

If We Will Hear • Hebrews 3:12-13

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Petrified*

1. This is a piece of petrified wood.
2. Don't worry; I didn't snag it from protected land.
3. I picked this up outside the boundaries of the Petrified Forest National Park.
4. Many years ago, floods deluged vast forests in northern Arizona and countless trees were buried under hundreds of feet of sediment in a matter of minutes.
5. Over the following years, as the water continued to break down the sediments, they dissolved into microscopic crystals, which slowly but surely replaced the cell structure of the trees and turned them, ever so slowly, from wood to rock; from living material to cold, hard stone.
6. This process of petrification took hundreds of years – but if you visit the area today, what you see is a vast wilderness covered with rocks that look like trees.

B. *Happening Today*

1. What happened to the Petrified Forest thousands of years ago is taking place *spiritually* in the lives of many today.
2. Slowly but surely, hearts are being hardened.
3. It's this the writer of Hebrews speaks of in our text today.

II. TEXT

A. *Setting The Context*

- 12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;**
- 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.**

1. As always, we need to see this in its setting, its context, if we're to understand it properly.

2. As we've already discovered in our studies in Hebrews, the author aims this letter at those Jewish Christians who stood in danger of falling away from Christ and reverting to the Judaism of their past.
3. His argument aims at showing the superiority of the Gospel and of Christ to its roots in Judaism.
 - a. so in chapters 1 & 2, he shows the superiority of Jesus to angels.
 - b. here in chapter 3, he shows Jesus' superiority to Moses, the standout heavyweight of Jewish history.
4. As he does, he draws on the collective sense of *outrage* the Jews of his day had toward their ancestors who had *resisted* Moses and *rebelled* against God in the Exodus.
 - a. you see, the Jews considered Moses the greatest man in history
 - b. he wrote the first 5 books of the Bible and had communicated with God directly!
 - c. the law they honored above life itself was called, "The Law of Moses."
 - d. it was Moses' leadership that had given *birth* to the nation in their deliverance from the slave pits of Egypt.
 - e. he was the one who had called down the 10 plagues, led them through the Red Sea, given them water in the wilderness, and hand delivered the 10 Commandments.
 - f. but this man, great and powerful as he was, had been *resisted* and *rejected* by the very people he had led out of bondage!
 - g. the readers of this letter looked back on their foolish forefathers with a sense of embarrassment and anger –
 - h. their question was, "How could they have been so wrong?"
5. The writer's point was this – you're rightly outraged at your forefather's rejection of Moses and rebellion against God – Don't you make an even bigger blunder by rejecting an even greater than Moses – Jesus Christ!
6. To bring this home to his readers, he quotes Psalm 95 in vs. 7-11 of this chapter. Let's look at what he says there . . .

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice,

8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness,

- 9** *Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years.*
- 10** *Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.'*
- 11** *So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"*

7. It's critical we understand what the writer of Hebrews is saying here.
8. King David wrote Psalm 95, 500 years *after* the Exodus and applied the example of their rebellion to the people of his own day.
9. Here in Hebrews 3, another *thousand* years later, the writer applies it to the people of *his* day,
10. Notice in v. 7 he didn't say, "The Holy Spirit **SAID**." He writes, "The Holy Spirit **SAYS**."
- God was *still speaking* with as much earnestness and power as when He first spoke to the people in the Exodus.
 - what was true for the original readers of Psalm 95, and then for the first readers of Hebrews is equally true for us today – for *God is still speaking*.
 - it's God's very nature to reveal Himself!
 - the great title the Apostle John gives to Jesus is in the opening verses of his gospel is "The Word."
 - as AW Tozer says in his classic, *The Pursuit of God*, God is the Ever-Speaking voice.
11. So he writes – "Today, if you will hear his voice – do not harden your hearts as they did in the wilderness."

B. The Rebellion

- Two key words here give us a clue as to exactly what the author means.
- The word for *rebellion* is *Meribah*, and the word *trial* is *Massah*.
- This points to Exodus 17 and the story of the people complaining because of a lack of water.
 - now, this was the desert they were in, so they needed water
 - but instead of humbly asking, they immediately started *complaining*

