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Hebrews #10

Perseverance is a Community Project
Hebrews 3:7-19

I'd be curious to know what many of you think about your salvation and what God has done through Christ to reconcile you to himself. My guess is that most Christians today would respond by talking of personal faith in Jesus and repentance from sin, of being forgiven and becoming a child of God. A few of you would mention what it means to be justified or declared righteous in the sight of God through faith alone in Christ alone. And of course, all these things are true and wonderful. Don't think for a moment that I'm not thankful for everything God has done for me in and through Jesus.

But the picture we see in the NT reveals a much grander and more expansive view of salvation. In fact, all through the OT as well as in the NT we are told in a variety of ways ***that what God did for us in Jesus, in saving us from sin and death, is nothing short of a Second Exodus***. A "second" exodus? Some of you may be struggling with that because you don't have much of a grasp on the "first" exodus! So let me briefly remind you of what the exodus was all about.

The nation of Israel was in bondage in Egypt. They were physically enslaved to Pharaoh. You may recall that God worked incredible miracles in the form of ten plagues of judgment to bring about Israel's deliverance from bondage. Perhaps most important of all, he provided a sacrificial lamb, one "without spot or blemish" whose shed blood was applied to the doorposts of all the houses of Israel. This led God to "pass over" their sins (hence, the Passover feast that was celebrated throughout Israel's history to commemorate that event).

Moses then led the people into the wilderness where they passed safely through the Red Sea, while Egypt's armies drowned in its waters. Later Moses led them to the holy mountain where they received the law of God, what we know as the Ten Commandments. While they wandered in the wilderness God provided them with manna from heaven and water from a rock. All of this, mind you, while they journeyed to their promised land where they were to enter into rest.

Most people are aware of these basic facts, if not by reading their Bibles then from having watched the movie *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston as Moses! But tragically, what most Christians don't know is that ***all of this was a type or foreshadowing of an even***

greater and more important exodus, namely, our exodus or deliverance out of bondage and slavery to sin.

For example, just as Israel was in ***physical*** bondage so we were in ***spiritual*** bondage, subject to the tyranny of sin and guilt. Just as God worked miraculous signs in the ten plagues so he also performed great miracles and supernatural wonders in the ministry of Jesus. Just as God provided Israel with a sacrificial lamb so that they might be spared physical death, he has provided us with a sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ, so that we might be spared eternal death. Jesus, so says the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7, is “our Passover Lamb.” When his blood is applied to our hearts by faith, we are spared the penalty of sin. By the way, it is of more than passing interest that when Jesus described his impending death on the cross, we read in **Luke 9:31** that he “spoke of his ***departure***, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The word “departure” in your English Bible is a translation of the Greek word “exodus”!

Jesus, the anti-type or fulfillment of Moses, some even call him the Second Moses, has provided us with his law or commandments under the New Covenant to guide and shape our behavior. Just as God provided Israel with *manna* from heaven, we are told in John 6 that Jesus is himself the true manna that doesn’t merely sustain us physically but gives us eternal life. And in **1 Corinthians 10:4** we read that the rock from which the people of Israel drank life-giving waters was none other than Christ himself! Christ is the manna. Christ is the rock. Christ is the living water.

And the land of Canaan, the promised land, toward which they journeyed in search of physical rest was itself a type or prophetic preview of the *spiritual rest* we receive now through faith in Christ and will experience forever when we dwell with God in the New Earth, when Christ returns.

Now, why is it important for us to know this? One reason is found here in Hebrews 3. It seems rather clear that ***our author is drawing a comparison between the experience of Israel in her Exodus out of physical bondage in Egypt and the Church’s Exodus out of spiritual bondage in sin.***

The point that he makes here in Hebrews 3 is that we need to be very, very careful that no one in our midst makes the same mistake that many Israelites made. What sort of mistakes did they make? The answer is given in vv. 7-11 and again in vv. 16-19.

In vv. 7-11 our author quotes from Psalm 95. We can’t be certain what specific event he has in mind, but it may be what we read about in Exodus 17:1-7. There we are told that only six months

after being delivered from Egypt, after the Israelites had witnessed the miracle at the Red Sea, they started griping and complaining about the lack of water.

