

Hebrews 3:16-17 Commentary

PREVIOUS

NEXT

CLICK VERSE

To go directly to that verse

[Hebrews 1-13 Commentary](#)

- [Hebrews 3:1](#)
- [Hebrews 3:2](#)
- [Hebrews 3:3](#)
- [Hebrews 3:4](#)
- [Hebrews 3:5](#)
- [Hebrews 3:6](#)
- [Hebrews 3:7](#)
- [Hebrews 3:8](#)
- [Hebrews 3:9](#)
- [Hebrews 3:10](#)
- [Hebrews 3:11](#)
- [Hebrews 3:12](#)
- [Hebrews 3:13](#)
- [Hebrews 3:14](#)
- [Hebrews 3:15](#)
- [Hebrews 3:16](#)
- [Hebrews 3:17](#)
- [Hebrews 3:18](#)
- [Hebrews 3:19](#)

CONSIDER JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST
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[Swindoll's Chart](#), [Interesting Pictorial Chart of Hebrews](#), [Another Chart](#)

The Epistle to the Hebrews				
INSTRUCTION Hebrews 1-10:18				EXHORTATION Hebrews 10:19-13:25
Superior Person of Christ Hebrews 1:1-4:13	Superior Priest in Christ Hebrews 4:14-10:18			Superior Life In Christ Hebrews 10:19-13:25
BETTER THAN PERSON Hebrews 1:1-4:13	BETTER PRIESTHOOD Heb 4:14-7:28	BETTER COVENANT Heb 8:1-13	BETTER SACRIFICE Heb 9:1-10:18	BETTER LIFE
MAJESTY OF CHRIST	MINISTRY OF CHRIST			MINISTERS FOR CHRIST
DOCTRINE				DUTY
DATE WRITTEN: ca. 64-68AD				

See [ESV Study Bible "Introduction to Hebrews"](#)
(See also [MacArthur's Introduction to Hebrews](#))

Hebrews 3:16 For [who provoked](#) Him when they had [heard](#)? [Indeed](#), did not [all those who came](#) out of [Egypt](#) led by [Moses](#)? ([NASB: Lockman](#))

Greek: tines gar akousantes (AAPMPN) parepikranan (3PAAI) all ou pantes oi exelthontes (AAPMPN) ex Aiguptou dia Mouseos

Amplified: For who were they who heard and yet were rebellious and provoked [Him]? Was it not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

KJV: For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses.

NET: For which ones heard and rebelled? Was it not all who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership? ([NET Bible](#))

NLT: And who was it who rebelled against God, even though they heard his voice? Wasn't it the people Moses led out of Egypt? ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: For who was it who heard the Word of God and yet provoked his indignation? Was is not all who were rescued from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses? ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

Wuest: For who, having heard, rebelled? But was it not all who came out of Egypt through the aid of Moses? But with whom was He, angry forty years?

Young's Literal: For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?

FOR WHO PROVOKED HIM WHEN THEY HEARD?: tines gar akousantes (AAPMPN) parepikranan (3PAAI) tines gar akousantes (AAPMPN) parepikranan:

- Heb 3:9,10; Numbers 14:2,4; 26:65; Ps 78:17
- Hebrews 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

For (gar) is a **term of explanation**.

David Allen - The conjunction **gar** (for) is construed by some as a weak transition, but it indicates the reason that the wilderness generation was excluded, a reason that, as Greenlee pointed out, is implicit in the answer to the rhetorical question, "Who were they who heard and rebelled?" The point is that they should not harden their hearts because those who did so at Kadesh were excluded from God's Canaan rest. (New American Commentary)

Provoked (3893)(**parapikraino** from **pará** to the point of, unto, implying movement toward a certain point + **pikraíno** = embitter) (only used in Heb 3:16) means to embitter alongside, to exasperate, to provoke to bitterness or anger, to make bitter towards one. And so the children of Israel provoked God to bitterness and anger, exasperating God Who had graciously promised them the land of milk and honey. Without faith it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:6) and it was only by faith men of old gained approval (Heb 11:2).

