

It seems that we've had a lot of warnings in the news recently. I'm sure you've heard all the warnings about COVID, about climate change, about wildfires, water safety, monkeypox. And then every week there seems to be some kind of yellow, amber or red weather warning about wind or rain or even heat waves.

And of course warnings are really important. They warn us about very real dangers that we need to do something to avoid. But the problem is, we can get so used to the warnings that we just become indifferent to them and relaxed about the dangers they point to.

That's what happened to a 23 year old American tourist a couple of weeks ago. He was visiting the active volcano Mount Vesuvius in Italy. But he ignored the warning signs and took a closed off path up to the top of the crater.

But when he got there, he dropped his mobile phone while trying to take a selfie. And instead of just giving up on it, he climbed down into the crater to try and recover it. It was then that he stumbled and fell further into the crater and was unable to climb back out.

A team of guides tried to climb down to rescue him, but they couldn't reach him. Ultimately a rescue helicopter managed to get him off the mountain.

Now he was fortunate. He survived with just cuts and bruises, and probably a prosecution for trespassing. But many people don't fare so well when they ignore warnings.

Like 26 year old Alexandre Naussance. A few years ago he was surfing off Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean despite the beach being closed to water sports because of a shark warning. He should have known better as he had previously been employed as a shark spotter by a surfing association.

But still went out into the water where he was bitten in the leg by a shark and although he was pulled out of the water by fisherman, he died at the scene.

So warnings are serious and ignoring them is dangerous. And so the writer of Hebrews didn't want his readers to ignore his warning not to give up on their Christian faith, not to drift away back to their previous religious life.

And so in this next section he reminded them of a tragic episode in their nation's history and pleaded with them for a better response.

Hebrews 3:7-19: "So, as the Holy Spirit says:

"Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸do not harden your hearts

as you did in the rebellion,

during the time of testing in the desert,

⁹where your fathers tested and tried me

and for forty years saw what I did.

¹⁰That is why I was angry with that generation,

and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray,

and they have not known my ways.'

¹¹So I declared on oath in my anger,

'They shall never enter my rest.' "

¹²See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. ¹⁵As has just been said:

"Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts

as you did in the rebellion."

¹⁶Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."

1. A Warning from the Past

Last time, the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to remain faithful to God by showing them two positive examples

of faithfulness in Moses and ultimately in Jesus.

But in this passage the writer presented them with a warning from the negative example of the people of Israel who were not faithful and who suffered the consequences of that unfaithfulness!

To do that, he quoted from Psalm 95. This psalm is a call to worship. It begins with [“Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.”](#) Psalm 95:1 And it encourages us to praise God by reminding us of the greatness of our God, his ownership of the world he created and his care for us as his people.

But it goes on to give a warning to those who are tempted to turn away from God.

And it takes that warning from a tragic episode in Israel’s past.

a) A Demonstration of God’s Power

God had rescued the nation from slavery in Egypt. He sent 10 devastating plagues until finally Pharaoh let his people leave.

But even then he changed his mind and chased them down. But again God intervened, drying up the Red Sea to let his people safely walk through, then allowing the sea to flow again to destroy Pharaoh and his whole army.

These were amazing demonstrations of his might and power. And initially it impacted the hearts of the people. [“When the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.”](#) Exodus 14:31

But very soon after that, the people started to harden their hearts and rebel against the Lord.

b) A Test of Faith

So when they got to a place where there was no water to drink, they grumbled against Moses: [“Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”](#) Exodus 17:3 Despite all that they had experienced, they were still questioning God’s love and doubting his goodness to them.

But in his grace, God again stepped in to provide water for them, miraculously causing water to flow from a rock. But Moses [“called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”](#) Exodus 17:7

Then about a year later, God brought them to the border of the land that he had promised to give them. But when 10 of the 12 spies came back with a bad report about the strength and size of the people living there, the people of Israel panicked. It seemed that they completely forgot about what God had done in Egypt.

They said, [“If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?”](#) Numbers 14:2-3

Their hearts were completely hardened to what God had been doing for them and they refused to believe that God could do what he promised. And so they rebelled against God. They refused to go into land as God had commanded and incredibly, they talked about appointing a new leader who would take them back to Egypt, the land of slavery that God had so graciously rescued them from.

c) A Judgement on Unbelief

And so in judgement God responded. He did not punish them immediately as they deserved. But instead, he said, [“Not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—²³ not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No-one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.”](#) Numbers 14:22–23

And so over the next 40 years, that whole generation died. Apart from Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies who trusted in the Lord, all the rest died in the desert.

- Yes they had heard God’s Word.
- And they saw God work in amazing power in their lives.
- And they were led out of Egypt by Moses.
- But they hardened their hearts against God.
- They rebelled against his rule in their lives.
- They refused to believe in him and his good plan for them.

- And so their bodies fell in the desert.
- They did not enter the Promised Land.

And this was according to the word of the Lord. As stated in Psalm 95:

“I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.’

¹¹So I declared on oath in my anger,
‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ” Hebrews 3:10-11

What a tragedy for that generation! They missed out on God’s good plan for them because of their sinful and unbelieving hearts. “They were not able to enter because of their unbelief.” Hebrews 3:19

2. A Warning For Today

And the writer of Hebrews was concerned that some of his readers might do something very similar. And so he applied this Psalm to them. He said to them,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion.

