

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

Has anyone read their Bible since Sunday?! If so, what difference did it make?
How are you feeling about the prospect of looking at the Bible together now?

INTRO: *So far in Hebrews we've seen the need to pay closer attention to the gospel to stop us drifting from Jesus. Today we'll think about how this plays out when we open our Bibles...*

QUESTIONS

What's the big thing we're told not to do in this passage? (8, 15)
What do you think that means?
How do 12 and 19 explain what a 'hardened' heart is?
How aware are you of your heart when you hear God speak in the Bible?

7-11 quote from Psalm 95, which in turn refers back to a few incidents in the Old Testament. Just from this bit in Hebrews, what's the gist of the story we're told about the Israelites relationship with God? How is their sin described?

READ Exodus 17:1-7

How did Israel sin in that story?

READ Numbers 13:25-31; 14:1-4, 20-23, 28-35

What happened to stop the people entering the Promised Land?

Coming back to Hebrews, why are we being reminded of these stories? What is the application? (12-13)

It's not just aimed at individuals but the group. How can we help each other?

What does it mean to "exhort one another"?

What should we "exhort" each other to do?

What is "the deceitfulness of sin"?

What lies did the Israelites in the wilderness believe?

What similar lies do we believe today?

When should we exhort one another?

Do we really need this every day?! Why?

What difference should this make to our life together as a church?

Why is there so much focus on not hardening our heart "today"? Why isn't it enough to say that we believed yesterday? (14)

Does our salvation depend on how well we listen to sermons?! Why / why not?

Answer the rhetorical questions of 16-18.

Who were those who heard and rebelled? Who was God angry with for 40 years? Who did God swear would never enter his rest?

What's the point of these questions? How do they challenge *us*?

How does this link to what we've seen before in Hebrews about "drift"? (2:1-3)

CONCLUSION

Is hardness of heart something we struggle with?

In practical terms, what can we do about it?

How can we encourage one another *right now* to keep trusting Jesus?

Hebrews 3:7-19



Theme of *Hebrews*

Hebrews is written because of an urgent problem: the readers are on the verge of apostasy. Apostasy is the opposite of conversion; it is 'falling away from' or 'throwing away' Christ (3:12; 4:11; 5:6; 10:35). That is the 'sin' in Hebrews, and the 'temptation' they face is 'drift' (2:1). But their drifting is surprisingly not into irreligion, but back into the Jewish faith from which they had converted.

The main argument (to warn them against this drift) is that in Jesus God has spoken his **final word** (chs 1-4) and completed a **finished work** (chs 5-9/10): why go back to the 'shadow' (cf 10:1)? All of *Hebrews*' dense theology is included to serve the main application of this 'word of exhortation' (13:22).

Theme Sentence for 3:7-19

Beware the danger of unbelief; encourage each other to believe the Word today!

How this passage fits in

Jesus is the final word from God (1:1-2). In the past God spoke through the prophets (1:1) via angels (2:2), and that message turned out to be true. 2:2-3 has argued that since people who disobeyed that word were judged, how will we escape if we neglect the salvation we have through Jesus, which is far greater and comes with stronger reasons to believe it (2:3-4)?

Readers have so far been warned to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" (2:1) and have been called to "consider Jesus" (3:1). There is a real danger of slipping away from the gospel by neglecting to focus on it. The verse just preceding our passage (3:6) has told us that we are part of what God is building *if* we "hold fast our confidence". Perseverance in believing is key.

Our passage then takes a warning from Israel's history (Psalm 95 referring back to Exodus 17 and Numbers 14) to remind us that previous generations of believers have indeed fallen away into judgement because they refused to continue believing God when he spoke. If everyone who God saved from Egypt ending up dying in the desert rather than enjoying the Promised Land, why do we think we'll be ok to presume upon *our* past experience of God and neglect faith in his Word in the present (3:16)? Those people never entered God's rest. The following passage in 4:1-13 unpacks a more positive spin on Psalm 95 when it urges us to "strive to enter that rest". But for now, the warning stands: believe God when he speaks TODAY!

Application

- Don't harden your heart when you hear God – believe him!
- Encourage each other to keep on believing too.

[NB]

Commentary

7 To make his point about the need to keep considering Jesus, holding onto our confidence, paying closer attention and not drifting, the writer quotes from Psalm 95. The first half of the psalm (not quoted) calls people to worship God and this part calls people to listen to him. It was read every Sabbath to start the synagogue meetings, so would have been very familiar.

