

“THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN”

I. Introduction

A. Last week, in our study of the first six verses of chapter 3, we were reminded of the importance of keeping our focus upon Jesus.

1. Jesus is the apostle and high priest of our confession.
2. Jesus is worthy of greater honor than Moses.
3. In Jesus we are living stones in God’s house, God’s true temple.
4. We need to persevere in our confession of Christ.
5. As the writer said, “we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in hope.”
6. That little word “if” makes a significant impact upon the meaning of that statement.
7. It places a condition upon our identity as God’s house.
8. We are his house if we persevere in the faith.

B. In the verses that we have just read, the writer further develops that conditional statement by issuing a warning against falling away from God.

1. These verses are a part of a unit that runs all the way to 4:13.
2. I am breaking it up because I want to make sure that we have adequate time to consider all that is being said here.
3. Today, we will focus upon the way in which the writer uses a passage from the Old Testament to issue a warning and appeal to God’s people today.

II. Rebellion in the Wilderness (3:7-11)

- A. One of the things that stands out about this passage is that Psalm 95 is cited again and again throughout it.
1. Psalm 95 is both a call to worship and a warning not to repeat the rebellion of the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for forty years.
 2. It unites the themes of worship and loyalty, reminding us that we not only need to ascribe praise to the Lord with our lips but also need to remain faithful to him in our lives.
 3. The verses cited in our text are from the warning portion of the psalm.
 4. These verses reflect upon Israel's rebellion at Meribah and Massah, which is recorded in Exodus 17.
 5. That was the occasion when they grumbled against the Lord because there was no water.
 6. The psalm views that incident as an early manifestation of the same rebellious spirit that the Israelites would display later on in Numbers 14, where they responded to the report of the spies by refusing to trust that the Lord would give them the land of Canaan.
 7. They had heard God's voice.
 8. They had received God's promise to bring them into their inheritance.
 9. But they did not benefit from that message because they refused to believe it when their circumstances seemed to contradict it.
 10. Their unbelief and rebellion caused the Lord to swear that not one of those who grumbled in disbelief would enter into

the land.

- B. It is helpful to reflect upon the context in which this rebellion emerged.
1. The Israelites experienced a great deliverance when God brought them out of Egypt.
 2. They witnessed God's power in the plagues and in the parting of the Red Sea.
 3. They participated in the Passover feast, which was God's gracious provision to spare them from the judgment that befell the Egyptians.
 4. They had a glorious beginning, but it was not enough.
 5. It was not enough because their faith did not endure.
 6. And the thing that tripped them up after they left Egypt was the interim condition of their existence.
 7. They left Egypt with the goal of entering into Canaan, but the Lord did not immediately bring them to Canaan.
 8. Instead, they had to make their way as pilgrims through the wilderness, and they did not deal well with that challenge.
- C. The writer of Hebrews wants us to see that we too are in a wilderness context.
1. We are not yet in full possession of the inheritance that Christ has secured for us.
 2. It is not easy for us to live as pilgrims on the way.
 3. When challenging situations arise, our faith is put to the test.

4. We are prone to ask the same question that the Israelites asked: "Is the Lord among us or not?"
5. The Lord's response to their unbelief stands as a warning to us.
6. It tells us that it is critical that we not fall into the same error of hardening our hearts against the Lord.
7. Their rebellion barred them from entering into the land of Canaan.
8. As tragic as that was, there is something that is much worse.
9. Canaan was only a type, a foreshadowing of God's rest.
10. The reality to which it pointed is the city that has foundations, the city that can never be shaken, the heavenly Zion.
11. Rebellion against Christ results in being barred from entering the eternal rest that Canaan foreshadowed.

III. Hold Firm to the End (3:12-15)

- A. After citing the second half of Psalm 95 as a warning, the writer then issues an appeal for these Christians to hold firm to the end.
 1. This appeal speaks directly to us as well.
 2. We need to be careful not to repeat the error of Israel's wilderness generation.
 3. We need to keep watch on our hearts, lest we allow an evil and unbelieving heart to grow inside of us.
 4. If we do, then our heart will eventually cause us to fall away from the living God.

- B. The phrase “fall away” must mean that this is one of the Bible’s Arminian passages.
1. At least that is how some Christians view the Bible.
 2. They say that some passages teach Reformed doctrine and other passages teach Arminian doctrine.
 3. There are passages like John 6:39, where Jesus says that he will not lose any of those whom God the Father has given to him.
 4. And then there are passages like this one, passages that say that believers can fall away from the faith.
- C. I hope that you can see the problem with that way of reading the Bible.
1. It makes the Bible contradict itself.
 2. It says that God can say one thing in one place and then the exact opposite in another place.
 3. But that is impossible.
 4. God speaks the truth.
 5. And because he speaks the truth, the Bible cannot have manifold meanings when it speaks on a particular subject but only one meaning.
- D. In light of this, what are we to make of this reference to Christians falling away from the faith?
1. We simply need to realize that the writer is talking to a group of people who have made a profession of faith in Christ.

