

Hebrews 3:7-19 // Today, if You Hear His Voice...A warning from the Wilderness

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[0 : 00] The second reading tonight is from Hebrews chapter 3 and you can find that on page 1203 of the church bibles. We're going to be reading from verses 7 to 19.

Hebrews chapter 3. So as the Holy Spirit says, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for 40 years they saw what I did.

That is why I was angry with that generation. I said, their hearts are always going astray and they have not known my ways. So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. As has just been said, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.

[1 : 19] Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for 40 years?

Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest, if not to those who disobeyed?

So we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief. Thanks, Amy.

And it's brilliant to see you all. Let me add my welcome to you. And let's turn to the Lord in prayer as we come to his word. Heavenly Father, we sang earlier, asking you to speak to us.

Now we ask it again, as we come to think about your word to us this evening. Would you feed us with its truth? Would you take what we've just heard, read, and plant it deep within us?

[2 : 26] Shape us. Change us. Make us more like our Lord Jesus Christ. More equipped to follow him. For it's in his name that we pray.

Amen. Well, let's start with a quick question. Which generation do you belong to? I thought that might have been quite fun to do in the town in Greek.

Perhaps there was a more fun conversation going on. Which generation do you belong to? All right, hands up if you belong to Gen Z. Don't be shy. Lots of you there.

That's making me feel very old. I left school in 97. So that's great. What about millennials? How many millennials in the building this evening? Give us a shout. Woo!

Excellent. And then there's us Xennials, or Xenials, a.k.a. the Oregon Trail Generation. I'm not looking for hands here, but let's own it if you want. That's fine.

[3 : 22] A micro generation spanning the gap between Generation X and the millennials. We grew up analog, but we landed in adulthood digital, fully digital somehow.

Well, the writer to the Hebrews is talking about a very different generation this evening. Let's call them Gen W, the wilderness generation. A generation that had an absolute shocker in the desert, as we heard about in Numbers chapter 14.

They saw God's rescue. They heard his voice on Mount Sinai, but they hardened their hearts. They left Egypt, but they never made it to God's promised rest.

And so the writer of the Hebrews' great concern for us, don't become the next Gen W. Don't start well in the Christian life and fail to finish the race.

And so there's this big warning in verse 7. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

[4 : 34] Just in case you missed it the first time, it's repeated in verse 15 and drummed in again in chapter 4, verse 7. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

So that's the warning. There's two parts to it. God's voice, our hearts. And we thought about God's voice a lot in the opening chapters.

He is a God who speaks, who's spoken most fully and finally through his Son, the Lord Jesus. And now we're thinking about our hearts. And they're not always reliable, as we're going to see.

So the warning takes center stage. And this evening we'll listen carefully to that warning. And the writer wants us to see both the peril and the prevention.

And first we'll look at when hearts grow hard, the perilous nature of unbelief. The headings are in the service sheet if you find that helpful. First we'll look at when hearts grow hard.

[5 : 36] And then we'll see how hearts stay soft, the persevering nature of faith. So let's start with the first one, when hearts grow hard. So let's start by thinking again about this big warning in verse 7.

So, as the Holy Spirit says, not said, says, present tense. Today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts.

So that's striking, isn't it? He's writing to first century Christians with all their very real struggles and difficulties and temptations, particular to their situation, their circumstances.

And yet he's quoting a psalm written centuries before. What's the point? What God spoke back then through David, God is saying to us right now.

And that's why we've got our Bibles open in front of us, because when we open God's Word, we're hearing from the living God speaking to us. That's why we sang earlier, Speak, O Lord, as we come to you, to receive the food of your holy words.

[6 : 50] So the Holy Spirit is saying to you tonight, when you hear his voice, Don't you harden your heart. Because every time God speaks, we've got a choice.

We either receive it or resist it. Will you trust him or test him? So let's rewind to this story behind the Psalm 95 quote, and let's meet Gen W, the wilderness generation, and see where it all went wrong for them.

So picture the story on the screen down here, Egypt. That's where the story began. Up here, the promised land, that's where God's leading them. And in between the wilderness and the wilder people.

