

October 10, 2021 – Hebrews 3:12-19

We had a very good question asked during Bible Class last week. We were discussing some topics relating to baptism and faith and the hope of the resurrection. And then Jason Linneman asked something that had come up during a discussion with a of his friend: Can Christians lose their salvation? It wasn't exactly on topic, but it was a great question and I took a few moments to discuss it last week.

I'd like to talk about it some more this morning. Because it really is an important doctrine. And it's one on which the church has a really broad range of opinions and confessions of faith.

Among some Christians, you will find that the answer is, "No. A true Christian cannot lose their salvation." "Once saved, always saved," is the shorthand way of describing it. Once the Holy Spirit has done His work of faith and salvation within you, it is permanent. It cannot be taken away. It cannot be rejected.

This often goes hand-in-hand with a Calvinist doctrine of election. That God chose those whom he would save and those whom he would condemn before the creation of the world. So if you're one of the elect, then that election can't be taken away.

And if it appears that someone falls away, well then it just means that they weren't one of the elect. They weren't really saved to begin with. Even if they were baptized. Even if they confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Nope. It was all an illusion. They weren't really saved.

As Lutherans, we don't agree with that. Faith isn't an illusion. Baptism isn't an illusion. The work of God in a person is not an illusion. As Paul himself says, a person cannot say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is there. He has given the gift of faith to that person. They are saved. That is not an illusion.

At the same time, though, we don't agree with the opposite extreme. The doctrine that says that our salvation cannot only be lost, it can be lost easily. It can be lost in a moment of doubt or a single tragic sin.

And it requires constant vigilance on our part to avoid all temptation. Constant works of piety and holy living. Constant recommittals of our lives to Christ and being rebaptized over and over again to prove our renewed devotion.

But, of course, that's because this idea of losing your salvation comes out of an Arminian doctrine of decision theology. In which faith is not a gift of God, but an act of our own mind and strength. Where God offers us grace and we choose to follow him. Choose to be baptized to prove our commitment to Christ.

As Lutherans, we don't agree with that either. Faith is not flimsy. It is not fragile. It is a work of God, apart from our own frail flesh. And it rests of the unchanging truth of Christ's death and resurrection, that is completely outside of ourselves. You are not saved because you chose God. You are saved because God chose you. And nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So where does that leave us exactly? Well, in some ways, right smack in the middle of a paradox. But it's a spot that we share with the writer of Hebrews in our Epistle this morning.

I say "the writer of Hebrews" because we don't exactly know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews. Many are convinced Paul is the writer and it's simply another Pauline Epistle. That could be. Or it could be somebody else. Lots of theories have been proposed. We just don't know.

What we do know is that the writer knew the Old Testament inside and out. And he knew the life and teachings of Christ inside and out. And for that reason the early church fathers had no qualms about calling Hebrews the inspired Word of God and accepting it into the New Testament canon.

And while the Book of Hebrews delves into some immensely deep, powerful theology about the person of Jesus Christ as the Great High Priest over God's people and the perfect sacrifice for the atonement of sins, today's lesson is really quite practical in its teaching. And the very first verse sums up his lesson:

*"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."* Take care, because you can fall away. Take care, because your salvation can be lost.

OK, that's simple enough. We can lose our salvation. Case close. And yet, it's not. Because he says something in there that's kind of bizarre: *"...lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart."*

I don't know about you, but if I had an evil, unbelieving heart, would I really care about falling away from the living God? Would that really concern me one bit? And would there be any point in telling a person with an evil, unbelieving heart to take care, lest they fall away?

This one sentence really sums up quite well the paradox of losing our salvation. Because every one of us is of two hearts. We have a heart given to us by God through the work of the Holy Spirit. A heart born in the waters of Holy Baptism and nourished by Christ's Body and Blood. A heart that clings to the living God and to His Word, and never, ever wants to fall away. It's that very heart that brought you here this morning.

And we have an evil, unbelieving heart. A heart of sinful flesh that is spiritually dead. A heart that rejects God and His Word. A heart that is drawn toward the devil and His temptations. A heart that is hard and stubborn and deceived by sin.

And yet, we are not two people. We are one person. And only one of these hearts can prevail. On the last day, God will not divide us in two and send half of us to hell and half of us to heaven. Which leaves us with some difficult choices about which of these hearts we are going to follow. Which of these hearts is going to decide our thoughts, words, and deeds.

So the writer tells us: take care. Take care, because that evil, unbelieving heart will lead you away from God. Take care, and exhort one another to turn away from the deceitfulness of sin, which will only strengthen that hard, stubborn heart. Take care, and listen to God's voice in His Word, or else find yourself in rebellion to him.

And he gives us an example of what that looks like. It looks like the people Israel leaving Egypt. Seeing the miracles that God did through Moses. Seeing the plagues that God rained down upon Pharaoh. Seeing the death of the Egyptian firstborns as their own homes were passed over.

They saw all that God did for them and they believed. Until... they didn't. Until they got to the Red Sea and rebelled, but God brought them through. Until they grew thirsty, but God gave them water. Until they grew hungry, but God gave them manna. Until they grew idolatrous, but God gave them his commandments.

Until they finally reached the very edge of the Promised Land that God was bringing them to and they grew faithless. Doubting. Fearful. All this time they had travelled, they doubted and they complained and they rebelled and their hearts grew harder and harder. More and more evil and unbelieving.

So that when they finally arrived at the Promised Land, at God's salvation, they looked inside and they said, "Nope. God can't do it. It's impossible. It's hopeless. We're doomed." They had spent so much time rebelling against God. So much time listening to the evil, unbelieving heart, that they just had no more faith left.

And to them, God said, "Of course it's possible. But it's not for you. You've ignored every single thing I have done for you. You have rejected every single word I have spoken to you. You have denied every promise I have made for you. You have convinced yourselves that you are going to die in the wilderness.

And so, that's exactly what you're going to do. Die in the wilderness. You are blind to my salvation. But I won't abandon you. For even though you reject me, your children will still see it one day."

Faith isn't flimsy. It isn't fragile. It isn't frail. It is born in us through Holy Baptism. It is strengthened through Christ's Body and Blood. And it clings to the living God and His Word. It is truly the greatest and strongest gift God can give us. And it will persevere through moments of doubt and times of sin. It will persevere to everlasting life.

And we need not live in constant fear that we are rejected by God. The God who was faithful to Israel through all that doubt and sin will be faithful to us during our times of doubt and sin as well.

At the same time, though, a life spent indulging in sin and listening to the lies of the devil is a dangerous way to live. A life spent without contrition or repentance is a life spent in rebellion to God. A life spent without confidence in Christ's work on the cross is a life spent growing hardened to God's grace.

Take care, brothers. Your faith isn't flimsy. But it can be broken. And today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Listen. Repent. And know that you are forgiven. For the voice you hear is the voice of his mercy calling to you. Telling you that your sins are already washed away. Amen.