

Text: Hebrews 3

The lesson in our book today begins with the story of Eric Liddell, as depicted in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. While that story is relevant to our point today, I want to begin today's lesson with one that is equally applicable, yet perhaps more poignant in light of the current political and ecclesiastical situations.

On Monday, October 14, FOX News reporter Steve Centanni and his cameraman Olaf Wiig were kidnapped by Muslim extremists in Gaza City and held captive for 13 days. They were released on Sunday, August 27, after "apparently" converting to Islam at the point of a gun. In other words, they were willing to at least *say* that they believed in and served Allah, and pretended to change their names and adopt anti-Western attitudes in order to save their lives.

Now, nobody, *perhaps including the kidnappers*, believes that these men actually became followers of Allah. And, granted, we don't even know if these men are Christians or hold to any faith at all. For a moment, though, let's assume that they were Christians. Or, even better, let's say that *you* are the one kidnapped and told to proclaim that "there is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet," or die. What do you do? Is it permissible to feign conversion in order to save your life?

28"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28)

32"Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33"But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33)

In these verses, Jesus plainly tells us to have no fear of those that can kill us physically, but to fear *God*, who is able to cast us into Hell (Satan doesn't rule Hell—God intends it for his punishment as well). Additionally, He tells us that if we deny Him before men, He will deny us before God. That is a scary prospect indeed! In today's passages from Hebrews 3, we consider the necessity of remaining true to our calling to and confession of Jesus Christ.

1Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; 2He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. 3 For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. 4For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. 5Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; 6but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house--whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. (Hebrews 3:1-6)

As this passage begins, the author is continuing his exposition of Jesus' superiority to the Old Covenant of Moses, as we have discussed in previous lessons. As ethnic (and formerly religious) Jews, the recipients of this letter would perhaps have needed reminding of this superiority, since they held Moses in such high esteem. Jesus Himself not only claimed superiority to Moses—He claimed it in part based upon Moses' own writings!

45"Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. 46"For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. 47"But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:45-47)

15"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

In other words, Jesus is saying that true belief in and adherence to Moses' writings demands that one follow Him, since His Person and Covenant are superior to those of Moses.

The remainder of the verses in this passage, and really beginning with verse 6, talk about the peril of falling away.

6but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house--whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. 7Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says,

**"TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,
8DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME,
AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS,
9WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED Me BY TESTING Me,
AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS.
10"THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION,
AND SAID, 'THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART,
AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS';
11AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH,
'THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.'"**

12Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, 15while it is said,

**"TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,
DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME." (Hebrews 3:6-15)**

This is the sort of passage that can get Baptists really worked up, scrambling to reconcile our doctrine of “eternal security” with parts of the Bible which warn us against the peril of “falling away.” Even the writer of our lesson today seems to offer an inconsistent take on the subject, sometimes saying it discusses “Christians who are not being faithful to God” (p. 33), yet later admonishing us that “continuance in the faith is proof that the faith is real” (p. 34), as if to say that lack of such continuance is proof that the faith is not real. While I do acknowledge that Christians will sometimes sin—as I noted two weeks ago, **1 John 1:9** is addressed to Christians—the point that true believers will not “fall away” in any significant way is, I think, valid.

Before going further into this, I do want to once again affirm eternal security:

27"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29" My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

John 10:27-29 plainly teaches that true believers, Christ’s “sheep,” will not be “snatched away.” If you have truly been saved through faith in Jesus Christ, you can rest assured that your eternal destiny is secure. Consider another familiar passage:

8For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This is a comforting passage not only because it teaches that our salvation is based upon faith rather than works, but also because it teaches that the faith by which we are saved comes not from within us, but as a gift from God Himself! The question, then, is not “how can one be saved,” but rather “how can one know that he is truly among God’s elect, having received and exercised true saving faith?”

First of all, I would contend that our usual model of “decisional regeneration” is seriously flawed. Think about it. How many people do you know that prayed a prayer, walked down an aisle, “got wet,” maybe persisted in church for a while (perhaps until their parents couldn’t make them do so anymore), and then never returned to church again? In fact, one of my students remarked to me a little over a week ago that the “former church kids” are among the most depraved sinners on campus! What are we to make of this? What are the poor parents, clinging to a faint hope that their children really are saved and will “come back to God” to make of this?

