

## SESSION TWELVE

### A WARNING FROM PSALM 95

#### *Heb 3:7-19*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Although the initial part of this chapter (3:1-6) was meant to highlight the faithfulness of Christ and His superiority to Moses, the author concluded on an ominous note (3:6) that His audience remained Jesus' "house" only if they held fast their confidence and the boast of their hope firm until the end. Jesus is a Great High Priest and presides over a far superior *tabernacle-house*, but our functioning in this "house" can be jeopardized. Through unbelief and disobedience, Christians might jeopardize their role as *believer-priests* and consequently their "inheritance" that potentially awaits them.

A similar thing happened with the Old Covenant people of God who came out of Egypt but failed to go into the promised land (God's "rest" for them). This generation hardened their hearts against God until they reached the point of making a fatal decision in unbelief, namely, the decision to not go up against the Canaanites to take the land. The author of Hebrews sees this Old Covenant tragedy as analogous for his present readers. By the quotation and use of Psalm 95, he seeks to warn them not to repeat the *kind of error* that the wilderness generation did.

#### II. THE QUOTATION OF PSALM 95 (Heb 3:7b-11)

##### A. Source

1. MT and English Bibles: Ps 95:7c-11
2. LXX: Ps 94:7c-11

##### B. Textual Comparison

The NT text is obviously drawn directly from the LXX text, and the differences are minor.

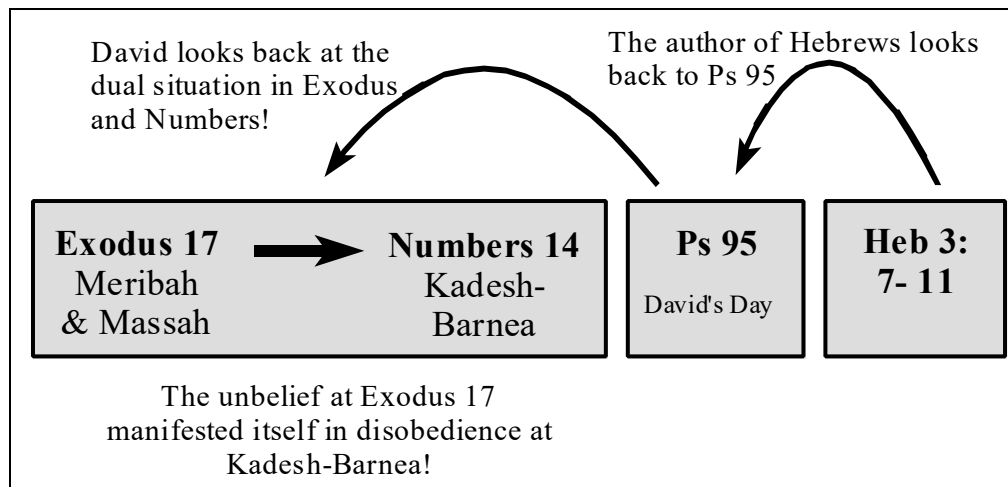
##### 1. Heb 3:9

- a. UBS<sup>4</sup> = οὐ̅ ἐπείρασαν  
LXX (B) and  $\mathfrak{M}$  = οὐ̅ ἐπείρασαν με  $\mathfrak{M}$  = Majority Text
- b. UBS<sup>4</sup> = ἐν δοκιμασίᾳ (Noun: Fem Dat Sg)  
LXX (B) = ἐδοκίμασαν  
LXX (A) and  $\mathfrak{M}$  = ἐδοκίμασάν με (Verb)

2. Heb 3:10
  - a. UBS<sup>4</sup> = διὸ (ℳ also supports διὸ)  
LXX (B) = omit
  - b. UBS<sup>4</sup> = τῆ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ  
LXX (B) = τῆ γενεᾷ ἐκείνῃ (so C and ℳ)
  - c. UBS<sup>4</sup> = αὐτοὶ δὲ  
LXX (B) = καὶ αὐτοὶ  
LXX (A), LXX (⚡) = αὐτοὶ δὲ (so ℳ)

### III. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT PSALM 95

#### A. The Perspective of the Author of Hebrews:



#### B. The Meaning of Psalm 95 in its Own Context

1. This is a "Descriptive Praise Psalm"

Its primary purpose is to call the people of God to worship and humility because of who God is and what He has done in history (see supplement 12.1).

