
The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Completing Well (Part 3)

Hebrews 3:7-19

12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...

The other day my daughter was putting some dishes away when she lost hold of a bowl that went crashing into the ground. Needless to say, it shattered into many pieces leaving bits of ceramic glass in the kitchen. Upon first response to this accident, I told my daughter not to move, as she, and I, were both barefoot at the time. She had some sandals nearby and then she and her mother promptly began clean up. All the time we were commenting on being careful until we were sure all the glass was cleaned up.

Well, it wasn't more than a few minutes later that I tromped my way to the kitchen, *barefoot* and obviously indifferent to the warning I had given the rest of the family. And so, sure enough, I wound up with the smallest of glass shards in my foot. Laura did her best to find it, but it was small, buried and tenacious. For the rest of the day I would walk around occasionally putting just the right amount of weight and pressure on the spot to cause me to flinch. I was paying a price for my own carelessness. It wasn't until the next day that I finally tweaked my foot enough for me to dig in and get it out.

Now, while relatively benign in scope, there is a lesson that both you and I can learn from this episode revealing my injudicious act. For the more reasonably minded person, upon knowing that there may yet be glass upon the floor which he treads, will take the necessary precautions to protect his feet. It is this idea that one must "take care" in light of potentially dangerous circumstances that the author of Hebrews addresses in the text before us.

Hebrews 3:12-14 sits on the heels of verses 7-11, which, as you may recall, presents a very short, yet pointed history of Israel from the time of the Exodus and on through to their wilderness wandering. The main idea we examined in those verses was this premise that it is possible to begin well, yet still finish poorly. A large majority of Israel that began well with the Exodus from Egypt, because of their unbelief in the power and promise of God, ended poorly, not being allowed to enter the Promised Land. The author of Hebrews is now taking from that idea, the idea of beginning well, but finishing poorly, and

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applying to the experience of those who profess or had professed Jesus Christ as Lord.

The outline of these three verses is two-fold. The outline follows two specific commands found in verses 12 and 13 that teach us how to persevere in the faith, or to complete well in this spiritual journey with Christ. The two commands and two points of this passage can be summarized with the words, EXAMINATION and ENCOURAGEMENT.

I. Examination (3:12)

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God...

A. The Exhortation to Examine (3:12a)

The first command is found in the words, “take care” or “*blepete*” in the Greek. It literally means to “watch out” or “take careful heed”; which is something I did not do when there was glass in my kitchen. I would also have you note that the command to “take care” is in the present tense, meaning we might rightly translate this by saying, “take care and keep on taking care” or “watch out and keep on watching out.”

If you come across a sign that says, “Beware of the dog” what do you do? Some may heed the warning, others may not believe the warning, until of course they see and hear the ferocious snarling and barking of the beast behind the fence. At issue is that when you know a real and potential danger exists, a person will generally take the necessary safeguards to care for his well-being.

Remember then that this command is given in light of the history of numerous Israelites who failed to fully experience the salvation of God because of disbelief. And here is the point – if the many of Israel, who saw the power and presence of God, could fall short and reveal unbelieving and rebellious hearts, it may well be possible for those having experienced the power and presence of the Gospel as revealed in the person of Jesus to likewise fall short and reveal unbelieving hearts. This is not because the power of God is weak or limited, but rather because of the nature of man’s heart, because of the sickly condition of his soul not to fully depend upon and trust in God.

The command and call here then is to self-examination, not the examination of others. This directive is very personal and pointed. All who call themselves and consider themselves “brethren” that is a part of the church, must make a careful and constant evaluation of their spiritual health. Each of us are to be like doctors who examine the spiritual health of our own souls. The greatest

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medicine is to guard against disease altogether. And what specifically are we to “take care” of as “brethren?” Our text tells us. We are to take care of our hearts. This call to watch over our hearts is a common theme in Scripture. Proverbs 4:23 says,

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.

