

Faith Reformed Church  
Stevensville, Ontario  
March 30, 2008  
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 3:12-19  
Sermon: Warnings and Remedies

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was a pastor, not a professor. But that I mean that his intent was not simply to pass along needed doctrinal information—needed teachings about Jesus Christ—although he did that very well. His intent was to bring and apply these teachings in such a way that his flock would persevere in the faith in spite of the hard times that had come upon them. He was intent on not losing any of the flock that the Lord had entrusted to his care and so he exhorts them to obedience. In our lesson today he repeats, for a second time, the warning that is found in Psalm 95:

Today, if you hear his voice,  
Do not harden your hearts  
As you did in the rebellion.

As we saw earlier, this warning points back to two episodes in the life of the Israelites. The first is found in Exodus 17. The people had been delivered from the slave pens of Egypt by the mighty hand of God which visited disaster upon disaster upon Pharaoh and his people. They had left Egypt with the wealth of that nation in hand. They had escaped Pharaoh's pursuing armies through the parting of the Red Sea and they had seen those armies perish as the Sea closed back up upon them. But just a short time later they found themselves without water. Unwilling to wait upon the Lord for his

provision, they immediately began to grumble and complain against Moses and against their God. It was a remarkable display of ingratitude.

The second incident this warning points to is recorded in Numbers 14. The Israelites have reached the southern border of the Promised Land. They have sent spies into the land to assess the situation. They were in the land for forty days. On coming back ten of the twelve spies reported that while the land was a good land, flowing with milk and honey, it was clear that the inhabitants were too strong for them to conquer. They should not even attempt to enter the Land of Promise. The other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, urged the people to enter the land for while the foes may have been formidable, they were not nearly as formidable as the Lord their God. The people would not believe that God could fulfill his promise and let them take this land. As a result, God made them wander in the desert for forty years—one year for each day the spies were in the land—and none of that generation was to enter Canaan with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb.

Our writer tells us that these trials, faced and failed by the Israelites, are very much like the trials we face as we walk through the wilderness of this life towards the “better country—[the] heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16). And he warns his flock that if the Israelites did not reach their goal because

they failed to heed God's word given them through Moses, how much more must Christians heed the better word given through Jesus Christ if they are to reach their goal. Heed his voice. Develop a soft heart—a heart that is responsive to God's word. And then walk in obedience before the Lord. These are the keys to a victorious walk.

That is not to say, however, that these things are easy. There are many troubles and dangers that face the Christian in his journey through this life. Our Lord himself said that “In the world you have tribulation.” Let me mention two warnings and two remedies that our author points to. Warnings and remedies. If we heed them, taking them to heart, we will be safe.

Let's start at verse 16. It reads, “Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?” Here is the first warning: “A good beginning is no guarantee of a good ending.” Again: “A good beginning is no guarantee of a good ending.” The Israelites had a great beginning. They had cried out to the Lord and the Lord had answered. They had seen the great miracles of God poured out upon the land. They had seen Pharaoh and the gods he represented utterly humiliated and their God, the living God, highly exalted. They had seen the Red Sea part. Think of this. Just as at creation God parted the waters so there would be land for his

people, so at the time of redemption he parted the waters so there would be land for his people. And yet, as soon as the first sign of trouble came, these people turned away from the Lord.

Here is the lesson for us. We must learn that we are not to rely upon past spiritual experiences that came at the start of our Christian life—a time when we prayed a particular prayer or walked down a church aisle for an altar call, for instance—as blessed as those events might have been. Those past experiences will not get us through a present crisis. Look: None of us will have experiences quite as vivid as those Israelites did as they made their way out of Egypt with the cloud of the Lord shielding them by day and the pillar of fire leading them at night, and those past experiences couldn't sustain the Israelites in the day of trouble. Past experiences can't take the place of a daily trusting in the Lord in a long walk of faith. If we are going to persevere in times of trial we must have a faithful relationship with the Lord when those trials come. As the hymn says, "Simply trusting every day." Let me put it another way. To assess your spiritual health, do not look back to the day of your conversion; look to this day and ask yourself, "Am I walking in a spirit of obedience? Am I keeping short accounts with the Lord by daily confessing my sin and making a daily commitment to turn from sin and to turn to righteousness? Am I being constant in prayer? Am I seeking

the fellowship of God's people? These are the things that will give us a clue regarding our present spiritual situation, not something that may have happened forty or fifty or even eighty years ago. These present habits of spiritual discipline will serve us well when the trials come.

