

## **First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In our study of the letter to the Hebrews, we have reached the second of the “warning passages.” The first one was at the beginning of chapter 2. That one was only 2 ½ verses long. This one is much longer – it is all of chapters 3 and 4! But both of these warnings are pretty similar. Both of them say the same thing – keep paying close attention to Jesus, or there will be terrible consequences.

In that first warning passage, at the beginning of chapter 2, we read, “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. . . how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:1b, 3a) Now, in the second warning passage, we see pretty much the same thing. Last week we read, “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus.” (Heb 3:1a) That’s another way of saying, “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.” And we read, “And we are his [Christ’s] house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” (Heb 3:6b) That’s another way of saying that we must not “drift away.”

There are terrible consequences if we do. Just like the first warning, this second warning carries consequences. The rest of chapters 3-4 get to those consequences – what will happen to you if you drift away, if you fail to continue considering Jesus, fail to continue to pay close attention to him, fail to hold fast your confidence and your boasting in your hope in Jesus.

Please open your Bibles to Hebrews 3. I want to show you the big picture here in Hebrews 3-4. Look at the very beginning of ch. 3. In 3:1 the writer picks up the idea of Jesus being our high priest that he introduced in 2:17. He’s not going to come back to that idea until the very end of ch. 4, in 4:14. In between, we have this warning that we’re going to spend a few weeks looking at. In 3:7-11, it begins with a quote from Psalm 95, followed by three verses of immediate exhortation. Then, starting in v. 14, the writer of Hebrews expounds on what he quoted from Psalm 95. This morning, I’m just going to scratch the surface of this passage:

Hebrews 3:7-14 7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ 11 As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ” 12 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 have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

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In this sermon, I'm just going to focus on the command at the very beginning of this passage, "Do not harden your hearts." But before I get to that, I should say a word about the nature of these warning passages in Hebrews.

## I. A Word on the Warning Passages in Hebrews

I want to say a word about this because the big question that everyone asks is, What do these warnings in Hebrews really mean? We faced this when we got to the first warning, back at the beginning of ch. 2, where we read, "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" Escape what? The writer did not say. And now in this second warning passage, we read frightening things about falling away from God and failing to enter into God's rest. What does that mean? Does it mean that if you fall away from God you will go to hell? Or does it mean that if you fall away you will miss out on God's rest in this life, even though you will still go to heaven?

This is a huge question, and it is a hard one to answer. Many men have debated this for many years, men far more brilliant and far more spiritual than I. I come to you this morning with some fear and trembling, because while I do have an answer for you, I'm not entirely sure that I am right.

Some say that these warnings are for true Christians, and they warn Christians that they will lose their salvation if they fall away. But that cannot be true, because the Bible is clear that once you come to faith in Christ, nothing can ever separate you from Christ. Once God has begun his work in you, he will finish what he starts. Once God has foreknown, predestined, called, and justified you, there is no doubt that he will glorify you (Rom 8:29-30).

Others say that these warnings are for true Christians and they really do threaten damnation, but since Christians cannot lose their salvation, they are just hypothetical warnings – a Christian can't really fall away and be damned, but if he *could*, then this is what would happen. I have a hard time with that explanation, because a warning isn't much of a warning unless it is a real one.

Others say that this letter is written to true Christians, and since we know Christians cannot lose their salvation, then these warnings must be threatening something short of eternal punishment in hell, like punishment in this life. That's how I've been preaching so far. But now I am not so sure. After studying this warning in ch. 3-4, I have to say that it looks very much like this really is about heaven and hell.

At this point in my life I think I agree with those who say that these warnings are for *professing* Christians who may or may not actually be *true* Christians. The writer of Hebrews treats professing Christians as Christians until proven otherwise. But if they fall away, then they simply prove that they never had faith to begin with – and they stand condemned to eternal punishment.

I'm going to say more about this. But I don't want to get too distracted by it. It's an important point, but it's not the most important point of this passage. We need to be careful not to get so caught up in the consequences that we miss the whole point! Can you imagine if Jesus was standing here right now, and he said, "You must hold fast," and you

answered, “Tell me first what the punishment is, and then I’ll decide whether I want to obey you or be punished by you.” Wrong answer! It misses the whole point.

The whole point of ch. 3-4 is that we *hold fast*. That’s the drumbeat that is repeated over and over. It’s in the last part of 3:6, and again in 3:14, and finally in 4:14. The main point is *endurance*. We must hold fast. We must not drift away. We’re going to see this again and again in this letter.