2. They were members of the visible church, but this did not necessary mean that they were regenerate.
 3. Not all who profess Christ truly possess Christ.
 4. But a true Christian cannot lose his or her salvation.
 5. If they really do have a share in Christ, this will be demonstrated by their holding firm to him to the end.
 6. As Calvin explains: "if [Christ] is possessed by faith, we must persevere in it, so that he may be our perpetual possession. Christ then has given himself to us on this condition, that by the same faith by which we have been admitted into a participation of him, we are to preserve so great a blessing even to death."
 7. The faith that the Spirit of God works in the hearts of the redeemed is a faith that perseveres.
 8. Warnings like the one contained in this passage are part of the means that God uses to cause us to persevere in faith.
- E. After making this appeal for us to be watchful over our hearts, the writer then tells us about one specific way to do this.
1. He says that we need to exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today."
 2. Notice what he is doing by using that word "today" in verse 13.
 3. It is taken right out of Psalm 95.
 4. The writer is telling us that our "today" is the same as the "today" of the Israelites in the wilderness.
 5. We are in the same kind of situation.

6. God has promised to bring us into his rest, but we have not yet fully entered into that rest.
 7. This is why we need to persevere.
- F. One of the ways this perseverance is brought about is by our exhorting one another.
1. This shows us that we need to be an active part of a local church.
 2. We need our brothers and sisters in Christ to ask after us when they don't see us in worship on the Lord's Day.
 3. We need their support when we experience trials.
 4. We need their counsel when we find ourselves in difficult situations.
 5. We need to be confronted and held accountable if we begin to stray.
 6. If we are not a part of a body that is seeking to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, we will inevitably let ourselves be conformed to the pattern of this world.
- G. When Christians are isolated, they become spiritually lax.
1. Even if they do not rebel in a scandalous manner, they put themselves in a position in which it is extremely easy to just do whatever seems right in their own eyes.
 2. Intentionally neglecting the fellowship and worship of God's people never produces good results.
 3. I can think of more than one occasion when I have had a conversation with someone who was not regular in their worship attendance and was very troubled by some of the

ideas that they were espousing.

4. We need ongoing instruction and accountability if we are going to stay on track in the Christian life.
 5. As Calvin puts it, "Unless our faith be now and then raised up, it will lie prostrate; it will grow torpid."
- H. When the writer warns us against the danger of being hardened by sin's deceitfulness, he is telling us something important about the process by which professing believers fall.
1. Think about what it means to be deceitful.
 2. It means being dishonest.
 3. It means lying.
 4. That is what sin does.
 5. It lies to us.
 6. It promises us things, but then it never makes good on those promises.
- I. The deceitfulness of sin makes falling away a gradual process.
1. Nobody ever wakes up one morning and says, 'I'm going to apostatize today.'
 2. Instead, a person takes one step away from the Lord, then another, then another and another until he eventually finds that he doesn't really care about the things of God any more.
 3. Bit by bit, his heart is hardened until he is primed to blatantly rebel against Christ.
 4. It is so easy for us to be deceived by our hearts.

5. This is why we need to keep such close watch over them.

IV. The Consequences of Unbelief (3:16-19)

- A. This brings us to the last part of our passage, where the writer shifts his focus back to Israel's wilderness generation.
 1. He calls our attention to the fact that that generation not only heard God's word but they also witnessed his power firsthand.
 2. These people who experienced the exodus, who were brought out of Egypt by God's mighty hand, they rebelled against the Lord.
 3. This should be sobering to us.
 4. If a people who saw the Lord display his power in the ways that he did at the time of the exodus were susceptible to falling away, then we should not be presumptuous about ourselves.
- B. This does not mean that we cannot be assured that we truly are in a state of grace.
 1. We certainly can.
 2. The Bible tells us that the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God.
 3. At the same time, the Bible also says this: "let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor. 10:12-13)
 4. The Lord will be faithful to what he says here.

5. He always provides a way of escape.
 6. But we need to look for the way of escape that he provides when temptation is raging against us.
- C. The last thing that I want to point out about this passage is how it shows us that unbelief leads to disobedience.
1. The fundamental sin of the wilderness generation was their unbelief.
 2. They did not believe that God would be faithful to what he had promised.
 3. Their unbelief caused them to refuse to go in and take possession of the land of Canaan when the spies brought back a discouraging report.
 4. And God responded to their disobedience by swearing that they would not enter his rest.
 5. This shows us that believing on Christ is not just a decision that we make at one point in time.
 6. If we have truly come to share in Christ, we will hold our original confidence in him firm to the end.

V. Conclusion

- A. Even when we practice the kind of watchfulness to which this passage calls us, we still fall prey to sin's deceitfulness far more often than we would like.
- B. While we should be grieved at this, we should not let it cause us to fall into despair.
- C. Instead, we should respond to our failings by being humbled by our weakness and being all the more thankful for God's grace.

- D. We do not hold firm to our holding firm.
- E. We hold firm to our original confidence, to the apostle and high priest of our confession.
- F. As John Newton explains, "Indeed every sin, in its own nature, has a tendency towards a final apostasy; but there is a provision in the covenant of grace, and the Lord, in his own time, returns to convince, humble, pardon, comfort, and renew the soul... By repeated experiments and exercises of this sort... we begin at length to learn that we are nothing, have nothing, can do nothing but sin. And thus we are gradually prepared to live more out of ourselves, and to derive all our sufficiency of every kind from Jesus, the fountain of grace. We learn to tread more warily, to trust less to our own strength, to have lower thoughts of ourselves, and higher thoughts of him" [*Letters*, 119-20]