- c. in fact, they threatened to kill Moses if he didn't do something quick!
 - d. they said, "You've just brought us out here in to the desert so you could kill us."
 - e. "Yeah – that's it; there weren't enough burial plots in Egypt, so you dragged us into this wilderness."
4. Think about how wrong-headed and evil-hearted that reaction was.
 - a. these people had just witnessed the power of God in 10 dramatic plagues that brought mighty Egypt low
 - b. they'd seen the waters of the Red Sea rolled back to allow them an escape from their enemies
 - c. even as they bitterly complained, the pillar of fire that led them stood off to one side
 - d. these people were surrounded by the evidences of God's presence, power, and love
 - e. you would think that when they were thirsty, they would simply pray and ask the Lord to give them drink.
 - f. but no – they complain and hurl foolish accusations at Moses and God.
 5. You know the story and what happens – God told Moses to strike the rock with the very same staff he'd used to part the Red Sea.
 - a. when he did, the water flowed and the people had all the water they could ask for
 - b. Moses then named the place *Massah & Meribah* – Rebellion and Testing.
 - c. because the people said, "Is the Lord among us or not?"
 6. But note this - They said this – *going away from the water they had just drunk!*
 7. In other words – they complained against God, and when He showed Himself faithful, their reaction, instead of appreciation and repentance for complaining was an obstinate kind of *defiance* of God.
 8. Let me use an example -
 - a. Tom. Who's gone to church most of his life, comes down with cancer.
 - b. now, over the years, he's seen the hand of God working the miraculous time and again.
 - c. in fact, he's even known and prayed for people with cancer and

- seen them healed.
- d. but now that he has it, instead of humbly seeking the Lord and casting himself into God's good hands, he grows bitter and starts to complain.
 - e. he demands, "How could You let this happen to me? Heal me now."
 - f. and God, in His grace, as he did for the children of Israel, heals him.
 - g. what does TOm do, now that he's healed? He bitterly complains that God would let him come down with cancer in the first place.
 - h. like the rebellious children of Israel he says, "I thought God was on my side – but now it doesn't look like it."
9. This obstinate unbelief continued for over a year until the Jews were led to the very border of the Promised Land at a place called Kadesh Barnea.
 - a. it was from there they sent the 12 spies into Canaan.
 - b. when they returned, they brought the fruit of the land; grapes the size of golf balls, sweet, juicy figs!
 - c. it was a land that flowed with milk and honey
 - d. but – the Canaanites were giants who lived in massive fortress-cities.
 - e. while 2 of the spies were gung ho to enter in, believing the promise that God would fight for them, the other 10 gave a negative intelligence report and said the land and people were too fierce to overcome.
 - f. so once again the people complained and railed against Moses, saying God had brought them out of Egypt, just to kill them in Canaan!
 - g. the plagues and Red Sea were long forgotten.
 10. The result was their inability to enter in to the promise.
 11. And they spent the next 38 years wandering around in the wilderness until the entire generation that had come out of Egypt passed away.
 12. It was their *children* who entered in and took possession of the Promised Land.

C. Vs. 12-13

1. This then lays the foundation for vs. 12 & 13 where the writer *applies* the lesson of the past to his readers . . .

12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;

2. Beware! That's a strong word.

- a. he tells them to be on the lookout for a very real danger.
- b. the danger they're to beware of is an evil heart of unbelief
- c. what he means by that we'll investigate in just a moment,
- d. but first, notice whom he's addressing here . . .

3. "Brethren"

- a. this was written to *believers*, to followers of Christ.
- b. the author knows it's a group that will read this,
- c. and to each and every member of that group, he urges them to stop and take stock of exactly where their hearts are.
- d. there's the very real possibility that one or more of them might in fact be following the example of those who complained and rebelled against God in the wilderness.
- e. though they had seen the hand of God, though they'd been delivered from slavery to sin and had made a start in the life of faith, they had balked and grown hard to the voice of the Spirit.
- f. what they needed to realize was that if they didn't reverse this slide into unbelief, they might very well fall away altogether.

4. So what the writer says here, let me repeat now 2000 years later

—

- a. Beware, my brothers & sister in Christ!
- b. Be on the lookout for the dangerous threat of a heart bent on evil that will lead you to a place of unbelief.
- c. For if you don't beware, and you allow unbelief *to grow*, the day will come when you will depart from God altogether.

5. In a group this size, there are going to be some who will fall away.

- a. please let's not get caught up in a debate here over whether or not a person can lose their salvation
- b. notice that our text doesn't enter in to that issue at all here.
- c. what we have here is an urgent appeal to believers to look at their hearts and make sure they don't fall away!
- d. let's heed that appeal!

6. It's tragic and hard to admit, but not all of us are going to make it.

- a. in the nearly 20 years of CCO's history, we've seen several who've made professions of faith, but who wandered away
 - b. they drifted, as we saw last week.
 - c. and now they've gotten caught up in the world and appear to be lost.
 - d. chances are, despite our best efforts, some sitting here this morning will follow them.
 - e. though they come to church and sit among us, they have a hard heart that is growing harder
 - f. and one day, just like this piece of petrified wood, it will be hard as stone and insensitive to God.
7. So, what's the cure?
- a. how can we make sure our hearts remain soft and pliable to the Lord?
 - b. the answer is found in v. 13 . . .

