



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Hebrews 3:7-9

“The Evil Heart of Unbelief”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the word of God. We remember the Scriptures speak of it as a living word; living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit. That it is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart, and that it is the word with which we have to do. We thank Thee, Lord, for the exhortation to that effect, because we realize as we read through the word of God that over and over again, Thou didst say with respect to Israel that they did not hear Thy word, did not listen to it were disobedient. We remember the comments that they had forgotten Thee; that they had forsaken Thee and, Lord, we pray that that may not be our experience. We thank Thee for the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of the Spirit within our hearts, drawing us closer to Thee, opening our hearts and minds to Thy truth and enabling us to be pleasing to Thee. O God, our Father, we pray that each one of us may, truly, be pleasing to Thee in submission to Thee and Thy word. We ask, Lord, as we study tonight, that Thy presence shall be with us in the spirit, and that we may be responsive to Thy truth. We look forward to our time of study together.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Well, we’re turning to Hebrews chapter 3, and the topic for this evening is “The Evil Heart of Unbelief,” a phrase derived from the section that we’re going to read. And we’re beginning with chapter 3 in verse 7 and reading through verse 19. The author of the epistle writes.

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation,’ and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways. So I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest. Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called Today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.’”

Incidentally, that word “sin” here has the article with it, and while it’s not an essential, by way of translation, it may be, “the deceitfulness of the sin,” that we are speaking about, the sin of apostasy. At least that’s the sin, at any rate.

“For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end while it is said, ‘Today, if you will hear His voice do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. 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.’”

It has been said, that the saddest word in the Bible is not death, it is not Hell, it is not depart or lost but sin. Someone has said, “It’s the fountain of woe, the mother of sorrows,” now you can see from that that Saddam did not introduce that figure, the “Mother of All Battles,” but here, long

ago, someone said that it’s, “The mother of sorrows, as universal as human nature, as eternal as human history. If so, then the word “unbelief” is the word that should cast a dismal, lugubrious, funereal pall over all, for it is the root of sin.”

One only has to remember Genesis chapter 3, verse 1 through verse 6 to realize that. I’ll turn back that for just a moment and remind you of the things that Moses wrote here, concerning the temptation and the fall.

“Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’ Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

Now, if one analyzes this a little bit, I think you will see that the fundamental sin that is referred to here is not selfishness, it’s not rebellion, but what is the fundamental thing that is at the root of Eve’s disobedience and Adam’s disobedience is unbelief. Essentially, they did not believe God’s word. It was just as simple as that. And because she did not believe God’s word and he did not believe God’s word, they sinned.

Now, years later, the Lord Jesus, in John chapter 16, in the ministry in the upper room, spoke to the apostles and said to them something about sin. He said, “When the Holy Spirit comes, whom I am sending to you, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

Of sin because they have rebelled against Me? No. Of sin because they are selfish? No. Of sin because they are self-willed? No. Of sin because they believe not on Me.”

The fundamental feature of human sin is unbelief of the divine word. It is unbelief that leads to independence, which in turn manifests itself in disobedience. And so it's not surprising then in Genesis chapter 4, that we should read, after men have disbelieved and fallen, that Cain is slaying Abel. Immorality, is the product of the independent spirit, which is the product of unbelief, failure to respond to the word of God.

