

Hebrews 3:14-19 “Getting Serious about the Sin of Unbelief—part two” [**](#)

Main Idea: Hebrews 3:7-19 warns us to get serious about dealing with the sin of unbelief. In part two of this message, we’ll begin by reviewing the highlights from verses 7-13 and then break new ground by examining verses 14-19.

I. God the Holy Spirit confronts the sin of unbelief (7-11).

II. We must confront the sin of unbelief (12-19).

A. We need to deal with it in our own hearts (12).

B. We need to help each other deal with it (13).

1. Beware of faith without the Spirit.

2. Beware of faith without Christ.

3. Beware of faith without reason.

4. Beware of faith without repentance.

5. Beware of faith without fruit.

6. Beware of faith that does not last.

C. We need to make sure we possess real faith (14-15).

1. Real faith shares in Christ (14a).

2. Real faith perseveres to the end (14b).

3. Real faith is a present tense reality (15).

D. We need to remember that real faith is real over the long haul (16-19).

1. The Jews escaped Egypt but later rebelled (16).

2. The Jews sinned against God and died in the desert (17).

3. The Jews missed the promised land because of their disobedience (18).

4. The Jews missed the promised land because of their unbelief (19).

Make It Personal: Take inventory of your life...

1. Do I possess saving faith?

2. Am I taking seriously the sin of unbelief in my life?

3. Will I humble myself today and experience God’s grace?

“Most people will spend far more time examining the vegetables in the supermarket than they will ever spend scrutinizing their faith.” With those words Jim Elliff begins his thought-provoking, foundation-shaking book entitled *Wasted Faith*.

Elliff is right, isn't he? The world certainly doesn't encourage a person to examine and evaluate the validity of one's faith. "Faith is a personal matter," we're told. "As long as your faith is meaningful to you, as long as you are content with your faith, that's all that matters. Don't let anyone ever convince you that you need to question your faith."

But it's not just the world that frowns at faith-testing. Many inside the church echo the same charge, albeit for different reasons. Think of the following scenario...

A preacher proclaims the gospel message to his listening audience. He explains that all men, women, and children are sinners, cut off from God, and heading for eternal suffering in hell. Next he announces that God has done something to rescue sinners from their plight, that He sent His one and only Son into the world, Jesus the Christ, who lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay sin's penalty, and then rose again on the third day. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." That's what the Bible says, the preacher announces, if you will believe in God's Son you will have eternal life.

An invitation is given in which the preacher asks his listeners if they would like to know for sure that they have eternal life. The only thing you must do, he says, is *believe*. Put your *faith* in Jesus Christ and you will be saved, he emphasizes. And then he leads the congregation in a prayer of faith, the "sinner's prayer" as he calls it. "Just repeat after me these words and mean it in your heart, and God will save you today."

At the close of the service, while the congregation is singing a hymn of response, a ten year old boy approaches the preacher. "I don't want to go to hell," he shares. "I want to have eternal life like you just talked about. I want that."

"Did you pray the sinner's prayer?" he asks. The boy nods his head.

"Did you mean it? Did you really believe in Jesus?" he adds. Again, the boy nods his head, but this time says, "I prayed the prayer, and I meant it, but I don't feel any different. I'm still afraid that I won't go to heaven."

In response the preacher tells the boy to take his pen, and write the date in the back of his Bible. "This is your spiritual birthday, young man. You're in God's family now, and don't let anybody ever tell you otherwise. If you ever have doubts, just look right here in the back of your Bible, and remember this day. Remember, you believed in Jesus today, and the Bible says that if you believe you have eternal life."

And so, with assurance in his heart, ten year old Billy leaves church that day. A few years later he leaves church altogether and takes his home in the world he loves. He feels badly from time to time, but he quickly dispels those doubts by looking at the words in the back of his Bible: "November 7, 1985. My spiritual birthday."

In college he meets a unit-mate who shares Christ with him and urges him to believe and be saved. "I've done that," he responds. "I'm in God's family."

"Really?" his unit-mate asks. "I've never heard you talk about Jesus before, or have seen you go to church or read your Bible. You're a Christian? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely!" Bill emphasizes, and starts digging through his sock drawer. "Here it is! Look right here. *November 7, 1985. My spiritual birthday.* Don't worry about me. I'm okay with God. See, it says so right there. I was born again on that day."

"But are you sure?" Bill's unit-mate probes. "The Bible says that if any person is in Christ he is a *new* creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Please don't take me wrong, but in all the time I've known you I haven't seen much evidence that Christ has made you new. And I..."

