

Can I Fall Away?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 February 2018

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Good morning, St. Silas. Thank you very much, Anne, for reading. It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open on page 1204, if you're using the church Bibles.

We're going to look at that passage of the Bible together. Can I commend to you the link-up lunch coming up in two weeks' time? It's a great way to get to know just a few people better from across the church family.

So, do sign up either to host or to be a guest at someone's home for that. You can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful as we turn to this passage together.

It's quite a difficult bit of the Bible we've got today. It's quite challenging. It's quite hard to understand. But this is part of the benefit of just working through books of the Bible chapter by chapter is we're not missing out the bits we don't like or we find hard.

We're letting God set the agenda and we can ask for his help as he speaks to us. So, let's bow our heads now and I'll lead us in a prayer as we ask for God's help in his word.

[1 : 04] We praise you, almighty God and loving heavenly Father, for your word of grace to us. We thank you for the gift of your Spirit, your Spirit who has gathered us together today, your Spirit who has breathed out this word and speaks it to us now.

And so we ask, Father, that you will indeed speak to us. And by your Spirit, you will open our eyes to see Jesus, that you'll open our minds to know you more clearly.

And you'll work in our hearts so that we can respond rightly to all that you are and all that you ask of us. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Great. So we're thinking this morning about security. How secure do you feel as a person? Of course, ideally, it depends on the facts.

And we feel secure or insecure. We feel very secure or insecure, depending on the facts of a particular situation. I don't know if you saw this week in the news that Cape Town is in danger of becoming the first major world city to run out of water.

[2 : 14] It was in the news. They're having a massive crisis in Cape Town. And one of the newspaper headlines was a quote from a guy in Cape Town, obviously feeling appropriately insecure.

The headline was, My wife doesn't shower anymore, which was quite alarming to read. I didn't read on to find out if she is washing at all. But you can see that they feel insecure. And they're right to feel insecure about the water shortage.

And then there was this list of the 11 cities in the world that are most likely to run out of fresh water. So Beijing was there. Jakarta was there. London was there.

Not Glasgow. Glasgow was not there. And I guess we'd expect that, wouldn't we? When it comes to the risk of running out of fresh water, you can feel secure in Glasgow.

Okay? We're not worried about that. But sometimes you can feel wrongly, insecure, or oversecure. You get people who feel like that in a relationship.

[3 : 13] People who are insecure in a relationship and spend their whole time worried that their partner doesn't really care for them or like them. And they become almost neurotic with it.

Or then you get people who are oversecure, who never seem to give a friend enough attention and don't seem to value the friendship. And actually, the relationship isn't working well. But the person doesn't realize because they're just oversecure.

They don't think there's a problem. Well, in Hebrews 5 and 6, we're thinking about the question, how secure should I feel about my relationship with God?

It's not about finding the balance somewhere in the middle between oversecurity and insecurity. It's about reading the signs in your own life so that you take action if your security is under threat.

And you put your security in the right place when it comes to thinking about God. The problem is the original heroes of this letter, they had an oversecurity problem. They thought they could just drift along in the Christian life.

[4 : 18] And the truth is they needed a shock. They were in danger. So that's why the passage is shocking. Our first point is this, the threat to security and unwillingness to grow.

The problem is in verse 11. We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. Literally, you've become sluggish of hearing.

It's the same word that gets used in chapter 6, verse 12 about being lazy. At one time, these guys had made a great start in the Christian life. We get to Hebrews chapter 10 and we find out that they, in their earlier days as Christians, they'd been persecuted and they'd kept going.

They were publicly insulted, but they carried on as Christians. They had their property confiscated and accepted that as a privilege for being a Christian.

That is a big deal, isn't it? Can you imagine how we'd react to St. Silas today if things changed in Scotland? And for being a Christian, people started confiscating your property.

[5 : 24] It's a big deal. These guys were an example to everyone else. But something has gone wrong. They've not grown to maturity as Christians. And the key mark here is that they weren't willing to stretch themselves by growing in their knowledge of God.

If we read from verse 12, if you have a look with me. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again.

You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

So we've had a new baby born in our church family this week. Dave and Ruth have had baby Hugo has been born, which is great. And he'll be drinking milk for a while now, won't he?

For months. It's actually quite amazing how much a baby can grow on just milk, isn't it? They grow hugely. They get stronger. They start interacting and engaging with the outside world, looking around.

[6 : 35] But they get to a point, as the months go by, when they can't carry on on just milk. They need solid food. And if they won't move on to solid food, you start to worry about them.