Let's go back to the night, just before our Lord was crucified. It's midnight, approximately, there's a fire burning in the courtyard of the High Priest. There are servants, there are soldiers. They are standing about the fire. A door opens into the chamber off the courtyard and the Lord Jesus is led out, bleeding from the blows which he has taken. He has been mocked. He has been insulted. A crown of thorns has been put upon his head, crashed upon it, and as he comes out into the courtyard whether it's the exact time or not, we don't know, but it's about that time. There's a shout that goes out, “I never knew him.” Who can this be? Is it the man whom Andrew brought to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, to whom our Lord said, “Your name is Simon, henceforth, it shall be Peter, the Rock?” Is it the man who fell at the feet of Christ in the fishing boat, when the miraculous draft of fishes was taken up and who then said, “Depart from me, O God, for I am a sinful man?” Is it the man who at the point of our Lord's request for an identity, to be attached to himself said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God?” Or is it the man, who when many of his disciples forsook the Lord Jesus, as he saw them going off, Peter responded to our Lord's plaintive cry, “Will you also go away?” Who said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” Is this a man on the mount of transfiguration, who said, “Lord, let us build three tabernacles here, one for Moses, one for Elijah,” no doubt also, one for Peter. He didn't get that out of his mouth, while he was yet speaking, he was interrupted. But, nevertheless, you cannot help but admire him for his sentiment.

And then as our Lord is drawing near to his death, the one in the upper room who says that he will “never leave him,” is this same Apostle Peter? Yes, Peter, it’s you, the chief among equal men, the apostles, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” and our Lord has said to him, “Peter, you’re a blessed man because the Father in Heaven has revealed it to you.”

So when we look at the life of a believer and we look at the life of a great believer like the Apostle Peter, the Rock, and realize that a man like this is, nevertheless, a sinning man; a man who can deny our Lord, not once, but three times. Of course, the redeeming thing, as far as Peter is concerned, is that he went out and wept, which revealed that there was fundamentally something deep down within him that was truly from the Lord God.

Well, Hebrews is a book devoted to the exaltation of Jesus Christ and to the admonition of the receivers of this book against unbelief. As he says in verse 13, “Exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” One of the things that makes sin so deceitful is the fact that sin cancels the promises of God and separates the ones to whom the promises are given from the one who makes the promises.

We’ve been talking a lot about reading through the Bible and, I guess, every week, since I’m trying to be reading every week, I’m impressed with some of the things that I have been reading and they’re on my mind, and I’ve been going through Isaiah and Jeremiah. And one of the things that has gone through my mind, as I’ve read through those two major prophets, I’m not quite through Jeremiah, but as I’ve read those chapters, is the fact that over and over again God complains, if I may call it that, he complains against his people for not listening to his word and being disobedient to his word. Over and over again, “They have not paid attention to My word. They have forgotten Me.” They have forsaken Me.” All mixed in with this general theme of failure to submit to the word of God.

The comparison between Moses and Christ that the author has engaged in in the first six verses, leads naturally to a comparison between the recipients of the revelation of each. It’s rather interesting that forty years have, approximately, passed since our Lord’s ministry began when this

epistle is written. And it's very interesting that the two incidents that are chosen by our author to bring forward as illustrations of Israel's disobedience are incidents that were separated by forty years. The forty years that they spent wandering in the wilderness. One of the incidents occurs at the beginning and another occurs at the end and they both are instances of disobedience; the same kind of disobedience. It's almost as if after forty years, they've not learned anything. Well, anything? At least, they've not learned one of the major things. So two incidents are going to be brought forward here, he calls them here the rebellion and the trial.

But now, let's look at verse 7 through verse 11. And, again, as we've been saying, we're noticing the introductory conjunctions, “Therefore” or “Wherefore,” some of your texts, no doubt, have. “Wherefore, as the Holy Spirit said.” We said last time and someone has suggested that these little “therefores” and “wherefores” and “on account of this,” these particles by which thoughts are linked with one another, are the “stop, look, and listen,” of Bible study.

Now, this one is, I think, to be taken with verse 12. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,” and then he cites the passage from Psalm 95 and verse 12 begins, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.” Now, I know that in verse 10 there is a “therefore,” also but that's part of the quote. And so beginning at verse 7, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,” Psalm 95, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.”

