

Chapter 7 – Lessons on inheritance - Hebrews 3

Having set out the supremacy of Christ and His gospel the author brings a strong encouragement to faith and a warning against the unbelieving example of the Israelites in the wilderness. Because their hearts were hardened they could not inherit what God intended for them. We are exhorted to confidently rejoice in the hope we have in Christ through thick and thin – then we will come into all our inheritance in Christ.

Prayer

Give thanks to God for the things you learnt in Hebrews 2. Practice using the model from 1 Thessalonians:

Thank God for your great salvation.

Remember before God the times when He has shown mercy towards you and helped you in times of difficulty or temptation.

Express to Jesus your confidence that He is unashamed to call you His brother/sister and that He will “declare God’s name” to you as you continue to study His letter to the Hebrews.

Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 3 by again reading through and noting any surprises or questions. These are the surprises and questions that strike me.

- V1 Would he call me a holy brother?
- V1 I am not used to thinking of Jesus as a high priest.
- V6 What is meant by this *house*? Why is this assurance conditional?
- V11 Was God rash in His anger?
- V12 Can *brothers* turn away from God?
- V14 Is eternal salvation dependant upon perseverance?
- V19 What does this mean for us?

Mostly, the chapter raises questions for me about the security of our eternal salvation.

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Ps 95 which is quoted in this chapter and Numbers 13 & 14 which provide the background to the passage. Other background is found at Num 12:7 and Ps 110.

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was the following: “Consider the supremacy of Jesus and beware of unbelief.”¹ It follows a chapter defending the necessity of Jesus’ humanity and leads into an exhortation to enter God’s rest. So, the fine-brush structure might go as follows:

- 3:1 Conclusion of chapter 2: fix your thoughts on Jesus.
- 3:2-6 Jesus, the builder, is worthy of more honour than Moses, the caretaker.
- 3:6-15 Warning against unbelief

¹ See chapter 4

3:16-19 God's oath against unbelieving Israel in the desert.

The structure above is too brief to show how the argument flows naturally from section to section. We should try to bring this out in our summary of the argument.

Argument

My outline of the argument in chapter 3, along with the evidence that supports it, is as follows:

From the outset, the author has been arguing for the supremacy of the Gospel over the Law (1:1-2). In defence of the Gospel, the author first established Christ's supremacy over the angels as the "heir of all things". He then called his readers to give attention to the *message* (2:1), and now he wants to move his argument forward, focusing his reader's attention upon Jesus Himself as the messenger (3:1).² Moses was the messenger of the old Covenant; Jesus is the messenger of the new. Now he must prove Jesus' supremacy over Moses. He does this without denigrating Moses. Moses was faithful, but he was only a caretaker (3:5). He was not the master of the house in which he served. It is God's house (3:4), and He has now appointed His Son Jesus Christ as its heir and keeper (3:6).

Having a new master over God's household, we have a new Promised Land to enter and we must be careful not to repeat the mistakes of our forefathers through unbelief (3:6,12-14).

This argument seems a very good fit. We can see how the author is moving his argument forward carefully and logically, yet with a sense of urgency, towards a crucial conclusion in the next chapter.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 3:

In Christ, God has introduced a new era; the heir has taken his place as head over God's people and, like Moses, is leading us into new promises. We must maintain our faith and confidence so we may inherit what is promised and not repeat the mistakes of old.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 3.

Heb 3:1

⁽¹⁾ Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

Jesus, our new Apostle and High Priest

This chapter opens with sound advice! Why not take a few minutes to do what the author says and fix your thoughts on Jesus? We have been called by Christ and share with all Christian believers an eternal destiny. Conscious of my many failings, I may not think of myself as a *holy brother*, but that is certainly how Christ sees me. We have been *set apart*³ by God and for God. This is the reason we can have confidence in Him and in His promises. Our salvation is God's great idea for us, not our attempt at making ourselves acceptable. Jesus is both the messenger (apostle) bringing us this great news from God and also the one who fixes it up – He is our high priest. With Christ calling us, announcing salvation, and restoring and maintaining our friendship with God, we do, indeed, have every reason to have confidence in our salvation (3:6,14). We confess Him as our saviour.

This statement, proclaiming Jesus as the apostle and high priest we confess, makes the point that He replaces Moses (the apostle of the Old Covenant) and Aaron (the high priest of the Old Covenant).