A journey that should have taken weeks takes 40 years. 40 years of wandering, 40 years of watching God provide manna from heaven, water from a rock, 40 years of seeing God's grace at work, and still not trusting him.

That's what verse 9 says. For 40 years, they saw what I did. They saw his works. And yet verse 10 ends, They have not known my ways.

[8 : 05] Do you see the contrast? They saw God's works, but they didn't know God's ways. That's tragic, isn't it? They'd seen his power, but they didn't know him personally.

They'd experienced his miraculous provision, but they didn't trust his purposes. They grumbled, they complained, and finally they started saying, like we heard in Numbers 14, we'd be better off back in Egypt.

Can you believe it? And they'd reached the edge of the promised land, right there on the verge of the Jordan River, in sight of the finish line. And they bottled it.

They turned their backs on God's word, refused to believe his promises. And apart from Caleb and Joshua, the whole generation perished there in the desert.

The whole generation rebelled against God. So God says, fine. If you won't listen, if you won't trust me, if you won't believe me after all this time, after everything you've seen, have it your own way.

[9 : 11] Have it your own way. And the quote ends with that chilling verdict in verse 11. As I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.

Chilling. An entire generation perished in the wilderness. Their story written across the sand as a warning for us.

Our eternal destiny at stake. So that's the tragedy of the wilderness generation. That's the lesson we need to learn.

Now, World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars. But barely 20 years later, the world plunged into World War II. And a century on from the end of the Great War, trench warfare scars European soil in Ukraine today.

It's as if nothing was learned from the bodies scattered across the psalm in 1919. The writer of Hebrews doesn't want history to repeat itself.

[10 : 18] Today, if you hear his voice, learn from the past. Don't repeat the mistakes they made. Because here's where the passage turns the spotlight on us.

In verse 12, it's like he puts a big red sticker on the map and he says, you are here. Look at what verse 12 says. See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

Do you see what he's doing? Do you see what he's doing? He's taking the warning from Psalm 95 and he's applying it to his own generation who are at risk on turning their backs on the Lord Jesus.

And so if that applied to them, let's not be kidding ourselves here. It applies to us too. That's us up on the map.

You are here. That's where we stand if we're a Christian. Between rescue and rest. Between the cross and the new creation.

[11 : 28] And what he's saying is we are really in the situation they were in back then. Now, that's where we are. Spiritually speaking, we're in the wilderness.

We've been rescued by Christ, but we've not yet reached the new creation. We've not yet reached the promised rest. And so Hebrews flashes the same warning to us from Psalm 95.

Don't end up like them. Don't perish in the wilderness. Don't let your heart grow hard. Because that's where it all starts. Right here in the heart.

Before the rebellion, before the disobedience, before the turning away, there's a hard heart. So just look at verse 12 again. A sinful, unbelieving heart turns away from the living God.

Now flip to verse 19. They were unable to enter because of their unbelief. Do you see it? Unbelief.

[12 : 34] An unbelieving heart. Unbelief bookends that whole section. That's the peril. So how does it happen? It happens like this.

Sin deceives. Hearts harden. Trust fades. Unbelief grows. And before long, you're miles away from God. You keep going down that road.

It leads to rebellion. It leads to ruin. Bodies scattered across the desert. And that's the death spiral that Hebrews warns us against.

The slow, silent drift from hearing God's word to hardening our hearts to it. So you see the pattern there. Maybe you're used to checking your heart rate on a smart watch.

Well, Hebrews says time for a spiritual checkup on your hearts. Is it soft and responsive to God's word or hard and calloused?

[13 : 33] Do you come away from hearing God's words unmoved, untouched, unchanged? Maybe you're at risk of a hardening heart.

Even for those of us who open our Bible daily, the question isn't how many chapters we've ticked off. But whether the word of God is still changing our souls.

Is your heart absorbing what God says? Or is it Kevlar-coated impervious to God's truth? Because that's how it happened for Gen W.

They saw God's works. But they didn't know his ways. They didn't trust his ways. So the warning still stands. Today, if you hear his words, don't harden your heart.

What do we do with that? Well, if the danger is a hard heart, how do we keep our hearts soft to the living God?