Wuest explains that "The writer is saying, "For who, having heard, did provoke?" using a question to recall to the minds of his readers the identity of those who refused to enter Canaan. The interrogation is continued. "But, was it not all who came out of Egypt through the instrumentality of Moses?" The writer reminds his readers that it was the entire generation that committed the sin of apostasy. ([Hebrews - Wuest's word studies from the Greek New Testament](#))

Spurgeon on "who?" - There are many such, and there are no sinners who provoke God so much as those who hear the Gospel. A man who never hears the Gospel at all may provoke God, but the man that sins after he has heard it again and again and again, and has the sound of it ringing in his ears, provokes God with a sevenfold degree of provocation.

Phillip Hughes asks - Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? The startling character of the answer to this, the first of the three leading questions proposed in these verses, rests in the fact that the persons involved were none other than those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses—all of them, that is to say, the entire generation that had been set free from bitter bondage and victoriously led forth with Moses at their head from the land of the tyrant. This does not imply that all without exception were guilty of unfaithfulness and apostasy, for the mention of Moses, who was certainly no rebel, is sufficient to remind us that there was a loyal remnant of those whose trust in God remained constant. The point is that this generation, which had firsthand experience of

the goodness of God in bringing them from slavery to freedom, comprised the very last group of persons one would have expected to rebel against their Savior God. Still more unthinkable is the prospect of hard-hearted rebellion by Christians against the Lord who at the price of his own life-blood has ransomed them from the dark power of Satan and led them into the glorious liberty of the children of God. Yet this was precisely the danger threatening the community to whom this letter was addressed. ([A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews](#))

INDEED, DID NOT ALL THOSE WHO CAME OUT OF EGYPT LED BY MOSES: all ou pantes oi exelthontes (AAPMPN) ex Aiguptou dia Mouseos:

- Numbers 14:24,30,38; Deuteronomy 1:36,38; Joshua 14:7-11; Romans 11:4,5
- Hebrews 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

Indeed (alla) could be read "but."

The problem with the majority of Israel that came out of Egyptian bondage was their unbelief in God's promises which provoked the anger of Jehovah and resulted in them not entering into the promised land but wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Clearly this is a warning to the Hebrews who had heard the Gospel and were intrigued but who ultimately rejected it in unbelief. The result is not that they lost a land (the promised land) but that they lost a life (eternal life). Be careful in this section. The writer is NOT saying that genuine believers who express times of unbelief in their life (we all do from time to time and to varying degrees) will not enter heaven. Will we experience the discipline of the Lord? Yes, if that is what it takes to get our attention (Heb 12:5-11). But we will still go to heaven. **On the other hand** individuals who **profess** to believe in the Gospel of Christ but experience no change whatsoever in their life are indicating by their lack of such change that they are not really genuine believers but that they are still dead in their trespasses and sins because they are in unbelief.

Spurgeon qualifies the writers use of "all" - Not all, for there were two faithful ones; **Joshua** and **Caleb** were faithful among the faithless found. See how the Spirit of God gathers up the fragments that remain. If there are but two faithful ones out of two millions, He knows it, and He records it. There were only a few—a mere handful—in Sodom, but the Lord would not consume them with the wicked. They were brought out of it. And so here, if there be only two, the Holy Spirit takes care to be very accurate in the counting of God's elect ones. If you are one of a family, and two of a city, He will take you and bring you into Zion. You may be in so great a minority that in all your acquaintance there may not be one godly person, yet the Holy Ghost will not take the matter in the lump, but He will choose you out, and mark you out, and distinguish you. Do you not notice how careful He was when he spoke about Judas—the good Judas? He says, "Not Iscariot" (John 14:22). No, no; he will not have him mistaken for that traitor. He guards the names of His people, each one of them, if there be but one—and two, if there be but two.

Newell - As to Israel, "Even so then at this present time also there is **remnant** according to the election of grace" (Ro 11:5-note). But they are received by grace alone, as sinners only! As to this word, "**TODAY**," let Israel be our warning! Israel came to Kadesh-Barnea, and being permitted (let Dt 1:22 interpret Nu 13:1) to send spies into the good land God's word had vouchsafed them, they hearkened to the evil report of the ten unbelieving spies: "*It is a good land ... but the giants are there, and cities walled up to heaven.*" No attention was given to the testimony of Joshua and Caleb: "*The land is an exceeding good land ... Rebel not against Jehovah, neither fear ye the people of the land ... Jehovah is with us: fear them not.*" Nay! "*All the congregation bade stone them with stones!*" " '*Let us make us a captain,' said they, 'and let us return into Egypt!*'" (Nu 14:4-10). This was "the provocation" of our text. Then the glory of Jehovah appeared; and but for the intercession of Moses they would have been smitten with pestilence and disinherited, and Moses alone would have taken their place. (Read again, we beg you, Nu 13:1-33, Nu 14:1-45, and Dt 1:1-46.)

