

## ***First Century Evangelism***

### ***Hebrews 3:7-19***

We have discussed the types of people that would have received this letter in its original context. Among those groups there would have been true believers tempted to turn away from Christ and those who have heard the gospel but had not yet fully committed to following Christ. In the first six verse of chapter 3 the author spoke directly to the true believers (*holy brothers and sisters who share in the heavenly calling*), but in the rest of the chapter he addresses those who have not yet fully committed to Jesus. We can certainly find these same people groups in our churches today, but in this setting tonight we likely lack many unbelievers. Therefore, I would like to encourage us to consider how we should receive the Lord's message. I suggest we see this message as a lesson in evangelism. As we unfold the text we will look at how the author uses scripture and history to call people to a true and saving faith in Jesus. We will see him use a biblical illustration to make the call, demonstrate a personal and corporate application to it, and then reveal evidences of both the correct response in belief and the incorrect response in unbelief.

#### 1. The Warning Illustrated (7-11)

***Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, <sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.'<sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"***

Here the author is quoting Psalm 95:7-11 which is essentially quoting someone else who quoted someone else. A thousand years before Hebrews was written Psalmist is making reference to Israel's rebellion in the wilderness and is using it in the same way the author of Hebrews uses it, to call his generation to faith in God. It is a warning against rejecting God through unbelief that is just as valid today as it was then. It is a warning to anyone who has been exposed to the truth of God and is faced with a decision to respond in faith or reject it in belief.

The passage begins with the word **Therefore** to point us back to the previous argument for the supremacy of Jesus over Moses. The author is assuming he won the argument and is moving on to address those listening that are struggling to submit to Jesus' lordship in the way they submitted to Moses' legacy.

He does so on the authority of Scripture. **as the Holy Spirit says.**

Evangelism Lesson #1: Let God do the talking

- Inspiration – 2 Peter 1:21 *For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*
- Authority – 2 Timothy 3:16a *All Scripture is breathed out by God*
- Infallibility – It cannot fail
- Inerrant – It does not contain error
- It contains the power – *Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

That leads us to the illustration:

***“Today, if you hear his voice, <sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’<sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”***

A first-century Jewish audience would have known the full story of the Israelite's wilderness wanderings. They would have understood well the testing and the rebellion. In Psalm 95 the wilderness is referred to as Meribah, which means *quarreling*, and Massah, which means *testing*. They would know all the stories about the bitter water, the bread from heaven, the water from the rock, the receiving of the Law, etc... There was a pattern established in that 40 year period of a Divine miracle and then complacency. God would move, they would get excited, make commitments, and then

soon get bored and grumble. They could never stay satisfied. Their dissatisfaction would always lead them to grumbling and sin.

Because of that they were never permitted to enter into God's rest, which in this context was the promised land.

## 2. The Personal Application (12)

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

Here is where the author makes a personal application (or point of contact) to his current listeners. He makes a direct connection by calling them brothers. He is reminding them of just how closely they relate to this biblical and historical illustration. These were their forefathers. This is their history.

The warning to ***Take care*** indicates the idea that rebellion is not always on the surface and easy to detect. In fact, it is typically hidden within Satan's deception. The majority of lost people that congregate in churches believe they are saved. That is why we continue to preach the gospel to ourselves. Paul gives the same warning in Philippians 2:12 like this: *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*. Paul also tells the Corinthians to *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!* (2 Cor. 13:5).

That is exactly what the author of Hebrews is doing when he says, ***Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart***. It is your heart ***leading you to fall away from the living God*** and return to the Old Covenant temple worship.

## Evangelism Lesson #2: Challenge the Heart

So many people want to make the conversation about things we believe are right and wrong, but we need to focus on the heart just like Jesus did. Do not feel the need to defend Christian morality and ethics but challenge your listeners to answer the why questions. Look at the Sermon on the Mount as an example.

While the gospel is personal it also has a corporate nature for particularly for those who gather in a kingdom community.

### 3. The Corporate Application (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.***

This is one statement in this section that is meant to address the audience as a whole. It applies to both sides of the group. If you happen to be a true believer in this group your responsible to encourage those who are wavering daily. You are to implore them to believe. If you are one of the wavering ones you are warned here that your heart may be hardened by your sin. Listen diligently to those who are exhorting you.

Evangelism Lesson #3: Use your Spiritual gifts to evangelize in the Church.

Lost people fill our pews every Sunday. The difficulty with reaching these people is that they do not always know they are lost. The believe they are fine because they go to church. If we sugar coat the gospel in our churches where are they going to learn they are lost? We can't assume that the professional ministers will do the work for us. That is not the way God designed it to work. We are the minsters. We are the evangelists. We must accept our responsibility.

### 4. The Evidence of Belief (14-15)

***For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. <sup>15</sup> As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”***

I know how a message like this can create doubt and confusion in some people. All this talk about deception in salvation can be scary. The author of Hebrews knows this also. Therefore, he says ***For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*** Essentially, he is answering the rhetorical question, How can we know we are saved? The answer is this: If you are holding fast to your faith you can have assurance that you are sharing in Christ. However, if you turn away from your faith in doubt, grumbling, and disobedience you cannot have any assurance that you belong to Jesus.

It is not a matter of whether or not you can be saved and lose your salvation, it is a matter of if your saved you remain in that faith. Yes, a true believer can fall into sin, temptation, and sometimes doubt for a time, but they cannot fall away from true faith in any lasting sense. God will not allow one of his children to fall away completely.

John puts it like this in his first epistle. He says, *And by this we know that we have come to know him (past), if we keep (present) his commandments (1 Jn. 2:3).*

Evangelism Lesson #4: True faith must be evidenced by present faithfulness.

Evangelism Lesson #5: The matter is urgent. ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”***

Evangelism Lesson #6: God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are both active in evangelism. ***If you hear his voice*** is clearly indicating that not all hear it. It takes new ears given by the Holy Spirit to hear the gospel in all its glory and receive it in faith. Yet, the command is to the people, ***do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion***. When a person hears the call of God they are commanded not to reject it by hardening their hearts. On the day of judgment who will be responsible for not trusting in God’s promises in the wilderness?

#### 5. The Evidence of Unbelief (16-19)

***<sup>16</sup> For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? <sup>17</sup> And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup> So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.***

Lastly, we see what John meant when he said, *“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

*8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 Jn. 1:5-8).*

The greatest evidence that shows we are not truly saved is the ability to freely walk in sin. This is where it should get frightening for many church goers today. Our churches are full of people who worship like angels on Sundays and live like demons the rest of the week. Those are not Christians. You may be in sin but the defining factor is whether or not you can remain after you hear the gospel. If the gospel does not prick your heart and lead you to repentance, there is no other hope for you. This will help us understand Hebrews 6:4-9 *For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup> and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, <sup>6</sup> and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. <sup>7</sup> For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. <sup>8</sup> But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.*

*<sup>9</sup> Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.*

I will end on the better thing- the thing that belongs to salvation.

*9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*