

Do Not Harden Your Heart?

Hebrews 3:7-19

Psalm 95.

Psalm 95 is a wonderful exaltation to the people of God to enjoy the worship of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

That is what it says at the very beginning! “Let us sing for joy to the LORD.”

There is so much about God to delight in, but there is something that can derail that joy according to this psalm and that is a hard heart.

[The issue of a hard heart is raised in **Hebrews 3:7-19**. In verse 7-8a Psalm 95 is quoted like this, “So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” God is calling out to people. Whether it be through creation (Psalm 19:1), the circumstances of life, or the preaching of His word He is calling out to people. The impassioned plea here is “do not harden your hearts.” I want to present to you this morning the exaltation of this text by asking five questions that I believe these verses answer with concerning a hard heart. What is it? When is it revealed? What is the consequence of a hard heart? How do we fight against it? How do we know it is being overcome in us? First question...]

Question #1 – What is a hard heart?

If we are to avoid such a condition we must ask this question.

The command of verse 8 is ‘do not harden your hearts’, verse 12 fills out for us what that is exactly. Listen (Verse 12).

A hard heart is a ‘sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.’

The key to understanding what that means is the phrase at the end of verse 7.

‘Today if you hear his voice.’ The word ‘today’ gives us a sense of the constancy and urgency of the call.

God calls out day by day, whether it be through creation, life’s circumstances, or His proclaimed word. That is the constancy, but there is also urgency.

It will not be today forever, the time of God’s call upon your life will not go on indefinitely.

The ‘hearing of his voice’ suggests some level, probably a significant level, of understanding.

God is speaking and you know it.

If we understand that, then we can understand really and truly what sin is.

It is knowing rightly what God says to do or not do and then doing the opposite.

It is knowing what is right in God’s sight and turning your back upon that knowledge.

That is what it means to have a hard heart.

It is a stubbornness of the will towards what God wants.

[One of the clearest examples of this is the king of Egypt in the book of Exodus. God spoke clearly to the king through His servant Moses. It wasn't a matter of misunderstanding or not knowing. It was hearing rightly, it was knowing exactly what God was asking and then digging in the heels of his will with a refusal to obey.]

That is a hard heart and it is a great danger to our souls.

Just think for a moment of the basic commands the Lord has for Christians.

Forgiveness! We know that we are to forgive those who sin against us and yet some of you are holding onto bitterness.

Even as those words leave my lips you are already preparing your reasons why you cannot obey. It is hardness of heart.

Love! We know that we are supposed to love one another, but how quick we are to cast aside those affections for worldly pursuits.

Humility! We know that we are to turn our eyes to Christ and not to ourselves, but how quick we are to make things about us.

[We could go on, but that is enough to show us what a hard heart is and the great danger it poses to us. Let us then move on to our second question which is this...]

Question #2 – When is a hard heart revealed?

If we are to genuinely examine the condition of our hearts then we must be aware of the occasions when it may be revealed to us, so it is good that this text answers the question...

To answer this question the writer brings us back to the book of Exodus (Verse 7-9).

It begins by saying "The Holy Spirit says" which again reminds us that Psalm 95 like all of the bible is God's word.

Psalm 95:8-9 recalls a time when the people of Israel had no water to drink and because of their thirst they turn against Moses which was really turning against God.

Being thirsty in the desert was just one instance among many and the author of Hebrews here has in mind more than just one instance.

Do you see there at the end of verse 9, he mentions a 40 year period.

Why did the people of Israel spend 40 years in the desert?

It happened because when God first brought them to the Land He promised them they refused to go in.

Remember, they sent 12 spies into the land. All of them came back with a good report about what kind of land it was, but 10 of them said it was impossible for them to go in because the people who already live there were too strong for them.

The people listened to the 10 rather than the two.

Do you see the circumstances that revealed the hardness of their hearts?

It's when things were hard that they turned against God.

[If I say to you, “Come with me on a vacation to the Rocky Mountains because they are worth seeing” and I say we’ll take a private jet followed by a private helicopter to get to all the amazing views the Rockies have to offer. Would you come? Now what if I say come with me to the Rockies we’ll walk together the whole way and when we get there we’ll hike up every mountain to see all the amazing views the Rockies have to offer. Would you come? I have a feeling I would have a lot less company with option number #2. What is the difference? One is easy the other is hard.]

If God made everything easy on the people of Israel they would have all happily gone into the Promised Land, but that would have done nothing to expose the condition of their hearts.

It’s the same for us. When it is easy to follow the Lord many are able to deceive themselves into thinking that they Love Him.

But when things turn hard, that is when we discover whether we are truly content in Christ or whether we are willing to give Him up for sinful and selfish reasons.

Like the people who first received the letter of Hebrews trying times are ahead of us. In some ways they are already here. “Don’t harden your heart.”

[Here is question number three]

Question #3 – What is the consequence of a hard heart?

If we ignore this encouragement/warning what will the result be?

Again we should have in mind the urgency of the word ‘Today’.

We’ve been granted ‘today’ by God’s grace, if we waste it by being hard hearted the results will be dire.

Again we are pointed here to the example of Israel (**Verse 10-11**)

Instead of God’s favour they become objects of God’s anger.

