

Lesson 11
The Danger of Apostasy
Hebrews 3:12-19

Apostasy can be committed by any professing Christian. Apostasy is turning from the truth of Christianity and going back into paganism or false religion. An apostate is one who has professed faith in Christ with intellectual knowledge of Him, but because his heart is hardened by the sin of unbelief, he refuses to truly believe, yield and submit to Christ and he eventually leaves Christ and denounces Christianity.

Any professing Christian can fall into apostasy but no possessing Christian who is genuinely saved can ever become an apostate. Apostasy can only be committed by unbelievers. True believers will go on with Christ because God has saved them and Christ lives in them.

The reason that no true believer can apostatize is because of the Biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The perseverance of the saints teaches that once a person is saved he can never be lost, but once a person is saved, he can never be the same again. The perseverance of the saints is built on two great truths of Scripture: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. It is only as a balance is maintained between these two truths that we can be delivered from error and extremism. We are creatures of extremes, and nowhere is this more seen in Christendom than in the doctrine of the security of the believer.

The one extreme is to say that there is no security of salvation or assurance for a Christian, and a person must work to keep himself saved. The extremists who hold this view teach that a person may be saved today and lost tomorrow. It is not hard to understand how some might conclude that it is possible to lose salvation for there are some verses that seem to imply it. Any honest student of the Bible knows that there are a few verses that on the surface seem to teach that one can fall out of salvation. This is true right here in Hebrews. ***“For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end”*** (Heb. 3:14). However, to believe that once a person is truly saved and then can be lost is inconsistent with the elective purposes of God and with the finished work of Christ for sin. Furthermore, this view contradicts the many passages in the Bible that clearly teach once saved always saved.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand” (John 10:27-29).

The other extreme is to teach once saved always saved and put no emphasis upon demonstrating the reality of salvation in one's experience. The proponents of this view say that once a person makes a profession of faith in Christ that God must save him because he has met the Biblical condition of faith. Once a person has made the initial profession, he is saved no matter how he lives after that time. A person may be totally indifferent to Christ or deep in sin but he is saved because he says he believes. These extremists do say that this person is missing God's best for

his life in time but he will be saved in eternity. This view fails to take into account the many passages that require works as a proof of salvation.

“For we are His (God’s) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph. 2:10).

“Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; ‘DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’” (Matt. 7:21-23).

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).

Recently I was told about a famous Bible teacher who made a statement that showed his unbalance on the doctrine of eternal security. He said that if a drunk in a sober moment trusted Christ in sincerity and never drew another sober breath after that initial trusting, he would be saved because he met the Biblical condition of faith. But the Bible clearly says that no drunkards will enter into the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Bible teachers must teach the whole counsel of God and not make everything fit into a neat little system.

The truth, it seems to me, lies in a right understanding of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. God elects, predestinates, calls, justifies and glorifies by His grace all who have been, are, or ever will be saved.

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom. 8:28-30).

Those whom God has called truly trust in Jesus Christ and they will never perish for they are eternally secure in Christ. However, those who are secure in Christ now have Christ living in them and the living Christ begins to work in their lives. They begin to live for Christ but they never live perfectly for Him. Even true Christians are prone to discouragement, depression, rebellion and indifference because they still have sin in them, but they now have a bent, or leaning or propensity to push on in the things of Christ and to live a holy life.

Those who are true believers in Christ are saved and they can be sure of it. True believers persevere in the Faith. They demonstrate with their lives that they are truly saved. They work because they are saved and they do not work to keep saved, but spiritual works will show up in their lives.

A truly saved person can never apostatize from Christ because he will persevere. However, every person who professes Christ is not truly saved and those who only profess are liable to apostatize. If a person apostatizes, it only shows that that person was never saved in the first place.

THE WARNING AGAINST APOSTASY (Hebrews 3:12)

“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.” – The author of Hebrews writes to professing Hebrew-Christians who are seriously considering leaving Christianity to go back into Judaism. The author points out the great danger of this move because it would lead them into apostasy and an apostate cannot be saved. If they leave Christianity for Judaism, they are proving they were never saved in the first place and are on the verge of apostasy.