Elaboration: He should be worshiped, because He is the Creator God; and we should be brought to humility, because He has so graciously made us His people and cared for us.

2. The later part of the psalm transitions into a warning about guarding oneself from a "hardened heart." This is followed by the example of the Israelites in the wilderness. Finally, a pronouncement of judgment is given: they were excluded from God's "rest."

C. Crucial Interpretive Matters Regarding Ps 95

1. The people who receive the warning (note the "you" in Ps 95:7b) are the very same ones who are described in the earlier part of vs 7 as "the people of His pasture." The ones who might potentially harden their hearts are the ones who are "God's sheep." In other words, the warning is for *true believers*! The author of Hebrews does not think of them as *unbelievers*. God's people can harden their hearts.
2. There is no basis for assuming that all the people who did not go into the promised land were unbelievers (and that they eventually went to hell). Even Moses did not go into the promised land. In Exodus 15:13 (upon crossing the Red Sea and yet prior to their wilderness failure) Moses could write, "In Thy lovingkindness Thou hast led the people **whom Thou hast redeemed.**" While not claiming that every single one was "saved," by and large they were a *redeemed people*. Hodges writes,
 

"This meant of course that the sinful generation in the desert was permanently excluded from taking possession of their inheritance in Canaan. Naturally it had nothing to do with the question of their going to hell, so it would be wrong to allege that the entire Exodus generation was unregenerate. But exclusion from Canaan was a consequence of their lack of faith in the power of God to bring them into it in victory over their enemies, a failure that in principle might be repeated by the readers of Hebrews if they forgot Messiah's ultimate triumph over His enemies and theirs (cf. 1:13-14)."<sup>1</sup>
3. The consequence of their disobedience was *temporal punishment*, not assignment to eternity in hell. For this generation of disobedient Hebrews in the wilderness, they were disciplined by God's refusal to allow them to enter the promised land. For that generation, God's "rest" was the *rest in the land*, but this was forfeited as a *temporal judgment* upon them.
4. Twice in the quotation, the word "heart" is mentioned (Heb 3:8,10). The wilderness generation had hardened their hearts, and from God's perspective they continually had hearts that went astray. This emphasis upon the *heart condition* is significant, for it is in the heart that one either exercises faith or unbelief. In their case, of course, it was unbelief. Yet notice what the unbelief involved: not a failure to trust God as their Savior, but a failure to believe Him in leading them to Canaan. This was a faith issue of their *mission*, not of their salvation.
5. The end product of their unbelief of heart was "rebellion," i.e., a continued habit of unbelief and provoking the Lord eventually resulted in a fateful decision to rebel. This, of course, happened at Kadesh-Barnea. It was there after the twelve spies had come back with their reports that the people made their final decision to "not go in" (Num

---

<sup>1</sup>Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, 787.

14:1-10). In a commentary on this event after the forty years, Moses said, "Yet you were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God" (Deut 1:26). The point here is that God's people can rebel and can reach a point where they have gone too far. Only God knows when His people *pass the limit*, but there is a point when His mercy will cease and His judgment will come forth (though not in the form of loss of salvation).

6. In Numbers 14, God pointed out that they were particularly culpable in light of the miraculous signs that they had been privileged to witness. "And the LORD said to Moses, 'How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?'" (Num 14:11). Those people had every reason to believe in light of God's attesting signs (i.e., His miracles). Yet, the author of Hebrews knows that the same is true of his audience. He had already reminded them in Heb 2:3-4, ". . . it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will." He will remind them again of this factor in Heb 6:5!
7. Lastly, we should observe that the psalmist begins the warning by saying, "Today if you hear His voice." He was speaking several centuries after the Kadesh-Barnea incident, and yet he realized that God's principle was still operative. By saying "Today," the psalmist was making this whole experience applicable for those of his generation. The implication is that God's "rest" was still at stake. For the earlier generation, this had meant the possessing of the land of Canaan (Deut 12:9-10; Josh 21:44). But the psalmist was writing to those who were then possessing the land, and yet God's "rest" was still at stake. This can only mean that the possessing of the land was a *miniature* of a greater reality. Just as the tabernacle of the wilderness was to have a greater reality, so was the "rest" of the land. Hence, the greater "rest" is still ahead, and one may or may not gain that "rest." Thus, the psalmist says, "Today, if you hear His voice."

