

His Voice Today

Numbers 14, Psalm 95, Hebrews 3-4

Turn to Numbers 14. Hebrews 1 began with God's speech. God spoke in the past through the prophets, but now in these last days he has spoken through the Son. Hebrews 2 began this way: "let's not drift away; if Israel got in trouble for ignoring God's message through the prophets, how will we escape if we neglect God's message through the Son?"

Hebrews 3 is still about God's message, about hearing God's voice. But Hebrews 3 builds on Psalm 95, and Psalm 95 builds on Numbers 14. So we'll begin with Numbers 14.

The Israelites Rebel at Kadesh Barnea – Numbers 14 (Deuteronomy 1)

God led Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and to Mt Sinai, where God made the covenant with Israel. That's where they made the Tabernacle. Israel stayed nine months at Mt Sinai, and then they traveled again to Kadesh Barnea. The plan was that from Kadesh Barnea they would cross the Jordan and go into Canaan, the Promised Land.

This had been the plan all along. This was not new. When Moses first went to speak to the Israelite slaves in Egypt, he said, "God wants to take you out of here and into Canaan."

So from Kadesh Barnea they sent 12 spies in to look over Canaan, and they came back and said that it really was a wonderful land, but the Canaanites were strong, and their cities had high walls. And ten of the twelve spies said, "If we go in there, we'll get slaughtered, those Canaanites are far too big and far too strong. We cannot attack them."

And the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in Egypt, or in this wilderness," they said. "Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Let's go back to Egypt. Let's pick a new leader, and let's go back to Egypt."

The other two spies said, "Don't be afraid, and don't rebel against the Lord. The Lord is with us, he will give that land to us." But the whole group wanted to stone them. Moses said the same thing the two spies. "The Lord is going with you, don't be afraid. He's carried you all along, right to here, as a father carries his son" (Dt 1). But the Israelites did not trust God.

And then, God had had enough. God said, "These people have done this to me ten times. Ten times they have tested me and have not obeyed my voice." Israel had acted like this many times before this. I don't know which ones God is counting, but I counted once, starting back in Exodus, and I came to 14. This grumbling against Moses was Israel's habit, a way of living.

God said, "By not trusting and obeying me, they have treated me with contempt. Not one of them will enter the land."

God said: “They wish they had died in this wilderness?” God said, “That will happen. Every one of them, 20 and older, will die in this wilderness. They said, ‘Our children will be taken as plunder?’ I will lead the children into the land, to enjoy what the parents rejected.”

And God took an oath. “As surely as I live, and as surely as my glory fills the whole earth, not one person over 20 will enter the land, except for Caleb and Joshua, the faithful spies.” Three times Num 14 mentions God’s solemn oath. He will never change his mind about this. Those people will not enter Canaan. “Tomorrow,” said God, “turn around and go back into the wilderness.”

Fear itself is not the problem. Of course they will feel fear, when they attack large settled cities. The problem is when fear guides our lives rather than God. In the Bible that’s a big problem, and in this story that’s called rebelling against God, and treating him with contempt.

So Moses told the people what God has sworn to do, that none of them would enter, they would all die in the wilderness, only their children would enter. Tomorrow they will all head back into the wilderness. “O, we’re sorry,” said the Israelites, “we sinned, we’ll go, we’ll go attack the Canaanites.” “No,” said Moses, “don’t go, the Lord will not help you.”

But they rebelled against God again, and they attacked the Amorites, and were badly defeated. They had their chance, they’d had it ten times, and for those people, their chance was over, and it was not coming back.

The Warning of Psalm 95 – Don’t be Like Them! – Psalm 95:7-11

*Today, if only you would hear his voice,
“Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did.
For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said,
‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.’
So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’”*

Meribah and Massah are other places where Israel did the same kind of thing as they did at Kadesh Barnea, part of the ten times that Israel had disobeyed the voice of God. But the oath that God would not take them in, and the forty year consequence, that happened in Numbers 14 at Kadesh Barnea (the place is called K. B. in Deut 1).

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did back then. We are getting the voice of God himself here. “Your ancestors tested *me*, they tried *me*, though they had seen what *I* did. *I* was angry with that generation, *I* declared on oath in *my* anger.” What is the core of God’s message? “Do not harden your hearts, as you did that day in the wilderness.”

Psalm 95 comes to Israel four or five hundred years after the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. Psalm 95 says, “Israel, don’t do that again today. Don’t do today what you did back then.”

Psalm 95:1-6 describes worship with our mouths: “we sing, we shout aloud, we come before him with music and song.” Then it describes worship with our knees: “let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.”

But this warning starting in v7 wakes us up. Enthusiastic worship is not the whole story. What about our ears, and what about our hearts? “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” More than thankful songs and more than bended knees, our God wants simple obedience. “When you hear my voice, don’t harden your hearts. Do what I say.”

We can praise God with our mouth, and with our knees, and still harden our hearts when our ears hear his voice. You know this is true. Psalm 95 says, “be careful about that *today*.”

Another Today: Do Not Harden your Hearts – Hebrews 3:7 – 4:13

Now we jump ahead another thousand or so years to the time when Hebrews was written. Hebrews preaches Psalm 95 to the NT believers that received this letter we call Hebrews.

