

DAY 7: THE PERIL OF UNBELIEF

Hebrews 3:7-19

A WARNING FROM SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY The author of Hebrews wants to encourage his readers to persevere in their faith. He warns that if they make the same mistakes their countrymen made in the past, they will miss God's blessing. The Israelites are an example of how unbelief leads to disobedience, to falling away from the faith, and to the forfeit of God's blessing of rest.

"Therefore" connects verses 7-12 to the warning of verse 6—the readers should faithfully remain in God's household. The quote from Psalm 95:7-11 is introduced as a statement by the Holy Spirit. *"Today"* reminds readers that they live daily in an era of grace—a time in which the Son speaks for the Father, and that will last only until God's appointed time of judgment. The plea is strong: *"Do not harden your hearts"* (3:8). In Scripture the heart signifies the mind, emotions, and will. Refusal to listen produces hardness of heart. However, the *"do not"* indicates hope. Such a fate can be avoided.

The quotation from Psalm 95:7-11 deals with situations where the Israelites rebelled against God in the desert. One incident occurred when there was no water. Israel responded poorly to the crisis (Exodus 17:1-7). The narrative ends with *"he called the name of the place Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling] because the quarreling of the people ... and because they tested the LORD."* The psalm uses *"Meribah"* and *"Massah,"* but in Hebrews 3:8, where the psalm is quoted, *"rebellion"* and *"testing"* are used. The second incidence of rebellion caused God to swear that the Israelites would not enter His rest. Twelve spies returned from investigating the Promised Land. Caleb and Joshua praised the land and Israel's ability under God to overcome their enemies. The people chose to believe the discouraging report of the other spies. Deliberate disbelief in God caused their hearts to harden.

Israel saw God's works and experienced His goodness for 40 years. Israel's own land—God's place of rest—was withheld from the generation that refused to enter it through faith. Observe how *"that generation"* thought with one mind. Often, sin is a corporate behavior. Individually or as a group, we must not provoke God.

God's anger is a response to continued disobedience. Man's disobedience was the cause; God's oath, the result. In the days of Moses, a generation of Israelites was kept out of the Promised Land because of their unbelief. Centuries later, the psalmist urged the people to enter into God's promised rest. Now, the author of Hebrews also urges his readers to walk in faith lest they, too, be kept out of that promised rest. *Rest* once meant only a place; now it also means an experience. God invites us to share with Him daily fellowship and peace, and then, finally, a place—heaven itself.

THINK ABOUT how we are on a pilgrimage, as were the Israelites. Our journey is a path of spiritual growth, and we share it as we grow. We are God's means of bringing the good news to those who don't yet know Him. When we find the way to the place of rest, the desire to lead others to it comes naturally. The way to the Father—and to His place of rest—is through the Son: *"No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6). *"Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed"* (1 Corinthians 5:7), and He is *"the way"* that leads to rest.

CONSEQUENCES OF UNBELIEF The words *"take care"* suggest the author's anxiety over his readers' spiritual condition. There are many parallels between the condition of the Israelites and that of the Hebrew Christians. With the aid of key words from the psalm, he shows that unbelief and turning away with a hardened heart must not be allowed.

In 3:12, the writer selects a future tense: *"Take care ... lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart."* He presents a future fact rather than possibility, signaling great urgency. He is emphatic yet hopeful. Relaxation of belief will lead to apostasy, but the choice to prevent that is presently before the people. From chapter to chapter, the urging to strong faith while it is still possible leaps off the page. The danger of *"fall[ing] away from the living God"* is more than a



possibility, but not a fact—not yet. The danger stated, literally, is *to apostatize, to grow faithless, to deliberately rebel against God*—the final act of unbelief. To depart from Christ or lose hold on Him is to fall away from the living God. The words point to the power of God, who will not overlook rebellion.

In verse 13, the author urges Christians who are strong to help the weak and encourage one another daily. “*Today*” emphasizes that believers still have the chance to do what is right, for they live in the day of grace. The opportunity will end for all of them at Christ’s return, or for each of them at their own death. They are warned to be on guard against sin and to avoid being tricked by Satan and subtly led, without resistance, to unbelief.

THINK ABOUT how the phrases “*an evil, unbelieving heart*” (3:12) and “*the deceitfulness of sin*” (3:13) link sin and unbelief. One produces the other, and they feed on each other. We must heed the warning about having an unbelieving heart or being hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. Our responsibility is also not just for ourselves. We must encourage one another. Our actions, not just our words, should inspire and encourage others: “*Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up*” (Romans 15:2). If we earnestly try to keep our own hearts right before God and encourage others in their efforts to do so, we can interrupt the vicious circle of an unbelieving heart and the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 3:14 repeats the message of verse 6. While salvation is God’s work, not ours, we are nevertheless given responsibility. Sharing in Christ is a privilege that comes with God-appointed and God-empowered activities of faith. The expression “*if indeed we hold*” (3:14) underscores the author’s concern for the Christian’s steadfastness. By repeating Psalm 95:8, verse 15 emphasizes the need for keeping faith intact throughout life.

By using a series of questions, the author analyzes rebellion, retribution, and the reason for both. The second question in verse 16 actually answers the first. Who rebelled? Those who saw and enjoyed God’s miraculous deliverance and provision. During the 40 years of desert life, the Israelites’ continued stubbornness and rebellion provoked the Lord to anger. Punishment came as a holy vindication of God’s moral character and His authority over the people. The Israelites were kept out of the Promised Land because of their disobedience brought on by unbelief.

After a skillful presentation of Scripture, history, and logical argument, the author concludes that Israel failed to enter the land because of unbelief. The Israelites could not enter God’s rest because they rejected His requirements of love and obedience.

PERSONALIZE this lesson. This strong warning against sin and unbelief was not written to new Christians. This letter was written to redirect Christians who had drifted from the truth or were tolerating sin.

While we live, we must continually maintain a close and trusting relationship with the Lord. If we neglect reading and studying the Bible—if we decide we have already heard everything we need to know—we put ourselves at risk. Is there some aspect of your spiritual life that needs shoring up? What steps can you take today to make it right? Peter gave sound advice: “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith*” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

REVIEW: THE PERIL OF UNBELIEF

13. a. Do you feel the things we are “to do” and “not to do” in Hebrews 3:12-13 are primarily the responsibility of the corporate body of Christ, the individual believer, or both? Why?
 - b. What is one thing you feel you can and should assume as a personal responsibility?