Now, the psalm that is cited is Psalm 95. Not all of the psalm; as a matter of fact, this psalm, itself was a very popular psalm among those who, in the Christian church, who have used the psalms in their public worship. This is the one that begins with, “Come,” and it is called that in the liturgies of the Christian Church. The *Venite* because that's precisely what it has to do with. Psalm 95, I was looking at the wrong psalm. That's the reason I'm wandering around here, using the Bible. Psalm 95, the *Venite*, “O Come, let us sing to the Lord! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving.” This, incidentally, was the psalm, so I am told, which I just learned this afternoon really, was that this psalm, the *venite exultemus domino* was the chant which the Templars, the Knights of the Red Cross, sang when they went to battle against

the Saracens, for the conquest of Jerusalem in the time of the Crusades. And so this psalm was, no doubt, a psalm that constantly resounded as the Crusaders carried out what they hoped to do.

Well, we go on and read about the people are called to worship the Lord but then in verse 7.

“For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you will hear His voice do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, when your fathers tested Me; they tried Me, though they saw My work. For forty years I was grieved, I loathed that generation, [It could be rendered.] I loathed that generation and said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, and they do not know My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter into My rest.’”

So Psalm 95, invites God’s people to worship and then warns against disobedience by the historic wilderness examples.

Incidentally, we’ve been talking a lot about how our author has a very high view of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, finding in the Old Testament many testimonies to the deity of our Lord. Many passages, which in the Old Testament speak simply of Yahweh or the Lord, our author applies to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, the reason he does it is not just because, autonomously he wants to do that, but he knows that the passages in the Old Testament that speak of the coming of the Lord, of the appearance of the Lord, and of his coming in judgment, they are passages that have to refer to the second person of the Trinity. The first person of the Trinity does not ever have a body. The third person of the Trinity does not ever have a body. The person of the Trinity who is to be the incarnate Yahweh, the incarnate Lord, is our Lord Jesus Christ. And so the Holy Spirit guided the Old Testament authors and guided the New Testament authors, so that identification is properly made.

Now, this is interesting because in verse 7, we read, “Today” if you will hear His voice.” His voice? Whose voice? Well, we’ve just been reading in verse 6, “But Christ as a Son over His own

house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope, firm to the end. Therefore, the Holy Spirit says, “Today if you will hear His voice.” Whose voice? The Son’s voice; he just mentioned the son. So he regards the “His voice” of verse 7 as a reference to the Son. But when you turn back to the Old Testament, it’s “the Lord.” In other words, he sees Psalm 95, as being a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion.”

Now, we’re going to look, just briefly, at these two instances, which are suggested here by these words. “Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion.” Now, that’s a reference to Numbers chapter 20, verse 1 through 13. “In the day of trial in the wilderness.” That’s a reference to Exodus chapter 17, in verse 7. Now, we’re going to turn it around and look at the Exodus passage first simply because chronologically it was the first instance. So I’d like for you to turn to the Old Testament, to Exodus chapter 17, and we’ll look at what he calls “the trial in the wilderness.” Exodus chapter 17, verse 1 through verse 7. Now, remember what he’s talking about. He’s talking about the evil heart of unbelief and the parting from the living God.

Now, the children of Israel have just come out of Egypt and there have been a couple of miracles that have been performed. You remember, at Marah, the bitter water was made sweet. And then when they complained about food, the Lord gave them the manna. And now in verse 1 of chapter 17, we read.

“Then all the congregation of the children of Israel set out on their journey from the Wilderness of Sin, [How appropriate] according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped in Rephidim; but there was no water for the people to drink. [No water.] Therefore the people contended with Moses and said, ‘Give us water that we may drink.’ So Moses said to them, ‘Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?’ And the people thirsted there for water and the people complained [so, they’ve contended, they are now complaining] against Moses and said, ‘Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’

So Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!’ [So, they have contended with Moses, they have tempted the Lord, they have complained against Moses, and now, if Moses is correct, they are about to stone him.] And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river and go. [That was the rod with which he struck the river as they came out from the land of Egypt, turning it into blood.] Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock. [Moses, the representative of the law, the great representative of the law, we shall find out.] You shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.’ And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. So he called the name of the place Massah [which means tempted, or temptation] and Meribah [which means contention] because of the contention of the children of Israel and because they tempted the Lord saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”

It has been said that hunger gnaws in one organ of the body but thirst rages like a fever in the blood. The irony of this is that Rephidim is a term that means resting places. I wonder if there were signs everywhere, resting places.

