

Sermon 9: Hebrews 3:7-19: An Evil Unbelieving Heart

OUTLINE

Warnings against unbelief
Aids for unbelief
Examples of unbelief

INTRODUCTION

There have been various attempts to define, what is sin? At the heart of what sin is, is lawlessness. We as God's creatures refuse our creatureliness and His Creatorship and His right to rule over us, and we live by our law not His. But there have been other attempts to throw the nature of sin into relief. These are incomplete but helpful as they highlight aspects of sin that we can overlook or need to be reminded of. Some have characterized sin as disordered love, wrongly loving God and our neighbour, it is not a complete definition but it helps us focus on one part of what sin is. Some have characterized sin as idolatry, that every sin is an act of serving something other than God as your god. Another helpful perspective is seeing all sin as unbelief. Every sin you have ever committed has been a denial of those truths you know to be true and acting as if God is not God, sin is not sinful, sin will not be judged, etc. It is this idea of unbelief and the sinfulness of unbelief that our text places before us today in Heb. 3:7-19. I think this is a very important topic. Today unbelief has an intellectual respectability. Today many would say that because we don't know for sure, because we can't test all the data, and we don't have all the information, to remain agnostic is portrayed as intellectually honest and more virtuous than someone who believes. Agnosticism is framed as being heroic, having the courage to be adrift from absolute surety, to go off into the horizon not knowing what is around the bend. Many are self-deceiving into thinking that unbelief is a beautiful thing. If this were all the information there was we would have to agree. But, God is real, God has revealed Himself in nature, conscience, history, scripture, and even stepped into time in the person of Jesus Christ. He has sent His Holy Spirit to continue to witness to us of the truthfulness of God's word, and in particular of the glories of Christ. We will see as we look at the nature of unbelief today that it is not the forgivable naiveté of the ignorant, a well-intended misinformed blunder, but a refusal to believe the truth that is in front of us, the truth we have felt, the truth we are now willing to trade cheaply for something else. The book of Hebrews is a book that deals with the worst type of unbelief. To know the truth of God's greatest word and gift in Jesus Christ, and then to sell Him cheaply who has paid so dearly to save sinners, this is the highest act of insult we can offer against God, and the sin of unbelief these Christians are in danger of as under the pressure of persecution they are considering giving up Christ for Judaism.

Last week we saw the author call these Christians to 'hold fast' our confidence and our boast in Christ. We enter a new section from 3:7-4:13 that uses Psalm 95 as a way to motivate these believers to hold fast. After quoting the psalm in 3:7-11, we see a first application in v12-19 focusing specifically upon unbelief; a second in 4:1-10 focusing on rest; and a third in 4:11-13 focusing on heeding the word of God. We will look at v7-19 under three headings, warnings against unbelief; aids for unbelief; examples of unbelief.

Warnings against unbelief

V7-11, 'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.

Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.'

As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.' The quote is from Psalm 95, a famous call to worship that was regularly used. The first 7 verses call the people of God to worship based on the fact that God is the true God above all gods, that He is the Creator and sustainer of all things, and that He is our God and we are His flock. The second half of the psalm is the part quoted here. The psalm is credited to David, Heb. 4:7. David is writing about 1000 years after the Exodus and is calling upon the people of God in his generation to hear God's voice and listen, and not to be like that generation that was rescued from Egypt but died under the wrath of God due to their unbelief. You will remember that of 600 000 men only 2 entered into Canaan, all the others died in the wilderness. David is diagnosing the main problem of this generation as being one of unbelief and is warning his own generation to take heed. David is summarizing 40 years in a very quick sweep, but there are certain key events that are likely at the forefront of his mind. In Ps. 95:8 we have some geographical locations given, 'do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.' This is of course referring to Ex. 17. Think on it. God has sent Moses in answer to the cries of Israel. God has demonstrated his faithfulness to His promises and exercised His power in sending the ten plagues. Pharaoh the most powerful man in the world is humbled. The Israelites are sent away with gold. They are rescued by the pillar of fire and cloud from Pharaoh's armies. They are preserved as God literally parts the Red Sea so that they can cross on dry ground. After all of this, when they get thirsty what do they say, Ex. 17:3, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Moses cries out to God, and God instructs Moses to strike the rock to provide water for them. This marked Moses deeply because of the ingratitude and the willingness of the Israelites to believe that God was trying to kill them not save them. They refused to see God's past acts, His goodness, to interpret His actions in light of His promises, and to trust Him in hard times fixated only their comforts, judging God's goodness by their levels of comfort. We know that when Israel did this again, Moses struck the rock twice in disobedience against God, overcome by his own anger at their unbelief and as a result he lost his right to enter Canaan. Ex. 17:7 captures Moses attitude, 'And he called the name of the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarrelling), because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