## II. What Does it Mean to “Harden Your Heart?”

Now let’s turn to the first command in our passage this morning. The writer of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 95, and he applies it to his readers:

Hebrews 3:7-9 3 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.”

We’re going to spend more time on the rest of that quote from Psalm 95 in the weeks to come. For this morning, let’s simply focus on the command, “Do not harden your hearts.” I want to answer two questions. One question I want to answer is, How do we obey this command? But before we get to that question we need to answer another question. Just what does it *mean* to “harden your heart?”

The short answer is, Look at v. 12. To harden your heart is to have an “evil, unbelieving heart.” But let’s delve into this a bit deeper by looking at this quote from Psalm 95. The psalmist is referring to a time when the fathers of Israel had hard hearts – evil, unbelieving hearts – and rebelled against God. Keep your thumb in Hebrews 3, and turn to Numbers 14 with me.

Here’s what’s happening in Numbers 14. God has just delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Over and over he proved that he was the one who delivered them by his mighty power. When Pharaoh refused to let the people go, it was God who sent one plague after another against Egypt. When Pharaoh finally let them go, it was God who led the people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When Pharaoh chased after them with his army, it was God who delivered them by dividing the Red Sea so that they could walk across on dry land, and it was God who sent the waters back down upon the Egyptian army, destroying all of them. It was God who fed them quail and manna from heaven and water from the rock.

But the people of Israel resisted almost every step of the way. They grumbled against Moses, whom God had sent to lead them. They grumbled that their food didn’t taste good enough. They grumbled that they should have just stayed in Egypt. They even worshiped a golden calf when they got impatient waiting for Moses while he was with God on Mt. Sinai. And when God sent them to the promised land of Canaan, and promised them that he would drive out their enemies from before them, they dug in their heels and refused to go.

Twelve spies went up into the promised land, and when they came back, they brought back pomegranates and figs and a single cluster of grapes so big it took two men to carry

it with a pole between them. They told the people of Israel that the land God had sent them to was a rich land flowing with milk and honey. But then all but two of them told the people of Israel that they should not go into the land, because the people of the land were too strong for them.

Numbers 14:1-10 1 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?"

Notice who is talking? The fathers. They're afraid of what will happen to their wives and their little ones.

4 And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt." 5 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. 6 And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes 7 and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. 8 If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. 9 Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them." 10 Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

God had promised to drive out their enemies from before them, but they refused to believe him. In other words, they hardened their hearts. And God punished them by forcing them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, until those rebellious fathers all died.

They should have listened to God. They should have believed. Their hearts should have soaked up God's promises to them like thirsty soil. But their hearts were as hard as stone. God's word rolled off of their hearts like rain rolling off of a rock. That's what it means to harden your heart. To harden your heart is to refuse to trust in God's word.

Here God had delivered those fathers from lifelong slavery, but in their hearts, they preferred their Egyptian masters, their old way of life. They wanted nothing to do with God. God made big demands of them. God challenged them to believe that he could do mighty things. But they did not trust him. In God's words, "They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways." They made up their minds to go back to the masters they truly wanted.

So it is with those who have heard the gospel, but harden their hearts. Just as God delivered those Israelites from lifelong slavery to the Egyptians, so does Jesus deliver Christians from lifelong slavery to Satan (Heb 2:15). But just as those fathers in the

wilderness showed who their true masters were by the hardness of their hearts, so we will show who our true master is if our own hearts are hardened against God.

All of us are slaves of someone. The question is, Who is *your* master? Is your master Satan, or is your master Jesus Christ? The writer of Hebrews warns us, “We are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’” (Heb 3:6b-8a) But this brings us to the next question. How do we obey this command?

### **III. How We Obey this Command**

The short answer is: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. If a hard heart is an unbelieving heart, then don't have a heart like that. Don't have an *unbelieving* heart. Have a *believing* heart. And here is a massively important point. It is so obvious that you might miss it, but you dare not miss it. The point is this: this is a matter of the *heart*, not a matter of your works.

Not that works are completely irrelevant. If you have a believing heart, then you will obey God and do good works. And if you live a life that is full of sin, that is a pretty good clue that you have a hard heart. But what really matters is what is going on in your heart. It is possible to live a life that looks nice and clean on the outside but still have a hard heart on the inside. And while you may be able to hide your heart from the people around you, you can't hide your heart from God:

Hebrews 4:12-13 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Often people think that is about the Bible, but really it is about the judgment of God. God sees your heart, all of it, better than you can. You must obey God's command. Do not harden your heart – turn to Jesus and live!

