

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 20 June 2021. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Harden Not Your Hearts

Hebrews 3:7-19

Few people in history have had the kind of privileges that the children of Israel had when they were travelling in the desert, under the leadership of Moses. For starters, God delivered them from the bondage of Egypt. Through a series of ten horrific plagues God broke the Egyptians' will, until Pharaoh finally relented, and let them go. As they fled from Egypt, God parted the Red Sea, so that 3 million Israelites could cross over. He then brought the waters crashing down upon Pharaoh's army, and slew every one of them. For forty years, 3 million Israelites walked about in a parched wasteland; and God sustained them miraculously every day with bread from the sky, with water from a rock, and with His own visible presence in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night. He repeatedly protected them from hostile enemies. Yet, the majority of the people continually complained and rebelled against God; and their rebellion cost them dearly. When the people listened to the evil report of the ten spies at Kadesh-Barnea, they committed the ultimate insult against God; they threatened to murder the two spies who had given a *good* report of the land, and began to elect a captain to replace Moses, and to lead them back to Egypt. As the result of this rebellion, God condemned an entire generation of Israelites to 38 more years of wandering in the desert; and He forbade anyone over the age of 20 to enter the Promised Land. Every last one of them (except Caleb and Joshua) died in the desert.

God was very longsuffering with the children of Israel. However, there came a day when they rebelled one time too many: and as a result, God consigned an entire generation to spend the rest of their lives in the wilderness. My friends, there is much to be learned from this account. Remember, the Apostle Paul wrote the epistle of **Hebrews** to Jewish people who *professed* to have believed on Jesus. However, now that they were facing persecution for their professed faith in Christ, many of them were willing to abandon Christianity, and to return to Judaism. These people were never truly saved. Just as their forefathers had rebelled against God, and had tried to return to Egypt, so many of the professing Jewish Christians of Paul's day were about to make a much more tragic mistake—the mistake of abandoning Christ's call to salvation, and of returning to a lifeless religion, which could not save their souls.

My friends, there is no “Christ-less” salvation! Many so-called “evangelical Christian” leaders of our day have repeatedly gone on record as saying (or, at least, strongly implying) that one can make it to heaven *without* placing his trust in Jesus Christ, as long as he is sincere in his beliefs. Such men are on their way to hell; and they are leading countless others there. Yet, perhaps even more frightening is the reality that within the walls of solid, Bible-preaching churches, there are false professors of salvation, who never really bowed the knee to Jesus Christ. Equally frightening is the fact that genuine, blood-bought believers can become so *desensitised* to apostasy, that they are scarcely bothered by it. I pray that neither of these is the case in the group that is gathered here this morning; but I would be foolish to think that it couldn't be so. After all, Christ Himself had twelve “inner circle” disciples: yet, one of them was unsaved!

I'll warn you: this message won't be comfortable. However, everyone in this room *needs* to hear these words of warning and exhortation. The title of this message is ***Harden Not Your Hearts***.

Read Hebrews 3:7-19.

I. Paul's warning to false professors of salvation (vv. 7-12; 15-19)

In **verse 7**, Paul starts off a new sentence with the word "*Wherefore*" (or, as we would say today, "*Therefore*"). However, he immediately interrupts the thought that he had just started. You'll notice that there is a "parenthesis" which begins just after the word "*wherefore*," and continues all the way to the end of **verse 11**. If you read the sentence *without* the parenthesis, it reads like this: "*Wherefore...take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God*" (vv. 7 and 12). Paul is giving this warning to those in his audience who had made a false profession of salvation. He is challenging them to examine whether the faith that they *professed* to have was real, or whether theirs was a heart of unbelief, which had never truly been converted. That is the main thrust of this whole section of Scripture.

Now, let's go back and take a look at that parenthesis. (**Read the parenthesis in vv. 7-11.**) What we find in this parenthesis is a quotation from **Psalm 95**. This is a Scripture that Paul's Jewish audience would have known very well. Paul is reminding the Jews of a tragedy that had befallen their ancestors because of their unbelief; and in so doing, he is setting the stage to give them a striking illustration of the grave danger that many of them were in.

Now, let's take a look at the Scripture that Paul is quoting. Please turn with me to **Psalm 95**. By the way, while you are turning there, I would like to point out what Paul said about **Psalm 95**. Just before Paul began to quote **Psalm 95**, he said, "*As the Holy Ghost saith.*" Paul was so persuaded that the Bible is God's Word, that he didn't even mention that the *human* author of **Psalm 95** was David. Instead, he identified the *real* author of **Psalm 95** as the Holy Ghost! With this in mind, let us see what the Holy Ghost has to say to us here in **Psalm 95**.

