

Warnings and Exhortations Against Unbelief

PSALM 95:7B-11; HEBREWS 3:7-19; *Heidelberg Catechism* 86, 90-91

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Congregation of Christ: In every undertaking, whether in our studies, in sports, we are encouraged to finish well and finish strong. The Apostle Paul urged the church in Corinth, *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it"* (1 Cor 9:24-26). And when he knew that his life is about to end, told young Timothy, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"* (2 Tim 4:7).

What is the motivation for finishing well? In school, good grades. At work, a raise. In sports, a medal in the podium. In business, a good profit.

Last Sunday, we studied two faithful servants of God: Moses and Jesus. Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house. But Jesus was greater, because he was faithful in God's house as the Son. Today, the Preacher of Hebrews contrasts the faithfulness of Moses as God's servant in his chosen nation Israel, with the people whom he led out of slavery in Egypt. But in the wilderness, the people were not faithful; they repeatedly rebelled against God. And they did not finish well, falling short of the Promised Land.

The story of Israel's exodus out of Egypt is one of the most important stories in the Bible. It tells of God's mighty power in sending ten plagues against Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to let Israel leave to go to Canaan, the Promised Land. In that land, Israel will be free to worship the Lord their God. The Lord led them out, then destroyed the mighty Egyptian army in the Red Sea who came out in pursuit of the people. In the wilderness, God led them with a pillar of cloud by day to protect them from the heat of the sun. At night, God lighted their way with a pillar of fire. God provided food and water and clothes for them. He protected them from their enemies along the way. Psalm 105 recounts all of God's faithfulness to Israel.

But as soon as any hardship came, they grumbled and rebelled against God. When they ran out of food, God rained manna from heaven on them. When they tired of manna, God sent them quails. Psalm 106 recounts Israel's rebellion against the Lord. Then in verse 32, the psalmist recounts the events in our texts, *"They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account."*

The Preacher quotes Psalm 95:7-11 as he warned the Hebrew Christians about rebelling against God. He challenges them not to follow the example of their forefathers in their unbelief, *"Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."* The consequences of their unbelief and disobedience were fatal: death in the wilderness. So they were unable to enter God's rest in the Promised Land because of unbelief. But the Preacher follows this warning with another plea, *"Exhort one another every day."*

“Do Not Harden Your Hearts”

The quotation from Psalm 95:7 is introduced by the author with, *“Therefore, as the Holy Spirits says...”* The word “therefore” is a follow-up on the previous verses 1-6. Moses was the readers' example of a servant who was faithful and obedient in serving God's house. And Jesus is even greater in faithfulness and obedience as a Son in God's house. So the Preacher reminds his readers to persevere in their faith and hope in Jesus. If indeed they consider themselves as members of God's house, they must persevere in the faith. They must listen to the warning of Psalm 95:7, *“Today, if you hear his voice...”*

“Today” makes this is an urgent admonition. No procrastination. No “I'll think about it later.” This is why Paul exhorts us today, *“Behold, **now** is the favorable time; behold, **now** is the day of salvation”* (2 Cor 6:2). Why this urgency? Because no one knows the exact day, hour and minute of his departure from this life. Young people think they're invincible, but one of my sons' high school friends' heart simply stopped beating at basketball practice. And there are no second chances, for *“just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment”* (Heb 9:27). Today, right now, is the day of salvation!

Then the psalmist says, *“If you hear his voice.”* How did the Old Testament people of God hear his voice? When the Scriptures were not yet written, God spoke to them through dreams, visions and audible voice. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. Later, God spoke directly to his people through his appointed priests and prophets, or through the reading of Scriptures already written.

Today, so many evangelicals say they hear God audibly when they meditate, pray, or see dreams and visions. But what does the Bible say about hearing God's voice? The writer of Hebrews, right in the opening sentence, says, *“in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”* Why would Christians want God to whisper in their ears, or show them dreams and visions when we have the written inerrant, authoritative, sufficient Word of the Son of God?

In addition to hearing God's voice through the Scriptures, hearing involves the heart, which means obedience. We see in this in the Preacher's warning, *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”* Jesus explained why he spoke in parables by saying that unbelievers will never hear, see and understand lest they turn to him, *“because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”* (Matt 13:13-15). They might see, hear and understand with their physical senses, but they would not believe.

This is the state of the heart of an unbeliever. When they hear God's voice, they harden their hearts, because the Holy Spirit does not work in them. Have you noticed how most unbelievers get angry and provoked by God's Word? But “hardening of one's heart” is a hard saying. Who does the hardening, God or man? The answer is both. We read in Exodus that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exo 8:15, 32), and Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exo 3:19; 4:21; 7:3, 13).

Paul also says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Rom 9:18; also John 12:40). Therefore, man is responsible for his unbelief and disobedience, and cannot blame God. God does not create sin and unbelief in the heart of an unbeliever, since sin is *already present* in all mankind. All that God does—actually does not do—is to withhold the Holy Spirit of grace and mercy from the heart of an unbeliever. This is what Paul says: “*God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity*” (Rom 1: 24, 26-28). In the words of the Canons of Dort I:15, God decreed “to leave in the common misery... and not to bestow saving faith and the grace of conversion upon them; but, leaving them in their own ways.”

“As in the Rebellion”

The Preacher then continues in verse 8 to quote Psalm 95:8,

Do not harden your hearts your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness.

