

On Alert

Hebrews 3:7-19

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Good morning, welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't had the opportunity to meet, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here and it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you're here this morning, glad that you would choose to join us and be present amongst us, excuse me, as we come to God's Word. And if you are new with us, you're joining us in the midst of a sermon series in the book of Hebrews. And so this morning we're going to be looking at Hebrews chapter three, Hebrews chapter three. So if you have a Bible, you could turn to Hebrews three. If you're not familiar with where Hebrews is in the Bible, it's in the kind of latter half of the New Testament. If you hit the books of like 1 Peter, you've gone a little too far. If you're still in the Pauline epistles, you haven't gone far enough. So that maybe didn't help you at all, but just keep flipping, you'll find it. Or you can follow along on the screens in front of you in just a moment. But if you have been with us over the last number of weeks, as we've been going through this book, you maybe have noticed a little bit of a pattern that has developed in the book of Hebrews. It's this pattern of the author of Hebrews declaring something that is true. Something that's true about God, about the world, about us, about Jesus. He makes this statement about something that is true, but then oftentimes he'll couple these statements of truthfulness with a warning. So a number of weeks ago in our very first passage, as we opened Hebrews, the author of Hebrews said that God had once spoken by the prophets, but now he speaks by the son.

And so the warning is don't listen to the world, listen to the son. Or a number of weeks ago when we came across the passage about Jesus being greater than the angels, the warning there, that truth, Jesus is greater than the angels, he's more exalted, he has greater honor. But then we had this warning, don't venerate the angels, don't worship them, don't turn to them, instead trust in Christ. Even last week, as Tobias walked us through this passage about how Jesus is greater than Moses, right? That's the truth. Jesus is greater than this Old Testament prophet. He is the better Moses. And now this morning we get a warning that is coupled with that. We get the implications and the instruction. And what the author of Hebrews is instructing us to do this morning, in light of the fact that Jesus is greater than Moses, that he is the one who leads us to the place of rest, is that we should examine our hearts and hold fast to Christ. So with that in mind, let's read Hebrews chapter 3, beginning in verse 7.

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

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

For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for your word and ask that you would lead and guide us now, direct our ways, and help us to see Christ clearly. We pray that you would soften our hearts. Give us soft hearts, Father, and open our ears so that we would behold your glory and we would cling to Christ. And it's in his name we pray. Amen.

Red alert. Code blue. Take us to DEFCON 2. Man your battle stations. I have to tell you, these are words I've never heard individually. I've never experienced these in my life. I've never been walking down a hallway and heard red alert come over the speaker system. And I've never been sitting in my office and Angela, our receptionist, call out, “Man your battle stations!” That could be maybe a little funny. But no, I've never heard these things. And I imagine few of you have as well. But we've seen enough movies and we've watched enough TV shows that we know that these sorts of phrases, red alert, code blue, man your battle stations, that when they're spoken, they're indicating that there is a threat that's looming. Maybe the threat is a medical threat. The patient is declining. Something has turned. And so over the loudspeakers of the hospital comes code blue and beeping, right? I mean, is that actually what they say is code blue, doctors? Right? I mean, that's what they say on ER, so it must be true, right? But you know, they have these phrases and these words so that we know that something dangerous is happening. Or in a movie with a submarine, right, the captain sees that an enemy ship is bearing down upon them and so he yells out, “Man your battle stations!” Right? There's these different situations where people are called to action, where they're called to be ready. Red alert, code blue.

Why We're Alert

Well, in Hebrews chapter 3, we have basically a first century version of red alert. We have this calling out in verse 12, the author of Hebrew says, “take care.” Now that phrase, take care, it's this word that means be on alert, be on guard. And so what he's indicating is that there is danger that is lurking. And so these warning bells are going off. These sirens are blaring. There's a threat. There's a threat, but what is the threat? I mean, why are we to be alert? Now what's interesting about this is that the author of Hebrews isn't concerned with the threats that are external to God's people. He's not worried about the world. He's not worried about the flesh, right? Not to say that those aren't threats and things that we have to be on guard to, but his focus isn't on an external threat, but when he calls a red alert, what his focus is, is an internal threat, a hardened heart. Do you see that in verse 12? “Take care brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” So you see that his concern is about our hearts. And so he's inviting us to do some self-reflecting and some introspection. And he's saying, be careful, be on alert that your heart wouldn't become hard.