And they find it hard, babies, when they move on from milk to solid food. You know, you give them a bit of vegetable, and they stick it down their throat, and then they choke. And they start sort of trying to grab milk wherever they can.

You know, they're reaching out for the beaker. They don't like this new solid food thing that's going on. But they're never going to grow if they don't move on. And it's a bit like that in the Christian life. You don't grow just by having been a Christian a long time. That doesn't make you grow. You don't grow by going over the same thing again and again.

You have to pursue growth. And these Hebrew Christians have grown lazy. So it's worth examining yourself and thinking, do I ever worry that actually I'm still a bit of a baby Christian?

[7 : 34] That I've not really moved on? Could it even be said of you that when it comes to your Christian life, you're being a bit lazy? I remember a friend of mine saying to another Christian friend, I'm just a bit concerned that I think you might just be in second gear as a Christian.

Stuck in second gear. Well, the writer of Hebrews has been giving us some solid food. Last week, we were in solid food about Jesus as our priest.

It's big stuff. And then he comes back to it in chapters 7, 8, and 9 of Hebrews. And it is stretching. But he is paused because he needs to give this wake-up call. And we're meant to read that and feel shocked.

For any gathering like ours, some of us will not be in danger of this. But others of us will be in danger of the same problem that these first hearers had.

They're gifted enough. They've been around Christianity long enough. And maybe like us, maybe there's some of us who are gifted, and we've been around Christianity a long time. We could by now be building other people up and inspiring them in their faith.

[8 : 42] But the truth is we're not hungry enough for it. And we need to be eager to grow, to move on, to build on the basics. In chapter 6, verses 1 to 3, he talks about the basics.

Therefore, let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation. And then he gives us three pairs of what the foundation is.

The first are about how you become a Christian, the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God. The second pair are a bit harder to work out.

Instruction about cleansing rites. That's literally baptisms and the laying on of hands. It could mean lots of different things. I think it's probably about initiation into being a new Christian, that it's actually about baptisms, about being baptized when you first repent and believe.

And the laying on of hands might have been associated with baptism as a sign that all new believers are given the Holy Spirit in them. And then the third pair are about last things.

[9 : 52] He says the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. Those are the essential foundations. But to grow as a Christian, you have to build on them. And the focus of that growth is Christ.

As you read Hebrews, it's all about Christ. It's very much not about us, as you read Hebrews. It's not about you and me. It's about Christ. And if we want to stop stumbling around like toddlers, bumping into stuff, tripping over, we need to grow up by focusing on Christ and growing our knowledge and love of God through him.

If you don't grow, you don't just stand still. You end up in real trouble. And we see that next. We thought first about the threat to security. And now we see this disaster it can lead to.

Our second point, the end of security, being unable to repent. So the warning comes in verse 4. If you have a look with me. It is impossible for those who have, and then he gives four qualities, who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, and who have fallen away to be brought back to repentance.

Those four qualities, they sound like they might be describing a Christian, and then they fall away. So is it possible for a Christian to fall away, not to be a Christian anymore?

[11 : 26] Well, the answer very clearly taught from the rest of the Bible elsewhere is, no, that's not possible. When we become Christians, Jesus Christ has an unbreakable grip on us.

We see it in Jesus' words in John chapter 6. He says, There's a group of people, Christians, who the Father has given to the Son. John 6, 39, he says this, And this is the will of him who sent me, the Father, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. So Christians are the people the Father has given to the Son. So who are those people? Next verse, For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

So if you're someone who has looked to the Son and believes in him, you're one of the people Jesus will raise up on the last day because the Father has given you to him.

He has an unbreakable grip on you. In the same way, in John chapter 10, he says this, about his people. My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me.

[12 : 34] I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

And that's a source of real comfort to Christians. It's meant to be. But if you've put your trust in Jesus Christ, it's because God has taken hold of you and he won't let go of you. But Hebrews 6 is describing what we experience in churches today of somebody who says they're a Christian, who thinks they're a Christian, and then later they say they're not a Christian anymore.

They appear to have been a Christian who falls away. The reality from God's perspective is that they were never really a Christian at all. So if Christians can't fall away, why is there a warning here in Hebrews 6 not to fall away?

It's because God keeps his people by warning them. He preserves us. He doesn't let anyone snatch us away. He preserves us by warning us to persevere.

So we're not meant to hear this warning and think, oh, well, that's impossible. So, you know, I can't fall away. I've made a commitment. So I've got nothing to worry about. Nowhere to think, well, any of us could be in this category described in Hebrews 6.

[13 : 59] But if we belong to Jesus, then as we hear these words, his spirit in us works in us to move us, to press on so that we don't fall away.

