

¹² Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage each other daily, while it is still called **today**, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception. ¹⁴ For we have become participants in Christ if we hold firmly until the end the reality^[a] that we had at the start. ¹⁵ As it is said:

**Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.**^[b]

¹⁶ For who heard and rebelled? Wasn't it all who came out of Egypt under Moses? ¹⁷ With whom was God angry for forty years? Wasn't it with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

He's no Moses

Last week's I said, "He's no angel." In fact he is far greater than the angels though in many ways he is like an angel. We're no angels, nor will we ever be. This week we'll take a look at another comparison, "He's no Moses." In fact Jesus is far greater than Moses. That's not saying Jesus isn't like Moses. God revealed to Moses, "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him*" (Deuteronomy 18:15). Jesus is no Moses. He's greater than Moses.

Jesus offers a greater salvation of greater significance. It's not deliverance from the forces of Egypt and freedom in the Promised Land. It's greater, eternal even. Moses faithfully led God's people from slavery up to the Promised Land in Canaan, and Jesus he has rescued us from slavery to sin, death, and the devil and brought us into eternal life. He's won an eternal kingdom greater than any earthly kingdom.

The writer to the Hebrews warns us, "Don't miss out on such a great salvation... as did our ancestors whose bodies fell in the wilderness... who God swore, "They will not enter my rest." This isn't a hypothetical situation it really happened that some fell from faith. So how can we be sure and certain? Are we to live in a constant state of fear that we aren't chosen, that we don't have faith, or that we will fall? Of course not. Confidence comes from God as we make use of the gifts that he has given to his church. Here we share in Christ and he's no Moses.

It seems that the recipients of this letter were drifting away. They were drifting further from the church and from one another. Maybe they were thinking they were strong enough, they didn't need the church anymore, and they'd be fine. But it's this attitude that the writer confronts. "*Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*" He implies you can turn away from God, this is the reality for many Christians as they turn from the truth. The teaching, "Once saved always saved," is called into question. This teaching creates a false sense of security, that once I'm saved, I can go out and do whatever I want. Just pull the lever of salvation and enjoy the gifts that rain down. Another group runs in the opposite direction and teaches that it's your decision that gets you in or out of salvation. Such a person is constantly in doubt of salvation, wondering whether or not they were sincere or still are. But faith as taught by scripture is an act of the Almighty, it's not my decision. Paul says, "*When we were dead in our sin... God made us alive in Christ* (Ephesians 2:5). Paul writes, *For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is a gift of God so that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8).

We can't do anything to win salvation but we can do something to lose it and that's what the writer to the Hebrews wants us to understand. He gives a stern warning to confident Christians in the same way Paul did, "*So you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*" (1 Corinthians 10:12). He warns them and then urges them, "*Encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sins deception.*" This is daily reminder. If it's today, and it is, encourage one another. Why? So that *no one is hardened by sins deception*. A heart that is hardened by sin is like our hearts when they grow hard. The heart and arteries are supposed to remain flexible not harden.

When plaque builds up and arteries are clogged that can lead to clots, heart attack, or worse. Our spiritual heart can also take a beating through diet, our arteries can clog and lead to spiritual death.

As an example of this the author quotes from Psalm 95:7, *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”* This rebellion took place at the bitter waters of Marah. It didn’t end there either. Throughout Exodus and Numbers we can read about their rebellion. In Numbers 14 after the spies returned from Canaan and reported all they had seen and heard, they refused to enter and take possession of it. Only two of the twelve, Caleb and Joshua, said, “Let’s go.” The rest wanted to turn back to Egypt. These were the people who had seen the great deliverance of God. They were there watching the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea. They were there at Mount Sinai and they heard his voice from heaven. They were there and they rebelled. They refused to enter and take possession of the land the Lord was giving to them. He asks the question, *“Who heard and rebelled? Wasn’t it all who came out of Egypt? With whom was God angry for forty years? Wasn’t it those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? (bodies left unburied were considered cursed by God). And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not those who disobeyed? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”*

If they were there and saw all of those great wonders what hope do we have? Well, Jesus is no Moses. He has tied us to himself, to his Church, through Word, sacrament, one another: the body of Christ. But maybe we’ll try to lone wolf out Christianity. We don’t need anybody. We can do it on our own. Even survivalists think that’s a dumb idea. The saying goes, “Two is one... One is none.” Two people can survive, but alone there is no one to keep watch while you sleep, cook, or eat. One is none and there is no *each other*.