² Apostle means someone who is *sent*, here meaning the one sent with the message of salvation, the new covenant.

³ Holy means *set apart* for God.

The author deals with the replacement of Moses immediately, leaving the replacement of Aaron till later in the letter.

This verse also tells us that the letter, and specifically the argument of these opening chapters, is addressed to those who believe Christ to be the Messiah.

Heb 3:2-6

⁽²⁾ He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ⁽³⁾ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. ⁽⁴⁾ For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁽⁵⁾ Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. ⁽⁶⁾ But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

Jesus has taken Moses' place

The logic of this section seems a little awkward. It starts clearly enough: Jesus was faithful in all His Father required of Him. He said, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." (Jn 17:4) But the comparison between Moses and Jesus involving the house and its builder seems a little odd. A table will help to illustrate the oddity:

Jesus – greater honour	Moses – less honour
Jesus is the builder (implied in v3)	Moses is the house (implied in v3)
God is the builder (stated v4)	
Jesus is the Son <i>over</i> the house (stated v6)	Moses served <i>in</i> the house (stated v5)

By using the words "just as" he implies that Moses *is* the house.⁴ This is a little odd – perhaps we are stricter with our comparisons than the author intended. It seems likely he means that Moses *represents* the house, or is *part* of the house. Certainly he was part of the house of Israel, called and created by God. Verse 2 is a reference to Num 12:7, "But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house." We see from this, and its use in v6, that the *house* is the people of God. Indeed the word translated 'house' can equally mean household. So we could say that Moses is part of the people of God, whereas Jesus is the creator of His people. Perhaps this is the author's intended meaning.

Nevertheless, the point is clear. Moses' job, as a servant, was "testifying to what would be said in the future." That future has now come. Jesus, the Son and heir now presides over His household. Moses has been retired.

The writer concludes with this: "And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast." We will consider this statement along with the similar one when we get to it in v 14.

Heb 3:7-13

⁽⁷⁾ So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, ⁽⁸⁾ do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, ⁽⁹⁾ where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. ⁽¹⁰⁾ That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' ⁽¹¹⁾ So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never

⁴ Jesus uses the same construction when he says, "As the Father loved me, so I have loved you" in Jn 15:9.

enter my rest.”⁽¹²⁾ See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.⁽¹³⁾ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

Call to faith

Having established Christ as God’s authentic apostle of the new covenant, the writer again calls his readers to pay close attention to the message, this time using a quote from Psalm 95. This psalm is a call to worship used from ancient times up to the present day in the synagogue at the start of the Sabbath.⁵ As such, the quotation would immediately be recognised by the Nazarene readers and would have them nodding their heads approvingly. It is extremely appropriate as it calls God’s people to faith and also leads into the promise of a Sabbath rest, a subject shortly to be addressed. The familiar quote is applied with a punch by the author, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart...” This would certainly have brought them up sharp! The author is repeating his warning, of the previous chapter, to listen carefully to the Gospel Jesus preached, reminding them of the severity of the consequences of unbelief.

Warning of unbelief

The warning quoted from Ps 95 refers to the Israelites in the wilderness. They were a saved people, on the move with God, who failed to trust God and so never entered the promised land. It is important to note that although they failed to receive all that God had for them, they never lost their salvation and they never went back into slavery.⁶

The oath God swore against Israel in the desert because of their unbelief did not cut them off from God’s people, but resulted in them never entering God’s rest (3:11). The next chapter develops this theme and both chapters are clearly being addressed to believers.

The author is warning his readers not to turn their hearts away from believing all that God has promised in Christ. They need daily encouragement to keep on believing. Unbelief is sin in itself, but sin also has the effect of hardening our hearts against God (3:13). The implication is that, whether by our hard-heartedness or by God’s oath, a day may come when the possibility of entering God’s rest is forever lost. What, exactly, that promised rest is, we do not yet know. We will have to wait for the next chapter to discover that.

Heb 3:6,14

⁽⁶⁾ ...And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast ... ⁽¹⁴⁾ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

Conditional Assurance

Having addressed his readers in this chapter as “holy brothers” with a “heavenly calling”, the author twice makes a statement of conditional assurance. First we have to ask, “What does being *his house* and *sharing in Christ* mean?” The most obvious meaning is to be saved; to have eternal life, and this is the usual understanding of these verses.