I want to talk to the children for a minute. Grown-ups, you can listen in, because everything I'm going to say to the children applies to you, too. Boys and girls, listen to me. God says that you must have faith in Jesus. You must have believing hearts. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you will go to heaven just because your parents are Christians. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you will go to heaven just because you go to church every Sunday. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you will go to heaven just because you make your Mom and Dad happy. The only way you can go to heaven and be with Jesus is if you believe in him. If you do not believe in Jesus, then you have a hard heart. And you can't hide that from God. You must trust in what Jesus did for you on the cross.

That's how you obey this command not to harden your heart. You trust in what Jesus did for you on the cross. Jesus died for you because you have sinned, and you deserve to be punished for your sin. If Jesus had not died for you, then you would have to be punished in hell, in the lake of fire, where you would burn forever. But Jesus took the punishment

for you when he died on the cross, so that you can have eternal life in heaven with him. That's God's gift to you, if you will take it. Have you accepted that gift? Will you? The Bible says that the way you receive that gift is by faith – by believing that Jesus really did die for you, and by turning to Jesus to save you (Rom 3:24-25).

I hope you are believing in Jesus right now. That's what I want for you, more than anything. But Satan does not want that. Satan does not want you to believe. He wants you to be his slave forever, to have a hard heart forever, and he has many ways to keep you from believing.

Jesus told a parable about this:

Matthew 13:3b-9, 19-23 “A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, 6 but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear. . . . 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

Maybe somebody here is like that. Maybe somebody here is thinking, “I really don't understand what Pastor says about faith in Jesus,” and just waits for the sermon to be over so he can go play outside, or so that he can get back to his life. If you don't understand the gospel, then you don't believe the gospel – and your heart is hard, and Satan is happy that you are his slave. If you don't understand the gospel, then you need to ask about it. Ask me. Ask one of the Christians here. Ask your Mom or Dad. Ask, so that you can understand, and believe!

Jesus goes on:

20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

There were plenty of people like that in Jesus' day – people who liked some of the things they heard, but who never believed. A whole crowd of people chased after Jesus in John 6, because they really liked how Jesus could do miracles and feed them when they were hungry. But when he told them that they needed to believe *in him*, and not just look for what they could get out of him, they turned away. Their hearts were hard.

Maybe somebody here is like that. Maybe somebody here is just hoping that Jesus can just make him a little happier or just answer some prayer for something that he wants, but he doesn't believe in Jesus as his Savior. If that's you, then you have a hard heart. You're willing to give Jesus a try, as long as it doesn't cost you too much. (I once heard somebody say that at a baptism, when I was visiting the Jordan River in Israel – she stood

in the water and said, “I thought I’d give it a try.”) But you don’t truly believe that your *only hope* is in Jesus, so that not even persecution could change your mind. Do not harden your heart. Turn to Jesus and live!

Jesus went on to say:

22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

There were lots of people like that in Jesus’ day. “The cares of this world” kept lots of people from believing. Many would not believe in Jesus because they knew if they did, they would get kicked out of the synagogue. Many Pharisees would not believe in Jesus because they were devoted to the traditions of their fathers that had grown over the last few hundred years before Jesus was born. The rich young ruler loved his riches more than God. Their hearts were hard.

Maybe somebody here is like that. Maybe the cares of this world keep you from believing. Maybe you’re afraid of what other people would think if you turned to Jesus in faith. After all, if you turn to Jesus then it’s going to change your life. Maybe you’re afraid of what people would think of you when you start talking about Jesus and when you get baptized. Or maybe you just care more about your toys or your job than you do about God, and you really don’t want to change – so you “keep your arms tightly folded across your heart,” to quote my former pastor, Doug McLachlan. Do not harden your heart. Turn to Jesus and live!

But Jesus said:

23 As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

This is the mark of the believer. He has a believing heart. The believer is the one who hears Jesus and understands Jesus and trusts in Jesus. You can see it in his life. It changes him. He is no longer the slave of Satan. Now he is the slave of Jesus Christ. He holds fast to the faith. He does not harden his heart.

I hope that describes you. I hope you have a believing heart. But what happens if you waver? What happens if you do not always hold perfectly fast to the faith? What happens if you do start to harden your heart? Could that happen to you if you are a Christian? Absolutely. As Tozer said, “To commit a sin, a man must for the moment believe that things are different from what they really are . . . He must accept a lie as truth and see truth a lie.”<sup>2</sup> When a Christian knowingly sins, in that moment he has hardened his heart to some extent. And Christians do sin – that’s why God disciplines them in this lifetime, as we’re going to see in Hebrews 12. (And that’s why it is possible that all these warning passages simply refer to punishment in this lifetime, and not eternal punishment. But I’ll talk more about that in a week or two.)

