

Hebrews 3:7-19
Numbers 14
Psalm 95

“Yesterday and Today: A Warning Against Unbelief”

Jan 31, 2021

The story of Israel in the wilderness serves as a cautionary tale for us!
After all, they had experienced the great redemption from Egypt.
They had seen God’s mighty deeds – the plagues against Egypt,
the parting of the Red Sea,
they had eaten the manna in the wilderness,
and drunk water from the rock!

But then, when God told them to enter the promised land,
they refused.
They said, “let’s go back to Egypt” –
they didn’t believe that God would do what he promised.

Psalm 95 applies Numbers 14 to the people of God today.
It starts with a call to sing praise to the LORD for his mighty deeds –
his mighty deeds of creation and providence –
his great works of salvation (like the Exodus).

And then in the middle of verse 7, the Psalmist reminds us how important it is
to *hear* the Word of the LORD.

This is part of the reason why our liturgy is so full of the Word of God.
We need to *hear* God’s voice.

Today we are hearing five chapters of scripture:
Psalm 100, Psalm 23, Numbers 14, Psalm 95, Hebrews 3 –
along with several other portions of scripture woven into the service.

But if you *hear* his voice, then do not harden your hearts!
Hear and believe the message!

Sing Psalm 95
Read Hebrews 3

What is your “yesterday”?
For Israel, yesterday was that rebellion in the wilderness that came to define them.
Often it comes as a result of some trauma – some misery – in our life.
The drunkard is frustrated by some situation and so drinks to forget.
I don’t want to be *here* – because it hurts –
I want to be over there where the pain doesn’t feel so bad...

That actually describes our rationale for so many sins!
If I explode in rage I can control the pain.
If I watch porn I can make it through this situation.
If I gossip about it, I'll feel better...

And even it though it doesn't *really* work –
we still keep going... we still keep doing it –
because that misery – that trauma – keeps telling us that we can't be *present*.

We can't live *today*.
We are stuck in *yesterday*.

In light of the comparison between Moses and Jesus,
it is fitting that Hebrews turns to Psalm 95 in reflecting upon Israel's rebellion,
while wandering in the wilderness.

He takes the wilderness rebellion of Israel and says,
"Don't you make the same mistake they did."
God had just redeemed them from bondage and slavery in Egypt.

He had just saved them.

But just because you heard the message
doesn't mean that you're going to enter the promised land.

You must believe the message.

Hearing must be blended with faith.

And faith must persevere until the end.

Israel in the wilderness was yesterday.

Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father is today.

Don't be defined by yesterday!

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!

Don't live in yesterday!

Live in the *today* of the gospel.

1. Yesterday: The Wilderness Rebellion (Numbers 14 and Psalm 95)

⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

"Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹ where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.

¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, 'They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.'

¹¹ As I swore in my wrath,
'They shall not enter my rest.'"

Once again, Hebrews provides a very interesting use of the Old Testament.

Psalm 95, quoted here in verses 7-11,

reads “Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers put me to the test.”

Massah and Meribah refer to the grumbling in Exodus 17,
when just after they had crossed the Red Sea,
the people of Israel grumbled and complained because they had no water.

Massah means “testing” and Meribah means “quarrelling”
so the LXX, the Greek translation of the OT, rendered this
“Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness”

They simply translated the place names literally.

But this is faithful to the point of Psalm 95,

because Psalm 95 uses Massah and Meribah as an example of the rebellion
that characterized the wilderness generation.

Psalm 95 itself connects Massah and Meribah with Numbers 14:20-35,

where God promises that the rebellious generation will die in the wilderness.

“As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.”

So “Massah and Meribah” (which means, in Hebrew, testing and quarreling)
was not just one episode in the story of the Exodus.

Massah and Meribah became the chief characteristic of the wilderness journey.

This is what can happen to any of us!

One episode in our life can threaten to define us
and become the chief characteristic of our life!

And Hebrews is saying: “Don’t let yesterday define today!”

The grumbling of the wilderness generation is infamous.

But it is worth our while to remember it in a little more detail.

Because Hebrews tells us that this was given to us as a warning.

It all started while they were still in Egypt.

When Moses spoke to Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded by making the Israelites work harder
and the people grumbled that Moses was only making matters worse.

In Ex 14, when the Egyptians pursued them, the Israelites cried out,

“it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians
than to die in the wilderness.”