13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

8. There it is! There's the insurance we can take out to make sure we don't fall way.
9. We must *encourage* one another – how often? Daily!
- a. why daily?
 - b. because we live *daily* in a fallen world!
 - c. from the moment we rise to the moment we lay our weary heads on our pillows to sleep, we face the constant pressure of this world to conform, to fit in.
 - d. temptation and sin surround us!
 - e. so we need consistent and regular input to help us resist and to hold fast to Christ.
10. If the extent of your spiritual input is Sunday mornings twice a month, it ought to be no wonder why you're losing the battle with sin and why you find it so hard to believe.
- a. how strong would you be if you only *ate* twice a month?
 - b. how healthy would you be if you never got any exercise?
11. To *exhort* means to *seriously encourage*.
- a. how *seriously* do we take our Christian duty to *encourage others*.

- b. it's easy to pour cold water on someone's enthusiasm, specially when *we* lack it.
 - c. the world is full of *discouragers*.
 - d. but you and I have a holy calling to *encourage* one another.
 - e. a word of praise or appreciation or cheer has kept many a man or woman on their feet.
12. Friends, we need one another!
- a. and *what* we need from one another is more than just chit chat about the weather, the cost of living in Ventura County, or box scores.
 - b. we need to support each other in this thing called The Christian Life.
 - c. if you are out of fellowship, how can you exhort or be exhorted?
 - d. and if you aren't in this kind of support system in which you can be encouraged, what's to keep you from a hardened heart of unbelief?
 - e. despite what is so clearly stated here, a recent poll found that 78% believe a person "can be a *good* Christian *without* attending church" (Roof/McKinney, page 57)
 - f. let me respond to that by saying this –
 - 1) I agree that you can be a Christian WITHOUT going to church
 - 2) but because of what I find in the Bible, and what I've witnessed with my own eyes for many years now – you can't be a **GOOD** Christian without being committed to a local church.
13. Let me say as your pastor that I want to try to fulfill my obligation to exhort you daily
- a. to that end, beginning Monday, Sept. 10th, I will be posting a daily word of encouragement.
 - b. each day you can log on and find a short word, aimed at encouraging you to continued faith in Christ.

D. Today!

1. Look carefully at the urgency with which the writer pens this . . .
- 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness**

of sin.

2. Now look at v. 7 again

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice,

3. Now v. 15 . . .

15 while it is said: “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

4. In chapter 4, verse 7, he says it yet again!

5. Today – not tomorrow – TODAY!

6. God is speaking.

7. Are we listening?

8. Or are we like those of old who *heard*, but didn't *listen*?

a. who heard the *sound*, but didn't hearken to its *meaning*?

b. whose ears actually gathered in the sound waves, but whose hearts refused to receive?

9. Look at how the writer describes what happen to them . . .

a. in v. 12 he says . . .

12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;

b. then in v. 13 he concludes . . .

13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

10. You see, where they fell and the great danger for us is that even though the evidence for the love and power of God surrounds us, it's possible we could be so bent on sin, so longing after some evil, that it could lead us into a place of hardened unbelief.

11. God had taken the people out of Egypt, but it wasn't as easy taking Egypt out of the people.

a. they longed to go back

b. they grew tired of the miracle bread manna and the miracle fountain of water

c. they lusted for the yummy foods of leeks and onions

d. they tired of their freedom in tents and longed to return to the

- mud huts of a slave's life
12. How pathetic! But how often this is repeated among Christian people today.
 - a. they experience a dramatic conversion and God delivers them from terrible bondage to all kinds of addiction.
 - b. they are welcomed in to the family of God and make a good start in the faith
 - c. but when the honeymoon is over and the novelty of being a Christian wears off, the leaks and onions of their sinful past start looking good.
 - d. rather than resisting temptation and realizing how foolish such thoughts are and nothing more than a deceit told them by the devil –
 - e. they actually start toying with the idea of going back to that stuff.
 - f. they give a little corner of their heart to a seed of evil, and it takes ready root.
 - g. in that moment, as soon as they yield to temptation, even if they haven't actually performed the deed yet, they have turned deaf to the voice of God.
 - h. that's called here – *unbelief*.
 13. The problem with unbelief isn't a *lack of evidence* or a *lack of the revelation* of God.
 - a. unbelief is an issue of the *will* – it's a *choice* NOT TO believe!
 - b. unbelief is a problem of the heart, not the head.
 - c. but we must not think of unbelief as the *absence* of faith.
 - d. as the writer makes it clear here – unbelief is merely a *refusal to believe* God in favor of the lie our sinful desires deceive us with.
 14. There really is no such thing as an unbeliever – everyone believes something.
 15. The only choice is to believe the truth or believe a lie.
 16. The problem is – once we give our heart to cultivate some small sin, we give evil a beach head from which to work further hardening.
 17. If I refuse to listen to God's voice convicting me, my spiritual deafness will grow till I become unable to hear from God at all.
 18. A hardening of the heart is far more serious than hardening of

