

A certain hope

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[0 : 0 0] About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

You need milk, not solid food. For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore, let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith towards God, and of instruction without washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

For land that has drunk the rain, that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, and receives a blessing from God.

[1 : 4 1] But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things, things that belong to salvation.

For God is not unjust, so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, and as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness, to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless you and multiply you.

And thus Abraham, having waited patiently, obtained the promise. For people answer by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

[3 : 1 3] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Each Christmas, each December, I start reading A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens.

I haven't finished it yet, any year. I've got a pretty good handle on the first couple of chapters, though. There have been many adaptations, haven't there, of A Christmas Carol, perhaps the most iconic being the picture behind me of the Muppets' Christmas Carol.

But I guess we are familiar with the story, aren't we? Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley.

Now, to warn him to get off the path that you are on, Scrooge, in being cold-hearted. Otherwise, Scrooge, you're just going to turn out like I did.

[4 : 27] And so the three ghosts visit, don't they? The ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. And it's basically all an intervention. They're all to show him the error of his ways, of where the future will lead if you do not change.

That's essentially what the story's about. Well, the author of Hebrews, throughout the letter, does a similar thing. He's writing to a group of people that need to be encouraged to keep going as Christians because they are in danger.

He's already told them in chapter 2, verse 1, that we saw a few weeks ago, to pay much closer attention to what they've heard, lest they drift away from it. And so throughout the book that we've been studying this autumn, the author is saying, yes, think of Jesus.

He is amazing. And he wants the people to think, yes, I want to keep going. I want to follow him. Yet along the way, he gives warnings, essentially saying, don't you dare let go of Jesus and stop believing in him.

Now, to stretch the Christmas carol analogy further, the author has already given them the ghost of Israel's past in chapters 3 and 4. He's warning the congregation, don't be like that former generation in the wilderness who hardened their hearts and did not make it to the promised land.

[6 : 02] And so now he comes after an encouragement last week of the throne of grace that we can go to at any time. He comes back to warn them.

And here's the warning. There's a real danger for those who don't keep going. There's a real danger for those who don't keep going. The author has just said in verse 9 of chapter 5 how Jesus is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

And he's about to explain more about Jesus being a high priest that is the focus of all these chapters. But he screeches to a halt and he essentially asks, are you actually those who obey him?

Are you really going to pay attention? There's no point me carrying on telling you about how great Jesus is and his high priestly work if you're not going to pay attention.

And he outlines this warning in stages. And so firstly on the handout, being dull of hearing leads to stagnation. Have a look at verse 11.

[7 : 16] About this we have much to say and it is hard to explain since you've become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

You need milk, not solid food. For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness since he is a child. That solid food is for the mature.

Those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Well imagine it's a church lunch. You've just, all the food is on the tables behind me.

You've just, you've piled high your food. And you've sat down on a table. And next to ye, there's an adult who just whips out a bottle of milk and starts sucking away.

That is how the preacher describes the audience. They're like adults still living on milk. They were encouraged to pay much closer attention.

[8 : 26] But there seems to be an unwillingness to do that. And this is not an intellectual issue. It's not that they're stupid.

They are dull in hearing. That word dull in verse 11 is used again in chapter 6 verse 12 where it's translated sluggish. This is not a lack of ability but a lack of desire.

They're unskilled in the word of righteousness. In verse 14, there's been no constant practice. They're just not bothered. They're not bothered about putting God's word into constant practice.

They're putting their ear defenders on and are not even trying anymore. They've stagnated. But to keep going as a Christian is to keep growing as a Christian.

Have a look at chapter 6 verse 1. Therefore, let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity. Not that they're going to leave the gospel of Jesus behind but just as a child is weaned off milk they are to be weaned off a childlike understanding.

[9 : 46] Have a deeper grasp of who Jesus is. What he has done. What he is doing now. And what he will do in the future. And to live in the light of that.

Not that every Christian should sign up to do an online theology degree in their spare time. Or that if you're not reading the Bible for hours every day that you're not taking it seriously.

It's about a heart attitude. He's worried about people who just might not want to move on. Who no longer trying to understand.

People who close their ears to what God is saying. And he is saying, hey, let's graduate primary school. Let's move on. Have a deeper understanding.

And he warns them that this heart attitude leads to real danger. Because stagnation can lead to desertion. Have a look at verse 4.

[10 : 47] For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come and then have fallen away to restore them again to repentance.

It's a scary picture. It's a bit like the ghost of Christmas future. That part is always quite scary. Even in the Muppets Christmas carol I still find that quite scary. It's a real warning of what could happen.

And we're supposed to spot the parallels here with the ghost of Israel past. The Israelite generation already spoken about in chapters 3 and 4.

You will know from our Bible overview in growth groups they were brought out of Egypt quite literally enlightened with a pillar of cloud and fire with the Lord.

They had tasted the heavenly gift in being given manna from heaven in the wilderness. They were led by the Spirit Nehemiah says.

