

Don't Refuse to Follow!

As Christianity is an evangelistic faith, actively calling on others to believe on Jesus, it understandably provokes a hostile reaction from other religions. There are anti-missionary organisations, dedicated to “de-converting” people who have professed Christ.

To read that, is of course, perplexing to everyone who professes to be a Christian. Did such a person deceive himself? Was he truly saved and then lost it? If so, can he be saved a second time? Is he eternally secure and just backslidden? Was he never saved to begin with?

The book of Hebrews is really dealing with a similar situation. Its original readers, in about A.D. 64 were mostly Jews, who had either believed in Jesus, or become persuaded that Jesus is the Messiah, but had not committed. And all of them were facing pressure to return to Judaism, to go back to the functioning Temple worship in Jerusalem, to go back to the tradition which the religious leaders of the nation still upheld. There was no persecution if you went back to Judaism, and besides, Judaism still had the angels, Moses, Joshua, the Temple, the High Priest, the sacrifices.

But this writer had been urging them to understand, there is no turning back, once the final and ultimate form of God's revelation has come. Once the ultimate Prophet, the true High Priest, the real King, the final sacrifice, the true veil, the real Temple, the final covenant has come, it is no longer a case of choosing between equally good options. You must now either accept that the pre-Christ Judaism was leading up to Him, and now cannot stand without Him, or you must reject Him entirely, and turn back to Judaism. The choice is stark: you either draw near, and hold fast, or you draw back and fall away.

That's what many of his readers were thinking of doing. And it's what hundreds of thousands of readers of the book of Hebrews up to this very day have considered doing. They have wondered if it wouldn't be okay to just put this Christian book down and come back to it in some other time of life. They have wondered if it would really be so bad to just pull back from following Christ, and swim with the world for a while.

The writer deals with that possibility with his second warning passage of the book. Once again, he reaches into the Hebrew Scriptures, and expounds a text that deals with the question of turning back. He has found an Old Testament illustration of what that person on that website testified to doing. He wants his original readers and us to understand what it really means to dabble with the idea of turning back. It's not just a minor change. It is in fact, what the Bible calls falling away, turning back, rebelling. So, he begins with an example of rebellion, he then explains the severity of their rebellion, and then exhorts us against this rebellion.

I. The Example of Rebellion

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in *their* heart, And they have not known My ways.' 11 So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

He has been telling us about Moses, so an incident from Moses' life gives him a perfect illustration. The writer is quoting from Psalm 95. This is a psalm ascribed to David in chapter 4:7, but the writer shows us that Scripture has dual authorship: the Holy Spirit said these things.

Psalm 95 records God's response to Israel under Moses in the wilderness. You remember that Israel had been delivered from Egypt, which many New Testament writers see as a picture of salvation. They had seen amazing miracles: the Red Sea, water bursting from a Rock, manna descending from Heaven, the glory descending on the Tabernacle. But again and again, the Israelites chose to disbelieve the promises of God. They murmured when they couldn't see where the water was going to come from. They murmured when they were tired of Bread. They didn't obey the command not to gather on the Sabbath.

But perhaps the greatest act of rebellion, and the one which the writer primarily has in mind is when Israel was on the very cusp of entering the land. Moses sent in the twelve spies to spy out the land. Sadly, ten of the spies came back and spread unbelief and fear among the people. They essentially said, all that lies ahead is pain and persecution. We are going to die. We've been led to our deaths. This is all a terrible joke. We see their awful rebellion in Numbers 14:

Numbers 14:1 So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! 3 "Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt." (Num. 14:4)

Now as the story goes on, Moses, Caleb and Joshua plead with the nation not to rebel, but to trust God and go forward into the land. God is about to destroy the nation, until Moses intercedes. God pardons them, and then says this:

20 Then the LORD said: "I have pardoned, according to your word; 21 "but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD-- 22 "because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, 23 "they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. (Num. 14:20-23)
28 "Say to them, 'As I live,' says the LORD, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you: 29 'The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above. (Num. 14:28-29)

Now this is the incident which Psalm 95 references, which is being quoted here:

8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in *their* heart, And they have not known My ways.' 11 So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

This was the day of rebellion, the day of trial. In fact, the Hebrew is Massah and Meribah, which were names given to the places where Israel complained against the Lord. Israel was testing and trying God, and continued to do so for forty years.

