

#1545 - Sunday, March 11th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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THE WICKEDNESS OF AN UNBELIEVING HEART

Hebrews 3:12-4:2 - "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an *evil, unbelieving heart* [So this unbelief isn't from lack of evidence or opportunity. It is defined as something 'evil.' It's an *immoral* unbelief], *leading you to fall away from the living God* [This unbelief *matters*. It removes people from God. It destroys spiritual life]. [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*** [This unbelief is *deceitful*. I take that to mean we don't see it as something evil. We tend to justify or overlook it]. [14] **For we 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** [So this unbelief is further defined. It is essentially the condition of *not listening* to God], **do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'** [16] **For who were those who *heard and yet rebelled?*** [Now note the difference between *hearing* and *listening*.] **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....[4:1]....Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. [2] For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."**

What a marvelous text. The verse we're going to consider in detail is **Hebrews 4:2** - "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened." And I think you can see immediately that this is a *listening* verse. It fits in with this series. Notice the specific use of the words "heard" and "listened."

Notice as well that *hearing* and *listening* are not the same thing. The verse is made pungent by the way it calls us all to remember a specific group of people who *heard* God to no good effect. In fact, it was precisely the fact that they *heard* God that increased their guilt and their judgment for not *listening* to Him. And immediately we're reminded of our text from the last two weeks in Mark's gospel - **Mark 4:24-25** - "And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. [25] For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

This second verse from Hebrews four also tells us how we *must* listen if we are to *avoid* God's wrath and judgment - **Hebrews 4:2** - "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened." We are reminded through the example of these careless Old Testament listeners that *hearing* only turns into authentic *listening* when it is mixed with *faith* (or *belief*, depending on the translation). We'll look very specifically at what it means to mix hearing with faith next week.

But before we get there we need to consider the context and story behind that great second verse in our text. Because an overview of the whole picture of this text is needed if we're to avoid shallowing out that closing verse - **Hebrews 4:2** - "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."

So here's a fast overview of what *prompts* the writer's appeal to make sure we hear what God says with *faith* in our hearts. The text we're studying (**3:12-4:2**) forms a sandwich. There are two contemporary exhortations about the dangers of unbelief and listening to God's Word with faith. And sandwiched in between there is the historic example of classic unbelief from the Jewish people after their deliverance from Egypt. We'll start with the center of the sandwich and work back to the outer edges. Then, after seeing the bad example from the Old Testament and hearing the warning issued to those of us living in the church age.

1) **AN OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLE OF HEARING GOD WITH AN EVIL, UNBELIEVING HEART**

Hebrews 3:16-19 - "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."

Most of us know the basics of the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt by God's mighty hand. The parting of the Red Sea, the thunder and smoke on Mount Sinai, the giving of the ten commandments, the idolatrous worship of the golden calf - these are the stuff of Hollywood movies.

Most of us also know that there came a horrendous judgment from the LORD - a point in time where He prevented entrance into the very Promised Land He had pledged to give them. And, of course, they wandered in the wilderness - right on the doorstep of the Promised Land - for *forty years*, until an entire generation died off.

But there's another detail - almost buried in obscurity. There's an explanation of *why* they had to wait precisely forty years in the wilderness. And it's rarely talked about. It comes from the story of the twelve spies sent in to spy out the goodness of the land God was

about to give His people.

Ten spies came back and said taking the land was not a possibility.

Only two - Joshua and Caleb - said God would, as He promised, give it into their hand. And the people listened to the ten rather than to God. Notice the verb in that sentence. The people *listened* to the ten instead of listening to God.

Now, here's the reason for Israel's wandering under God's wrath for forty years: **Numbers 14:28-35** - "Say to them, 'As I live, declares the Lord, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: [29] your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, [30] not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. [31] But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected.[32] But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. [33] And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. [34] According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.' [35] I, the Lord, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die."

The writer of Hebrews has a point to make with this story. He's going to call these New Testament Christians to guard their hearts against unbelief. That's what this Old Testament account is all about. The Israelites had all *heard* God promise the land to them. They heard God tell them He would *give* them the land Himself. God had already made a firm promise that *He* would drive out all their enemies. He told them their enemies would be *bread* for them.

So the point of this whole Old Testament account is to reveal a people who had everything going for them and who ended up with nothing. "*Don't let this happen to you!*," the writer of Hebrews says. They had a great God and a wonderful promise but it did them absolutely no good. In fact, not only did it do them no good, it brought wrath and judgment on them for forty years. For every *day* the spies had a chance to evaluate the potential of the land and plan their future in it, the whole adult population would be judged for a whole *year*.

