

**Text: Heb 3.16-19**

In the year AD 250, the Roman emperor Decius instituted a very severe persecution of Christians. As a test of loyalty, all persons (except Jews) were required to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods and “the emperor’s genius” (*i.e.*, worship the emperor).

Anyone who did so would receive a *libelli*, a certificate of loyalty. Of course, Romans being what they were, a brisk business in forged *libelli* sprang into being.

Archaeology has discovered many of these *libelli* – here is a sample:

“To those chosen to superintend the sacrifices at the village of Alexander Island, from Aurelius Diogenes, the son of Satabus, of the village of Alexander Island, being about 72 years old, a scar on the right eyebrow. Not only have I always continued sacrificing to the gods, but now also in your presence, in accordance with the decrees, I have sacrificed and poured libations and tasted the offerings, and I request you to countersign my statement. May good fortune attend you. I, Aurelius Diogenes, have made this request.”

(2d Hand) “I, Aurelius Syrus, as a participant, have certified Diogenes as sacrificing along with us.”

(1st Hand) “The first year of the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajan Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Epiph. 2” (= June 25, 250 AD).<sup>1</sup>

Christians were understandably aghast, and many suffered abuse, even death, while others went underground, hoping to avoid imperial attention. But some Christians conformed to the demands of the state.

Some time later, after the persecution ended (and Decius was off the scene) many of these same *lapsed* Christians wanted to come back into the church.

This caused great controversy. Should the *lapsed*, who betrayed Christ, be readmitted? Should they be forgiven?

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<sup>1</sup> John Rutherford, “Persecution,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915).

Some then had to endure rigorous testing to prove themselves to their church leaders. Others, under more lenient bishops, were readily allowed to return.

No doubt it was a perplexing question.

In a way, it was a similar controversy that led to the split between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15. John Mark abandoned the work in Acts 13, Barnabas wanted to bring him back on the second journey, and Paul would have none of it.

Here we are in the 21st century. You may be faced with the requirement at work to affirm things you don't believe in order to keep your job, all in the name of "diversity, equity, and inclusion." If you don't accept the world's definition of inclusion, they will include you out.

What should you do?

It was just this sort of temptation that faced the Hebrew believers, the recipients of the book of Hebrews. They were under pressure, they knew (or thought they knew) that things would be easier if they went back to Judaism. They could rationalize the decision. It increasingly seemed an easy way out of pressure.

What should they do?

The writer of Hebrews is calling them to loyalty to Christ.

In our recent messages, we've been discussing the possibility that real Christians can allow themselves to harden their hearts to God, to rebel against his instructions and "take the easy way out."

Our passage today reiterates the stern warnings we've discussed in the last several weeks.

Read Heb 3.12-19, text 16-19

**Proposition:** The Scriptures warn that God opposes those who turn back.

## I. Identifying those who turn back

A. Our last message ended with another quotation of Ps 95 (15)

1. Note that the time for taking a stand is *today*
2. Note the reference to "those who provoked me"

B. The rhetorical question and answer (16-18)

“The fact of rebellion and its catastrophic results is pressed in the formulation of a series of rhetorical questions. Three parallel questions are posed, and the response to them in the first two cases is cast in an interrogative form, and in the third in the form of a clause incorporated within the question itself.”<sup>2</sup>

Lane shows how these questions interact with Ps 95 and Num 14

v 16a (Ps 95:7–8) v 16b (Num 14:13, 19, 22)

v 17a (Ps 95:10) v 17b (Num 14:10, 29, 32)

v 18a (Ps 95:11) v 18b (Num 14:30, 33, 43)

1. Question: Who provoked him when they had heard? (16a)

- a. “Provoke” ties in the first question with the quotation in 3.15
- b. Provocation is rebellion at God’s word: God said, “Go in,” the people said, “We won’t go in”

2. Answer: Who were these people?

- a. The very people who came out of Egypt under Moses
- b. The ones who saw the ten plagues
- c. The ones who crossed the Red Sea
- d. All of them disobeyed (note: exceptions [Caleb, Joshua, Moses] don’t negate the force of “all”)

3. Question: With whom was he angry for forty years? (17a)

- a. Note: in v. 9, they “say my works for forty years” (quoting Ps 95)
- b. God’s works manifested his glory, and his care for the nation through those years
- c. Yet the fact of the forty years also manifested his anger
  - 1) God waited them out
  - 2) Israel could not enter the land until the last man of the rejected generation died

<sup>2</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 88.

4. Answer: He was angry with those who sinned
  - a. The nation continued
  - b. The children grew, and were preserved
  - c. The rejected generation died out

The word here is very strong: “bodies” = “corpses”  
[echoing Num 14.29]

Num 14.29 your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me.

5. Question: To whom did he swear they would not enter His rest? (18a)
6. Answer: those who were disobedient (18b)

The inescapable conclusion is that those who turn back earn God's anger.

- The Hebrew Christians risked God's anger if they went back to Judaism
- Modern Christians: what do you risk if you give in to the social pressure of our world?

Remember, God sent that generation to forty years of wandering because they turned back

## II. Recalling the warning to those tempted to turn back

A. The first part of the epistle extols the virtues of Jesus Christ

1. He is greater than angels (ch. 1-2)
2. He is greater than Moses (ch. 3.1-6)

B. The warnings

1. Pay close attention to him (2.1) do not neglect so great a salvation (2.3)
2. Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me (3.8)
3. Take care lest a heart of unbelief arise in you (3.12)

4. Encourage one another while it is called "Today" (3.13)

C. The observation: they could not enter because of unbelief (19)

What is meant by "unbelief" here?

1. The Israelites of the Exodus were believers

Ex 14.31 When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.

2. But they came to the border of the land, and they were seized by fear

a. They heard the report of giants

b. They feared for their lives, and for their little ones

c. They said, "Let's go back to Egypt"

d. Unbelief = disobedience

No doubt there were some unbelievers (even so) among them: there were something around 2 million people in the nation. Did all believe the Lord in real faith? Probably not.

Yet most of them were people who believed the Lord.

For fear, they panicked and would turn back

- The last couple of years showed us what fear can do to people

3. Despite their fear, Moses prayed for them, and God forgave them (Num 14.11-23)

We don't want to minimize their disobedience, but we don't want to make more of the consequences than the Bible does.

### III. Emphasizing the futility of life for those who turn back

A. Their fear doomed them to wilderness wandering

1. We've discussed this before: how futile was this life?

2. No prospect for anything but wandering, and then death

3. They were God's people but they would not enter the Promised Land

B. But even more: they *could not* enter the promised land

*they were not able to enter because of unbelief*

1. Do you recall that they tried to enter?
2. After God pronounced the sentence, they said, "Ok, ok, we'll do it."
3. Too late. They were *not able* to enter

### Conclusion:

There may be great tests ahead of us. Social pressure will increase, it seems, on affirming gender and homosexual agendas.

It isn't enough to "tolerate" — you must "affirm" to be righteous in the eyes of the world.

Wouldn't it simply be easier to say the right words, and keep your Christianity secret?

- Walk through that door, and you walk into the wilderness
- Walk through that door, and God may never let you turn back

Today is a day for Christian courage.