

Hebrews 3

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We don't have to get very far into Hebrews before we spot one of the writer's main preoccupations. Over and over again, he compares some element of the old covenant that Israel made with God, to some element of the new covenant, that Christians have made with God. He contrasts the priests under the Law of Moses with Christ as our high priest, the tabernacle of the old covenant with the heavenly tabernacle where Christ offered Himself, the blood of the animals sacrificed under the Law of Moses with the blood that Christ shed on the cross, and so forth. In every instance, the Hebrews writer is at pains to point out how superior the new-covenant version is to its old-covenant equivalent.

From this, and from many of the other things that the writer says, we can easily piece together the problem that he was confronting. Due to the preaching of Peter and other godly men, many ethnic Jews in the first century chose to obey the gospel and become Christians. However, most Jews didn't make that decision, and the new Christian minority soon found itself persecuted by those who continued to follow the Old Law. They lost their family relationships, their wealth, their freedom, and sometimes even their lives. All of this provided the new Christians with a powerful incentive to recant, to return to Judaism in order to escape the persecution, and apparently many first-century brethren struggled with that choice. The book of Hebrews was written to address this problem, and its central argument is that any Christian who returns to Judaism both abandons a better covenant and puts himself in danger of the wrath of God.

Today, none of us are pressured to become Jews, but the dangers of falling away are no less real than they were 2000 years ago. Many of our family members and friends work to lead us into a denomination or into abandoning God entirely, and far too many Christians eventually listen to this call. In response, let's turn our attention to Hebrews 3.

Jesus and Moses

Hebrews 3 begins with a comparison between Jesus and Moses. The Hebrews writer begins this comparison by highlighting the faithfulness of Christ. We see this point made in Hebrews 3:1-2. This passage begins by assigning a unique title to Jesus, describing Him as the apostle and high priest of our confession. So, if you're ever playing Bible Trivia, and the question asks where in Scripture Jesus is called an apostle, the answer is Hebrews 3:1. In reality, though, the verse is making a non-trivial point. As most of us remember from Bible class, the definition of the word "apostle" is "one sent." The Bible speaks of the twelve apostles because they were the twelve men Jesus originally sent out to proclaim the gospel. However, Jesus was chosen as an apostle by the Father Himself. Likewise, Jesus was also selected as a high priest. His mission was twofold: to preach the word and to offer Himself for the sins of mankind.

This was a tall order. In fact, the only other man who had that kind of burden placed on him was Moses. Moses too was responsible for bringing the law to God's people and for organizing a system of sacrifices for sin. Moses carried out that charge faithfully, and Jesus also carried out His charge. Everything that God expected Him to do, He did.

However, this apparent equality between Jesus and Moses only goes so far. The Hebrews writer indicates one of the major differences between them in Hebrews 3:3-4. This puts the glory of Moses in perspective. As important as he was, he was only a part of the house that God built, only a part of God's chosen people. On the other hand, Jesus was worthy of greater glory because He Himself was the builder. Before the foundation of the world, Jesus came up with the idea that God should have a chosen people, and then He created that people. The Hebrews writer tells us that the builder of all things is God, so the conclusion is inescapable. In order to be the builder, Jesus must be God.

To us, this seems like a duh point to make, but in reality, the divinity of Jesus comes under frequent attack from all sides. Sometimes, we find ourselves in conversation with door-to-door evangelists who want us to believe that Jesus is nothing more than a created archangel. At other times, we flip on the TV and see some wise-looking guy with a doctorate in divinity who patiently tells us that Jesus was a good man who said some good things, but He certainly wasn't divine. In reality, brethren, the entire Christian system of faith depends on the fact that Jesus is God, and if we ourselves begin to deny that, then everything we believe collapses into an incoherent heap. We need to stand up for the divinity of Jesus.

The Hebrews writer further emphasizes the glory of Jesus in Hebrews 3:5-6. Here, he describes the interactions between Moses and God's people on the one hand, and Jesus and God's people on the other. Moses was just a part of God's people. He was a servant in that household, and he faithfully carried out his work of preparing God's people for the coming of the Christ. Jesus' status, though, is very different. He isn't in the house. He is over the house. Similarly, He is not a servant, but a Son, and He is faithful in all that He does for God's people. This is where the Hebrews writer homes in on his main point. Whether we are a part of that house, whether we share in that blessing, is entirely up to us. We are part of the house of Christ if and only if we hold our confession of Jesus as Lord firm to the end. Just because we are a part of God's people now doesn't mean we will always be. It is possible for any Christian to fall away.

Psalm 95.

