

# SALVATION LOST

Hebrews 3:12-19

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And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief (Heb. 3:18-19).

**T**he writer of the Book of Hebrews was a pastor. At least his concern in writing this grand exposition was a pastoral one, and we see this most clearly in passages like our present one. Here, he expresses concern not merely for the general health of his flock but that, as he says in verse 13, “none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” His purpose is not merely to set forth doctrine, valuable though that is, but to apply his teaching, to bring it to bear with force upon his precious readers, so they will persevere in faith through hard times. The thought of losing even one of this flock through unbelief is enough to motivate his strong exhortations.

With that end in mind, the writer’s basic point is that given in verse 7 and repeated in verse 15: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” The “rebellion” is recorded in Exodus 17 and Numbers 14, when Israel refused to trust the Lord during the desert trials after Moses had led them out from slavery in Egypt.

In our last study, we saw that after their deliverance from Egypt and passage through the Red Sea, God directed the Israelites on difficult journeys in the desert that were intended to test their faith in him.

Those trials are analogous to this present life when Christians will undergo hardships and temptations which similarly reveal the quality of our faith. The Israelites, wearied by hunger, danger and fatigue, failed to trust in God's Word. Drawing from that example, the writer of Hebrews warns his readers not likewise to fail, especially when we have the risen and exalted Jesus Christ as our leader in this world.

## REBELLION AGAINST GOD

**O**ur passage makes three notable points about the exodus generation of Israelites. The first is that *a good beginning does not ensure a good ending*. We see this in verse 16: "Who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?" These people had seen the great miracles in Egypt, and especially the parting of the Red Sea. And yet, now when they experienced hardship they turned away!

Even the most outwardly impressive beginnings do not ensure perseverance in faith. Especially, here, we see how little we can trust emotional experiences we had early in or at the inception of our Christian life. Many people rely on a particularly emotional event in the past, a time when they prayed a certain prayer, a revival when they walked down to the altar. But none of us will ever have an experience so vivid as that which this generation of Israelites had, and yet their good beginning could not take the place of daily trusting in the Lord. Neither will it for any of us.

Some will object that this conflicts with the Bible's teaching of eternal security. But we do have no security apart from a daily walk with God. If we have trusted in Christ for salvation, we are comforted by his complete sufficiency as our Savior. Jesus said of his own, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:28). But we need to remember that Judas was in his company at that time. We prove that we really are Christ's by persevering in faith. We "make our calling and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10), by bearing the fruit that salvation requires.

It is a terrible thing to read that it was *all* of those whom Moses led out of Egypt who rebelled against the Lord. There were some exceptions, like Joshua and Caleb. Yet, even after so great a

beginning as the exodus, virtually the entire body who experienced it went on to rebel against the Lord. How greatly this stark fact argues against any complacency on our part.

Second, we read here *several descriptions of unbelief*. Unbelief is first described as a “hardened heart,” which the writer of Hebrews wants us to avoid: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” (Heb. 3:15).

The terminology is obvious. A hardened heart is the opposite of a tender heart or a heart of flesh, one that is easily penetrated by the Word of God, that is easily impressed by teaching, that is moved by God’s love, and that is won over by God’s great redemptive works. It is a dreadful thing to be hardened in heart towards God, for then his Word sits upon the heart without penetrating, until before long it is plucked away, never to be grasped, and never to be believed. The great example in the Bible is that of Pharaoh; despite the most forceful demonstrations of God’s power and the clearest expressions of God’s will, Pharaoh would not yield but stubbornly resisted to the point of his own destruction. How terrible that these Israelites, the very people who saw Pharaoh’s example and escaped from his oppressive rule, followed his example. They, too, were hard in heart after all God had done; they complained against him in every difficulty and accused God of meaning them harm despite his many great demonstrations of love.

We see, then, why such a heart is called *evil* or *sinful* in verse 12, because it turns away from the living God. In verse 17 those who would not believe are described as *those who sinned*; and in verse 18 we are told they *disobeyed*. This shows that sin is disobedience; it is failure to listen to and obey God’s Word. In reading the accounts of this generation in Exodus and Numbers, we read of one sin after another. Yet the great sin the writer of Hebrews focuses on is the sin of unbelief.