Hebrews 3:17 And with [whom](#) was He [angry](#) for forty [years](#)? Was it not with [those who sinned](#), [whose bodies fell](#) in the [wilderness](#)? ([NASB: Lockman](#))

Greek: tisin de prosochthisen (3SAAI) tesserakonta ete ouchi tois hamartetasin (AAPMPD) on ta kola epesen (3SAAI) en te eremo

Amplified: And with whom was He irritated and provoked and grieved for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose dismembered bodies were strewn and left in the desert? ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

KJV: But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?

NET: And against whom was God provoked for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose dead bodies fell in the wilderness? ([NET Bible](#))

NLT: And who made God angry for forty years? Wasn't it the people who sinned, whose corpses lay in the wilderness? ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: And who was it with whom God was displeased for forty long years? Was it not those who, after all their hearing of God's Word, fell into sin, and left their bones in the desert? ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

Wuest: But with whom was He, angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose dead bodies fell in the wilderness?

Young's Literal: with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

AND WITH WHOM WAS HE ANGRY FOR FORTY YEARS?: tisin de prosochthisen (3SAAI) tesseractonta etc

- [Anger of God](#)
- Hebrews 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

Note that four different terms are employed to describe Israel's sin which emphasizes the depth of their rebellion against the Almighty! "**provoked**" (Heb 3:16), "**sinned**" (Heb 3:17), "**disobedient**" (Heb 3:18), "**unbelief**" (Heb 3:19).

Was... angry (4360)(**prosochthizo** from **pros** = toward or with + **ochtheô** = be sorely vexed; feel indignant at; loathe; spew out; be disgusted with; extreme anger and disgust) is expressive of a strong displeasure, amounting to offence. **Grieved** as translated in the KJV does not adequately express the righteous anger of God intimated in the passage and fails to accurately reflect the extreme anger and disgust of God. To put it mildly, God was offended at the actions of Israel which were a manifestation of their unbelief!

What does the "**40 years**" refer to? Nu 13:25ff: The spies into Canaan had begun to look at their circumstances and taken their focus off what God has promised. When they took their eyes off of God, fear began to enter in. They so provoked God that they were denied the very thing that they had wanted. So Israel's "rest" was a land but they were refused entry to Canaan bc they failed to believe God. Failure to Believe is not ignorance but stubbornness as they refused to obey God and thus they were refused rest.

Phillip Hughes - The same Israelites who had been rescued from Egypt were the ones with whom God was **provoked forty years**, and the reason for this provocation was that they sinned by abandoning their trust in God, with the consequence that their bodies fell in the wilderness. God judged and punished these rebels, who had set out with such protestations of loyalty and obedience, by not permitting them to arrive at the land of promise which was their destination. Only Joshua and Caleb, whose confidence in God had not wavered, and those who at the start of the exodus were immature in years were allowed to enter Canaan (see Nu 14:26ff.). And so a journey which might have taken a few months lasted for forty years—forty years of wandering and not arriving. This period involving the number forty represents, as on other occasions in Scripture (cf. Ge 7:4, 17; Dt. 2:7; 8:2; Josh. 14:10; Neh. 9:21; Amos 2:10; Jonah 3:4; Mt. 4:2; Acts 1:3; 7:30, 36), a period of divine longsuffering, on the one hand, and, on the other, of testing which culminates in judgment for the unrepentant. ([A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews](#))

WAS IT NOT WITH THOSE WHO SINNED, WHOSE BODIES FELL IN THE WILDERNESS: ouchi tois hamartesasin (AAPMPD) on ta kola epesen (3SAAI) en te eremo:

- Nu 26:64,65; 1Cor 10:1-13
- Nu 14:22,29,32,33; Deut 2:15,16; Jer 9:22; Jude 1:5
- Hebrews 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

God declared in Nu 14:22-23 - "Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.