Now you might hear that and think, I don't need to worry about this. My heart becoming hard? I mean, after all, I'm here at church. I'm singing the songs, and I'm praying the prayers, and I'm reading the Bible. I mean, I don't need to worry about this. I think my heart's in a good place. Maybe you're sitting there thinking that. And I imagine that the readers of Hebrews, right, the people who originally received this letter, maybe they were thinking the same thing. We're the people who have the promises. We've heard of the prophets, right? We are gathered together as God's people, so we don't need to worry about hardening of hearts. We're in a good place. But did you see the lead up to verse 12 to the warning? The author of Hebrews, he quotes Psalm 95. And then he says this, "today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for 40 years. Therefore, I was provoked with that generation and said, they always go astray in their heart. They have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest."

Now, so Psalm 95 is recounting the story of the wilderness generation, especially in Exodus chapter 17. So you remember the story of Exodus, right? God's people have been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years. They're in bondage. And so they cry out to God and God hears their cries. He sends Moses and Moses leads them out of Egypt. He leads them by his hand, right? He delivers them from bondage and from slavery. And so the people, they saw the signs and wonders of God. They saw all that he had done, like turning the river Nile into blood, or causing the sun to go black in the middle of the day or filling the sky with gnats. They saw God's wonders, his power. They saw God part the sea and they walked through on dry land. These people saw God's works and they heard his voice. And after all that they had seen, what did they do? They quarreled with Moses and complained to God. They said, "you let us out into the wilderness. You delivered us from slavery. Where's the food? Where's the water?" They said, "why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" You see these people, they had seen all these amazing things and they had experienced God's powerful hand and yet their hearts were hardened.

And just to make sure that this is, we know that this is who the author of Hebrews is talking about. He makes it clear in verses 16 through 19 when he says, "who were those who heard him rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?" Now I imagine that some of you, maybe at some point in your life, have thought and said, maybe even out loud, if only Jesus was with me physically, like if only he was here right now, then I wouldn't have been given over to temptation. Or if God would just part the clouds, right, he would just open up the clouds and he would speak his voice directly to me, then I would know what faithfulness looks like. Right? I mean, you've thought that. Come on, you've all thought it. I've thought it, right? If Jesus was only here, I wouldn't struggle. If I could only hear God's voice directly, then I would believe, then I would have faith, then I would walk in faithfulness, right? I would always be faithful. That's what we thought. But is that true? I mean, would we? You know, the disciples lived with Jesus for three years, and they fled when he was arrested, and Peter denied him three times, and Israel saw wonders beyond our imagination, and they still grumbled, and their hearts were hardened.

You see, what the author is telling us is that if it could happen to them, it could happen to us. And so, we need to be on alert. We need to be on guard. We need to be ready that our hearts wouldn't become hardened. So, what is a hardened heart? Well, a hardened heart, we're told in verse 19, it's an unbelieving heart, right? Verse 19, they damned their entry into the land because of their unbelief. They didn't believe. They didn't rest in God's care. They moved into the wilderness. They had seen these amazing things with their own eyes, and yet they still

doubted God's provision. And y'all, that is the deceitfulness of sin, right? He warns us about the deceitfulness of sin, and that's what it is, right? Sin says, sure, God delivered you. Jesus died for you. But what about now? Will he care for you? Now, look at your situation, right? Sin says, look at your situation. Look at your circumstance, your sadness, your pain. He cared for you then, but he doesn't care for you now. That's the deceitfulness of sin. That's what the people were saying, isn't it? God, deliver us, deliver us. He delivers us, and then they say, where's the food? You showed us your power. Now you're leaving us to die? You cared for us then, but do you care for us now? Their hearts were hardened. Their hearts were deceived.

