

Introduction:

- A. Over 15 years ago, a woman here at VCL invited her neighbor—we’ll call her Carla—to a Christmas luncheon at another church where the gospel was presented. For the first time Carla really *heard* the good news that she could have a relationship with God through Jesus. She joyfully responded. She loved the idea of being close to God. About six weeks later we had a white rose for her here. Later she joined the church. A year or two later, after a unsaved loved one died, she told me, “I just don’t think sin is that big a deal.” She loved the idea of being close to God but she came to reject the gospel truth that people need a Savior. So she walked away from Christianity.
- B. I keep a list of all the people whose salvation we celebrate with white roses. There have been nearly 150 in the 18years since I started keeping track. I’ve lost track of many of them but there are some on that list who are certainly not following Jesus today. **This is a sermon for those who have welcomed to the good news of salvation through Christ but who risk forfeiting the hope God set before them.**

Turn to **Heb. 3**. This passage is itself a sermon on part of **Ps. 95**. Here it begins, “*Today if you hear his voice...* ”

I. WHEN DID YOU HEAR GOD’S VOICE OFFERING SALVATION?

Perhaps you heard the gospel many times but when did you *hear it* as God’s offer of salvation to you?

- A. For the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people, it was when Moses returned to his enslaved countrymen in Egypt and told them, “*The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said, I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into ...a land flowing with milk and honey.*” The Bible says they believed what God had said and they bowed down and worshiped him. [Ex. 3:16-17; 4:31]

Later, on the eve of the tenth plague, the Israelites put the blood of a lamb on their doors to guard them when death passed over. Then God led them out of Egypt in triumph and when they came to the Red Sea, with the army of Pharaoh coming hard behind them, God parted the waters for them and then destroyed their enemies in the sea. **They were *free at last!* Ahead of them lay God’s Promised Land of blessing and peace. That was the goal of their salvation from Egypt: to go home! But first God sent them into the wilderness.**

- B. Their salvation experience foreshadowed ours, when we heard and believed that Jesus died for our sins so that death might *pass over* us, and we were baptized into Christ, and we set out on our pilgrimage toward our everlasting homeland with him. **But then, as with Israel, God sent us into a wilderness.**

So here is the beginning of the sermon on **Ps 95** from Heb. **3:6b-11...**

II. EVERYONE WHO HEARS AND WELCOMES GOD’S OFFER OF SALVATION WILL FACE “THE TIME OF TESTING IN THE WILDERNESS.” (3:8)

- A. Why? Why the testing? Why not just a straight shot to the life of peace and blessing. Because our relationship with God is a two-way covenant, like a wedding. God has proven his love and faithfulness for us by sending his own Son to live and die for us, and then to rise again to give us everlasting life. But it remains to be seen if we love and trust him. **You can’t go home with the Lord if in your heart you do not actually love and trust him.** You would never be happy, not even in heaven, and God’s love would be unrequited—unreturned.
- B. In the wilderness Israel basically faced three kinds of tests—the same kinds of temptations Jesus’ successfully faced when he was in the wilderness, and the same kind all of us who have heard the message of salvation will face.
1. **Will we trust God to provide for us even when we cannot see how?**

2. **Will we trust God that all he has promised is better than all we've left behind?**
3. **Will we serve God only even when God doesn't respond the way we want?**

The Bible here calls what happened in Israel “the rebellion.” From the very beginning, the Israelites complained against God and Moses. They demanded to go back to Egypt. They tried to take over leadership. They set up a golden calf to worship instead of the Lord. With only two exceptions, every adult Israelite rebelled in the wilderness and died there. So this warning is serious:

III. “TODAY, IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS”

- A. It is no sin to face the wilderness temptations with apprehension, to wonder if God will come through for you, if you'll ever make it through this “dry and weary land where there is no water.” It's no sin to be afraid.
- B. Look at where the trouble comes from: **v.8-10... You can't miss the irony here: “during the time of testing in the wilderness where your ancestors tested and tried me”!** When God was testing their faith they *tested and tried* God! They ignored him. Accused him. Disowned him. *Despite* seeing the 10 plagues. *Despite* seeing their firstborn sons saved from death. *Despite* their triumphant exodus from Egypt. *Despite* the parted waters of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's army. *Despite* witnessing—*feeling*—God's holy glory at Mt Sinai and receiving his covenant. *Despite* manna from heaven and water from a rock. *Despite* clothes that never wore out and enemies who never prevailed against them. *Despite* God's promise that they could take the land of Canaan as their own and that no enemy, no matter how gigantic, could prevail against them. ***Despite all that, they “tested and tried” God!***

And that unholy rebellion, that despicable unbelief *pales* in comparison to anyone who has heard the good news of Jesus Christ, and tasted all the benefits of eternal salvation through him, and yet hardens their heart against God.

- C. Look at **v.10**. Why did “**their hearts go astray**”? Because they didn’t know God’s ways. They refused to believe that God loved them, that he was gracious and compassionate. They wouldn’t believe that God was faithful to his promises. They wouldn’t believe God was more powerful than the enemies they feared. Those are God’s ways and they didn’t know it because they would not look at what he had done for them.

