

INTRODUCTION

How many are you facing a situation in your life or family right now that is requiring you to exercise an extra measure of faith? Hold up your hand. If you didn't hold up your hand, check your pulse.

Hebrews is the Bible's manual for faith. In this book we see the amazing things God can do when we put our faith in Him. But it also shows us the damage that occurs when we fail to trust God. Over the next three weeks we're going to be looking at what happened to the Children of Israel as they were moving from Egypt to the Promised Land. Sadly, they developed a hardened heart.

The number one cause of death in America is heart disease. And one of the main illnesses affecting the heart is arterial sclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. *Sclerosis* is the very Greek word used here in Hebrews 3 to describe a spiritual condition than can be more damaging than heart disease. It is the danger of a hardened heart.

I had originally planned to share only one message from this passage, but it is so full of life-changing truth, that I'm going to speak on it this week and next week as well. This is part one.

Hebrews 3:7-19. "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 desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and 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, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? 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.

In order to understand what it is to have a hardened heart, let's examine the pivotal event in the Old Testament that is referenced here. It is powerful example of what not to do when it comes to following Jesus. What took place in this Exodus experience is a spiritual biography of every Christian. You might also call it "spiritual geography," because it has to do with where they were.

1. EGYPT REPRESENTS A PERSON IN BONDAGE TO SIN

At one time Joseph and his descendants were treated with kindness and favor. But after several generations a Pharaoh came to power who didn't remember Joseph and he looked at all the Hebrews and declared that they were going to be slaves.

So they were made to dig the ditches, make the roads, build the buildings, and make bricks. When they complained, the overseers gave them less straw to make bricks. It was a harsh existence that offered no hope for the future. Because they were born as slaves, there was no way to gain their freedom.

That's a picture of a person today who doesn't know Jesus Christ. Romans 6:20 says at one time we were all slaves to sin. We were born in the wrong family, the family of humanity that inherited sin and misery from Adam and Eve.

It could be that you are here today and you have a good job and a nice home. But if you don't know Jesus you are living in spiritual Egypt. You are a slave to your sinful desires. But there IS hope for you. You can be set free today.

2. THE RED SEA REPRESENTS DELIVERANCE AND BAPTISM

God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to let His people go. Pharaoh refused, so God sent a series of plagues. Finally, God gave Moses a plan to save the people. He told them to take a lamb without spot or blemish and kill it in the front yard of their homes. They were to take the blood of the lamb and smear it on the sides and tops of their doors. Then they were to go inside the house and roast and eat the lamb. That night, God's deadly judgment would visit Egypt. Whenever the angel of death saw the blood applied to the doors, judgment would pass over that family. That's why it became known as Passover. But where there was the absence of the blood of the lamb, death visited that family. That included the palace of Pharaoh. So he finally relented and said, "You can leave."

So Moses led them westward out of Egypt toward the Red Sea. They were free at last! But they came up against the obstacle of the Red Sea. Moses lifted his staff and the waters parted and they passed through. Meanwhile Pharaoh had changed his mind and was pursuing the pesky Hebrews. He and his army followed the same trail through the sea, but before they got to the other side, the waters collapsed and their enemies were drowned. What a miracle! This event represents how we have been saved by the blood of the lamb and delivered from bondage. Passing through the sea is a symbol of our baptism.

Now at this point, some of you may be thinking, "You preachers really try to push all these symbols and try to connect everything that happened to some Old Testament event." I'm not making this up. Here's what Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 10: "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." (1 Corinthians 10:1-2)

The story of the Israelites is our story. The God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt has delivered us from the slavery of sin. The blood of the Passover Lamb deflected God's judgment, just as Christ, our Passover Lamb, has absorbed God's judgment against sin for you. The Hebrews were baptized into Moses in the Red Sea, just as we have been baptized into Christ.

But God never intended this to be the end of the story. He moved them on to Sinai where He gave them His law, and once they were equipped with His laws and precepts on how to live He said, "Now it's time to move on into the Promised Land. That brings us to:

3. KADESH-BARNEA REPRESENTS MOVING FORWARD IN FAITH TO CLAIM GOD'S PROMISE

I encourage you to put yourself in the sandals of the Israelites moving toward Canaan. According to Numbers 1:48, there were over 600,000 men, not counting their family members. Some scholars have estimated that the size of the wandering nation could have numbered as many as two million people. Marching a hundred abreast, they would have formed a line fifteen miles long!

Imagine yourself there with them, camped in the desert. Picture thousands of rows of pitched tents with the Tabernacle of God placed in the center. Close your eyes and smell the smoke from ten thousand Hebrew campfires. Hear the discontented grunts from the herds of livestock traveling with them all day. Listen to the laughter of thousands of children playing between the tents at sunset.

