

“The Hard Heart”
Hebrews 3:7-19
June 13, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

We’ve seen this pattern before. The author will describe the glories of our salvation and then follow that with a strong warning. Last week’s passage, where the readers were encouraged to consider Christ and all that he gives to us, is followed in today’s passage by a strong warning against allowing our hearts to grow hardened toward the Lord. The previous paragraph concluded with the statement that God’s people, his “house,” consists of those who hold fast their confidence and their boasting in hope. Today’s passage gives the alternative to that, which is described as a hard heart.

This chapter and the next take the main three events of the nation of Israel as something of a pattern for our lives. Those events are the exodus from their Egyptian bondage, the wilderness wanderings and entry into the Promised Land. The exodus corresponds to our salvation, when we are released from the bondage of sin and Satan. The wilderness wanderings describe this current life, one of challenge and difficulty. Entry into the Promised Land is our entry into our heavenly rest. The Christians being addressed in Hebrews, like all of us here today, are in that middle stage of wilderness life. We’ve been saved but not yet in our eternal rest. There is a danger in this stage that was the same danger Israel experienced in the wilderness, the danger of a hard heart.

I. Illustrating a Hard Heart

The danger of a hard heart is illustrated quite well by the wilderness wanderings of Israel. Consider all that they had witnessed. They had seen the ten plagues in Egypt, culminating in the Passover and their escape from Egyptian bondage. They had seen God divide the Red Sea to allow them to pass through those waters, the same waters that destroyed the Egyptian army. They had witnessed God rain manna from the sky six days a week, bring forth water from a rock, and guide them in the form of a glory cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Even their clothes and shoes did not wear out for the entire forty years. We sometimes think that if people could see such miracles as those, that everyone would believe in God. But the historical record refutes such an idea. Instead of these miraculous provisions strengthening their faith, they grew hard in their attitude toward God.

Their hardness of heart was seen in several ways. In spite of all that God had provided for them, whenever they lacked the basic necessities of life, such as water and bread, they responded by grumbling against God and his appointed

leader, Moses. At one point, they even wanted to stone Moses (Ex. 17:4). The climax of their hard hearts came at Kadesh, when God told Moses to send twelve spies into the land that he would give them. Every military endeavor requires a plan, and the work of these spies was to have been the gathering of the information needed to develop such a plan. They explored the land for forty days, discovering that it was indeed a very good land. But they also discovered that it was heavily fortified, even containing some giants in some parts of the land. Ten of the spies concluded, **“We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are”** (Num. 13:31). Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urged them to trust the Lord and to proceed to take the land God had promised them. But the people believed the ten spies. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron and wanted to select new leaders and return to Egypt. When Joshua and Caleb tried to urge them again to trust God and take the land, they tried to stone these two faithful spies, an attempt thwarted only by God’s intervention. After God pronounced his judgment upon them, that none of that generation other than Joshua and Caleb would be able to enter the land, they changed their minds and attempted to take the land in their own strength. Moses tried to dissuade them from this effort, because he knew that it was against the Lord’s command. But again they would not listen to the leaders God had given them and attempted in their own strength to take the land anyway. They were easily defeated.

The Bible intends that we take instruction from this incident in Israel’s history. There are several lessons we can draw from the tragedy of the hard hearts of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. Let me mention just one now, the one that is highlighted in verse 10. God’s evaluation of that generation is described like this: **“They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.”** The source of their hard hearts was poor theology. They did not know God as they should have. Bad theology lies at the root of all our problems, including this problem of a hard heart. They didn’t believe that God was both able and willing to help them, so they took matters into their own hands. When life feels like it’s spinning out of control, our tendency is to grab for anything that promises to give us some control. The problem is that we grab for things that will only make matters worse. You can see that in Israel’s history. When confronted with the prospect of fighting giants in heavily fortified cities, they grabbed for new leadership and a return to Egypt. Such a plan would not have ended well for them.

II. Recognizing a Hard Heart

One of the problems associated with a hard heart is the challenge of recognizing it. If the heart is hard, we are not receptive to the work of Holy Spirit to show us the truth about ourselves. The result is self-deceit, which we are warned about in verse 13. The “deceitfulness of sin” is a reality to be contended with. For example, when we read of Israel’s hard heart during their wilderness wanderings, it is easy for us to say, “I can’t believe how bad they were; I would

never do that.” But the truth is we grumble and complain about circumstances far less threatening than what they were facing. They were in a desert with no food and water. We sometimes complain if our internet is out for 30 minutes or if the price of gasoline goes up too much.

The Bible warns us about three powerful forces that lead to self-deception. There are false teachers who lead us astray (Rom. 16:18). They don’t wear signs saying, “I’m a false teacher.” Quite the contrary, they are skilled manipulators. Second, the Bible teaches that our hearts are deceitful. **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”** (Jer. 17:9). This self-deception today is often called “confirmation bias,” by which a person filters out any fact that might challenge his conclusions and receives only those facts that confirm those conclusions. According to the Bible, this is the kind of heart possessed not just by the notoriously evil, but by all of us. And to top it all off, there is a personal deceiver, the devil, who will even pose as an angel of light in order to turn us astray (2 Cor. 11:14). These are powerful forces which all lead us both to have a hard heart and to be one-hundred percent convinced that a hard heart is a problem others have, but not me.

As a result of the deceitfulness of sin, our text gives us a test to help us discern the presence of a hard heart in our own lives. It is found in a word that is repeated several times in our passage, the word “today.” **“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion”** (v. 7-8). The test is a simple one. “Do you hear God’s voice today as he speaks to us in the Scriptures?” Verse 7 is a significant one, as it introduces this passage from Psalm 95 with these words: **“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,...”** This teaches that not only did the Holy Spirit inspire the writing of Psalm 95, but he is also speaking in this day, one-thousand years later, to those being addressed in this book. Note the present tense of that verb “says.” The work of the Holy Spirit doesn’t stop with the inspiration of the Scriptures, but continues with the work of illuminating and applying that word to our hearts. In the words of this verse, he allows us to hear God’s voice.

