

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. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.
Hebrews 6.10-11.

As I keep saying, the key to understanding *Hebrews* is to see it as a letter of *encouragement*, of *paraclesis*. Yes, it has deep theology, and sometimes the ideas of priests, the elaborate Temple sacrificial system, this odd OT character Melchizedek seem bewildering to us in modern Britain, but if we remember that *Heb* was originally a word of encouragement to Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah, it will speak to us. These Jews were very much in a the minority. Although Jesus was a Jew, as were the disciples, St Paul and the first Christians, the vast majority of Jews were adamantly and angrily *opposed* to the notion of Jesus a mere carpenter and a crucified criminal as God's holy Messiah. The very *idea* of it! So those few Jews who *did* accept Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ (that is the Greek word for Messiah) were getting a lot of flak from their Jewish relatives, neighbours and friends. It would be far easier just to slip back into their old ways and forget about this Jesus. So the two main ideas in *Heb* are 'falling away' and 'encouragement'. When we grasp that, we can see how *Heb* can speak very powerfully to us in 21st century Britain. Since the War there has been a massive falling away from Christ in this country with devastating effects for our society. We now have a whole generation of young people who know absolutely zilch about Jesus and the Christian faith. They are utterly unchurched. And even we who are left, faithfully trying to keep the show on the road, have massive temptation to give up. We are flagging. We are few in number and secular society is most definitely against us. We no longer have the wind behind us. It is now in our face, and we need *encouragement*.

Chapter 6 verse 4-6 are troubling and have caused much anguish to Christians over the years Are Christians who fall from grace lost for ever? Have those who fall away no second chance? Many Christians have wandered from their path for a while and then come back. Can they not return? What about our children who were brought up by faithful parents, anxious to do the right thing for their youngsters by giving them a spiritual foundation, but who now as grown-ups never darken the door of the church? Are they lost for ever? This, as I say, is a difficult passage. Some ultra-Calvinists would argue 'once saved, always saved'. I think there is much truth in this. If God has saved us, then we are saved. (And let us never forget what I asserted on an earlier occasion, that Christianity is not feel good. It is essentially a *saving* religion. God through Christ on the Cross has *saved* us from punishment, from hell, from guilt and shame, and from ourselves). When God says we are saved, we are saved. We may let go of him – because we are feckless and weak – but he never lets go of us. He is a faithful God. If we are saved, we are safe - safe in the arms of Jesus.

Sometimes we hear of people 'losing their faith'. Perhaps it is after long intellectual enquiry and struggle, but more often it is after some tragedy that has befallen them. How could a good God do that to me/him/her? My experience, however, is that such people probably never had a true faith at all. The dreadful calamity merely exposed the fact. Sitting in a church does not make you a Christian, just as standing in a stable does not make you a horse. A faith that is not tested is not a faith. I think of Joni Earekson a beautiful young woman, brought up as Christian, who dived into the sea and was paralysed for life. She went through hell – physical, emotional and spiritual.

She had all the doubts, and suicidal thoughts. But she ultimately did not lose her faith, because her faith was real. In 1976 she brought out an inspirational biography, *Joni: The Unforgettable story of a young woman's struggle against quadriplegia and depression*. It was made into a film in 1979.

No, I think vv4-6 are referring to those who not only drift away from Jesus, but who deliberately and viciously set their face against him. Josef Stalin was a cruel atheist, but he started as a trainee priest. Another earlier Joseph, Joseph Fouché, also trained to be a priest at the end of the 18th century but was so cruel in his persecution of the clergy during the infamous dechristianisation of France that he appalled even Robespierre. If we go back now to *Heb*, we can see that Jews who might fall away from Jesus would in effect be now rejoining those Jews who had bayed for Christ's blood on the Cross. They would be crucifying him all over again, as we read in v6.

So there is a warning here in the first part of *Heb* 6, not to give up on Jesus; not to turn their face against the Saviour they once loved. But chap 6 then goes on to give a word of *encouragement*. V9 makes it clear that, though there is a real danger of their falling away from Jesus and turning on him, that had not happened yet ... There is a warning to us also in 2018. Yes, modern British society is against Christianity at the present moment. (But who knows what is round the corner?) It would be easy for us Christians struggling against the tide, just to give in and go with the flow. With fewer people coming to church and less money coming in, we few still have to keep the buildings going and do the jobs in the congregation. Wouldn't it be so tempting just to give up and have an easier life? Don't! Jesus is worth it. The Church, so embattled today, is the future, not this rotten, degenerate society.

If there is a warning, there is also an encouragement. Look at vv10-11 ... God sees the good work you do for his church; he sees the money you sacrificially give to keeping this place of worship going, and he will honour that. You come faithfully Sunday after Sunday to church. That in itself is an act of witness, while everyone stays in bed or rushes off to the shops, or football on the Stray. God will not forget your work. You could have found something more fun to do on a Sunday, but you chose to put God first. He will honour that. You supported other Christians. You befriended people coming to this house of prayer. You visited the sick and helped the grieving. You remembered the struggling in your prayers. God will not forget your work and the love you have shown *him* as you have helped his people.

Do you remember the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in *Matthew* 25? Let's turn to p995, because this passage is about the Final Judgement and the grounds on which we will either be going up there, or down there. The sheep are those who helped Jesus; who clothed and fed him. Look at vv37-39 ... 'When did we see *you* hungry, Lord?' And then Jesus gives his devastating teaching: 'inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto *me*.' And even more deadly is v45: 'inasmuch as ye did it *not* unto the least of these, ye did it *not* unto me'. vv41-43... That's scary!

God has promised in 1 *Sam* 2.30 that he will honour those who honour him, and think little of those who despise him. God sees what you are doing and, even if the world does not thank you, *he* thanks you. So stick at it. Only dead fish go with the current. God will honour what you are doing in his name. The Christian life is about perseverance, deep roots, keeping going until, as Sir Francis Drake said, 'it be thoroughly finished'. *That* yields the true glory.