

# The Keeping Power of Community

## The Keeping Power of Community

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Hebrews 3:7-19

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews, chapter 3. You will find that right near the end of the New Testament.

As you turn there, I want to ask you a very practical question: How many of you have a carbon monoxide detector installed in your house? A carbon monoxide detector is essential for two reasons. First – and this is an important reason – carbon monoxide can kill you! Second, carbon monoxide is nearly untraceable. If carbon monoxide begins to fill your house while you are lying in bed at night, your only hope of survival is if that detector goes off and springs you out of bed. If your hand wasn't raised a moment ago, then you need to make a stop at Home Hardware immediately after the service today. It's a silent killer.

Well, this morning, our text is going to point us to another silent killer that is wreaking havoc in our homes. This is a silent killer that wiped out an entire GENERATION of Israelites. This is a silent killer that Jesus warned us about with startlingly abrupt language and yet, it is a silent killer that very few Christians take very seriously.

It is the silent killer of unbelief, and our text this morning presents us with a sobering warning.

However, our text this morning also points us to a divinely instituted alarm that can protect our churches, our families, and our eternal souls. I would plead with you this morning to lean in and to listen close as we look to the text. We're going to read from verses 7-19. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years.  
<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;  
they have not known my ways.’  
<sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath,  
‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. <sup>15</sup> As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

<sup>16</sup> For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? <sup>17</sup> And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup> So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. (Hebrews 3:7-19 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I think you could summarize the entire passage that we just read with the title: A warning against unbelief.

## **A Warning Against Unbelief**

I see four aspects of unbelief in particular that are highlighted for us in this warning text. First, the author to the Hebrews warns us about:

### **1. The culpability of unbelief**

Is that a familiar word anymore? To be culpable is to be responsible. If you were caught speeding but there was no signage indicating that the speed limit had changed, you could make a case that

you were not culpable for breaking the law. How could you be guilty of breaking the limit if you didn't even know what the limit was?

Well, in a similar vein, many are inclined to make the argument that they are not culpable for their unbelief. Many expect that, when they stand before God and He points to all of their faithlessness and rebellion and backsliding, they will be able to make an excuse.

And I'm not talking this morning about the outside world. Romans 1 addresses the unbelief in the outside world. But our text this morning is not addressed to THEM – it's a warning to US. This is a warning for people who have convinced themselves that they are inside. Look again at verses 7-9:

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test  
**and saw my works for forty years.** (Hebrews 3:7b-9 ESV)

These folks had been hanging out in the covenant community for 40 YEARS! They saw the Red Sea parted! They saw the Egyptian army washed away in an instant! They saw the manifest glory of God hovering like a cloud over the tabernacle! They saw the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night! These were the INSIDERS! They were MEMBERS! They served on COMMITTEES!

Yet, in spite of all their outward appearance, they were not insiders at all. They were unbelievers. They had hard hearts.

What a horrible day it must have been when those Israelites stood before the judgement seat of God... No line of defense could ever excuse their unbelief. They had seen too much.

If that was true of those who followed Moses in the wilderness, then how much more culpable are we who follow the One who is infinitely greater than Moses? We who have witnessed the transformation of lives – who have experienced the powerful move of His Spirit – who have sat

under the authority of His Word – who have tasted of resurrection life – how culpable we will be if we turn away after all that we have seen! As the puritan George Swinnock once said:

It is terrible to fall into hell from the pew.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, horror of horrors, many will do just that.

And that leads us to the next lesson we learn in this text. The author to the Hebrews wants us to see:

## 2. The prevalence of unbelief

Look again at verse 16:

<sup>16</sup>For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not **all those who left Egypt** led by Moses? (Hebrews 3:16 ESV)

Have you ever tried to warn a teenager about something? It's just about impossible because most teenagers a) already know everything and, b) are invincible. As I read this verse, it feels as if we are being addressed like teenagers. It's as if he's saying, "Are you taking this warning lightly? Do you think I'm overemphasizing the danger of unbelief? Do you remember how many of those Israelites who left Egypt lapsed into unbelief? Let me remind you: **ALL OF THEM**<sup>2</sup>! All of them heard. All of them saw. Yet, all of them rebelled. So, take this seriously!"

Please hear me this morning: Do not lull yourself into a false sense of security by comparing yourself to other Christians in your social circle. Don't do it because, according to the Bible, a great number of the people who you think are part of your Christian social circle are not actually Christians at all. A great number of the people who you sat next to in the pew growing up are lost and deceived and they don't even know it. Jesus said:

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<sup>1</sup> George Swinnock as cited by Yuille, J. Stephen. *A Labor of Love: Puritan Pastoral Priorities* (p. 15). Reformation Heritage Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Yes, I know that Joshua and Caleb were exceptions, but the author to the Hebrews did not soften his point with a disclaimer so I'm going to follow suit.

