

Hebrews 3.7-19

Image: John Stephen Ackwari

Need: This life is not a sprint, but marathon. How do we finish race well over 50, 60, 70 years? Eugene Peterson, “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” Amidst pain, distraction, etc. easy to quit.

Context: Last week looked at cultivating faithfulness by centering our attention on Jesus, emulating Him as our ultimate hero. Today, I want us to think about what that looks like over a lifetime. The author here is going to draw on the negative example of a group that started well, but failed to finish.

Question: How do we avoid the same fate to finish strong in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds?

- I. We’re all in danger, all the time, of selling out. *Question: is it possible for someone to experience the power of God and fail to finish in unbelief? You bet it is.*
 - A. The prime example of this are the people of Israel in the wilderness who began well, but failed to finish. The author here spends 5 verses giving you an example of when it happened (7-11).
 1. This is a quotation of **Psalm 95**. The Psalmist is warning against the same thing in preparation for the reading of the Law. **Psalm 95** is a call to worship God (v. 1-7a) through responding to His voice in faithful obedience (v. 7b-11). He warns of this by pointing back even further in history to the time of the wilderness wanderings.
 2. The wilderness wanderings were marked by hardness of heart and disobedience. The Psalmist, and the author of Hebrews, are going to look at 2 events; one from the beginning of the wanderings, and one from the end, to paint a portrait of faithlessness in the people.
 - a. God led the Israelites walk out of Egypt in **Exodus chapter 12**. They are delivered from Pharaoh’s approaching army through the Red Sea (which then destroys the Egyptian pursuers) in **chapter 14**. They began complaining in **chapter 15** when they came to **Marah (bitterness)**. They were bitter, and so was the water. In **Exodus 17** they come to **Rephidim (MEANING)** and they have no water. So they complain and doubt whether God is still with them bc they haven’t seen any water. Maybe they should go back to Egypt? God provides water from a rock through Moses, and he names the place **Massah (test/trial)** and **Meribah (quarrel/provoke)** because the people tested God by doubting His goodness and provoking Him. Incidentally, these are the same used in the LXX which the Psalmist and our author translate as “**provoke**” and “**trial**” in **verses 8-9** (word play).
 - b. At the end of the wilderness wanderings, in **Numbers 14**, the Israelites are at the edge of the Promised Land. They decide to send in 12 spies to check it out (there is a shadow of doubt, again, as to whether God can provide). 10 of those spies come back to give a negative report and suggest they get rid of Moses and Aaron and return to Egypt. God has had enough. He doesn’t wipe them out bc of the intercession of Moses, but He does say that by His Name, those of fighting age will not enter the land of rest (oath form in v. 10-11 – “**my name is not God if they enter my rest**”). And God sends them around in circles for 38 and a half more years until everyone of those guys fell dead in that desert.
 - c. *Want example of people who started well but fell in disbelief, failed to finish. right here.*
 - B. Why is this quoted here? Because doubt and unbelief is a slippery slope to a hard heart.
 1. We’re all about 4 decisions away from failing to finish the race well...maybe fewer. There are many things that can trip us up. *Danger* (as was the case here in Hebrews), *discomfort* (maybe lack of money, or having to toil in pain, or health issues that cause you to doubt God’s goodness), how about *unmet expectations* (when God doesn’t do what you want in the way you want it done). Each of these, if we’re not careful can cause us to doubt. And each of those doubts solidifies as a new layer over our hearts, until eventually, we have no more heart to hear the voice of God. *Like clicks on a rollercoaster.*
 2. Israel forgot (God says, “**they did not know my ways**” v. 10b). They forgot the incredible things that God had done so much so that they thought they could do better going back into slavery in Egypt. They were drawn down that slope until their hearts were so hard that God said of them, “**you’re disqualified because of you unbelief**” – v. 11).

(How do we keep ourselves from this kind of faithlessness? Look what he tells them.)

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- II. With an eye to the future, we have to stand firm in faithful obedience...together (12-13)
- A. We must help one another avoid that slope of doubt that leads to desertion (vigilance) (v. 12).
 - 1. “**See to it that no one of you**” - here has the meaning of taking responsibility for something. *Me and the rubbish (taking responsibility)*. “**No one**” looks at individuals.
 - 2. Guard one another so that no one is carried away by sin’s lies in wandering off from the only faith that saves. “**evil unbelieving heart deserting the Living God**”.
 - a. **Apostasy** – walking away from the faith believing that there’s something better.
 - b. **Living God** – used of God as the only one who has the power of life and death.
 - B. We must stand together by encouraging one another to persevere in faithful obedience (v. 13).
 - 1. We’re called to encourage one another every day. *Encourage = to give courage to*.
 - 2. To give one another courage in the face of difficulty so that they won’t fall for sin’s deception.

(Why is this warning to stand firm together here? Because...)

- III. Christian life is forward-looking life. It’s not about starting well, but finishing together (v. 14-19).
- A. Future deliverance isn’t to those who start out and then peter out, retreating back. Israelites, Hebrew Christians, us. The Bible gives no assurance to those who desert. No reason to believe that they were ever truly converted. No hope in any religion or formula. Belief in God is tied so closely to obedience that the two are almost indistinguishable.
 - B. Rather, Salvation (future deliverance) belongs to those who continue in faithful obedience to God’s voice. It belongs to those who don’t peter out, but who stand firm.
 - 1. Having believed (“**we have become partakers with Christ**” – v. 14), we continue to persevere in response to God’s voice. We are in that sense, a bride, who responds to her groom. Once again, it’s our perseverance that demonstrates and marks out our faith (v. 15).
 - 2. He illustrates this notion that blessing belongs to those who finish well by once again looking to the Israelites’ example of beginning well, but failing to trust and obey to the end (v. 16-19).
 - a. Who provoked Him? Ones rescued from Egypt...saw His power, deliverance (v. 16).
 - b. Who angered Him? Same ones who, having seen Him move, sinned in unbelief (v. 17).
 - c. Who failed to finish because of their faithlessness? Those same ones who had experienced His power at work to deliver them (v. 18). Their sin? unbelief (v. 19).

(So how do we finish well against the odds? So many obstacles around us, how do we finish this race?)

- IV. Together, we trust and obey...today
- A. We must stand together if we’re to have any hope of navigating this life.
 - 1. We’re weak. Sometimes you can’t see what you’re up against. And I can’t either. *Olfactory fatigue – lose our sense of smell in the familiar. We need a fresh pair of nostrils* to help us avoid the lure of sin that leads to disbelief and a hard heart.
 - 2. We need to freely give courage to one another to continue to trust and obey the voice of God.
 - B. Work together to faithfully respond one day at a time. A faithful finish built 1 day at a time.
 - 1. It’s daunting and impossible for us to say that we’re going to finish our lives well in faithful obedience. That could be 30, 40, 50 years from now. That’s too big a chunk. Rather, we should strive to live a day at a time. *climbing hills one step at a time and then looking down*.
 - a. That’s what the author says here. 3 times you see the emphatic phrase, “**Today**” respond to God in faith...NOW! The Christian life finished well is a product of many days of faithful obedience. You make it your goal to respond to God’s voice in faith...TODAY. Don’t worry about tomorrow...trust and obey TODAY. *Long obedience in same dir*.
 - b. So you wake up in the morning and say “I want to be faithful today.” Go to bed.

Conc: So how do we avoid the unfaithfulness of Israel? How do we finish what we started without retreating back? Focus on today...together. Make today the day of faithful response. Then tomorrow, make today the day of faithful response. Encourage one another in that daily. And then, before you know it, we’ll piece together lives that faithfully respond to God in obedience.

Derek Redmond story