

STAND STRONG WITH JESUS, YOU'LL BE GLAD YOU DID
Looking at the Message of Hebrews
#1 God Has Spoken to Us Through Jesus
Hebrews 1:1-4

It's troubling to think about Christians who fall away from their faith, and they either forget about their commitment and profession of faith to Jesus, or they very publicly renounce their faith. I've known Christians through the years personally who upon leaving the church also say that they no longer believe that God is real or that sin or eternal life are things to worry about. Some people will say, "Well, then they must not have ever really believed in the first place," but most of those I know personally would say, no, they once truly believed, but now they no longer do. And they are intentionally, purposefully turning away from God and the church, having changed their mind about him.

I believe them. I look at it kind of like a marriage that fails. When a couple first gets together and gets married, I believe that 99.9 percent of them are truly in love with one another, and they never dream that THEIR marriage will end in divorce. And then it does. Does that mean they never loved each other to begin with? No, I don't believe that. They did love each other, and they did mean their marriage vows when they said them at the time. But then they change their mind, choosing not to love their spouse anymore, and they walk away from their marriage vows. Now, I know that there are different circumstances out there that lead to divorce: Maybe a spouse is abusive, or their spouse steps out on their marriage sexually, and other things happen that might warrant a divorce that I'm not even thinking of...but probably most people who leave their marriage say something along the lines like, "I just don't love him anymore" or "I've fallen out of love with her." Many followers of Jesus are like that: they once loved Jesus, but now they've simply fallen out of love with him and his church.

It's bad enough when the average Christian renounces his or her faith, but it hurts even more when Christian leaders renounce their faith. When I say "renounce their faith," I'm not talking about a leader who has fallen into some sin or scandal—like what has happened to the Christian apologist and defender of the faith, Ravi Zacharias. He passed away last May (5/21/20), and then it was very publicly revealed that he was involved with multiple instances of sexual sin. That's horrible, and he's dead now, so we don't know how he would have responded to all of this public revelation. Many leaders who have sinned publicly repent of their sin and work with counselors to get their life back on track with the Lord's expectations. But they don't renounce their faith.

Even though I know it has happened all along, it seems like there has been a spate of Christian influencers and leaders as of late who are renouncing their faith in Jesus Christ, the most recent person being Paul Maxwell (April 2021), a popular blogger with John Piper's "Desiring God" podcast. He's also a Christian author and a former philosophy professor at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and Paul Maxwell says he's never felt happier. He tearfully told his Instagram followers that he's "not a Christian anymore" and he said, "I love you guys, and I love all the support and friendships I've built here [Referring to Instagram]." Maxwell went on to say, "I think it's important to say that I'm just not a Christian anymore, and it feels really good. I'm really happy...I'm really happy," he repeated. To be honest with you, on the video where he says all this, he didn't look happy; but maybe that's how he expresses himself, cause I don't really know him.

I bring all this up because today we begin a new message series from the Book of Hebrews which I've entitled **STAND STRONG WITH JESUS, YOU'LL BE GLAD YOU DID -- Looking at the Message of Hebrews**. We're going to study this entire book in the months ahead. It's a book that addresses the issue of Christians who are tempted to fall away from the faith. Now, some Christians don't believe that it's possible to fall away from one's faith, because they believe that once a person is saved, then they're always saved, no matter what. But the New Testament book of Hebrews says otherwise. It is written precisely to remind Christians why they shouldn't forfeit their faith in Jesus to turn back again to other philosophies and pagan religions that won't do them any good when all is said and done. Furthermore, the book of Hebrews was written to show Christians how they CAN stay strong in their faith in Christ.

The fact that apparent believers actually do fall away from Christ, and that the possibility of falling away from Jesus is a very real and present danger for any of us, is confirmed by other writings in the New Testament as well. Not only does the letter to the Hebrews admit this possibility, but the writings of the Apostle Paul confirm it. Paul speaks of at least four different one-time believers who in one respect or another fell away from faith in Jesus. The four are Hymenaeus, Alexander, Demas and Philetus. The Apostle Peter encourages Christians to stay strong in their faith and to hold onto Jesus as their Savior when in 2 Peter 2:20-21 he writes, *If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred*

command that was passed on to them. He's speaking on the importance of not turning your back on Jesus.