And what the author of Hebrews is telling us is that we need to be on alert. We need to be aware. We need to be mindful of what it is that God has done, because God who cared for us then will care for us now. I mean, think about that, right? They called for God to deliver them, and he does. And then they enter into this, like, well, what have you done for me lately, right? But the God who gave his own son, the God who sent Jesus to live and to die and to rise again, and he did that for us to take our sin upon himself to give us grace and mercy and forgiveness.

How We're Alert

What more could he do? See, why can't we trust him? No, you see, we have to resist the deceitfulness of sin. We have to be alert to the hardening of our heart, to this disbelief. So that's why we're alert, but how do we do this? I mean, how do we live this way? How are we alert? How do we keep our hearts soft? Well, we do so by listening to the Spirit, by listening to the Spirit, right? Our passage began as the Holy Spirit says and then quoted Psalm 95. Now, if we're to turn to Psalm 95 in the superscript, some of you know this, so in the Psalms, we have what's called a superscript. It's in small caps. It's verse zero in our Bibles, but in the Hebrew, it was verse one. So it's actually part of the Bible. It's not an insertion by our translators. This is where it says, like, a Psalm of David, you know, the sons of Korah, that sort of thing. Well, Psalm 95 doesn't have that superscript. But the author of Hebrews in the next chapter makes reference to Psalm 95 being written by David. So we know, though it's on the superscript, there was a tradition that David wrote Psalm 95.

a) Listening to the Spirit

So David's the human author, but coupled with the human author of the Psalm is the divine author. "The Spirit says." So these things are united together. And what the author of Hebrews is helping us to do is see that we combat the deceitfulness of sin and we resist the hardening of our heart by listening to the Spirit. Now, as soon as I say that, some of you felt very uncomfortable. And some of you maybe started to squirm a little bit, maybe not in your seats, because, you know, you want to be respectful, but inside you are squirming like crazy. Listen to the Spirit, right? And I know why you're squirming. I know why you feel uncomfortable, because we're good Presbyterians, right? Because we're good Presbyterians. And we hear listen to the Spirit and in our minds we go to all those times where we've heard people invoke the Spirit as a way of affirming whatever they think, whatever they say, whatever they do, right? You've seen this, right? I was just moved by the Spirit. And so I said whatever came to my mind, and it doesn't matter if it was gossip. It was the Spirit, right? You can't challenge it. I was just moved by the Spirit. And so I did whatever I wanted to do. It doesn't matter if it's contrary to God's Word. I was moved by, right?

Y'all have seen this. And so because we've experienced this, because we've heard people talk this way, then it makes us concern whenever someone invokes this. This is why we squirm. But friends, the misuse and misappropriating of the Spirit doesn't mean the Spirit isn't working. So how do we know if the Spirit is speaking and not our sin, or not the world, and not our flesh? Well, the Spirit speaks through His Word. The Spirit speaks through God's Word, right? The author of Hebrews, as the Holy Spirit says, and then what does he do? He quotes God's Word. He says Scripture. You want to hear the voice of the Spirit? You listen to the Word. In 2 Timothy 3, the Apostle Paul says, Scripture is breathed out by God. And so when we feel this internal prompting, this moving, this encouragement, and we wonder, is this the Spirit? We weigh it against the Word of God. Because where the Word is, that's where we hear the Spirit's voice. That's how we stay on alert. That's how we keep our heart soft. By listening to the voice of the Spirit, spoken through the Word of God. Now, that's not the only way we're alert.

b) Speaking to One Another

We don't just listen to the Spirit, but we also speak to one another. So you see it in verses 12 through 13. The author says, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." And then he goes on and says, "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." So that phrase, exhort one another, it simply means to urge, to appeal to, to encourage. And so what the author of Hebrews is encouraging us to do is to encourage one another with the Word. And to encourage one another, to urge one another with the truth of who God is, and what He's doing, and who we are in Him. And what is true? We're the family of God. Right? He calls us brothers.

