

THE EPISTLES TO THE HEBREWS

HEBREWS 1:1-4:13, THE SUPERIORITY OF THE PERSON OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

- A. Outline of Hebrews (to be finalized at completion of Hebrews study)
1. The superiority of the person of Christ (1:1-4:13)
 - a. Christ has the superior message (1:1-2a)
 - b. Christ is the superior person (1:2b-3)
 - c. Christ is superior to angels (1:4-2:18)
 - d. Christ is superior to Moses (3:1-4:13)
 - 1) He is superior in His work and person (3:1-6)
 - 2) Second warning passage: the danger of disbelief (3:7-19)
 - a) A warning to not harden one's heart (3:7-11)
- B. Review of Hebrews 3:1-6
1. Warren Wiersbe, *The writer exhorted these suffering saints to enjoy their spiritual experience and not simply endure it. Jesus Christ is the beloved Son over His house, and He will care for each member of the family. He is the faithful High Priest who provides all the grace we need for each demand of life. As the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:19-20), Jesus Christ is using the experiences in His people's lives to equip them for service that will glorify His name.*
 2. R. Kent Hughes, *Focus on—hold on—to Christ, our great, superior apostle and high priest.*
- C. Comments on Hebrews 3:7-19
1. Thomas Constable, *In verse 6 the writer warned of losing our privilege of serving as priests in the present. Now he warned of losing some of our privileges as heirs in the future.*
 2. Zane Hodges, *To drive home his call to fidelity and to warn of the consequences of unbelieving infidelity, the author referred to the classic failure of Israel at Kadesh Barnea which led to their 40-year detour in the wilderness.*
 3. R. Kent Hughes, *It all began so well—but ended so poorly. Of the 600,000 men (the million-plus Israelites who began so well), only two over the age of twenty ever got to the Promised Land—and that was forty years later. The rest fell, disappointed corpses in the desert. The grand and terrible lesson of Israel's history is that it is possible to begin well and end poorly.*
 4. Warren Wiersbe, *This long section is the second of the five exhortations in this epistle. In the first exhortation (Heb. 2:1-4), the writer pointed out the danger of drifting from the Word because of neglect. In this exhortation, he explains the danger of doubting and disbelieving the Word because of hardness of heart.*

HEBREWS 3:1-4:13, JESUS CHRIST IS SUPERIOR TO MOSES AND JOSHUA

HEBREWS 3:7-19, SECOND WARNING PASSAGE: THE DANGER OF DISBELIEF

HEBREWS 3:7-11, A WARNING TO NOT HARDEN ONE'S HEART

- A. Scripture is identified as the work of the Holy Spirit (7a), *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,*
1. *Therefore*
 - a. It looks back to the warning of verse 6, *we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope* and looks forward to verse 8, *do not harden your hearts.*
 - b. William L. Lane, *According to Numbers 13-14 Israel was camped at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran, on the verge of entering Canaan. Entrance into the land was the goal of the Exodus and was necessary for the fulfillment of the promise. When those who had been sent into Canaan to explore the land brought back a bad report, however, the Israelites refused to enter. They rejected the promise through unbelief.*

2. *As the Holy Spirit says*
 - a. William L. Lane, *It is characteristic of the writer's high conception of Scripture. . . The present tense of the verb(says) is important. . . What was spoken or written concerning the desert generation centuries before has immediate relevance to the community addressed.*
 - b. Donald Hagner, *The Holy Spirit is regularly regarded in the NT as the one who inspires and thus who speaks through the writers of the OT.*
 - c. R. Kent Hughes, *As the writer uses Psalm 95, he is convinced that the warning of the opening line and the extended warning it introduces comes directly from the Holy Spirit to his hearers. . . There is a timeless urgency to the message. We must listen to the Holy Spirit's message today, for it is God's message for the church in this troubled age. May we listen with all we have!*