[14 : 33] Soft to God's voice? How do we make it through the wilderness of this world without ending up like Gen W? Well, Hebrews gives us some answers in verses 12 to 14.

But before we dive into that, let's face up to it. The Christian life is a journey. It is a journey through the wilderness. Spiritually speaking, it's in the wilderness.

It's a time of testing and trusting. A time between rescue and rest. And we are pilgrims and strangers in this world.

And just like God's people in the desert, we know where we're headed. God's promised rest. But the journey we're on, it can be slow.

It can be confusing. It can be frustrating at times. It can be disappointing very often. Life throws curveballs. God can feel distant.

[15 : 32] And obstacles can appear out of nowhere. Well, let me tell you about a journey that I was on with my family last April. We were driving from York to the Cotswolds.

We hit roadworks. The M1 was completely shut round about Sheffield. No problem. We can handle that. We've got SatNav. It turns out SatNav absolutely loves the scenic route.

It keeps asking me, do you want to take this route and we'll save five minutes? I'm like, yes. You want to save five minutes if we go this way? Yes. There's cars everywhere. We're being led down these back roads through the countryside.

Kids in the back. Are we there yet? Me, no. We're not there. We are here. We're here forever. We're stuck. SatNav, do you want to save five minutes by going this way?

Yes. No, wait a minute. Suddenly, to my horror, I see where the SatNav's trying to lead us down to. Down a single track country lane that's carrying the entire M1 motorway.

[16 : 29] No, thank you. It takes swift evasive action and the SatNav is overruled. We are not going down that country lane. If we had, we'd probably still be here today. Are we there yet, Dad?

Sometimes following Jesus is just a little bit like that. You know the destination. God's promised rest. But the route, winding, stall, seemingly going nowhere at times.

And if we're not careful, our hearts can begin to harden when we encounter situations like that. We can begin to harden to the God who's leading us. So how do we keep going?

How do we keep our hearts soft? Hebrews is clear. The only way through the wilderness is what we see in verse 13. Encourage one another daily as long as it's called today.

So that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Hebrews is saying you won't make it through the wilderness alone. We need daily encouragement.

[17 : 35] We need it in community. And Hebrews shows us how. We do it today. We do it together. And we do it by taking care to hold on firmly.

So let's start with the first. Today. It's there in the warning in verses 7 and 15. Today if you hear his voice. And then again in verse 13 in the command we just read.

Encourage one another every day as long as it's called today. Why the emphasis on today? Two reasons I think. First, it's urgent.

It's not something to keep putting off. Don't say tomorrow I'll take God's side. Tomorrow I'll deal with that sin that's been bothering me. Because tomorrow never comes. And by the time it does come, your heart might already have become too hard to hear God's voice.

Now I saw this somewhere. I forget the slide up hand. Made me laugh. Probably shouldn't have. But if your wife begins a sentence, if you get the chance, dot, dot, dot.

[18 : 38] Just drop everything. Just start putting your shoes on. She means now. Move it. The writer to the Hebrews doesn't bother with such indirectness.

He's saying now's the time. Today's the day. Second, the emphasis on today because it's daily. Every day is today.

Every day another chance to listen, trust, and obey God's words. And as Rico reminded us on Wednesday, for those of us here for the evangelism training, we need the gospel in our hearts every day.

Because our hearts are forgetful. Our hearts are prone to wonder. And for me personally, the danger isn't so much skipping my daily Bible reading time.

It's that when I get the Bible open, I can go on to autopilot sometimes. I'll have read it for sure. But have I actually received it? Am I actually responding to it?

[19 : 39] We need to take care how we're listening to God's words. Because that's how hearts can just begin to grow hard. Not in open rebellion, but in routine like that.

It can be subtle. So today, every day, receive God's word afresh. Keep choosing to listen. Keep on going.

That's the first word, today. Second word, together. Together, the Christian life isn't a solo expedition. It's done in community, a shared trek through the wilderness.

Do you see that shared responsibility in verses 12 to 13? See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, but encourage one another daily.

It's not every man and woman for themselves. It's a collective responsibility. It's a church responsibility. The antidote to unbelief isn't isolation.