Heb 3:7-8 - *So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness ...”*

Psalm 95 preached to Israel back in the time of David. But, says Hebrews, the Holy Spirit is saying that to you Hebrews. “Today,” at the time of Hebrews, “if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

There was real danger at the time of the Psalms, that Israel would do this again. We don’t know what the issue was at the time of Psalm 95, but there was something, and they needed to be warned not to do what their ancestors did back in the wilderness, in the time of Numbers 14.

And again in the time of Hebrews, there was a real danger of this. And we know what the danger was at the time of Hebrews. They were drifting away from the gospel of Christ. They needed to pay more careful attention, and not neglect the message through the Son.

The Hebrews who got this letter were Jews who came to Christ, and that was all great, but then there was pressure, and persecution, and trouble. They wondered if they should pull back from Christ, and just be faithful Jews again. It would be safer.

So the writer uses Psalm 95 to say, “The Holy Spirit is telling you, do not harden your hearts against God’s message today, as you did in the wilderness.”

As Long as it is Called “Today” – Hebrews 3:12-13

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 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, as long as it is called “Today.” As long as there is a today, the Holy Spirit is saying this to us. In February of 2022, there is still a today. You and I are here, today. As long as there is a “today,” says Hebrews, this is for us. Our hearts can harden and turn away from the living God.

The rebellion of Number 14, when God’s people refused to do what he said, is still a real danger. It was a real danger when the Psalms were written, it was a real danger when Hebrews was written, and it is still real right now for us here, because we can still call this day “today.”

What “Voice of God” Do We Mean?

Sometimes we use words like “I heard the voice of God” to describe a private call of God, something just for me. Something my heart tells me, or like that. Some message from God to me personally. But that is not what Hebrews means. In Numbers 14, all of Israel heard the same message, and they heard this through Moses, they did not get this directly from God at all.

But that was still God’s voice. God said to Moses, “*Not one of these who **disobeyed my voice ten times will enter***” (Num 14:22). The message everyone got through Moses was God’s voice.

Psalm 95 is a congregational song, and it tells the wilderness story, so Psalm 95 as well is not about anyone’s private message, but the call to all Israel. And in Hebrews again, it was the whole congregation that was in danger of drifting away from the gospel. The Hebrews believers all heard the gospel, preached to them by men and women who had followed the Lord.

As far as God was concerned, the Hebrew believers had all heard *his voice*, and the Holy Spirit was still speaking *his voice* to them through Psalm 95. That’s what the writer was telling them. And as long as there is a today, we can still drift away.

The voice of God is the same message we’ve all heard. In our minds we did not hear it directly from God at all, but as far as God is concerned, we have heard his voice.

Encourage One Another Daily – Heb 3:11

Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

How do we protect ourselves from sin's deceitfulness? How do we protect our hearts from hardness? Do we read our Bibles more, or pray more? Those are good things, but not what Hebrews says. Hebrews says, "*encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today.*"

Hebrews little confidence in what I can do for myself, or what you can do for yourself. We must do this for each other. In Hebrews 10 the writer comes back to the same call: *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**.*

There are quite a few believers in North America who choose to live without regular congregational life. Some have no choice, but many do have a choice. Many of them think they are doing fine spiritually. I am not sure you and I are very good judges of how well we are doing. But our Scripture mentions deceit. As hearts get hard, they get deceived.

And now, because of two years of covid isolation, we've gotten used not to meet together at all. We can get this online. We will be pulled just to stay home. We will say to ourselves, "It's not so bad at all, when you get used to it avoiding church I can get my encouragement other ways."

But we don't meet to get encouragement. We meet to give encouragement. *Encourage one another.* That's a command from God to me, and I don't do that when I watch an online service. This Scripture says that our main protection against repeating the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea is that we regularly meet together, *so that* we can encourage each other to live faithfully to God.

There are people who cannot meet, for health reasons, or something like that. This is obviously not for them. But it is certainly for the rest of us, to visit them and encourage them.

Is the Problem Unbelief, or is it Disobedience?

In Hebrews 3 and 4, our Scripture today, the writer goes back and forth between unbelief and sinful disobedience. In our Scripture, and generally in the Bible, there is no separating them. Israel *disobeyed*. Israel could not enter because of *unbelief*. Hebrews says both. God has never been much interested in a belief that does not shape our lives. And we won't obey without faith.

When do we Rest?

There is quite a bit in Hebrews 3 and 4 about entering into God's rest, which comes from Ps 95. At first it is not clear if this is a rest God offers us now, or if this rest is our future life with God, after the Lord returns. Without going into detail, the sabbath rest in Hebrews 3 and 4 is our future life with God.

In 3:14 we read this is a time to hold on firmly to the end. In 4:11, the last sentence of our section, we read that this is a time to make every effort to enter rest. This rest is future. This is a time to hold on firmly, this is a time for effort, this is a time for endurance.

How do we do Endure? Hold on firmly? Make Every Effort?

First, let's not kid ourselves about the danger. People who have experienced many wonderful things from God can fall into unbelief and disobedience, and lose everything from God. It happens, you know it does. And a hard heart gets deceived, our Scripture says that. We think we're doing the only sensible thing.

Two, let's do what Hebrews says. *Encourage each other daily, as long as it is called today. Let's consider how we may urge 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, all the more as the Day approaches.* Amen.

PRAYER: O God, we are as vulnerable as anyone. If they could stop trusting you, and rebel, so can we. Help us listen to your voice. Keep our hearts open toward you. Lead us with your Spirit in our lives together. We want this encouraging one another, and urging each other to always be a part of our lives together. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.