#### IV. THE AUTHOR'S EXPLICATION OF PSALM 95 (Heb 3:12-19)

##### A. A Word of Caution (Heb 3:12)

"Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God."

1. Notice that he reminds them again that they are "brethren."
2. The words "evil, unbelieving heart" are καρδιά πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας. By translating this "an evil heart of unbelief" the point may be sharper. The crucial question here is to whom does such a heart belong to? Is this "proof" that the author has *unbelievers* in view (i.e., unregenerate)?

- a. The author uses the same word ἀπιστίας again in 3:19 - "And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief (δι' ἀπιστίαν)." Obviously, the unbelief that he has in mind is not in regard to "trusting Christ as Savior" but to disbelief of God's promises and His will to go up to the promised land.
  - b. The words "evil heart" (καρδία πονηρὰ) need not demand that they are unregenerate. It is true that the adjective πονηρός is often used to refer to Satan (e.g., Eph 6:16) and to demons (e.g., Acts 19:12), but that does not exclude it from reference to a regenerate Christian. It is used of the brother under discipline in 1 Cor 5:13 ("wicked man"), and is used in Jas 2:4 to speak of believers who have "evil motives." Finally, when teaching the disciples about prayer in Lk 11:13, the Lord said, "If you then, being evil . . ."
3. He warns them about "falling away" from the living God. The Greek word he uses is the Aorist Infinitive ἀποστῆναι (from ἀφίστημι). What does it mean for one to "fall away"? Can a true believer do this?

The verb ἀφίστημι is used 14x in the NT, but only here in 3:12 for Hebrews. It is used in several various ways, but primarily means to depart from someone or from a place *literally* (e.g., Lk 13:27; Acts 12:10). It can also mean to stand back (aloof) from someone (Acts 22:29). It is used, for example, of John Mark (a true believer) who had deserted Paul and Barnabas on the mission trip (Acts 15:38).

Theological uses of the verb are rare in the NT. In 1 Tim 4:1, it is used to speak of "falling away from the faith" by those who embrace heretical doctrines. This is the closest analogy to a *spiritual departure*, but in this case it is not clear whether the subjects in view are believers or unbelievers. The only other NT use that speaks of falling away from God is Lk 8:13 in regard to the parable of the soils. Speaking of the seed that fell on the rocky soil, we are told that "they believe (πιστεύουσιν) for a while, and in time of temptation fall away." One could dispute the meaning of "believe," but probably it is used in a soteriological sense here. In the previous soil category (Lk 8:12), the devil is said to have taken the word from their heart "so that they may not believe and be saved."

In classical Greek, the word was used by Herodotus in the sense "to revolt from" (even though this nuance is not listed in *BAG*). Usage of ἀφίστημι is quite frequent in the LXX (at least 85x). In particular, we have several uses of ἀφίστημι with the preposition ἀπὸ and either θεός or κύριος:

- a. Deut 32:15 - ἀπέστη ἀπὸ θεοῦ  
Here it is used of Israel **forsaking God** by turning to idols & false gods.
- b. Josh 22:19 - ἀποστάται ἀπὸ θεοῦ  
Used of Israel **forsaking God** by building another altar.
- c. 2 Chr 26:18 - ἀπέστης ἀπὸ κυρίου

Use of Uzziah in the sense of "rebel" - "for you have rebelled against the Lord."

- d. 2 Chr 30:7 - οἱ ἀπέστησαν ἀπὸ κυρίου θεοῦ

Used of Israel's general unfaithfulness "who rebelled against the Lord God of their fathers."

### Conclusions

ἀφίστημι is not used in the sense of "falling away" from salvation, i.e., turning away from the offer of salvation. In fact, the nuance of "falling away" has very little support in the NT (except possibly Lk 8:13). More often, it has the idea of "departing" or "withdrawing" from someone or someplace. Stronger clues are available for the Septuagint usage where we do have several similar constructions. In these cases, the nuances of "rebellious" or "forsaking" the Lord are dominant. In the case of Josh 22:19, ἀφίστημι translates the Hebrew word מרר which means to "rebel, revolt." Furthermore, Heb 3:12 needs to be seen in contrast with Heb 3:6 and the admonition of "holding fast." The author of Hebrews seems to be saying, "Hold fast . . . and don't rebel against God." The translation "fall away" is O.K., as long as we see this as a rebellious turning away from God which believers can do (and that the issue is not "salvation").