The second question is, “What does the conditional *if* mean?” There are two standard interpretations:

⁵ This Psalm is part of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* used in the introduction to worship each Friday night, at the start of the Sabbath. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_services#Friday_night

⁶ That is, the generation being addressed never went back into slavery. Later, the Israelites were taken into temporary slavery in accordance with the curses pronounced with the Law, but they never ceased being God’s chosen people.

- a) We are saved *whilst* we hold fast in our faith, but lose our salvation if we lose our faith.
- b) If we hold fast in our faith to the *end* we demonstrate that we were saved at the *beginning*.

These are the two usual interpretations of these verses. The first is the so-called Armenian interpretation in which our eternal salvation depends upon our continuing faith and obedience. The second is the so-called Calvinist interpretation in which our eternal salvation cannot be lost (once saved always saved). The standard Calvinist position agrees with the Armenians that persevering faith is necessary, but they argue that true saving faith *does* persevere to the end. Those who fall away may have appeared to have faith, but their loss of faith proves it was not genuine.⁷ The debate between these two positions has gone on for centuries and we will encounter it a number of times as we continue through this letter. Indeed, the letter to the Hebrews could justly be claimed to be the cause of this debate. We will return to this shortly but, lest we lose sight of the flow of the argument, we will now move on.

Heb 3:15-19

- ⁽¹⁵⁾ As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’ ⁽¹⁶⁾ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ⁽¹⁷⁾ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ⁽¹⁸⁾ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ⁽¹⁹⁾ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Applying the warning

The author now presses home his warning, proving that it applies to his believing readers, by asking to whom the original warning was addressed. The questions are taken from the Psalm, but the answers are drawn from Numbers 14, which records the incident to which the Psalm refers. He makes the point that the warning was to God’s own special people, not to unbelieving heathens. He is making absolutely sure his readers understand the warning applies to Christians, to his *Nazarene* readers. He is not warning unbelieving Jews to embrace the faith, but believers to embrace the promises.

What is at stake?

- ⁽⁶⁾ ...And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast ... ⁽¹⁴⁾ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (Heb 3:6,14)

The standard interpretation

Having followed the argument to the end of the chapter, we can now return to examine more closely the question of what is at stake in these warnings. My reading is that the issue at stake is not eternal salvation but promises in Christ. But this is not how most commentators understand it. For instance, of the six popular commentaries I have on my desk, all assume the author is writing to believers under the threat of persecution and that he is warning them not to give up their faith. They all say that the Christian life is not just a matter of a confession of faith but a life-long walk of faith and obedience (which of course is true), but none of them give proper consideration to the warning or the conditional assurances. By ignoring the question of the consequences of failure, they do not get to the heart of the passage. The writer to the Hebrews clearly has a sense of urgency in warning his

⁷ They point, for example, to 1Jn 2:19 “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

readers and he does so six times in this letter. He is clearly addressing himself to believers and is clearly warning them of serious loss if they fail to give due heed to the message that has been proclaimed to them.

The Promised Land

The standard interpretations equate the Promised Land with heaven and eternal life. In this view, the Israelites in the desert represent the church on earth, some of whom are *true* believers who will eventually enter heaven, and some are *false* believers who, though they confess faith today, will fail in their faith and become unbelievers.

The Armenian view

Summarising, from the Armenian perspective, the chapter says, “Holy brothers, who have embraced Christ and received the hope of eternal life, keep pressing on, lest you never actually obtain the promise.” Salvation, in this view, is a perilous journey of faith and hope that may, or may not, end in eternal life, depending upon the state of the person’s faith at the moment of death. If they persevere *to the end* they will be saved, but if their faith holds fast all through their life, yet fails in the final test, they will be lost.⁸ They understand our salvation to be *in Christ* until judgement day, when it finally becomes ours. Thus, whilst we walk in faith, we share in His salvation, but when we fail to abide in Christ we are outside that salvation. This understanding fits the warnings well, but not, I suggest, the wider context.

The Calvinist view

Summarising, from the Calvinist perspective, the chapter says, “Holy brothers, who have embraced Christ and hope to have received eternal life, keep pressing on, lest any of you discover yourselves to be false believers.”⁹ In this view, *holding on* is evidence of having *become*. However, there is no hint in the passage that the author is concerned about the possibility of *false* believers, but rather *failing* believers. False believers were not the problem in the desert, and they are not what concerns the writer to the Hebrews.