At any rate, the perversity of the people is obvious. They chided, they murmured, they are ready to stone Moses. Many people who have become Christians have feelings like this. Sometimes there are problems in the family. Sometimes there are problems in the business. I’ve heard Christians say, and I can sympathize with them, “I’ve become a Christian. My whole life is turned over. And now I’m really suffering and going through all kinds of trials.” And sometimes even with a smile on their face, fortunately, “maybe I made the wrong decision.”

I know when I came to theological seminary, after I’d been in theological seminary about six months, and my family was back where I had been living. It was during the time when there was very difficult to find even an apartment. And I remember thinking, “Well, perhaps I should go back and get back in the insurance business and reach people in the insurance business.” Well, I don’t

have anything against that. It just happened to be not the Lord’s leading for me. But I can understand what it means when you are in difficulties and trials to say, “Well, perhaps, it would have been better if I’d done something else.”

The early Easterners after the Western boom collapsed in the drought of 1887, put on their wagons, as they made their way back home, “In God we trusted; in Kansas we busted.” [Laughter] I think, in some sense, a Christian can understand that because he does have trials when he becomes a Christian. Why provocation? Why temptation? Well, one of the reasons is the fact that it’s a temptation to the Lord, to destroy them from the face of the earth. There’ve been two great water miracles already performed. He has, actually, made a way for them through the Red Sea, and they’ve come to Marah, and he’s changed the bitter waters into sweet water. And now, because there’s no water, they want to complain. And they’re about, if Moses is right, they’re about to stone their leader. Well, the provision of God is very interesting because what it is is typical. Moses, as I say, the representative of the law, smites the rock, and of course, the rock is figurative of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In fact, over and over, if you’ve been reading through the Bible, you know that the term “rock” is a term applied to the Lord God. So, Moses, the representative of the law, smites the rock, Christ, in judgment, and what results. Well, we read that the water of life flows out. “And water will come out of it that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of the children of Israel.”

Someone has said that, “What we have here is an illustration of the positive side of John 3:16. ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish,’ [the negative side] ‘but should have everlasting life.’” And so the waters flowing out of the rock illustrate and underline the positive side of the ministry of our Lord’s death on the Cross.

Many years ago, I heard Dr. Barnhouse in some meetings, I guess they were in Birmingham, Alabama, although I did hear him when he was here in Dallas and in Fort Worth. In fact, whenever he came within driving range, I would always go to hear him, in those early days. In one of his

messages, while he was on a tour, which he made every spring, he made the remark that, “Jesus Christ,” he said in one of his messages, “was the pre-existent person who ministered to Israel in Old Testament times before he was born.” And he said, the next day, in the town where he was, he went out and sat on a bench in the park of the city to enjoy a bit of relaxation. And a woman approached him and said, “I heard you preach last night. And I enjoyed what you had to say. But there’s one thing you said that was ridiculous. You said that, ‘Jesus was alive in the Old Testament times before he was born.’ I cannot believe that.”

And Dr. Barnhouse had his Bible with him and he said, “Would you sit down here? And, would you take my Bible.” He used to do that all the time. If you wanted to talk to him, he would make you look up passages of Scripture. So, I guess, if you really had to talk to him, you had to know the order of the books of the Bible because he would say, “Find that verse.” Well, I can hear him doing that now.

He gave her the Bible and he said, “You look up 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 4, and then read it.” And so she read it. And he said that she read this, and the story at this point in 1 Corinthians is the Apostle is talking about the children of Israel and their experiences. And he says, “And all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.” He won that argument.

