us? You have struck a heavy blow at our pride, at the false God of self, and we lie in pieces before You. But You have given us another Master and Lord, Your Son Jesus, and now our hearts are turned toward holiness, our lives speed as an arrow from a bow toward complete obedience to You.

Help us in all our doings to put down sin and to humble pride. Save us from the love of the world and the pride of life, from everything that is natural to fallen man, and let Christ's nature be seen in us day by day.

Grant us grace to bear Thy will without grumbling and repining, and delight to be not only chiseled, squared, or fashioned, but separated from the old rock where we have been embedded so long, and lifted from the quarry to the upper air, where we may be built in Christ forever.

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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