

HEBREWS 10:23

THE YEAR OF HOLDING FIRM

Well, I'm sure you've noticed; Christianity is in decline in the Western World. It's been in decline for a few decades. According to Australian census data, affiliation with Christianity in Australia, that's people who identify with the Christian faith in some way, who subscribe to some kind of vague Christian belief, has plummeted from 88% of our population in 1966 to just 47% in 2020. And this decline in Christian belief within the general population is mirrored in church attendance. Less people attend church in Australia today than they did in the past. Chances are, less people are attending YOUR church than they did in the past. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, but this is the undeniable general trend within the Western world. We are witnessing a great falling away from the faith.

And this falling away has a very personal face to it. I think back to my early days as a Christian, when I first placed my faith in Christ at a youth group at St Phillip's Anglican Church, Eastwood. And I think back to many close friends in that youth group who were so strong in the faith, who were on fire for Jesus, some of them leading Bible Studies and teaching Sunday School and evangelising their own friends and family, but in the years since, many of them have completely left the faith. They are far from God. Some of them no longer even believe anymore.

In fact, I would guess that well over half, possibly 70 or 75% of my friends from youth group days, people who were once on fire for Jesus, now no longer profess to be Christians.

It's alarming. It's disturbing. But it's probably been your experience too. Most of you can think of people who were once strong in the faith but who have since drifted away. They no longer attend church and many of them no longer even believe.

And what I want to say to you today, and what the writer to the Hebrews is saying to us, not only in today's key verse, but throughout the entire letter, is "It can happen to anyone; so take care!".

In verse 23 he says, **"Let us hold unswervingly** (without turning aside, without turning back, without drifting off course) **let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."**

This is a constant theme throughout the whole book of Hebrews.

In chapter 6 verses 4-6, the writer speaks of this very tragedy of people who were once strong in the faith and who have now fallen away. He writes:



"It is impossible for those 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. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

Make no mistake, the people being spoken of here were not mere hangers on. They were active Christians. They had **been enlightened**. They had **tasted the heavenly gift**. They had **shared in the Holy Spirit**. They had **tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age**. Yet, despite all this, they had **fallen away**.

You see? It can happen to anyone! It can even happen to you, if you're not careful.

How does it happen? How is it possible that someone can start off so well and then completely fall away?

Throughout this letter to the Hebrews, the writer identifies three factors that can lead people to chuck in their faith. Let me mention them very briefly:



1. The first one is **sin**. Heb 12:1 says, **“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”** Be assured of this. Sin may start small, but it will quickly gain a foothold and it will eat away at your faith. This was certainly the case with a number of my friends. They began to live a lifestyle that was contrary to God's will and in the end, they had to choose between the two and they discarded their faith and chose sin. Beware! This verse exhorts us to **throw off the sin that so easily entangles**. Get rid of it! Because it will destroy your faith if you don't.

2. The second contributing factor that can lead to a loss of faith is **hardship**. In that same passage, in Hebrews chapter 12, the writer speaks of the persecution and hardship faced by these early Christians and he exhorts them, in verse 3,



“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” And a few verses later he exhorts them to **“Endure hardship!” (v.7)**. Hardship can certainly cause some people to grow weary and lose heart. It was certainly the case with some of my friends. Tough things happened to them and they lost heart. They couldn't reconcile their hard circumstances with a God who supposedly loves them. And they just gave up. They handed in their membership card. They said, **“I'm done. I can't believe anymore.”**

Maybe you know people like that. People who have had painful things happen to them, and now struggle to believe. Maybe, I'm actually describing you. Maybe you're only just hanging on by your fingernails at the moment, questioning why God has allowed these painful things to happen to you or to those you love. . Something that has hit you hard and stopped you in your tracks and now you're wondering where God is in all of this.

What's to be done? What is the answer?

The writer to the Hebrews gives us the answer. In the same verses I just read to you. In chapter 12: 1-3 he says,



“... and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

What’s the answer? How can we keep these hardships from derailing our faith? **Look to Jesus.** Fix our eyes on HIM and NOT on our own circumstances. Remember that Christ suffered and died for your sins, to bring you back to God. Remember that he endured more suffering for you than you will ever endure yourself. If you are struggling with hardship and questioning God’s love, there can be no greater evidence of God’s love for you than the sacrifice of Christ to forgive you and save you.