To illustrate this point, the Hebrews writer turns to a lengthy quotation from Psalm 95. We read the first half of this quotation in Hebrews 3:7-9. This passage refers to a series of events with which the epistle's Jewish audience would have been very familiar. It describes the events of the Exodus and the wilderness wandering. Those 40 years of exile were not the Israelite nation's finest hour. Even though they had seen God use the ten plagues to bring them out of Egypt, part the Red Sea to give them a way to escape, and reveal Himself in glory at the top of Mt. Sinai, none of it taught them to be faithful. Instead, they hardened their hearts against God and rebelled, not once, but repeatedly. For 40 years, they tested Him again and again, and in response, God used His power not to save them, but to punish them.

It's tempting for us to consider the Israelites and think what fools they were, but God's people can be just as foolish today. We have the evidence of creation all around us, and we have His word, which is filled with internal evidences of its authenticity. However, that doesn't keep Christians from hardening their hearts against their Creator and putting Him to the test through disobedience. It is true that God acts with more subtlety today. He isn't going to have the earth swallow up the rebellious. However, if we put Him to the test, we can expect to see His works too.

We see God's ultimate reaction to His rebellious people in Hebrews 3:10-11. What we see from this is that God has no trouble recognizing the pattern of disobedience. It's not like God considered the conduct of the Israelites and made excuses for them. He didn't say, "They're good people, except that they messed up that time and that time and that time and that other time." Instead, He saw that their conduct stemmed from who they were. They lived wicked lives because they had wicked hearts, and those wicked hearts provoked God to wrath. He determined that they would not enter the promised land of Canaan, and even though His simple word on such a subject would have been enough, He became so angry that He swore He would destroy them. And, indeed, 600,000 men died in the wilderness.

This, friends, is what we're fooling with when we start flirting with sin. God hasn't gotten senile over the past 3500 years. He is still perfectly capable of recognizing patterns of conduct, and if our pattern of conduct is wicked, He won't just chastise us. He will reject us. This rejection of the wicked is not just possible. It is inevitable.

The Need for Endurance.

Our understanding of this, or lack of understanding of this, will produce a great contrast in our behavior. The Hebrews writer highlights these two contrasting responses in Hebrews 3:12-13. The first way that we can respond is through willful ignorance, when we have an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away. Notice how this language throws a monkey wrench in the false doctrine of Calvinism, which teaches that once we are saved, we are always saved. We can certainly have an unbelieving heart, it is true. However, this unbelieving heart is something that we can take care to prevent. In other words, we have a choice about whether we continue in faith or not. Also, the way that Calvinists deal with people who appear to fall away is by saying that those fallen-away Christians were never truly saved to begin with. Once again, that doesn't match the text. The people under discussion here knew God, but chose to depart from Him.

If we understand this problem, we will not only take heed for ourselves, but for our brethren. This isn't just an elder thing. It's a Christian thing. If we see that a brother hasn't been at services much recently, it's our responsibility to get in touch and see what we can do. We need to be looking out for one another and helping one another stay faithful.

Next, the Hebrews writer emphasizes just how important this endurance is for all of us. Look with me at Hebrews 3:14-15. The writer here begins by describing something that we all want to be—partakers of Christ. In this life, our foremost goal should be to share in His salvation. However, the only way we can become this kind of partaker is by holding fast the confession of our hope. If we don't hold fast, then we don't get to share in the spiritual blessings of Jesus either. That is precisely why we need not to harden our hearts, as the Israelites who rebelled chose to do.

After this, the writer takes us through the history of those Israelites, step by step, to illustrate where they went wrong and how we can avoid following in their footsteps. Let's look together at Hebrews 3:16-19. In this segment, let's pay attention first of all to where this group of rebellious Israelites came from. Both the Hebrews writer and the book of Exodus tell the same story—they came out of Egypt. Now, why did they do that? Did they randomly drift out into the wilderness one day? Hardly. They left Egypt because they heard God's message through Moses and obeyed it. They started off doing what God wanted them to, but then, they heard some things that they didn't want to do, and they rebelled. We're not talking about people who were always on the wrong track. They started off right, then went wrong.

Then, God became angry with those Israelites and slew them in the wilderness, not because they were His little puppets of wrath who were always doomed, but because they chose to sin. Likewise, God swore that they would not enter His rest. He didn't do this because He was prejudiced before they ever existed, but because they disobeyed. The root of this spiritual disaster was not God's capricious choice, but the unbelief of the people who should have listened. This example is both reassuring and ominous for us. It's reassuring because it shows that God doesn't arbitrarily choose people and roast the unchosen regardless of what they do. I'd hate to live in a universe run by a God like that. It's ominous, though, because it tells us that if we want to be saved, we must choose to believe and obey. It's all on us.