The way, then, that we recognize the presence of a hard heart is that such a heart loses the voice of God, even if it maintains a formal affirmation of the Bible as God’s inspired word. It is the like the heart Jesus mentioned in his parable of the soils. One of the soils was the hard soil on which the seed of God’s word falls. But since the soil is hard, the word is not able to penetrate it and Satan comes and steals the seed before it can bring forth fruit. To coin a word, the hard heart denies the “today-ness” of God’s word. Alternatively, such a heart is often marked by a “yesterday-ness” or a “tomorrow-ness.”

There are those who live off of a good beginning, whose focus is on some past religious experience. Theirs is a yesterday religion. Verse 16 speaks of these people. **“For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?”** They had a salvation experience, having

sacrificed the Passover lamb and having passed through the Red Sea. But a good beginning doesn't guarantee a good ending. There are those whose assurance of salvation is based completely on some past experience. Perhaps they walked an aisle or prayed a prayer years ago, but there is no vibrant, living relationship with God in the present. That is a hard heart. This is not meant to deny the possibility of an assurance of our salvation. But such assurance must be based on reliance on Jesus and not on something we might have done. And if there was a true reliance on Jesus, even though it may have been weak and riddled with all kinds of shortcomings, such a faith will continue to grow our reliance on Jesus.

Another indicator of a hard heart is a "tomorrow-ness" in our hearing of God's word. That is the procrastinating attitude that says, "I will get serious about following God and obeying his word tomorrow." Such procrastination allows us to have it both ways. We can go ahead and do what we want, while deceiving ourselves that we are okay spiritually because we intend to follow God eventually.

III. Preventing a Hard Heart

How then do we fight this natural tendency of hard-heartedness that lies within us all? Our text gives us help in several ways. As we just noted in our last point, a focus on present application of God's word to our lives is critical. The present tense hearing of God through his word is a key component of a heart that is soft toward God. What it requires is regular reading and meditation on God's word *and* the work of the Holy Spirit through that word. So we take up God's word and read it, but do so in dependence on his Spirit.

Second, it is important that we accept our current place in the story of redemption. In that narrative of Israel I mentioned earlier—the exodus, the wilderness wanderings and entry into the Promised Land—we are in the wilderness. We are in the place of trial where we need to depend on God for our survival. We are to expect times when we come to the end of ourselves and don't know what to do. We are not yet in our heavenly rest.

Third, we need one another. We're told to "**exhort one another every day**" (v. 13). We are not intended to live in the challenging wilderness all by ourselves. We need one another if we are to avoid falling. The verb to exhort has the idea of coming alongside others. We do so in a variety of ways. At times, we simply speak to others of what God is doing in our own lives. At other times, we just need to be present with others. There will also be times when a warning is in order.

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory about a Christian's journey through the challenges of this life. The main character, named Christian, finds companionship with a fellow believer named Hopeful. Bunyan writes, "They entered a brotherly covenant and agreed to be companions." They journey together to the Celestial City, helping one another through the various trials they

face. They meet a man named By-Ends from the town of Fair-Speech. As his name indicates, he believes that the ends justifies the means, and his end is always his own comfort and ease. No point in taking your faith too seriously if it places too many demands upon you. Christian and Hopeful pool their discernment and realize that this is a man to be avoided. They encounter a group led by Mr. Hold-the-world, who tempted them to seek dishonest gain. Together, they rebuked him. Next, they meet Demas, who attempted to divert them from their goal by promising a place filled with the riches of the world. Hopeful was deceived and wanted to go take a look. But Christian warned him, "I have heard of this place....The treasure is a snare to those that seek it." He then exhorted Hopeful, "Let us not go a step closer. Let us keep on our way." Later on, their journey brings them to Doubting Castle, where lived the Giant Despair. They were thrown into a terrible dungeon, and it was Christian who fell prey to Giant Despair's temptation and wanted to kill himself. This time it was Hopeful who saved the day. He helped Christian find the key called Promise that opened the door that allowed them to escape Doubting Castle.

The pandemic we have been suffering from has shown us our need of other Christians. Without the fellowship of God's people, without the Church, our hearts grow hard and we drift away. I want to encourage those of you in high school now to remember this when you graduate and move away from home. You will be tempted to disengage from church. That is a snare from the devil that will result in your heart growing cold and hard. It will take you to a bad place.

Verse 14 speaks of our final weapon for preventing a hard heart. **"For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."** The original confidence he speaks of is our confidence in Christ at our salvation. Where is your confidence? Is it in yourself and your own good works, or is it in Christ and his work on your behalf? We are being told here to continue our walk with Christ in the very same way we began it, with confidence in Christ instead of ourselves.

CONCLUSION:

I like this word "confidence" as a description of the kind of faith we are to maintain. To put our confidence in Christ is like a story I read of a woman named Susan Smart. She was in the middle of her third solo flight in a Cessna airplane when she lost control and the plane began spinning wildly toward the earth. After a few second of panic, she remembered the words of her flight instructor. "If you ever go into a spin in this Cessna, just let go of the controls. It's built to right itself and fly on its own." After telling herself several times to let go, she finally managed to loosen her death grip on the controls. In just a few seconds, the plane leveled off and began flying normally, after having lost about 3000 feet of altitude while she tried vainly to stop the spin. Just as she let go and placed her confidence in her plane, we need to place our confidence in Christ.