However, it is more likely Numbers 13-14 that he has in mind. You will recall that when they arrived at the border of the promised land Moses sent in spies to gain knowledge about Canaan and the people who lived there. When 10 of the 12 spies brought back an unfavorable report, the people revolted against Moses and Aaron and demanded a new leader who would take them back to Egypt.

Regardless of which of these incidents is in view, it angered God. Many in Israel hardened their hearts against God. They put him to the test. They “rebelled” (Heb. 3:16). They were “disobedient” (Heb. 3:18). They were guilty of “unbelief” (Heb. 3:19).

Clearly, not everyone was saved who came out of Egypt in the first Exodus. In fact, the majority probably were not. They had seen countless miracles. They had stood with their eyes wide open while God parted the waters of the Red Sea. They had watched the pillar of cloud guide them by day and the pillar of fire by night. They had watched as manna fell from heaven to feed them. But when times got tough and things didn’t go their way they rebelled against God. They grumbled. They murmured. They complained.

But worst of all, beneath this outward displeasure with how God had done things there was an unbelieving heart. According to v. 8, they hardened their “hearts.” According to v. 10, they went “astray in their heart.” According to v. 12 they suffered from an “unbelieving heart.” And in v. 19, he sums it up by saying they were guilty of “unbelief.”

They simply didn’t trust God or believe God or hope in God. They gave every outward appearance of being saved so long as the miracles continued and so long as God made provision for food and water. But when difficulties intensified, the true state of their souls was exposed.

This was quite similar to what was happening in the church to which the Epistle to the Hebrews was sent. These people in the first century had also seen miracles and had witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit. They had heard about God’s saving grace and had been told that their sins could be forgiven. They probably had been baptized and had participated in the Lord’s Supper. They were being exposed daily and weekly to the riches of God’s Word. But when times turned tough and persecution intensified and God didn’t do things how and when they thought he should, they too began to grumble and to harden themselves and were on the verge of turning away from God.

And what does our author say to them, and also to us? He puts it in no uncertain terms in v. 12 – “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”

“Sam, are you saying that there are people at Bridgeway, like many in Israel who came out of Egypt, who *aren’t genuinely saved*? Are you saying that *some* of us who have become covenant members and have partaken of the Lord’s Table and regularly attend Sunday services and are part of a community group *do not know Christ in a saving way*? Are you saying that *some*, in spite of having heard the gospel and having responded with joy and affirmation, yet have within them ‘an evil, unbelieving heart’?” Yes.

Yes, there are professing Christians, men and women who “say” they trust and hope in Christ, who have become increasingly hardened in their hearts and no longer find the Word of God interesting and no longer pray and are bored with worship and find little if any affection in their hearts for God and his grace to sinners in and through Jesus and find the sensual and self-indulgent pleasures of the world, the flesh, and the Devil more attractive and more satisfying than the things of the Holy Spirit. Yes, it grieves me deeply to concede this sad truth, but it is truth nonetheless.

And this sermon and this local body of believers and all we are and all we do here at Bridgeway are designed to call you and to encourage you to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ fully and freely and wholly and sincerely and forever.

Three Crucial Questions

Three questions demand to be answered.

First, what does it mean to “fall away from the living God” if you aren’t a true, born-again believer?

The best way to answer this very important question is by looking again at the example of those in Israel who came out of Egypt in the first exodus. Our author has described their experience for us in vv. 7-11 and again in vv. 16-19.

We read in v. 9 where God says *they “saw my works for forty years.”* In v. 16 *they “heard” God’s voice.* They witnessed over and over again the majesty of God’s miracle-working power. They were among those set free from Egypt. They were recipients of his mercy in the form of

manna from heaven and water from the rock and guidance by cloud and fire. But in spite of it all they hardened their hearts and griped and murmured and rebelled against God. That is what our author means when he says they “fell away” from the living God.

We need to come to grips with the reality of people who grow up in a church and are saturated with sermons and prayer and glorious times of worship and the sacraments and the many benefits of community and have participated in overseas missions trips and yet never finally and fully embrace Jesus Christ in genuine faith and repentance. Friends, our churches are filled with such people.