We heed the warning. So back in verses 4 to 6, what is the warning saying? It's saying if we say we're a Christian and we spend time among other Christians belonging to a church family and then we give up on that, we fall away, we could find ourselves in a category of people for whom there's

no turning back.

It said in verse 6, it is impossible to be brought back to repentance. Why? Well, it's because repentance is a gift from God. None of us can turn back to God without God working in us by his spirit, opening our eyes, changing our hearts, so that we're moved by God's love to turn to him. Repentance is a gift from God. And there is a category of people described here in Hebrews for whom God won't do that. The reason comes next in verse 6. To their loss, they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

If you're publicly known as a Christian today and then you turn around and say, I don't believe it. It's a sham. I've seen it. I've been amongst it. There's nothing in it.

[15:25] You bring public shame on Jesus. He died a shameful death once to save us, to offer us eternal life. He won't be shamed again.

And I think that what this passage is saying is that there's a group of people, there's a type of person who might do that and having done that, God would no longer do a merciful work in them and bring them back.

Hearing this, a few of you today here might get concerned thinking, well, is this me? Am I in that situation where I would have offended God like that?

I don't think we can ever know for sure if we're in this category or not, but a surefire way of ensuring that you're not in that category is to repent. Just come to Christ today, put your trust in him and you're not one of those people.

If you're willing to turn back to God, then clearly you're not in the category described in Hebrews 6 because you have been brought back to repentance. Just turn to God.

[16:35] So don't worry about it. Don't think, oh, have I done this? Don't worry about it. Just repent. And why does the writer use these four phrases in Hebrews 6, in verses 4 and 5, to describe the experience of that person before they fall away?

Well, they're four phrases that you could use to describe being amongst the church family, a church community, sharing in the Holy Spirit, tasting the goodness of the Word of God, the powers of the coming age, being enlightened.

But here's the thing. They're also phrases that you could have used to describe the first generation of God's people who were rescued in the Exodus. And they're words that are used about them, echoes of words used about them in Nehemiah chapter 9.

The first generation brought out through the Red Sea from slavery in Egypt. They were fed by God. They were led by God. God met with them and gave them His law.

And almost all those people failed to get into the Promised Land because they gave up on trusting God. I don't know if you've ever run a long distance run.

[17:43] I've run the Great North Run a few times. And the Great North Run is the world's biggest half marathon. Tens of thousands of people run the Great North Run. And like any race, some people have trained hard and in a disciplined way for the run.

But the thing is that in the crowd of runners in Newcastle, because it's like such a big occasion, there are guys who don't do any training, who just sort of...

In fact, it's a bit of a thing in Newcastle, like a sort of a macho thing, that you sign up for the Great North Run, you don't train, you go out the night before on the quayside, and then the next day you try and run it.

Okay? So you set off on the Great North Run and there's people around you who look the part, you know, they're in the kit and they look fresh and ready, and you all set off running and they run off at a great pace.

Now one of the years I ran the Great North Run, it was actually sunny in Newcastle. Okay? So it was a few degrees warmer than normal. And loads of people didn't make it.

[18:43] They just pulled out halfway through. You know, they looked the part going over the time bridge, they were up for it. But once they realized it was hot, they couldn't go to the end. And it's true in any race like that, isn't it?

You don't judge runners by the way they start, you judge them by how they finish. And Hebrews 5 and 6 urges us to do the same thing about our Christian lives.

If you're here this morning, you're in the crowd, but some people who are in the crowd don't finish the race. They don't make it to the end. And according to Hebrews 5 and 6, the warning sign is being lazy about Christian growth.

So folks, we just need to examine ourselves and we need to think about each other. It's a letter written to a church. Think about your Christian friends. Any of us here might be somebody who should be feeling a bit less secure than we actually do about our salvation.

If you're in second gear, if you ever think to yourself, well, I don't need to worry. I'm a Christian. That's enough. What might Jesus see in us as he looks in at St. Silas?

[19 : 55] Might he see that the amount of time we spend investing in our Christian growth doesn't compare well with the amount of time we spend devoted to our other aims in life, our careers, our studies, our investments and our bank balance, our exercise regime, the sports club, our kids' hobbies, making our home nice, good things.

But do we spend far more of our time pursuing growth in those things than we do in pursuing growth as Christians? If you're someone who likes to read, what Christian book are you reading at the moment to stretch yourself, to grow?

How much do you feel the need not to miss church on a Sunday? Because you feel you're pursuing growth. It's the old bicycle principle. If you stop moving forward, you don't just go slower, you fall off. And that first generation of Israel, they reach this point of no return. And if you're on a bad trajectory, you could find that you end up missing out on salvation altogether.

