Warning Signs
Hebrews 5:11-6:12

This morning we are going to look at what is probably one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament. It's one of those passages that Christians, who agree about so many other things, fight over. And it's one of the so-called 'warning passages' in this letter to the Hebrews. Now one of the things that makes this Letter stand out is that it contains a number of these passages where the author warns the friends he's writing to not to turn their backs on Jesus, or fall away from the faith, because of the potentially catastrophic consequences if they were to do that.

And you might think 'what's so controversial about that? Isn't that exactly what he should do?' And the answer is, there's nothing controversial about that, except people can't agree on what some of the implications are of what he writes. You see, if he warns his friends not to fall away from Jesus, because things will turn bad for them if they do, does that mean it's possible for a Christian – a real, genuine Christian whose life has been turned around by God's grace, to lose their salvation? To go from being a child of God to being disowned by him, and all that means now and for eternity? And if that's the case, how does that leave us? Does that mean when Jesus said he holds us in his hand and no-one can snatch us out of his hand – that he didn't really mean it? That we're not quite as safe as we thought we were, as safe other passages in the Bible tell us we are?

Well, as we look at this passage, I want you to keep something in mind. The author has not written what we are going to read with a theological debate in mind. He's not writing this to his friends because he wants a debate on 'is it possible for a Christian to lose their salvation?' That's not why he's writing this. He's writing this because he loves the people, the church, he's writing to. And sometimes when you love someone you have to say the tough things to them. And the writer has cause for concern for his friends, and he doesn't want them to fall away, with all the consequences of that.

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

This morning I've got four points: Danger Ahead; No U-turns; Don't Go Near the Cliff Edge; and Run for the Finish Line.

Danger Ahead
Now let's just review where we're at. The writer is writing to a group of Christians who have almost certainly become Christians out of a Jewish background. They probably live in Rome and it's around the middle of the first century. Because the tide of persecution is on the rise it seems like some at least of his friends are thinking of turning their backs on the Christian faith and going back to Judaism. So the writer has been urging them not to do that – reminding them of how much greater Jesus is than the angels who mediated the law of Moses; how much greater Jesus is than Moses himself, greater than Joshua who led the people into the promised land and gave them rest; that Jesus gives a much better rest, a rest from inner turmoil and restlessness. And now the writer has begun to talk about how much greater Jesus is than Aaron, the archetypal Jewish high priest. And he's got lots to say about this, and he's going to say it, but

before he does so he realizes that he has to deal with an underlying issue, their immaturity, which Mark spoke about last week.

Now these guys have had teaching poured into them; the foundations of the faith have been laid in their lives. In fact by this stage they should have been teaching others. But instead they are like bottle-sucking babies. They're like university undergraduates who should be discussing Shakespeare or Fermat's Theorum but instead want to sit in the lecture hall reciting their ABC and two-times table. As Mark put it last week, they're like someone who's been skiing for 20 years but still goes down the bunny runs in a snow plough.

And the problem is that that kind of immature thinking has consequences, and the consequence he's worried about is that they will drift away from the gospel, drift away from Jesus and all Christ has done for them and simply go back to a dry and dead religion.

So he confronts them on this and gives them an incredibly stark warning, v4-6: 'For it is impossible in the case of those who… [and he puts in some descriptions which we'll look at]… have fallen away to restore them again to repentance.'

So no-one can accuse the writer of mincing his words, can they? There's no fudging there, no trying to soften the message and make it palatable. There's no 'let's be nice and English and beat around the bush for a bit'. It is impossible, he says, there comes a point of no return, if certain people take a certain line of action, to bring them back to repentance.

Now given the seriousness of what he's saying – who is he talking about? Who are the people who so risk hardening their hearts to God that there's no turning back?

Well, he describes them: v4-6 again, '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.'

So he's saying, look, it's possible to have been enlightened, to have had the light of God shine into your heart, to have had the light of God's grace and mercy in the gospel of Jesus shine into your darkness; it's possible to have tasted the heavenly gift, to have tasted what grace and forgiveness and salvation in Jesus are like; it's possible even to have shared in the Holy Spirit, to have known his convicting and calling and transforming power in your life; it's possible to have tasted the goodness of God's word, to have experienced him talking to you from out of this book, and hearing his voice; to have known and experienced the power of God breaking into this world – the powers of the age to come, it's possible to know and experience all those things and then to turn your back on it all. And that turning away, he says, can have dire consequences.

You see he says in v6 that if such people fall away, it's impossible 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.'