Read Psalm 95:7-11.

The psalm that we have just read was written by King David. In this psalm, David is reminding the people of his day of the terrible thing that had befallen their ancestors 400 years earlier. After the children of Israel had been freed from Egypt for about two years, they came to Kadesh-Barnea, on the southern border of Canaan. At this point, God commanded the children of Israel to go into the land, and to inherit it. They first sent twelve men from each of the twelve tribes to spy out the land; however, ten of the spies came back with an evil report. They acknowledged that Canaan was a fruitful land; however, they insisted that they could not possibly defeat the Canaanites, because their cities were walled, and strong; and also, there were tribes of giants, which made them feel like grasshoppers. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, believed that God would give them victory; and they tried to encourage the people to trust the LORD. However, the people refused to listen. Instead, they rebelled against Moses, and began to elect a captain to lead them back to Egypt. They preferred to be *slaves* to the Egyptians than to be *conquerors* of the land that God had promised them!

The children of Israel had already tested God's patience many times; and each time that they had murmured and rebelled against Him, the consequences had become more severe. However, this was the last straw. God was so angry at them for their unbelief, that He was ready to wipe them all out, and to save only Moses alive, and to start all over again with Moses! However, Moses pleaded to God on their behalf; and God withheld His wrath. Nonetheless, there was still a huge price to be paid for their rebellion and unbelief.

Read Numbers 14:23-35.

So, now you have the backdrop for what Paul is saying in **Hebrews 3**. Paul is using this tragic event from Israel's past in order to illustrate to the Jews of his day the great danger that many of them were facing because they were about to turn away from the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as an entire generation of Israelites missed out on the Promised Land because of their unbelief in God's promises, so many Jews in Paul's day were in danger of missing out on the *promise of salvation* because of their unbelief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, as we look at **Hebrews 3**, we need to remember that this is an *illustration*. Paul is not saying that every person who was barred from the land Canaan was also barred from salvation, or from Heaven. If that were the case, Moses himself would have been an unsaved man! Moses and Aaron were later barred from entering Canaan because of *their* disobedience at the waters of Meribah, when Moses struck the rock twice instead of speaking to it! Obviously, Moses and Aaron were saved men; yet, they were not allowed to go into Canaan because of the unbelief that they had displayed on that one occasion. Undoubtedly, there was at least a small minority of Israelites who were *personally saved* because of their faith in the coming Redeemer; yet, they were barred from entering Canaan because of their unbelief at Kadesh-Barnea. There may have been many Israelites who did not personally participate in trying to stone Joshua and Caleb, nor in electing a captain to go back into Egypt; yet, in their hearts, they failed to believe God's promise that they could conquer the land of Canaan.

We see, then, that Paul is taking the situation of the Israelites' unbelief in the wilderness, and is making a giant analogy of it. He is telling the false professors, who were thinking of turning away from Jesus Christ, that they were in grave danger. Those who rejected *Moses'* authority, and didn't believe God's promises concerning the Promised Land, were refused entry into Canaan. However, rejection of Jesus Christ has a far worse price tag. **The price tag for rejecting Jesus is to be refused entry into the ark of salvation!**

Now, notice what Paul says in **verse 11**. (**Read Hebrews 3:11 again.**) What is the "*rest*" that Paul is talking about? He's talking about the land of Canaan. Canaan is called God's "*rest*" because it was the place where the Israelites could finally stop wandering about in the desert, and settle in permanent homes, and plant olive yards and vineyards, and harvest crops, and have plenty of water, and corn, and oil, and milk, and honey. Well, guess what? Salvation is the same way. Salvation is a place of "rest." Paul is taking this idea of "*rest*" in the land of Canaan, and he is likening it to **salvation through Jesus Christ**.

By the way, in the New Testament, "Canaan" and "the Promise Land" do not represent "Heaven," as many of our songs portray. In Scripture, Canaan is a picture of *the Christian life*, which we enter by faith in Jesus Christ. It especially represents *victorious* Christian living. Canaan was a place where the Israelites had to *fight battles* against the Canaanites. In the same way, Christians must fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil in their Christian lives! This may not sound very "restful"; but it is! Why? **Because the Christian is resting in the perfect work of redemption.**

Read Matthew 11:28-30.