That is a terrifying thought.

It is both understandable and right that God should act this way towards them though.

They saw God’s wonders in Egypt, they saw the sea parted, they saw water from a rock, a pillar of fire and cloud to lead them, and yet they refused to believe.

Because they refuse to believe they don’t get to enjoy the Promised Land.

Instead they get this (**Verse 15-19**).

They die in the desert.

That should not surprise us because the Bible says the “wages of sin is death.”

God offers life and rest and they say “No way, we are not going in.” And so instead of life and rest they get hardship and death.

That is the consequence of a hard heart towards God.

[More than once in my life I've been working on something without using the proper tool for the job. More than once I have the thought occur to me, "This is not a good idea you are going to break it if you keep going!" On occasion I have foolishly kept going and do you know what happens? I break it!]

Isn't that silly? I know what I would say to my kids if they did that.

How much more foolish is it to remain stubborn against the call of God on your life? He has opened the way for you to the eternal Promised Land through the death and resurrection of Christ.

"Do not harden your heart!" against Him. Turn from your sin, trust Him as your Saviour, and follow Him as your Lord!

Why receive the consequence of death when life is available to you?

[That brings us to an important question. If having a hard heart is so bad, then we should ask ourselves...]

Question #4 – How do we fight against a hard heart?

As human beings we have a sin nature. That means we are inclined to have hard hearts towards God, is there anything that we can do to combat this?

The answer to this question comes to us in verse 13 which is connected to verse 12 (Verse 12-13).

Verse 12 tells us the problem that we need to avoid and verse 13 tells us how to do it.

Again we are reminded of the urgency of this call with the word 'today'.

Think about that for a moment! We are always living 'today'. We can learn from yesterday, but we can't relive it or change it.

We can plan for the future, but it is far from guaranteed. Who knows what may befall us, but there is today.

It is with that sense of urgency that he says "encourage one another daily."

In the ancient world the only way to do that practically was to meet together in person.

Given what we know of the early church from the Bible, this cannot mean that the whole church meets together every single day.

Sometimes they did, but the general feel of the NT is that believers met as often as they could with once a week likely being a minimum.

The point here is that regularly meeting in person with other believers is absolutely essential for the encouragement of our faith.

If I have learned anything from all the lock down orders that we have endured it is that in person gathering is absolutely necessary to the Christian life.

We have gone about 62 weeks now without meeting as an entire congregation and 25 of those weeks have been under severe restrictions.

It's harming us brothers and sisters. It is making our love grow cold and it is hardening our hearts.

[A well-worn illustration of the church likens it to a fire. Do you know what happens when you remove a hot coal from a fire and set it aside? It grows cold. So it is with being separated from the church.]

And it is not enough to simply plant your backside in a pew.

We actually need to be invested in each other's lives. No one person can accomplish that by themselves.

We all need to be participants in that. Asking about the weather is fine, but it is far more important to ask about the spiritual wellbeing of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

We need that to keep us from being 'hardened by the deceitfulness of sin'

Sin is always a lie. It promises to make your life better, but in reality it always brings misery and destruction.

The devil is good and making sin look good and you will fall for it if you separate yourself from bible believing Christians who love the Lord.

[If you want to keep from having a hard heart you need to come to church. Not just come but come with a concern for the condition of your heart and the hearts of others. Don't just come to church, come to prayer meeting, come to bible study, and come to ask the pastor, come and encourage each other. That leads us to one more question...]

Question #5 – How do we know our hard hearts are being overcome?

It is pretty clear that hardness of heart is something that we need to avoid so how do we know if we are.

It is a simple but profound answer. It is right there in verse 14.

We know that our hard hearts have been and are being overcome if we stick at it.

You can't stick at it if you never confess Jesus as your Saviour.

No one makes it to the end of a race that they never begin.

That is what is meant here by "the confidence we had at first."

He is talking to us about that time in our lives when the gospel becomes clear and we look to Christ as our only hope in life and death as the catechism puts it.

That is different for different people. For me I can look to a particular moment in time when in that moment I understood and believed the gospel, for others it is a process.

Either way at some point along the way every true Christian comes to know and accept Jesus as LORD and Saviour.

What we are being told here is that there can never come a time in your life where that is no longer true.

Our “share in Christ” depends on moment by moment, especially in times of trial, holding firmly to the cross and empty tomb of Jesus.

I admit on the surface it seems to be saying here that this depends upon us.

In one sense it does. We are the ones who do the believing, we need to want to hold on to Christ.

But the question is why? What makes us want to hold on?

Listen to what God says about His people in Ezekiel 36:26, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Keeping at it continues to overcome a hard heart because that is what God does when He saves you!

He takes out a hard heart and replaces it with a heart that is teachable and filled with affection for Him.

We know that has and is happening if we stick with it.

What is the condition of your heart today?

I fear the hearts of many are harder than they know.

Resolve today to “not harden your heart” the consequences are far too great for us to be complacent about this.

Times are upon us when the true nature of our hearts is going to be revealed, it’s happening already.

Because this is so let us make every effort to encourage one another in the Lord so that we might hold firmly to Jesus as we look to our eternal reward.