

Merciful God, heavenly Father, we heartily ask You, that You would so govern us by Your Holy Spirit that we may not neglect the time of Your gracious visitation, nor by impenitence fall into temporal and eternal punishment, but in this our day lay hold on the things that make for salvation and everlasting peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord ... Amen. (The Lutheran Liturgy, companion altar book for The Lutheran Hymnal, p. 151)

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. As it is said, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. Therefore, while the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

In Christ Jesus, whose tender voice calling us to repent and believe has been heard in every one of our rebellions, dear fellow redeemed:

Do you remember your lifetime rebellions against authority? Was it the defiant two-year old "NO!" punctuated with a foot stomping exclamation point? Was it the teenage scoffing declaration on your way out slamming the door behind you? Was it the crashing fist on the desk of your boss before you yelled and exited the office?

Like all your sins, they begin in the heart, so your rebellions against God and His Holy Law all begin in the secrets of your heart. But by God's grace as a Christian your conscience has been sharpened by His Word and is accompanied not only by the Word of God's Law but the remembered Word of His grace. So as we consider our Lord's continual desire for our renewed obedience: **Be Renewed by the Voice of God's Deliverance Today; Rebel Not.**

I

The writer of Hebrews makes reference to "*the rebellion*." That was readily identifiable to the readers of this letter at the time of its writing, even though it was over a millennium and a half earlier. It would be like in our generation hearing these references: "*the Revolution*", "*the Civil War*", "*the Great Depression*", "*Pearl Harbor*", "*D-Day*", "*the Cold War*", "*9-11*". All those expressions need little added information for most of us to know what is being referenced even

though we did not personally experience them. Nevertheless, they conjure up all sorts of images and facts learned already in our youth.

"The Rebellion" referenced in our text was the period after Israel was delivered out of their slavery from Egypt and rejected entering the land promised to them by God their Deliver. Almost at every turn in their journey to the promise land, the wandering for 40 years in the Sinai wilderness, up through the entrance into the promise land, there were acts of rebellion against God and His prophet, Moses. At any hint of danger from the lack of food and water to opposing armies, many of the Israelites expressed a desire to flee the danger and return to Egypt as slaves once again.

The One and only True God demonstrated repeatedly that He was for them not against them, delivering them out of any and all danger. Yet, despite this often fresh history of another deliverance, they would rebel. It was like they would soon forget what God had been doing for them for a long time.

What about your acts of rebellion against God who has delivered you from your sin, death and hell? Does the free and liberal offer of forgiveness, life and salvation in Word and Sacrament easily fade into the background, when you are led to complain against God about the difficulties of everyday life? Do you question the love and faithfulness of God when you experience suffering and disappointments in life? Then – "Take care, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."

Of course we all have an evil, unbelieving heart when it comes to our old sinful nature. It is like the man who came to Jesus in behalf of his demon possessed son and asked Jesus if He was *able* to heal him. Jesus challenged this weak statement and the man spoke up: "Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief." You and I can identify with that sentiment. The writer of our text warns us however to be aware of that active challenge to our faith at work in us so that we are not led to fall away from the living God.

II

Just as we are told here in our text, you are being exhorted today, so that you are not "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. As it is said, 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'" Hearing is not just hearing the sound of God's Word, but the hearing you and I need is to receive the Word of God with faith, comprehending but especially appropriating what great things God has promised us in regard to

our deliverance in Christ. You see when God declares something, like “let there be light” there was light, so when we hear Him declare that our sins are forgiven. That is not information for the brain, but a truth to be received by faith, by His Word your sins are forgiven.

Now tomorrow may be too late for you. Putting off the Words of your Lord as though they only apply to you in your old age is not a safe decision. Today is always the day to hear and believe what God has to declare to you the sinner – “you are forgiven, redeemed, restored in Christ Jesus”. You and I are not in charge of our repentance, it remains the work of the Spirit, as it was in the days of Israel’s wandering rebellion. They heard, but did not hear; they saw, but did not see – all because of the deceitfulness of their sinful hearts.

Toward the end of Paul’s life, when he was arrested in Palestine, he appealed to Caesar and was then able to preach the Gospel before Governor Felix (Acts 24) and King Agrippa (Acts 26). Both indicated that they would hear more from Paul in the future, but as far as we know they never found the time hear with blessing. Their “*Today*” passed them by.

In Rev. 3 we read Jesus’ letter to the Church at Laodicea. He was addressing believers like you and me and said: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with Me.” Often this is misunderstood as though Jesus were standing at the door of an unbeliever. Rather He was addressing a Christian Church, although a Church primarily filled with complacent believers. They were evidently neglecting the means of grace, not letting Christ come to them regularly through Word and Sacrament.

Thus the writer of our Hebrews text wants his hearers of his letter inspired by God, to truly hear and take to heart the warning from the example of those found wanting in the rebellion. He therefore warns them: “to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. Therefore, while the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.”

So we hear our Lord say while He was weeping over the inhabitants of Jerusalem: “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But they are hidden from your eyes.” Then He went to the Temple to cleanse it from the false practices which betrayed the true worship of their Savior God and said: “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.’”

You, my fellow delivered slaves to sin, know the voice of your great Deliverer. Yes, He daily rebukes your sin calling you to repentance, but He also daily declares you to be forgiven for all your rebellious sins and bedecks you in His holiness, His eternal righteousness. You have received the invitation to sit down with Him to eat the eternal feast of peace and rest. Today is not a day to ignore this voice of your Deliverer. It definitely is not a day to rebel against Him and not recognize the day of your visitation. The Lord Jesus has visited you with His tender voice of emancipation once again today. Live in this blood bought liberty as those who truly believe it and possess it now to His glory and your eternal welfare. Amen.