

In 1997, 21-year-old Joshua Harris released a book entitled “I Kissed Dating Goodbye,” in which he proposed new Biblical models for dating and courtship. This put Harris on the map, so to speak, in modern North American Christianity. He spoke at countless conferences, became pastor of a megachurch in Maryland; his voice was influential. So it came as a shock to many when, in 2019, he renounced the message of his book, separated from his wife, and took to Instagram to declare that, by his own definition, he was no longer Christian. The interim pastor where Harris had served wrote in a letter to the congregation: “[Josh] is a beloved former pastor and friend...so this hits home personally,” and, reflecting on the apostle Paul’s writings, said, “Several times Paul mentions former Christian leaders swerving from, wandering from, or making shipwreck of their faith, so while this is sad and confusing, it isn’t new. [But] Paul’s hope was for redemption and restoration.” In that letter, the interim pastor urged the congregation to pray for Harris and for “fresh resolve in your own fight of faith.” I would urge you to do the same, as today we consider the struggle of living in faith, the possibility of wandering away from God’s goodness, and the role we have to play in strengthening in each other.

Looking back into the Old Testament, the cold hard truth is: Israel experienced God’s grace and still fell. They refused to believe that God would actually give them the promised land. They lost the awe and wonder of their deliverance, and from the distance of history, it seems astounding. These were the very people who had seen how bad life could be. They had been crushed under the weight of slavery. They had witnessed with their very own eyes the ten mighty signs against Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. They had tasted the miraculous bread of heaven laid out with the morning’s dew. They had quenched their thirst from a gushing rock in the desert. They had all those things, yet their hearts became hard and they swerved from the truth.

It was unbelief that caused their rebellion against the Lord, and the punishment that struck them. Moses told the people this very fact in Numbers 14. They could not enter the promised land on account of their unbelief. They could not reach their goal, the end of the way, because at the bottom of their unruly conduct lay the refusal to believe in the Lord, their God, with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind. And there is always that same danger for us, that despite God’s goodness, our hearts might be deceived into hardness and sin.

Sin deceives. Sin kills. Sin is never what it seems. No sinner ever has sin under control. Just as imperceptibly as arteries harden until the heart attack happens, sin works the same hardening effect on faith. We can lose our sense of awe and wonder at God and His works on our behalf. We can forget to be thankful for His many benefits. And the change can come so slowly and imperceptibly that you never feel the danger until it is too late.

Listen again to this verse from Hebrews: “For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” How can we hold our original confidence firm to the end? Crucial question, isn’t it? Fortunately, there’s a clear answer. Remain in the Word of God. The

danger lies in neglecting the Word. Sin has so many pleasant disguises that it requires vigilant care on the part of every Christian to maintain connection with God through his Word and Sacraments and personal prayers. Things that seem like innocent pastimes or even important priorities can become lethal to faith if they prevent you from being in the Word; if they crowd your calendar and keep the gospel of Jesus from reaching your ears and mind and heart.

We need the Word like a plant needs water. We need the Word to define our deepest issues. We need the Word to confront us with the unpleasant truth about our corruption and self-centeredness. We need the Word to summon us, to call us to return like the prodigals we are, to honestly admit where and how we have failed to love God and neighbor. We need that because only then are you ready to hear that your every failure is completely forgiven in Jesus. His innocent suffering and death have paid the price. The balance you owe God is zero, because Jesus' sacrifice on the cross handled every bit of the debt. In fact, Jesus did not simply pay off your sin debt, he purchased you. He's taken care of all the adoption fees, so that you can be part of His family. And this family is a real thing; it is part of God's plan to keep us in faith.

Again, today's Epistle: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Exhort one another every day. Encourage one another with great passion and care. This is part of God's plan to defend us against unfaith.

The community of faith, the church of Christ in all her diverse congregations exists for the distribution of God's Gifts in Christ, AND for giving and receiving of mutual encouragement. Maybe it goes without saying but "One anothers" exist only in communities. The power of Christians to encourage and uphold faith in one another should never be downplayed. The Bible never does! Take care not to give up the great gift of "one another" and the sustenance that comes when we receive and deliver words of encouragement.

There's an old, old story that's told about a pastor who went to visit a parishioner who had not been to church in quite a while. He knocked on the door and was let inside. This was back in the days when the fireplace was the primary means of heating the home, so the pastor entered the room where this delinquent member was seated, and without saying a word, took the tongs and found a brightly glowing ember, which he removed from the fire and placed on the cold stone floor. The ember held it's bright orange glow for a few moments, but then very rapidly cooled, fading to a dull grey. The pastor looked at the ember, looked up at the resident of the home, replaced the tongs and left, without comment, but the point was impossible to miss.

Today is the day to gather around God's gifts. Today is the day to depend on Jesus for redemption and rest. Today is the day to encourage each other in love and truth, to share the flame, to kindle the gift of faith in each other, to receive fresh resolve in your fight of faith.