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and **those who find it are few.**  
(Matthew 7:14 ESV)

Elsewhere he explains that many who THINK that they have found eternal life have actually deceived themselves. He warns:

On that day **many will say to me,** ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’<sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’  
(Matthew 7:22-23 ESV)

Are you hearing this? Are you taking this seriously? This isn’t a rare disorder. It isn’t an isolated incident. MANY people will see the powerful work of God. MANY will even convince themselves that they are followers of Christ! But, according to Jesus, MANY will be wrong. Jesus said that. The author to the Hebrews wants us to see that.

Who rebelled? Was it not all who left Egypt and followed Moses? Take care, lest you also fall into unbelief!

How can we know then if our faith is real or if we have succumbed to unbelief? If you are taking this warning seriously, then that is the question you should be asking right now. To that end, the author to the Hebrews draws our attention to:

### **3. The mark of unbelief**

Are you in, or are you out? Is your faith real? Or are you self-deceived? Here is a diagnostic question: Are you walking in obedience?

And, just to be clear, that question doesn’t simply spring from my imagination. Do you remember that passage that we just read in Matthew 7, where Jesus said that many who thought they were in went on to discover that they were out? Well, here is what he said directly before that warning:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.** (Matthew 7:21 ESV)

If you are content to say “Lord! Lord!” on Sunday but then to walk in patterns of habitual disobedience Monday to Saturday; if you sing with hands raised on Sunday but then gossip with your husband on the drive home; if you say that Jesus is Lord of everything but then build walls around the parts of your life that are “off-limits”, then you are NOT walking on the narrow road that leads to life! Am I being clear enough? I won’t risk you missing this, so let me say it again: If you say that Jesus is Lord but you habitually disregard his commandments, then you are NOT SAVED. You are spiritually blind. You are living in rebellion. You are walking straight into disaster. And, Jesus says, MANY are doing just that.

Such was the case for the Israelites in the wilderness. We read in verse 10:

<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;  
**they have not known my ways.**’ (Hebrews 3:10 ESV)

How was unbelief manifested in the Israelites? It was manifested in their perpetual disobedience. It was evidenced by the fact that they consistently chose to go their own way when they were told to go God’s way. And they were so crafty in their self-deceit that they managed to convince themselves that God’s ways – the God of life’s ways – would lead to ruin. That is one of the things that we do in our unbelief. As John Calvin wisely observes:

Unbelief thence draws weapons and engines to put faith to flight, the aim of all its efforts being to make us think that God is adverse and hostile to us, and thus, instead of hoping for any assistance from him, to make us dread him as a deadly foe.<sup>3</sup>

Let me apply that for a moment. Here’s how you can know that you are in danger of hardening your heart and plummeting into unbelief: If you are able to convince yourself that obeying God would actually rob you of joy – that following His direction for your life will lead to a worse result than following your own direction for your life – if you find yourself saying with Eve “Perhaps God IS withholding happiness from me...” – then you are in a PERILOUS place!

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 368.

The Israelites stood on the outskirts of the promised land but because of their unbelief they were unable to enter. That leads us to the last lesson that the author to the Hebrews would have us see, and that is:

#### **4. The cost of unbelief**

Look again at the final verse of our text this morning:

So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. (Hebrews 3:19 ESV)

God had prepared a place for them. He led them right to the outskirts. He demonstrated miraculous victory after miraculous victory over the course of their history. They saw challenges ahead, but He promised to go before them. They were right there!

But they were unable to enter.

“Lord! Lord! Did we not follow You out of captivity? Did we not walk through the sea on dry land? Did we not behold your glory as you spoke to us through your servant Moses? Would you now keep us from entering the promised land?”

But God, in effect, said: “Depart from me. I never knew you.”

I know a number of Christians who worry about their retirement savings. I know a number of Christians who fret about the state of our country. But surprisingly, I know very few Christians who spend much time thinking about what God will say to them when they finally stand before that judgement seat.

“But Pastor,” you object, “we hold to the doctrines of grace! We believe in the doctrine of predestination – that before the foundation of the world God set apart His elect. We believe that those whom He foreknew He predestined, and those whom He predestined He called, and those whom He called He justified, and those whom He justified He glorified! We believe in the glorious doctrine of the perseverance of the saints – that God will not lose a single one who is His! He will hold us fast! You taught us that, pastor!”

