

Corpses in the Wilderness

Hebrews 3:16-19

I. INTRODUCTION:

1. **2** Did you ever walk through a cemetery and take time to read the inscriptions on the headstones?

A. Headstones always tell a story:

☛ **3** Some are poignant.

☛ **4** Some are humorous.

☛ **5** Some are clever.

☛ **6** Some say something about the person in the grave.

☛ **7** Some are sad, ******some even sadder.

☛ **8** Some just give the name and dates of birth and death.

B. **9** But all of them said something!

C. All of them are reminders that life is brief, death is sure, and how we live will be remembered in eternity (Eccl. 11:9-12:7; Jas. 4:14; Heb. 9:27)

Eccl. 11:9-12:13-14:

*“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth,
And let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth;
Walk in the ways of your heart,
And in the sight of your eyes;
But know that for all these
God will bring you into judgment.”*

v. 12: *“Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth,”*

vv. 13-14: *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” (KJV)*

D. They all should cause us to seriously reflect on our own life (Eccl. 7:2; 9:5).

E. ****** We should reflect on that living a life lived only for this world, without “*fearing God and keeping His commandments,*” is “*vanity of vanities*” (Eccl. 12:8).

F. ****** There is no more vivid example of this than the death of the Israelites whom God led out of Egyptian slavery.

G. The Scriptures explain why that generation did not enter the land of promise:

****Heb. 3:16-19:** *“For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”*

3. ****** Imagine the enormous number of graves that were dug in the wilderness of Sinai for “*who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness*” during the forty years Israel wandered there.

A. Before leaving Mt. Sinai, a standing army of 603,550 men over twenty years of age was numbered (Num. 1:1-3, 45-46).

B. Accounting for women, children and the elderly, we are well within reason to believe upwards of 2-3 million Israelites left Egypt bound for Canaan (some claim ~6 million!).

- C. Yet, only 2 men above twenty years old entered the land; Joshua and Caleb (Deut. 1:35-36).
 - D. A conservative estimate suggests >1 million deaths occurred during the period of wandering.
 - E. The wilderness of Sinai became the graveyard of rebels—each grave a landmark to blessings wasted and the tragic and bitter fruit of sin.
4. The rebellion of Israel was written to teach us not to follow their example (Rom. 15:4; I Cor. 10:11).
- A. We do well to ponder those wilderness graves, *“lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience”* (Heb. 4:11).
 - B. **10** Let us imagine the headstones of those buried in the wilderness:

“Here lies an unbelieving rebel who obstinately refused to believe God and accept His gracious blessings.”
 - C. **11** They teach us valuable lessons and warn us not to fall away from God; let’s consider four things we need to learn from the *“Corpses in the Wilderness”*:

II. DISCUSSION:

One epitaph that could be written on their headstone is...

I. **12 “Here lies Unbelief: Disobedient to the end.”**

- A. I have always thought it quite interesting that the Hebrew write **equivocates** the sin of “unbelief” and disobedience.

Heb. 3:18-19: *“...to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who **did not obey?** 19 So we see that they could not enter in because of **unbelief.**”*

 - (1) Did you catch that? *“those who did not obey”* (v. 18) are the same condemned for “unbelief” (v. 19).
 - (2) In other words, “unbelief” manifests itself in disobedience (Heb. 3:18-19).
 - (3) Think about it! Disobedience occurs when there is a lack of faith.
- B. Just like Israel in the wilderness, a Christian can develop *“an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God”* (Heb. 3:12).
- C. Israel saw:
 - ☛ God’s mighty works in Egypt (Ex. 4-12),
 - ☛ Walked through the parted waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14 & 15),
 - ☛ God gave them water from the rocks, and quail and manna from heaven (Ex. 16 & 17; Num. 11 & 20).

But still their hearts did not trust God!

Num. 14:1-4: *“So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, ‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?’ 4 So they said to one another, ‘Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.’”*

- D. God has truly blessed our generation above all others!

Heb. 11:39-40: “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, 40 God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.”

- (1) Do you ever contemplate that? Do you take it for granted? You shouldn't!!!
- (2) We have the entire divine record certified by God!
- (3) We need to wake up, sober up, and not mess it up!

Heb. 2:1-4: “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?”

- (4) The Israelites knew better! See point C above.
 - (5) We are no different than “those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness” (Heb. 3:17). Why?
 - (a) Although our sins have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, we can easily fall back into sin through a fearful, faltering and failing faith!
 - (b) I’ve seen it happen to even the strongest and most faithful among us (e.g., preachers, elders, etc.).
 - (c) Satan will not leave you alone! Never! 1 Pet. 5:8
- E. Therefore, “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.” (1 Cor. 16:13; KJV).
- (1) It is very possible to deceive ourselves about our faith.
 - (2) If we are not obeying the Lord, our faith is not strong.

2 Pet. 1:10-12: “...give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: 11 For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. 12 Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth.” (KJV)

Study→meditate→Pray→Attend

- F. There were graves in the wilderness because Israel did not believe and obey
Go656656656566d with her whole heart. **What about you? Will that sad epitaph sum up your life?!**

Another epitaph that could be written on their headstone is...

2. 13 “Here lies Rebellion: Irreverent in life, forgotten in death.”

