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A WARNING AGAINST HARDNESS OF HEART

Hebrews 3:7-11

By

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Hebrews Lesson 10

A Warning Against Hardness of Heart Hebrews 3:7-11

If you have been a Christian for very long, you have watched someone make a profession of faith in Christ, followed by dramatic changes in his life. It's exciting to see his new joy. But then a difficult trial hits. His faith is shaken. He stops coming to church and begins to avoid other Christians. Soon he is back into his old ways. And you wonder, "What happened? Was his conversion genuine? Can Christians lose their salvation?"

Jesus explained what I just described in the parable of the sower. He said that the seed of the gospel falls on four kinds of soils: the hard road; the thin soil over a hard rocky layer; the soil infested with thorns; and, the good soil. I just described the seed that fell on the rocky soil. In Jesus' words, "When they hear the word, immediately [they] receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away" (Mark 4:16-17). Neither they nor the thorny ground persevere to bear fruit unto eternal life.

The author of Hebrews is concerned that his readers may be the rocky soil that withers under affliction or persecution. They were in danger of going back to a more comfortable life in their old Jewish religion because of the imminent threat of persecution in their newfound Christian faith. So as he concludes his comparison showing Jesus' superiority over Moses, he says that we are God's house, but then adds, "if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope" (3:6).

He continues by illustrating his point with a story from Jewish history that all of his readers knew well, the story of Israel in the wilderness. He quotes the latter half of Psalm 95, which in its entirety was the call to worship in the Jewish synagogues. It tells about a people who had been redeemed from Egypt by applying the blood of the Passover lamb to their homes. They had been "baptized" into Moses through the cloud that enveloped them and through the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:2). They had eaten the heavenly

manna and drank water from the rock. Seemingly, they were a “redeemed” people. Yet, as Paul states, “with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness” (1 Cor. 10:5). As he goes on to say, “these things happened as examples,” so that we would not fall into their same sins.

The author of Hebrews uses this story to make the same point. He is warning us against the soul-destroying sin of hardness of heart. He is saying,

To avoid hardness of heart, we must submit our hearts to God’s Word and God’s ways, especially in times of trial.

We can divide our text into four lessons:

1. To avoid hardness of heart, we must submit to God’s authority through His inspired Word.

He begins, “Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says,” and then quotes from Psalm 95. In 4:7, he mentions that David was the human author of the psalm, but here he emphasizes that it was really the Holy Spirit who spoke and who continues to speak to us (“says” is present tense). This means:

A. What the Bible says, God is saying to us now.

Although the author isn’t directly speaking to the issue of the inspiration of Scripture, his attributing Psalm 95 to the Holy Spirit shows his implicit belief that God inspired Scripture. The Holy Spirit used human authors, but He is the divine voice behind all Scripture. As Peter explains, “no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). Or, as Paul puts it, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (literally, 2 Tim. 3:16). Charles Hodge (*Systematic Theology* [Eerdmans], 1:154) wrote,

On this subject the common doctrine of the Church is, and ever has been, that inspiration was an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will. They were in such a sense the organs of God, that what they said God said.

The starting point for avoiding a hardened heart is to recognize and submit to God’s authority through His inspired Word. If

we sit in judgment on the Word, criticizing the things we don't agree with as outdated or in error, our hearts are challenging God. To learn from God, we must submit to His inspired Word.

B. We should learn from the biblical stories how to avoid the sins of those who lived before us.

As Paul says, these things "were written for our instruction" (1 Cor. 10:11). We disobey or ignore them to our own peril. The starting point is that we *hear His voice* (Heb. 3:7). "To hear" in Hebrew often has the nuance of not just hearing sounds, but also of obeying what we hear. In this regard, it is amazing how many Christians never read the Old Testament. They are unfamiliar with the many stories of triumph and tragedy that are recorded there for our instruction in the faith.

The story behind Psalm 95 (Heb. 3:7-11) is recorded in Exodus 17. Israel had just come out of Egypt through God's mighty deliverance. They went three days into the wilderness and found no water, except bitter water. Did the people say, "Well, God didn't go to all the trouble of delivering us from Egypt so that we would thirst to death in this desert"? No, they grumbled at Moses. He cried out to God, who showed him a tree. When he threw it into the water, it became sweet (Exod. 15:22-25). Exodus 16 tells how God provided manna to feed Israel each day.

You would think that after these gracious miracles, the people would have implicitly trusted God. But then you come to Exodus 17, when again they came to a place where there was no water. Rather than asking God to provide, the people quarreled with Moses and put God to the test. God instructed Moses to strike a rock with his staff, and water gushed forth. Moses named that place Massah (= a test) and Meribah (= a quarrel). The Greek translates the Hebrew, "as at Meribah," into, "as when they provoked Me" (3:8a). It translates, "As in the day of Massah," into, "as in the day of trial" (3:8b).

The last part of the Psalm, referring to God's swearing in wrath that they would not enter His rest, probably refers to Numbers 14, when the people grumbled after the report of the spies. In spite of all that God had done, they were ready to stone Moses and return to Egypt, when God intervened. On that occasion, He

swore that all that had grumbled against Him would die in the wilderness, and thus not enter the land of rest. Only Joshua and Caleb, who believed God, were spared. The point is, we should learn from their sins and do differently!

