

Weekly Reflection: Warning: “Don’t neglect exhorting one another; eternal life is at stake.”

What’s the purpose of warnings?

Warnings are there because there is the potential for something negative to happen. Warnings are meant to protect us, to help us, to keep us safe. We understand what warnings mean in our daily lives, and we know what the risks are for ignoring them, but what about the warnings that exist for our spiritual lives? If our spiritual lives are more important, and even more “real” since they are eternal, if they are more important than our physical lives, how much more should we pay attention to spiritual warning signs? We should not treat them like we do many of the warnings we see in our everyday lives. Much more is at stake.

Two weeks ago, we looked at Hebrews 10 and talked about Christian fellowship being a means of grace. ***“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:23-25 ESV)*** That we should not neglect to meet together so we can consider one another for the purpose of stirring each other up to love and good works and encouraging each other so that we hold fast to the confession of our hope. I want to look at a warning that tells us how vital Christian fellowship is. Specifically small group fellowship where you can get personal and vulnerable. I pray that we see and believe that this fellowship that can only happen in small groups is not just a church thing to do, a religious thing, something to check off the list, it's not an optional part of the Christian life. Too often we schedule Christian fellowship around the rest of our life activities, when it fits into our schedule. That’s like being too busy to take medication that will keep you alive or being in too much of a hurry to stop for gas on a long trip. This small group fellowship is a lifeline, this fellowship is a means of grace that will keep you alive and growing as a disciple of Jesus, and without this grace you will die.

Hebrews 3:12-14

There are people who believe that you cannot lose your salvation and there are people who believe you can lose your salvation. I’m not going to argue for either, but I do want to say this, the truth of the passage we are about to read in Hebrews applies to both beliefs. If you believe you cannot lose your salvation then this passage tells you that the perseverance that is required to keep you saved is accomplished through means, one of which is Christian fellowship. If you believe you can lose your salvation then this passage tells you that the way to persevere and be saved is accomplished through means, one of which is Christian fellowship. So, wherever you land on that, please do not miss the seriousness of the warning in the passage we are about to read and discuss. You persevering to the end and being saved is accomplished in great part by Christian fellowship.

Take care...why? Take care...how?

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” (Hebrews 3:12-14 ESV) First, notice the imperative in verses 12 “Take care!” Take care is like “Warning, pay attention, danger.” Take care...why? We read three big reasons why we are to take care. Take care... to make sure there is not in you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. Take care...so you are not hardened by the deceitfulness of

sin. Take care...so you hold your original confidence firm to the end. Now, if you came across a warning sign that simply said, "Warning – This could lead to death." You would probably be thinking, "What could lead to death? What do I do so I don't die?" In the same way we should be asking, "What could lead me to falling away from the living God? What must I do so this does not happen?"

Take care...how, what do we do so we don't fall away from the living God? The answer is, "Exhort one another every day." Exhort = "to urge, advise, or caution earnestly; admonish urgently." So, your exhortation is one of God's means of grace for keeping your brother or sister holding fast to Christ and saving them from destruction. The important question is, "How do I exhort? What do I say?" If we are called to take care to exhort one another every day so that we don't get deceived by sin, get an evil, unbelieving heart that causes us to fall away from the living God; I want to know about this exhorting one another every day, what is that, what does that sound like, how does that happen?

Five words connected to someone falling away from the living God.

There are five words in this passage that are part of a reality, a real thing that can happen, that are part of, or connected to, someone falling away from the living God or not persevering to the end and not sharing in Christ. Look at the five words of verse 12 and 13: evil, unbelieving, hardened, deceitfulness, and sin. In verse 12, **"an evil, unbelieving heart."** How does someone end up with an evil, unbelieving heart that leads them to fall away from the living God? Verse 13 seems to point us at how it happens, **"don't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."** Our heart is hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, so let's start there, with the deceitfulness of sin.

What is sin? The very heart of sin is preferring anything over God or trusting anything more than God. The reason we disobey God, or don't trust God, or don't love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength is because we prefer something else over God, we trust something else more than God. All sin is a lie because nothing is more preferable than God. All sin, which consists in preferring anything to God, is lying to us. Therefore, all sin is deceitful. Deceit is concealment or distortion of the truth for the purpose of misleading, tricking. Temptation is not simply being enticed to do something you shouldn't do. Temptation is being enticed not to prefer God over anything else. Temptation is, "this is more beautiful than God, this is more trustworthy than God, this is more secure than God." When that deceit comes and we believe it, we sin, one description of the effect is hardness.