At which point Bill interrupts, "I don't like where this conversation is going. I may not be perfect, but I've got faith and that's all that matters. Case closed."

To cite Jim Elliff again, "Most people will spend far more time examining the vegetables in the supermarket than

they will ever spend scrutinizing their faith.” To scrutinize your faith means you look not to the back flyleaf of your Bible for assurance, but to the pages between the front and back covers, for the Bible calls us to test our faith and the Bible shows us what the test is.

Now, do I believe that a person can know for sure that he or she is saved and eternally secure? Yes indeed! for the Bible teaches so (1 John 5:11-13). But I also believe the Scriptures teach that it’s possible to think you are saved and *not* be (Matt. 7:21-23). Which is why the Bible exhorts us, in passages like 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?”

When was the last time you obeyed that command and *examined your faith*? Be honest with yourself. Why do you think you are going to heaven? On what basis are you placing your assurance? Do you possess true, biblical faith?

It’s exam time, beloved. We’re going to take the “faith test” this morning, for scrutinizing one’s faith is exactly what Hebrews 3 helps us do. Last week we investigated Hebrews 3:7-13 which warns us to get serious about dealing with the sin of *unbelief*, which of course is the absence of true faith. I want to begin this message by reviewing the highlights from verses 7-13, and then break new ground by examining verses 14-19. Last week we saw that...

I. God the Holy Spirit confronts the sin of unbelief (7-11).

Verse 7 begins, “So, as the Holy Spirit says.” If you want to hear God the Holy Spirit speak, where do you go? You go to Scripture, like the writer of Hebrews did. In verses 7-11 he quotes from Psalm 95, a psalm where David recalls what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness. They heard God’s voice, but they hardened their hearts (8), tested and tried God (9), failed to know God’s ways (10), and consequently failed to enter God’s rest (11). Don’t let that happen to you, said the Holy Spirit through David in Psalm 95. Don’t tolerate any unbelief in your hearts.

But there’s more, for according to Hebrews 3 what God the Holy Spirit did, we must do...

II. We must confront the sin of unbelief (12-19).

A. We need to deal with it in our own hearts (12). That’s what verse 12 exhorts. And...

B. We need to help each other deal with it (13). How? By *encouraging* each other, as verse 13 says, “as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” To put it simply, it’s not just *my* “faith test” that should matter to me. I need to be concerned about *your* faith test, too. *We* need to be concerned about each other’s faith test, too.

That’s why Jim Elliff wrote his soul-stirring book, *Wasted Faith*. As I heard him share, he grew up in the Southern Baptist denomination that year after year produced statistics stating that huge numbers of people were saved, baptized, and added to the church. In his own admission, “Out of the nearly 16 million on the rolls only 30% come on a given Sunday morning. This is my own denomination and the pangs of this truth have driven me to an all-out effort to say whatever can be said to turn this situation around.”^[1]

That’s why Elliff wrote *Wasted Faith*, as he shares at the outset. “In the following pages we will take a hard look at faith...*your* faith. We will pry off the lid of deceptive faith and smell its contents. In the process we will come to an understanding of what is authentic—the faith that is the acceptable response to the activity of God. And we will discover the disturbing possibility that what we thought was conversion to Christ may have only been a shadow, an illusion, a mere experience.”^[2]

In *Wasted Faith* Elliff exposes six kinds of deficient, non-saving faith.^[3] Allow me to mention them so that we

might help each pass the faith test.

1. *Beware of faith without the Spirit.* Elliff writes, “To say that have had what you call a faith experience does not in itself prove anything. Faith, after all, does not save; God alone saves, *through* faith. Faith is a necessary corollary, to be sure. You must believe if you are to be saved. But apart from the ‘wind’ of God’s Spirit, no one *can* believe. A hoisted sail has no power to make the wind blow; it only catches the wind when it does blow. Likewise, human decisions (often mistakenly viewed as certain evidence of saving faith), have no power to cause the Spirit of God to work.”^[4]

Remember Jesus’ words in John 3:8? “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” So beware of faith with the Holy Spirit.

2. *Beware of faith without Christ.* Many know the facts about Christ, that He died for sinners and rose again. And many even recited those facts in some sort of prayer. But knowing *about* Christ is no guarantee that a person truly knows Christ. As Elliff puts it, “Knowing His biographical sketch accurately is not the same as knowing Him personally.”^[5] True faith is *relational*, and true sheep hear and follow the Shepherd’s voice (John 10:27).