What is the warning in **v.12**? “*A sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*” And **v.13** warns against being “*hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.*” Their willful, stubborn unbelief in the face of all that God had done for them *deceived* them, and when they believed the diabolical lie that God was not good nor trustworthy their hearts hardened, so there came a point where they would no longer change and God would no longer tolerate their hard hearts.

- C. That pattern is still a threat for people today. Here is someone who prayed to receive Christ as a child, say, or with a friend in college. Now they face some wilderness experience and the test is whether they will trust the God whose salvation they once welcomed when *now* he doesn’t give them what they want, or when he commands them to behave in a way they don’t want to behave, or when they must endure a great loss that God didn’t stop.

Do you remember Jesus’ parable of the sower scattering gospel seed on different kinds of soil. **Matt 13:20-22** says, “*The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once **receives it with joy**. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. **When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.** The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but **the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth** choke the word, making it unfruitful.*” Could this be describing you?

- D. Listen to the Holy Spirit warning you: **3:15-4:2... Think of it!** “*The message they heard was of no value to them*”! Think of hearing the good news of Jesus—of freedom from

sin and death, and of a hope of life in God’s great kingdom—and it being “*of no value*” to you because you wouldn’t believe it enough to obey God. “*They did not share the faith of those who obeyed,*” not because of intellectual struggles or because they couldn’t understand, but because they hardened their hearts against God’s truth. They would not believe God was as trustworthy in the wilderness as he was in saving them. They would not live *now* for the home he has promised. They would not serve him and him alone, *despite* all he had done to prove his love and faithfulness.

But as this writer will say later, “*Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation.*” [6:9]

IV. GOD’S PROMISED REST STILL STANDS OPEN

- A. We saw in **v.11** how God said of the rebels, “*They shall never enter my rest.*” In the short view for Israel, it meant the Promised Land. But the Promised Land of Canaan was only a foreshadowing of the better time and place, our home of endless blessing and peace with God and his people, and the passage to that Rest still stands open.
- B. This rest is God’s rest—“my rest”. In **4:4-5** the writer connects the dots for us... The rest God offers is the same rest he enjoyed after six days of creation. God didn’t rest because he was tired. It wasn’t like my Sunday afternoon nap—*el nappo grande*. **It was God’s celebration time—like a harvest festival; the joy of God and all the inhabitants of heaven at a job well done.** Remember how after every day of creation God said, “*It is good*”? That’s what the Sabbath day celebrates. *It is good!* And that festival is still going on in heaven. The promise here is that when we rest from our diligent faithful, obedient journey through this world’s wilderness we will join God in that endless, joyful, Sabbath-rest festival.
- C. There the arduous faith and obedience required of us in this life’s wilderness will be done and we will rest from our work as God rests from his. **Rev. 7** promises...

*'Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
'he will lead them to springs of living water.'
'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*

So the conclusion is in **4:4**:

V. "LET US, THEREFORE, MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO ENTER THAT REST"

How do we do that? Look back at **3:12-14**.

- A. **V.12**, "*See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*" Take charge of your heart. Are you testing God? Are you refusing to believe his promises, to trust his care, to live for what he's promised? Would you rather go back to your Christ-less life than go homeward in God's love? Confess your sin and turn back to the God who loves you. The sin you will not let go of now is hardening you. It is calcifying your faith. **There can come a point of no return**, not so much because God won't receive you but because you will no longer want his love.
- B. **V.13**, "*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*" **Encourage one another daily**. We're not meant to make this journey home alone. Our churches are pretty aware of the need to be sharing Christ with lost people, but here is the little-noticed commission to be sure those who have responded to the gospel make it home to God's rest. To fulfill that commission, we must "*encourage one another daily.*"

The word *encourage* means to come alongside, the way the Holy Spirit comes alongside us. Sometimes we bring patient listening. Sometimes we give a brother a kick in the pants. Sometimes we chase after someone who has wandered off. When God brings someone to mind, we pray

for them. Like our heavenly Father watching for prodigals, we keep looking “a long way off” for any sign of returning sons or daughters. **But this is as urgent a work for our church as sharing the gospel in the first place.** So **Heb. 10:24-25** tells us, “*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*”

- C. **Finally, 3:14**, “*We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.*” To enter God’s rest we constantly strengthen our grip on “our original conviction, to the very end.” **Hold our original conviction firmly.** This is why we sing our faith, why we come to the Lord’s table, why we take in God’s Word here in church, in Growth Groups and personally. Here is why we share our stories with each other. Why we pray in times of trouble. Why we talk about heaven. Why we fix our thoughts on Jesus.

Conclusion

The amazing thing to me as a pastor is not how many harden their hearts, but how many don’t. Here’s something I wrote:

This side of the cloud of witnesses, pastors have the best seat in the house for seeing God work among His people... From my place in the front row I see quiet and astonishing generosity, dogged daily service, and love blanketing a multitude of sins. I watch through the dark shadows as brothers and sisters wrestle with the Lord till they limp into the light. I’ve watched saints straighten their shoulders and go out to face death. Again and again, I have seen God’s people trust Him and I’ve only rarely seen people turn away. “Didn’t you ever get angry with God?” I asked a friend who had suffered a crushing loss. “No, I never did,” he said, “I grieved but I knew God was good.” [Lee Eclov, *Pastoral Graces*, p.135, 137]

This morning, if living in the wilderness is taking a toll on you, why not come up here after the benediction and let one of our folks pray with you.