

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



**Hebrews 3:7-15** *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, <sup>8</sup> Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup> Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.' <sup>11</sup> So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'" <sup>12</sup> Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; <sup>13</sup> but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, <sup>15</sup> while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

Dear friends in Christ: "Today is a good day to die." Have you ever heard that saying before? If you're a fan of Star Trek, perhaps you recognize it as the Klingon proverb that they would say before battle. Of course that's all make believe, but the phrase itself is borrowed from warriors who actually existed. It's a phrase with Native American origins as it was the ending of a Lakota Sioux prayer. As the Lakota warriors would head into battle, they would pray, "Today is a good day to die." When the Lakota Sioux fought against General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn, the Lakota Chief Low Dog is supposed to have rallied his men for one final charge against their enemies with the rallying cry, "Today is a good day to die. Follow me!" These were men that were willing even to give up their lives if it meant protecting their territories and their families.

But you don't have to be a Klingon or Lakota Sioux warrior to say these words. A simple Christian should be able wake up in the morning and regardless of what is scheduled for that day say, "Today is a good day to die." (If the Lord wills of course.) I know there are elderly members of our congregation that feel that way, that are ready to depart this life and be with the Lord whenever He decides their time has come—but they shouldn't be the only ones thinking this. Every Christian regardless of age ought to always be ready to die, heart equipped with the confidence of sure salvation due to Christ's forgiveness. So, how about it? Is that a phrase that you could honestly say this morning? "Today is a good day to die"? Or are you thinking instead, "Maybe in a year would be better. Maybe when I'm a bit older. Maybe after I retire, or after I see my grandkids get married, then perhaps it could be a good day to die."

Even though as Christians we do rest our confidence for salvation in Christ, yet we can often become distracted by the joys of this life and lose sight of eternal joys. We can get sidetracked into wanting to follow our own path through life on our own terms; and that's not good. Instead, may the Lord help us to spend our days wisely, focused on the Word of God and encouraging one another with it. With that as our focus, any day would be a good day to die. The theme we'll be considering this morning is:

## **Is Today "A Good Day to Die"?**

- I. No, for those who partake in themselves
- II. Yes, for those who partake in Christ Jesus

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians, ethnic Jews who had found the answer to their Jewish faith in Jesus Christ the long-awaited Messiah. But things weren't easy for them; being a Jewish Christian meant to live a life of persecution at the hands of both the unbelieving Jews and the Romans. Both of those groups saw Jesus as a nuisance that needed to be crucified, and likewise

anyone who followed Him needed to be stamped out. How much easier life had been for these Jewish Christians back when they practiced the national Jewish faith which was basically just a series of outward rituals and salvation based upon good living. Back under that faith practice, they had no persecution at all! And so, the temptation to depart the true faith for their old faith was fierce, so the writer to the Hebrews writes this letter to exhort these people to not depart from Christ.

So, to be clear, this epistle is written to a group of true Christians who had saving faith in their heart, just as I am addressing a group of Christians with saving faith. But to these believing Christians, the writer delivers a stern warning: ***"Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."*** There's a teaching that the Reformed like to promote which says, *"Once saved, always saved."* The idea behind it comes across readily in that phrase, but basically it's this belief that once you've come to faith and been saved, you can never fall away. Not only does this teaching promote a lackadaisical attitude when it comes to faith and God's Word, it also does not mesh with God's Word before us this morning.

To support his warning, the writer to the Hebrews puts forward an example from their history. That starts in verse 8, ***"Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years."*** This is referring to something that happened when the Children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years after leaving Egypt and before entering the promised land. They were in a dry place that came to be known as Massah and Meribah, and there was no water to drink. So they complained to Moses, and asked ***"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"*** (Exodus 17:3) Then they turned their accusations against God, saying, ***"Is the LORD among us or not?"*** (Exodus 17:8) Is the Lord among you? Remember, these were the very same Children of Israel for whom God had demonstrated His power through the twelve plagues in Egypt. These were the very same people who walked along the sea floor of the Red Sea as God held the waters back for them to escape Pharaoh and his armies. These are the very same people who daily went out and collected bread that had settled on the ground as if it was morning dew, and they did so for forty years. "Is the LORD among us?"

These are the people whose houses God had passed over as He struck down the firstborn sons of Egypt—passed over because He saw their faith, by the way—and this same people had gradually hardened their hearts and now had fallen away. So we see that once saved does not mean always saved. God concludes their story with the solemn judgment: ***"Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.' So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"*** It is possible for a person who has faith in their heart, to grow calloused and complacent and eventually fall away, just look at those Old Testament Israelites for a prime example.

But now the writer takes this history lesson and applies it to us: ***"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."*** How does this even happen? How could a true believer depart from the faith? It's because of the last few words I just read, ***"the deceitfulness of sin."*** Sin is tricky. The devil is sly. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he says, ***"Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."*** (2 Corinthians 11:14) The devil does not tempt us by showing himself as a demon, he masks himself in things that look appealing. Likewise sin, deceitful as it is, is so tempting to us because it often looks harmless.

I'll give you a few examples. Here God tells us, ***"Exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today.'"*** If you have breath in your lungs "today," there a few things that ought to be at the top of your priority

list. Like today in particular, attending the divine worship service. Any other day, top of the priority list ought to be taking out time to have a personal devotion and also a heart to heart talk with God. If you're a parent, top priority spending time in God's Word together with your children. If you are ever alive on a day that you can call, "Today," these are the highest priorities for that day. Is that true for you? Are those your top priorities? Or do you often think, "Why do today what I can put off until tomorrow?"

