

Sermon Draft

Text: Hebrews 3:12–19

Sermon: Holding On, Holding Firm

Why did we spend all that time in Sunday School learning about the children of Israel? Why did we learn about them being brought out of Egypt by God's mighty hand, the plagues, the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, the spies' fear to enter the land God had promised, their wandering around for forty years being sustained by manna, quail, water from a rock?

Why did we hear about the fiery serpents and the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole? Why did we learn of Moses' death and Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land? Was it simply to hear about the great miracles of old so that we could be excited about God's power?

Was it to learn of Israel's great faith as God's people? (That could hardly be the case!) Or was it to point us to Christ, to learn how Christ—even after saving his people—sustains his people and keeps his promises to them?

As we are rightly focused on justification by grace alone, we sometimes wrongly forget that the scriptural record speaks not only of God redeeming his people but also sustaining his people—we might refer to it as sanctification, where the people of God faithfully rejoice in and hold firm to God’s promises, as he continues to sustain and keep them until the ultimate fulfillment and deliverance of those promises. Sanctification isn’t about saying, “Now, what are you going to do for God?” It’s about saying, hold on, hold firm, for you share in Christ.

That’s what our text today exhorts us. From Hebrews 3, ***“For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end”*** (v 14). Let us learn to appreciate God’s preaching on sanctification—on holding firm and being kept in the faith. From the Small Catechism: **“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord . . . but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith”** (Third Article).

We forget that we depend just as much upon our God to sustain us in the deliverance as much as we depended upon him to deliver us in the first place! Remember, he's not just delivering out of Egypt but also unto the promised rest. Meanwhile, in the wilderness, we depend on him to keep us in the faith. Thus, we must learn from those whom he allowed to be the example: ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test”*** (3:7–9).

The people of Israel were sharers of Moses; anything he had been given by God, of that they were partakers. God gave Moses a decree of deliverance and said, ***“Bring it to my people,” and they shared in that deliverance. God gave Moses the Law, and they became partakers in it. God heard Moses' prayer, and they benefited from divine mercy. But the people grumbled against God's guarantees through Moses. Had they doubted just Moses, maybe we wouldn't be so hard on them, for Moses fell short of the Promised Land. Nevertheless, Moses was God's servant, “faithful in all God's house as a servant.”*** (3:5)

To grumble against Moses was to grumble against God. Growing stubborn to God's promises, they refused to listen to his guarantee. And ultimately, they died in the wilderness, short of the promised rest.

Had they remained faithful, they would have seen God's deliverance. They would have seen God replace Moses the servant with one perhaps honored more greatly than was Moses, for this one was brought into the house of the Promised Land as a son; indeed, this one shared the name of the Son. To keep his guarantee to his people, God raised up Joshua. And in Joshua, the guarantee of God came to its fulfillment; Joshua led the people of God to be partakers of, sharers in, the long-promised land of rest. Joshua a pre-type of Jesus.

What joy is ours to learn from the foreshadowing, to see in Christ the great fulfillment, to hear him say plainly that everything in the Old Testament is about him and that, therefore, we can read how God cared for his people of old through the death of a sacrificial lamb, through the raising up of a sin-bearer upon the pole, through the blood safeguarding the firstborn (and on, and on).

We can learn from it all what Christ crucified has accomplished for and delivered to us. But, how many Israelites did not taste the final joy because, instead of encouraging one another in the promised guarantee, they inflamed one another in sinful passions, self-gratification, and various sins of wickedness and unbelief that led them to fall away from the living God to set their hearts on the lifeless gods of idols. And their rebellion ended when, our text says, their ***“bodies fell in the wilderness”*** and ***“they were unable to enter because of unbelief”*** (vs 17, 19). Paul recounts the sad example they left for us, admonishing us, ***“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did”*** (1 Cor 10:6).