But another key event hinted at in David's wording is the tragic events of Num. 14. In Numbers 13 after travelling through the wilderness and are on the brink of entering Canaan, they send in 12 spies to spy out the land. But you will remember that 10 of the 12 spoke about the giants in the land, where Caleb and Joshua were full of faith and were not deterred. 14:1-5, 'Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.' The people tried to take up stones to put Moses

and Aaron and Caleb and Joshua to death before the Lord intervened, v10-11. God, like with the instance of the golden calf wanted to wipe them out and start again with Moses. Again Moses intercedes and God answers, v20-22, 'Then the Lord said, "I have pardoned, according to your word. ²¹ But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, ²² none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice'. God swears that the people will not enter the land.

The author of Hebrews chooses this text because of how much grace they had received and yet instead of believing in God, clinging to Him in hard times, trusting in the promised good that will come to them, they turned away from the truth in their hearts provoking God's wrath. Having every reason to practice persevering faith, they gave themselves over to unbelief. This was not a case of ignorance but self-deception, a willful turning from the truth of God's goodness to them.

Aids for unbelief

Now that we have familiarized ourselves with the OT background we are ready to see how the author draws his applications from the text. V12, 'Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.' Those words 'take care' can be translated 'watch out'. Words of strong warning. The warning has to do with our hearts and unbelief. Many might think that unbelief is our natural state and that believing has to happen as we are moved from neutral unbelief to positive belief. The Bible tells us it is the opposite. We all have eternity in our hearts, we all have a knowledge of right and wrong, all of creation testifies to an all powerful being that is uncreated who made everything, the human heart naturally expresses itself in religious worship. We are spiritual beings who pray, and worship, and express ourselves in a religious way. But because of sin we suppress this natural bent to God. We all pervert any truth we have and turn it to our own devices. Unbelief is not neutral but negative. Even in those who are not Christians, take you typical western non-religious type, the Bible says that their unbelief is a negative, it is evil. Unbelief here is not describing someone who does not have enough information, but who turns away from the information that they have. But the evil heart of unbelief here is not describing the lack of faith in Christ in an unbeliever, but the willing turning away from Christ by those who have heard and understood. Those who at least externally are part of the church, who are baptized, who participate in worship, who eat at the Lord's Supper. It is a great evil to turn your back on Christ.

I want to emphasize this. Firstly, think about the privilege we have in the West. We have had the Bible in our language for over 400 years, Christianity and the truth of Christ is widely spread, we have benefitted from the positive effects of Christianity and the Bible's teaching for centuries. God has given us so many gifts through His truth. We have all grown up within ears reach of a church, of hearing the gospel, we have all encountered Christians, some of us having even been so privileged to have grown up in a Christian home where parents have taught you from your youngest years to follow Christ. God has provided a bible, preserved, in as many different translations as you could desire, in beautiful leather editions, with bible study aids, there is no text that will remain unlocked and unknown if you would just study it. God has filled our lives with His truth, bearing witness to the truth of our sin, of Jesus as the sufficient provision of His

love, who died to pay for our sins, to save us, to make us children of God. And we would dare not to believe, wickedness! One day when we stand before God's judgement throne, I can imagine every person who has not believed standing there, and in a moment every instance of exposure to God's truth, every pang of conscience, every person who tried to speak to them about Christ, every parental exchange, every family devotion, every Christian they encountered, every choice to deny the truth and self-deceive, every sermon they sat under, every hymn they sang, will pass before their minds eye, and a growing horror of how much truth we denied, of how willingly we scorned His merciful offers over and over again will heap itself upon us until we are so overweighted with the reality of how evil our unbelief is. And then add to that God's glory and who it is you deny; then add to that how worthy the Son is who was willing to be our Saviour; and then add to that how much He suffered; and then add to that your own deep unworthiness, it is only then that the full evil of our unbelief will be apparent. And it is then and only then that Hell will look and feel fair. Because until you see and feel how utterly sinful we are you will find hell impossible. Hell feels impossible to those who have not felt their sins; hell feels fair to those who have seen the glory of God, the sufferings of Christ and the magnitude of their sins.