Jesus said, "***Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***" Just as the Israelites toiled in bondage in the land of Egypt, so we who are saved once toiled in

the bondage of sin, before we were saved. But now, we have found “*rest*” unto our souls. Does this mean that we now have no work to do? Does it mean that we can now “loaf around”? Not on your life! Remember, Jesus said, “*My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” The word “*yoke*” implies service! There *is* a yoke of service for God’s people. Like oxen that are yoked together, we who are saved are “yoked” together in service with fellow Christians; and Christ is our Master driving the plough. We were saved in order to *serve* the Lord Jesus Christ; and there *is* a lot of work to be done. However, it is not *burdensome* work. It is not a *heavy* burden. Why? Because we are no longer working in order to do the impossible: we are not working to try to *earn our own salvation*. Trying to earn your salvation is an *exceedingly* heavy burden! No matter how hard you may try to earn your salvation, you can’t do it! In contrast, when you trust in *Christ* to save you, Christ takes away that awful, impossible burden of trying to earn your salvation, and assures you that you now belong to *Him*. He also takes away the awful burden of sin. Sin seems fun at first; but it is fun only for a season. In the end, it ensnares you, enslaves you, and destroys your life. As for Satan, he is a cruel taskmaster. Christ, on the other hand, is a kind and loving Master. When you turn your life over to Christ, and let Him take your sin away, He gives you rest. He does have work for you to do *after* you are saved; however, your labour is a labour of love and gratitude to Him, and not one of fear and bondage. *That* makes all the difference! My friend, if you have not entered into Jesus’ rest, please do not forfeit the chance to do so! “*Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*”

There came a day when the children of Israel forfeited their chance to enter Canaan. On that fateful day, they declared that they would rather live in bondage to the Egyptians than to live as conquerors in Canaan. Yet, this was not a decision that they made suddenly, on the spot. In their *hearts*, they never really left Egypt. At any point along the way, they would have gone back in a heartbeat *if* the opportunity had presented itself. Why? Because they would rather live in slavery than to live by faith in a God whom they could not see. So it is with salvation. Most people would rather live in the misery of sin than to live by faith in an unseen God. When Christ knocks on their heart’s door, they refuse to let Him come in. However, there will come a day when those who resisted the Holy Spirit’s pleadings to be saved will forfeit their chance of salvation. If *you* are unsaved, and are merely playing the game of Christianity, there may come a point when *you* will have rejected Christ one too many times; and the Holy Spirit of God will convict you of sin no more.

That is precisely what the Jewish nation in the Apostles’ day did. They rejected their Saviour, Jesus Christ, just as their fathers had rejected their God in the wilderness. By the way, I find it interesting that the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for **40 years**. Throughout Scripture, **the number 40 (whether 40 days, or 40 months, or 40 years) is often a time of testing and proving**. At the time when Paul wrote this letter (about A.D. 69), it had been almost forty years since Christ had begun His earthly ministry. Within a year of the writing of this letter, on the 9th of Av, A.D. 70, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman general Titus. This was forty years after Jesus began to perform His miracles in Galilee. Coincidence? I think not! Yet, that is not all. The annihilation and scattering of Israel continued for three and a half years; but finally, in A.D. 73, the last of the Jewish freedom fighters, who had barricaded themselves in the fortress of Masada, committed suicide just before the Romans broke into the fortress. The Romans had been building an earthen ramp to the door of the fortress; and on April 16, A.D. 73, the Romans reached the door of the fortress, and smashed down the door with their battering rams. Why is that date significant? Because it happened to be the 15th of the month *Nisan*—the day immediately after the

Passover. It was on the Passover Day, exactly forty years earlier (in A.D. 33) that Christ, the Passover Lamb, had died on the cross. For forty years, Israel, as a nation, had had the opportunity to repent and believe on their Passover Lamb; but now, their time was up. Folks, God is not mocked! He means business! There came a definite time when Israel's opportunity to turn to Jesus was up. However, the same is true for individuals. If you have not opened your heart's door to Jesus, how long will God give *you* to open the door? You may not have another forty years before your time is up: your time may be up before this day is over! If you have never trusted in Jesus to save you, *please do so today!* Jesus said, "***What shall it profit a man if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?***"

II. Paul's admonition to the possessors of salvation (vv. 12-14)

As we've already seen, the second half of **chapter 3** is addressed mostly to unsaved professors of Christianity. However, Paul has some warning and exhortation for true believers, as well. (Read Hebrews 3:12-14.)