[11 : 55] They had tasted the goodness of God's direct word to them in his good promises. They experienced God's power by being brought through the Red Sea and yet they did not make it.

And it's like the author is putting this Hebrews generation back into their shoes. They had been enlightened. Jesus, the light of the world that we think about at Christmas has come down from heaven.

They too have tasted the heavenly gift in being assured of forgiveness through the gospel. The Holy Spirit has been at work among them bringing God's word to them.

They knew of Jesus' miracles his resurrection from the dead. But verse 6 is the real warning that it's possible to experience something of those things and fall away.

To walk away from Jesus and his gospel altogether. Now 2024 saw the resurgence of the classic TV program Gladiators. I don't know if you know of it.

[13 : 04] People compete against the Gladiators in a series of challenges kind of big athletes and bodybuilders and Lycra spandex in a series of challenges and the finale is a massive obstacle course that includes the travelator.

The contestants run up essentially a moving walkway and I've got to get to the top. The moving walkway is going the other way. And if you run forward you can keep going and get to the top even though it's hard.

But imagine you got halfway up and stood still. What would happen? You'd go backwards. You'd slide down back to the bottom.

And these verses say the Christian life is like that. if we keep going if we stick with Jesus and want to grow we will keep moving forwards even when it's hard.

But if we stand still spiritually and don't have a desire to grow to have a deeper understanding and put God's word into practice we'll find ourselves going backwards.

[14 : 21] Now which could lead to walking away from Jesus altogether. Now sadly this does line up with reality doesn't it? And we all know those who have been enlightened in some sense by understanding the message about Jesus.

They've perhaps tasted the goodness of the word of God by being moved by a sermon or a Bible study. They've perhaps well they once professed faith but don't anymore.

I can think of friends in youth group at university and beyond and I know there are many stories in this room of family and friends who have sadly walked away from Jesus.

And the author is saying to the people who have begun to respond to God to keep on responding. He's already referred to this in chapter 3 verse 14 if you flick over for we have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Notice the tenses. We have come past tense. It has happened if you keep going. It happened back then if it's shown through all of life.

[15 : 46] true faith in Jesus is seen in perseverance sticking with him to the end listening to him and growing in him.

And he wants them to keep doing that to keep going and keep growing because there is a way of leaving Jesus that can't lead to coming back to him. A desertion that can't lead to restoration.

It is quite striking isn't it? He says it's impossible to have experienced verses 4 or 5 as part of being part of a church community and then to turn your back on Jesus to verse 6 restore them again to repentance.

Now I'm sure there'll be some in this room who would say they did walk away from Jesus and wonderfully came back to him. Well if that's you then be assured you didn't fall away as these verses describe.

But there is a category of people who do fall away and can't be brought back to repentance because verse 6 they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

[17 : 06] Meaning they reject Jesus as deliberately as his executioners did with the ongoing denial of any need for salvation that Jesus provides.

And if someone continues in this rejection then they can't be brought back because God cannot provide another way of salvation. Imagine a parent and child and you know the parent has poured out their life for this child and the child turns around and spits in the parent's face walks off and cuts off all contact.

You may know instances where that has happened and it's tragic and we're supposed to be really cut up by that and that's what's going on here. The author is trying to evoke an emotional response from his audience by seeing how awful it would be to walk away from Jesus and cut off all contact with salvation.

some warnings that we have warnings in life all the time don't we? Some warnings they just give us information really don't they?

Oh this surface is hot so I shouldn't touch it. That's great. There's no emotional response to that. The warning here is supposed to make me recoil.

[18 : 31] A bit like the pictures on cigarette packets. the government wants us to look at them and feel a little bit sick. That's the sort of thing the author is doing.

He's painting a picture that makes us go I don't want that to be me. Now if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian and you're exploring the Christian faith then we're so glad that you are here.

Please know that this is a warning to Christians to keep going. That's not your situation but nonetheless we can take away the seriousness of this message.

We're talking about taking Jesus seriously and going on taking Jesus seriously otherwise there are dire consequences.

And for those of us Christians in the room for many this will be difficult to hear. We think of those close to us who have left the Christian faith and haven't come back. Are they in this category?

[19 : 36] Well we can't see whose names are written in the book of life and there definitely is a distinction between someone who's grown up at church and have left home and doesn't quite know what they think to someone who is really openly violently against the Lord Jesus.

Ultimately we can't see whose names are written in the book of life. life. And so when we see people who walk away from Jesus we continue to pray for them and to hold out the message of forgiveness to them in the gospel and we pray that they will come back, that they won't be like this group.

Naturally it is our tendency to think of others isn't it? but also the author really wants us to think of ourselves. He wants us to see how terrible it is so it wouldn't happen to us.

But also we need to see this not as a warning to the person who doesn't think they're a very good Christian because let's face it that is all of us. Maybe most of the time that's your thought.

I'm a rubbish Christian. Nor is this the warning to the person who is fighting sin in their life and struggling but still wanting to fight because last week we heard about forgiveness.