And more than that, we know the heartache of having children, some of whom professed faith in Christ and were baptized, but now they do not continue to follow Christ. Recent studies by the Barna Group and others suggest that as many as 75% of children brought up in evangelical churches fall away from their Christian faith after high school. This is no small problem the book of Hebrews addresses. Falling away from the faith is a very real danger, especially for our children, and even for our grandchildren. The Book of Hebrews addresses how we can prevent ourselves from falling away, and no doubt provides wisdom for how we can encourage others who are contemplating falling away. Especially in this time of the Covid-19 Pandemic there are perhaps many people drifting away from Jesus because of their absences from the fellowship of believers in the church.

Since we're going to be taking a number of weeks working our way through the message of Hebrews on Sunday mornings, let me share a little bit about the Book of Hebrews. As its title suggests it was written to Jewish Christians, or Hebrews, most likely Jews who lived in Judea, and in Jerusalem who had experienced decades of persecution on account of their faith in Jesus as Messiah. The persecution against believers there had broken out with the martyrdom of Stephen in about AD 37, and had probably continued nearly 30 years thereafter, until this book was written in about 65 A.D. or so. By this time, believers in Judea and Jerusalem had been disowned by their own Jewish families on many occasions, for decades, had often been unemployed perhaps because they were counted as unclean, and were treated as though they were pagans or Gentiles.

And the persecution had not let up. If it had been temporary, perhaps they would not now be contemplating a return to Judaism. The thinking among them had now become "maybe it wouldn't be so bad to just go back and worship God as Jews always have by offering sacrifices in the temple, rather than following Christ." Because it appeared that in this life their suffering for Christ was never going to let up, they were growing weary of it, and you can understand why. Just think about how we feel today when people misunderstand what our faith and intentions are really all about. I was in a Facebook conversation with a gentleman just this week who accused Christians of having a belief system that was divisive, racist, and snobbish in that it looked down on others according to him. I shared with him that it wasn't true. That Christianity believes ALL are sinners in need of a saving God. That John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the WORLD that he sent his one and only Son, that WHOEVER believes in him shall

not perish but have eternal life. That in Acts 2 the very first people who became the Christian church were from different nations and races of people, and that in the church all who were baptized were UNITED through Jesus. He still wouldn't believe me that that's what Christians believe. And then he told me that I had "zero say about anything, and that I should just keep quiet." He didn't even know me. It can become tiring to have people look down on you because they misunderstand your faith. That's how it was for these Hebrew Christians. And, so, the writer of Hebrews puts his pen to papyrus, and writes a letter to encourage followers of Jesus to stay strong in their faith and not walk away from Christ and the church.

As the author of Hebrews starts out his message, he wants his readers to know without a shadow of doubt that He has spoken his authoritative message of salvation through Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-2). In Hebrews 1:1-2, this is what we read: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.* You might at first wonder, "What's the big deal about that?" But it is really a big deal. One of the main themes of Hebrews concerns the fact that God shifted away from his old way of revealing himself. Now he reveals himself in a new way. The same God who spoke through prophets in the past now speaks decisively in Jesus his Son. God's revelation in former times in the Old Testament points forward to what has now been revealed in the person and work of Jesus.

Anne Graham Lotz, in her book "Just Give Me Jesus," begins her introduction telling the story of Andrew Morton who several years ago wrote a biography of Diana, Princess of Wales. In his publicity tour for the book, he said his information was based on conversations he had with some of her closest friends. His book sold thousands of copies. Well, later after Lady Diana's tragic death in a car accident in Paris, Andrew Morton's book was re-released. This time he revealed that the source of his information had not really been intimate friends of Diana's, but Diana herself. He then produced hours of taped conversations with the princess as proof. And his book sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

So, think about this. It made an enormous difference to the reading public to discover that the book was not hearsay but what Diana had said about herself. Diana was the source of the book's message. Now think about what God has done in Jesus. God has had many spokesmen through history, and they have revealed God's will for His people faithfully, but they were only instruments through whom God spoke. When Jesus came into history, God was doing something different.

He was no longer just using the bodies and minds of men to convey His Word. He was Himself in a body and mind speaking directly to humanity. It was no longer just, “Thus saith the Lord,” but “I say unto you.” Jesus was God speaking to us, and not just another person God was using to convey His Word. HE was the Word. HE was the greatest revelation of God because He was God revealing Himself. His revelation is superior to all that had gone before Him because He was superior to all that had gone before Him. He was superior to everyone and everything, and that point is the major message of the whole book of Hebrews. Walk away from the prophets of old if you want to do that—though that’s not recommended—but don’t walk away from Jesus, because he is God in the flesh. If you walk away from Jesus, you are walking away from God. Since the time when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden when their sin separated them from God, people had never been closer to God. Jesus is God, and that’s why we need to stand with him.

