

# A Serious Warning

Text: Hebrews 3:16-4:3a

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

*<sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? <sup>19</sup> So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. <sup>2</sup> For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. <sup>3</sup> Now we who have believed enter that rest...” (Heb. 3:15–4:3a NIV84)*

I’m going to show you a couple of warning signs, and I want you to think about how you might respond if you encounter them during the week.

The first is a sign that might be posted above an electrical box that reads “Warning: High Voltage!” I don’t know about you, but I’m going to take that message very seriously. Electricity can be extremely dangerous if you’re not careful. There is a lot of power flowing through those lines. I’m not even going to think about messing with those wires because I don’t want to end up extra crispy.

What about this next one? You are cruising down the highway and notice a message on the billboard that says: “Drive Safely, Don’t Text and Drive.” I’m sure there are people who go past that sign every day and ignore the warning. “Yeah, yeah, yeah... I know it’s against the law, but I’m a good driver, I can check my phone and see the road at the same time, and besides it will only take me a second to answer the text.” But it only takes a second for a deer to run out onto the highway or for the cars in front of you to slam on their brakes. If you don’t heed the warning you might end up in a wreck.

Warnings are meant to be taken seriously. That’s especially true as we open our Bibles to the Hebrews 3. We’ve been studying the NT this year, and over the last couple of weeks our reading plan has brought us to the book of Hebrews. If you’ve been following along, you may have noticed the author issues a series of warnings throughout the book urging us to respond to God’s Word with faith and not to turn away in unbelief.

We’re not sure who the author was. He doesn’t sign his name anywhere in these verses. Some commentators think it may have been the apostle Paul or one of his associates, like Barnabas or Silas or Apollos, but we just don’t know. Whoever it might have been, the Holy Spirit inspired him to write these words. We don’t know exactly when the book was written, but we can tell that it was during a time of persecution when followers of Christ were beginning to suffer for their faith, most likely 64-68 AD. And we don’t know the identity of the original

audience. It was probably a congregation where most of the people had come from a Jewish background, because there are numerous references to the OT in every chapter.

As their faith was being put to the test, the author was concerned that some of the people in the congregation might be tempted to turn away from Christ and go back to their old religion: to the temple, to the sacrifices, to the priesthood, to the rituals of the old covenant. But he warned them that this would be a serious mistake, because the coming of Christ has made the old order obsolete, and there is no salvation except through the blood of Jesus.

As in any church, the congregation was a mixed group. There were some who sincerely believed the gospel, and the Lord would give them the strength to persevere through their struggles. But there were others who had not yet surrendered their hearts to God. They were intrigued by the person of Jesus, and they were drawn to the message of his love. They were curious about the God who would come to this earth and offer his life as a sacrifice for our sin. But maybe they hadn't quite reached the place where they were willing to receive him as their Savior by trusting in his finished work on the cross. The author pleaded with them not to harden their hearts but to respond to the gospel with faith.

In Hebrews 3 & 4, he uses an example from the OT to make his point. He warns them not to follow the example of the generation of Israelites who were led out of Egypt during the days of Moses, who crossed the wilderness and camped at the edge of the Promised Land. They had seen God's power demonstrated through miracles. They passed through the Red Sea on dry land and were delivered from the army of Pharaoh. They had tasted manna from heaven and experienced God's faithful provision each step of the way. And yet, they stubbornly refused to trust in the Lord. Because of their unbelief, that generation never made it to the Promised Land. They wandered the wilderness for 40 years, and perished in the desert.

It was a terrible tragedy which brought incredible grief to the Lord. He loved these people, and desperately longed for them to take hold of the blessings of salvation he was offering to them. But they wouldn't have it. The writer of Hebrews thought about the people in his own day, and didn't want history to repeat itself, so he urged his readers to be sure they did not make the same mistake.

And his words challenge us as well. There may be people who have had sat in church for years, who have never accepted Christ as their Savior. There are men and women who have heard the gospel, but have never surrendered their lives to the Lord. For a while they might follow until a moment of crisis comes that reveals the quality of their faith. Is it a superficial faith that fades away when troubles come? Or is genuine faith that perseveres?