Yes! All of that is true. If you are in Christ, then God is holding onto you and He will see you through to the end. Yes!

But, are you in Christ?

The warning of Hebrews 3 exists because, Old Testament and New, people have convinced themselves that they are standing in a secure position when, in fact, they are standing in rebellion and unbelief. There are people who declare with their mouths, “I have surrendered my sin to Jesus!” but they are simultaneously gripping their pet sin with white knuckles refusing to let it go.

Is that you?

What a horrible thing it would be to fall into hell from the pew! Hear me: The door to heaven is closed for you for as long as you persist in your unbelief. Your faithful attendance can't crack it open. Your Bible reading won't move it an inch. You can volunteer faithfully for the rest of your life, but there is only one way to enter into that rest, and his name is Jesus. If you would enter, then you need to surrender completely to him. You need to believe that his plan for your life is better than your own, and that faith will be made evident when you finally let go of that sin you've been trying to drag with you. Jesus died for the sin of hypocrisy and unbelief, and he is offering to take that sin from you and to bear it on the cross in your place.

How could it be that so many people, according to Jesus, will stand before the gate in shock and awe that they were never truly in relationship with him? How does a person live their entire life oblivious to the reality that their heart has grown hard? How do we battle this silent killer?

Well, thankfully, the author to the Hebrews points us to an alarm that we can all install in our lives to combat against this deadly threat. Did you spot it? Look again at verses 12-13:

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> **But exhort one another every day**, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12-13 ESV)

Here the author to the Hebrews points us an alarm that we are guilty of neglecting in the North American church. Here, he points us to the keeping power of community.

## The Keeping Power of Community

As careful Bible readers, we understand that it is ultimately God who keeps us in the faith. I already alluded to that glorious passage in Romans 8 where God declares that those whom He foreknew He has already glorified. In His eyes, it's done! There's no question. He will not lose a single one who is His.

And yet, He calls us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. He calls us in verse 12 of this passage to take care lest we fall. So, how do we hold that tension? Has God done it? Or do we do it? John Piper captured this tension well when he said in a sermon:

God keeps me by enabling me to do self-keeping things, and I must do them. I must do these things.<sup>4</sup>

How does God keep you? By enabling you to do keeping things! He works, but He calls you to work. As you push with all your feeble strength, He lifts. That is the tension of the Christian life. That is why we are simultaneously resting in the completed work of Christ while also taking care lest we fall. And this text highlights one of the graces that God uses to keep us in the faith, and that is the keeping power of community.

But, before I go any further, I want to point something out: Not all community has keeping power!

The Israelites were in community – and yet the entire community missed out on the rest that God had in store for them. The book of Hebrews is written to a group of believers who were in community, yet many of them were about to abandon the faith and to return to Judaism. Not all community has keeping power – but those that do have a particular ingredient that is highlighted in this passage. Look again at verse 13. Do you see it?

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *The Prayer I Have Prayed Most* <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/glory-majesty-dominion-and-authority-keep-us-safe-for-everlasting-joy/excerpts/the-prayer-i-have-prayed-most> accessed Sept. 28, 2021.

**But exhort one another every day**, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:13 ESV)

To exhort is to speak with urgency. It is to make an appeal. It is to encourage. Exhorting means pointing out my sin and giving me a rebuke when I need it and it also means stooping down next to me and pointing me to grace when I don't see it.

Here's the problem: I can't see my blind spot. But you can. You are the divinely appointed alarm that God has put in my life to guard against the deadly threat of unbelief.

God keeps us by wrapping us up in community – but not all communities have keeping power. As we conclude this morning, I want to highlight three factors that we need to work hard to cultivate in order to enjoy the benefit of the keeping power of community.

First, the keeping power of community requires:

## **1. Proximity**

If you legitimately want to make use of this gift of community, then you need to allow people to get close enough to see your blind spots. Too many of us keep the whole world forever at arm's length. Let me ask you, when is the last time that a brother or sister in Christ has given you a solid, needed rebuke? When is the last time someone called you on your sin? If that isn't a thing that you have experienced in your Christian walk, then that is a problem. That means that you're probably too closed off and the Christian community around you is too cowardly to tell you what you need to hear. Proverbs 27:6 says:

Faithful are the wounds of a friend;  
profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (Proverbs 27:6 ESV)

Better to have my sin pointed out by a friend so that I can turn from it, then to have it pointed out at the final judgement when my opportunity for repentance is over.