We must each “take care” of our hearts so that “there not be in any one of” us an evil, unbelieving heart. The phrase “there not be in any one of you” does not adequately express the original intent. The verb here is in the future tense meaning a more expressive translation might be, *“Take care, brethren, that there shall not be [found] in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart.”* This is why we must always be on guard to “watch and keep watching.” We must be actively aware of evil’s and disbelief’s potential because, my beloved, it can come upon a person so subtly and so deceptively and often times nearly imperceptively.

And why must we go to such great efforts and often times pains to “take care”? My beloved, as we examine our lives and our hearts, we must always be aware of our heart’s condition. What is the state of man’s heart? Man’s heart is fallen, that is, it seeks to be removed from and unshackled by the seeming restraints of its Creator God. And sin, sometimes boldly, but often times quietly and deceptively, draws us away from God. Was not sin subtle as it was presented to Eve in the garden? Just a seemingly benign question of the serpent to Eve, “Did God really say...?”

Like the “beware of dog” sign that warns us of the potential of being hurt by a vicious animal, we must know that there exists a sort of “beware of heart” sign that warns us of the potential of being spiritual hurt by the vicious power of sin. This is a real problem for all of fallen humanity. Consider the testimony of Scripture:

Deuteronomy 4:9

Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons.

Here then we read of the LORD giving the warning that unless we “take care” we will forget the awesome blessings and power of God.

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Psalm 139:23-24

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

Here we see that we actually need the LORD's help to see the seeds of evil that may exist in our hearts.

Proverbs 22:5

Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse; He who guards himself will be far from them.

And here we see that one of our greatest efforts are to steer clear of the "thorns and snares" of the perverse.

B. The Evaluation of the Examination's Symptoms (3:12b)

Moving then from the command to "take care", the author of Hebrews now shows us the symptoms that reveal a bad heart. There are two specific manifestations of a bad heart for which we must "watch out and keep watching out for" in our lives.

The first symptom is an "evil" heart. The word "evil" or *"ponera"* in the Greek, means degenerate, defiled, diseased and/or derelict. I would like you to think of evil in this sense - it is the opposite of how God originally created the heart of man, which was good. In other words, an evil heart is one that is not what it was originally supposed to be. And evil heart is one that spends more time concerning itself with self rather than glorifying God. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. When man does not seek to glorify God and does not enjoy God, then such a man has an evil heart. And so, a question to ask yourself is, "Does my heart express or desire those things that it was not originally supposed to?" When we come across such things, they must be confessed as sin and we must seek God, asking Him to replace such desires with godly one.

The second symptom is an "unbelieving" heart. The word "unbelieving" is *"apistias"* in the Greek. Some of you may know the word *"pistias"* which means belief or faith. When you put an "a" in front of it, it means simply "without faith." When we fail to live out or act upon the promises of God, we are "apistias" or without faith. Remember that this idea of faithlessness was very much in view in Psalm 95 as quoted in Hebrews 3:7-11. In Numbers 13-14, the vast majority of

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Israel did not believe that God would or could deliver them safely into the Promised Land. Rather than listening to the promises of God, they listened to the gutless and faithless opinions of ten men. Their faithlessness resulted not only then in disbelief, but also in disobedience. When a heart is bad, it will begin to disbelieve the power and promise of God and will result in disobedience. In other words, when a person is disobedient to the expressly revealed will of God, they have already demonstrated that they do not completely believe in who God is and what He has said.

The call of God then is to watch out for any signs or indications that we are potentially harboring a disbelieving heart, the greatest sign of which is simple disobedience to God's word. May our disobedience drive us to repentance and pleas for the mercy of God to be made evident in our lives.

C. The Expectation of non-Examination (3:12c)

Having expressed the symptoms of a bad heart, our author then reveals to us the final and devastating result of such a heart that remains unexamined and unrepentant. Such a heart is one that “falls away from the living God.” To fall away means simply “to depart, desist, or desert.” What is really fascinating about this idea of “falls away” is that it implies having been somewhere near God, but not in a saving sense. Is this not the picture we saw of so many in Israel who saw the glories of God and experienced the blessings of God, but not really first hand, but rather vicariously through others?

