

# † The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

## Completing Well (Part 4)

Hebrews 3:7-19

*14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, 15 while it is said, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME." 16 For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.*

Let us begin this morning by asking and contemplating this question, "What is it that most angers God?" Given some time with this question, I suppose that we might come up with a number of answers that all might well be summed up with one word – "sin" – it is sin, we might say that most angers God.

But let me ask you this question as well, "Why do people die and go to hell?" Again, we might quickly say, "A person dies and goes to hell for sin." And while this is certainly true in the most general of senses, for indeed a person does go to hell for sin, I say to you that people die and go to hell for one specific sin and one specific sin only – and that is the sin of unbelief. And what exactly is meant by "unbelief" - I say that unbelief is simply the disregard and distrust of who God is, what God has said and what God has done. And when a people, particularly a people who have seen and been exposed to various aspects of God's person and power, choose to disregard or distrust God, such actions bring about His wrath and anger.

In our study of Hebrews 3, we have seen the history of Israel, noting how they started off with God at the beginning of the Exodus with great hope, with great joy and with great enthusiasm. The many who exited Egypt made mighty professions of faith and trust in God and in His servant Moses. But their exuberance was quickly squelched by challenges of trusting God to get them through a hostile and inhospitable desert. These were those whom are like the seed thrown on rocky soil, of whom Jesus said in Matthew 3:20-21;

***20...this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when***

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***affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.***

Why was God angry with the many who came up out of Egypt? Was God angry with them because some were liars, or because some were thieves, or because some were cheaters, or lustful, or because some were even murderers? To be sure, such types were certainly a part of the mass that traveled out into the desert under the watchful eye of God via the pillar of cloud and fire. Such things certainly displease and anger God. But what is it that truly provoked God to the greatest extent of His anger, so much so as to prohibit the lot of them to ever enter the rest of the Promised Land? According to Numbers and Psalm 95 and even in the book of Hebrews, we learn that what most provoked God was Israel's hardened hearts, hearts of disbelief in the person and power of God; hearts that did not trust in the character and capabilities of God; hearts, that in the final analysis, revealed a total lack of faith or full confidence in God and His ability to provide them everything needed for victory; be it victory over their past enemy, that is bondage to Egypt; victory over their present circumstances, that is the traversing of an inhospitable desert; or victory over future trials that await them, potential giants that could instill fear and doubt.

I remember in my senior year in High School, I decided that I wanted to play on the football team. I had run in cross-country and track in my Freshman through Junior years. Now, you need to know that I was in a very large High School in San Diego, about 3500 students. When I spoke to the coach about trying out, he told me that it would be unlikely I would make the team because I had no previous experience playing and with a large High School, there was a lot of talent to compete against. I remember some of the players on the team razing me about trying to make the team. Yet, I knew what I was capable of, and so I went out and did what I could do. On the first full day of practice in pads, the coach worked us hard with drills and such and then had us run a timed mile. Here I thanked the Lord for my cross-country training. I ran that mile like my life depended upon it, and while there were guys certainly faster than me in the short distances, I ran that mile in 5:25 with pads, well in front of the rest of the team. Upon finishing, the coach called me over and gave only these words of encouragement. He said, "Hey boy, what's your name again?" I said, "Godfrey!" To which he responded, "I'll be watching you, Godfrey!" In spite of all the disbelievers, I made the team and enjoyed football in my senior year.

I share this story only because I remember being somewhat frustrated with so many people who razed and mocked me for trying out for the team, saying

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that I had no chance. Have you ever had your own abilities or intentions challenged by those who were absolutely mistaken about such things, and yet perhaps continued to say that you could not or would not be able to perform? You see, it is this type of attitude, only to a much greater degree that Israel exhibited toward God. They did not believe God could pull off such a feat as delivering them safely to the Promised Land.

And there are many in the church who believe they have begun something with God and yet over the course of time, their trust and faith begin to wane. And if left unchecked, such disbelief will inevitably result in one falling away from God. So we must learn that to complete well in the Christian journey, we must have a firm trust and belief in the power of God to do what He has promised – to bring us to the Promised Land of glory by the sole merits of Jesus Christ His Son – this is in fact the very essence of the gospel.

In these final verses of Hebrews 3, the author is summarizing the points and the warning he has made concerning disbelief. He once again draws our attention back to the illustration of Israel, show us her failure, so that we might learn from such failure and not allow even the smallest semblance of her sin to find its way into our lives. Let us look then at verses 15-19 and note four final considerations.