There is an important insight here, namely, that unbelief is at the root of all sin. Think of a tree. Specific sins are like rotten fruit hanging on a bad tree. That is not the real problem, not the disease but just the symptom. If we are greedy or hateful or selfish or dishonest, that is just evidence of dead and rotten things deeper inside. Bad fruit grows on a bad tree, just as sin grows from our sinful, corrupt nature. But

we still need to look down further, for there is a root system to every tree; that is most important of all. Unbelief is the root system that feeds the whole tree of sin.

In contrast, it is believing that causes us to obey God. Consider Noah. He believed when God foretold the flood, and because of that belief Noah built the ark. In contrast, it was because the Israelites had never come to know God, had not believed God's promises, that they rebelled against him and sinned in the desert. In this manner, the issue of faith versus unbelief is at the core of every spiritual issue.

Notice that lack of evidence is not the cause of unbelief. These Israelites had all the evidence you could ever want, but because their hearts were hard the evidence did not produce faith. Likewise, people today do not reject Jesus Christ on philosophical grounds but on moral grounds. They reject God's Word because they have a greater love for sin, and that love for sin requires hardness to God's Word. The philosophy comes later, but it is only the fruit of hardness to God's Word and love of sin.

Third, we see *God's attitude towards the unbelief of these people*, which is his attitude towards all sin. In verse 17 we see that God was "provoked" with those who sinned in disbelief. In verse 18 we read that because of their attitude God swore that they would never enter his rest. What we are seeing here is God's wrath against sin.

Many people today consider wrath to be an inappropriate response for God. God should be more like us, they think: he shouldn't take sin so seriously. But, unlike us, God is perfectly holy and therefore his wrath burns against sin.

When we speak of God's wrath, we do not mean God throws a temper tantrum in anger; rather, God's wrath is his deliberate response in judgment towards sin and sinners. Because of their unbelief and subsequent sin, this entire generation of Israelites, the very people God had redeemed out of Pharaoh's grasp, died in the wilderness. "And with whom was he provoked for forty years?" the writer of Hebrews asks. "Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?" (Heb. 3:17). Leon Morris observes:

The Bible is clear that God is not impassive or indifferent in the face of human sin. He is a 'consuming fire' (12:29), and his inevitable

reaction to sin is wrath... God does care, and he did not allow the sinning Israelites to enter the rest.<sup>1</sup>

J.I. Packer adds:

This is *righteous* anger - the *right* reaction of moral perfection in the Creator towards moral perversity in the creature. So far from the manifestation of God's wrath in punishing sin being morally doubtful, the thing that would be morally doubtful would be for Him *not* to show His wrath in this way.<sup>2</sup>

We often hear that God punishes the sin but not the sinner – but look at the contrary evidence here. It was not unbelief that died and left its bones upon the desert sands; it was the unbelievers themselves. So also will God cast unbelieving sinners into the fires of hell, not merely their sin but the unrepentant sinners themselves.

God's wrath was deliberate, not erratic, persistent and not fleeting. One commentator begins with the number of adult males we are told departed from Egypt, which was 603,550 (Num. 1:46), then adds in a likely number of adult women, and then calculates that on average 90 Israelite adults died every day for 40 years, until the entire generation was gone. Daily, they were reminded of what we so often forget, that as the apostle Paul insisted, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).<sup>3</sup>

Now, this raises a question. "Does this mean that all these Israelites suffered God's eternal wrath, that they not only died in the desert but also all went to hell?" On the one hand, the death of these unbelieving Israelites is certainly meant to point to God's wrath in the greater judgment that will send men and women into hell forever. On the other hand, it is not stated in the Bible that these Israelites were condemned to eternal damnation. The problem with them was unbelief, and unbelief is what causes salvation to be lost. They signify salvation lost: the opportunity to enter into God's rest that is forfeited by lack of faith. Any individuals who did not repent and trust themselves to God during those forty years must certainly have entered death without a salvation. I think many of them must have repented, believed, and thus have been forgiven. Nonetheless, in

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris: *Hebrews*, pp.?