the arteries.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Hurry!*

1. This is why the author writes with such *urgency*
2. Today – right now – what is God saying to you?
3. Whatever He is saying – do it?
4. Don't delay. Don't put it off.
5. Dwight Moody, by his own admission, made a mistake on the 8th of October, 1871.
 - a. it was a mistake he determined never to repeat.
 - b. he had been preaching in the city of Chicago and on that particular night drew his largest audience yet.
 - c. his message was "What will you do then with Jesus?"
 - d. it was a powerful message, but by the end of the service, Moody was tired.
 - e. he concluded with a presentation of the gospel and this statement:
 - f. "Now I give you a week to think it over. And when we come together again, you will have an opportunity to respond."
 - g. a soloist began to sing the closing song, but before the final note, the music was drowned out by the clanging bells and wailing sirens of the fire trucks.
 - h. the great Chicago Fire was blazing.
 - i. in the ashen aftermath, hundreds were dead and over a hundred thousand were homeless.
 - j. some who heard Moody's message that night had died in the fire.
 - k. he reflected with horrible regret that he would have given his right arm before he would ever give an audience another week to think over the message of the gospel.
6. If God is speaking to you this morning – listen to Him, don't harden your heart by pretending you don't hear or saying, "Yeah, I'll get around to that *later*."
7. If you're a Christian, but you don't hear the Lord – if the Spirit doesn't speak to you, then I would venture to say you are the very one this passage is especially aimed at.

- a. did the Lord speak to you in the past and you refused to listen?
 - b. is your present spiritual deafness due to a hard heart because you've been nurturing some hidden sin?
8. Go back to that place now – that last place you clearly heard the Lord speaking to you and repent.

B. No Hurry

1. Finally , let me say a brief word to those here who aren't Christians.
2. This message applies equally to you – for God is speaking – He's calling you to Himself right now and you can sense it.
3. Today, if you will listen to His voice, don't harden your heart to Him. Yield – Come to Him and believe His promise of forgiveness and eternal life.
4. TODAY is the day of your salvation!
5. Don't listen to the well-worn lie of the enemy trying to dissuade you.
6. There's a story that says one day the devil held a high level meeting with his chief demons to try to come up with an effective strategy to keep people from receiving Christ.
 - a. they sat around a big table sipping hot sauce until one of the demons said,
 - b. "How about this? We tell people there is no God."
 - c. there was a moment of excitement as this idea was put forward but the excitement quickly died when they saw satan shaking his head.
 - d. he said, "No – that one won't work. The evidence for God is too abundant. All a human has to do is look out at the night sky and they know there's a God."
 - e. so they wall went back to sipping hot sauce and thinking.
 - f. then another demon said, "I've got it! I've got it! We'll tell them there's no heaven and hell."
 - g. again, there was a buzz of excitement as they considered the possibilities.
 - h. and again, the excitement died when they saw the devil shaking his head once more.
 - i. "No," he said with a sigh, "God has placed eternity in their hearts. They know intuitively that there's life after death. We

- need something more- more subtle.”
- j. after a long pause and some worried looks, a chuckle came from satan’s end of the table.
 - k. everyone looked at the boss to see him grinning from ear to ear.
 - l. “I’ve got it,” he chortled. “We can’t tell them there’s no *God* or no *heaven and hell*; but we’ll tell them there’s no *hurry*.”
 - m. this was so subtle, it took a while for the brilliance of this strategy to work it’s way round the table.
 - n. and now, it is one of the devil’s most effective lies to keep people from giving their lives to Christ.
 - o. are you one of them?
 - p. have you swallowed this deception - that you’ve got lots of time
 - q. let me tell you friend – you don’t – and here’s why.
 - 1) you aren’t guaranteed tomorrow – all you have is today – right now
 - 2) then again - you may live for another 20, 30, 40, or 50 years,
 - 3) but you are hearing the truth *today!* God is speaking to you and urging you to receive Christ *right now*.
 - 4) if you resist that voice and stirring – your heart will harden.
 - 5) every time you resist, it gets a little harder
 - 6) and the time will come when you *can’t* respond
 - r. don’t make that mistake – come to Christ – and come NOW!