Well, now, this is one of the incidents. Now, this is the incident that occurred shortly after they’ve come out of Egypt. Now, the second instance is the one referred to first, verse 8 of Hebrews 3. “Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” So let’s turn to the rebellion, chapter 20 of the Book of Numbers. And you can see that the first miracle occurred in the beginning of the wilderness wanderings, the next mentioned in the same verse, occurs forty years later. I’m going to begin with Numbers chapter 20 in verse 1, because if some of you are reading through the Bible, and you’re not yet to Numbers. Verse 1. In fact, some of you haven’t begun yet. And Dan Duncan has told us to read through the Bible this year, and you’re behind.

“Then the children of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh; and Miriam died there and was buried there. Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron. And the people contended with Moses and spoke. [This is forty years later, approximately.] The people contended with Moses and spoke, saying, ‘If only we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! [Isn’t that pathetic? Don’t you feel so sorry for them?] Why have you brought up the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness that we and our animals should die here? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink.’ So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and they fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, [Notice that, “speak to the rock,” not, smite the rock. Speak to the rock. I can’t go into details here, but I just suggest to you that the reason that he says “speak to the rock” even using a different term for rock, is suggestive of the great High Priest, which we believers have.] Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.’ So Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, ‘Hear now, you rebels.’”

It’s interesting isn’t it because he is rebelling himself. The very point at which he is calling them rebels, he is disobeying because, “Hear now you rebels must we bring water. What do you mean? Aaron and I bring water out of the rock? Whose glory is he robbing and stealing? Why the glory of God. Must we, Moses the lawgiver, Aaron the high priest, they can’t give water.

“Hear now you rebels must we bring water for you out of this rock?’ Then Moses lifted his hand and spoke to the rock [no, no] struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly. [God remarkably does his part.] And the congregation and their animals drank. Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel. [To set Me apart as the one through whom, alone, this mighty miracle can be performed. Must we? So, they failed to hallow, sanctify, the Lord God.] Therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’ This was the water of Meribah because the children of Israel contended with the Lord, and He was hallowed among them.”

Aaron, as you know, died. Moses was unable to enter into the land, he can only see it from afar because of disobedience; disobedience of the people and disobedience of Moses, too. And so here it’s called. “Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion in the day of trial in the wilderness.” So here we are forty years the children of Israel have been in the wilderness guided by Moses, the great lawgiver, God speaking to them and at the end of it, they are disobedient. Isn’t that a striking, striking thing that after forty years of the ministry of the Lord God in their midst by miracles and signs and wonders, they are still filled with, what our author calls, an evil heart of unbelief.

Now, let’s look at the admonition in verse 12 through verse 15, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.” So the Hebrews are warned against similar experience, what has been called an irretrievable sin. And what we’re going to see when we come to the chapters like 6 and 10, is that there is such a thing that can be called an irretrievable sin, illustrated also in our Lord’s ministry when in the last days before His cross, he speaks about Israel having departed from Him and, therefore, consigned to judgment. He says in verse 12, “Beware, brethren, take heed brethren, departing.” This is an interesting word, because when he says, “An evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God,” we get an idea of the primary sin that he’s concerned about with reference to the Hebrews.

The word for departing is the Greek term *aphistēmi* and the form *apostani*. Now, if you just can pronounce the term “apostasy” you can see *aphistēmi* is close to it. *aphistēmi* comes from the word that means “to stand,” *histēmi*, and *apo* which means “to stand off.” What is an apostate? He’s a person who’s made a profession, but now he’s turning away from it. So “take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing.” Apostatizing is the term, “Apostatizing from the living God.” That’s what he’s concerned about with the Hebrew believers because they don’t show the evidence of growth in the knowledge of the Lord and in grace that one should expect of growing, healthy Christian believers. Anybody who knows anything about the Christian church, the Evangelical Church, knows there are countless illustrations of those who have been with us, ostensibly, visibly, no longer with us. I don’t mean someone has gone to another church who’s still a vital Christian testimony, I’m talking about those who do not care at all for the things of the Lord, now, but at one time they sat in the pews, heard the ministry of the word of God, and even made expressions of appreciation for it. There are a number of people who have sat in our pews who are just like that. They’ve departed from the living God. “Beware, brethren,” beware brethren, beware sisters “lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.” Unbelief is the product of a wicked heart; an evil heart of unbelief.