Given the focus later on the word “today”, it’s important to note how the writer leads into his quote. This is not what the Holy Spirit SAID but what the Holy Spirit SAYS, present tense. We hear God’s voice today through his Word, the Bible.

8-10 The original psalm translates the words “rebellion” and “testing” into their geographical place names, Massah and Meribah – this is referring to a specific incident in a particular place. God had rescued Israel out of slavery in Egypt and miraculously provided bread and water for them in the desert. But in Exodus 17:1-7 they grumbled about a lack of water and wished they’d never been rescued! God provided water again but it became a key moment of unbelief in God’s ability to come through on his promises. Their complaint is summarised in verse 7 of that passage as, “Is the LORD among us or not?” They don’t really believe that God is traveling with them for their good to bring them safely to the Promised Land.

The issue with listening is one of the heart, not just the ears. The psalm warns present day readers not only to hear, but to make sure that they are believing what they hear. Those Israelites saw God’s works for forty years and yet they did not know God’s ways; knowing about him without knowing him. And so we are warned not to harden *our* hearts in the same way.

11 Ironically, their lack of belief in God’s ability to bring them to the “rest” in the Promised Land led to them not entering that rest! Numbers 13-14 shows God bringing the people right up to the edge of the land he’d promised to them, where they sent spies in who said that the people of the land were big and strong. Rather than trusting God’s word to give them the land, as only Caleb and Joshua did, they disbelieved and would not go in. So God swore, “They shall not enter my rest.”

God’s oath to wait until that entire generation (bar Caleb and Joshua) had died out before bringing the people into Canaan came much later than the famous water rebellion. Their first instance of grumbling still gets mentioned in the same breath as their decisive last one, however, because it turned out to be typical of them – always disbelieving.

12-13 The rest of the chapter (and the first part of chapter 4) is a mini-sermon on Psalm 95, explaining and applying it to Christians.

The “you” in 7’s “Today if *you* hear his voice...” is plural, so it makes sense that the writer’s main application is to the congregation together, not just to individuals. Of course we have to watch our own hearts as we hear God speak, but we’re told here to help one another with this as well.

A “hardened” heart is unpacked here as an “evil, unbelieving” heart. It is unbelief which could lead us to “fall away from the living God”, which is the danger to watch out for throughout Hebrews.

We can’t know for sure the condition of one another’s hearts, so the way to take care is to “exhort one another every day”. Exhorting means to give a strong encouragement, the way a captain might rally the troops before a big battle. We need one another to call us to keep believing the gospel, keep having a soft heart as we listen to God. (This is a great thing to try to flesh out in the context of Connect Groups).

This should happen every day, which has implications for how we interact with one another outside formal meeting times. The reason is the word “today” in the psalm. We mustn’t rely on previous faith or listening; the question is always whether we’re listening TODAY! So we should encourage one another to believe every day. The thing which could lure us away from faith today is “the deceitfulness of sin”, that is, the way that disobedience to God tricks us into thinking it’d be so much better than listening and obeying, like the Israelites believing life was better in Egypt. Part of our “exhorting” should include pointing out those lies and unmasking sin’s apparent attractiveness. Considering Jesus and keeping a soft heart towards his voice is far better!

14-15 There is encouragement and a warning here. Yes, we get to share in Christ. We are partners together with him, benefiting from all he is and all he has done for us, with all those promises of “rest” to look forward to. But... only if “we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” Again, we mustn’t simply look back to previous times when we trusted God; we have to keep on believing!

For some, this will raise a concern over the issue of “once saved, always saved”. These verses aren’t here to shake our confidence but build it up. They are meant to wake up the person who has become complacent and no longer actively trusts God, and call all of us to press on. The way to tell if we’re really saved (“sharing in Christ”) is whether we’re believing God right now *and* whether we still are 20/30/60 years from now. And the way to still be trusting years later is to trust now!

16-19 The passage ends with some rhetorical questions to drive home the point. The people who heard God’s voice and rebelled were the very same people who were saved from Egypt. So we mustn’t rely on past experience but keep on believing! The people who God was angry with were those who sinned and died. So we mustn’t fall for the “deceitfulness of sin” – it leads to judgement. The people who didn’t enter God’s rest were those who disobeyed. So stick with God!

Their big problem is identified in v19 as being “unbelief”. That’s what stopped them entering the rest of the Promised Land. Similarly unbelief, as manifested through disobedience and distrust of God’s Word today, is our big enemy. We must be careful of the state of our hearts as we listen and encourage others to keep believing too. Our salvation really does hang on our faith in God’s Word TODAY!