That's the shock of our passage today. It's meant to make us feel uncomfortable. But things then look a lot more positive. Our third point this morning, the mark of security, diligent service, of God's people.

[21 : 24] Have a look with me at verse 9. He says, even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case. The things that have to do with salvation.

So, what gives the writer that confidence? Is he just being diplomatic? What gives him that confidence in them that they're not going to lose their security? Well, it's their changed lives. He describes them in verse 10.

God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. And then the positive of verse 11.

He says, we want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end. You've been diligent. Carry on in that diligence. So, faith that lasts, that goes the distance, is faith that demonstrates itself in works.

In verses 7 and 8, he uses the illustration of farmland. You judge the kind of land you've got by what's coming out of it, don't you? Obviously. You don't worry about land if the crops are good.

[22 : 27] You don't think, I'm a bit worried about my soil. If you can farm the land and you're getting good crops and we can all eat our cornflakes, we're all happy. But if the land is producing weeds, thorns and thistles are coming out, then it's bad land and it's worthless.

And a farmer will sometimes go to the result of burning up the land so they can start again with more fertile land. You judge the land by what comes out of it when the water lands.

That's the picture that you can judge a church by, and whether it's security is well founded, by seeing the word of God land on it and thinking, what fruit is being produced?

If we can see evidence in our lives of distinctive, holy living, we can be confident of salvation. The evidence that he looks for here is that we've shown that we love God by loving and serving his people, whether that's serving Christians here or it's serving Christians in need around the world.

Signs of behavior that you'd only really do if you were a Christian, if you were trusting Jesus. And I look around St. Silas and I see lots of that. There are many examples here of that, of some of you who visit each other when you're sick, who spend time with people who are lonely, who lead in children's ministry and youth ministry, who open your homes to others.

[23 : 53] Those of you who are committed to growth groups, committed to roots, preparing and leading Bible studies, serving with musical gifts, giving your money sacrificially to support gospel work, praying for the persecuted church.

There are many more. Here is evidence that we can be convinced of better things for us, things that have to do with salvation, not falling away. So the question, I guess, is can you see evidence of that in your own life?

If you can, then the writer just urges us here, don't become lazy, but show that same kind of diligence today and every day. So that's the mark that can give us security, diligent service of God's people.

But of course, it's not our works that save us. We don't do works because we have to add them to the faith that saves us. It's just that faith alone saves us and real faith is evidenced by good works. What saves us is trusting God's promise. And that's our final point this morning, the ground of security, the unchangeable promise of God. So the writer points us back to the seedbed of the Bible.

[25 : 09] God promises to Abraham that through Abraham's seed, ultimately Jesus, he would one day put the world right. All the brokenness and fallenness of our world will one day be taken away and people will live in the blessing of right relationship with God.

God promised that to Abraham and God's promises to us in Jesus are just an outworking of him keeping that promise to Abraham. He made the promise in Genesis 12 but then he repeated the promise in Genesis 22 and he swore an oath.

So we read that in verse 13 here. When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself saying, I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.

But God never lied. So why did he swear an oath when we could trust him anyway? Well, he did it for us. Verse 18. God did this so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, that is the promise and the oath, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.

That's where we find true security. If you are trusting those promises to us in Jesus, feel secure today as a Christian. Verse 19.

[26 : 31] We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. And then he describes how that hope in Jesus, as we saw last week, Jesus has gone right into the heavenly realms, into the throne room of God himself.

And that's our security, that Jesus is in the most holy place now, and in him we're there as well. So Hebrews 6 urges us to guard against over-security, to pursue growth, to be diligent, but at the same time it points us to the place of true security.

There's no place for being paranoid or neurotic about what God thinks of us or our future with him. No, when we trust his promises to us in Jesus, when we take hold of them in faith, we find that our souls should be firm and secure.

And people all around us have souls that are in turmoil, even the turbulent waters that might hit us of this life. We cling on to that anchor and we can be secure and stable.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, as we approach your table together as a church family for our family meal of bread and wine, we thank you for the certainty of your promise to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 49] We pray that you will reassure us today that your purposes for us and for your world are unchanging, that we are heirs of what you have promised so that this hope in Christ will be an anchor for our souls.

And we pray that as you work this in us, by your grace, you will enable us to repent of our laziness, of our sluggishness to learn, and you will bring about in us the diligence you call us to, that you would find us to be good land, producing good fruit, and that we will persevere to the end.

For our good and for your glory. Amen.