But notice our author pointing us to our hearts, and the need for us to guard our hearts. This is the psychology of the Bible, it helps you to see that we are not robots, but that we act from our hearts. If our hearts are compromised, this will impact all of our lives, Prov. 4:23, 'Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.' Last week we spent some time doing some work on our hearts, we spoke about considering Christ, the importance of beholding His glory, the sufficiency of His person and work and allowing that to build up our confidence and boast in what awaits and to help us push through the obstacles to our faith. With hearts full of Christ we will be able to endure. But there is a negative work that we need to focus on as well. Are you keeping your heart set on God and His truth, committed to His ways, or are you rationalizing sin in your hearts? Are you coming up with good sounding excuses to make your bad decisions look virtuous? Are you refusing to fill your hearts with the truth of God's faithfulness, His love for us, the obvious display of His love and power through the sending of His Son. The thing with unbelief is that we often decide what we want, and then rally the excuses to fit. If someone has already decided on a favourite sin and not God, their hearts go through a process of finding fault with God, with making up excuses, trying to find the weaknesses in the Christian case. We have to guard our hearts and keep them firmly fixed on those things that will build up our faith not tear it down.

V13, '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.' Last week we saw how considering Christ keeps us from apostasy, well here is another aid to help us keep our hearts, exhort one another. One of the God given aids to faith is the church. God never intended us for us to be lone wolves. God put us into a body, we are individually members of each other, He has made us to be interdependent. We have been gifts that we are all to use so that the overall health of the body grows. An important aspect of our spiritual health is being together and being ministered to by one another. Heb. 10:24-25, 'And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.' This is one of the reasons why we think membership matters, it is a formalizing and recognizing of this reality. We have

a duty to each other. This can include giving one another the hard word, calling them to account; speaking truth to each other's consciences when we have hardened our hearts to truth. This word exhort can mean comfort, as well as to strenuously call upon another to do the right thing. One of the things you are giving permission for when you become a church member is for another member to talk to you if they have concerns about the pattern of your life; to raise the matter of your sins, obviously from a right heart and in a spirit of gentleness; to call upon you to believe and obey the word of God we are all obliged to keep. Sometimes we can self-feed; and encourage ourselves from the scriptures, but at other times when we are down, or defeated we need help. This can come from the elders, but other believers are also able to bring God's truth to bear to help and encourage; to pray and be present. This is why we must go to church, to receive God's strengthening grace through the means of grace. This is why we encourage going to midweek meetings. This is why we encourage you to be committed to the life of the church and do life with the other members of this church. God has made the spiritual life to be a community affair not an individualistic one. One of the first signs that someone is in spiritual trouble is when they cut themselves off from others, they have already silenced their consciences and now they want to cut off the other voices in their lives, Prov. 18:1, 'Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.' The devil prowls around looking for who he can devour, and it is often the isolated. Those who drift from the herd.

V14-15, 'For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." We noted last week that there is this conditional 'if' language in Hebrews 3:6. The question we raised was, is this a case of us getting saved because we persevere, or persevering because we are saved? Here the author reveals the consistent teaching of scripture, that a good fruit bears good fruit, that those who are united to Christ, who have been joined with the power of His resurrection, are those who hold fast to the end. It is because they are one with Christ and are sustained by Him that they are able to endure. And then after v14 we see a repeat of the exhortation to listen and not harden our hearts, this reinforces the other thing that we said, that Christ sustains us, how? Yes by His Spirit at work within us, but also because our new hearts heed the voice of the Shepherd, we hear these warnings and we take them to heart, and the Spirit and word work together to hold fast. Our perseverance is not all God or all us, it is all God and all us, it is in theological terms a case of concurrence, God is working and willing, and we are working and willing. The nature of our work is not meritorious, but responding to His grace at work within us. It is not a case of earning salvation but the outworking of an inner work of salvation.

Examples of unbelief

V16-19, 'For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.' Here we see the author really pressing home his point. We see three sets of questions all related to the fact that it is those who were part of the external people of God who sinned and were punished. It seems that the author is detecting that some might have that typical malady of 'safety in numbers'.

Because they are part of the right religious group they are safe from judgement. Some can take false security in being those who sit under the hearing of the truth, well look at the first set of questions, who was it who heard and still rebelled? It was those who saw the 10 plagues, the parting of the Red Sea and the miracles in the wilderness, they too saw and experienced things, but because they did not endure in faith they did not make it to Canaan. The second set of questions asks who died in the wilderness, the very same people who drank the water from the rock, who ate the manna from heaven, those who worshipped along with God's people and were part of the covenant community. To whom did God promise they would not enter into His rest? It was the disobedient, namely those who did not believe, did not endure, who sought to turn back to Egypt, to slavery. The message here is the same as Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:1-6, 'For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.' Don't rest on past experiences, don't rely on present associations, endure with persevering faith, consider Christ, guard your hearts, exhort one another, take heed to the warnings and act. This is how we hold fast.