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2 A. W. Tozer, *The Tozer Pulpit: Selections from His Pulpit Ministry*, ed. Gerald B. Smith (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1967), 111-112.

When a professing Christian sins, it means one of two things. Either you truly are a Christian and you have simply stumbled for a moment, or you never were a Christian to begin with, and you are simply revealing your true colors. Either way, we gain assurance by obeying God.

I'm not trying to sow seeds of doubt, here. God gives great assurance to Christians, as I mentioned earlier. But God also tells us that obedience strengthens our assurance that we have truly believed, while disobedience weakens that assurance. Not because our obedience is what earns us a place in heaven, but because our obedience is evidence of our faith. "Endurance produces character, and character produces hope." (Rom 5:4b) "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" (2Co 13:5) Look at your life. Are you obeying God, or not? Are you living for God, or not? Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do you hunger and thirst for the world?

No matter how you answer those questions, here is what you must do: Turn to Jesus and live! Believe! "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Whoever you are, whether you have never believed, or whether you have been professing faith in Jesus for all your life, that is the command to obey! Believe! That's what really matters – not that you walked down the aisle or knelt in your bedroom with your mother or father or had some other religious experience. If you had an experience like that, praise the Lord! But what matters right here, right now, is that you obey this command: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

That's the command to obey tomorrow morning, and the morning after that, and every single morning and afternoon and evening of your life. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." This is the life of faith. This is the life of the Christian.

This isn't something that you just do when you "dedicate" or "re-dedicate" your life at a revival meeting or at summer camp or even at the close of a Sunday service. This is something you do every single day. Call it dedication if you like, as long as there is never a time when you stop re-dedicating yourself!

There are many churches out there that think of the Christian life in two steps. The first step is salvation, and the second step is dedication. I've even heard a youth pastor say that he plans his summer camp and his winter retreat that way – the first camp is aimed at salvation, and the winter retreat is aimed at dedication. Maybe there is someone here who has been taught that, and even now you are wondering whether to dedicate your life to the Lord. But that simply doesn't fit with our passage this morning. If you are a Christian, then you dedicate your life every single day, whether you are a pastor, a missionary, a truck driver, or a homemaker. The moment you are not dedicated to God, you are dedicated to somebody else. The moment you are not dedicated to God, you are hardening your heart. That's not at all what the normal Christian life looks like in the Bible. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

Before I close, I want to add one word for us fathers. Today is Fathers' Day, and the best blessing I can possibly give you is right here in this passage. Because right here in this passage there is a tremendously powerful encouragement to be godly fathers. Who is it

that the Psalmist and the writer of Hebrews hold up as an example of who *not* to be like? The fathers who rebelled against God. The fathers who were so worried about the comfort and safety of their wives and their children that they wanted to take their wives and children back into the comfort and safety of slavery in Egypt.

There are so many lessons we can learn from that, Fathers. One lesson is that there does come a time when it is okay to critique our own fathers. Now we are to honor our fathers. And where our fathers got it right, we had better follow their example. But there does come a time to look back at our own fathers and decide *not* to do what they did. The Psalmist certainly did. The writer of Hebrews does. And when the Pharisees failed to do it, Jesus rebuked them – they were so obsessed with the recent traditions their fathers had invented that he rebuked them for “making void the word of God by your tradition.” (Mar 7:13) Men, if we just take the easy way out, and refuse to think, and insist on living the way we’ve always lived simply because that’s what our own fathers did, we could make a terrible mistake. Respectfully examine what you have been handed down by your own fathers, in the light of God’s word, and do what is right. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

But another lesson is even more sobering, especially when we consider vv. 12-13, which I’ll get to next week. Those fathers who rebelled against God not only failed God, they failed their families in more ways than one. One of the greatest ways they failed them was by setting an example of faithlessness for their wives and children – the very opposite of what they were supposed to do. As we will see in vv. 12-13, it is the responsibility of *all* of us to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” We all have to answer to God for how well we are doing that. If anyone is going to get that right in this room, Fathers, shouldn’t it be us? If we don’t get that right, who will? How will you be remembered? Might you be remembered in a song like Psalm 95, so that your great-great-grandchildren sing of how they should not be like you? Or will they sing of your faith?

That is a sobering thought. Fathers, we of all people must get this right. We must obey this command. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

### **Conclusion**

As must we all. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

Turn to Jesus and live!