The majority of people, unfortunately, I think, rank unbelief among the venial rather than the mortal sins. They apologize for it; if you talk to Christians, and they will apologize for their unbelief. It’s like it’s something we all have, and so we apologize, even think less of it. And when we apologize for it, we even assume an air of humility. We understand our unbelief. We wish we could believe more. And pretty soon, you can see the little rays of sanctification because I’m so pathetic and I cannot believe. I have trouble with unbelief. Look, my Christian friend, the person who is an unbeliever has an evil heart. It’s an evil heart of unbelief. And we’ll see in a moment, it’s the most serious of all sins. Unbelief! It’s not trifling. It’s not part of humility to confess it. I don’t say that a person should not confess the sin of unbelief. Confess it to the Lord. But confess it as an evil, a product of the evil heart of unbelief.

The author goes on to say, “But exhort one another daily.” Unbelief is very deceptive. You can see that in Genesis chapter 1. Satan knew how he could defeat Eve and defeat Adam. “Is it really true that God said that you should not eat of every tree of the garden?” That’s kind of like a “it’s not wrong is it?” “God indeed said you shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” In verse 4, after he’s already put the hook in a little bit, he says, “Oh, well, you will not surely die.” And then in verse 5, he wants to attack the Lord God’s character. “For God knows that in the day you eat thereof, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Very clever! Be like God!

And what is God? He’s a selfish person. He wants all of that knowledge for himself. And so he’s put this test to you with that in mind, selfish. But he says, “For we,” “For we, have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” Notice, it’s “to the end.” It’s not partial. It’s to the end.

Now, there are lots of Christians that find this a very difficult thing because they look at themselves and they can see things in their lives that are not pleasing to the Lord, at the moment and so when they look at this they seem to lose all assurance of their salvation. “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” But, what is the confidence that we hold? It’s simply that the Scriptures are the word of God and that God in his marvelous grace has implanted in our hearts a trust in him. When we say a Christian perseveres, we don’t mean a Christian perseveres in a certain style of life. Take a look at Jacob? He didn’t persevere. One minute he was up, another moment down. Abraham the same way. Abraham was a liar. Isaac followed along in his example. He lied, too. But the one thing that was characteristic of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was they had a fundamental trust in the Lord God in the midst of all of their failure. Sanctification is that which is working in our hearts and minds today, as Christians. And God has a way to deal with our sin in the Scriptures, like there is family discipline. The Corinthians were told by the apostle, because of their disorders at the Lord’s Table, “for this cause some of you are weak, some of you are sickly, and some have actually fallen asleep.”

But he uses the term for falling asleep that applies only to believers. They were genuine believers and what the doctrine of perseverance says is that the man who has come to Christ and believed in him will never apostatize from the faith. He may fail. He may do things that are displeasing to the Lord. But the faith implanted by the Lord God in his heart, through regeneration, that new life, because the first act of new life is to believe in the Lord, that continues. That’s what we mean when we say, “We believe in the perseverance of the saints.” They will not fall away. “I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish.”

Well, in the last few verses our author interprets the lesson of the psalm.

“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? [A whole generation 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, he says, they could not enter in because of unbelief; warning them against apostasy.

One of the commentators has said, “Scoff at the idea that unbelief is so fatal, that faith should be so decisive. Is it so easy to scoff at the thought of all of those graves in the wilderness, of that whole generation?”

Well, let me conclude by use of an illustration. We have a solemn peril here of unbelief. It’s the one damning sin, the one sin that exasperates God, and it touches all other sins. It cancels the promises of God. It voids the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It separates an individual from the one who makes the promises.