Now, just put yourself in their shoes. His friends are living in Rome, at the very centre of the empire that had crucified Jesus. Under pressure and persecution from that empire, some of them were considering going back to Judaism, going back, if you like, under the authority of the Jewish High Priest and religious leaders who had demanded Jesus be crucified. And if they turned away from Jesus and under pressure from the Romans went back to the Judaism which had refused to accept Christ as the messiah and the son of God, it would be like them siding with the very people who had crucified Jesus. It would be like them crucifying him all over again: saying, 'you know what, you're right, he's not the messiah, he's not the Son of God at all, crucify him'.

And the reason such people can't be brought back to repentance is that there is no other way of salvation other than Jesus. So if someone turns their back on the means God has provided to save them and bring them to repentance; if someone refuses God's love and grace to them in Jesus, and instead of seeing Christ's death on the cross as the supreme expression of God's love for us, in the Son of God dying for us, they side with those who see it as the meaningless death of some first century travelling rabbi, they're ridiculing the only means God has provided to rescue them, and there is no other way for them to be saved. It's impossible, he says.

So this isn't about people who are struggling with their faith or who want to believe but are struggling with unbelief. And it's not even about people who for one reason or another drift away but still in their hearts long for home and want to know God and his grace. And he's not talking about those who because of their own bad choices slip away from church and make a mess of their life, but like the prodigal son, come to realize they're in a pig-sty and long for forgiveness and to come back to the Father's embrace. The very fact that someone is grieving over their sin and wanting to repent tells you, this isn't them. The writer's talking about people who know the gospel and have felt its power at work in their lives, who have been a part of the community of God's people, who to all intents and purposes look like the real thing, but then turn their backs on it and decide they're done with Jesus.

And to show that, the writer uses this farming illustration: v7-8 '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, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.'

In other words, someone can experience all the blessings of being involved in the community of the church; just like a farmer's land enjoys the rain and the farmer's hard work; and that participation can result in a life of fruitfulness for God. But it's all possible to experience all that and then turn away and want nothing further to do with it, and the writer describes that as being like a field which gets the rain just as much but instead produces thorns and thistles. You

see, participation is not the same as transformation. And the ground that produces thorns and thistles will be treated very differently from that which produces fruit, the writer says, and you don't want to go there.

But if that's the danger the writer sees, just ask yourself why might people fall away from the faith in the first place?

No U-turns

Well, let's look at the people he's writing to. There are many reasons why people might fall away, but I want to highlight just two that were relevant to them and applicable to us.

What they were facing was persecution. The bold affirmation of faith that the early Christians made, that Jesus is Lord, could only mean one thing and that was that Caesar wasn't. Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. And what was happening around this time was that Christians were being made to choose – between Jesus and their lives, between Jesus and a public and painful death. Renounce Jesus publically and pledge your loyalty to Caesar as a god, and you can live. Hold on to Jesus and you might very well be martyred.

And the writer is saying that rather than expose Christ to public contempt, sometimes a Christian has to experience that themselves: public disgrace, even death, for Jesus' sake. But how you respond to that challenge of standing up for Jesus even when it costs you, depends crucially on who you're listening to.

Now there are many joys to having teenage daughters, but one of them is not trying to talk to them when they have their earphones in. You're talking to them thinking they're listening and then you realize they've not heard a word you've said because they're listening to the ipod.

And the problem for the writer's friends is that, as one commentator has put it, by listening to the voice of their fears, they had stopped listening to the voice of God, and they sought safety and security apart from him, without him, which of course is futile.

Now, here in Switzerland you and I don't face anything like what they were. But there is always the danger of listening to the wrong voices, of being shaped and moulded by what others think, and of renouncing Christ because you are more concerned about what others are saying than what God says. And what the writer is saying is, it's not wrong to be concerned about someone else's opinion, everyone of us is being shaped by others, but it does matter who that someone else is, because ultimately the only opinion that really matters, is God's.

But whilst they were in danger of falling away because of external pressure, the writer gives us another clue here as to what they were thinking, when he says in v10, '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 people can turn their backs on the faith when it seems like God is unfair or unjust. Now, one example of that is when young people don't get their questions answered, especially the question of 'how can a good, all-powerful God allow suffering?' Isn't God unfair or unjust to allow innocent suffering? And if they don't get an answer to that question and others like it, that satisfies intellectually, then they will come to the conclusion that they've been sold a dud and drift away.

Now, answering those kinds of questions is vital – it's one of the reasons why we do Q&A in the evening service. But I don't think that's what he's getting at here. Rather it's this. These people he's writing to have been seeking to live God-honouring lives: they've tried to live out their faith by doing good works and serving their brothers and sisters in the church, and doing that out of a love for God. That's what that verse 10 means. And yet, all this trouble was coming down on their heads.

And the danger is that when trials and trouble comes your way you can think: 'God, I don't deserve this. This isn't fair. You're not being fair. I've tried to live a good life, I've served the church, I've given my money away, and this shouldn't be happening to me.' And we can think God is unjust and this deep seated, nagging discouragement sets in, eating away at the foundations.