3. *Beware of faith without reason.* We just stated that true faith is *relational*, but that doesn’t mean we can throw correct notions of truth out the window. Just because I’ve had a “faith experience” doesn’t make my experience valid. As Elliff puts it, “Faith is not a subjective experience apart from fact. Faith is relational, but it must also be rational. It is not a matter of faith being either subjective or objective; it is both.”^[6]

4. *Beware of faith without repentance.* Elliff explains, “Christ did not come to bless good people, but rather to save sinners. He did not come to give people the added benefit of heaven attached to their already fulfilled lives. He came to snatch sinners out of the hellishness of their souls and deliver them from the hell of their destiny! Any other understanding makes too little of Christ’s sacrifice.”^[7] Hear Peter in Acts 3:19, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out...”

5. *Beware of faith without fruit.* The fruit of the Spirit, says Galatians 5:22, is “love, joy, peace, etc.” The Holy Spirit indwells all who know Christ personally. That would indicate that all who know Christ will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. There will be *love*—they will love God and God’s people. There will be *joy*, not merely circumstance-based happiness but real heaven-sent joy, especially in trials. And if this love and joy are missing? It would indicate a deficient, non-saving faith?

6. *Beware of faith that does not last.* This, of course, is what the book of Hebrews is all about. Some first century Jews professed faith in Jesus the Messiah, but began to entertain second thoughts when persecution hit. They were thinking about throwing in the towel. “Hang in there!” says Hebrews. “Run with perseverance the race marked out for us (12:1). “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...who endured the cross (12:2).” If He suffered for us, ought we not follow Him to the end?

Last week I told you I ran Cross Country. In four years of Cross Country I never saw the following occur. No trophies were presented at the beginning of a race, and not even during a race, but always after the race. That’s because a fast start didn’t mean anything. A person could fake being a runner for a couple hundred yards, maybe longer. But the grind of the race would expose the reality of the facts.

If a person is a believer in Jesus Christ, that person will persevere in the race of life, by the grace of God. Yet if the person is an *unbeliever* who merely professed faith in Christ, in time he will drop out of the race, for if faith isn’t real then perseverance won’t be a reality.

Which brings us to a critical question. We’ve talked about *unbelief* and the need to confront it, and we’ve considered *wasted faith* and the great danger of settling for it. But what exactly is *real faith*? It’s not enough to be able to discuss deficient faith...

C. We need to make sure we possess real faith (14-15). And that brings us to verses 14-15: “We have come to

share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’”

How can we know if we have truly been saved? Ephesians 2:8 says, “For by grace are you saved through faith.” A person is saved by grace through faith. But how can one know whether his faith is genuine or not? We find the answer right where we’re told that three things are true of real faith.

1. *Real faith shares in Christ (14a)*. Notice the switch from the second person “you” in verse 13 to the first person “we” in verse 14. “We have come to share in Christ.” The Greek word translated “share” is *metachoi*. We find the same word back in 3:1 where the writer says that his readers “share in the heavenly calling.”

The fact is, God who is holy cannot tolerate sin in His presence. He must judge it appropriately. That’s why He sent His Son into the world. Jesus did something we could not do—He lived a sinless life. And Jesus also experienced something we deserve to experience—the judgment of God for sin. On the cross God judged His own Son. Why? Because on the cross God’s Son took upon Himself the horrendous sins committed by every person that would ever truly believe on Him. He paid the penalty for those sins, and three days later God the Son was raised to life to verify the success of His saving mission.

True Christians, biblically defined, are those who “share in Christ.” [\[8\]](#) They recognize that Christ did what He did *for them*, and so they *believe*, not just in the facts of His death and resurrection, but they believe *in Him* as a person. They come to share *in Him*.[\[9\]](#)

Eliza Hewitt expressed it well:[\[10\]](#)

*My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device or creed;
I trust the ever living One,
His wounds for me shall plead.*

*I need no other argument,
I need no other plea,
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me.*

Well said. What’s true of real faith? First of all, it shares in the person and work of Christ. But that’s not all...

2. *Real faith perseveres to the end (14b)*. “We have come to share in Christ *if*.” This isn’t the first time the author has pointed out that real faith meets real conditions, nor will it be the last. Back in verse 6 we were told, “But 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.” So true faith *holds on*. For how long? He doesn’t tell us in verse 6. He does in verse 14: “...if we hold firmly *till the end* the confidence we had at first.”

Keep in mind that although real faith perseveres, we are not saved *by* our perseverance. Christ saves us. We are saved because we “share in Christ.” Yet our perseverance is visible evidence that Christ has truly saved us.