<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer: *Knowing God*, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Kistemacker, p. 93.

their lost opportunity to enter the Promised Land, they are a dramatic warning against the perils of unbelief.

## A REMEDY FOR UNBELIEF

**S**urely, this scenario is enough to alarm us with regard to the matter of unbelief. It is with this in mind that we turn to the remedy for unbelief contained in this passage, with perhaps a new earnestness and sense of urgency.

The author delivers two exhortations in verses 12 and 13, which are directed at the issue hearts hardened in unbelief. First, he says, “Take care, brothers” (v. 12) – a command that is rightly taken as “Watch out.” Then in verse 13 he adds, “Exhort one another every day.”

This is the essence of his argument, and it is excellent instruction for us today. We are to exert a watchful guard over our own hearts, and come alongside others in the church to exhort them likewise. John Calvin explains why this encouragement is so needful:

As by nature we are prone to fall into evil, we have need of various helps to help us in the fear of God. Unless our faith is repeatedly encouraged, it lies dormant; unless it is warmed, it grows cold; unless it is aroused, it gets numb. He therefore wishes them to stimulate one another by mutual encouragement, so that Satan will not steal into their hearts and by his falsehoods lead them away from God.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek word for “exhort” is *parakaleo*. The prefix *para* means alongside, and the verb stem *kaleo* means to call out. The picture, then, is that we are to come alongside one another daily, exhorting one another in the practice of Christian faith.

Christianity is not an individual but a team endeavor. But if we do not know the nature of our fellow-believers’ struggles, and if we do not share ours with them, then we will never be able to follow through with this command. The result, in that case, will be that people among us will fall prey to sin. Therefore, we are commanded to be watchful for just these things in the body of Christ, thereby ensuring that none of us fall away because of sin’s deceitfulness. As long as it is “today” -- that is, this present age of testing, of both

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Hebrews*, p. 41.

opportunity and danger like that the Israelites faced -- we must watch out and exhort one another daily in the things of the faith.

What we must specifically watch for, we read, is the *deceitfulness of sin* (Heb. 3:13). The Bible attaches this label of “deceitful” to a number of things. It speaks often of false teachers who would lead us astray by their deceit. In Romans 16:18, Paul warns against them, saying: “For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.” Colossians 2:8 says the same thing about worldly philosophies, and Proverbs 12:5 tells us that “the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.” Certainly, then, we must exert a watchful care against enticing but false teachings that deceive the mind.

But it gets worse, for the Bible goes on to say that our very hearts are deceitful. Jeremiah 17:9 is the famous verse to this effect: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” In Ephesians 4:22, Paul tells us that our very human nature, apart from God’s saving work, is “corrupt through deceitful desires.” This is quite a bit closer to home -- I cannot even trust my heart, the Bible says. My desires are not trustworthy. And the wise man comes to realize that this is so -- that the things we long for are often foolish and vain, if not outright idolatrous -- and therefore he seeks the scrutiny and exhortation of brothers and sisters in the Lord.

More threatening still is the presence of a personal deceiver loose in the world. The Bible tells us that the devil is a great deceiver, beguiling men and women into folly and unbelief, as he did Eve in the Garden. Paul tells us that Satan even masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Then there is sin itself, which has as one of its main qualities that it is deceitful. The point is that we must not toy with sin or we will be drawn in and ensnared.

Consider the case of a man who is tempted to leave his wife and children for another woman. The sin seems so alluring; she is so much more wonderful than the plain old wife he has grown tired of. And she admires him so; she plays to his ego where his wife only nags him. It would be better, despite the broken taboos; he will be better off and happier with the adulteress. People will understand, they will get over it, his children will ultimately be glad for him.

It is all, however, a great deceit. It will not be more wonderful – for the problem with his marriage is his own heart, and he will soon get tired of his new lover as well. She admires him now but will think less of him when he loses his job, his reputation, his money, and his self-respect. His children will not get over it, but will bear scars and brokenness all the days of their lives. Sin says it will be better and he will be happy, but it is a deceit. He is stepping forward into misery and ruin, bringing disgrace upon himself and, if he is a Christian, scandal upon the church and even the name of Jesus Christ.