This is when sin can be so deceitful. Because we never just outright think, "I will disobey God today and obey Him tomorrow." Instead, the devil with his craftiness tricks us into rationalizing our failures in ways that make a lot of logical sense and maybe even seem honorable. "I'd like to go to church this morning, but I've got to feed my family, don't I? Work is offering overtime this morning which I'd hate to miss." "I know we should have a family devotion, but it's a school night, and the kids aren't done with their homework yet. We can always have devotion tomorrow but the homework needs to be done today." God says, "I've given you 'Today.' Use your time wisely; make use of my Word and sacraments today." And we often say, "I'll use my time wisely, tomorrow." This is a dangerous path. This is a slippery slope a calloused unbelieving heart.

Discarding and disregarding the Words that God speaks to you is never a minor thing. Trying to find time for God's way only as it fits in around your own way and your own schedule—this is dangerous. God calls us to forsake our way and follow Him instead. For if we only ever partake in ourselves, we'll end up on the receiving end of God's pronouncement, "**[You] shall not enter My rest.**" I tremble to think of all the ways in which I've fallen to the deceitfulness of sin, doing what seems right in my own eyes and playing around with sin which only hardens my heart. Maybe you feel the same. Because this is the path that can lead to today not being a particularly good day to die.

Thankfully, since you're sitting here this morning, I can confidently say that God has given us another "Today." Have you ever noticed how often we sing about "Today" in our Lutheran hymns? "Christ the Lord is Risen TODAY!" "TODAY He rose and left the dead, and Satan's empire fell." Or as we're about to sing in a few minutes, "TODAY Thy Mercy Calls us." On and on and on throughout our hymns, we often sing about "Today." And none of that is playacting, it's not that we're pretending to be living at a time when we were not. It's simply the recognition that the Word of God brings with it the realities that it speaks of. So no, we weren't there at Bethlehem or Calvary; but when God speaks through His Word to us about the results of these events, their realities are transported through time and given to us today.

This brings to mind Paul's words to the Corinthians, "**We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.**" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2) That is, today is the day of grace, where the mercy of God which Christ won for all is made available to you. Today, with oxygen still in your lungs, you can use your breath to confess your sins before God, and He promises to hear and forgive. This is the day where you have found grace and favor before your Lord. That is due alone to what we read in verse 14, "**We have become partakers of Christ.**"

Jesus partook in flesh and blood, He shared in what you have. And because He did that, now God says you share in what He has. The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as the Great High Priest who went once for all into the Holy Place and offered sacrifice for all sins—you have a share of that. You are an owner of Jesus' blood and Jesus' salvation. That's what it means to be a partaker in Christ.

Right now, Christ is the King of glory in the heavenly places, and you have a share in that as well. Everything Christ can claim He has given to you—because of Him you also are now without sin. You also

can go straight to God the Father for anything. You also are a son or daughter of God. You also have a place in heaven by the throne of God. That's what it means to be a partaker in Christ.

But in this verse there's a bit of a "now, but not yet" flavor. We read, ***"For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end."*** And this statement brings this whole section of Scripture full circle. Once saved does not mean always saved. There is a serious warning in this text that we need to be on guard against the deceitfulness of sin so that we do not fall away from the faith and fail to enter God's rest. That's why the final verse repeats, ***"Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."***

Well, today we have heard God's voice. Today, God came to us in His Word and announced that our sins have been forgiven. During the confession and absolution I announced, ***"He who believes and is baptized shall be saved."*** And I wasn't just making that up, that's a direct promise from Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. (Mark 16:16) Today we witnessed our Sister-in-Christ Ann Wyatt stand up and confess with her own words that she believes what we confessed thereafter in the Apostle's Creed: namely that *"our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and was buried,"* and also that on *"the third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty."* And this is a very good thing to believe in and confess because God says in Paul's letter to the Romans, ***"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*** (Romans 10:9)

We have not yet received the full consummation of our faith, in other words, we're not in heaven yet. But we have partaken in Christ. And He is in heaven. He died and now He lives; and in His own Words, He is the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. He's the guarantee, that our resurrection from the dead will follow, and that we also will be in heaven with the Lord. This we can be confident in because God says through Paul to the Romans, ***"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."*** (Romans 6:3-4) We're not there yet, but in Christ we have an anchor in God's eternal Kingdom. He is the consolidation of all of our hope in this life, and partaking in Christ, we will not be put to shame. Because of Him, **Today is great day to die.** For it is far better to depart this life and be with Christ. (Philippians 1:23)

I'm guessing though, that most likely all of us will still be here tomorrow. As we've been directed through this text, so I encourage you: set all the other stuff in its place. When God gives you a new "Today," use that time wisely. Spend it with God in His Word. Encourage your loved ones not just with friendly greetings, but with the encouragement of forgiveness through Christ. Resist the deceitfulness of sin which hardens your heart, and instead cling to Christ who creates a clean heart within you. Clinging to Him until to your dying day, it doesn't matter if it's tomorrow or next year or in fifty years. It doesn't matter if you've started your own family or not. In Christ, every day is a good day to die, because in Christ, we *have* entered God's rest. Amen.

***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 4:7)

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh  
Tenth Sunday after Trinity  
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