These are the sort of people that Jesus had in mind in the parable of the sower. He describes them in Mark 4:16-19 . . .

“And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Mark 4:16-19).

To the degree that a person comes close to God and the gospel, to the local church and its grace and power and life and joy, close enough to taste its goodness and to be deeply affected by the hope that is promised should one repent and believe, only then, under pressure and persecution, to turn away. . . . such is what it means to “fall away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).

Second, what do we conclude about those who do fall away, who fail to “hold” their “original confidence firm to the end”?

I’ve been answering that question ever since we arrived in chapter two of Hebrews, so let me keep it brief.

If a person does ***not*** “hold fast” their original confidence in Christ (Heb. 3:6, 14), we do ***not*** conclude that they then cease to be a member of God’s “house” (3:6) or that they then cease to “share in Christ” (3:14). Rather, we conclude that they ***had never become*** a partaker of Christ in the first place. Both Hebrews 3:6 and 3:14 are telling us that persevering or enduring or remaining in faith and hope is ***not a way to keep from losing or forfeiting*** your relationship to Christ. No, it is instead ***the way you show or demonstrate*** that you ***have*** a saving relationship with Christ.

Once again, we are not being told that if we hold fast our confidence in Christ we “will (in the future) become” a sharer in Christ or a partner with him. Rather, holding fast our confidence demonstrates that we “have [already] come” (past tense) to share in Christ. An individual’s continuous confidence in Christ in the present and all the way to the end proves that they already “have come” to know him in a saving way.

It is of crucial important that we *observe what a biblical text does not say*. Neither Hebrews 3:6 nor 3:14 says that if we hold fast our confidence we “will become” a part of God’s household or a partaker of Christ. Nor do either of these texts say that if we *don’t* hold fast our confidence we “will cease” to be a part of God’s household or a partaker of Christ. Instead, our author is *defining* for us who *is* a member of God’s household and a partaker of Christ. So, who “is” genuinely saved? The answer is right there: it is the man or woman who perseveres in faith and holds fast and firm their original confidence in Christ all the way to the end.

If that is the case, what conclusion should we draw about people who do *not* hold fast their confidence firm until the end? What should we conclude about those we know who have “said” they trusted Christ for salvation and at least initially displayed joy and excitement and a measure of commitment to Christ but subsequently walked away from him and now live in proud and unrepentant sin? Is it absolutely certain that they are not Christians at all? No. They may be. They may simply be living in temporary rebellion, in what we call a “backslidden” condition. If that is the case, God will deal with them as children and bring discipline into their lives and will restore them to repentance and a vibrant life of faith in Christ and obedience to his will.

But it is equally possible that their failure to hold fast their confidence is proof that they never genuinely knew Christ in the first place. Their failure to persevere in faith is the evidence that they “have *not*” come to share in Christ, that they have *not* been the recipient of a heavenly calling, and that they are *not* members of God’s household after all.

Perhaps it will help you see what our author is saying if we state it negatively. “We have *not* come to share in Christ, if indeed we do *not* hold our original confidence firm to the end.” His point again is that if you are born again and have thus come to share in Christ, if you were justified and forgiven of your sins and adopted in God’s family by faith, *you cannot fail to persevere*. You *will* hold your original confidence firm unto the end.

Thus, holding firm, not drifting, not neglecting our great salvation, is the *evidence* or *proof* that we genuinely trusted Christ in the first place. Conversely, to drift or neglect or walk away from Christ, that is to say, to abandon whatever original “confidence” one claimed to experience is to demonstrate that one was never “in Christ” in the first place.

Third, what provision has God made that a person might avoid falling away?

The means God has appointed is right there in v. 13 – ***“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*** In other words, the means God has ordained is the loving and sustained encouragement and instruction and personal accountability that one finds in Christian community.

This is why I titled this message: ***Perseverance is a Community Project!***

Of course, none of this is to deny that God also uses other means: the Word preached and proclaimed and applied, prayer, the ordinances, worship, etc. But perhaps the most important means is when each of you embraces the responsibility to speak into the lives of others: encourage them, warn them, love them, remind them of the promises of Scripture, pray for them, teach them God’s Word.

This is what Paul had in mind in Ephesians 4:29 when he said, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” This is the purpose for the spiritual gift of prophecy as outlined in 1 Corinthians 14:3 – “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” And again, this is what the author of Hebrews will say yet again in 10:24-25 – “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

In the absence of a healthy, honest, faithful community I don’t give you much of a chance in the Christian life. Those who isolate themselves from the local church, or even those who attend a local church but avoid genuine fellowship and regular interaction and accountability with others, are a disaster waiting to happen.

You are the means by which God desires to keep **others** faithful and full of hope. **Others** are the means by which God desires to sustain **you** in perseverance and endurance. We are all placed in this local church so that by means of one another’s input and encouragement and warning we might continue steadfast in our commitment to Christ.

God always accomplishes his purposes through means, through instruments, through a variety of factors and people and opportunities that we, in obedience, take advantage of. People come to faith in Christ only if we employ the means of preaching the gospel to them. People awaken to

the beauty of Christ only if we demonstrate in a variety of ways how he is a superior treasure to whatever alternative the world may offer. People grow up in the knowledge of God only if they avail themselves of the means of memorizing Scripture. People go deep in their relationship with Christ and have their hope renewed only by means of the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word. The sick are healed only if we pray for them. Others are instructed and encouraged and assisted only when the body of Christ employs those means or instruments that we call spiritual gifts.

What specific things are you doing on a regular basis to help your wife or your husband or a friend or a member of your community group or your d-group flourish spiritually? How should you be speaking to them and what questions ought you to ask them? I have two suggestions in closing.

First, look one more time at v. 13. Our authors talks about the *“deceitfulness”* of sin. Sin lies to us. Sin tries to deceive us into thinking that yielding to it will bring more happiness and joy and value than will obedience to Christ. Sin misleads us into believing the lie that someone or something other than Christ will bring satisfaction and sweetness to our souls. So speak to people in such a way that you expose that lie and that you point them to the beauty and glory and splendor and all-satisfying sweetness of Jesus Christ.

Second, ask questions like these:

As you contemplate your immediate future, what do you most want to see happen? What do you most fear or worry about losing?

If you could change one thing about yourself right now, what would it be? I'm not asking what you think you ought to change or what you think the Bible or some other individual says should change. In complete honesty, what do you wish could change (even if it's not the most spiritual thing in the world!). Why?

When you are depressed or bitter or angry or frustrated, to what or to whom do you typically turn first for comfort?

What experience in life makes you feel the most significant? Or again, when do you feel valuable and life seems meaningful?

Who is there in your life that you find yourself incapable or unwilling to forgive? What did they do? What prevents you from forgiving them according to Scriptural guidelines?

What doctrinal truth in Scripture do you struggle most to believe? In what ways does your doubt regarding this biblical truth affect your life and your relationship with God?

What or who in your life is the greatest obstacle to spiritual growth and your passionate pursuit of God?

What is the greatest obstacle in your life to the pursuit of that ministry or mission to which you believe God has called you?

What are the most severe and appealing temptations to sin that you currently encounter? How are you fighting to resist them and to whom are you accountable in the process?

Let me be as clear and forthright and honest and urgent as I can. ***You cannot make it alone.*** You cannot flourish spiritually in the absence of other Christians who speak truth into your life and call you to account and regularly pray for you and with you and display for you to see, on a daily basis, the superior beauty and treasure of Jesus Christ. You need someone there to pick you up when you fall down, to point you in the right direction, to call you back from having turned aside, to cry with you and rejoice with you and to remind you each day of the unfailing love of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps ***the greatest deception*** that sin has unleashed upon Christian men and women is precisely that they ***don't need*** other Christian men and women to "exhort" them daily lest they be hardened by the deceitful and treacherous schemes of Satan. So, I'll say it again with the words of Hebrews 3:12, "***Take care***" men and women of Bridgeway, "***Take care*** . . . lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."