## **I. The Application of Truth (3:15)**

*while it is said, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”*

In verse 15 the author points us back once again to Psalm 95:7-8. These were words that were spoken to Israel, to remind them of the dangers of disbelief and disobedience and they are repeated now for our benefit, that we too might learn from Israel’s previous failure. There are two key observations I wish to make from this verse:

### **A. Two Obligations**

First, please note that there are two obligations or duties presented to us in this verse. The first obligation is to **“hear His voice.”** If we desire to complete well this journey we have begun with God, then we must hear, or heed the voice of God. We have already learned from the book of Hebrews that God has spoken to us finally and completely in His Son Jesus Christ. All who profess to know Christ must take heed to the very words of God spoken concerning His Son. He said in Matthew 17:5;

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***This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!***

And what is it that Jesus Himself spoke to His disciples concerning listening and heeding His words? In John 14:15 He said,

***If you love Me, you will keep [or do; perform] My commandments.***

*This command to hear God's voice is a positive way in which we may be kept from disbelief.* In other words, if you are struggling with whether you can completely trust God or if He will really do what you have read He will do, do not shrink away, but rather be determined to ***"hear His voice"*** and keep His commandments.

The second obligation then is stated in the negative with the words, ***"do not harden your hearts..."*** It is interesting that the Bible speaks of man possessing a hard heart. People are by birth and by nature hard-hearted when it comes to the things of God. We are said to be ***"dead in our trespasses and sins"*** (Ephesians 2:1) and to possess hearts that are, according to Jeremiah 17:9, ***deceitful and desperately sick***. All that is required for one to harden his heart is to avoid or remove himself from the things of God; from the Word of God, and from the gathering of God's people. It is not so hard to understand why some find it difficult to engage the fundamentals of prayer, bible reading and fellowship. Such things go against the nature of a hard heart. Therefore, avoiding such things are also then evidences of a hard or hardening heart.

The heart that ***"hears His voice"*** must respond so that it may be softened. And what are the characteristics of a softened heart? Let me give you five characteristics of a softened heart. The softened heart (1) receives God's Word (1 Thessalonians 2:13); (2) it acknowledges sin (Psalm 32:5); (3) it adores the mercy of God (Psalm 5:7); (4) desires God's fellowship (Psalm 51:10-12); and (5) it longs for the return of Christ (Revelation 22:20). And what are those things that will help aid us in possessing such a heart? Beloved, may we practice repentance from sin, faith, prayer, patience, hope and love. Our obligations are to hear His voice, to walk as Jesus Himself walked and to do everything necessary to avoid even the appearance of evil and disbelief in our lives.

## ***B. One Opportunity***

I pray that the two obligations of hearing God's voice and not hardening one's heart are straightforward enough. However, there are many enemies to fulfilling these duties and you know many of these enemies well by name. They

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include such things as laziness, sloth, complacency, excuse giving and even business. But note again that Hebrews 3:15 gives us but one opportunity to fulfill the obligations and that time is **“while it is said, Today...”** Grace is granted to us “today” to hear his voice and pursue soften heart. We are far too easily spent on the notion that obeying God and pursuing purity of heart can be sought after and obtained later. Beloved, if you hear the voice of God, you must do something now! When is it “Today!” Is this not right now? And, if the Lord does will, tomorrow will become today, but we cannot wait to do until tomorrow what God has called us to do today. So, let us hear His voice and may we not harden our hearts.

As we move then into the next three points, I would like you to note that there are in essence six questions in verses 16-19. These six questions are in three sets of two with the first question of each set making an inquiry, and the second question actually answering that inquiry.

## II. The Aggravation of God (3:16)

Our first set of questions point out to us the Aggravation of God. The inquiry is made by asking, **“For whom provoked Him when they had heard?”** In other words, who provoked, or aggravated to wrath, God? In the recorded history of the world and of Israel, who has the unique distinction of having pushed, tested and repeatedly tried God’s patience and mercy? The answer is given to us in the second question, **“Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?”**

The point of these questions is simply this, God is provoked by people who make professions of faith and yet reveal no follow through. It is easy to get on the celebratory band-wagon; to enjoy all the frolic and fun of what appears to be an exciting and perhaps seemingly easy road. But when reality sets in, when faith is tested by extreme circumstances, many people will falter and fail.

Last week I mentioned the term “vicarious” - meaning “one person serving as a substitute for another or to the benefit or advantage of another.” I spoke of many people who are enjoying baseball and their team’s victories “vicariously” in that they are not playing on the team themselves but they are taking credit for and enjoying the benefits of those victories. But how many of those same fans, upon such time as their team loses, will quickly fall away and perhaps even disown their team? Many. Everybody likes a winner and very few stick it out with the losers.

When it appeared to Israel that perhaps God was inept and unable to perform, many of the people lost heart and faith. They questioned the abilities of

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God and this provoked God to anger; not an unbalanced and emotional rage, but a righteous anger that burned against the peoples' hardness of heart to remember and appreciate all that He had already done for them. If we are going to complete well, we must not aggravate the wrath of God by demonstrating in any fashion hearts that express any kind of distrust of God and His abilities to save. You see, to start off by saying, "I believe in Jesus. I trust God. I will follow Him all the days of my life" and then purposely fall short in those statements is nothing short of hypocrisy. May we not exasperate and aggravate our God to the point of incurring His wrath.