B. A warning against hardening one's heart (7b-11)

1. The writer's citation of Psalm 95:7b-11
 - a. Psalm 95:7b-11, *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."*
 - b. He used the passage to address the issue of falling into spiritual disbelief.
 - c. R. Kent Hughes, *Every Jew knew this passage by heart because its opening line served as a call to worship every Sabbath evening in the synagogue with these words: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Hebrew ears perked up at their sound.*
 - d. Raymond Brown, *It is important to note that, in the view of the author, God is still speaking to them through this Old Testament scripture. In his view the Psalms are something more than memorable hymns of rich poetic beauty. They are vehicles of God's present revelation to his people.*
2. The writer's purpose in citing the passage.
 - a. Thomas Constable, *His purpose was to help them realize the serious consequences of that behavior and to motivate them to persevere faithfully in the apostles' teaching.*
 - b. William L. Lane, *In the first half of the psalm Israel is summoned to praise and worship (vv 2, 6), but the second half conveyed the warning that the hardness of heart displayed by the desert generation must not be emulated..."*
 - c. Raymond Brown, *This psalm unites 'worship' and 'loyalty' as two inseparable ideas. What is the point of offering our praise to God, if the words we use are merely slick and religiously appropriate phrases which do not in fact reflect our hearts' love and obedience? Worship must be expressed in action as well as in language.*
3. Commentary on Hebrews 3:7b-11
 - a. The readers are warned not to harden their hearts like their fathers did in the wilderness (7b-9), ***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.***
 - 1) *Today, if you hear his voice*
 - a) There is urgency in the writer's command.
 - b) *His voice* refers to the Holy Spirit who spoke in Psalms 95 and still speaks in it today.
 - c) Thomas Constable, *This exhortation is really a commentary on Psalm 95:7b-11 in which the writer assumed a correspondence between the successive generations of God's people and consistency in God's character.*
 - 2) The command is *do not harden your hearts.*
 - a) R. Kent Hughes, *The grand and terrible lesson of Israel's history is that it is possible to begin well and end poorly. In fact, this tragic human tendency dominates much human spiritual experience.*
 - b) Raymond Brown, *He knows only too well that even Christians can develop hard (3:8), then wayward (3:10) hearts. The psalmist is himself reflecting on the unhappy incidents recorded in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20 when the redeemed Israelites forgot the Lord's earlier deliverance and complained about their present circumstances.*
 - c) Charles Spurgeon speaks of hardening the heart as being caused by unbelief, *God cannot save me. He is not able to forgive me; the blood of Christ cannot cleanse me; I am too black a sinner for God's mercy to deal with." That is a copy of what the Israelites said: "God cannot take us into Canaan; He cannot conquer the sons of Anak." Though you may look upon unbelief as a slight sin, it is the sin of sins.*

- 3) They tested God's mercy and grace for forty years.
 - a) *the rebellion . . . the day of testing*
 - 1] The psalmist spoke of Massah and Meribah when the Israelites quarreled with Moses over the lack of water, note Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-13.
 - 2] The Septuagint (LXX, Greek translation of the Old Testament) changed the place names as *the rebellion* for Massah and *the testing* for Meribah, Psalm 95:8 (LXX), *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, according to the day of testing in the desert,*
 - 3] R. Kent Hughes, *These words point us directly to Exodus 17, where early in their wilderness experience Israel was camped at Rephidim by Mount Sinai and ran out of water and began to quarrel with Moses. . . The point is, the mention of these words at the beginning and end of the wilderness sojourn is meant to tell us that this conduct was repeated many times during that whole period of wandering.*
 - 4] That rebellion was the result of Israelites accepting the bad report concerning the promised land by most of those sent to scout out the land.
 - b) *saw my works for forty years*
 - 1] The writer attaches forty years to verse 9 instead of verse 10, which gives emphasis to God's grace to the Israelites instead of to God's wrath.
 - 2] William L. Lane, *The alteration indicates the translator's intention to interpret Ps 95:7b-11 in the light of Num 14, where Israel incurred God's wrath by the refusal to enter the promised land. . . The association of the forty years with grace and blessing that God bestowed through his judgments is the most distinctive element in the interpretation of the LXX text by the writer. . .*
 - 3] R. Kent Hughes, . . . *the hardening that took place in the wilderness was rooted in unbelief. . . It was a fair-weather, herd-instinct faith—good until the first trial, when it dissolved in unbelief.*
- b. God's response to their hardened hearts (10-11), ***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.'***
 - 1) *I was provoked with that generation*
 - a) R. Kent Hughes, *They had the mutually attested miracles of the Passover and the Exodus. No one could dispute the reality of those amazing supernatural events. They also still had the daily provision of the cloud by day and the fire by night. They had been regularly fed with manna and quail from Heaven—but they refused to believe God for the land. The unbelief of God's people is even more amazing than belief!*
 - b) Ray Stedman, *God's anger is not lightly aroused. Their grumblings and murmurings were patiently endured over a span of forty years. On occasion God sought to make them aware of their ingratitude and rebellion by visiting them with deserved punishment (fire, plagues, quails and poisonous serpents). But he always offered repentance and recovery. Still, their complaints continued and their hearts gradually hardened until, at Kadesh-Barnea, when God commanded them to enter the land of Canaan and take it for their own, they rebelled and refused to go up.*
 - c)
 - 2) God declared that they always went *astray in their heart. . . they have not known my ways*
 - a) Charles Spurgeon, *God is very tender to errors of judgment—errors of the head. But to err in the heart—this is the heart of erring, and very provoking to the Most High. . . The foundation of sin often lies in ignorance. . . ignorance of God is the constant course of the errors of the heart..*
 - b) William L. Lane, *It indicates that God's anger (cf. Num 14:11, 23, 43b) was not aroused by a single incident but by a persistent tendency to refuse his direction.*
 - c) R. Kent Hughes, *The depth of their defective belief produced one other subsidiary characteristic—contempt/irreverence. Hence all the railing against God and his faithful servants. Thus we understand that the pathology of a hard heart originates in unbelief that spawns a hardened contempt and, as we shall see, a hardness that works out in sinful disobedience.*
 - d) Ray Stedman, *Over forty years, their real knowledge of God had not increased because their grumbling hearts blinded their spiritual eyes. A teachable spirit sustains a grateful heart.*
 - e) Warren Wiersbe, *When a person has an erring heart and a disbelieving heart, the result will also be a hard heart. This is a heart that is insensitive to the Word and work of God. So hard was the heart of Israel that the people even wanted to return to Egypt! Imagine wanting to exchange their freedom under God for slavery in Egypt!*