Although only God knows the condition of each individual’s heart, I think we all know what the evidence suggests. In fact, Jesus taught about it in the Parable of the Sower.

3And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5"Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6"But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7"Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8"And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9"He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:3-9)

18"Hear then the parable of the sower. 19"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20"The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23"And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:18-23)

Here's a sobering thought: of the four individuals described in this parable how many were truly saved? *One*. The first one obviously was unsaved, since the Word never "sunk in." The last one obviously was saved, since he brought forth fruit. The other two, however, no doubt believed on some level, could have made public professions of some kind, and may have even been baptized, yet were never true followers of Christ. In fact, I believe *I was one of those middle two* in my "first" salvation experience as a young child, and only later did I truly make Christ my Master and Savior and still later get baptized, as Skip put it, "after salvation." How many people, though, are relying on a superficial childhood "salvation" experience such as this as the basis of their "felt" security? Sure, they believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Savior of the World, but:

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. (James 2:19)

Long story short, it is obvious that if we are looking to a "decision," a prayer, a baptism, a "response card," or any other singular and perhaps superficial action to establish us as believing, secure Christians, we are deceiving ourselves. How, then, can we *know* that we are saved? We've already said that saving faith is a gift, and that our works cannot merit that salvation. What, though, does the response to the granting of real, genuine, saving faith look like?

9that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Romans 10:9-10)

18We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. (1 John 5:18)

First of all, as the Father "draws" a person (**John 6:44**) to Himself, having granted him saving faith, the person will confess Jesus as his Lord and Master. There is no separating Jesus' roles and Savior and Lord in our lives. He is both Savior and Lord, or He is neither. This Lordship results in the absence of any consistent pattern of sin. The 1 John verse seems to state at first that true believers are sinless; however, the larger context of that letter indicates that the reference here is to the absence of habitual sin.

24and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

13But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:13, a relevant verse from today's passage)

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. (1 John 3:14)

Second, the person that is truly saved will "love the brethren," desiring to meet together for encouragement, edification, and admonition, and also to meet one another's needs, as the surrounding verses in John 3 suggest. I don't know about you, but I *prefer* the company of other believers to that of nonbelievers. Church is not only a place that I go because I am commanded to do so, but also because the fellowship of other Christians is refreshing, while that of non-Christians is often uncomfortable. In other words, the Bible suggests that true believers will desire the company of other believers, and will not continually avoid it.

20But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? 21Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. 24You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received

the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:20-26)

Saving faith will result in works commensurate with that faith. It's like the story of the man who every day successfully walked a tightrope across Niagara Falls while pushing a wheelbarrow. You can believe in your heart and acknowledge with your intellect that he is capable of this act, but you're not exercising *faith* in his ability to do so until you volunteer to sit in the wheelbarrow. Likewise, Abraham and Rahab did not simply acknowledge God and His abilities—they staked their futures and their lives on it. Abraham trusted in God's ability to preserve his line and produce a new nation. Rahab indeed risked her life for her faith in God, trusting that Israel's God would protect her from the carnage that was about to befall her city. In our own lives, perhaps we express faith in Him through works by witnessing to those around us even when it is unpopular, or by giving liberally of our income to the work of His Kingdom, or by serving and giving to those that are in need, or by using our free time in acts of service to Him. The point is, a true believer will be involved in Kingdom work on some level; that being the least we can do in service to the Lord that bought us by shedding His own blood for our sins.

22But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.24Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-25)

As I look at the list of traits in the first two verses here, I am struck by how contrary these are to human nature. The “fruit of the flesh,” so to speak, would be the opposite of these: hate, despair, anxiety, impatience, meanness, evil, faithlessness, harshness, self-indulgence—all of which are rampant in our society. The presence of the fruit of the Spirit is a powerful indicator of a true salvation experience, and we should seek to cultivate this fruit in our lives, shunning and even “crucifying” the fleshly desires that crop up from time to time.

I will conclude by reiterating Hebrews 3:14:

14For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end. (Hebrews 3:14)

True believers, or “partakers of Christ,” will endure to the end, not giving up, not falling away, but persevering. As Christians, we are called to “**give diligence to make your calling and election sure**” (2 Peter 4:10), seeking to serve Him not only for the assurance that it brings to us, but primarily out of love and devotion toward the God that loved us enough to send His Son to die in our place.

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