You saw that, right? He calls us brothers. Now, brothers isn't limited just to men here, right? It's a categorical statement about all those who believe, right? It's like saying brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, all the people of God, right? We are brought into the family of God. That's who we are. And we're united to Christ. Did you hear that? We share in Christ. It's just another way of saying we are united to Him, so that what is true of Jesus is now true of us. And that's what we remind one another of. That you belong to Christ. That He gave His life for you. That you are the family of God. How we encourage one another is by urging us not to believe, not to believe the lies of sin, and not to harden our hearts against what's God's truth and His promises. But that we are reminded we are united to Jesus. That we trust in Him. You see, friends, when we are in our personal wildernesses, right? Like we don't live in the wilderness, right? We're as far away from it as we could be. But metaphorically speaking, in our personal wildernesses, when we are in those places, it would be easy for us to think, and for us to doubt, and for us to wonder, will God provide? And it's in those moments that we need one another to remind us and to encourage us of who God is and what He's made us to be. That we are those united to Jesus.

And God gives us one another to remind us of that truth. I mean, that's one of the amazing things about being the people of God. That God, yes, saves us as individuals out of our sin, but He saves us into a people. This is His goodness to us. That He doesn't call us to walk alone, but He calls us to walk with one another. That He has given us one another for this purpose. It's an amazing grace that He gives. And so, the question we should be asking ourselves is, is though we might be surrounded by people, though there may be hundreds here on a Sunday morning, though we may know one another by name, do we really know one another? That's what we need to ask ourselves.

Right? Is there anyone in our lives that knows us well enough to know when the sin might be seeking to deceive us? Is there anyone who knows us well enough to know those times that our hearts could be getting a little harder? Is there anyone who knows us, who is going to remind us of God's truth and who He is and who we are in Him? I'm not saying everyone needs to know, but does someone? And so, maybe you're sitting there, and you're thinking, no one knows. And so, let me just encourage you, if that's you, don't wait for someone to think that no one knows you, but you pursue being known. Right? You pursue perceived being known, right?

We have opportunities for you to be known, right? There's men's Bible studies on Tuesday mornings, right? There's men's breakfast every other Wednesday. There's women's Bible studies on Thursday morning and Thursday evening. There's prayer on Wednesday morning at 6.30 on Zoom. I would love to see you on it, you know, if you'd like, if that's where you want to be known. There are small groups. You could talk to Tobias. He will get you connected. Or if none of those things are good options for you, you can simply call someone and invite them to lunch and have a drink, because the likelihood of you being the only person who isn't known is pretty slim. We assume everybody else, right, they've got their people, they've got their friends, they've got their connection, but let's be honest, many don't. I was at a retreat a number of years ago at my previous church. It was a men's retreat, and those can be really, really awkward. I'll just name it, right? They can be super awkward, and we're sitting there, and we're in a circle, and there's probably about like six of us, and the speaker was talking basically about this topic, how we need one another and all this, and every man in the circle basically was saying, man, I need it. I'm alone, right? My wife's telling me I need friends, right? She's saying go out with some guys, who knows, right? Like I know I need this. Every single one of them said this, and then they all went, you know, and finally I went, did y'all hear this? Like, okay, you said you need someone to know you, and you said you need some, so how about y'all know one another?

Like it sometimes is that simple, and friends, that's what God gives us. Isn't that beautiful? Like that is a beautiful thing that God doesn't call us to walk through life on our own, to let our hearts become hardened, but instead He calls us into a people, and He gives us one another so that we, in those times where we are forgetting, and we're believing the lies of sin, in those times we have one another to remind us of what is true. It is a beautiful thing that God gives us, to give us people to love us, and share our burdens, and encourage us, and to be alert with. He brings us into this people, brothers and sisters in the Lord, those who belong to Jesus, so that we would be alert together, and speak to one another, and listen with one another. Christ has given us one another, so that we would share in, and be united to Christ. That is the truth. That is what we need reminding of. That is what we need encouraging. That you are not your own, but you belong to Jesus. That you have been united to Him, and that you are part of the people of God. That is what we cling to, as we seek to resist that hardened heart. Amen.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us your spirit, to speak your truth. That you have given us your Son, who redeems us, and that you have given us your body to live amongst.

And so we pray, Father, that you would help us to turn away from the deceitfulness of sin, to resist a hardened heart, and to pursue soft, fleshy hearts with one another. And so, Father, open our ears to the words of your spirit, to open our lives to one another, that we would pursue you, and pursue what it means to be the people of God. And so we ask that you would help us to do this.