The author in Hebrews picked out an illustration from the Old Testament to show how it is possible to make a profession of faith and still not hold fast one’s faith right to the end of one’s life. The author goes back to the children of Israel when they came out of Egypt. That generation was characterized by unbelief. They entered not into the Promised Land because of unbelief, and many of these Jews were not saved. How do we know this? Because they professed belief in the living God but lived for forty years as unbelievers in their actions. They began well but they did not end well. They did not persevere unto the end and God judged them for their unbelief.

Notice carefully the impact of this warning. If God acted harshly with professors of God in the Old Testament when they were dealing primarily with incomplete revelation, how much more severe will be His judgment on those who turn from Christ, the final and complete revelation! The author warns them not to have an evil heart of unbelief. It may be that some to whom he was writing were only professors and he warns them. They are in great danger of departing and losing the possibility of eternal life. Their souls were in danger of eternal damnation!

“In falling away (apostatizing) from the living God.” – While most of the Hebrew-Christians were truly saved, there were some who were only professors and were in danger of “departing” or “apostatizing” from the living God and the one way of salvation through Christ.

Notice carefully that the Hebrew-Christians were not warned of any danger of falling away from denominationalism but from the living God. Apostasy is falling away from Christ, the living God, who alone is salvation. Christians might change their church affiliations from Baptist to Methodist or Presbyterian because of doctrinal convictions concerning the whole counsel of God, but apostasy is a complete denial of the living God. This is not talking about falling into sin, for all Christians still at times sin, but it is falling away from a person, the living God.

True Christians may have at times a heart where there is unbelief but they cannot have an unbelieving heart. A true Christian may have lapses of faith and even flirt with apostasy but he cannot apostatize. However, a professing Christian is characterized by unbelief and is a likely candidate for apostasy.

We should note that the author makes no attempt to reconcile this warning with the elective purposes of God. He assumes man's total responsibility to believe and persevere. We, too, should accept a mystery which we cannot reconcile. We know that the author is saying a professing Christian can apostatize and in so doing he will incur the judgment of God. ***"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God"*** (Heb. 10:31).

THE CURE FOR APOSTASY (Hebrews 3:13)

"But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today'..." -- The first way to avoid apostasy is for Christians to be constantly exhorting and encouraging one another. Exhortation involves concern, encouragement and confrontation if necessary. There is to be daily admonition based on the love of Christ in our hearts for one another.

Exhortation is the responsibility of every Christian. We need to exhort one another because the heart of a Christian has such a tendency to wander from the things of Christ.

"Prone to wander. Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love..."

Exhortation was practiced in the New Testament.

"...and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord..." (Acts 11:22b, 23).

"Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43).

"And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God'" (Acts 14:21,22).

Exhortation is important to keep Christians from falling away from the living God. We need the fellowship of one another to keep from growing cold. The Bible clearly teaches that Christians are to care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25), to love one another (John 13:34), to pray for one another (James 5:16), to comfort one another (1 Thess. 4:18), to admonish one another (Rom. 15:14) and encourage and build up one another (1Thess. 5:11).

I remember reading somewhere about a group of Russian Christians in the Ukraine area. They took the command to exhort one another seriously, and whenever these Christians met individually or collectively, they would ask each other the question, "Is it well with your soul today?" They were concerned for their own hearts and for the hearts of their fellow Christians that they might not fall away. Some Christians say to me, "Are you walking close to the Lord, Jack?"

“...lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” – The second way to avoid apostasy is not to harden one’s heart against God and His will for your life. Any professing Christian can be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. A continued and repeated hardening of one’s heart may result in falling into the state of apostasy. It is a very dangerous move to harden our hearts to God, and the final result of this act may have eternal consequences.

The deceitfulness of sin refers to the “trickery” of sin. Every Christian must be on guard against the subtlety of sin. Sin causes believers to harden their hearts. Sin tricks us by getting us to think that sin is not really as serious as God says it is and that a loving God will not judge our sins. As one yields to this kind of thinking, his heart becomes more and more hardened, and if that hardening process continues that person may find himself moving away from Christ and falling into apostasy. Sin appears very attractive but the consequences of yielding to it continually could well have eternal consequences.

An old time Puritan said, “All the devices of sin are as fair baits whereby dangerous hooks are covered over to entice silly fish to snap at them, so as they are taken and made a prey to the fisher” (Dr. Gouge).

Ray Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, says this concerning warning:

But this second warning is against the danger of hardening. Of hearing the words and believing them, understanding what they mean, but of taking no action upon them. The peril of holding truth in the head but never letting it get into the heart. But truth known never does anything; it is truth done which sets us free. Truth known simply puffs us up in pride of knowledge. He can quote the Scriptures by the yard, can memorize it, can know the message of every book and know the whole book from cover to cover, but truth known will never do anything for us. It is truth done, truth acted upon, that moves and delivers and changes.

THE CHALLENGE TO THOSE CONSIDERING APOSTASY (Hebrews 3:14)

“For we have become (have been made) partakers of Christ..” -- All true Christians are partakers, sharers or companions with Christ because they are in Christ. True Christians have eternal life and have an eternal position in Christ that nothing in earth, hell or heaven can take away from them. They are secure in Christ because God in His sovereign grace has redeemed them in Christ.

“...if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...” – While all Christians are secure in Christ, all those who are secure in Christ have the responsibility to persevere in the Faith. The genuine Christian needs to be continually trusting, for we are kept by God’s power, but faith is the means of that keeping. **“...who (Christians) are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”** (1 Pet. 1:5). True Christians will persevere.

The issue here is not retention of salvation based on the persistence of faith, but of the possession of salvation as evidenced by a continuation of faith.

The conditional “if” should not discourage us but encourage us. Realizing that God has saved us by His grace and is presently sanctifying us by His grace, should cause us to trust Christ more and to push on for Christ. Since God is working in us and for us, we can persevere. **“...for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and do work for His good pleasure”** (Phil. 2:13).

We must remember, however, that even as Christians we will sometimes fail, but the mark that we are true Christians is that we come under conviction for this sin, repent of this sin, and get up and continue to follow Christ. True Christians will push on right up to the end of their lives.

Jonathan Edwards said, “A sure proof of election is that one holds out to the end.”

THE CAUSE OF APOSTASY (Hebrews 3:15-19)

“While it is said, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.’ For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rests, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see they were not able to enter because of unbelief.” -- God’s anger burned hot against that generation of Israelites. His judgment fell upon them because they refused to believe God and obey Him. They were rebels and God destroyed them. What was Israel’s problem? It was unbelief and more unbelief!

Notice carefully that the older generation failed to believe God. They were rebels when they were young and they were still rebels when they were older. After forty years they should have learned but did not. As they grew older, they became even more rigid, inflexible, and set in their ways and God had to judge them. Then God raised up a whole new generation of young Israelites to go into the land. What was the reason? Unbelief!

Their chief crime against God was unbelief. At the root of all the children of Israel’s immoralities, idolatries and rebellions was unbelief. God simply will not permit men into His rest of salvation without faith. Man’s unbelief holds back the blessing of God.

The entire generation of Israelites that came out of Egypt began well. After the Red Sea incident they all sang praises to God (Exo. 15) and they all outwardly said they would do God’s will when the Law was given. **“And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do!’”** (Exo. 19:8). They all began well but they all did not end well. They did not hold fast their confidence to the end; therefore, they entered not into God’s rest.

It is important how we begin our Christian life, but it is more important how we end our Christian life. **“And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured (persevered) to the end who will be saved”** (Matt. 10:22).

CONCLUSION

Where are you spiritually? Are you a rank rejecter of Christ with no church affiliation at all? If you are, then you must trust Christ for salvation for only in Him is there forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Are you a good church member who mentally assents to Christ but your heart is far from Him? Are you a mere professor of Christ and not a possessor of Him? If you are, then you need to face up honestly to your evil heart of unbelief and realize that unless you turn to Christ you shall perish in your sins.

Christ will save all who turn to Him in genuine repentance and faith.

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection, and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ (John 11:25-26).

Will you receive Christ as your Lord and Savior?