God saw Israel's response and said, I was angry at that generation, and said, they always go astray (wander) in their hearts, and have not known my ways. So in My anger, I swore, they will not enter My rest.

So here is the picture the writer wants us to have in our minds. It's a picture of people claiming to be

God's people, who've seen enough to trust Him, who have the choice to draw near, and keep trusting, or to draw back and turn away.
He is going to explain the meaning of their actions.

II. The Explanation of Rebellion

16 For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, *was it* not all who came out of Egypt, *led* by Moses? 17 Now with whom was He angry forty years? *Was it* not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? 18 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.

8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness,

Now, the writer wants his readers to see themselves in this illustration. The writer asks three questions which explain the severity of the offence. And answers them with rhetorical questions.

First, Who was it that rebelled?

This was Israel, who had been under the greatest Prophet of Israel, Moses! He just showed us what a great Prophet Moses was. They were knowledgeable. They had seen God's works. But they, in his words, **rebelled**. They willfully turned back from going into the promised land, and chose to go back to Egypt.

Second question:

17 Now with whom was He angry forty years? *Was it* not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?

Again, who drew back? The people of Israel, who had heard from the prophet Moses. These people did not make a mistake, or forget, or have an accident. They **sinned**. They knowingly disobeyed what they knew.

Third question:

18 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey?

Who was forbidden from entering by an oath? The people of the Book! The people of the covenant.

Did not obey – fascinating word which is used in the New Testament to mean both, did not believe, and did not obey. It is a word that captures the idea that truly believing is obeying. If they had believed Moses, they would have gone into the land. But unbelief fuels rebellion.

And here's the great summary in verse 19: So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

What was the great sin of Israel? Israel fundamentally decided to not trust the Word of God delivered through Moses. They'd heard. They'd understood. They chose to believe what they wanted, what they thought was easier or better or more convenient. They willingly and knowingly rejected what had been revealed to them, preached to them, and shown to them.

A similar statement is made in verse 8: if you will hear, do not harden your heart. Israel didn't hear obediently, and they did harden their hearts. To harden the heart is means to stiffen the neck. That's a wonderfully vivid and accurate illustration of what happens when someone does not want to obey.

They had knowledge, but not heart-knowledge. In verse 9, God says these people saw my works. But

then in verse 10 He says, they have not known my ways.

There's a difference between seeing God's works and knowing His ways. Some of them saw His works forty years, and never came to know His ways. You know His ways when you want to love Him and trust Him. You can be in church, and attached to a church, and see God's works, but never know His ways.

If you know God's ways, you won't go astray. If you hear Him with teachable hearts, you won't fall away.

So here's the parallel. Israel were about to enter the promised land, led the greatest prophet, Moses. They'd seen God's works, and had every reason to trust, and to obey and go forward. But they chose unbelief, they sinned, and rebelled, and turned back. The ones who knew God's ways, like Caleb and Joshua, went forward.

So it is with his readers. They have heard the Gospel, which was also confirmed with signs and wonders. They have heard from the Greatest Prophet of all, Jesus Christ. They can cross over into a life of rest in Christ, and into a future of rest in heaven. But they must go forward, in faith, and obedience. Instead, some of them are looking at the difficulties, the battles that lie ahead, and deciding it would be better to turn back, to go back to Judaism. And the writer says, once you've heard the truth, that's rebellion, that's unbelief, that's sin.

Many of the Israelites that died in the wilderness were no doubt true believers. They were judged physically; it doesn't mean they went to Hell. But the warning here is far more severe. There is no physical inheritance to forfeit. This is forfeiting eternal life. The writer wants them to understand that this is in many ways more serious, and more dangerous than what the Israelites did. Moses was great, and those who rebelled against him died in the wilderness. But Jesus is transcendentally superior, and rejecting Him will bring a far greater penalty.

And it is the same today with the person who has heard that Jesus is God's Son and the Messiah, and perhaps agrees, or even claims to have "accepted" that, but then seriously toys with the idea of turning back to the world, turning back to another religion, turning back to no religion.