After pausing at Mt. Sinai to receive the Law of God it should have taken the Israelites eleven days to reach the Promised Land. But it took them forty years. Why? The writer of Hebrews calls it The Rebellion. I've always suspected that the Children of Israel acted like a Baptist Church at Kadesh-Barnea. We love committees, and they elected a Holy-land Investigation Committee of twelve men. Upon returning ten of the twelve members of the committee gave a majority report. They confirmed that it was indeed a rich land flowing with milk and honey. They brought back one cluster of grapes so large that it took two men to carry it. But they discovered there were giants in the land. Most of the spies said, "We looked like grasshoppers in their eyes." These ten men suffered from a grasshopper-complex and spread fear among the Israelites that if they tried to take the land, they would be squashed like insects.

But two of the men, Caleb and Joshua, gave a minority report that confirmed that giants lived there. But they encouraged the people to trust God. The ten cowards said, "They're too big for us to attack!" Joshua and Caleb said, "They're too big for us to miss!"

The cowards said, "Look how big they were compared to us. Joshua and Caleb said, "Look how small they are compared to our God!"

By the way, all ten spies are named, but can anyone any one of the ten cowards? However, all of us know the names of the two faith-filled spies, Joshua and Caleb. One of the coward spies was named Shamu. We name our whales Shamu, but we proudly name our sons Joshua and Caleb.

I can just hear Moses moderating that first church business meeting out there in the wilderness. He said, "All in favor of going in and taking the lands say "Yes." Joshua and Caleb shouted, "Yes!" Then Moses said, "All opposed to going in and taking the Promised Land say "no." Hundreds of thousands of scared voices shouted "No!!!!!" It echoed off the mountain ranges. And as the song that Keith Green wrote, God said, "Take another lap around Mt. Sinai. And another and another—for forty years." What they were really saying was, "We don't trust God. We aren't going forward. We're turning back." And they wandered in the wilderness for forty years until everyone of that generation died except for Joshua and Caleb.

4. THE WILDERNESS REPRESENTS AN IMMATURE, JOYLESS BELIEVER

There are several names we could use to represent this person, and it may be you. You call this person a chronic baby Christian; a carnal Christian; or a backslidden believer. It's important to recognize that these Israelites who turned back didn't lose their relationship with God. They never ceased to be God's chosen people delivered from Egypt. For forty years God will feed them manna. For forty years he's going to sustain them. He's still going to do miracles. He's still going to give them victories over their enemies but the victories are meaningless. They don't mean anything. What's worth the fight? Somebody said a bulldog can whip a skunk, but it's just not worth the fight. For forty years their sandals and their clothes are not going to wear out. In other words these are still the people of God.

This represents people who have been saved (they came out of Egypt). They have been baptized (like the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.) We're talking about Christians who have lost their purpose. They've lost their direction. They've lost their peace. They've lost the joy of their salvation. They are miserable wandering in the wilderness.

I think the most miserable thing about being a carnal Christian is "what might have been." They staggered at the thought of what might have been! "For forty years instead of eating this manna I could be eating those grapes! Instead of more manna I could be eating those pomegranates. If I had only trusted God!" John Greenleaf Whittier said, "Of all the words of tongue or pen the saddest words are, 'It might have been.'"

Here's the good lesson from a bad example according to the writer of Hebrews: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." (Hebrews 3:12)

Are you at a point where you need to trust God? He brought the Israelites to Kadesh Barnea only once, but He brings us to Kadesh Barnea over and over again. There are many times when God brings you to a point of crisis in your life, where the obstacles look too big to overcome where the enemies appear to be too strong to defeat and every sense you have is screaming, "No! No! No!" and God says, "You go on! You trust me!" God is constantly bringing us to those points of crisis and the choice is this: Am I going to go on? Or am I going to go back? Turning back is the result of having a hardened heart.

CONCLUSION

For a couple of summers when I was in high school I worked at sawmill in South Alabama. My job was working on the green chain. That's where a pine log is ripped into rough lumber before it is sent to the planer mill to make it smooth. I worked with five or six other older guys. Our job was to grab the green lumber as it moved down a moving chain and stack it according to size. It was hard work. Because the lumber was so rough it had many splinters. I wore thick canvas gloves, and wore out a pair about every three weeks. But some of those men who had been working there for years didn't even use gloves. They had handled the rough lumber over and over again thousands of times and their hands had developed thick, hard calluses. Shaking hands with them was like shaking hands with a lobster.

The same thing can happen to a heart, especially to those of us who have heard and handled the Gospel thousands and thousands of times. Our hearts can develop spiritual calluses. In Ezekiel, God calls it a heart of stone. God promised He would remove the heart of stone and replace it with a tender heart of flesh. Will you make that your prayer today? Lord, take away my hardened heart and give me a tender heart that trusts you even when there was giants of opposition standing in front of me.

We'll continue this message next week. But notice the word "today" in our text. Today, God is challenging you. He says, "TODAY, trust me. Move forward in faith. Don't turn back!" Faith is coming to the very edge of all you can see, hear, taste, smell, or feel. And in that moment of utter darkness God says, "Take another step." Faith is believing that there will either be something solid for you to step on, or God will teach you how to fly.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes