

Unbelief

In the same way that we understand from the Bible that real faith is expressed by actions:

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.¹

We also understand from the Bible that not following the instruction of God is caused by lack of belief in God's promises. The writer to the Hebrews uses Israel's disobedience in the desert to make this point:

So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.²

The apostle Paul adds this point:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.³

They did not follow God's instruction even after God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them out of the country in victory. God protected and fed them in the desert:

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.⁴

What then, is the lesson for us?

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. 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."⁵

Remember the point we are making here, God provides his analysis on what this all means:

So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.⁶

When we are personally engaged in not following God's instruction we may have all sorts of reasons or explanations for why. The clear message from God's word though is that unbelief is the cause. This should not be surprising since we are the product of a culture of unbelief. Those who understand the promise and the consequences should encourage and help family and friends understand the truth.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"⁷

Today, hearing his voice is difficult because our culture has wandered away from God's instruction. We are surrounded by friends and family who have been raised to ignore God's instruction.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.⁸

Clearly, God alone will be the final judge of us all. Our job is to believe the promise and follow the instructions of God; this is the scriptural definition of faith.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.⁹

¹ James 2:26

² Heb 3:19

³ 1 Cor 10:11

⁴ 1 Cor 10:5

⁵ Heb 3:12-15

⁶ Heb 3:19

⁷ Rom 10:14-15

⁸ Rom 3:23

The righteous will live by faith.¹⁰

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.¹¹

Unbelief makes it impossible to please God, this is clear. Let's go back to the passage from Hebrews chapter three which contains this instruction:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.¹²

Because we are the product of a culture of unbelief that has by and large turned away from God, we begin our adult lives on a path away from God. We, each of us need to set an example for family and friends by changing our direction and following a path toward God. We do this by following the example and instruction of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul makes this very point in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.¹³

Because we are the product of a culture of unbelief that has by and large turned away from God, we also need to be careful and make it clear to everyone that we are following Christ, the only path God has chosen for us back to him:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.¹⁴ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!¹⁵

Back to the example of Israel in the desert; at the end of the desert wandering, just before entering the promised land Moses warns Israel:

Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you. Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.¹⁶

God's instruction is meant to be conspicuously followed and passed down across generations. This we need to be careful to do. We need to set an example:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you — a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant — then when you eat and are

⁹ Heb 11:1-2

¹⁰ Gal 3:11

¹¹ Heb 11:6

¹² Heb 3:12

¹³ 1 Cor 11:1

¹⁴ 1 Tim 2:5

¹⁵ Gal 1:6-9

¹⁶ Deut 11:16-21

satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."¹⁷

We are the product of a culture of unbelief that has for many thousands of years forgotten the instruction:

-be careful that you do not forget the LORD¹⁸

God has chosen to consider righteous those who believe his promise and follow his instruction. This is important. This is the conspicuous example for us that the life of Abraham presents:

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness ." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.¹⁹

Because we are the product of a culture of unbelief that has by and large turned away from God, we need to carefully consider the example set by Abraham as we set our own example:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁰

We understand from the Bible that not following the instruction of God is caused by lack of belief in God's promises. We have looked at the unbelief of Israel in the desert as a warning for us. We have also looked at Abraham and at how "he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God" as a positive example for us. Unbelief is what prevents us from following God's instruction. Unbelief is what prevents us from setting an example for others. Unbelief is what prevents us from escaping condemnation and assisting others in choosing life:

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.²¹

The choice is clear, life or death. What then, will the choice be for you? Unbelief prevents us from crossing over from death to life. This is the challenge presented to us by God, just as he presented

¹⁷ Deut 6:10-12, 20-21, 25

¹⁸ Deut 6:12

¹⁹ Gal 3:6-9

²⁰ Rom 4:18-5:1

²¹ Deut 30:19-20

the same challenge to Abraham and the nation of Israel. Because we are the product of a culture of unbelief that has by and large turned away from God, we may not see things that way. Clearly though, this is the way God sees it. Jesus Christ said:

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.²²

What then, will the choice be for you?

So, as the Holy Spirit says:

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the desert,
where your fathers tested and tried me
and for forty years saw what I did.
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.'
So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'"

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.²³

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²² John 5:24

²³ Heb 3:7-14