### III. The Anger of God (3:17)

The second set of questions expands on this idea of aggravating God and speaks of us then of the actual anger of God. The question is asked in verse 17, **"And with whom was He angry for forty years?"** I find this an interesting question. In our study we have noted that the watershed of Israel's disbelief occurred in Numbers 13 and 14 when the recommendation of Joshua and Caleb to go and possess the Land by the power of God was countered with the faithlessness on the part of the other ten spies and the disbelief on the part of Israel. But the truth of the matter is that there were many episodes before and after this event that reveal a continual and habitual disbelief in God on the people's part. Near the beginning, Israel revealed disbelief when they assembled the golden calf (Exodus 32). Near the end, Israel expressed faithlessness when they fell into the sin of Balaam at Peor (Numbers 25). The vast majority of the Israelites' lives became characterized as those that did not ever repent or ever believe. They attended the tent of meeting every week. They gave their tithes and offerings. They presented outwardly some semblance of religiosity and morality, yet their hearts were evidently full of disbelief. And so, for forty years God endured their hard heartedness.

And that it was disbelieving Israel that angered God for forty years is given to us in the second question of verse 17, **"Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?"** God is angered by those who willfully continue in the practices of disbelief, whether by heart or by action. We must learn the lesson that God hates sin. Even after hearing many messages on the topic of God's hatred toward sin, we can still almost immediately rank, categorize and therefore seek to justify various sins, especially our own. If we are to complete well the journey we began with Christ, we must not toy with or seek to tolerate sin in our lives. We tend to justify the sin in our secret closets as not

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being so bad as the sins we see overtly in others. But may I quote from Spurgeon who said,

*“Brethren, do not, I beseech you, incur the fearful guilt of secret sins. No man can sin a little in secret, it will certainly engender more sin; no man can be a hypocrite and yet be moderate in guilt; he will go from bad to worse, and still proceed, until when his guilt shall be published, he shall be found to be the very worst and most hardened of men. Take heed of the guilt of secret sin.*”

God will deal most harshly with sin, be it public or private. Our text says that those who sinned were those **“whose bodies fell in the wilderness.”** This translation does not do this phrase justice. The Greek word for “bodies” here is actually not plural, but in the singular and literally means “limb” like a leg or an arm. The idea of the word is dismemberment. The Apostle Paul uses this idea in the context of disbelieving Israel in 1 Corinthians 10:5 when he writes (and I am quoting now from the NKJV);

***But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.***

How angry is God toward the sin of disbelief? He is willing and able to literally dismember any group or individual who continues in such a state. Dear professing Christian, fear any semblance of disbelief which could reveal a heart that has never truly believed and will therefore one day face the wrath of God.

## IV. The Attributes of Disobedience (3:18-19)

We end then with the third set of questions beginning in verse 18, which I know is really only one, but can easily be divided into two. The first question then would be, **“And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest?”** There is always a consequence to sin. As has been stated from this pulpit before, “You can choose your sin, but you cannot choose the consequences.” I know that many feel the consequences of sins can be dealt with and endured. Often times sin seemingly goes by without any apparent judgment at all. But I tell you the truth, those whose hearts are characterized by disbelief, who entertain the notions and practices of this world, these are those who will find that God has prohibited them from His rest, that is heaven. God has stated, He has declared and made an oath that those who practice the sins of

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disbelief will find themselves far from God in the end, in a place of eternal torment and judgment. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 we read:

***9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.***

Again, what do such sins reveal, they reveal disbelief. The second question derived from verse 18 so states, Was it not, ***“but those who were disobedient.”*** Now I said that such sins reveals disbelief, but our author says such sin resulted in disobedience. The word translated “disobedient” here literally means “not to allow one’s self to be persuaded or believe and therefore not to act.” If I tell you that the building is on fire and that you need to leave now, but you don’t believe me, then you will also naturally disobey me. If a person does not believe what God has commanded, demanded and required of him, then he will also naturally disobey Him. We are speaking of people who are obstinate, stiff-necked and dreadfully stubborn.

May we be wary then of disobeying God, for it reveals a heart of disbelief. And in verse 19 we see the terrible demise of such disbelief stated again, ***“So, we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.”*** Those who are seeking to complete well are those who, as we said last week, are persevering in the faith, striving to trust God in all areas of life on a continual basis. Such people may rightfully have an assurance of their salvation. But, for those who simply make a profession of Christ, who rarely or purposely seek to follow Christ obediently, such persons have every right to question their faith. Do not put off the obtaining of your assurance until tomorrow. God has not given anyone tomorrow, only “Today.” May all take a serious look at their standing before God. Do you know Jesus truly as your LORD and your only Savior? May all who started well, complete well by trusting completely and wholly on Christ alone. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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