#### B. The Remedy for Unbelief and Rebellion (Heb 3:13)

"But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

"The antidote for developing a hard heart is a caring, encouraging community of believers."<sup>2</sup> We dare not underestimate ourselves: we can succumb to a hardened heart, a danger aggravated by the deceitfulness of sin.

#### C. A Warning to Stick with Our Obligation (Heb 3:14)

"For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance (τῆς ὑποστάσεως) firm until the end."

The words "our assurance" are better translated "the obligation we have undertaken" (see BDAG, p 1040 on ὑποστάσεως).

Once again, the author speaks of being "partakers" (μέτοχοι) of Christ. Unfortunately, the *NIV* translation renders the verse in a rather misleading way: "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first." To "share in" Christ implies that "salvation" is in view (similar to being "in Christ"). The Greek μέτοχοι has more the idea of "partnership" in mind.<sup>3</sup> The striking similarity of this verse to Heb 3:6 (see discussion above) suggests that it should be understood in exactly the same way: we are partners/participants with Christ in the spiritual service of the greater tabernacle, if we (i.e.,

<sup>2</sup>T. K. Oberholtzer, "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1--4:13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (Apr-Jun 1988), 189.

<sup>3</sup>Balz & Schneider (2:420) suggest, "'for we have become partners of Christ,' i.e., through participation in the heavenly calling; cf. 3:12 and 2:11f.; hardly 'participants in Christ' . . . ."

as long as we) hold fast . . . the undertaking (we have obligated ourselves to). [The translation "with Christ" (rather than "of Christ") reflects the classification of the Greek as a genitive of association (see Wallace, pp 127-28)].

D. Final Reminders about Possible Judgment (Heb 3:15-19)

Once again, the author of Hebrews points out some things from the Ps 95 quotation to remind his audience that they need to take this as a serious warning for themselves.

1. Heb 3:15-16

If a whole generation that came out of Egypt (God's people under the Old Covenant) succumbed to provoking and rebelling against God, then this is possible for New Covenant participants, too.

2. Heb 3:17

If God followed through on His discipline of that generation who rebelled, the present audience must not be falsely misled to think that God will be "soft" on them. He reminds his audience that "their bodies fell in the wilderness." They had better realize that *temporal discipline* is a possibility.

3. Heb 3:18-19

Not only did they die in the wilderness (temporal discipline), but they spoiled their future. God had His "rest" planned for them, but their unbelief and disobedience robbed it for them. The implication is that God has a "rest" for the audience of Hebrews, too, but *unbelief* can lead to a forfeiture of that rest. Regarding this, our author will probe into it more deeply in the next chapter.

## V. COMMENTS ON PETER ENNS'S ARTICLE:

### "CREATION AND RE-CREATION . . ."

I found this article woefully short of understanding the full seriousness of the quotation of Psalm 95 for the readers. Enns apparently sees the relationship between the wilderness generation and the author's generation as more of "contrast" than of similarity. Notice his comments:

"Simply by quoting this psalm, Hebrews is making a statement regarding the *continuity* between Israel and the church: both have a wilderness period. Yet, the negative overtones in Psalm 95 regarding the wilderness period would not suit the reality of the church age as one of great blessing. . . . there is a *distinction* between the two periods of wilderness wandering. The Israelite wilderness period was one of wrath: 'With whom was he angry for forty years?' (3:17). The church's wilderness period is one of divine blessing: 'They saw my works for forty years' (3:10). Although Israel may have fallen away shortly after her Exodus, thus characterizing her wilderness wandering as a time of wrath, the period following the church's Exodus is characterized by 'signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.' [pp 274-75]

Enns is saying that both Israel and the church have a wilderness period, but the two are different. Israel failed, and God was angry. But the church, in contrast, is blessed. This is what marks the superiority of the latter to the former. Such a view does a great injustice to this chapter and robs it of the seriousness of warning to the New Covenant believers. Once again, we must let the text speak for itself: "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief!"