## **Like the children of Israel, we have heard the voice of the Lord.**

Hebrews 3:15 says, *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."* The people of Israel, in the OT, heard the voice of the Lord speaking to them at Mt.

Sinai. There was also a pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day to guide them across the desert. And they had Moses to deliver God's message. But they refused to listen.

This was especially true when they reached the southern border of the Promised Land. The Israelites set up camp at a place called Kadesh Barnea. From there, they sent 12 spies ahead of them to scope out the land. "Go, see what it's like, is it as beautiful as we were told? If you can, bring us back a sample of the fruit that grows in the orchards." The spies traveled from one side of the land to the other, and after 40 days they returned with their report. "Yes, it is a good land, but the cities are heavily fortified, and the people who live there are like giants. We will be crushed if we try to enter. Its hopeless. We might as well turn around and go back to Egypt." Moses and Joshua and Caleb begged the people to listen. "Don't be afraid. God has promised to go with us. He will fight for us. He will give this land to us as our inheritance." But the crowd wouldn't hear it. They wanted to appoint new leaders and were ready to stone Moses to death until the Lord intervened.

Are we listening to the voice of the Lord? He is speaking to us today. We don't have a pillar of fire by night or a pillar of smoke by day to guide us, but we have something even better, the Word of God. Through the pages of Scripture, the Lord reveals himself to us and we hear the good news of the gospel. The Bible points us to Jesus and invites us to follow him. But as wonderful as this message is, it will be ineffective unless we open hearts in faith and listen.

That's what Caleb and Joshua did. They had seen the same challenges as the other spies, and yet they had confidence in the Word of the Lord. We trust God! We know that his words are truth! We will make it if we follow him. They were willing to stake their lives on his promise. May we cling to the Word of God as they did, saying "yes, I believe that the gospel is true, and I'm willing to stake my life on this message because I trust in the Savior."

## **Like the children of Israel, we are invited to enter God's rest.**

Hebrews 4:1 says, *"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. <sup>2</sup> For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith."*

Moses encouraged the people to take hold of God's promises. They had spent their lives in slavery, but the Lord was setting them free, and bringing them to a land that was flowing with milk and honey. After all the hardship and struggles, they had experienced, it would have been wonderful to settle into permanent homes and experience real peace for the very first time in their lives. Rest from their journey, rest from their afflictions, rest from their enemies... this is what the Lord was offering to them. They were so close. It was all right there in front of them. The Lord had prepared the way. But sadly, they refused to enter.

God continues to offer rest to people today. It is not a land flowing with milk and honey, but the blessings of salvation. Though we were slaves to sin and death, he sets us free and makes us

children of God. He brings us peace with our Heavenly Father, and gives us hope for eternity. He gives us the promise of a glorious home in his presence. Now he urges us to enter his salvation by placing our trust in him.

Sometimes people think that they have to do it themselves. They have to make their own way, and climb the mountain to God through their own religious efforts or good works. But the gospel tells us that Christ has made a way for us, and he invites us to enter in by trusting in his finished work.

Have you entered his rest? Have you trusted in the Savior? Let us be careful not to fall short of it through unbelief.

Some have misunderstood these verses, thinking that the passage tells us to be careful lest we lose our salvation. But that's not what the author is saying. Scripture tells us in many places that for someone who has sincerely received the gospel who has genuinely accepted Christ as their Savior, there is no one who can snatch us out his hand (John 10:28), and there is nothing that can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38-39). And so this isn't a warning about losing our salvation, it is a warning to be certain that we have entered this salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

One commentator writes,

“God makes men and women an offer. Just as he offered the Israelites the blessings of the promised land, he offers to everyone the blessings of a life which is far beyond the life that can be lived without him. But, to obtain the blessings of God... *Trust* is necessary. We must believe that what God says is true. We must be willing to stake our lives on his promises... God's offer must be accepted today; the trust and obedience must be given today—for we cannot be sure that there will be a tomorrow for us... and it must be accepted now—or it may be too late.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, W. (2002). [\*The Letter to the Hebrews\*](#) (pp. 40–41). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.