

Message Six: The Second Warning, Part I

Hebrews 3:1-6 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 6

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Buried inside the first warning was a single line we passed over quickly: "the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward" (Hebrews 2:2). That line was a seed. The author planted it and moved on, but he never intended to leave it there. Chapters three and four are where that seed grows into the second of the letter's five great warnings, and it comes with the longest, most detailed illustration in the entire book — the story of an entire redeemed generation that left Egypt, saw the power of God with their own eyes, and still never entered the land they were promised.

This is a heavier message than most, because the ground it covers is wide. But stay with the story. By the time we're through, you'll understand exactly what the author means when he tells "holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling" to hold their confidence firm to the end — and why he thought an eight-hundred-year-old story about a wilderness generation was the clearest way to say it.

I. Partakers of a Heavenly Calling

Look at how the second warning opens: "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus" (Hebrews 3:1). Notice exactly who is being addressed. "Brethren" alone might leave room for doubt, but "holy brethren" removes it — this is language for people *set apart*, not for the unconverted. And "partakers of the heavenly calling" seals it further: this is a specific, technical phrase for those who have been called to inherit rule from the heavens, the very calling we have already traced through this whole letter.

That calling was first extended to Israel — "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" was the message Christ brought at His first coming. Israel, as a nation, rejected the King and the offer that came with Him, and the kingdom was, in Christ's own words, "taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Matthew 21:43). That nation is the Church. The offer never disappeared; it changed hands. And the whole Book of Hebrews is written to the people now holding it.

II. Builder Greater Than the House

Now watch how the author establishes Christ's authority to issue this warning in the first place: "who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God.

And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end" (Hebrews 3:2-6).

There's a comparison being made here, and it isn't subtle. Moses was faithful, genuinely faithful, but faithful as a servant inside a house he didn't build. Christ is faithful as a Son over a house *He did build* — because, as we already established earlier in this letter, all things were made through Him and for Him. He is, quite literally, God the builder. And notice the echo from far earlier in this series: God promised David that He would build David a house — a dynasty, an everlasting throne. Christ fulfills that promise on both ends at once. He is the builder as God, and He is the builder as the very Son of David the promise was made to.

And then comes the condition that hangs over everything that follows: "whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end." Not "we are His house, guaranteed, no matter what." "We are His house, if." That word carries real weight in the original language — the grammar itself signals sincere potential, an outcome that may or may not happen. This is not a rhetorical flourish. It's the hinge the rest of the warning swings on.

III. The Type That Explains the Warning

To show us exactly what's at stake in that word "if," the author reaches for the longest, most detailed illustration in the whole letter — an entire generation of God's own redeemed people. Paul told the Corinthians precisely why this history matters to us: "Now these things became our examples... Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11). This is not ancient trivia. It was written on purpose, for us.

Here is the story, compressed. Israel was enslaved in Egypt — a picture of our own bondage to sin before Christ. On the night of the Passover, a lamb was slain in every household, its blood placed on the doorposts, and God said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exodus 12:13). Every firstborn son was safe under that blood, and no other provision existed. Paul makes the connection explicit for us: "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). The seven days of putting leaven out of the house that followed the Passover pictures the whole of the redeemed life that follows the moment of our own salvation — a complete, ongoing cleaning-out, from the day we believe until the day we die or are gathered to Him.

Then came the Red Sea. Pharaoh's army pursued them to the water's edge, and God parted the sea, brought Israel through on dry ground, and closed the waters over the pursuing army behind them. Paul describes our own baptism in exactly this shape: "we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Israel's redemption, at this point, was total and irreversible. As a nation, they could never again become enslaved to Egypt. What had been settled could never be unsettled.

But redemption was never the finish line — only the starting line. At Mount Sinai, God gave Israel something they had never been given before: a *conditional* covenant. "If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6). Notice the order. The law was never given to an unredeemed people to show them how to become redeemed — it was given to an already-redeemed people to show them how to live with the kingdom in view. Obedience was never the way in. It was the way forward.

And then came Kadesh Barnea — the edge of the promised land itself. Twelve spies went in; all twelve brought back the same true report of a good land. But ten of the twelve added their own unbelief to the report: the inhabitants were too strong, the cities too well fortified, the task impossible. Only two — Joshua and Caleb — urged the people to trust God to do what He had promised. The nation believed the ten. They wept, they rebelled, they even spoke of stoning Moses and Aaron and returning to Egypt. And God's response was severe: that entire adult generation was turned back into the wilderness to die there, forfeiting the inheritance they had been redeemed to receive. Of that whole generation, only two entered the land — Joshua and Caleb — and the reason given is simple: they "followed the LORD fully" (Numbers 14:24).

Notice carefully what did not happen. Israel was never sent back to Egypt. Their redemption was never revoked; God had already settled that at the Red Sea, and a redeemed people cannot become unredeemed. What they lost was not their standing — it was their inheritance.

IV. Reading the Type as a Mirror

Lay this history next to the Church and the pattern is unmistakable. The bondage in Egypt is our bondage to sin. The Passover lamb is Christ, our Passover, sacrificed once for all. The Red Sea is our baptism into His death and resurrection — settled, complete, never to be undone. Mount Sinai is where we are presently being taught the purpose of our salvation and what lies ahead of us, exactly as this series has been doing from its first message. Kadesh Barnea and the offer of the land is the offer of the kingdom of the heavens held out to us right now. The land itself pictures the heavenly city where Christ and His co-heirs will reign over the earth in the age to come. Israel's unbelief at the border is the same temptation held out to us — to trade the confident report of faith for the discouraged report of unbelief. And being turned back into the wilderness pictures the real possibility of being turned away from participating in the coming kingdom's activities, while remaining, permanently and irrevocably, a redeemed child of God.

V. Applying the Type

So here is the question this history was written to put in front of you: whose report are you believing about what lies ahead? Ten spies looked at the same land, the same giants, the same walled cities as Joshua and Caleb — and came back convinced the promise was impossible. Two looked at the very same evidence and were ready to go up at once. The difference was never the facts on the ground. It was where they fixed their confidence.

Peter, writing with this same history in view, warns believers not to be "carried away with the error of the wicked" and fall "from your own steadfastness," but instead to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:17-18). That is the whole choice in front of every reader of this letter, including you. Not whether you belong to God — that was settled at your own Red Sea, and nothing can unsettle it. But whether you will hold fast your confidence and the rejoicing of your hope firm to the end, or let an entire generation's mistake become your own.

Looking Ahead

Next, we continue this second warning into the rest of chapter three and into chapter four, where the author fully unpacks the words "Today, if you will hear His voice" and the rest that still remains for the people of God.