Let me say it another way. A person is saved when he repents of his sin and puts his trust in the person and redemptive work of Christ. However, if a professing Christian subsequently denies his belief in the unique personhood and substitutionary work of Christ, then his denial is evidence that he never truly did believe to begin with, not with saving faith. As Jonathan Edwards once said, “The sure proof of election is that one holds out to the end.”[\[11\]](#)

3. *Real faith is a present tense reality (15)*. “As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’” Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? The writer is quoting again from Psalm 95, just like he did back in verses 7-11. This time he cites only the verse that begins the section, yet in so doing he

undoubtedly has the whole passage in mind. It's kind of like playing a line from a song. With just a few notes and words a musician can call to our attention the message of an entire familiar song.

He wants us to remember what happened to the Israelites as described in Psalm 95. In fact, he's going to tell us exactly what happened to them in the next three verses, as we'll see. But for now, notice that word 'today' again. The writer loves that word and uses over and over in Hebrews. The point? Real faith is a *present tense* reality.

So you heard God's Word when you were ten years old, and responded. That's great. But what about *today*? The fact is, if you truly responded with saving faith that day long ago, then it wasn't the last time you heard His voice and responded. That's because real faith is a *present tense reality*.

You don't have to twist a true believer's arm to get him to come to church. That's because he loves to hear God's voice as it's spoken through the preached Word. And you don't have to entertain him to keep him coming, either, for he loves to hear the sweetest voice of all, the voice that called him out of darkness and into light.

Does this true believer ever struggle? For sure! That's why Hebrews was written! At times we can get sidetracked by other voices and begin to wander from the fold. But our Shepherd won't let us go. He says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand (John 10:27-28)." Note our part: we listen and follow. But we do that because of what Christ does: He gives us life, eternal life. When we were dead in our sins, His Spirit regenerated our dead hearts so we could exercise faith in Him. And every day since then He graciously has enabled us to live out our faith in Him. And when we blow it, He stands ready, as our mediator and great high priest, to restore us back into our Father's fellowship.

And that brings us to the fourth responsibility in confronting unbelief...

D. We need to remember that real faith is real over the long haul (16-19). In the closing verses of the chapter, the writer takes us back to 1400 B.C. He wants us to learn from the Jews in Moses' day that real faith is real over the long haul. That example involved four stages...

1. The Jews escaped Egypt but later rebelled (16). "Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?"

Talk about experiencing privileges! The fifteenth-century-BC Hebrews saw God work ten plagues in Egypt, harden Pharaoh's heart and then change his heart so that he set free the Israelite slaves. They watched God part the Red Sea and walked across on dry ground. They ate heaven-sent food called manna that came fresh from God every day. They watched God provide fresh drinking water from a rock in the desert. They saw the mountain smoke when God met with Moses on Sinai.

Later they saw the firstfruits of the land of Canaan that the spies brought back. They heard the promise of God that He would destroy the inhabitants of the land and give it to them.

Yet in spite of all these spiritual privileges, they rebelled. Consequently...

2. The Jews sinned against God and died in the desert (17). "And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?"

Notice that God was *angry* with them. He loved them, showered them with blessings, but became angry with them. Why? Because they sinned against Him in specific ways which will be identified in the following verses.

"And their bodies fell in the desert," says the writer. Just think. The trip should have taken just a couple of months. In the end it lasted forty years, forty years of regretful wandering, and in the end everyone over twenty years of age died except for Joshua and Caleb.

The number is 603,550, according to Numbers 1:46. That's how many Hebrew men over the age of twenty left Egypt, and they all, minus Joshua and Caleb, died. Or to use the harsh reality of Hebrews 3:17, their *bodies fell in the*

desert. I did some figuring and learned there are 2,080 weeks in forty years. If you divide the number of Hebrew men by the number of weeks, you discover that there was an average of 290 funerals per week in the Israelite camp, every week for forty years. That translates into 41 funerals every day for forty years, and that's just the funerals for the *men*.

Is sin costly? Yes, the wages of sin is *death*. What specific sin caused this massive loss of Hebrew life and caused an entire generation to forfeit the promised land? The writer of Hebrews gives two causes...

3. *The Jews missed the promised land because of their disobedience (18)*. "And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?" The defining moment, of course, happened at Kadesh Barnea (see Numbers 14). God had told the Israelites to take the promised land, but when the spies returned and said there were giants in the land, the people grew hysterical.

"Why is the LORD bringing us here only to let us fall by the sword?" they asked. "Let's go back to Egypt!" they proposed, and even talked of stoning Moses. And by that act of disobedience, which was their *tenth* act of blatant disobedience according to God's assessment in Numbers 14:22, they forfeited the promised land.

But the final verse of Hebrews 3 gives another reason, indicating that...