Sin advertises pleasure but delivers pain. The problem is that our hearts are so willing to be deceived. Combine this with the reality that sin is deceitful in its very nature, and you see why we have so great a need of godly fellowship, of exhortation, of warning at the very first stages of temptation. We need help being watchful over spiritually dangerous circumstances that most of us face – jobs or family ties or relationships or specific temptations that by their very nature are hostile to Christian faith. Therefore, we must exhort one another, lest one of us should fall to sin’s deceitfulness, even to the hardening of our hearts against God.

We must realize that sin is not merely something we do. Sin is a power, an enemy army, like a pack of wolves surrounding the flock and darting in to pick off likely targets. Therefore, as Simon Kistemacker writes, “Believers have a corporate and an individual responsibility to care for the spiritual well-being of their fellow men. They must consider this responsibility a holy obligation and exhibit utter faithfulness.”<sup>5</sup>

From deception grows hardness of heart – such was the fate of the Israelites who came under God’s wrath. Christian fellowship, including church membership, prayer, Bible study and godly friendship, is a great bulwark against sin’s deception; in such company the arguments of sin lose their force and we are strengthened in faith and obedience. Our goal is to persevere to the end and enter into God’s rest, and our strategy is to be mutual watchfulness. What a worthy cause this is! It is worth inconvenience. It is worth giving up some leisure time. It is worth real sacrifice and will repay the dividends of eternal life.

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<sup>5</sup> Kistemacker, p. 98.



In his great allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan shows the importance of godly fellowship. At one point in the journey to the Celestial City, he tells that his hero, Christian, did not go alone. A man named Hopeful joined him. Bunyan writes, "They entered a brotherly covenant and agreed to be companions." What a wonderful statement! It reminds of the description of the godly men of King Asa's generation, as told in 2 Chronicles 15:12, "They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul"

In such fashion Christian and Hopeful journeyed together, and their companionship was very profitable. Soon they came across another traveler, a man named By-ends from the town of Fair-speech. Pooling their discernment, Christian and Hopeful realized this was a man to avoid. Next, they encountered a group led by Mr. Hold-the-world, who tried to tempt them into seeking dishonest gain, and together they reprovved him. Next came Demas who called to them to depart from the way, promising a place filled with riches of the world. This time, 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 exhorted Hopeful, "Let us not go a step closer. Let us keep on our way," and the two companions went forward safely on the pilgrimage. Later, they came to Doubting Castle, where they were thrown in a terrible dungeon. Here it was Christian who faltered, falling prey to the Giant Despair's temptation. This time it was Hopeful who kept his faith, recalling God's commandments. With his help, Christian found the key, called Promise, that opened the door to let them escape Doubting Castle.<sup>6</sup> This is the kind of help we are to give one another, each of us in our weakness and folly being helped by the strength and faith of our brother, each helping the other in turn so that all of us may endure.

## CONFIDENCE TO ENDURE

**W**e saw earlier that a good beginning is not enough, that we must persevere through hardship to the end, holding fast and trusting to Jesus for our salvation. The author summarizes in verse 14: "For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence

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<sup>6</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 85-100

firm to the end.” It is perseverance that tests and proves and demonstrates the fact that we truly are joined to Jesus Christ.

Note, however, what it is we are to hold until the end. It is “our original confidence” (v. 14). Of what are we to be confident? Surely it is not our own works or strength, but that power for salvation that is in Jesus Christ. It is our “original” confidence, namely the very message of the gospel that saved us in the first place. This is what we need to persevere to the end. The gospel is not merely a message we need to hear only once, only at the beginning of the Christian life. The gospel, the good news of our crucified and risen Lord that makes us Christians also keeps us in the faith. So let us diligently, obediently, proclaim one to another that gospel, that none of us might be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

“Take care, brothers,” says our author, “lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” What does this involve? One of our hymns, *Blest Be the Ties that Bind*, puts it well:

Before the Father’s throne we pour our ardent prayers; our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.

We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.

These are not merely words for us to sing, but words to live together in the church. And so may we all be found faithful to the end, that this great salvation should not be lost by us, and that in due time we may all enter into God’s rest.