Let explain what I mean by experiencing the blessings of God vicariously through others. The word “vicarious” is an important term in Christian thought. It means “performed or suffered by one person as a substitute for another or to the benefit or advantage of another.” Our Lord Jesus Christ's death was “vicarious” as He suffered our death, as our substitute, so that we might experience the benefits and blessings of God in salvation. Well, many of the Israelite vicariously experienced the blessings of God through those who truly believed God. When God blessed Israel with manna from heaven, He caused His blessing to fall upon the good and the evil. The evil ones were blessed because of their association with the good. The problem is that often the evil think that they are receiving the blessings of God because of themselves rather than because God is actually blessing others instead. We must be careful to know that we are firsthand experiencing the blessings of God and not merely reaping the benefits that remain as a result of God blessing others.

Just to put this idea of reaping blessings vicariously, let me use a modern context. Just the other day some of the men were talking about the various

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baseball teams that had secured playoff spots. When speaking of their favorite team they would use interesting phrases such as, “we won the title” or “when we play this other team in the playoffs.” But you see, the last time I checked, none of these men had ever practiced much less played on the team. When their team wins, they vicariously experience the sensation of winning even though they themselves did nothing to help the team win. And while not true of all such fans, what generally happens to many fans when the team performs poorly the next year, such fans “fall away” they desist, desert and depart.

Now, when Israel thought that God was not so good, many of them desisted, deserted and departed from God. And the same result will come to pass for those with a bad heart, they will fall way from the living God. To fall way from the living God is to turn to lifeless and dead idols. And remember that idols are really anything that has our heart’s attention above and beyond the true and living God. May we constantly examine our own hearts so that they will not be found like the hearts of rebellious Israel, evil and unbelieving hearts that will, if left unrepentant, fall away from God.

II. Encouragement (3:13-14)

13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...

A. The Exhortation to Encourage (3:13a)

The second command is found beginning in verse 13 and comes to us as an exhortation as well. Rather than fall away from the living God, believers are commanded not only to examine themselves, but now also to edify, or build up one another. The first command was personal, this second command is public. Like the first command, the command to “encourage one another” is in the present tense, meaning we are to continuously be encouraging or urging on another on in the things of the faith. This command to encourage demands and requires a corporate context, meaning that we must not and cannot isolate ourselves from other believers. Once we have rightly examined ourselves, then we may be used of God to encourage others.

The word for encourage is another somewhat familiar Greek word. The verb is *parakleite* and means “to come along side in order to help, comfort or implore.” In the Gospel of John, in 14:16 and 16:7, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the “Paraklete” or the Helper, Comforter. The command here is to become

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like God in helping, comforting and encouraging, or edifying one another. If we want to see the sin of disbelief eradicated from the corporate gathering of the church, then we must seek to encourage one another “day after day.” Too often we Christians today are isolated. We see and truly converse with other Christians in a meaningful way maybe once or twice a week. This means we place ourselves in isolation for most of the week. Listen and heed the words of Proverbs 18:1 which says this,

He who separates himself seeks his own desire, He quarrels against all sound wisdom.

You absolutely cannot be helped, encouraged or built up in the faith, or so aid others in such endeavors while in isolation, be it partial or permanent. You see, the original recipients of this letter were isolating themselves from other believers so as not to be confronted with and by the truth. Again, Christian encouragement demands a corporate context. What are you doing to encourage a brother or sister in Christ, particularly those with whom you fellowship regularly? What do you think it would communicate to the unbelievers in your circles if you were constantly devising ways to encourage those who attend your church or who are of the faith?

When a person is isolated, not encouraging other believers and or not receiving encouragement, such a person is alone and unaccountable and will find it most tempting to take the easy course of action rather than the right course.

