



10: Warning: Beware

"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said:

"Today, if you will hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."
Failure of the Wilderness Wanderers

For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? 19 So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:12 – 19

In chapter 3 verse 7 the writer of the book of Hebrews, as he's prone to do, left off from his main line of thought. He's out to prove that Jesus is way better than anyone or anything that came before and way better than anyone or anything yet to come, but he's set aside building his case to warn us, his readers, about how dangerous it would be not to persevere in following Jesus.

He set out the nub of of his warning in verses 7 to 11 with a quote from Psalm 95 — an example of people who didn't persevere in trusting God and what became of them — and then to make sure we'd got the point he added his own comment.

"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God."

Hebrews 3:12

Now, having made the point, he's going to rub it in a bit, at the same time telling us how to be sure that none of us does have an unbelieving heart. But before we come to that, let's look more closely at verse 12.

Heart Trouble Is Big Trouble

The word heart, just like when we use it in English, doesn't always mean the same thing. Your heart can be the thing that pumps your blood around or the heart of something can be its centre or its most important feature but neither of those meanings is what's in mind here.

Your heart, the way the word is most often used in the Bible, is where your emotions arise: it can be merry, glad, joyful, sad, distressed, bitter, anxious, loving, hateful, lustful, bitter or angry. But your heart is more than just that. Your heart is also where your rational mind operates: it perceives, understands, debates, reflects, remembers, thinks and imagines and a heart can be wise or foolish. Even that's not the whole picture. Your heart is also where your will is located: it's your heart that prompts you and steers you and it's in your heart that decisions are made. A heart can be steadfast or weak. It's in your heart that you'll find your conscience and your heart is your moral compass: a heart can be gentle, lowly, holy, faithful, upright, pure, clean and loving or it can be evil, lustful, perverse and impenitent. The heart is where sin comes from.

"...whatever enters a man from the outside cannot defile him...what comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts..."

Mark 7:18-21

It's with our hearts that we know God and it's in a believer's heart that God dwells. You ought to pray from your heart, love God with all your heart and believe in Him with all your heart. Our hearts are constantly open to influence from God and Satan. God can lay hold of the heart, open it to hear and understand His Word and ways and put into it the resolve to obey Him. Satan, on the other hand, can put it into the heart to do evil.

Your heart is you, the whole you, but it's not you as other people see you. Your heart is not open to public view: the Bible distinguishes between the heart and outward appearance. It talks, for example, in 1 Peter 3:4 about "the hidden person of the heart". A man's heart can never be properly known and understood, not even by the man himself; God is the only one who sees your heart like it really is.

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to every man according to his ways,"

Jeremiah 17:9-10

If you want to know our own heart you have to turn to the Bible and see what God says about you. No amount of introspection will give you a true picture. God's Word is the only true mirror that can give you a glimpse of your real self.

Pulling all that together, we could say that your heart is the whole you, the real you, not you as you appear to others or even to yourself.

- ◆ *Why is it a false distinction to talk about a difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge?*

To have an evil unbelieving heart is to have serious potentially fatal heart trouble. It is to be fundamentally and thoroughly wicked and untrusting and that, according to verse 12, is the kind of heart those who depart from the living God have. In this context, to depart from God is to depart from the teaching of Christ, who is far superior to Moses and the angels.

- ◆ *In the light of all this, in your own words, what kind of people does the writer have in mind when he talks about those who have "an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God"?*
- ◆ *Why, do you think, might the writer call God "the living God" here?*

Beware!

Beware! he writes. In other words, this is a real possibility and you must watch out for it.

The obvious question now is, how can it be avoided? How can anyone be sure that he or she does not have an evil unbelieving heart? The first step has to be to do what is urged here: to be aware, alert, watchful, attentive to the possibility.

- ◆ *Bearing in mind what's been said about the heart's potential for self-deceit how will you set about making sure that you don't have an evil unbelieving heart?*

Encourage One Another

But we don't just need to look out for ourselves; we must also look out for one another. In verse 13 we're told to encourage one another. This is the second step to take if you want be sure that you don't have an evil unbelieving heart. It goes beyond what we usually think of when we think about encouragement. It means to warn, to rebuke, to plead with and to urge forward. It can also mean to comfort, to console and to make strong. The most basic idea in the word is to come alongside to help. So to encourage someone is to get alongside him or her and do whatever of those things is needed to help him or her keep pressing on toward heaven. And bear in mind that in the Bible encouragement is always based on God's promises: encouragement in the Lord, through the Scriptures.

- ◆ *Who are the people you find most encouraging?*
- ◆ *What is it about them that makes them good encouragers?*
- ◆ *How can you be a good encourager?*

It's Urgent

The command of verse 13 has a strong sense of urgency about it. We're to encourage one another every day if need be and we're to do it "while it is still called 'Today'" — don't put it off till tomorrow. The words also convey the idea that this is something that should be happening among believers all the time; it's not something just to be thought about in exceptional circumstances.

A Great Danger To Avoid

Next we're told why we must encourage one another: it must be done if we are to avoid being "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin".

To be hardened is to become unable to take in and understand the Word of God: it just can't get through to you. It happens. You don't have to make it happen, you just have to allow it to happen (that's the sense of the passive verb in the sentence).

- ◆ *What do you understand by the phrase "the deceitfulness of sin"?*
- ◆ *Can you think of some examples of sin's deceitfulness?*
- ◆ *In what ways can sin's deceitfulness harden our hearts?*

Hold Fast

in verse 14 the writer reiterates his warning. To be a partaker of Christ is to be a real Christian and he tells us that to be a partaker of Christ is conditional.

"We have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end."

Hebrews 3:14

Our "confidence" is that hope that every Christian has — the hope of heaven and all that goes with it. It's also all the things we are firmly convinced of — the gospel and all that it means. We must hold on to our belief in these things, without wavering, right to the end of our lives. Only those who do are genuinely saved. So the third step to be taken if you want be sure that you don't have an evil unbelieving hear is to hold fast: to persevere.

- ◆ *What might holding the beginning of your confidence steadfast to the end mean for you in your circumstances?*

Verse 15 returns our thoughts to that quote from Psalm 95 and Israel's unbelief and in verses 16 – 19 the warning to be taken from their example is repeated: we're reminded that their ultimate fate was the result of unbelief.