Shortcomings of these views

I do not think either view fits the passage at all well. They both fail to recognise the fact that God forgave the rebellious unbelievers in the desert. They fail to recognise that the unbelievers continued to be numbered amongst God’s people. I believe that equating the Promised Land with heaven and eternal life is the wrong starting point.

An alternative interpretation

The conditional assurance we looked at briefly above is crucial. The author clearly has some future promise in mind throughout chapter 3 and into chapter 4. He describes this as “entering rest”. If “rest” is eternal life, then he is addressing holy brothers, urging them to keep hold of the faith until eventually they obtain eternal life. In other words, eternal life is the reward of a lifetime of persevering faith. This is contrary to the clear NT teaching that eternal salvation is a gift of grace and not the reward for our faithfulness.

⁸ There are many NT scriptures that speak of the necessity of persevering in faith to the end. The Armenian view seeks to give due weight to these warnings, understanding them to apply to eternal life and viewing them as motivating enduring faith and obedience.

⁹ The Calvinist recognises the many NT scriptures that offer assurance of eternal life on the basis of faith alone.

The whole passage is addressed to holy believers and the parallel is drawn with God's people in the desert. Is it possible that the conditional statement of Hebrews 3:6,14, (of being *his house* and *sharing in Christ*), is not to do with eternal salvation, but inheritance?

God's mercy in the desert

The warning of Psalm 95 refers back to the incident recorded in Numbers 13-14 where Moses sends twelve spies ahead into the Promised Land to see what it is like, before their invasion. Ten come back with reports that it is populated by giants and cannot be taken and two return saying that God would give it to them. The people agree with the ten and refuse to invade. God is angry and threatens to destroy the people, but Moses intercedes saying,

“The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.’ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.” The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked.” (Nu 14:18-20)

So we see that, despite the people's great unbelief, God, in His mercy, forgave them. They were not free of the consequences of their unbelief, but they were restored in their relationship with God. They would die in the desert and never enter the Promised Land, but they continued to be God's chosen people whom He loved and cared for. When God swore His oath against Israel, it effectively created two groups; those of fighting age who would never enter the promised land, and the young and as yet unborn, who would grow up and eventually enter the promised land. All remained God's special people. All ate the manna and drank the water from the rock. All were protected from their enemies. All were forgiven and saved.¹⁰ Yet some were subject to an oath preventing them from moving forward whilst others were being trained and prepared to eventually go on and take the promised land.

This examination of the incident that the Psalmist and our author use as a lesson for their warnings, shows that the issue at stake in the desert was not salvation, but the inheritance of the promised land. Since the writer to the Hebrews also addresses himself to believers who have an inheritance in the promises (Heb 6:12), it seems perfectly reasonable to assume that the warnings of chapter 2 and 3 are also addressing the question of future inheritance of the promises and do not concern eternal salvation. We will discover the nature of these promises in the following chapters.

The Conditional Assurance

Our author is using the Israelite example to urge his holy brothers to maintain their faith for *all* God has promised in Christ. He anticipates the possibility of unbelief hardening their hearts as happened in the desert. As such, some could still move forward in Christ whereas others would be, at least for a while, incapable of such faith.

This, to me, seems a more likely meaning. We are His household – part of the ongoing, forward-moving, promise-inheriting, purpose-fulfilling people of God – if we hold onto our courage. We share in Christ if we share in His plans, His vision, and His discipline, which will bring us step-by-step into all that God purposed for us in this life. Those whose faith fails them, who turn aside from the challenges and tests of faith, become bystanders. They have settled for the reward they already have and will never move forward. They are still numbered amongst God's people, still assured of their eternal salvation, but no longer actively sharing in Christ, no longer part of His household.

¹⁰ I do not mean that they all had eternal life, but that in the understanding of the Covenant under which they lived, they were still God's chosen people who received the benefit of God's mercy and forgiveness; in their own terms, they were “saved”. We do not know the terms by which Christ applied His saving death retrospectively to them. See Rom 6:25.

Conclusion

We may not be able to come to any firm conclusions about how to interpret the warning and conditional assurances of this chapter until we study the rest of the letter, but I hope the attention we have paid to this passage here has helped us to feel the urgency of the author's warnings and primed us for the next chapter.