And the writer is saying: Look, God is not unjust. Your present trials are not a reason for you to fall away. He will not overlook you. You just need a longer-term view. You see, if we think we are saved by good works, then if we've tried to live a good life and trouble comes we think God hasn't kept his side of the deal and we turn on him; or even if we understand that we aren't saved by good works, but still think that in some way he owes us one because we've been good, we can think he's unjust to allow hardship to come our way.

But if we realize that salvation is all of Jesus' grace to us and we don't deserve anything good from his hands, but he died and rose from the dead to lavish his free and undeserved grace on us anyway, then we won't view him as being unjust or unfair at all. And if we realize that this life is not all there is, but he calls us to live for the long-term, for eternity, then rather than turn and fall away in the time of trial we will cling to him even more closely.

Because that, after all, is the whole reason the writer is warning them in the first place.

Don't go near the cliff edge

If you were to ask me, 'what do you miss most about England?', I'd tell you it's the sea. I grew up by the sea and however big the waves get on the Lake, they're a pale imitation of the real thing. And one of my favourite places in England is walking the South West Coastal footpath around Cornwall, where this magnificent coastline falls away into the sea below.

And every now and again if you walk it, you'll come across a sign that says something like 'Danger, coastal erosion: Beware of cliff edge'. Now, why do you

think the landowners put those signs up? Do you think it's so that we can get as close to the edge as we can, look over it and think, well I don't think it's such a big drop, or that we stand a little bit back from the edge and watch someone else fall over the edge and think 'ah they can't have been English or they would have read the sign, must have been a Frenchman, so that's ok.' Is that why they put the sign up?

No. Warning signs are there not to be debated over but to keep us from falling off the cliff edge. They're there to say, 'don't risk it, don't go near the edge, stay on the path.' And that is why the writer has used the terms that he's used when he describes the person who could fall away. Because you're left thinking, 'who does he mean: does he mean real, genuine Christians can fall away? Could I be included in that?' But he doesn't spell it out like that, does he? Instead, he simply leaves us as a warning sign, so that whoever reads it, whoever is walking near the cliff edge can see it and get back on the path. And the warning becomes the very thing God uses to keep you on the path, and keep you from going over the edge: hey, you don't want to risk it, do you? Steer clear,

You see, ultimately, he hasn't written this for us to debate over, he's written it for us to listen to and obey. And so the warning passages, like this one, are like a safety rail. They are what God uses to keep his children from throwing themselves off cliff tops.

And so having warned them so bluntly in v4-8, the writer's tone changes dramatically in v9: 'Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation.'

Running for the finishing line

Now, if you were eagle-eyed you'll have noticed that when he talked about those who might fall away, who have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, he always spoke in the 3rd person. He didn't say 'and if *you* do this then you're in big trouble'. He says, 'if *someone* were to behave like this then…' but then he says in v9, 'but *you*, well, in your case we feel sure of better things.'

Whilst he's genuinely concerned for them, he's also got this deep, underlying confidence about them. He knows that their lives have already shown evidence of having been transformed by the Spirit of God: their good works show that, their serving of others shows that, and the fact that it's all been motivated by a love for God's name rather than a desire to make a name for themselves, shows that. And that means that he is as certain as he can be that these guys are the real deal, so they *will* heed the warning signs. To quote Paul in Philippians (Phil 1:6), he's confident that the God 'who has begun a good work in [them] will bring it to completion.' He's confident, with Paul, that 'neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [them] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38-9).

You see, ultimately if you're a Christian, your confidence does not rest in yourself but in the faithful God who is at work in your life. Now, you know that work isn't finished yet, you know it's still a work in progress. But he's started it and he's going to finish it. And so the writer can say that his earnest desire for them is that, rather than them falling away, v11, 'each one of you show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end' – that rather than quit the race, they keep on running for the finish line – in the full assurance that God has got his strong and safe hand upon them. That's his desire for them, that rather than them slink into the crèche and suck on their milk bottles, they'll keep on running to the end, v12, 'so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.'

Now, because we can't find a pitch to play on during the winter, the Men's Sports hasn't met to play rugby for weeks. And I'm getting fat and my exercise tolerance is dropping. I'm becoming sluggish, no push. And the writer's saying 'hey, don't be like that. Don't become a couch potato. Don't check out, don't drift away, but keep trusting God, even when life is hard and things aren't making sense, and you will be like those who inherit the promises. God hasn't left you, he's not overlooking you. You may not hear applause down here, in this life, and the reward may lie ahead, but it is coming, so live for the applause of the only one who really matters and keep running, in his strength, for the finishing line.