- 3) *They shall not enter my rest.*
- a) Concerning God's rest
 - 1] Leon Morris, *Rest, as used here, points to a place of blessing where there is no more striving but only relaxation in the presence of God and in the certainty that there is no cause for fear.*
 - 2] Ray Stedman, *This is the first use of the word rest in Hebrews. This word describes the end of wandering and restlessness, and promises calmness and tranquility. Here it clearly refers to the land of Canaan and the promise of a settled state of peace and full supply. But, as we shall see, this Canaan rest was a symbol, a shadow, of a greater rest available to the people of God in the future.*
 - b) God judged the Israelites even though He forgave them.
 - 1] Numbers 14:20-23, *Then the LORD said, "I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, 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 that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.*
 - 2] R. Kent Hughes, *No one who was over twenty at the Exodus entered the land, except for Joshua and Caleb (14:29, 30). The rest filled a million sandy graves during the next thirty-eight years.*
 - 3] William L. Lane, *The finality of God's oath and the judgment it sealed must be seen as a just and adequate recompense for Israel's tragic defiance.*
 - c) The next generation of Israelites entered the rest promised by God.
 - 1] Joshua 1:13, *Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, 'The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.'*
 - 2] Joshua 21:44, *And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands.*
 - 3] Joshua 23:1-5, *A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, "I am now old and well advanced in years. And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you. Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you.*
 - d) The importance of God's rest in Hebrews
 - 1] Thomas Constable, *For Israel, "rest" meant the enjoyment of all that God had promised the nation, not just entrance into the Promised Land . . . For the Christian, "rest" is the enjoyment of all that God has promised us, not just going to heaven. This includes the fullness of rewards that can be ours if we follow the Lord faithfully.*
 - 2] Donald Hagner, *If the Jews were delivered from slavery in Egypt, God has through the cross delivered humanity from a greater slavery. God has acted gloriously and triumphantly in both instances, the earlier foreshadowing the later. And similarity exists not only in the redemptive events, but also in the aftermath of those events. Our author would be in perfect accord with Paul when he writes: "these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us" (1 Cor. 10:11; cf. Rom. 15:4).*

CONCLUSION

- Raymond Brown, *God was deeply grieved by his people's doubt and disloyalty and swore they would not enter into the land of rest which had been promised to them and prepared for them. This warning from the past would certainly not be lost on these Jewish Christians in danger of defection and apostasy.*
- R. Kent Hughes, *The point the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to see is that it is possible to have a remarkable spiritual "exodus" and yet fall by the way when trouble comes. This was the Holy Spirit's message to the beleaguered little church from Psalm 95, and it is his message to us . . . The problem today is that so many people when asked about faith point to their "exodus"—when they began with Christ. They can wax eloquent about their experience . . . Their "exodus" is a convenient memory. But to trust God now? That is a problem, for their faith is dead.*