Now, I’d like to illustrate this in the few moments that we have remaining by turning back to Luke chapter 1. And you know the story of Zacharias, the husband of Elizabeth, the father of John

the Baptist. And you know that his birth, John’s, is announced first. And we read in verse 15 of Luke chapter 1, and the angel of the Lord is speaking to Zacharias.

“Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ And Zacharias said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this?’”

How shall I know this? Wait a moment. Did Mary say something like that when the birth was announced to her of the Son? Well, we do read something like that, don’t we? Over here we read with reference to the announcement to Mary, after the announcement is made. Incidentally, John is said to be “great in the sight of the Lord.” We read, with reference to our Lord, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” And then, in verse 34, Mary said to him, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”

Why is Zacharias blamed for saying, “How shall I know this?” whereas, Mary is not, for saying, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” Well, you know the answer, of course. Zacharias doubts the truthfulness of the promise just made to him. “How can I know this?” Mary didn’t doubt the truth. She wondered how in the world it could come to pass. “How can this be?” She accepted the truth of the matter, but puzzled over the manner by which it would be done. Whereas Zacharias doubts the fact, itself. “How can I know this?” Well, he’s been told by the Lord God. That’s how you can know it.

Now, what is interesting about this, I think, is, let me turn over to the latter part of this chapter. Incidentally, I should have gone on and read here, in verse 19, of Luke 1.

“And the angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”

So, he would be dumb, unable to speak.

Now, in the latter part of the chapter, after John is born, we read over in verse 62, of chapter 1, after John, now, has been born, and the question of the name arises. And they’ve circumcised the child. And they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. But, verse 60:

“His mother answered and said, ‘No; he shall be called John.’

But they said to her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.’ So they made signs to his father...”

Now, if he was just dumb, they wouldn’t have to make any signs. What shall be his name? He’d write it down. But they made signs to him.

Some commentators say, well, it’s customary for people who are dumb, to treat them as if they were deaf. But, it’s not necessary.

So, they made signs to his father:

“—what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet. [he cannot talk yet. He is a mute.] And wrote, saying, ‘His name is John.’ So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.”

Zacharias was deaf and dumb. Deaf and dumb! What opened his ears and loosed his tongue. Faith! That’s all. Just believing the promise that his name would be John. So, what I’m going to do is just say this: unbelief makes a man deaf toward God, dumb toward men. Faith gives the man the ability to speak and the ability to hear the Lord God. What a beautiful illustration it is.

So, what’s the remedy for unbelief? Why, it’s plain. Abandon it. Forever abandon it, by the grace of God.

Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God, we are told. Start reading the word of God, if you have any question about it. And if you want more faith, keep reading the word of God. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

So, you want faith, don’t you? Read the word of God. You say you want faith, and you don’t read the word of God, do you really want faith? Not much... Not much. There are other things you want more.

Faith comes by hearing; hearing by the word of God.

Faith opens Zacharias’ mouth. The Living God and the unbelieving heart, on earth, are united there.

What a marvelous—what a marvelous exhortation! Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of us and evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.

May God give us a desire to read His word and study His word; and then, to live in the light of that word, to be submissive to that word, to take it as an opportunity to grow to know the lord, to start obeying the word of God. If necessary, start in the little things...

But, let’s by God’s marvelous grace, learn what it is to grow in the knowledge of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let’s bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for the lessons of the word of God and for admonitions of the word of God. And, when we think of the children of Israel, with the great privileges of seeing the waters of the Red Sea parted, and the children of Israel marching throughout

“The Evil Heart of Unbelief” by S. Lewis Johnson
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of Egypt, to the salvation that the Lord God was providing for them, and when we think of the other ways in which Thou didst manifest Thy marvelous grace to them; Lord, deliver us, O God, deliver us from that kind of failure in our lives? Enable us, Lord, truly, to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord, and to be pleasing to Thee in submission to Thy word. We pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.