

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews

SERMON: **The Tragedy of Unbelief**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 3:7-19

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Open your Bibles to Hebrews 3. Last week in Mike's sermon on Hebrews 3:1-6 we saw a comparison and a contrast between Moses and Jesus. Moses was a faithful servant in God's house, but Jesus was even more faithful as a son over God's house. The first part of chapter 3 presented Moses and Jesus as examples of faithfulness; in contrast, the second part of chapter 3 presents the Israelites as an example of unfaithfulness.

Moses was faithful, but most of the people he led out of Egypt were not faithful. Their unfaithfulness had tragic consequences. The Israelites were delivered out of Egypt with the purpose of going into the Promised Land, but almost all of that generation died in the wilderness and failed to enter the Promised Land.

Jesus was even more faithful than Moses, but like the Israelites many of Jesus' followers are not faithful. The pressure and temptations that faced the Israelites in the wilderness are not unlike the pressures and temptations that faced the Hebrew Christians in the first century, and they're not unlike the pressures and temptations that face us today. That's why the writer of Hebrews uses this example. If the unfaithfulness of the Israelites had tragic consequences then how much more should their example serve as a warning to those who claim to follow Jesus.

Hebrews 3:1 addresses the readers as *holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling*. And in verse 6 the biblical writer addresses the readers as *God's house*. Both of these designations refer to Christians. But at the end of verse 6 he attaches a condition to these statements: *and we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast*. Verse 14 uses this same type of condition, "*We have come to share in Christ, if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.*" This letter was written to people who all claimed to be Christians, and no doubt many of them were, but there is no indication in the letter that the writer knew who the true believers were. And so he warns all Christians to not be unfaithful.

3:1-19 *Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. ²He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ³Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. ⁴For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁵Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. ⁶But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.*

⁷*So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice ⁸do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, ⁹where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. ¹⁰That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said,*

'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' ¹¹So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

¹²See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. ¹⁵As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

¹⁶Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Sermon in a Sentence: ***True faith in Jesus is marked by long term faithfulness to God's Word.***

This morning we are first going to look at an *example* of unfaithfulness from Israel's history and then look at an *exhortation* to faithfulness.

The *example* of the unfaithfulness of the Israelites in the wilderness teaches us that...

Long-term unfaithfulness has tragic consequences. (7-11; 16-19)

In verses 7-11 the writer of Hebrews quotes the second half of Psalm 95 to provide an example of unfaithfulness in Israel during the years of wilderness wandering. He doesn't include the first half of Psalm 95, but the original readers of Hebrews would have had it in mind. The first half of Psalm 95 is a call to worship, and shows us that...

God is faithful.

According to the first half of the Psalm God is worthy of worship. Not only was God the creator of all things, he was also the redeemer of Israel who led his people like a shepherd leads a flock, out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.¹ God had proved himself to be a strong deliverer and faithful in fulfilling all of his promises. This aspect of God should elicit worship from God's people (Psalm 95:6-7).

Hebrews 3:1-6 parallels the first part of Psalm 95. It shows us that Jesus was faithful. He is also seen as the creator in chapter 1. And he is seen as the great redeemer who saved us from our sins by his death on the cross in chapter 2.

The second half of the Psalm, which we find in Hebrews 3:7-11, is a warning. This warning illustrates the folly of rebelling against a faithful God who had given his people so much. It warns the readers by referencing the fate of those who were unfaithful during the wilderness years – they died in the wilderness and failed to enter the Promised Land.

¹ When shepherd language is used in the OT it often refers to the Exodus event where God redeemed his people; he led them like a shepherd, out of Egypt and into the Promised Land (Ps 77:20; Ps 78; Ps 80:1). For more on this see Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*.

3:8-9 *do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert,⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.*

The “rebellion” referred to in verse 8 speaks of the years the Israelites wandered in the desert. From the time they crossed the Red Sea until the time they arrived at the doorstep of the Promised Land the Israelites were unfaithful. They grumbled and complained about everything. Many times they said they would have been better off going back to Egypt. They didn’t trust God. They committed horrible acts of sin against God. God was faithful, but the Israelites were unfaithful.

Most of the language in the second half of Psalm 95 draws our attention back to Numbers 13 and 14. This is the main example of unfaithfulness the writer of Hebrews is referencing throughout chapters 3 and 4. Many of you are probably familiar with the story.

Less than two years after they had crossed the Red Sea they came to the doorstep of the Promised Land. They had finally reached the land God promised to give to Abraham’s descendants over 600 years before. Moses commissioned twelve spies to scout out the land and bring back a report. The spies traveled all the way through the land. And all of the spies agreed that the land was amazing, flowing with milk and honey. But there was only one problem: there were giants in the land; men that were too strong and too big for the Israelites to defeat. Only two of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb, thought they should go into the land and take possession of it. They reasoned that God would secure the victory as he had done in the past. But the other ten spies were afraid and didn’t trust God. They believed it would be better to return to Egypt as slaves than to be killed in battle. These ten persuaded the rest of the Israelites with their reasoning.

This angered God greatly.

3:10-11 *That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' ¹¹So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."*

Keep in mind they had just been saved from out of Egypt by the strong hand of God. God had been faithful to fulfill every promise he had ever made to his people. So why would God not be able to save the Israelites now from those big and strong people living in the land of Canaan? God could have brought that generation into the Promised Land, but they didn’t believe he could and so they wanted to return to Egypt.

It was not the Israelites unfaithfulness alone that angered God it was their unbelief that led to unfaithfulness.

Unbelief leads to unfaithfulness.

And unbelief that leads to continual unfaithfulness is a big deal with God. It was such a big deal that God’s own people weren’t able to enter the Promised Land.

3:16-19 *Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*

God wanted to deliver his people from slavery and give them rest from their enemies in the Promised Land (Exodus 3:8), but these wilderness wanderers didn't enter God's rest because of their persistent unbelief and unfaithfulness.

The unfaithful forfeit God's faithful promises.

God's judgment on Israel's disobedience may seem too harsh at first glance, but if you look closely at the books of Exodus and Numbers you will see that they were continually disobedient to the Lord. That's why verse 10 says, *"Their hearts are always going astray."* This judgment was not due to one act of rebellion, but to repeated and persistent rebellion.

And even more importantly their unfaithfulness proved their lack of belief. Falling away from God doesn't happen over night; as we see here, it happens over a long period of time where unbelief leads to unfaithfulness over and over again.

Why did the writer use this example?

The Christian life is analogous to the wilderness years.

All of the Israelites who crossed over the Red Sea were identified as the children of God. And all of those being addressed in the letter to the Hebrews were identified as "brothers" who share in the "heavenly calling." But the time between their profession of faith and their entrance into heaven was a time like the wilderness years for the Israelites (Figure 1) where their lives would prove whether or not they had true faith.



Figure 1

Paul makes this analogy clear in 1 Corinthians 10. He identifies the crossing of the Red Sea as a baptism of sorts and the manna and water are equated with communion. There are certain things within the faith community that identify people as Christians, just like the events that happened following the Exodus would have identified the Israelites as the children of God.

But even though all of the Israelites crossed the Red Sea only a few of that generation made it into the Promised Land. In the same way there are many in the church who have made a profession of faith, and there have been many who have identified themselves with Christ through baptism and communion, but not all who profess Christ will prove to be true Christians in the end, just like not all who left Egypt entered the Promised Land.

The time between our original commitment to Christ and when we die are wilderness years, so to speak. During this time true belief will be shown by our faithfulness or unbelief will be shown by our unfaithfulness.

This example of the Israelites has shown us that long-term unfaithfulness has tragic consequences. Let's look now at the exhortation in verses 12-15 that shows us that...

Long-term faithfulness has eternal blessings. (12-15)

Before we continue any further in this discussion I think it is critical that we understand what the writer of Hebrews means by faith. The writer of Hebrews defines faith throughout the letter. But Hebrews 11 may be the most famous chapter in the whole Bible on the topic of faith.

In chapter 11 there are many examples of saints who are all described as possessing true faith. But the thing that sticks out to me most is how many of the examples of faith emphasize the perseverance of the saints. Then at the beginning of chapter 12 we have one of the best known verses in the whole Bible which links the faith stories from the OT with the lives of the Hebrew Christians: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses [who had faith that persevered], let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

Defining faith:

1. Faith by definition perseveres²

That's why in verse 6 it says, *"We are his house, if we hold on to our courage..."* And in verse 14, *"we have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end."* That's also why the writer cited the example from Israel's history. There were many who identified themselves as the children of God, but in the end they didn't enter into God's rest, the Promised Land; they didn't persevere.

There are many who profess to have faith in Jesus, but we have to keep in mind...

2. Profession of faith does not equal possession of faith

If anyone puts their assurance of salvation in a prayer that was said, or an aisle that was walked that is a false assurance. Assurance of salvation comes from perseverance.

I made a profession of faith when I was in eighth grade. But I lived my life in college as if I had no faith. I recommitted my life to Jesus when I was 21. Some may ask when I became a true Christian, was it in eighth grade or when I recommitted my life at 21. I don't know the answer to that question, but I know this: It would have been ridiculous for me to have had any assurance of salvation during those years of living in rebellion to God just because I said a prayer when I was 13 years old.

² The language for this division comes from Carson's sermon "Jesus' Rest is Better Than All the Rest" (April 2002). See also Colossians 1:21-23; 1 John 2:19; John 8:31

The same is true for those of us who have loved ones that made a commitment to Jesus at some point in their lives but who are currently living their lives in complete rebellion to God – we can't have assurance of our salvation or of anyone else's salvation if faith is not accompanied by perseverance. Profession of faith does not equal possession of faith because faith by definition perseveres.

With that being said I think it is important to clarify something. I don't believe a person can *lose* their salvation. But I do think a person will *prove* their salvation (or not) by perseverance.

3. Possession of faith will be proved by perseverance.

Those people who don't persevere in faith don't lose their salvation; they simply prove that they never had it in the first place. And those people who persevere in the faith don't earn their salvation; they just prove by their faithfulness that they possess salvation.

Pay close attention to the conditionals in verses 6b and 14. So far I have been emphasizing the "if," but look at what comes before.

3:6b *And we **are** his house if we hold on*

3:14 *We **have come** to share in Christ, if we hold firmly till the end*

It doesn't say we "will be" his house or we "will come" to share in Christ if we hold on – it says we "are" his house and we "have come" to share in Christ if we hold on. Both of these conditionals describe something that is already a reality. The holding on proves we are His house; it doesn't get us in or keep us in. Only the work of Jesus can get us in and keep us in.

But there is a tension in the Bible concerning the work of Jesus on our behalf and the work we are to do.

4. Jesus does all the work in saving us, but we must make every effort.

Our salvation is only by faith in what Christ has done for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus lived the life we failed to live and he paid the penalty for our sin. Faith in Jesus' work is our only way to salvation. But although there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, if we have been saved we need to give the Christian life everything we've got.

In verse 14 the writer says we have come to "share" in Christ. This word "share" carries a business partner idea with it. Jesus has been so faithful and has secured everything we need for life and salvation, but we are called as partners with him to make every effort to be just as faithful (2 Peter 1:3-5). Jesus persevered and we are called to persevere as well. We see this in...

Hebrews 4:11 *Let us make every effort to enter that rest...*
and

Luke 13:24 *Make every effort to enter through the narrow door...*

But I can think of no verses that better summarize this tension than...

Philippians 2:12-13 *Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

The call is for everybody who professes faith to take sin and unbelief seriously every day.

Faithfulness requires individual vigilance against sin and unbelief.

3:12-13 *See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

The writer uses many terms to describe what is involved in falling away from God. If we're going to understand what it means to be vigilant against sin and unbelief then we need to understand what all of these terms mean and how they fit together. (Figure 2)

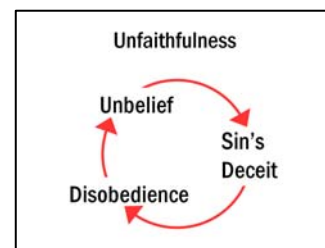


Figure 2

Unbelief is failure to believe what God's Word says is true, but not just intellectually. A lot of people would say they agree with a truth found in God's Word intellectually, but they don't really believe it.

True belief will always be accompanied by action. This passage says multiple times, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden you hearts as you did in the rebellion." How you respond to God's voice (or his Word) will determine whether or not you believe God.

When we don't believe what God says we live in an environment where sin's deceitfulness becomes believable. Sin deceives us into believing that something other than God can do something for us that only God can do. Or sin deceives us into thinking that God can't do something that his Word says he can do.

Once we have been deceived by sin, then we are all the more prone to fall into sin and disobedience. And the more you live in disobedience the more hardened you become and the less you believe God's Word.

For example, the Israelites were deceived into thinking that the giants in the land of Canaan could defeat them. But if they believed God's promise that he would fight for them they wouldn't have been deceived. As sin's deceitfulness took hold in their lives they disobeyed God, became fearful, and wanted to return to Egypt.

The Hebrew Christians were deceived into thinking that reverting back into Judaism would be better than being persecuted, but they were wrong. For if they really believed that Jesus' death destroyed the power of death and freed them from fear of death and that following Jesus would result in eternal life then they wouldn't have been deceived. As long as they were deceived by sin they were prone to fear and drifting.

The problem with fearing man is it proves that we don't believe (or fear) God. And if we don't believe in God we need to fear for our souls more than anything else. But what do we fear? Do we fear unemployment? Do we fear that if we are too generous we won't have enough for ourselves? Do we fear that we won't be comfortable enough? These fears could be an indication that we don't believe God can provide for us. Do we fear what people will think of us if we lived our lives completely sold out for Jesus? That could indicate that we believe our reputation is more important than God's. It could indicate that we don't believe only God is worthy of glory.

We are often deceived into thinking that the things of this world can satisfy us. But sin's deceitfulness fails to tell us that the pleasures of this world will not last. If we really believed that only God can satisfy us, then we wouldn't be deceived. If we really believed that only God can satisfy us, then we wouldn't be so greedy; we wouldn't be such gluttons, such consumers; we wouldn't engage in so much sexual immorality.

If we continue in this cycle of unbelief our hearts become hardened by sin's deceitfulness and we are more prone to disobedience. This is what unfaithfulness (apostasy/falling away) looks like.

Some of you may be wondering at this point: How do we know when we or someone else has gone too far in unfaithfulness? Or when has someone become an outright rebel who is hardened by sin and in danger of forfeiting the promise of eternal life? Well the text doesn't answer that question. Instead the text seems to say that we all need to be vigilant every day against sin and unbelief.

Notice that verse 12 says, "*see to it brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*" It is important for us to remember that this vigilance required for faithfulness applies to all of us. The writer addresses the whole congregation, not just the ones who are obviously in sin. All of us are to some degree dealing with unbelief in our life which makes us vulnerable to the deceitfulness of sin and leads to disobedience.

What should you do about it? You should identify the areas in your life where you see evidence of unbelief; areas where you see continued patterns of sin – and write them down. Ask God to expose your unbelief and renew your mind. Ask him to forgive you and deliver you from sin. Then get someone else involved. Let them know where you struggle with sin and unbelief.

Although we are all as individuals called to vigilance, we are not called to be vigilant alone.

Faithfulness requires corporate vigilance against sin and unbelief.

3:13 *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

The word "encourage" is rendered various ways in the different translations: "encourage," "warn," "exhort." I prefer "exhort" because it carries more of the intended meaning in this passage. If you exhort someone, you challenge and encourage them. You encourage them to stay on track and you challenge them when they're getting off track.

Faithfulness is not a maverick enterprise. We need to hold each other up. When you see the evidence of unbelief in your life you need to be vigilant and deal with it and invite others to help you. But when you see the evidence of unbelief in someone else's life you need to take that just as seriously, if you really care about them. But exhortation must always be done in a spirit of love. And while loving someone does involve confrontation you have to remember that you're not the "sin and unbelief" police; you're a fellow brother or sister in Christ. And that is the spirit in which you are to exhort.

Exhortation happens best in the context of relationships. Parents need to challenge and encourage their kids to follow Jesus and to avoid sin and unbelief – that includes kids who are still in the home as well as those who are now adults. Husbands need to challenge and encourage their wives to follow Jesus and to avoid sin and unbelief. Wives need to challenge and encourage their husbands to follow Jesus and to avoid sin and unbelief. Although I am still a very sinful man, I am less sinful than I was 12 years ago. I owe much of my sanctification to my wife, Maggie, who is an incredible encourager, but she doesn't pull any punches either when I'm out of line.

In addition to family relationships I also think we need to intentionally seek after mentors and spiritual leaders in the church who we invite to challenge us and encourage us on a regular basis. I would not be persevering in my faith today if it weren't for men in my life like my Young Life leader, Joe Bahr, and my mentor of 11 years, Wes Penner. These men have encouraged me to follow Jesus and have challenged me when I've strayed. They have helped me see the deceitfulness of sin and to put my trust in God's Word. If you don't have a person or group in your life who is challenging and encouraging you to follow Jesus I challenge and encourage you to find one this week!

If you know of people who have made a profession of faith, but who are living their lives in rebellion to God don't leave today wondering whether they're really saved. Instead challenge and encourage them to follow Jesus. Expose the deceitfulness of sin in their lives and expose them to the truth of God's Word. This verse says that we are to exhort one another daily as long as it is called today. As long as it is called today refers to all of the time before the end of time. Don't go away discouraged if loved ones are not walking with Jesus, go away convicted to challenge them and encourage them every day between now and the end of your life to follow Jesus.

You can't save them and they can't save themselves. Only Jesus can save. But we are called to make every effort.

In closing I want to say a final word about how to remain faithful.

If I were to pick one topic for chapter 3 it would be the topic of faithfulness. Today we've seen an example of unfaithfulness from the Israelites and we've heard an exhortation to remain faithful. But the whole chapter started out by drawing our attention to the faithfulness of Jesus. Look at verse 1, "*Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus...*"

He created us for himself. Then he redeemed us for himself. His faithfulness is worthy of all of our worship and all of our devotion. Falling away seems like craziness in light of his faithfulness. Jesus is the one who was faithful and who persevered. If we're going to have true faith that perseveres we have to set our thoughts on Jesus and we have to fix our eyes on Jesus.

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