But then God opened a way through the Red Sea,

and the Israelites passed through on dry land –
but the Egyptians perished in the waters.
Only three days later—three days after seeing God part the waters—
the people are complaining because the water of Marah is too bitter,
and so the LORD sweetens the water by the hand of Moses.
A month later they are grumbling that they don't have enough food
and so the LORD sends quail and manna from heaven.
Then a few days later they are out of water again,
and rather than ask in faith, it says that “the people quarreled with Moses.”
They asked, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt?
to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”
In a span of less than three months God has delivered them from Egypt,
killing the firstborn of every family in Egypt,
he has brought them through the Red Sea on dry land,
destroying the Egyptian army in the waters,
he has given them water twice, bread from heaven every day.
And all of this he did for a rebellious, ungrateful people,
who continued to grumble and rebel in a matter of hours after each new gift.

So by the time they get to Sinai, three months after the Exodus from Egypt,
the people of Israel have already rebelled five times.

Will this come to define them?
Or will they hear God's voice and turn away from grumbling?

The answer comes in Exodus 32, while God is giving the law to Moses,
the people rebel and make idols to worship.
This is the only rebellion in the year while they were at Sinai (overall it was a pretty good year!)

Then when they leave Sinai, it starts all over again.
In Numbers 11 there are two rebellions,
some complaining about their misfortunes—
others grumbling that they don't have meat.
Then in Numbers 12 Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses.
Then in Numbers 13-14 ten of the 12 spies rebel against Moses,
and Israel refuses to enter the promised land.
As if that is not enough, then in Numbers 16, Korah leads a rebellion,
attempting to seize power from Moses and take over the leadership of Israel.
In Numbers 20, Israel again complains about water a third time,
and this time Moses, furious with the people,
disobeys God and strikes the rock, instead of speaking to it,
thereby bringing the curse of the rebellious generation upon himself.
And finally, in Numbers 21, comes the final rebellion,
as the Israelites complain about their wanderings.

Over and over the scripture records the rebellions of Israel.
No matter how many times God was gracious to them,
they kept rebelling.

You know what it sounds like?

It sounds like a two-year old
who keeps doing the same thing over and over again.
And if you are gracious and kind, and give them what they want,
then they get spoiled and demand even more.
And if you discipline them, then they just get more sneaky about it!

There is a reason why Israel sounds like a two-year old.

When God said, "Israel is my son, my firstborn," he meant it!
Paul tells us in Galatians 4 that Israel was the son of God in his minority.
Israel is acting like a two-year old, because he is one!
This is not to excuse Israel's rebellion.
A rebellious two-year old is not innocent!
Rather, God is teaching his children what it means to be his people.
If you rebel against him, judgment will come.
And so those who rebelled were forbidden to enter the promised land.

Hebrews follows the LXX reading of Psalm 95,
thereby drawing attention to Numbers 14.
Numbers 14 is the one place in all the rebellions of Israel,
where God draws attention to the problem of unbelief.
"How long will this people despise me?
And how long will they not believe in me,
in spite of all the signs that I have done among them." (Num 14:11)

If you insist on living in yesterday –
then God will let you!

Psalm 95 concludes with that solemn oath:

"As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest."
And so the wilderness generation fell in the wilderness,
and died outside the land of Promise.

Hebrews 3-5 opens, as we saw last week with the comparison between Jesus and Moses.

Moses was a faithful servant in the house
(This is Hebrews parallel to Paul's discussion of the law as paedagogue–
the law was a servant that disciplined the Son of God in his minority)

But Jesus is faithful over God's house as a Son.

Hebrews 3-5 will conclude with the reminder that Jesus is the Son.

He is the Son come to maturity.
And he has come to maturity through the suffering of death –
through the cross!

And through Jesus we have come from yesterday to today.

2. Today: Hear and Believe

Blending exposition and exhortation, verses 12-19 then apply the lessons of yesterday to today.

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

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

a) Look out for Unbelief

Verse 12 and verse 19 both use the same language
to signal the beginning and end of the paragraph.

“Take care, brothers, [literally, “see”] lest there be in any of you an evil,
unbelieving heart...”

The same words “see” and “unbelief” appear in verse 19:

“So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”

Because we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief,
therefore we must keep our eyes open, “looking out” for unbelief today.

Because the root of apostasy is found in an “evil, unbelieving heart,”
which leads you to fall away from the living God.

Is it possible to fall away from the living God?

Yes.

Paul says in Galatians 5:4,

“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law;
you have fallen away from grace.”

In both Galatians 5 and Hebrews 3 we are talking about
those who have converted to Christianity,
but now are contemplating conversion to Judaism.

The Gentile who get circumcised has abandoned faith in Christ,
and is clinging to Moses.

It is as though a son renounced his sonship, preferring servitude.
To use the example of Israel in the wilderness,
it is like Israel saying, “we’d rather be slaves in Egypt,
than worship the living God!”

