

Do Not Harden Your Hearts

From our Second Reading for today, Hebrews 3:12-19, we see that with pastoral concern the author applies a warning to his readers and fellow believers when he writes, “*Be careful, fellow-Christians, that none of you has in him a wicked, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God!*” (v.12). He did not want a single one of them to be lost. Unbelief is always a heart problem, one that deals with the inner being, and unbelief is always serious because it rejects Christ’s salvation.

Turning away from a living God is not a matter of casual drifting but of *deliberate desertion* by hearts that once heard and believed but then cut themselves off from the living God. Were any of the readers inclined because of persecution’s heat to rebel against Jesus by turning back to Judaism? Let them be warned! To turn away from Jesus is to reject the living God. In John 5:23 Jesus had said, “*He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who has sent Him.*”

All of them needed constant encouragement from one another. Sin can be so violently deceitful. It disguises its horrible purpose, dilutes its poisonous taste, and in the end utterly destroys. Did the sin of turning from Christ back to Judaism seem not so serious, perhaps even prudent, in the face of persecution? Therefore, “Watch out,” the author warned, “*that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!*” Rather, they were to “*Encourage one another daily.*”

The author reminded his readers that no believer exists as an island. Christian faith and spiritual health are not just matters between a man and his God. They are of vital concern among fellow believers. Gathering together in local congregations is more than advisable; it is necessary so that we can “*encourage one another daily.*”

Believers share so much in Christ and have so much more waiting for them. All that the heaven-sent Saviour offers is ours “*if we firmly hold the reality that we had at the beginning until the end*” (v.14). What a firm, confident stand those readers had when first brought to faith! How sad if any were now to turn out like the rocky soil of Mark 4:16-17, where the seed of faith lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they quickly fall away.

Once more the author warns his readers about hardening their hearts when he writes, “*Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as you did in the rebellion!*” (v. 15). Then with a series of hard-hitting questions, he drives home his point. “*Who, indeed, were those that heard Him and rebelled?*” (v. 16). Not people who were ignorant or had never experienced God’s wondrous works and ways but “*all those who were brought out of Egypt through Moses. With whom was **He angry for forty years?** Was it not with those who sinned and whose **bodies fell in the wilderness?**” (v. 17). God’s anger was not with those who didn’t know any better or were innocent but “*those who sinned.*” God’s anger is not capricious or hasty.*

Forty years of rejection and rebellion by those who had richly experienced divine providence was the cause of all those graves dotting the desert. “*To whom did He declare on oath that they would not enter His place of rest?*” To people who had no excuse whatsoever, to those who knew better and yet disobeyed, refusing to believe. Can any reader miss the point? “*So, we see,*” the author concludes, “*that they could not enter because of unbelief*” (v. 19). What robbed that generation of Israel of rest both in the earthly and the heavenly Canaan? The answer is unbelief. Will the consequences be any less severe for those who would turn away from the superior Jesus today?

So much seems to be demanded of those first readers and of us today. The race of faith is to be all-out all the time; the course on which it is run is hazardous and obstacle-filled, and it never lets up! How can we do it? How can we hold out? “*Consider Jesus,*” the author urges, “*the Apostle and High Priest of our confession!*” (3:1). Let that superior Jesus and His Word be the sure basis of our confidence. This is why we pray, “God, rest our faith not on what we are but on what Jesus is, not on what we do but on what Jesus has done.” Then our journey in life’s wilderness, unlike Israel’s, will have both a good beginning and a good end.