Review

We have addressed most of the surprises I noted at the beginning. Two remain:

Was God rash in His anger? (v11)

The Psalmist quotes God as stating He was angry with Israel and that in His anger he declared an oath against them. This raises at least two questions for me:

1. Is God sometimes rash in His anger, doing things that he later regrets?
2. Could God get angry with me and declare an oath against me?

Does God regret His anger?

To answer the first question, we could do a Bible study on all the occasions that God is recorded as being angry. I'm sure this would be instructive, but I shall not embark on that just now. There are other things we know about God that can help answer our question. In the passage in Numbers 14 we quoted above, Moses quotes God Himself, recorded in Exodus 34:6, saying, "The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished." We see that God is not like us, suddenly flaring up in anger and making rash statements, but He is slow in coming to anger. God is filled with love. He forgives sin and rebellion, and comes to a state of anger in a slow, deliberate, merciful process.

Nevertheless, when God is recorded as being angry, we often see Him acting in an apparently rash way. In Numbers 14:12 God declares that He will destroy the rebellious people and start afresh with Moses, but Moses intercedes and God relents.¹¹ He often makes a statement, which He then retracts, but it seems He does this to draw out compassion and mercy in others. Indeed, this was Jonah's complaint. God had proclaimed judgement, in *fierce anger* against the heathen city of Nineveh, but when they repented, God relented. This did not please Jonah, who wanted the city destroyed:

"O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." (Jon 4:2)

Because Jonah did not respond with intercession for mercy, as Moses had, God had to teach Jonah a lesson about compassion, which He did through the plant that gave Jonah shade. We learn from Moses and from Jonah that God's anger is meant to draw out repentance, and intercession for mercy. God is not rash in His anger.¹²

¹¹ Moses had quite a lot of experience of God's anger. First, God was angry with Moses for his reluctance to speak for Him (Ex 4:14) and then for not circumcising his son (Ex 4:24). Then God was angry with Israel when the people made the golden calf (Ex 32:10) and when they complained about the food (Num 11:1,33). Then God was angry with Aaron and Miriam when they complained about Moses (Num 12:9). Then God was angry with Israel for their unbelief concerning entering the Promised Land (Num 14) and again when they started worshipping Baal (Num 25:3).

¹² Jeremiah 32:26-44 is a study in God's purposeful wrath. Here He discusses His coming wrath towards Israel and His unbounded love that will then restore them.

Could God get angry with me?

We have seen that we do not need to fear God acting against us rashly, but could I drive Him to anger, and eventually have Him swear an oath against me? Jesus got very angry with the Pharisees and warned that offending the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. Ananias and Sapphira were killed by God for lying. Paul hands an immoral believer over to Satan.¹³ The writer to the Hebrews warns of the consequences of unbelief. He seems to be saying that, regarding God's anger, the same is true under the new covenant as was under the old. God is slow to anger, but persistent unbelief and disobedience can result in His anger being roused to the point where he swears an oath concerning the consequences of our behaviour. I think we can take it that we would have to be very persistent in disobedience for God to swear an oath against us, but the possibility is real. However, I believe this is an oath of no more progress in faith, not an oath of loss of salvation. We will see what else the author has to say about this matter in due course.

What does this mean for us? (v19)

The chapter closes with this observation:

"So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."

The question as to the relevance and application of this observation is really the cliffhanger at the end of chapter 3. We will see what answer chapter 4 gives us.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 3

- V1 Defend the title *holy brother/sister* when applied to you.
 - Have you considered Jesus to be God's apostle? What does this title convey to you?
 - Have you considered Jesus to be your High Priest? What does this title convey to you?
 - V6,14 Are you confident in your salvation? What are the reasons?
 - V10-11 What do you feel might arouse God's anger in your life? ... church? ... nation?
 - V12 Do you know any believer who is in danger of turning away from the living God? How can you encourage them?
 - V13 How does encouragement help you to avoid the deceitfulness of sin?
 - Do you get enough encouragement?
 - Do you give enough encouragement?
 - Who should you be encouraging?
 - V15 What things cause some Christians to harden their hearts towards God?
 - What can prevent us from hearing God speak to us?
 - Are you still listening to, and obeying, God?
 - Is there anything God has said to you that you are struggling to accept?
- Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?

¹³ 1 Cor 5:5 Paul expects this man to be disciplined by Satan, but he is still saved.