Fix your eyes on the Saviour, who never, by the way, promised us a carefree life, who, in fact, warned us that we would experience hardship in this life, but who DID promise to be with us always, to the very end of the age. Like Peter, after he stepped out of the boat, when the waves seem overwhelming, we need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

3. A MORE SUBTLE THREAT

But there is another, more subtle threat to our faith that the writer to the Hebrews warns us about, and we need to go back to our key verse again for this.



In **Hebrews 10:23**, he exhorts us to **“Hold unswervingly to the hope that we profess”** – that is, the hope of salvation and a place in God’s eternal kingdom. But notice this word, **“unswervingly”**. The Greek word used here means to wander off-course, to drift slightly off-line. He is not just talking here about people who completely throw their faith away, who stop in their tracks and turn around and head back in the opposite direction, who do a u-turn and walk away. He is also talking about those who seemingly continue on in the Christian faith, but who start to veer off-course. Who swerve off-centre. Who lose their central focus.

In saying this, the writer was addressing a very specific and serious situation in the first century, and it’s helpful for us to understand the historical context here. Some 1st century Christians had begun to assimilate some of their old beliefs and sacrificial practices back into their Christian faith. They had stopped trusting in Christ alone for their salvation and had become convinced by false teachers of their need to offer sacrifices and adhere to Jewish rituals in order to be forgiven. Their faith in Christ had been diluted, and they had begun to trust in their own man-made efforts to achieve salvation.

And note, please, these were people who were still in the congregation. They had not fallen away. They had not lost their faith and walked away. They were still turning up to church week by week. But their faith in Jesus was now compromised. They had begun so well, but now they were starting to trust in their own religious works and self-righteousness again.

Am I talking to anyone like that today? A stalwart of the church. A regular attender. A faithful church member and possibly even an active participant on ministry teams and parish council? On Sundays you turn up faithfully, you recite the liturgy and sing the songs, but perhaps, in subtle ways you are like these first century Christians. Still clinging to the false belief that your good service, your religious activity, can make you acceptable to God and secure your salvation.

What does the writer to the Hebrews say about this? It's right there in our key verse today, in verse 23:



**“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful.”
(10:23)**

“Let us hold unswervingly [without getting off track] **to the hope we profess** [the hope of salvation] **for he** [that is Christ our Saviour] **he who promised** [promised what? Promised to forgive our sins and save us!] **he who promised is faithful** [he will do it! You can trust him for your salvation. Jesus, and only Jesus, can save you, and he will do it if you trust him and him alone.]”

What are you trusting? Who are you trusting? Are you trusting your own record of religious service and good works to somehow impress God and open the door of heaven for you? It might not be as blatant as that. You may have swerved only very slightly off-centre. It may be a very subtle attitude that has crept in over the years. Yes, Jesus is my Saviour, but surely I didn't take much saving because I'm such a good, religious person.

Think again. Unless Christ went to the cross for you, you were destined to be separated from God forever. So put aside those subtle thoughts of self-righteousness, adjust your attitude, adjust your steering wheel, come back to the centre line, come back to the cross, and place your whole trust in Christ and Christ alone.

CONCLUSION

Today's message is entitled “The Year of Holding Firm”. Holding firm to our faith. To the central truth of our faith: to Jesus himself. Not swerving off centre. Not getting off track. Not trusting in anything or anyone else.

And did you notice that for all three threats to our faith that the writer to the Hebrews addresses – the sin that so easily entangles, the hardships that can cause us to chuck the towel in and the subtle ways we can start trusting in things other than Jesus – in all three cases, the antidote, the thing we are exhorted to do, is exactly the same: fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

May 2022 be a year when you reinstitute things that you may have let slip in recent times, so that you do not become a statistic too.

May it be a year when you recommit to regular daily Bible reading ... and daily prayer ... and more regular attendance at church services and Bible study groups.

May this be a year when you guard your life closely to ensure that the sinuous tendrils of sin do not choke the life out of your faith ...

May it be a year when **hold firm** as you fix your eyes on Jesus and increasingly learn to trust in him and him alone, through whatever life may dish up to you.

Amen.