Unless you are perfect, you need some people who are close enough to your marriage that they can call you out for the way that you treat one another. You need someone close enough to your

personal life that they can point out your patterns of gossip, or pride, or apathy. You need someone close enough to your parenting that they can highlight the ways that you are modeling sinful and destructive behavior for your little ones.

And you need people to remind you of the mercy of God when you're being too hard on yourself. You need people who can scoop you up off the floor and direct your eyes toward the cross when you feel like you're too far gone.

You need all of that. And many of you don't have that. You refuse to let anyone get close enough to you to tell you that your sin stinks. And, while that is a good strategy to live a conflict-free, comfortable life, it's a lousy strategy for entering the kingdom of heaven, and it suggests to me that you need to take the warning in our text this morning far more seriously than you currently do. "But making friends is hard, pastor!" It sure is. It's also hard to learn how to swim. But we take the swimming lessons, because the threat of drowning is real.

Well, the threat of unbelief is real too. If you want to experience the keeping power of community, then you need proximity.

If this community is going to have keeping power then we will also need:

## **2. Courage**

Courage will be needed for everyone involved in the process.

First of all, it takes courage to put yourself in a position of exposure. We live in an individualistic, Instagram-filtered culture and breaking out of that curated presentation of our lives is scary. It takes courage to put yourself out there. It takes courage to invite others in. It takes courage to accept a word of correction without lashing back in self defense. It takes courage to acknowledge that you're not perfect.

But it also takes courage to give a rebuke. If you've ever attempted to confront a person about their sin, then you likely know why courage is required. As Doctor Craig always says, "Hurt people hurt people." When sin is exposed, people get defensive. They lash out. They build walls.

They run. When you give a rebuke – even when it’s done with the best of intentions – you should not be surprised if you get a nasty backlash and a season of silence in response.

“Why would we do that to ourselves? Why would we hold out our chin when we know full well that a blow is coming?” Because we have courage. Because we believe that it is our responsibility to warn our brothers and sisters about the sin that is festering in their blind spot. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote:

Although my patients might become angry when I probe their infected wounds, they will thank me when they recover. If I am afraid to tell people about their sins, I murder their souls.<sup>5</sup>

Have you ever spoken a hard word to a brother or sister in Christ? If the answer to that question is no, then you either have a proximity problem or a courage problem. Perhaps even both.

If you want to experience the keeping power of community, then you need proximity, and you need courage. But that’s not enough. If we only had those two elements, there would be a whole lot of confronting, but very little change. For change to happen – for community to have the keeping power that we see described in our text today, there needs to be one last element, and that is:

### **3. Love**

An exhortation without love feels like an attack. But, when a person who has demonstrated their love for you courageously reaches out and tells you something that is difficult for you to hear, you can know that the keeping power of God is at work in your life. If an enemy were pointing out that fault, you could write it off as malicious, but why would your friend say that to you? Why would someone who cares about you say something that threatens to put a strain on your relationship?

Because they love you. Because they are more committed to your eternal joy than they are to your present happiness. Because they are more committed to the glory of God in your life than they are to your feelings. As one pastor notes:

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<sup>5</sup> George Swinnock as cited by Yuille, J. Stephen. *A Labor of Love: Puritan Pastoral Priorities* (p. 27). Reformation Heritage Books. Kindle Edition.

Love does not equal unconditional affirmation. Love entails the relentless pursuit of what is for our good. And our good is always growth in godliness.<sup>6</sup>

True love – Christian love – has the hard talks.

This week we are rolling out our Life Together program. As someone who is going to give an account for your souls when I stand before Jesus, I want to urge you with all my might to make Thursday night at Redeemer a part of your weekly schedule.

In this program, your church family will watch as you wrestle with your kids at the table. In this program, you will hear testimonies about the struggles that your brothers and sisters have faced and about how God has moved in their lives to bring them to where they are now. In this program, you will pray out loud with other Christians in small groups and get to know your church family beyond the superficial level.

We are not launching this program because we want to fill up the midweek slot. We're not launching this to entertain the kids. We're launching this because the Bible says that each of us and our families are going to need real, deep, honest, close, courageous, loving church family if we are going to navigate through this world with our faith intact. We're launching this because we all still have blind spots, and we'll never be able to spot them without the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is a silent killer that plagues our churches. But God has not left us without an alarm. He has given us this messy, glorious, awkward, beautiful thing called the church. I need you to sound the alarm when I go astray. You need me to point out your sin when you don't see it. We need each other – and we HAVE each other! So let's thank God for the keeping power of community, and let's lean in as if our eternal souls are at stake. Because they are.

Let's pray together.

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 73.