[21 : 03] We could always go to the throne of grace to keep us going. No, this warning is people who are in danger of just not being bothered. There are early warning signs to watch out for.

Not being bothered about sinning. Not being quick to confess our sin to the throne of grace, going to God, not rejoicing in God's forgiveness.

And so the question is, is that any of us this morning? Are there warning signs in our lives? Perhaps that's something to meditate on and chew on over this afternoon. I guess sometimes it's easy to think that standing still in the Christian faith seems like the safe option.

dipping in and out. Keeping Jesus, his people and his word a bit at arm's length. That's enough. But the author here says it's the complete opposite.

And there's a real danger for those who don't keep going, who become sluggish, dull of hearing. The ear defenders come on. Because it could lead away, lead to walking away from Jesus altogether.

[22 : 22] Well, that's the warning. And wonderfully, the author doesn't stay there. He gives us great encouragement. And so secondly, and much more briefly, there's a certain hope for those who do keep going.

There is a certain hope for those who do keep going. So in verse 9 of chapter 6, the author has confidence that they aren't in that position yet, of verses 4 to 6.

He's convinced through the evidence. Verse 10, they're still loving God, they're still loving each other, and yet he still encourages them to keep going to the end.

Verse 11, and we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end. hope. We often use the word hope to describe something uncertain.

I hope I'll get a PS5 for Christmas, something like that. But hope in Hebrews always refers to something rock solid, the rock solid objective reality of our present and future salvation in Jesus.

[23 : 37] And the author says, despite the warnings, we can have certainty of hope because of what God says. So verse 13, if you look, for when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater to whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, surely I will bless you and multiply ye.

And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. Again, we'll know from our growth groups that God made big promises to Abraham in Genesis 12.

But the quote here is from Genesis 22, after the near sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac. In that chapter, we're told God swore an oath, saying he will do what he had promised.

Now, we swear oaths because human beings are notoriously untrustworthy. I swear on my mum's life, you might have said in the past. cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.

Or a bit more seriously, I swear by almighty God, the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Some of us here have heard that quite a lot.

[24 : 56] But God didn't need to swear oaths. Verse 18, it's impossible for God to lie. But so that we can have be doubly sure, 200% sure, of God's promises.

God swore an oath to Abraham. The implication is, Abraham, you can definitely trust my word, and I've made an oath. You can definitely trust what I'm saying.

And it's same for us today. We can definitely trust God's word, what he says. He has promised to save his people.

He heirs of his promise. And God cannot lie. He makes assurances that forgiveness to all those who come to the Lord Jesus will be forgiven. That no one, none of his people can be snatched from his hand.

God cannot lie. And he wants us to keep going based and trusting in those promises because of what God says. And also because of where Jesus is.

[26 : 03] have a look at the last couple of verses. Verse 19. We have this sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

I guess we are all familiar with anchors on a ship and what they do. They keep it secure, don't they, so they don't drift away. Back then, they were used slightly differently.

If an anchor, if a ship is battling a storm and they're trying to get into harbour, they would drop an anchor. But they would also send a little boat, a forerunner, with the rope.

And they would go into the harbour, and they would attach the rope to a big anchor, big stone, on the harbour side that is secure and immovable.

And from there, the ship simply just had to hold on to the rope, and they were winched in to safety. The forerunner has gone ahead.

[27 : 20] Secure anchor is there. And this is the analogy, that the author is using. Our hope through the gospel is that we have a sure and steadfast anchor in the Lord Jesus.

He is our forerunner who has gone before us to the harbour of heaven. He has gone through the storms of life and death.

He has planted one end of the rope in the harbour of heaven. He's anchored it there firmly around himself. And so that now there's no possibility of his people ever being swept away despite the storms of life and sin and shame and suffering.

And so right now when we keep going, when we trust in Lord Jesus, we are tethered to heaven. and so we can hold on tight and grow into maturity to put God's word into constant practice and so be drawn into heaven.

I hope I'm not spoiling the ending of A Christmas Carol by telling you that the warnings of the Christmas ghost worked. Scrooge woke up on Christmas morning. A changed man.

[28 : 45] He listened to the warnings and changed. And so the writer of the Hebrews wants us to heed this warning. And becoming dull of hearing isn't the safe option because it could lead to stopping following Jesus altogether.

And there is a way of leaving Jesus that means we can't be brought back because there's no other way of salvation. And yet the author, encourages us with a certain hope if we keep going to the end.

Because of what God says and because of where Jesus is. He is our sure and steadfast anchor in heaven. He's connected us in.

If we keep going, we will certainly get there. Let's pray together. heavenly father, we thank you that in Jesus we have a sure and steadfast anchor, a forerunner who has gone before us into the harbour of heaven and that he is there now and that through trusting in him, we are connected to him.

Father, please help us to heed these warnings where we need to. Please help us to encourage one another to keep going until the end. Amen.