- A. Israel greatly dishonored God with her idolatry, even though He delivered her, protected her, provisioned her and guided her.
- (1) Israel repaid God’s faithfulness by breaking His law and worshiping a golden calf, even as He was giving Moses His law on two tablets of stone (Ex. 32; v. 28: ~3,000 died!).
Ex. 32:4: “Then they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’”
 - (2) They could not have been more rebellious and disrespectful if they had slapped God in the face and spit on Him! BTW: they ultimately did that very thing! Mk. 14:65

- B. This is strikingly parallel to Christians who give lip-service to the gospel of Christ, yet serve the gods they have made: covetousness, pleasure and selfishness.
- (1) Oh yes, idolatry is still alive and well.
 - (2) Some take their service to God so lightly (Jas. 4:4).
 - (3) So many Christians are “lukewarm” at best (Rev. 3:16; Heb. 10:24-25).
- C. Don’t fool yourself! God will not be disrespected; He is holy, and we must respect His holiness (**1 Pet. 1:15-16**: “*but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’*”).
- (1) “Hello! Anybody home!” Do you “get it”!
 - (2) We must honor God w/God-fearing priorities in our lives; every aspect of our lives! 24/7
Gal. 2:20: “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*”
 - (3) Is that true for you? For me? Rom. 8:29
 - (4) Where there is godly fear there is a yearning to love and obey the Lord with all the heart, knowing that God accepts those who fear Him and work righteousness (Acts 10:34-35; **Isa. 66:2**: “*But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.*”).
- D. When we disrespect the Bible, the word of God, we disrespect God and can lay no claim to knowing Him (2 Jn. 2:3-5).
- (1) Such irreverence will prepare us a grave in the wilderness.
 - (2) **What about you? Will that sad epitaph sum up your life?!**

Another epitaph that could be written on their headstone is...

3. 14 “Here lies Lust: Consumed by evil desire.”

- A. Thousands upon thousands in Israel craved evil things and were buried in the desert:
1 Cor. 10:6-11: “*Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. 7 And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.’ 8 Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; 9 nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; 10 nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 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.*”; cf. Num. 4, 34; 25:1-9).
- B. We all know it, but we must constantly remind ourselves that evil things always promise more than they can deliver (Heb. 11:25; 2 Pet. 2:19: “*While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage.*”). Sin **ALWAYS**:
- ❶ Takes you further than you wanted to go (2 Sam. 11 & 12).
 - ❷ Keeps you longer than you wanted to stay (Rom. 6:16).
 - ❸ Costs you more than you wanted to pay (Rom. 6:23).
- C. The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes turn the saint’s attention away from the Holy One to the fleeting folly of the world’s unholiness (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

- D. When a person yields to the intense cravings of sin (e.g., drugs, alcohol, sex, cheating, lying, thievery, gambling, pride, worldliness in general) he or she is often reduced to poverty, both earthly and spiritual; and becomes a slave of Satan (cf. Prov. 6:26; Rom. 6:16; Matt. 25:41).
- E. Fill yourself with the desire for good things, and God will fill you up.

Phil. 4:8-9: *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things. 9 The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”*

F. What about you? Will that sad epitaph sum up your life?!

Another epitaph that could be written on their headstone is...

4. 15 “Here lies Certainty: He reaped what he sowed.”

- A. God did not treat Israel unjustly: *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap”* (Gal. 6:7).
 - (1) They got exactly what they had sown; they got exactly what they deserved.
 - (2) The law of “reaping what you have sown” has not been repealed!
 - (3) We too, will “reap what we have sown”:
 - (a) Paul wrote: **Rom. 2:5:** *“in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,”*
 - (b) We will reap as we’ve sown: **Rom. 2:6, 11:** *“who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’” “I I For there is no partiality with God.”*
 - (c) **Door #1: Rom 2:7, 10:** *“eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality” “but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good”*
 - (d) **Door #2: Rom. 2:8:** *“but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness — indignation and wrath, 9 tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil,”*
- B. Americans are adamant in defending our freewill to “do what we think is right.” (aka: “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”)
 - (1) That is certainly true, but it does not trump the law of “reaping what one has sown.”
 - (2) With freedom comes responsibility; behavior and attitudes have consequences!
 - (3) We must also acknowledge God’s punishment if we choose what’s against God’s will:

Gal. 6:7-9: *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.”*

Jn. 12:48: *“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him — the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.”*
 - (4) We cannot sow sin and reap heaven’s eternal life.
 - (5) This should compel us to:
 - ☛ *“test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil”* (2 Thess. 5:21-22).

- ☛ *“present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,”* (Rom. 12:1-2).
- ☛ *“Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.”* (Rom. 12:9)
- ☛ *“but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet. 3:18).
- ☛ *“be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;”* (2 Pet. 1:10-11).
- ☛ *“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”* (2 Cor. 7:1).
- ☛ *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”* (1 Cor. 15:58).
- ☛ *“let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. 24 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.”* (Lk. 9:23-24).
- ☛ *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”* (Gal. 2:20).

III. 16 CONCLUSION:

1. How will your headstone read?
 - A. 17 If we do these things, the epitaph on our headstone can rightly read:
 - B. 18 If we don't do these things, the epitaph on our headstone will rightly read like those whose graves littered the wilderness.
2. 19 You (and I) are writing the epitaph of our headstone right now!
3. Invitation

—Adapted from a sermon (*Graves in the Wilderness*) by Joe R. Price.