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PERSEVERING IN FAITH

Hebrews 3:12-19

By

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One of the most controversial issues among Christians is, "Can a believer lose his salvation?" Our emotions can get involved, since most of us have loved ones who at one time made a profession of faith in Christ, and perhaps were even involved in some ministry. But today they are far from the Lord. We wonder, "Is this person truly saved?" Our hearts want to say "yes," but there are scary verses, such as several in our text, that make us hesitate.

Among evangelicals, there are three main camps. Consistent Arminians would say that this person was saved, but he lost his salvation. These folks view salvation primarily as a human decision. If your decision to believe gets you in, your decision to deny the faith puts you out. I dismiss this view as indefensible in light of many Scriptures that promise security to God's children (such as Rom. 8:1 & 29-36).

Among those who hold that believers cannot lose their salvation, there are two main camps. Some argue that perseverance is not necessary for salvation to be secure. Their motto is, "Once saved, always saved." They argue that to make salvation require perseverance makes it depend on works. And they argue that if final salvation depends on perseverance, then assurance of salvation is impossible. What if I fall away in the future? And so they say that all that matters is that a person once believed in Christ.

This view shares with the Arminian view the idea that faith is a human decision. It is not a gift that God imparts to those He regenerates. Rather, faith is like a lever that we pull. Once we pull it, all the benefits of salvation come pouring out, and we can't stop the process. We can walk away and say that we don't want those benefits, but they still belong to us. How we live after we believe has nothing to do with our eternal destiny or security.

The other main view is that of Reformed theology, that saving faith is God's gift, imparted to us when He saves us. Salvation originates with God and depends totally on His purpose and

power. Since He promises to complete what He began to the praise of His glorious grace, all of God's elect will persevere in faith unto eternal life. This view, which I believe is the truth, holds that there is such a thing as false faith. It is possible for some who profess faith in Christ later to fall away from the faith, thus demonstrating that their faith was not genuine. But saving faith, by its very nature, perseveres. Continuance in the faith is the evidence that our faith is from God, and not from man.

This is not to say that persevering faith is effortless or automatic. God ordains the means as well as the ends. God's sovereignty in salvation never negates human responsibility. God elects all whom He saves, but the elect are responsible to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ. Although God promises that His elect will all finally be saved, we are exhorted to persevere in faith. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are not at odds!

Our text is a strong exhortation to persevere in the faith. Genuine believers will heed the warning and hold fast their faith in times of trial. False believers will grumble against God and fall into sin and unbelief when trials hit, just as many in Israel did in the wilderness. So the author exhorts the church ("brethren," 3:12) to "hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end" (3:14). He shows us four aspects of persevering faith:

To persevere in faith, there is a great sin to avoid, a great service to practice, a great salvation to hold to, and a great story to personalize.

1. To persevere in faith, there is a great sin to avoid (3:12).

If I were to ask you to name what you consider to be the very worst sins, we would probably hear mass murder, genocide, child molestation, cannibalism, and degraded sexual practices. Unbelief probably would not occur to us. But it's on God's list of terrible sins: "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, ..." (3:12).

A. To avoid this terrible sin, we must see how evil unbelief really is.

If we shrug it off as no big deal, we won't be on guard against it. If I told you that there is a stray cat on the loose outside, you'd say, "No big deal." You wouldn't be cautious about encountering

this wild animal. But if I mentioned that the stray cat was a hungry lion, you'd be a bit more careful! Consider five aspects of unbelief that should cause us to be on guard against it:

- 1) Unbelief is the worst of all sins, because it is the root of all sins.

Unbelief is behind every other sin that people commit. When Satan tempted Eve in the garden, he got her to disbelieve the word of God: "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1). He was saying, "You really can't believe that, can you?" If people really believed God, they would not practice any of the terrible sins mentioned earlier, because they would know that they will face His severe judgment. But not believing God, they do as they please. Unbelief is the root of all sins.

- 2) Unbelief is a sin that hardens the heart.

In 3:13 the author warns that they may be hardened by this sin. He repeats the warning again in 3:15, where he cites again the verse from Psalm 95 (see 3:8). Sin is like the calluses that form on our skin. If we don't have calluses, our hands are sensitive to any pain. But once calluses form, we can do things that previously would have caused pain, and we barely feel it. Our consciences are that way. The first time we commit a sin, our conscience goes "Ouch!" The second time, it hurts, but not as bad. After a while, we can do it without even being aware that we are sinning. I've read of hardened hit men with the Mafia that can shoot a man in the face at close range and then go out for lunch to celebrate. Unbelief hardens our hearts against God's standards of holiness.

- 3) Unbelief is a persistent threat to all of God's people.

In 3:13, the author tells us to "encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today.'" He is referring back to the word "today" in Psalm 95. It warns us that this sin of unbelief is a persistent, daily threat. We may have been strong in faith yesterday, but then we run out of water in the wilderness today. How will we respond? Will we trust God and look to Him in faith to provide, or will we grumble and turn back to the world?