Remember what the rebels always wanted? Give us a sign, that we may believe. But if you are only interested in serving yourself, then no matter how many of God's works you see, you will never be persuaded. The rich man in hell asked Lazarus to send someone from the dead to witness to his brothers. Abraham said, if they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen to one risen from the dead. There is never enough evidence for the heart that has not chosen to submit. The rebellious heart is always short of reasons to believe, and full of reasons not to.

But the believing heart is seeking to maintain faith. Like the man who said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" That's the heart of the true believer. He doesn't need more proof; he simply needs more encouragement. That's why in the middle of this section, we have an exhortation against rebellion.

III. The Exhortation Against Rebellion

12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, 15 while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Beware, or see to it, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. Notice, he has shifted from *holy brethren* in verse 1, to the more generic *brethren* here in verse 12. He is now addressing the crowd of Christians and almost-Christians.

What is the almost Christian? The great evangelist George Whitefield described the almost Christian: An almost Christian, if we consider him in respect to his duty to God, is one that halts between two opinions; that wavers between Christ and the world; that would reconcile God and Mammon, light and darkness, Christ and Belial. It is true, he has an inclination to religion, but then he is very cautious how he goes too far in it: his false heart is always crying out, Spare thyself, do thyself no harm. He prays indeed, that "God's will may be done on earth, as it is in heaven." But notwithstanding, he is very partial in his obedience, and fondly hopes that God will not be extreme to mark every thing that he willfully does amiss; though an inspired apostle has told him, that "he who offends in one point is guilty of all." But chiefly, he is one that depends much on outward ordinances, and on that account looks upon himself as righteous, and despises others; though at the same time he is as great a stranger to the divine life as any other person whatsoever. In short, he is fond of the form, but never experiences the power of godliness in his heart. He goes on year after year, attending on the means of grace, but then, like Pharaoh's lean cows, he is never the better, but rather the worse for them."

So to this mixed audience of Christians and almost Christians, he tells you how to avoid rebellion, something to prevent, and something to promote.

The negative is: make sure none of you have that kind of evil heart of unbelief that those Israelites had. What kind of evil heart? The kind that departs from the living God. This word departs is , from where we get apostasy. It means to fall away, but in an active, deliberate sense. Would someone going back to Judaism be departing from the living God? Yes, because God had finally and ultimately spoken in His Son. A Sonless Scripture has had its heart ripped out. A Christless religion can no longer point to God, it can only point to itself. It is no longer simply the Old Testament religion. It is now an apostate religion. Fall away.

The same word used in Luke 8:13 "But the ones on the rock *are those* who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. (Lk. 8:13)

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, (1 Tim. 4:1)

Instead of continuing with Christ, and going forward into the promised land of life in Christ, the person departs, forsakes, turns back.

Is falling away possible? Of course it is. It is possible from the point of view of person who thinks he or she is a Christian. Who does that include? Most of us here. From God's point of view, He knows for whom it is impossible, because He knows who it is that has genuine faith, that becomes purer with trials, and false faith, that erodes with trials. But God has not chosen to give the possessors of genuine and counterfeit faith different commands. He instead tells everyone: don't depart from the living God.

But as we saw a few weeks ago, the same warning is going to have different effects on different groups. Those with genuine faith resonate with the warning. In many ways for them, it doesn't sound like a burden; it sounds like, receive more of Jesus, all your life. Never stop being utterly childlike and dependent on Him. It encourages the true believer. The true believer reacts like Caleb and Joshua: "Yes, there are challenges ahead, but our God is able! We must go forward in faith! Christ is sufficient! Christ is superior!"

Verse 14 summarises what true faith is like.

14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end

We are truly partakers of Christ, if instead of departing from the living God, instead of having this evil heart of unbelief, if we hold our faith firm to the end. Notice, this is not a promise, but a statement of a present situation that was completed in the past. *We have become* is in the perfect tense – completed action in the past with continuing results in the present. It is not the salvation that is to be conditionally kept, it is a status to be conditionally confirmed. We have truly already been saved, if we hold the confidence, which we had at the beginning, to the the very end. If we keep holding to our original conviction to the end of our journey. If we endure and keep trusting and keep going forward.