The writer is alluding to the tragic description in Numbers.

Num 14:29 your **corpses** shall fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me.

Num 14:32 'But as for you, your **corpses** shall fall in this wilderness.

Num 14:33 'And your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they shall suffer [for] your unfaithfulness, until your **corpses** lie in the wilderness.

Paul spoke of this same event in 1Cor 10:5 - "Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; **for (term of explanation - What's Paul explaining?) they were laid low in the wilderness.**"

Sinned (264)(hamartano) literally means to miss the mark (and so not share in the prize). Hamartano means to act contrary to the will and law of God. To commit a wrong. To be in error. Hamartano means to **err** (err is from Latin errare = to wander or to stray!) which means to wander from the right way, to deviate from the true course or purpose and so to violate an accepted standard of conduct. To err is to miss the right way. To err means to deviate from the path or line of duty. To stray by design or mistake. To err is to stray from God and/or His commandments. Hamartano means to swerve from the truth, to turn aside from the straight course charted by the Word of Truth. To swerve means to wander from any line prescribed, or from a rule of duty; to depart from what is established by law, duty or custom. In short hamartano means to miss the mark of God's perfect standard.

Speaking of those Israelites who had come out of Egypt with Moses, the writer is saying that they missed the mark when they swerved from the truth that God had promised them entry and victory in the promised land. They refused to believe and unbelief is disobedience and disobedience is sin and when sin is fully accomplished it brings death.

Spurgeon - God speaks very lovingly of the bodies of His saints, but see how the apostle speaks of the bodies of apostates. He does not say that their bodies were buried, but that their carcasses fell in the wilderness. Unbelief degrades us into beasts whose carcasses fall beneath the poleax of judgment. Remember that in the Old Testament the unredeemed man is comparable to the donkey: "If you will not redeem it, then you will break its neck" (Ex 13:13). But the redeemed man is comparable to the sheep. Valuable property is in him, and God esteems him.

Bodies - carcasses. [Ro 6:23, Eph 2:1] members of the body like feet, in LXX = dead body [Nu 14:29] (your corpses shall fall in this wilderness). Also Nu 14:32,33.

Bodies (2966)(kolon) means a limb, a member of the human body or of an animal. A dead body, a corpse (inasmuch as the members of a corpse are loose and fall apart) and in the plural as here the carcasses or corpses (as in Nu 14:29). There are 6 uses in the Septuagint - Lev. 26:30 Nu 14:29 Nu 14:32 Nu 14:33 1Sa 17:46 Isa. 66:24

Henry Morris - One of the difficulties posed by skeptics is that, if a million or more Israelites perished in the wilderness during their forty years in the desert, why have none of their graves been found by archaeologists? This verse suggests that the bodies may not have been buried at all but simply left to decay and return to dust under the desert sun. These all died "because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19), without seeing the promised land.

Fell (4098)(pipto) means to fall, fall down, fall into ruin, fall under condemnation. The bodies in the wilderness **fell** at the rate of about 90 corpses per day! It is interesting to note that when **pipto** is used to describe a building it paints the picture of an edifice that has fallen into ruin!

Wilderness (2048) (eremos) means lonesome, solitary, wilderness = uninhabited, lonely, uncultivated region translated "wilderness" 32x in the KJV.

The writer of Hebrews is implying that his readers will die in their sins (cp Jesus' solemn warning - Jn 8:21, 24) if they fail to place their faith in Messiah and bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance (Mt 3:8), even as the wilderness wanderers died a physical death because of their unbelief. If they profess belief but do not "possess" (genuine, soul saving) belief, they will die in the wilderness just as the unbelieving, disobedient Israelites did. But here we need a caveat or qualifier -- the writer is not saying all those who came out of Egypt were unsaved, except for Joshua and Caleb (who entered the promised land). This is clear from the life of Moses who died without entering the promised land and yet was present at the Transfiguration with Jesus. Clearly, Moses was saved. (See Steven Cole's comments below)