Jonathan Edwards, in his book *Religious Affections* defines hardness of heart like this. "Now, by a hard heart is plainly meant an unaffected heart, or a heart not easy to be moved with virtuous affections, like a stone, insensible, stupid, unmoved and hard to be impressed" The hard heart refuses to hear God, refuses to turn to God in repentance. It's unfeeling, unresponsive, like a stone. **Romans 2:4-5: "Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath."** God's kindness, God's patience, God's long-suffering, Paul says, ought to melt the heart with thankfulness and humility and repentance, and instead it can be met with a heart of stone; unresponsive, unmoved, unthankful, proud. And this hardening heart is called in verse 12 "an evil heart of unbelief."

Unbelief is not believing that God is more preferable than anything else; it's not believing that Jesus is more precious, more beautiful, more satisfying than anything else. As the heart is deceived by the lie of sin, that anything is more desirable than God, it hardens, and it no longer feels, believes, and trusts the beauty and worth of Christ. And this is called unbelief.

And the last thing to say about it is that it is evil. It is an evil heart of unbelief, because it is in the grip of sin's delusion that other things are more desirable than God. That is the essence of evil.

Fellowship is meant to keep each other believing.

The reason we dig into the reality of what really happens in the heart that is falling away from the living God is so that we know what our job is in Christian fellowship. Our job is to help each other keep this catastrophe from happening. Specifically in verse 13: “Exhort one another every day — while there still is a day — that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” You are God’s appointed means of grace to keep another believer from being deceived by sin. That is one of the great callings on your life as a Christian. Christian fellowship exists for this: to say things that will keep each other believing.

What is the heart of our daily exhortations?

If the heart of the deceit that leads to sin and hardness and unbelief and falling away and eternal destruction; if the heart of that deceit is making anything look preferable to God, look more desirable than God, more valuable than all that God is for us in Jesus; if that is what leads to destruction, then what will be the heart of these exhortations? Will it not be, first: God is better! Christ is better! His way is better. And a thousand biblical and experiential descriptions of why His word, His way, His future, His greatness, His guidance, His promises, His value, His beauty, His friendship is better. And second, will these exhortations not also be the flip side of He is better? Don’t throw Him away. Don’t shrink back. Don’t give up. Don’t commit eternal suicide. You say to your brother, “If you shrink back, if your heart is deceived, and hard and unbelieving, you will be destroyed.” The question is, “Do you approach your interactions with other believers that way?”

Paul said, ***“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29 ESV)*** We are either weakening people’s affections for God or strengthening them. We are either building up toward heaven or tearing down toward hell.

Be a Jonathan and have a Jonathan.

In 1 Samuel 23, David’s life is hanging in the balance. The Lord shows him that the people of the town of Keilah are going to hand him over to Saul. So, David must run and hide. Later in the chapter we read, ***“And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand. David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh.” (1 Samuel 23:14-15 ESV)*** Imagine the pressure, the stress, the tension, the discouragement; knowing the king is out to kill you? David’s probably thinking, “I’m not sure I want to be the next king, I’m not sure it’s worth it to be God’s anointed, maybe I should just go back to shepherding.” Maybe you’re thinking, but it says God did not give him into Saul’s hand, David was safe, God was protecting him, why would David be afraid? The same reason that you and I get scared and worried, and doubt, and get discouraged even when God has promised to never leave us or forsake us, even when God promised to give us the grace we need for every moment. David was human, I’m human, and you’re human; we all need help trusting, we all need help believing, we all need help persevering.

God gives us a glimpse of how David persevered. ***“And Jonathan, Saul’s son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God. And he said to him, “Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this.” (1 Samuel 23:16-17 ESV)*** The significance of this scene lies in Jonathan’s intent: He helped David find strength in God or, as the text puts it, he “strengthened his hand [grip] in God.” That is the essence of Christian fellowship. Jonathan put his life at risk to go to David for the purpose of exhorting David, strengthening David in God.

Your calling is to be a Jonathan to someone. ***“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (Hebrews 3:13 ESV)*** You are God’s appointed means to keep your brother or sister from falling away from the living God.