4. *The Jews missed the promised land because of their unbelief (19)*. "So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief^[12]." The two go hand in hand, of course, for the failure to believe God is the root of all disobedience.^[13] Unbelief is the heart sin that produces the action sin of disobedience.

What's the point of this illustration? As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 10:11-12, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

If we learn anything from the Jews in Moses' day, it's this sobering reality. Past spiritual privileges don't guarantee future blessings. Sure, the Israelites experienced God's delivering power when they left Egypt. They later heard God speak at Mount Sinai, and even saw Him provide for their needs time and time again. *But...*they never made it to the promised land. They forfeited what could have been theirs because of one very simple and very deadly problem.

It's the same problem that the first readers of the book of Hebrews were facing, and the parallels were striking. They too had seen God rescue slaves out of bondage, slaves to sin that were set free through faith in Jesus Christ. They too heard God's voice through His Word, and saw Him provide for their needs time and time again. *But...*now they were in danger of forfeiting the land of God's rest, the promised land of heaven, because of this same deadly problem, the sin of *unbelief*.

Hanging around real believers doesn't guarantee a person has real faith. It's time to take inventory, says the book of Hebrews. That goes for us, too.

Make It Personal: Take inventory of your life...

Sometimes the Bible comforts the troubled, yet sometimes it troubles the comfortable. The passage before us today can do both if we'll take it's message to heart. So ponder carefully three questions.

1. *Do I possess saving faith?* Remember the three marks from earlier? Real, saving faith shares in Christ, perseveres to the end, and is a present tense reality. Is that true of your faith? Is your confidence in Christ alone, is it persevering, and is it real today?

Let me say a word to parents and grandparents. Please don't give your children and grandchildren a false sense of assurance about their spiritual condition. Encourage them to test their faith.

Suppose your child bought a parachute and told you he was going skydiving. And suppose right after he left the house you happened to hear a news release about a parachute manufacturing company, indicating that thousands of defective parachutes, instead of being destroyed, were sold to the public. My question is, would you let your child jump out of the plane without first urging him to check out the reliability of his parachute? You know the answer. Any loving parent would urge their child *not* to jump until he first did a thorough exam of that parachute.

Beloved, we're talking about something much more dangerous, eternally so. Why would we allow our kids or grandkids to go through and leave this life with what may be a deficient-faith—a defective parachute—without urging them to test it? But it happens in family after family.

Remember Billy from the beginning? It's not just Billy that's got his "spiritual birthday" written in his Bible. It's in his mother's Bible, too. And what happens when Billy's youth leader approaches Billy's mom, expressing concern over his disrespect for the youth leaders and his total disinterest in spiritual matters? Does she thank the leader, proceed to urge Billy to examine the validity of his so-called faith, and then fast and pray for the sake of his soul? Or does she get offended at the leader's comment, taking it as an insult on her parenting, and start looking for another youth group that knows how to "make Christianity appealing" to boys like hers.

Beloved, examine your own faith, but also encourage those you love to do the same. Don't settle for man-produced security.

2. *Am I taking seriously the sin of unbelief in my life?* Are there doubts that you have refused to face, questions you have refused to answer? Be honest with yourself. Don't coast through life on autopilot. Is there a ministry God is wanting you to attempt, but you're refusing because all you can see are the giants? If so, then answer this...

3. *Will I humble myself today and experience God's grace?* Here's the good news, my friend, in the words of James 4:6, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." If you will humble yourself today, God will give you exactly what you need. Exactly. So believe Him. Humble yourself. And prepare to be amazed!

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Jim Elliff, *Revival and the Unregenerate Church Member*, p. 6.

[2] Jim Elliff, *Wasted Faith*, p. 7.

[3] To see Jim Elliff's materials, visit his website at <http://www.ccwonline.org>

[4] Elliff, p. 12.

[5] Elliff, p. 19.

[6] Elliff, p. 23.

[7] Elliff, pp. 27-8.

[8] Donald Guthrie observes, "The word *metochoi* could be understood to mean either 'partakers of Christ' or 'partakers with Christ'. The latter is certainly better suited to the context." Donald Guthrie, p. 107.

[9] Leon Morris remarks that it can be understood in two ways: "participators in Christ" or "participators with Christ," and favors the former translation. Leon Morris, p. 36.

[10] The hymn, "My Faith Has Found a Resting Place," is attributed to Lidie Edmunds, Eliza's pseudonym.

[\[11\]](#) Quote by Jonathan Edwards, in Gromacki, p. 67.

[\[12\]](#) In the Greek text, the word ‘unbelief’ appears in the climactic position at the end of the sentence.

[\[13\]](#) Observation by BAG, p. 82, in Leon Morris, p. 38.