True believers can fall into the sin of unbelief. God had promised David that he would sit on the throne of Israel, but David was running for his life from the mad King Saul. After years

of this, David said to himself, "Now I will perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than to escape into the land of the Philistines" (1 Sam. 27:1). That was *not* a statement of faith in God's promise! It got David into all sorts of trouble before he finally came to his senses (1 Sam. 30:6). But the point is, believers are not immune from unbelief! Be on guard!

4) Unbelief, like all sin, deceives us.

The author refers to "the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13). Sin fools us into thinking that it will get us out of our current problems and will deliver what we want, and that obedience to God will deprive us of what we want. When David went over to the Philistines, Saul stopped pursuing him. The Philistine king gave David his own city. Instead of living from cave to cave, David and his wives could settle down in a normal way of life. Sin always works that way. It fools us into thinking that we're getting what we want. But then the bills of sin come due!

You're single and lonely. There haven't been any godly men calling you for a date. Satan comes along and says, "You'll never get what you want if you wait on God! Here's a nice unbeliever. Go out with him!" Or, you're having problems in your marriage. Your wife constantly nags you. She doesn't meet your needs sexually. Along comes a beautiful, sensitive, understanding woman who offers herself to you. Satan whispers, "She will meet your needs!" Sin, including unbelief, always deceives us.

5) Unbelief is inseparable from disobedience.

In verse 12, the warning is against *unbelief*, but in verse 13, without any shift in subject, he warns against the deceitfulness of *sin*. In verses 17 & 18, he mentions those who *sinned* and were *disobedient*. In verse 19 he explains that they were barred from entering the land because of *unbelief*. The Bible repeatedly uses "faith" and "obedience" interchangeably (John 3:36; Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 10:16; 15:18; 16:26; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:8; 3:1; 4:17). We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith always results in a life of obedience to God (James 2:18-26). If you truly believe God, you will obey Him. If you disbelieve God, you will disobey Him.

Thus to avoid this terrible sin of unbelief, we must see how evil it really is.

B. To avoid this terrible sin we must exercise great caution.

“Take care, brethren” (3:12)! “Look out! Be on guard!” It does not require carefulness to go to hell, but it does require great carefulness to go to heaven. If you’re nonchalant or unconcerned about your soul, the powerful stream of the world, the flesh, and the devil will sweep you into hell. You must *strive* to enter at the narrow gate of heaven (Luke 13:24). Vigilance and watchfulness are marks of true believers. True believers do not flippantly say, “Hey, don’t worry about a little sin! Once saved, always saved!” True believers examine their hearts often to make sure that they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). They take care that their hearts do not become evil and unbelieving, so that they do not fall away from the living God.

C. To avoid this terrible sin, we must avoid ritualistic religion and walk closely with the living God.

As we saw last week, Christianity is a matter of the heart before God. It’s easy to put on a good show in front of others, so that they think, “What a godly man Steve is!” I can sing with a loud voice, I can lift my hands in worship, I can pray with intensity, I can partake of communion, and I can even preach sermons with fervency—but it could all be outward! God is the *living God* (9:14; 10:31; 12:22) who looks on the heart. “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (4:13). The living God knows my every doubt and sinful thought. I can’t fool Him, even for a second! If I want to avoid falling into this terrible sin of unbelief, I must bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. I must confess my doubts as sin and walk in reality before the living God every day. To persevere in faith, there is a great sin to avoid, namely, unbelief.

2. To persevere in faith, there is a great service to practice (3:13).

“But encourage one another day after day, . . .” The verb can also mean to exhort. The root word has the idea of coming alongside someone to give aid. It is used as a name for the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26, “Helper”). Briefly, note three things about this service of encouragement:

- A. Encouragement is a service for every member of the body.

This is not just something that pastors should do. It is a necessary ministry for every member of the body to practice mutually. Sometimes I need to exercise this ministry to someone, but at other times, I will need him to exercise it towards me. This command assumes that you are having personal contact with other believers during the week and that they know what is going on in your life well enough to offer this ministry when you need it. Also, to exercise this service, you must realize that you *are* your brother's keeper! If you see your brother being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and you shrug it off, you are not obeying this command. You are responsible to help your brother who is struggling with unbelief or sin. You can't keep your distance.

- B. Encouragement is a service that is needed daily because the enemy attacks daily.

We are to do this "day after day." Don't assume, "Well, I'll let the pastor deal with him someday, but that's not my responsibility." It *is* your responsibility if you see your brother turning away from the Lord! Since Satan does not let up in his attacks, we must not let up on encouraging one another in the faith.

- C. Encouragement is a service that is needed because of the deceitfulness of sin.

A deceived person can't evaluate himself properly. He thinks that everything is fine when it's not fine. If you've ever been deceived by a con artist, he was long gone with your money before you realized that there was a problem. An outside party could have warned you, "Look out for that guy!" Maybe you would have avoided getting ripped off. Because sin fools us, we need one another to come alongside and give this ministry of encouragement.

To persevere, there is a great sin to avoid—unbelief. There is a great service to practice—encouragement.

- 3. To persevere in faith, there is a great salvation to hold fast to (3:14).

"For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." Two things:

A. Salvation unites us to Christ.

“We have become partakers of Christ” (see also, 1:9; 3:1; 6:4; 12:8). Scholars are divided over whether this refers to our sharing with Christ in His kingdom work; or to our union with Christ, what Paul frequently calls, being “in Christ.” While both are true, the context seems to refer to our share in Christ Himself. When God saves us, He places us in Christ so that all that is true of Him is true of us. As Paul boldly states, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

B. While final salvation for believers is certain, it is not automatic.

While “partakers of Christ” focuses on what God has done for us by grace, the “if” clause focuses on our responsibility. “The beginning of our assurance” refers to our initial faith in Christ for salvation. Saving faith isn’t just a one-time action. If it is genuine, we go on believing until the time that we see Jesus (“the end”). It is our responsibility to hold fast to such faith and assurance.

In Philippians, Paul presents the same balance. He says that God will complete the good work that He began in us, but at the same time he exhorts us to work out our salvation, recognizing all the while that it is God who is at work in us (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13). In other words, the promises about the certainty of our salvation should never cause us to kick back and assume that we have no responsibility in the process. Those who truly believe in Christ will continue to hold fast to faith in Him until the end. If they let go of their faith in Him, turn back to the world, and are content to stay there, it indicates that they never really trusted in Him as Savior at all. True believers may go through times of doubt and sin, but they can’t remain there. God’s discipline will bring them back (12:8).

To persevere in faith, there is a great sin to avoid, a great service to practice, and a great salvation to hold fast to. Finally,

4. To persevere in faith, there is a great story to personalize (3:15-19).

The author comes back to the story of Israel in the wilderness, quoting again from Psalm 95: “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.” Then he brings this story home to his readers by asking three sets of two rhetorical

questions each (the KJV mistranslates 3:16). The first question in each set is answered by the second question. He wants his readers to see that their situation parallels exactly that of Israel in the wilderness. In 3:19 he sums up his point, tying it back to the idea of unbelief in 3:12.

The first question and answer show that *this story applies to all professing believers*. Who provoked God when they heard His voice? The same group that Moses had led out of Egypt. While there was a truly saved remnant in that company, most of them grumbled, disbelieved God, and died in the wilderness. The author is saying to all professing Christians, "This applies to you!" Even if we are true believers, John Owen's comment is apropos: "The best of saints have need to be cautioned against the worst of evils" (*Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning* [Kregel], p. 53).

The second question and answer show that *professing believers who persist in sin should expect God's anger, not His rest*. If we are not true believers, our sin in the face of knowledge will incur God's final judgment. If we are true believers, our sin will bring on His strong discipline. Either way, you don't want to go there!

The third question and answer show that *those who incurred God's judgment in the wilderness were not only unbelieving; they were disobedient*. As we've seen, you cannot separate the two. Unbelief that is unchecked quickly moves into disobedience. Often unbelief is a smokescreen used to hide disobedience. Unbelief is more socially acceptable than sin, so we posture ourselves as struggling with intellectual issues. But beneath the surface, we know that if God's Word is true, then we need to turn from our sins, and we don't want to do that. The disobedient who failed to enter God's rest were one and the same with the unbelieving.

His final summary (3:19) also shows that unbelief renders us not only *unwilling*, but also *unable* to appropriate God's blessings. Either faith opens the blessings of God's eternal rest to you, or unbelief bars you from them. To persevere in faith, we need to personalize the story of Israel in the wilderness. We need to avoid their awful sin of unbelief that rendered them unable to enter God's promised rest.

Conclusion

I had a neighbor in California who could be described as an all-out macho man. His face and tattooed arms were tanned from working on a road crew and from riding his motorcycle in the California sun. He had a quick temper. I once heard him from over 100 yards away cussing out the snowplow driver for plowing a berm in front of his driveway. He had copies of *Penthouse* magazine lying around his house. He never went to church.

One day I got an opportunity to share Christ with him. But he quickly held up his hand to silence me and then said, "Steve, I've got that all fixed up with the Man Upstairs." I'm always worried when someone refers to Almighty God as "the Man Upstairs." I said, "What do you mean?" He proceeded to tell me that when he was a teenager, he attended a large Baptist church in the Los Angeles area. The youth pastor had told him that if he would accept Christ, he would be assured of going to heaven. He said, "I did that, and so you don't need to worry about me." Even though there was not a shred of evidence that he was persevering in the faith, and in spite of much evidence that he was not, he thought that because he had once believed, he had eternal life!

The author of Hebrews had a different view of things. He says that to enter God's rest, we must persevere in obedient faith. To persevere, we must avoid the great sin of unbelief; we must practice the great service of mutual encouragement; we must hold fast our great salvation in Christ; and, we must personalize the great story of Israel in the wilderness. Take care, brethren!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is unbelief such a terrible sin? Does this mean that true Christians never doubt? Why/why not?
2. Since sin is so deceptive, how can we recognize and deal with our unbelief? Is unbelief primarily intellectual or moral?
3. Should we share assurance of salvation with a person who says that he believes in Christ, but who is persisting in sin? What guidelines should we follow here?
4. Is the criticism valid, that if salvation entails perseverance, then we can never have assurance? Why/why not?

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