Although Paul is dealing mostly with false professors in this passage, there is certainly an *application* that Christians can draw from Paul's warning in **verse 7**. The application is, "Don't harden your heart!" A true Christian cannot lose his *salvation*; but he can lose blessing and joy, and face chastisement in his life, when he hardens his heart against *any* command of God. If we disregard the command to put away lying; or the command not to defile our "temple" through alcohol, or adultery, or fornication; or the command to give to God; or the command to witness to the lost, we will face spiritual loss, and chastisement. Again, I would emphasise that a true Christian will not utterly fall away. God won't let him do so! However, as Christians, we *can* harden our hearts, and suffer consequences for doing so. That is why Paul says, "***Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.***"

Clearly, this remark was directed to *believers*. Even believers can have a heart of "***unbelief.***" Even believers can start to doubt God's Word. (Ask the Apostle Peter about what happened in *his* heart when a young woman accused him of being a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. He'll tell you!) How, then, can we avoid this hardening of our hearts? **By exhorting each other daily!** (Read **verse 13** again.) To "***exhort***" means "to urge someone strongly and earnestly." It means to confront someone with truth (even if it be uncomfortable truth) in a loving manner. This isn't merely a job for the pastor: it is a job for *all* Christians. Why are we to do this? First of all, because even Christians can begin to doubt God's Word, and harden their hearts; and we need to remind each other of God's promises. Secondly, it may be that there are some among us who *appear* to be saved, and who *think themselves* to be saved, but who *aren't*. By exhorting each other, and confronting each other with truth, those among us who are not saved may be cut to the heart, realise their lost condition, and receive Christ before it's too late.

Every Sunday, godly pastors all over the world get up in front of their congregations and address their assembly as "brothers and sisters." In doing so, they are *assuming* that those whom they have baptised into their assembly are truly saved. A pastor who is being faithful to his charge will, before he baptises *anyone*, do everything in his power to discern whether that person is truly saved. Yet, every pastor knows (and trembles at the thought) that there may be some souls in his congregation who *seemed* to have a genuine profession of salvation, but who are not truly saved. That is why Paul warns Christians to be vigilant, and not merely to assume that everyone who is attending church (or who is even on the membership role) is truly

saved. We need to confront and exhort each other with God's Word all the time, so that the true condition of people's hearts might be revealed to them.

Now, let's take a close look at **verse 14. (Read again.)** What is Paul saying, here? Why does he use that conditional word "*if*"? Is Paul saying that believers are on "probation" until they are definitely and finally saved? Is he saying that we will be made partakers of Christ only *if and when* we have successfully endured the course to the end of our lives? No, he is not. That simply does not match up with Scripture! If that were what Paul is saying, it would mean that Christians are *not* partakers of Christ here and now. Paul said in **Romans 8:9**, "***Now if any have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.***" Either you *are* a partaker of Christ, and are saved, or you have *never* been a partaker of Christ, and you are *not* saved. "***He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.***" For a true child of God, there is no "*ye shall be a partaker of Christ...if.*" If you have been truly saved, then you *are*, right here and now, a partaker of Christ.

A Christian's salvation does not *depend upon* his steadfastness, because his salvation is already settled. If this weren't the case, it would mean that salvation is through our good works: and Paul says that salvation is "***not of works, lest any man should boast***"! If salvation *depended* on your steadfastness, you couldn't possibly make it to Heaven, because one sin would bar you from God's presence! What, then, is Paul saying in **verse 14**? He is saying that true, saving faith *will be made evident* by a life of continued faith, obedience, and submission to God. Your salvation doesn't *depend upon* your being steadfast; rather, you are *able* to be steadfast *because you are truly saved*. People who *profess* to be saved, but who turn away from Christ, and never look back, have shown that they were never truly saved. True, saving faith *will endure*, because it is of God. Peter denied the Lord in a moment of fear and dismay; but he got back up and repented, because he truly knew Jesus. True faith does not spark up just long enough to be saved, and then completely disappear, never to arise again.