I'm meant to notice that sins committed very *quickly* seem to merit very *long, protracted* periods of punishment. It's a stunning story. And it's the center of the sandwich that I mentioned earlier. On either side of the center of the sandwich there lies a contemporary warning to the Christian church:

2) TWO WARNINGS FROM THIS ACCOUNT ON HOW THE CHURCH MUST LISTEN WHEN GOD SPEAKS

a) *The only evidence of a one time, professed conversion to Christ Jesus is the ongoing, present listening to the speaking Lord*

Hebrews 3:12-15 - "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 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.'"

When the writer begins with "*take care*," he means we don't easily see the beginnings of not listening. Not listening to God's Word rarely *feels* drastically wicked at first. It is easily overlooked. Notice the way the writer emphasizes this by saying this kind of unbelief works by "*...leading you to fall away...*"(12).

The process and effects of *not* listening are gradual and subtle. Not listening always *ends* much worse than it feels when it *starts*. That's the whole point of this Old Testament account. Who among all those thousands who sat listening to the unbelieving report of the ten spies would have imagined that just that seemingly democratic process of choosing their report over the Word of the LORD would have resulted in their slow death in the wilderness. It didn't *seem* to be that wicked simply to not want to go in a take the land. They thought they were just being *careful*. I've been thinking a lot about that lately.

There something else here. The "*deceitfulness of sin*" (3:13) can't simply be wished away. A heart of unbelief isn't overruled in the one initial decision of faith in conversion. The habit of not listening to God - of not believing His Word - is gutted from our souls only by great diligence in listening to God's Word *today* - **Hebrews 3:13** - "*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.*"

The fight against the *deceitfulness of sin* is a *daily* fight. Daily listening - leaving no *gaps* in the hearing of God's Word - is the only path to a spiritual heart. It's not when you were saved that counts. It's how are you listening to God's Word *today*.

Planning on obedience at some *future* point is folly. It's the opposite of listening *today*. Don't let *regret* about past failure keep

you from listening to God today. Condemnation and regret over the past can keep you from listening to God **today**. Don't let the world **distract** you from listening to God's Word today. This world - especially through the entertainment media - wants to constantly keep the **noise level** of your life loud enough that your mind isn't hearing the voice of God through His Word.

So indeed, "**Take care!**" about this. **Not** listening is easily done. Be **paranoid** about listening to God's Word. Now look toward the end of the text to see the other warning to the church that completes the sandwich around that Old Testament story:

b) **Let your life be motivated by the fear of not listening to God's Word**

Hebrews 4:1-2 - "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, **let us fear** lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. [2] For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."

I think we're meant to see the paradox of being called to a mind-set of "**fear**"(1) when the topic under discussion is "**good news**"(2). In what sense can this stance of **fear** be a good thing? How does this fit in with trust and confidence in the grace and power of God and redemption in Christ Jesus?

In 1862 Dr. John Brown wrote a massive commentary on the book of Hebrews. I was so thankful I took time, as I scoured my library, to read his words on these first two verses of Hebrews chapter four: "*Both believers and unbelievers have their fears; but they arise from different sources, and have quite opposite effects. The fear of unbelievers....arise from unworthy thoughts of God - a distrust of His power, faithfulness, and goodness - a prevailing love of 'the present evil world' and its enjoyments, which makes them more afraid of worldly losses and sufferings and ridicule for righteousness' sake than of forfeiting the divine favor. Such fears not only corrupt the mind for obedience, but lead directly to sin.*"

But the godly fear enjoined in this text, which is peculiar to believers, which arises from a just view, reverence, and esteem of the divine character - a supreme desire of His favor as their chief happiness, - is a fear lest they should offend Him, and incur His just displeasure, - such a fear of Him outweighs all the allurements of sin on the one hand, and all the terrors of suffering and rejection for righteousness' sake on the other.... This is what it means to sanctify the Lord our God always in our hearts....This godly fear, instead of dejecting or abasing the mind, inspires a noble courage and freedom. Fearing our God, we know no other fear. It preserves from sloth and false security, checks self-confidence and high-mindedness, and makes us joyous and vigilant in reference to everything which may endanger the safety of the soul."

Next week we're going to study very specifically what it means to receive or listen to God's Word with faith. But let me close today with this application. Christians who choose **not** to listen to God's Word at some specific point in their lives almost **never** see their disobedience as a big deal. They can almost always explain their actions to their own satisfaction. And the writer of our text tells us that this is the **deceitful** part of not listening to God's Word. Many times it feels fine to pretend God hasn't spoken. But it isn't.

O how we need to hear a fresh, wonderful, soul-saving call to fear missing God's saving rest and approval. It **can** happen. No wonder we're told to "**take care**" that we listen to God every moment of every day (3:12). Everything of your eternal future hangs on how you hear God's Word **today** and **every day** forward from this moment on. Your ears belong to God alone.