

Heb. 3:7-19 A Warning Against Unbelief

Kids, have you ever been at the beach and there are strong currents, and your mom or dad warns you not to swim in those areas or go very deep. Why? It is dangerous, and if you disobey and swim there, it may be your last swim. I think of one particular family that decided to swim across the inlet in Cherry Grove. There were signs of warning, not to mention the obvious risks involved. And disobedience to this warning resulted in the death of the father. What a tragic example! Well, today, we come to what is the most urgent and pastoral warning of the Book of Hebrews. Look at v. 12: **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”** Our warning today is not merely *“Don’t swim in the dangerous currents,”* but *“Do not fall away from the living God.”* Our first warning speaks only of danger and physical death. But our text warns of spiritual death, separation from God, and a failure to find rest for our souls. Therefore, we so need this text! Today, I have 3 questions I will answer: 1) What is unbelief? 2) What is the danger of unbelief? And 3) What is the remedy of unbelief? And then how do we apply this to our lives today as Christians.

1. What is unbelief? To many in this world, this may seem simple. Most of the world would say they believe in God. So, in order to answer this question, we must consider the context. This letter was written to the Hebrews, particularly to Hebrew Christians who made a profession. Look back at 3:1: **“Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.”** And they are God’s house. Look at 3:6 **“And we are his house . . .”** Notice what the author says next, **“If we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.”** Look also at 3:14 **“For we have come to share in Christ, . . . if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”** You see, there were those who made professions, but were returning to the old ways of Moses and the law. Look over at 2:1. **“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.”** And in 3:12 the author equates this “drifting away,” this “falling away” with an **“unbelieving heart.”** And then, as he always does, he quotes from the OT (Ps. 95 LXX) for explanation, particularly to show that they are in danger of doing exactly the same thing. In this way, he defines unbelief.

Look at vv. 7-11: **“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”** Let me recall the story for a few minutes. Think back with me. By the great power of God, Moses led the people out of slavery from Egypt. And where were they headed? Back to Land of Canaan, the land God promised to give to their fathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). Do you remember what happened? Well, the first two years were filled with miracles as God provided for them. Early on, there was no drinking water. They came to a place with water, but it was bitter. What did Moses do? He threw a log into the water and the water became sweet (drinkable). And there, the Bible says, **“God tested them.”** In Exod. 15:26 we read: **“There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments, and**

keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.” In other words, **“Obey me and you will be blessed.”**

Then, they set out again and they ran out of food. And they complained against Moses and against God. Yet, in his love, with grace and mercy, God sent manna from heaven. And after some days, they got tired of the manna and they complained again. What did God do? This time, along with the manna, He sent quail so they could enjoy meat with their bread. And they complained again! And then, they continued their journey to a place called Rephidim and they ran out of water . . . again. Do you remember what happened? They complained. But, in his great love, with grace and mercy for his people, God told Moses to strike a rock, and when he did, water flowed abundantly. But, apparently this place was so filled with complaining and questioning God, they renamed the place by two names: *“Meribah”* and *“Massah.”* Do you know what they mean? Meribah means “rebellion” and Massah means “testing.” Exod. 17:7 says, **“And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”**

HOW COULD THEY SAY THIS AND THINK THIS IN THEIR HEARTS ABOUT GOD! HOW COULD THEY REBELLAND TEST GOD AGAIN! After all they had witnessed; the plagues, the miracles at the Red Sea, the destruction of Pharaoh’s armies, the miraculous gifts of manna, quail, and sweet water! Our text highlights these two characteristics as signs of unbelief. Look at v. 8: **“Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion (Meribah), on the day of testing (Massah), in the wilderness.”** But, that’s not all. They continue their journey and at around 2 years after leaving Egypt, they come to a place called Kadesh. Now, it is time to enter the land and take possession of it. So, they send out 12 spies. And they go and see the land, its inhabitants, its produce, its beauty and they come back to report. What do they say? Ten of them say, *“NO WAY. The people will defeat us. We cannot overtake them.”* But two men, Caleb and Joshua, say the opposite. *“God is on our side. We can take the land.”* And here, the people follow the 10. And this story becomes the GREATEST EXAMPLE OF UNBELIEF IN THE HISTORY OF OT ISRAEL. Look at v. 19. **“So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”** They looked out into this most beautiful and abundant land to which God had promised them. And they KNEW what HE had done to bring them there. They saw his ways. And they rejected God and his promise. And this is seen in their rebellion and their testing of God.

You might say, *“I see their rebellion, but in what way were they testing God?”* Well, simply put, to test God is to see and receive his blessings over and over and over and over again, and still rebel in your heart and in your actions . . . And then . . . to think God will continue to pour out his blessings on you and save you, no matter what you do. To put it another way, To test God is to say you trust him and then continue in your sin, supposing God will continue to save you no matter what you do. A good example is Jesus’ temptation in the dessert. Matthew tells us the devil **“took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”** And Jesus said to him, **It is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”** (Matt. 4:5-7). In other words, Satan, *“I will not sin by listening to your words and*

putting myself in danger, presuming God will save me. . . I will not put God to the test.” This is what Israel did in the dessert. And this is what the Hebrews in the early church were doing.