B. The Extent of Encouragement (3:13b)

So the exhortation is to encourage one another. Now let us consider briefly the extent of this encouragement. It is to be “day after day.” Let me give you four thoughts concerning the extent of this call to encouragement.

1. This encouragement is not a “Sunday Only” thing, it is to be regular, constant and daily;
2. This encouragement is not a task limited to pastors, elders and leaders in the church. Rather, it is the duty, privilege and call to all believers who first examine themselves.
3. This encouragement holds the promise of God’s deliverance as being available. “As long as it is still called, Today” we have the promise of God to bring us to His rest.

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4. This encouragement has a healthy and noble goal – for hearts so encourage will not be as susceptible to the “deceitfulness of sin” – such deceitfulness hardens the heart toward the things of God.

C. The Enemy of Encouragement (3:13c)

So the exhortation is to “encourage one another.” The extent of this encouragement is “day after day.” And now, let us consider for a moment the enemy of encouragement. The enemy of encouragement is sin and its ability to be deceitful. The word “deceitfulness” speaks of a trick or strategy. You see, sin has the ability to play tricks upon the heart. Sin is clever and so we must be on guard both personally and corporately against its advances. For while we might certainly catch much sin if we rightly and personally “take care” that evil and disbelief not be found in our hearts, much more sin will be eliminated as well when we purposely and regularly seek to encourage, come along side to help and urge one another on to faithful living in the Lord.

D. The Expectation of Encouragement (3:14)

We conclude then with the expectation of encouragement. What should we expect to see from a group of people who are practicing personal examinations of their hearts and public encouragement of the body? In verse 14 we find two things.

First we find that those who do such things are “***partakers of Christ***”. Our text says that “we have become partakers.” The idea here is that somewhere in the past we partook of Christ, we are presently partaking of Christ and will continue to partake of Christ indefinitely. As we have already come to see, to partake means “to take hold of something that is not naturally of one’s own kind or preference.” We did not originally desire or love Christ. We love because He first loved us. But what is of great significance here is that it says “we have become partakers of Christ...” The idea clearly communicate here is community. We participate together, with one another in coming to know and possess Christ. If you want to take care that you do not come to have an evil and unbelieving heart, then you must participate with others to know and possess Christ. That is the first expectation of encouragement, that we are working together to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. This idea is so clearly communicate by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11-13 and following.

But in addition to having the expectation that we would all be real and continually partakers of Christ, the second expectation is that we would all “***persevere in the faith***”. This is what is mean by, “*if we hold fast the beginning*”

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of our assurance firm until the end...” In a sense, this answers the question, “How may I know if I possess Christ?” If the faith you had in Christ at the beginning has continued and holds fast, and by holding fast we are to understand a faith that is growing ever stronger and more stable, then there can be an assurance of faith. For understand this, genuine faith in Christ always seeks to grow and gain confidence in the things of God. The Israelites had no lack of confidence right at the beginning of the Exodus, but it quickly faded away, it did not grow or hold fast, even within a few short days out in the wilderness. So then, we must learn that a lessening of confidence or assurance in God is a warning sign that your faith may very well not be a saving faith. Now then, my point is not to make those of you who are presently trusting in Christ worry that sometime in the future you might fall away. Rather, the point is to warn those who are thinking of falling away or have fallen away, if only in heart and mind, for they may still attend church, that if they do this, it is an indication that they may never have been saved in the first place. The issue of concern is not will you fall away but rather are you now or have you already fallen away.

This then is to be our examination and our encouragement. Take time to consider the condition of your soul right now. What characterizes your heart? Will you pray with the Psalmist,

Psalm 139:23-24

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

And then, will you purposely seek to encourage others in the things of God on a regular and daily basis, so long as it is TODAY? For these are the practices of those who are true partakers of Christ; and these are the practices of those who will complete well their journey with Christ. May these then be the desire of your soul.

Soli Deo Gloria

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