Our first warning is this: A good start does not guarantee a good ending. Look at verse 15:

Today, if you hear his voice,  
Do not harden your hearts  
As you did in the rebellion.

Our second warning is this: It is a dreadful thing to become hard-hearted against the Lord. Again: It is a dreadful thing to become hard-hearted against the Lord. A hard heart is the opposite of a tender heart—a heart that can be penetrated by the word of God, impressed by the teachings of the word, moved by God's faithfulness and touched and won over by God's redemptive love. Jesus tells a parable about this in Matthew 13. A sower went out to sow. The first seeds he sowed fell upon a pathway; they fell upon hard ground. Birds came along and plucked the seeds away. When the word of God sits upon a hard heart without penetrating it, it is soon plucked away, never to be heard again.

Pharaoh was a man who had a hard heart. His heart would not yield even though it destroyed his country. Naomi was a woman who had a hard heart, though ultimately hers was cured. We are reading about Naomi in the evening service where we have just begun a study of the Book of Ruth. Naomi and her husband Elimelech left their home of Bethlehem during a time of famine and went to live in Moab where they thought the pastures were greener. In doing this they sinned. They had no business going to Moab, for it was a pagan land and hostile to the things of God. It was their duty to wait patiently in Bethlehem and to trust that the Lord would provide. While in that far country things went well, for a while at least. Then Elimelech died. Naomi had two other sons who could take care of her, but they died as well. She was left as a stranger in a strange land with no one to care for her and so she decided to go home to Bethlehem. One of her daughters-in-law decided to stay in Moab; her other daughter-in-law, Ruth, decided to remain with her.

You all know the touching speech Ruth gave when Naomi urged her to remain in Moab.

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

In response to this the New International Version of the Bible says, “When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.” The Hebrew literally reads, “When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped talking to her.” Naomi greets this declaration with stony silence. You see, she doesn’t want Ruth on the journey. When they get to Bethlehem and rely on the charity of her family, it will mean another mouth to feed and another body to clothe—and if that weren’t bad enough, this extra person is a Moabitess who would not be welcomed in polite society. More than that, she would be a constant reminder of Naomi’s sinfulness in leaving the Promised Land in the first place. And so it happens that when they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth is ignored as if she weren’t even there and Naomi declares, “Don’t call me Naomi [which means ‘pleasant’]. Call me Mara [which means ‘bitter’] because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.”

Now here’s the point. When trials came upon Naomi she hardened her heart to the Lord. These trials made her hard and bitter. They caused her to focus in upon herself and to throw a pity party. She refused to hear the beautiful declaration of service and fealty that Ruth made. She refused to give thanks that God had brought her back from Moab, with its horrible

pagan ways, to the land of promise and of her inheritance. Beloved, don't let the trials of this life harden your heart to the Lord. Instead, remember that he is sovereign and that all things are in his hands. Remember that he gave you his only Son, and along with him will also give you all things. Remember that even trials will in God's hands one day become a blessing for his children and the occasion for his name to be glorified. And if you cannot see that now, trust him for it. Walk by faith, not by sight, and do not ever think that the Lord is either lacking in power or lacking in love. That is plain unbelief and it is to be fought and rejected.

Let me describe how we can do that. Imagine that a trial has come upon you. You lost a job but you still have bills to pay. You got a dire diagnosis. One of your children is in some sort of trouble. What are you to do? The first thing you must do is not panic. You must take hold of yourself. You must say, "A trial has come upon me. It is a difficult and challenging thing. There has come upon me a time of pain and sorrow and loss. But I will not panic. I will not give myself over to desperate thoughts. I will do something else. What is this something else? I will remember the Lord. I will think about his attributes and his character. What will you remember about God? That he is God Almighty—a God of power and might whose arm is not too short to save. And that he a loving heavenly

Father. He cares for his own and will not let anything happen to them that will not be for their ultimate blessing, for ‘in all things [not “some” things, or “most” things, but in “all” things] God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28). And I will cast myself upon this God. I will trust him. I will rest in him. If he wants me to go through this, then I will go through it without complaining and without bitterness. He has done so much for me; how can I deny him when he calls me to endure just a little bit for the sake of his dear name?”

Don’t presume upon the Lord by assuming that a good start guarantees a good finish, but learn to rely upon him daily. When trials come, do not harden your hearts with foolish ingratitude, but learn instead to cast yourself upon the Lord in true faith. Now these things are easier said than done. John Calvin wrote these words some 450 years ago and they are true now as they were then:

As by nature we are prone to fall into evil we have need of various helps to help us in the fear of God. Unless our faith is repeatedly encouraged, it lies dormant; unless it is warmed it grows cold; unless it is around it gets numb. [The writer of Hebrews] therefore wishes them to stimulate one another by mutual encouragement so that Satan will not steal into their hearts and by his falsehoods lead them away from God.