During the time of testing in the desert.” Hebrews 3:7-8

They too had heard God’s Word . They had heard the good news of Jesus preached to them. And they had seen God at work among them. But now they were facing a time of testing.

Things had become a bit more difficult for them. Persecution was rising up again. The cost of following Jesus was becoming all too clear.

And in this challenging time, God was calling them to hold on in faith and live for him. But some of them were being tempted, as it were, to go back to Egypt. Back to the religious system that they had known. Yes they had been enslaved by the rules and regulations of that system, but it seemed more attractive to them than living radically for Christ!

But the writer knew what was at stake.

a) We Have A Personal Relationship

Look at v14: “We have come to share in Christ.” Hebrews 3:14 This is a wonderful promise here. It could be more literally translated, “We are partners or companions with Christ.”

If we put our faith in Jesus, then we are brought into a living, secure, intimate relationship with Jesus. We are joined with him, united to him, part of his family. He becomes our Saviour, our Friend, our Shepherd, our Provider, our Protector, our Lord!

This is similar to verse 6 which we looked at last time which said, “We are his house.” Hebrews 3:6. We are part of the community of God’s people. We belong to him.

b) If We Have Persevering Faith

But like last time, this comes with a condition. We belong to Christ, we are partners with him, “if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.” Hebrews 3:14

We can be sure of our relationship with Christ if we continue to courageously stand with Christ and put our hope in Christ!

As we saw last week, this is not saying that we are brought into relationship with Christ through our efforts, commitment or perseverance. And neither is it saying that we who have been saved could in some way be rejected by Christ. Paul declared with confidence: “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38–39

If we have come into a relationship with Christ, then we can know that we are securely held by him and nothing and no-one can ever separate us from his love. It is God that holds onto us and it is God who will continue and complete the work that he has begun in our lives.

But this warning in v14 is saying that the faith that brings us into this secure, stable and eternal relationship with Christ is a faith that endures. The perseverance of our faith does not achieve for us a relationship with Jesus. Rather it demonstrates that we really have come into a relationship with him!

And so this is a warning to anyone who, like the first readers of this letter, are tempted to turn away from Christ. If we walk away, if we rebel against God and refuse to believe in his Son, then there is no assurance of salvation.

Rather we are in danger because this might demonstrate that we never really did come into relationship with Christ in the first place!

c) So Be Careful

And so the writer pleaded with his readers: “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” Hebrews 3:12

This is not talking about people who are struggling to live out their commitment to Christ. We all at times are like that. We all struggle with sin.

This is talking about people who deliberately and decisively walk away from Christ! Who refuse to follow him because they refuse to believe in him.

And so he wanted them to be careful that they were not among those who had a sinful and unbelieving heart. He didn't want them to miss out on God's plan of salvation.

He wanted them to make sure that they had repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus, in his sacrificial death on the cross for their sins and his glorious resurrection for their justification. He wanted them to know that they had received his forgiveness, that they'd been adopted into God's family and that they were heading for glory!

That's why he challenged them

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion.” Hebrews 3:15

He wanted them to respond today. Not just depend on a decision that they had made months or years ago. But check their heart and see how they were responding in the present. To see if they were listening to God's Word, trusting in God's Son, being led by God's Spirit. To see if they truly belonged to Christ because they were holding on to faith in him today!

And, we need to hear that same challenge in our today. We need to be careful that we do not have a sinful and unbelieving heart. We need to make sure that today we are

- Holding onto our faith in Christ.
- Listening to his Word.
- Trusting in his grace.
- Depending on him alone for salvation.
- Obeying him as our Lord and God.

If we are not, then we need to get this right today. This is the day of salvation. This is the only day that we are guaranteed. So we are in that situation, we need to come to Christ today and receive him as our Saviour and Lord.

And then, with all who are trusting in Jesus today, we can stand in the assurance that we've come to share in Christ and that no-one and nothing could snatch us out of his hand!

3. So Watch Out For Each Other

But, to do this, we need help. “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.” Hebrews 3:13

We can't do this on our own. We're not designed as believers to thrive in isolation. God has designed us to need each other. To depend on each other. To strengthen each other in our commitment to Christ. Persevering in faith is a community experience.

So we need to watch out for each other. Especially when it comes to the deceptiveness of sin. That's the way that sin tricks

us. It promises us so much, but in the end it always leads to death.

a) In Love

That doesn't mean we should go around pointing out everybody else's mistakes and flaws. Being judgemental and critical is not encouraging at all.

But it does mean that in love we need to do all that we can to encourage each other to keep on coming to Christ. To keep on fixing our thoughts on Christ. To keep on trusting in Christ for the mercy and the grace that we all need every day. It means that daily we walk with each other to the foot of the cross and put our trust in our wonderful Saviour!

This is something that we all need and that we all need to do for each other. It is not the job that some in our church need to do for everyone else. This is our collective responsibility and privilege. As Paul wrote in Colossians 3:16: ["Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."](#)

Conclusion

Warnings are serious and ignoring them is dangerous.

- So let's learn from the unbelief of the Israelites in the past.
- And heed this warning for today, being careful that we don't have a sinful and unbelieving heart.
- And let us watch out for each other, so that together we might hold firmly to Christ until the end. For his honour and his glory.

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