

1. The danger is lapsing into unbelief

- A serious warning to Christians

1. **The danger is lapsing into unbelief.** ¹²Watch out, brothers and sisters, lest there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. Note: (i) The warning is addressed to Christians. Watch out 'brothers and sisters...'. (ii) It warns against unbelief. (iii) The sin may be committed by an individual person. 'Watch out,' he says, 'lest there shall be in **any one of you** an evil heart...'. This failure can take place in the life of one person. It is not exclusively something corporate. (iv) Lapse into unbelief will result in a failure to experience God as the living God. (v) Our writer gives a warning because he assumes that it is not too late. (vi) The warning is followed by an encouraging exhortation. The author of our exhortation wants to encourage his Christian friends to help each other in persisting in faith. ¹³Encourage one another every day, while it is called today, lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

2. We aim at being companions of Christ.

- Passive justifying faith is to be followed by active sanctifying faith

2. **We aim at being companions of Christ.** The joy of actually sharing in the living daily blessings of our Lord Jesus Christ depends on our persistent faith. ¹⁴For we have become people who participate with Christ only on the assumption that we are holding fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, ¹⁵while it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion.' These verses are speaking about spiritual experience in this life. Those who hold fast the beginning of their assurance firm until the end enjoy the blessing of companionship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and experience of the powers of his kingdom. Jesus likes to have 'companions', people who share in what he is doing. The Lord Jesus Christ has his companions, 'those who walk about with him in white' ¹. If our initial coming to faith in Christ is 'the beginning' of our assurance, the remainder of the Christian life is to be in continuing assurance. First faith is to be followed by 'second' faith. Stage-one faith is to be followed by stage-two faith. Justifying faith is to be followed by sanctifying faith. Passive faith is to be followed by active faith.

- Two stages

This two-stage nature of Christian faith is sometimes put in terms of two floors of a building. There is the foundation, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is what is built upon the foundation ¹. There is being placed on a running track and winning the prize ². There is being 'apprehended' and then taking hold of what one was apprehended for ³. There is getting out of Egypt into a wilderness, and there is getting out of a wilderness into a promised land. One does not go from Egypt to a promised land in one stage. Stage one brings you out of Egypt. Stage two brings you in – to a promised land. The most striking statement is perhaps found in Jude verse 5: 'The Lord, after he had once for ever saved a people out of Egypt, in the second phase destroyed those who did not believe.' Jude uses the Greek word *deuteron* – 'in the second place'.

- Stage One is secure; Stage Two is conditional

The first stage of salvation is secure. Israel never went back to Egypt! It is the second stage of faith about which the New Testament (including Hebrews) gives many warnings. What has been given them through their first assurance (later called 'eternal redemption', being 'sanctified for ever') is not lost. But what could possibly be lost is a promised land, the full realization of the promises of God. In the wilderness Moses and Joshua never had to encourage the Israelites to be thoroughly redeemed from Egypt. The matter did not have to be even discussed. The message is not, 'If you get rebellious, you will go back to Egypt.' Rather his message was, 'Press on. If you get rebellious you will fail to get to the land flowing with milk and honey.' Joshua's message was, 'The land...is an exceedingly good

¹ Revelation 3:4–5

¹ see 1 Corinthians 3:10–15

² 1 Corinthians 9:24–27

³ Philippians 3:12–14

land. The LORD will bring us into this land and give it to us. The LORD is with us; do not fear' ¹. Stage one had already been achieved; stage two was ahead of them. The warnings are about stage two, not stage one.

¹
Numbers 14:7-9

Holding fast till the end

We have become people who participate with Christ only on the assumption that we are holding fast the beginning of our assurance firm. For how long? 'Until the end!' ¹. The end of what? Is it to the end of our lives? We should certainly think of it that way. We say to ourselves, 'I am resolving to believe God until the very last day of my life.' Yet actually 'the end' might come earlier than that! He partly means (as anyone with any experience in living for God will surely know) 'until the end of each situation we find ourselves in'. But in the light of our entire letter to the Hebrews it is clear that he also means: 'until the time when God swears in his mercy that we have inherited his promises'.

¹ 3:14

• "Do not harden your hearts"

We hold 'fast our assurance firm while it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..." All the time, as we are holding to firm faith, God is saying to us, 'Hear my voice. Don't get hard. Don't become rebellious'.

• Three questions press the point home

He presses the point on them in some questions. **First, he asks who was involved in this sin.** The answer is: almost everyone. ¹⁶For who was it who provoked God when they heard him? Was it not all who came out of Egypt led by Moses? The writer is suggesting to us that in our generation we determine to be among the few who enter rest. **Second, he asks what brought about their punishment** ¹. If the vast majority of Israelites did not actually get to the promised land, why did so many fall? ¹⁷And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? The cause of the gigantic failure was sin upon the part of God's people. Sin and nothing else caused their fall. **Third, he asks what was the nature of their sin** ². The writer wants to press even further into the nature of the fall. ¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest except to those who were disbelieving and disobeying him? His word here (from *apeitheo*, 'refuse belief' or 'disobey') refers to disobedience but it is a particular kind of disobedience. I translate two Greek words (*tois apeithesasin*) with seven English words: 'those who were disbelieving and disobeying him' ³.

¹ 3:17

² 3:18-19

³ 3:18

• Persistent faith inherits – unbelief loses what was possible

Who rebelled against God's voice? Everyone ¹! What sort of people were they? Sinful people ²! What was the nature of their sin? It was unbelief! ³. ¹⁹And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. Faith inherits promises – if it persists. Unbelief loses the privilege of 'entering into rest'.

¹ 3:16

² 3:17

³ 3:18-19

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