Ray Stedman writes "The rhetorical questions of Heb 3:16–18 show how an **outward facade of belief** can be maintained while the **heart is still unrepentant, and therefore unredeemed**. It is possible to participate in and benefit from the great miracles of God, as the Israelites did who came out of Egypt with Moses (Heb 3:16). Yet, despite such evidence, **the heart can remain unchanged for a lifetime**. God sees that inner hardness and warns continually against it until he is forced to judge it (He 3:17). Note the growing stages of unbelief: general rebellion (He 3:16); sin, punished by physical death (He 3:17); and disobedience (Gk "being unpersuadable"—He 3:18). The cause of this recalcitrance lies deeper than a wrong attitude or wrong behavior; it lies in a **disobedient will**. Therefore, the loss of promised blessing is traceable only and solely to long-continued unbelief (He 3:19). This word (apistian, "disbelief") is the platform upon which the writer's more positive explanation of rest is founded. He gives us the other

side of disbelief in Hebrews 4. ([Hebrews 3:12-19 Don't Miss Your Opportunity](#)) (Bolding added)

Steven Cole on Hebrews 3:16-19 - The author comes back to the story of Israel in the wilderness, quoting again from Psalm 95: "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me." Then he brings this story home to his readers by asking three sets of two rhetorical questions each (the KJV mistranslates Heb 3:16). The first question in each set is answered by the second question. He wants his readers to see that their situation parallels exactly that of Israel in the wilderness. In Heb 3:19 he sums up his point, tying it back to the idea of unbelief in Heb 3:12.

The first question and answer show that this story applies to all **professing** believers. **Who provoked God when they heard His voice?** (Heb 3:16) The same group that Moses had led out of Egypt. While there was a truly saved remnant in that company (**Ed**: For example, Moses was in this company and he certainly was genuinely saved as he appeared with Jesus in the Transfiguration!), **most** of them grumbled, disbelieved God, and died in the wilderness. The author is saying to all **professing** Christians, "This applies to you!" Even if we are true believers, John Owen's comment is apropos: "The best of saints have need to be cautioned against the worst of evils" (Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning [Kregel], p. 53).

The second question and answer show that **professing** believers who persist in sin should expect God's anger, not His rest. If we are not true believers, our sin in the face of knowledge will incur God's final judgment. If we are true believers, our sin will bring on His strong discipline. Either way, you don't want to go there!

The third question and answer show that those who incurred God's judgment in the wilderness were not only **unbelieving**; they were **disobedient**. As we've seen, you cannot separate the two. **Unbelief that is unchecked quickly moves into disobedience. Often unbelief is a smokescreen used to hide disobedience. Unbelief is more socially acceptable than sin, so we posture ourselves as struggling with intellectual issues. But beneath the surface, we know that if God's Word is true, then we need to turn from our sins, and we don't want to do that.** The disobedient who failed to enter God's rest were one and the same with the unbelieving.

His final summary (Heb 3:19) also shows that unbelief renders us not only **unwilling**, but also **unable** to appropriate God's blessings. Either faith opens the blessings of God's eternal rest to you, or unbelief bars you from them. To persevere in faith, we need to personalize the story of Israel in the wilderness. We need to avoid their awful sin of unbelief that rendered them unable to enter God's promised rest.

Conclusion - I had a neighbor in California who could be described as an all-out macho man. His face and tattooed arms were tanned from working on a road crew and from riding his motorcycle in the California sun. He had a quick temper. I once heard him from over 100 yards away cussing out the snowplow driver for plowing a berm in front of his driveway. He had copies of Penthouse magazine lying around his house. He never went to church.

One day I got an opportunity to share Christ with him. But he quickly held up his hand to silence me and then said, "Steve, I've got that all fixed up with the Man Upstairs." I'm always worried when someone refers to Almighty God as "the Man Upstairs." I said, "What do you mean?" He proceeded to tell me that when he was a teenager, he attended a large Baptist church in the Los Angeles area. The youth pastor had told him that if he would accept Christ, he would be assured of going to heaven. He said, "I did that, and so you don't need to worry about me." Even though there was not a shred of evidence that he was persevering in the faith, and in spite of much evidence that he was not, he thought that because he had once believed, he had eternal life!

The author of Hebrews had a different view of things. He says that to enter God's rest, we must persevere in obedient faith. To persevere, we must avoid the great sin of unbelief; we must practice the great service of mutual encouragement; we must hold fast our great salvation in Christ; and, we must personalize the great story of Israel in the wilderness. Take care, brethren! ([Lesson 11- Persevering in Faith Hebrews 3:12-19](#)) (Bolding added)