But when we go to Psalm 95:8, we find it different,

*do not harden your hearts, as **at Meribah**, as **on the day at Massah** in the wilderness.*

Why the change? The answer is found in Israel's exodus from Egypt. Just three days after crossing the Red Sea, they couldn't find water to drink (Exo 15:22-25), so they grumbled against Moses. A month and a half later, they didn't have enough to eat, so they grumbled again (Exo 16:1-3). A third time, in Exodus 17:1-7, when they were near Horeb (Sinai), they ran out of water again, and grumbled yet again. Moses then rebuked the people, “*Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?*” So the LORD told Moses to strike a rock in the wilderness, and water came out of the rock. Moses called the place *Massah* and *Meribah*: Massah means “testing,” and Meribah means “quarreling” or “rebellious.”

Almost 40 years later, when they were near the Promised Land, they again grumbled against Moses. So the LORD commanded Moses to speak to—not strike—a rock there to make water flow out. But in anger, Moses struck the rock twice. Water gushed out, but because of his disobedience to God's instruction, Moses and Aaron were disbarred from entering the Promised Land. And because of the people's unbelief and disobedience, out of the tens of thousands of men over 20 years of age who came out of Egypt, only two men—Joshua and Caleb—were allowed by God to enter Canaan. They never entered God's rest in the Promised Land. So the names Massah and Meribah were a reminder to them that in these places, they rebelled against God and tested him, and the consequence was no rest in God.

The root of this rebellion is unbelief. We see this rebellion when our unbelieving family and friends are offended whenever we present God and the Bible to them. Some are not merely offended; they actually hate God and his Word. So we see their rebellion in their ungodly and evil behavior, unhindered by any fear of God's judgment and wrath against sin. We see their hearts harden against God as they continue in their sinful lives, ignoring the law that God put in their hearts. In other words, their conscience is seared.

“Exhort One Another Every Day”

But the Preacher does not leave his Hebrew readers without hope and encouragement. He commands them, *“Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today.’”* This means that a Christian has to be a part of a local body of Christ, to take part in encouraging *“one another.”* There is no lone ranger Christianity. Membership in a local body of Christ is a safeguard against hardening of hearts and falling away from the faith. Christians are to worship God, read, listen and meditate and sing his Word *together* to be firm in the faith.

So the Preacher prods us with two exhortations. The first is in verse 12, *“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”* The Hebrew audience was going through severe persecution as a test of their faith. Would they persevere, or would their sin lead them *“to fall away from the living God”*? The word used in verse 12 for “fall away” is the same word for “apostatize,” which means to *finally* forsake, reject, or turn away from the faith. The important word is “finally.” We know of people who left the church and never attend church anymore. Some have even rejected the faith, and rejected the Word of God. If they continue in this state till death, then they had finally fallen away. The Apostle John explains who and what they are, *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us”* (1 John 2:19).

The warning to us today is parallel to the Preacher's warning to the Hebrew Christians: if you continue in your unbelief and rebellion, you're dangerously close to completely hardening your heart and finally falling away from God. Provoking the holy God is dangerous to your spiritual welfare. The Israelites who fell in the desert are a picture of those in the church who fall away completely from the faith. The Israelites were God's covenant people, where all the boys and men were circumcised as a sign of their and their household's membership in God's covenant people. But the people were a mixture of believers and unbelievers. Only a few of these circumcised men were true believers as Moses and Aaron were.

So is the church today. They may be members or regular attendees, and have been baptized or made profession of faith, whether as infants, children or adults. But they are not true Christians. Our Belgic Confession Article 29 explains that “hypocrites [those who are in the church, but are not truly saved] are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it.”

The second exhortation is in verse 14, *“hold [your] original confidence firm to the end.”* This is related to the first exhortation in that if your heart is evil and unbelieving, you will not be firm to the end. In this chapter, there are two related “ifs.” One is in verse 6, *“And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.”* The other is in verse 14, *“For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence*

firm to the end.” Is the Preacher saying that if we don't hold fast to our faith, we will lose our salvation? No, the Preacher and the whole of Scriptures teach that a true believer will persevere in the faith because God preserves him in the faith. This is our assurance.

An unbalanced emphasis on assurance is dangerous. In some Christian churches, the people are told, “If you have accepted Christ as Savior, you are saved, no matter how you live and behave.” We often hear people say they have been “born again,” and yet exhibit no change in their blatantly sinful lifestyles, or are not even part of any local body of Christ. Many of these churches shun church discipline because they consider these people as true believers. Paul condemns such mindset in Romans 6:1-2, *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”* This is false assurance. An emphasis on prior “conversion experience,” or baptism, or profession of faith, without evidence of good fruits results in false assurance.

But when we sin, do we lose our salvation? The Canons of Dort tell us that because of sufferings and temptations, a Christian might fall into serious sin and then “lose the sense of God's favor, for a time, until on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them” (V:5). So, you as Christians ought to have assurance that you will “ever will continue true and living members of the church; and that [you will] experience forgiveness of sins, and will at last inherit eternal life” (V:9).

Your salvation is based on the completed work of our Savior Jesus Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of all your sins. The faith that the Holy Spirit put into your heart is the instrument by which you are saved. And good fruits arising out of your faith is evidence of your salvation. Good works is evidence of your salvation, not the means of your salvation.

The Canons of Dort V:10 says that good works is one of three sources of your assurance. The other two are: First, faith in the promises of God. When you believe, he preserves you by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in you. The Spirit enables you to obey God, and mature and persevere in the faith to the end. The other source of assurance is from the Spirit also, *“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God”* (Rom 8:16).

So, dear Christian, believe in these two promises:

“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24-25).