So yes, it is certainly possible for those who have once professed faith in Christ,
to fall away from the living God.
The fact that you have believed, by itself, is not a guarantee of perseverance.
Your faith is not the ground of your salvation.

Our confession says it well:

“The perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will,
but upon the immutability of the decree of election
flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father;
upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ;
the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them....”

The ground of your salvation is not your faith,
but the work of the Triune God:
The love of the Father who chose you;
The love of the Son who laid down his life for you;
The love of the Spirit who abides in you.

But that doesn’t mean that what you do is irrelevant!
Far from it!

b) Hold fast to the Substance

This is why verse 13 urges you to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today”
that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

We know that the Jerusalem church gathered daily for worship,
and we know that many churches in the patristic era did the same,
so this may be referring to the daily gatherings of the church.
But at the very least, Hebrews assumes that you will be seeing other believers “daily”
and urges you to exhort one another.
Don’t be bashful about warning each other.
If you see your brother or sister weighed down by sin,
don’t hesitate!
We are far too “secular” in the way we speak to each other.
Unfortunately, we only seem to have two languages:
secular and pietist.

We either ask, “how are you doing?”
(Which means external, surface stuff)

Or we ask, “how are you doing *spiritually*?”

(Which creates an artificial distinction between the “spiritual” and the “secular”)

We need to penetrate this false dichotomy by getting to know each other well enough that Hebrews exhortation about “every day” can become something of a reality.

Because the alternative is to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

If you only see each other once a week,
then you can hide the “real” you behind a facade.

And don’t wait for “church” events.

We have some “church” events

for those who have a tough time doing it on their own.

But if you look back over the last week and say,

“hmm, I haven’t seen anyone from church since last Sunday”

then Hebrews is telling you that something is wrong.

Thus saith the LORD!

You need each other!

If you are trying to make it, just you and your family by yourselves,

then, in the end, you are in peril

of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

I think our congregation is much better than the average American church at fellowship.

But compared to what Hebrews calls us to,

we are nowhere close!

Because Hebrews sees our life together as an essential part of our perseverance.

And perseverance is the final test of genuine saving faith.

Saving faith is a faith that perseveres to the end.

As Hebrews 3:14 puts it,

“For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold fast our original confidence
firm until the end.”

“Original confidence” captures the meaning okay,

but it makes it impossible to see what Hebrews is doing.

The phrase could be woodenly translated “the beginning of the substance.”

Hebrews uses this word “substance” three times in his epistle,

each time at a key juncture.

The eternal Son is the stamp of God’s substance (1:3).

Here we are called to hold fast “the beginning of the substance firm until the end.”

And in 11:1 we are told that faith is “the substance of things hoped for.”

Plainly Hebrews is connecting these three passages.

For Hebrews, “substance” refers to the basic reality of God

behind the transitory appearances of the world.

We are holding fast to the substance,
the basic reality of the Christian confession—
so that we might not fall away into rebellion.
Jesus is the stamp of God's substance—
he is the most real thing in an age where everything seems unreal.
Faith, then, is apprehending that Jesus is indeed sitting at the right hand of God.
It is the substance of things hoped for.
You cannot see it—but it is more real than anything you can see.

c) Unbelief and Disobedience (v16-19)

Hebrews closes the paragraph with a series of rapid fire questions that flow from Ps 95.

- 3:16 For who, having heard, rebelled?
Was it not all who came out of Egypt through Moses?
3:17 And by whom was he provoked forty years?
Was it not those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?
3:18 And to whom did he swear they would not enter into his rest, if not to those who were disobedient?
3:19 Thus we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

The basic disobedience of the wilderness generation—
behind all the rebellions—
behind all the idolatry—
was unbelief.

They did not believe God's promises.
They did not believe that God would do what he had said.

And having reminded the church of the wilderness generation,
Hebrews says the same thing to you.

The church lives now in the wilderness,
in between redemption and rest, promise and fulfillment;

You are at Kadesh.
You are on the brink of the Promised Land.
God has promised you eternal rest,
will you enter?

Do not harden your hearts!
Do not disobey his voice!

But believe!
As we will see in chapter 4,
Hebrews sees Jesus as the true Joshua

who has led his people into that eschatological rest.
And so now you are called to enter that rest—
and persevere in faith until the end.

We all have “yesterdays” that threaten to define us.

We all have patterns and tendencies that are rooted in unbelief.

When I want to be in control, I am saying that I don’t believe that God is really God.

But Hebrews says remember who you are!

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!

Tomorrow it will be too late!

Because tomorrow never comes.

Tomorrow is always a day away.

I’ll do that tomorrow – means, in effect, I’ll never get around to it!

But *today*, you can repent –

Today, you can believe the good news and turn away from yesterday!