

"Beware the Unbelieving Heart!" 1/20/2013 E2 INI Heb. 3:12-19

Dear Fellow Redeemed by the blood of God's only Son,

Our fire ants in South Carolina are a bother, and a hurt if we are bitten by them. The termite is a much greater problem. Did you know that more houses are destroyed by termites than by fires? At least the fire ant and the termite are visible above ground. The African white ant, however, stays underground and is hardly ever seen by humans, until it is too late. A person builds a house where he thinks there are no white ants. But one day the doorpost and rafters come down with a crash. When the house-owner looks at a section of the fallen doorpost he finds the whole inside eaten away!

Something like this can happen with the Christian too! Because we seem to be doing well outwardly, we may assume that everything is OK with our inward, spiritual life. We may not realize until it is too late that we no longer believe – our faith has been eaten away! So the writer to the Hebrew Christians warns:

BEWARE THE UNBELIEVING HEART WHICH TURNS AWAY FROM THE LIVING GOD!

I.

How can we who have believed in Jesus Christ, lose our faith? It doesn't happen overnight. Our text speaks of a process that may be hard to see. There is such a thing as the deceitfulness of sin that is able to harden the heart in unbelief.

Why did the elder generation of those "wandering" Israelites not enter the promised "rest" in the land of Canaan. It wasn't because God changed His mind about them, or was unable to bring them all the way into Canaan. Numbers chapter 14 tells us that **"they could not enter because of unbelief."**

For 40 years the people had rebelled against God's Word, challenging His governing through Moses, and grumbling about the difficult way God had chosen for them. They were never satisfied with the things He provided for them. Finally, when they arrived at the border of the Promised Land, they would not enter because of the "giants" in the land. Yet God had promised them the victory!

Israel's heard-hearted unbelief and rebellion could no longer be

tolerated. God sent them back into the wilderness to wander about until all the men who had left Egypt under Moses, and all others who rejected Him had died.

What was so terrible about Israel's rebellious unbelief? Verse 16 tells us that **"having heard"** they rebelled. Israel had heard God's good and gracious will for them, and how He desired their well-being on earth and their eternal salvation through the promised Savior. But they doubted His mercy and goodness. They grumbled and complained from the very beginning: "What good has it done to follow Jehovah-God? Life has been worse for us since we left Egypt. We loathe this 'manna;' we are thirsty and homeless. And we don't like taking orders from Moses!

Sin is deceitful. Who would think that grumbling and complaining could be dangerous to us? We've all done it, more times than we can count, ever since we were children. Because our merciful God does not strike us dead on the spot, we don't see the hidden danger of our complaining. But every time we do it, we become like the Israelites – We reject what we have received from the goodness of our God!

Sin is deceitful. It tells us that it's alright to tell a lie as long as we can get by with it. Sin tells us that as long as we "believe in Jesus," it won't hurt to seek the praises of men, or cheat our neighbor, or indulge the sins of the flesh. Sin tells us that if we don't speak against the Word of God taught on Sunday, we can still do as we please on Monday. But every disobedience to God, every refusal to obey His Word, is a denial of His goodness in Christ, which can lead to a hardening of the heart in unbelief!

We must not play with sin as if it were something we can easily lay aside whenever we wish. The story is told of a wild beast tamer in England who entertained audiences by permitting a 25-foot boa constrictor to coil itself around him. He had done this many times over the years, as if the snake were his toy. However, one day the snake became his destroyer as it squeezed the life out of him! How terrible the deceitfulness of sin is! While we think we are in control, sin may be slowly hardening us in unbelief until it squeezes out our spiritual life in God and His saving Word!

II.

Such an evil heart of unbelief can develop in any one of us, as the

deceitfulness of sin hardens us against the Word of our God. What shall we do? We are to "exhort one another daily, while it is still called 'Today'." (V. 13a) The key word in v. 13 is "**daily**" – daily exhortations are needed while it is still today. We need more than the Sunday exhortations of our pastor and teachers. Daily exhortations and admonitions are also given in the Christian home, and the Christian Day School.

When your parents remind you children that Jesus died for your sins; when they correct and punish you for lying, for selfishness, or disobedience, it's because they do not want sin to take hold of you and become a way of life. They don't want the trickery of sin to harden your heart in unbelief. They don't want you to turn away from your Savior God, and lose the heaven that Jesus won for you.

Daily exhortations and admonitions are also to be given in the Church. As believing members of the body of Christ, we should be glad to admonish and encourage one another to put away sin and to serve Christ more faithfully. Are we not striving together to reach the Promised Land of heaven? Do you know some who are neglecting the Word and Sacrament, or walking in disobedience to a command of the living God? Does the deceitfulness of sin have some of us thinking that our pastimes and activities are innocent and harmless, when they are not?

While we're on the subject: Who among us is to do the exhorting and admonishing of the erring brother and sister? Is this the work of the pastor or the church council alone? Am I the only who loves the brethren enough to speak to them of the danger they are in? Are the members of the church council the only ones in the congregation who love the brethren enough to speak to them about their sinful turning away from their Savior?

May God grant that we all love one another enough to exhort and encourage, correct and admonish when we see someone turning away from his or her Savior. For NOW is God's great "**today**"! NOW is the "time of grace" He has given to the living! NOW is the time He wants us to correct the erring and encourage them to believe in the living God and live according to that faith!

III.

One more thing should move us to beware of turning from the living

God in unbelief: We have become partakers of Christ IF we hold the beginning of our confidence in steadfast faith to the end. Those first "Wise Men" surely started out toward Bethlehem with great confidence and faith. But if they had grown tired of the long journey and turned aside, they would not have seen the Christ, their Savior.

By faith in the Gospel of Christ, we have "seen" Him and have become partakers of all the eternal blessings which He has earned for us by His life, death, and resurrection. We must never forget this! The daily fellowship of the living God, the forgiveness of sins, and the eternal riches of heaven are ours through Jesus alone. But we can lose all that we have been given by God's grace, IF we do not remain in that saving grace to the END of our earthly lives.

This is what Paul speaks of so often in his letters when he warns Christians about "carnal" or fleshly security. This is what Peter speaks about in the Epistle lesson for today: **"Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure."** (2Peter 1:10) We make our calling and election **"sure"** when we never leave that simple, child-like faith which confesses its sins, pleads for mercy in the blood of Jesus, and is afraid to move a fraction of an inch from the Word of the living God.

Our **"beginning confidence"** in Jesus Christ, that simple trust in Him as our Savior, was the work of God in us by His Word alone when we first believed. From that moment on, our faith has been and is under constant attack by trials and temptations. The devil seeks by the deceitfulness of sin to harden our hearts against God's Word, so that in unbelief we finally depart from Him. Therefore let us **"beware, . . . lest there be an evil heart of unbelief in any one of us."** Let us **"hold fast the beginning of our confidence, steadfast to the end."**

Brethren in Christ, we share so much in Him, and we have so much more waiting for us in heaven, IF we hold our confidence in Christ firmly till the end. Let not the persecutions and deceitfulness of this world turn us away from our inheritance! So that we all may reach the Promised Land and none be lost, we pray: O LORD, grant that today and daily until the end of our wilderness journey, we may all hear the voice of Your Word with humble hearts, repent of our sins, and believe on You as our Life forever through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.