[20 : 43] It's mutual encouragement. And it's precisely because sin deceives us, end of verse 13, that we need each other to see clearly.

We need each other to point it out in our lives. We need to be kind and loving enough to one another to say, brother, you need to cut that out of your life.

It's disastrous. Sister, if you keep on going down that track, it's going to end in ruin. We all need friends who will cheer us on.

When we're weary, we all need friends who will challenge us. When we wander, we all need friends who see us, warts and all, and still walk with us. So when you notice someone drifting or just being a little bit less engaged in their Christian life, a friend, a small group member, perhaps someone who's gone quiet or even gone AWOL, don't just shrug and move on, but ask yourselves, how might I help them come back?

Maybe even now somebody comes to mind. Who could you message this week just to share a word of encouragement? And if you live with other Christians, what could encouraging one another daily look like?

[22 : 05] Maybe it's reading a psalm together in the morning. Maybe it's a verse and a post-it note in the fridge. Or simply taking a moment to say, keep going. Don't give up. And that reminds me of one of sport's most iconic moments.

Mexico 2016, the World Triathlon Finals. Johnny Brownlee is meters from the finish when he's struck by heat exhaustion. He began to stagger, about to collapse, and his brother Alistair, a few meters behind, comes around the corner, sees his brother in trouble, and without a second thought, he throws Johnny's arm around his shoulder and half carries him, half drags him across the finishing line, shouting, come on, you can do it.

You can make it. They cross together. Alistair pushes Johnny over the finishing line into second place ahead of him. What an extraordinary picture of brotherly love.

That's what Christian community looks like. It's brothers and sisters saying, I'm not finishing without you. So at St. Silas, let's be that kind of community, a generation determined.

No one is left behind. No one left by the wayside in the wilderness. Today, together. Finally, we're to take care to hold family to the end.

[23 : 30] Now, we're not meant to hear all these warnings in Hebrews and come away thinking, right then, time for me to try harder. That's not what Hebrews is saying.

The call isn't to try harder, but to hold tighter. Verse 14. We've come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firmly to the end.

It's the same idea as in verse 6 we looked at last week. We are God's household if we hold firmly to our confidence and hope.

Perseverance isn't about gritted teeth. It's about clinging to Christ, fixing our thoughts on him. And if you're trusting in Jesus, you've come to share in him.

Verse 14. You're joined to him, grafted into him. He's the source of eternal salvation, as Hebrews tells us later on, for all who obey him. And that means our confidence isn't in how strong our grip is, but in the one who's holding onto us.

[24 : 47] Remember, this is Jesus. Jesus who walked in the wilderness before us. Jesus who heard the warnings of Psalm 95 and heeded them and didn't turn in rebellion, but never hardened his heart.

He resisted temptation. He was faithful where Israel failed. He went to the cross to deal with our rebellion once and for all. And now he leads us.

He leads us to God's promised rest. So when Hebrews says, hold on, it's really saying, don't let go of the one who will never let go of you.

That's what perseverance looks like. Not self-powered effort, but trusting in Jesus. Hearts, family, believing in the one who carries our burdens, who's dealt with our sin.

It's finished. He's the one who carries us over the finishing line. Brothers and sisters, the wilderness is real.

[25 : 50] Hebrews says, don't harden your hearts. Don't drift. Today, together, hold fast to Jesus. That's what a generation of faith looks like.

Listening, responding, sticking together. Step by step. Day by day. Through the twists, the setbacks, the surprises, because we follow the one who never lets go.

And one day, the wandering ends. One day, we'll cross the line. We'll enter God's rest. And when we do, we'll cross that finish together, safe into our Savior's arms.

Amen. And let's pray. Amen. Father, we give thanks to you for the Lord Jesus who went before us through the wilderness and leads us safely home.

Please keep our hearts from hardening. When we're tired, distracted, or doubting, help us to keep listening, to keep trusting, to keep on obeying.

[27 : 03] and would your spirit create us to be a church family that walks together, a generation that's quick to encourage, slow to give up on each other.

Help us to hold tightly to Jesus, even when the road feels long or the way ahead unclear. and we thank you that you're holding on to us and that one day the wandering will end and we'll be home with you.

In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to respond now.