It should cause us to shudder that they are our example? How often we want Christ to be our example. Though at times the epistles do speak of him positively as such, he is not merely our example, not merely the occupant of the house, but the builder of it. ***“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”*** (John 2:19), and again, ***“On this rock I will build my church”*** (Matthew 16:18), and again,

“I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). Christ is the builder of the house, having more glory and due more honor than the example. No mere example is he, but the one to whom all the types of old point. He is the substitute, the one who endures all things that we needed a righteous substitute to endure for us in order that the promise may be guaranteed. He is the one who, as the Son, is faithful over God’s house. And we are the house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

But isn’t that exactly what the Israelites could also claim? That they were his house, his people? And there it is! From the Israelites, we ought to learn to behave! And certainly, the lesson they have left us, though tragic, is invaluable. They left us the lesson that sin hardens hearts to the guarantee, that they may not enter the promised rest! Sin is so dangerous, not just because it harms our neighbor (though that is bad enough!), but because it deceives us regarding the things of God. Greed breeds contempt for God’s provision and seeks to depend on self-survival.

The sinful delight of no immediate punishment for “doing things our own way” breeds an ego of invincibility, which in turn leads to independence and self-pleasure. All of this in turn deceives us into thinking the promises of God were in vain.

And as we deceive ourselves, we deceive others with us. Instead of encouraging and exhorting one another in the faith today, we live for the supposed utopia tomorrow might bring—if only we make our own rules, follow our own will, foster our own hopes. Instead of being partakers of Christ—who accomplished all things for us and freely gives them all to us and who, having more glory than Moses, fulfilling the purpose of Joshua of old, now says, ***“Follow me,” for “as for me and my house, we will serve [and trust] the Lord”*** (Joshua 24:15)—instead of being partakers of him and all that is his, we all too quickly follow the example of the malcontents of Israel.

Let us remember our examples in the faith, the Israelites, sin led to faithlessness, faithlessness led to hardening, hardening led to destruction, so that they fell in the wilderness and did not enter the promised rest. Why? Because they relied on themselves.

But the encouragement now belongs to our ears, ***“We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end”*** (v 14). Our confidence is in Christ! Isn't that the “original confidence” into which we were baptized? Were you not baptized into him, into his name, into his suffering and death, into the promise to share in his resurrection and inheritance? All so that we might hold firm in that confidence to the end! We were baptized in baptismal waters, washed clean of sin and stain, that we might approach God with confidence because of Christ: ***“In Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him”*** (Ephesians 3:11–12).

With boldness and confidence, we approach God—not just as Moses the servant did on the holy mountain, where he ate and drank and merely beheld God. But far better, we eat and drink and partake of God—his very body, his very blood.

Therefore, we point one another to these mysterious gifts and encourage one another every day to hold fast our confidence in these things. For when we exhort one another in the faith, we do nothing other than point one another to the continuing encouragement and comfort of the Holy Spirit among us, that same Holy Spirit who continually points us to Christ: ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion”*** (3:7–8).

Is it not of Christ that the voice from heaven called, ***“Listen to him”*** (Matthew 17:5). Listen to him who said, ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear”*** (Matthew 11:15); he who said, ***“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you”*** (John 14:25); he who promises you the comfort and encouragement of the Comforter:

“The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit . . . he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

The Holy Spirit works tirelessly to bring all that is Christ’s and give it to us. That’s what it means that ***“we have come to share in Christ”*** (v 14)! This is what it means that Christ is our Savior: he has taken all the sin and bondage that is ours and hung with it on the tree in our place and overcome it and paid for it, and he has given us all the riches and inheritance that are his, that we might be sharers (“part-owners”) in him, according to the mercies of God.

So, we who have become sharers in Christ, if we each individually share in Christ, we all collectively share with one another. Therefore, exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today” and look out for one another that your hearts may not be deceived by sin and be led away from the living God into stubbornness and the cold hardness of death.

Instead, encourage one another to depend upon Christ, to pray for his Holy Spirit's comfort and keeping, and to hold Christ's guarantee firm to the end—or as the writer to the Hebrews elsewhere says it:

Therefore, ***“let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful”*** (10:23).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.