C. God's Word speaks directly to us today.

Says is in the present tense. "*Today*, if you hear His voice..." This very day, God speaks to us through His Word! *Today* lends a sense of urgency to this message. It says, "Don't put off obedience to a more convenient time. *Now* is the day of salvation! Now is the time God is speaking to you. Don't ignore Him! You may not get another opportunity!"

We have to apply Scripture to our lives in line with proper rules of interpretation, or we may misapply it. Before we apply it to ourselves, we need to figure out what it was saying to the original hearers in their historical context. We need to compare Scripture with Scripture, and interpret the text in its context. For example, we are not under the Jewish laws of sacrifice or cleansing. But there are lessons in these things that do apply to us who have seen the fulfillment of them in Christ. To sum up this point: to avoid hardness of heart, we must come to God's Word with submissive hearts, ready to obey His will.

2. To avoid hardness of heart, we must make sure that our hearts are in proper relationship to God.

Note 3:8, "Do not harden your *hearts*," and, 3:10, "They always go astray in their *hearts*." In the Bible, the heart refers to our total inner being—the mind, the emotions, and the will. As Proverbs 4:23 warns us, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

A. All sin begins in the heart.

Jesus taught, "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness" (Mark 7:21-22). We tend to look at the outward man, but God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7).

For example, we see a man in ministry, who preaches God's Word. He serves the church selflessly. He seems so kind and car-

ing. Suddenly, he falls into adultery and we are shocked. How could this happen? We didn't see that in his heart, he was lusting after women and was not judging his sin. He was not walking in holiness before God in his thought life. What came out in his behavior stemmed from his heart. This is one of the most helpful lessons I have learned about the Christian walk: *all sin begins in the heart*. If you deal with your thought life before God, you stop sin at the root.

- B. Our hardness of heart stirs up God's anger and incurs His severe judgment or discipline.

God says that He was angry with the generation in the wilderness (3:8). This word has the nuance of being disgusted with, or loathing someone. He swore in His wrath (3:11). Wrath refers to God's settled, passionate opposition to sin. God is not passive when it comes to sin. If we profess to be His children, but have not truly repented of our sins (as was the case with many who perished in the wilderness), God's eternal wrath is upon us (John 3:36). If we are truly His children through faith in Christ, then Jesus bore God's wrath for us on the cross, so that we do not need to fear His eternal punishment. But we should fear His discipline, which is never pleasant (Heb. 12:6, 11). He disciplines His children in love, that we may share His holiness. But He can get pretty rough if He has to! If we judge our own hearts, we will avoid God's discipline (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

Thus, to avoid hardness of heart, we must submit to the authority of God's Word and we must do business with God on the heart level.

- 3. To avoid hardness of heart, we must recognize and submit to God's ways.

God says of Israel in the wilderness, "They did not know My ways" (3:10). He says (Isa. 55:8-9), "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" The only way that we can know God's ways are as He has revealed them to us in the Scriptures.

- A. We are responsible to learn and submit to God's ways.

We can't plead ignorance. We can't protest, "But, God, I didn't know that You were working in *that way!*" These people in the wilderness should have known God's ways. But since they didn't know His ways, they didn't submit to them. The time to learn God's ways is *before* we get into a difficult situation (Prov. 1:20-33). If we neglect wisdom when we have opportunity to learn it, we will be overwhelmed when we get into a crisis without it.

- B. God's ways sometimes reveal His mighty power, but miracles alone will not change a stubborn heart.

Those who went astray had seen some of the greatest miracles that God has ever done. They saw the ten plagues in Egypt. They witnessed the Red Sea part for them and close up again on Pharaoh's army. They had seen God provide water and manna already in the barren Sinai desert. God emphasizes that *for forty years* they saw His works (3:9). If miracles alone could soften hard hearts, these people should have been mighty in faith! But they weren't.

You hear people say, "If I just saw a miracle, I'd believe." Sometimes God does use miracles to bring people to saving faith. But often, those words are just a smokescreen. The skeptic is just making an excuse so that he can continue in his sin. The rich man in Hades pled with Abraham to send someone to his brothers and warn them, so that they would not come to that place of torment. Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." The rich man replied, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" Just let them see a miracle! But Abraham answered, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:27-31).

- C. God's ways often involve situations of extreme trial for His people.

Remember, His ways are *not* our ways. He often works in an upside down sort of way that seems strange to us. Again, His Word reveals His different ways to us so that we will recognize them when they actually happen to us.

Consider God's ways in delivering Israel from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. To pull this off, He needs a strong Jewish leader. Pick a man who has been raised in Pharaoh's household, trained in

all of the wisdom of the Egyptians, a man powerful in word and deed (Acts 7:22). So far, so good! Then, have this man fail in a colossal manner and spend the next forty years of his life tending sheep out in the wilderness. Whoa! Then, when God calls him to his task, He will harden Pharaoh's heart repeatedly, so that he will make the Israelites' task harder and will refuse to let them go.