Folks, we are living in a day of tremendous apostasy. The success of the so-called Christian book *The Shack* is a perfect example of this apostasy. This book is read and endorsed by many within the realm of "evangelicalism." *The Shack* was a *USA Today* best-seller, and a *New York Times* #1 paperback fiction seller, for a good while after it launched in 2008; and it continues to sell millions of copies to this day. Yet, what does this "Christian" book teach? In this ludicrous tale, a man who is supposed to be a "Christian" has a personal encounter in a shack one night with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who manifest themselves to him individually and separately, in bodily form. The Father reveals Himself as an African-American woman who calls herself "Papa"; the Son reveals Himself as a Middle-Eastern carpenter; and the Holy Spirit reveals "itself" (not "Himself") and as an Asian woman called Sarayu. This is utter blasphemy, on multiple levels! This novel also teaches universal salvation (the idea that because Christ died for everyone, everyone is therefore saved, and will get to Heaven one way or another, regardless of which "path" he chooses.) The fact that "evangelicals" would lap up such a blasphemous story reveals that multitudes of people who call themselves "born-again Christians" are *not really* born again. There are many who *profess* salvation, but who do not truly *possess* salvation. Peter describes this in **2 Peter 2**.

Read 2 Peter 2:1-3, 17-22.

There are people who, from these verses, try to make the case that a true Christian can apostatise, and lose his salvation. However, Paul never says anything of the kind. What Paul

says is that these false teachers have escaped the “*pollutions of the world*” through the “*knowledge*” of Jesus Christ. The word for “knowledge” is the word *epignosis*, which carries the idea of “recognition,” or “acknowledgment.” It doesn’t have to imply anything more than an *intellectual* acknowledgment of truth.

An unsaved person may intellectually acknowledge who Jesus is, yet never come to know Him personally. An unsaved person can even “clean up his act”—so much so, that true Christians mistakenly believe that he is saved. A false professor of salvation can blend right in with true Christians, because he speaks the right words, and outwardly seems to be living a decent life. He may even experience “blessing” in his life, and seemingly see answered prayers, simply because he is hanging around Christians. Take **Laban**, for example (the father-in-law of Jacob). Laban had grown up in a Jehovah-worshipping home. Yet, as the years rolled by, he embraced the idol-worship of the culture. Laban worshipped Jehovah outwardly; but in his heart, he was a lying, scheming idolater. Nevertheless, Laban was blessed because of his close association with Jacob, who was a *true* believer. As long as Laban treated Jacob right, and hung around him, things went well in his life. **Potiphar**, though a lost man, prospered greatly as long as Joseph was in charge of his house. Joseph’s very presence brought blessing to Potiphar’s house—as long as he treated Joseph right. The **prison keeper**, though a lost man, prospered as long as Joseph was in charge of his prison.

Read Genesis 30:25-27.

Read Genesis 39:1-6, 20-23.

Don’t be fooled: material prosperity is no sign that a person knows God. Even a lost person can, by his own will power, stop drinking, smoking, doing drugs, or being immoral; and his life may go much better as a result. In fact, he may even become wealthy. An unsaved person *can* have a great “*knowledge*” of Scripture, and be so affected by it, that he successfully “cleans up” his life. The only problem is that he is still the same unregenerate person that he was before. A dog is still a dog, even if you clean him up, and put him in a clean environment. A sow is still a sow, even if you clean her up, and put her in a clean environment. Likewise, an unsaved person, though he may be “cleaned up,” and though he may be attending a Bible-preaching church, and “fellowshipping” with saints, is the same creature that he always was. A true Christian, on the other hand, is a *new creature in Christ*, and has the ability to live the way God wants him to live, and to *continue* to do so. Why? Because he has hearkened to the Saviour’s voice; and his heart has been transformed.

Christian, will you take heed to this exhortation? God wants you to continue to hear His voice, and not harden your heart. He also wants you to exhort others with the truth of God’s Word *daily*, lest there might be a soul in your life who *thinks* himself to be saved, but who isn’t. What a tragedy it would be for someone to slip off into a Christ-less eternity, without having ever been given a word of challenge from you!

Conclusion: The children of Israel “*could not enter in because of unbelief*”; and their carcasses fell in the wilderness. Sadly, they had no excuse, because they had heard God’s Word. Likewise, if you have never truly believed on Jesus Christ, you are without excuse. That is why Paul warns us, “*While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*” Do not wait any longer! Place your trust in Jesus today! Should you be saved already, this message has an application to you, too. **Don’t harden your heart to God’s will and calling in your life.** You placed your trust in Christ the day you were

saved; and your faith *will* endure. However, God has much for you to do. There *is* a yoke to wear, and a burden to pull; and God wants you to live this life of service by faith. He wants you to trust Him, and to obey His voice. Are you doing that faithfully?