Our author points to two remedies that we are to put into practice so we might endure various trials as good soldiers of Christ. In verse 12 he writes, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” “See to it.” It means, “Watch out.” “Take care.” We are each of us to place a watchful guard over our hearts.

Specifically, we must watch out for the deceitfulness of sin. Sometimes that means being on guard against false teachers who seek to infect the church with lies, telling us, for example, that Jesus is only one of many ways to God. Last week I read a newspaper called the Niagara Anglican (April 2008). It has columns written by various pastors and bishops. Eleanor Johnston, who serves at St. Thomas Anglican church in St. Catharines, wrote a long column denying that Jesus was our substitute when he died on the cross. She wrote, “Thinking back to the story of Abraham and Isaac, it is difficult to believe that the God of love required his own son to suffer and die as a substitute for sinful humanity.” We need to be on guard against people like her.

More important, perhaps, we need to be on guard against our own deceitful hearts. Jeremiah wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” He was right. As sinners we can

rationalize the worst sort of behaviour. Richard Phillips gives us an example of this in his Commentary on Hebrews:

Consider the case of a man who is tempted to leave his wife and children for another woman. The sin seems so alluring; she is so much more wonderful than the plain old wife he has grown tired of. And she admires him so; she plays to his ego where his wife only nags at him. She would be better for him despite the broken taboos; he will be better off and happier with the adulteress. People will understand; they will get over it; his children will ultimately be glad for him.

It is all, however, a great deceit. It will not be more wonderful, for the problem with his marriage is his own heart, and he will soon get tired of his new lover as well. She admires him now but will think less of him when he loses his job, his reputation, his money and his self-respect. His children will not get over it, but will bear scars and brokenness all the days of their lives. Sin says it will be better and he will be happy, but it is a deceit. He is stepping forward into misery and ruin, bringing disgrace upon himself and, if he is a Christian, scandal upon the church and even the name of Jesus Christ.

Take heed to yourselves. Guard your heart. And remember this: Sin is not simply something we do. Sin is a power. It is an enemy army that lies ready to swoop down upon us at any moment. And that is why it is necessary for us in our battle against sin not simply to rely upon our own powers, but to rely upon each other as well. Our lesson says, “Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” The word for “encourage” here is *parakaleo*. “*Para*” means “to come along side of.” “*Kaleo*” means “to call out.” We are to draw near to one another. We are to call out to one another,

encouraging and blessing one another as we walk through the wilderness of this world. Christianity is not an individual endeavour; it is a team effort.

We need to share our struggles with one another so we can be blessed in our time of need and so that we can bless others in theirs. Simon Kistemaker put it this way in his work on Hebrews:

Christians have a corporate and individual responsibility to care for the well-being of their fellow men. They must consider this responsibility a holy obligation and exhibit utter faithfulness.

Two things must be said here. First of all, we have a responsibility to maintain a meek and teachable spirit before the Lord and before our brothers and sisters in the Lord. That means if someone has seen in your behaviour something that needs amending—if someone comes to you and says, “I am concerned about your drinking,” or “I am concerned about your missing worship,” or “I am concerned about your habit of gossiping,” or “I am concerned about a growing attitude of resentment or anger,” we are not to get all defensive and immediately dismiss these comments as “none of anybody’s business.” Their concerns may be valid or invalid, but they are concerns we must have the courage to address honestly before the Lord. We need to ask him, “Is there a problem here? Is there something I am not seeing? Is there something I don’t want to see?” We need to be open to hear these things and to respond in a Christian way.

The second thing that needs to be said is this: We have a responsibility to speak out when necessary. I am not saying that we are to be busybodies. Far from it. I am saying that if we see something that is going on in a person's life that is destructive—that is not honouring to the Lord—we need to take a deep breath, pluck up our moral courage, go to the person and say something about it. There is a lot at stake. Not too long ago we studied the words that ended the Letter to James:

Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

There are dangers on this road of life. We have, however, been warned and with the warnings we have been given gifts to help keep us on the straight and narrow. We have the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We have the Lord Jesus interceding on our behalf at the right hand of the heavenly Father. We have worship, the Lord's Supper, prayer, Bible study and Christian service. Not least, we have one another to bless, encourage and minister to. Cherish these gifts and use them well. In Christ's name. AMEN.