2. What is the danger of unbelief? Well, let’s go back to our story to answer this question: What is the danger of unbelief? What happens after the 12 spies come back and report? Num. 14 says the people **“raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night.”** And they said to Moses: **“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt”** (14:1-4). And then God says, **“None of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land I promised to give to their fathers . . . except Joshua and Caleb”** (14:20-23). And then it gets worse. Not only will that generation NOT enter the land, but God says, **“their dead bodies shall fall in the wilderness . . . and you shall suffer for your FAITHLESSNESS . . .”** (vv. 26-35). Brothers and sisters this is unbelief! This is an “evil, unbelieving heart.” This is what it means to “fall away from the living God” (3:12). And the result of unbelief is death and separation from God and his promise of salvation.

Look at vv. 16-19: **“For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 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.”**

3. What is the remedy of unbelief? What do we take from this passage today? What is the remedy of unbelief? The short answer is to believe God, believe his promises. But, it is at this point we must consider the question of unbelief and its danger in light of the Gospel of Christ, as regards the great love of God in sending the Son. For God so loved the world . . . Brothers and sisters, the principle of unbelief is the same. The result of unbelief is the same. But, today, God’s promise isn’t merely the earthly land of Canaan and the earthly blessings of that land. And God’s promise does not merely come through the words of Moses. God’s promise of salvation is found in the Son of God, who is the fulfillment of all God’s promises! **“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, od spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . .”** (1:1-3).

How much greater a rejection! How much greater the sin of unbelief. How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation! Look to Heb. 6:4-6: **“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, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ 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.”** Or Heb. 10:26-27: **“For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the**

truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” So, what are our applications?

Application: Listen to the Word of God. “Today if you hear his voice.” There is a real danger! As a father says to his children, “do not swim in the dangerous currents or you will die.” In v. 7 we read: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, **“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion . . .”** Look also at 4:1: **“Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.”** The Bible says, **“today is the day of salvation.”** (2 Cor. 6:2).

Application: Unbelief is disobedience. How do we know Israel did not believe God? Look at their works. They rebelled and tested God. Faith and Works go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. As James says, “Faith without works is dead.”

Application: Since we have the gospel today, we must take every opportunity to improve upon this gospel in obedience. In my quiet times I’ve been reading through Revelation. And chapters 2 and 3 come to mind as Jesus speaks to the seven churches. Let me read just a small portion to the Church at Ephesus. **“I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”** (Rev. 2:3-5). The remedy to unbelief is repentance and faith.

Application: The more we sin the more we are deceived. The more we turn away from the living God the more we are hardened. Look at v. 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.”** Have you ever been swimming in the ocean way down the beach from the dangerous currents, but over some time, you lose sight of the dangerous place, and before you know it, you are in it. Brothers and sisters, keep your eyes fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

Application: When we reject God’s promise, we reject God. I do not think the Israelites stopped believing in God from one perspective. That particular generation didn’t all of a sudden become atheists. They had some kind of “faith,” but not saving faith. Look again at v. 10 **“They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.”** The people did the same in Isaiah’s generation. God says to him: **“Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”** In the NT Jesus speaks in parables to the religious leaders saying, **“they may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven”** (Mark 4:12). Brothers and sisters, there are many who claim to know God and even his Son, but who **“do not know his ways.”** This is why this warning is so important!

Application: There will come a time that will be too late.. The Scriptures teach there is “sin unto death,” which is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. And in nature, this is exactly what the Israelites did in the dessert. This is exactly what the religious leaders of Jesus’ day did, even though they knew all of his works and knew He was the Son of God. And others also commit this sin as well.

And when this happens God only knows. But, if you find yourself dangerously close to this in your heart, even if you call yourself a Christian, then this WARNING is for you today!

Question: Can Christians commit apostasy? No! So why address Christians? It is God's means to keep us until the end! This is the great means of a loving God to give us warnings. Yes, if we swim in the dangerous currents, we will die. But, we listen! We don't swim in the currents! Heb. 6:9 says: "**Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.**" I believe these warnings are for Christians, for those in the church. Think about it. How does "falling away" or "drifting away" apply to those who who've never considered God and his ways. Those who are closest to the truth are in the most danger of apostasy. This is why these words are so important for US to hear!

And yes, they are also for those who are not Christians, those who listen week in and week out and still do not believe. The outcome is the same for ALL who do not believe. And yes, I do believe these warnings are dealing with those who commit apostasy, those who know the truth, those who have tasted, those who have benefited from the blessings of God in the church (as with Israel in the dessert). But, at the end of the day, ALL unbelief in God's Son results in the same, to die as unbelieving Israel did in the dessert. The result is a failure to enter the "rest" of God, which is salvation "today" and eternal life to come. I do not think these warnings are hypothetical. And, I do not think these warnings are for a mixed community of believers and unbelievers (though it still applies), these warnings are for God's people. So be warned by a man such as myself, who also needs these words!

Application: Exhort one another. Do this daily. Do this always. Look at v. 13. This is why we meet weekly. This is why we meet in our home groups. And this command must be a part of who we are as Christians.

Application: Finally this morning, this warning comes from the most loving God and Father. To use our initial illustration: As a loving and good father would say to his children, "*Don't swim in the dangerous currents. You will drown.*" "**Take care brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.**" When I warn my children not to swim in the dangerous currents, I do it because I love them. I want them to live. I want them to prosper. In the same way God gives us this warning. Do not harden your hearts, but instead look unto your great high priest, the Son, the savior of the world!