In the body of Christ, in his church we are able to *look out for the deceit of sin*. That word deceit speaks of the enticement and pleasure that may follow. Deceit is like a con man seeking to trick you into a purchase while stealing your wallet. The problem with the deceit of sin is that it is always deceptive. It takes you by surprise. It didn’t take Adam or Eve long to find out that they were better off not knowing and experiencing evil. They were deceived. As it is the siren call of the world pulls us in so many different directions. Pursue the riches of the world at the expense of the church, have sex outside of marriage it will be enjoyable only to feel empty and alone later, chase after selfish ambition only you’ll be left alone later in life. When we hear the deceptive call and listen to it the heart calcifies and the arteries harden a little more. It begins to call “good bad and bad good.” It is spiritual suicidal because it stops listening to the life giving Word; *as it turns away from the living God*. It usually doesn’t happen all at once for all to see, it starts secretly in the heart, and we are deceived and duped. We’re no Moses.

There are two ways people are deceived. On one hand you’ll find the one who has lived a rough life, he struggles with a number of demons and says, “Pastor... don’t waste your time with me. I’ve done too much. I’ve sinned more than you can imagine. It’s too great to forgive.” That’s despair. The other is self confidence that says, “I’ve been a good person. I deserve this. Sure we’re saved by Christ but then they turn to the heart for assurance, ‘I’m more mature than I was before. I give a lot. I’m a good disciple.’ That’s the deception of sin. It leads us to stop trusting in Christ and trust in self. Both are lies and both lead away from Jesus.

That’s why God has given us the church. Not so we can join together as a group and talk about how good we are. The church is hospital for sinners not a museum of saints. We gather to confess our sins to one another saying, “You’re not alone. I fail too.” Some sins aren’t as open or obvious but they still deceive. We still rebel. We still fall into sin. If Israel couldn’t resist what makes us think we can? How can we resist falling away? *“But encourage each other daily, while it is called today.”* How does God sustain faith? It’s done through the ministry of the church, through Word and Sacrament, through the support and encouragement of fellow Christians. God has given us his church, calls us to make use of these gifts, as long as it’s called today, which means, “Everyday.”

God’s people Israel needed encouragement every day. Although they made the tragic decision to rebel against God, and refused to enter into the Promised Land only to be confronted with forty years of wandering, God swore

an oath against them and “*They were not able to enter.*” The punishment for their rebellion meant the loss of physical life in the Promised Land, not necessarily the loss of salvation. God is indeed slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin, but he is also just God who punishes sin.

Which why he sent his only son. Jesus came into this world and he softened our hearts with his forgiveness. This is the real exodus that our lesson is talking about. Jesus provided a way out from hell and the just punishment our sins deserved. He lived that perfect life we should have. He didn’t cut himself off from the world. He surrounded himself with 12 close friends even into his 30’s. He then died the death we deserve to bring peace with God. He rose from the dead and now leads the way home. He provided a way of salvation to a better land not an earthly kingdom but an eternal kingdom. He is indeed the door, the way, the truth, and life. This is Jesus. He’s no Moses. He’s greater than Moses.

For we have become participants in Christ if we hold firmly until the end the reality that we had at the start. This verse leaves me with a few questions. Are we participants in Christ or are we Christ’s participants? Both can be understood correctly. We partake in Christ and he owns us. We have him in common. And we are able to hold on to something objective, not the congregation or the individual’s subjective confidence but the objective basis for our participation with him. The beginning, the foundation for life with Christ is given in baptism to every believer.

If we hold fast to the reality that we had at the start. This refers to the most basic part of what it means to be a Christian. That word translated as start can also refer back to the foundation of it all. It’s the beginning the start, the reality that God has saved us and keeps us in this faith. He has taken care of it all. Just as Moses rescued Israel from Egypt by leading them through the waters towards the Promised Land, so also Jesus draws us to himself through the waters of baptism where we are set free from an earthly tyrant (our sinful nature) and raised to new life (Romans 6:1-6). This is the faith that we’ve been brought in to through baptism. It’s what we have right now! Because God is at work in the water and the word doing exactly what he promises. Forgiving sin and bringing life and salvation. That’s why we don’t baptize ourselves. Someone else does it.

The answer to a deceptive heart, the best defense against a minefield of temptation, the answer to apostasy is not to go off on your own and try to figure out how to fix your struggling faith but the answer is found in the gifts God has given his church. Christ has given his church for the individual, but individuals cannot survive on their own. Christ has given his church and calls us to give each other his gifts, “*as long as it is called, ‘today.’*” So gather together with the saints around Word and Sacrament, encourage and be encouraged. Apostasy and unbelief is undone through the mutual encouragement of the worship service and even life together beyond these walls. *Encourage one another.* God has sent the Holy Spirit, also known as the paraclete, and that’s the same verb that is used here. Come together alongside each other and encourage one another. Gather a community. Encourage you to build a community because they are stubborn things. They aren’t so easily moved. It is here, with his Word in your ears and his body and blood placed on your lips, where he sustains you unto life everlasting.

Jesus is no angel. He is no Moses. He’s greater. He binds us to himself through the gifts he has given to his church. Live in your baptismal grace. Don’t live in yesterday’s failures. Live in today. Hear your savior calling today, “Your sins are forgiven.” And as long as it is called today this message remains the same. Amen.