We are not saved by faithfulness, we are saved by faith. But those saved by faith have a faith that endures. That's how we test if our faith is genuine – by its resilience, by its endurance, by what it does under pressure.

6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 receiving the end of your faith-- the salvation of *your* souls. (1 Pet. 1:6-9)

A Christian is called a *believer*, not a *believed*. Believer emphasises one who keeps believing.

19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. (1 Jn. 2:1)

But false faith departs. Those with false faith may respond differently to the warning not to depart. Some may resent the idea that they have to keep trusting all their lives. Some may feel their proud will stirred into action. Some may begin looking back to Egypt, or looking around to see what their other options are. It's the same warning, carefully and deliberately placed in the path of true and false professors of faith in Christ.

So instead of having this evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God, the writer tells us what to do. Here's the positive exhortation against rebellion.

13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

But, by contrast, exhort (come alongside, support) one another daily. Encourage each other to keep trusting Christ. Encourage each other to keep enduring, keep obeying. The writer knows that unless we have frequent fellowship, a continual ministry, we are in danger.

Isolation is the first step towards rebellion. Alone, our doubts begin to magnify. Alone, hurts become wounds which fester. Alone, failures and sins of omission become deliberate wounds. Alone, the world seems so much more alluring. Alone, the grass seems so much greener on the other side. But a few hours with believers, a good phonecall, a helpful email, and our resolve is restored. You might never know when your call, your email, your visit, your gift, your SMS will pull a soul back from the brink of total despair.

How often should we encourage each other to endure? Daily. Why? Because sin works on us daily. Sin has a hardening and deceiving effect on us. Sin deceives. Sin makes us think we're believing when we aren't. Sin makes us think we're submitting when we aren't. Sin covers up how far we have drifted. Sin masks how rebellious we have become to God's authority. Sin covers up how much we have come to hate listening to God. Sin was at work in the Israelites, and it took the event of hearing about giants in Canaan that brought it all out.

And all it takes is an event to expose how hard the heart has become. The death of a loved one. The loss of a job. The added pressure of another child. The maltreatment of someone dear to you.

And suddenly we're in crisis counselling with the pastor – the person wants to leave the church, or the marriage is in crisis, or the child is so rebellious he won't respond at all. But it isn't usually that event. It is that the deceitfulness of sin has allowed a drift from Christ, a weakening of loyalty, a lukewarmness of faith. For lack of exhorting and being exhorted with the Word, sin silently planted the seeds of rebellion.

When should we start doing this? Do it, today, while today is still called today. As soon as today is yesterday, it's no longer today. And today is never tomorrow, because once tomorrow is today, it's no longer tomorrow. There is only one day available to you to exhort other Christians. It's not yesterday and it's not tomorrow.

For the true Christian, the command is simple, don't allow an attitude of wanting to depart to grow in you, but rather exhort one another daily, so that you will continue to endure.

The almost-Christian can only go in one of two opposing directions. Both are difficult choices. One is to finally give up on the whole thing, admit he doesn't really see what others see, doesn't want this life, doesn't believe Christ is the Supreme One and the only way, and turn back and turn away. Go into a secular life of friends, parties, food & fun, cars and clothes. Go into a different religious life. Go into some 21st century mishmash of spiritualities, mixed together to create a designer religion that perfectly suits who you are.

But the writer wants you to know that choice is evil, it's rebellion, it's unbelief, it's hardness of heart, and it will bring only death.

The other choice is to own up to the fact that you have been an almost-Christian and it is time to fully commit, to embrace Christ not just privately, but publicly, in baptism and membership. It is time to own that while you subscribe to Christian teachings, there is nothing going on between your soul and the Saviour. There is no communication, and so no communion. It is dead, and you need to draw near to Christ, be saved, be born from above, receive new life and go from an almost Christian, to an actual Christian. So you draw near, you cross the Jordan, you enter in to that rest in Christ.

I need this exhortation. So do you. You need to hear it from me, and I need to hear it from you. Each of

us needs to hear it from the other. Don't depart, hold fast, draw near, because our Christ, for the joy set before Him, endured the Cross.