Once he lets them go, march Israel to the Red Sea, where they're helplessly trapped for Pharaoh's strong army. Once they get through this crisis, lead them out into the barren desert, where there is no water. When they find water, make it bitter water. Rather than lead them directly into the Promised Land, an eleven-day journey (Deut. 1:2), take them on the "scenic route," a forty-year journey through the barren desert. That was God's way with His chosen people! He wanted to teach them to trust Him and learn warfare (Exod. 13:17).

Regarding Canaan, God could have sent a plague to wipe out the wicked Canaanites. Israel then could have moved in and lived happily ever after. Instead, God required Israel to fight many difficult battles to get rid of the Canaanites. Later, when Israel needed a prophet, God's way was to make a woman barren. There were many women with children in Israel, but God's way was to bring a woman to desperation, where she knew that she could not produce a son. When she cried out to God, He gave her Samuel, who became His prophet (1 Samuel 1 & 2). Later, when God wanted a man after His heart to be on Israel's throne, He didn't pick the man whom Samuel would have picked. He chose the youngest of Jesse's sons, a teenage shepherd, named David. Then, rather than putting him on the throne immediately, God had his chosen one run for years, in fear of his life, from the mad King Saul.

I could multiply examples, because they are all through the Bible. God's ways usually involve bringing His people to the end of themselves, so that they know that *their trust must be in Him alone*. If we do not know His ways, when we are put in the wilderness with no water, or when we are barren with no strength to produce anything for God, we will be prone to grumble, as Israel did. So we must learn to know His ways through His Word.

- D. When we are confronted with God's ways, we have the choice of submitting to Him or grumbling and going back to the world.

Psalm 95:1-3 reads, "O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods." The warning of our text comes after seven verses of praise. The choice is clear: rejoice in the Lord by faith, or grumble and turn back to the world (Egypt).

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians demonstrates the proper response to God's ways. He was in prison in Rome on false charges. Fellow Christian leaders in Rome were criticizing him and preaching out of envy. As God's great apostle to the Gentiles, Paul easily could have complained about his unfair, difficult circumstances. And yet he wrote, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing" (Phil. 2:15). The words "rejoice" or "joy" occur over 15 times in this short letter. It's not a coincidence that the Greek word for "attitude" also occurs ten times. Our attitude of submission and trust in God will lead us into joy, even in the midst of great trials. An attitude of pride and self-centeredness leads to grumbling, where we resist God's ways and turn back to the world.

- E. To refuse to submit to God's ways is to put God to the test.

God says, "your fathers tried Me by testing Me" (3:9). At the root of testing God is the sin of unbelief (which we will examine in more detail next week). When God promises something and we face trials that seem to negate His promise, we again are faced with a choice: Is God faithful to His word or not? Granted, we're in a barren desert with no water. Granted, there are huge giants that live in the land. In ourselves, we are completely unable to deal with these problems. Will we trust in God and His promises, or will we allow the problems to cause us to grumble and not take God at His word? If we do not submit to God's ways and trust in His word, we put Him to the test, which is normally not a good thing to do! (There are rare exceptions; see Mal. 3:10.)

Thus, to avoid hardness of heart, we must submit to God's authority through His Word. We must make sure that our hearts are properly submitted to Him. We must recognize and submit to His ways of dealing with us. Finally,

4. When we submit to God's Word and His ways, we enter into His rest.

We will deal with this more in chapter 4. But for now, note 3:11. God's oath refers to His settled determination that those who rebelled in the wilderness would not enter the land of Canaan (Num. 14:21-36). When God swears in His wrath, we had better believe that He means business! There is no rest for the soul that is under God's wrath!

God's rest had an initial reference to Israel's settling into the land of promise, but it also has a spiritual fulfillment, as we'll see in chapter 4. Leon Morris (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 12:35) says that God's rest refers to "a place of blessing where there is no more striving but only relaxation in the presence of God and in the certainty that there is no cause for fear." God's spiritual rest comes to the person who "does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

Conclusion

One of God's ways that is most unlike our ways is the cross. Jesus, the sinless Son of God died as the sacrifice for ungodly sinners. God justifies the ungodly through faith alone. That runs counter to human pride. Have you trusted in Jesus' blood alone as your hope for heaven? Is your heart in submission to God's Word and His ways, especially when those ways involve a trip through the barren wilderness? Your heart is either hardening against God because you are resisting His sovereign ways with you, or it is growing softer toward God because you are submitting to His Word and His ways. Your response to trials reveals your heart. Send down spiritual roots, deep into the fertile, moist soil of God's Word, so that you can endure when the hot sun of affliction beats down on you!

Discussion Questions

1. Since God's Word does not all apply directly to us, how can we be sure that we are applying it properly?
2. Since the sinful heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9), how can we know when our hearts are properly submissive to God?
3. Why do God's ways often involve trials for His people? Is it wrong to pray for these trials to be lifted? Why/why not?
4. Why is grumbling about our circumstances a serious sin? What does it really reflect?

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