And then the author of Hebrews shares why Jesus is so authoritative to speak God’s message by listing 7 attributes of who Jesus is that make him so special. These seven qualities of Jesus are qualities that apply to Christ alone. If you ever want to know whether or not a religion is Christian, find out if they believe these truths about Jesus. Hebrews 1:2-4 says: *In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.* ³ *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.* ⁴ *So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.* This is why we should keep our eyes on Jesus. Seven characteristics of Jesus are mentioned in Hebrews 1:2-4.

First, Jesus is heir of all things. Not “error” as in something that’s wrong. Heir, as in someone who inherits an estate, because of their connection to the owner. Inheritance naturally connects to sonship, but in this case it refers to the Messianic authority God gave the Son in his resurrection and exaltation. Jesus is the legitimate Son of God who takes away the sins of the world and gives us eternal life in the presence of God. This is why he has the authority to direct our life and to judge us in the Final Judgement.

Second, Jesus is the Creator of the universe. In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. God speaks his message of salvation through Jesus now, but back at the beginning of creation, Jesus spoke it into existence. Third, Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory. God’s glory shines forth in Jesus, and the

imprint of God's essence is seen in him. These characteristics reveal that Jesus is eternal, both back in time and forward in the future.

Fourth, he is the exact representation of God's being. Jesus once said "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." He is the exact representation of God in the sense that he is God, and nothing therefore that is in God is devoid in Jesus. God is Jesus, and Jesus is God. Number five, Jesus sustains all things by his powerful word. The Son upholds the universe and carries it forward to its God-ordained purpose. The Son's shared authority in fulfilling God's intent for creation mirrors God's sovereign authority in creating: He spoke, and it was done.

Sixth, Jesus provides purification for sins. We sometimes sing that old hymn, "What can take away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." Jesus' purpose for coming to this earth was to provide the means for our sins to be forgiven. Praise God, he provides the perfect forgiveness and purification we need in order to live in the direct presence of God without being ultimately destroyed. And, seventh, Jesus sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Jesus was mistreated by people on earth, but he was vindicated when he was exalted to the right hand of God. The symbolism of "right hand" refers to his authority, power and strength. Jesus is special because he possesses all seven of these characteristics that apply to God alone and only to God.

Not only should Jesus be followed because he spoke the message of God, but he should also be followed because of what his characteristics reveal about him. Only God has this kind of authority. The writer of Hebrews wants us to be in awe at how God has spoken to us in these last days. You gonna blow Him off? I hope not, because He's going to be in charge of your eternal destiny! This is who Jesus is.

As we think about the message of Hebrews, which is summed up in its opening paragraph, I just want to mention a couple points of application that we can act on. I think one way for us to apply these opening words is to realize that we should be gracious and gentle toward those who walk away from God (Ephesians 6:11-12). Sometimes we think that our enemy is the person who is against us, but really, our enemy is Satan. Ephesians 6:11-12 states, *Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.* ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* In other words, don't be judgmental and angry toward those who fall away from their faith, but do your best to help them, understanding that they are not our enemy, the devil is.

This is how the author of Hebrews is approaching his readers who are struggling to stick with their faith. But another point of application to our life from these opening words of Hebrews is to take opportunities to examine ourselves and our own faith lest we fall away (Luke 22:54-62). Sometimes we think to ourselves that we would NEVER renounce our faith in God. And it might truly seem that way right now. But it can happen to anyone. Remember Peter on the night when Jesus was betrayed by Judas, and the sham trials were going on? Three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. Three times! If it can happen to him, it can happen to anyone. So, we need to be diligent and intentional about staying close to the Lord, paying attention to our faith, and serving God consistently.

About a half-century ago a hit movie was in the theaters called “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” Robert Redford and Paul Newman played outlaws who were constantly eluding law enforcement. But after one train holdup a different posse began chasing them, constantly outwitting them. And in three successive scenes Butch and Sundance kept asking each other, “who are those guys.” It’s one of the classic movie lines: “who are those guys?” That’s kinda like what the writer of Hebrews is doing for us. He’s wanting us to see who Jesus was, what he did, and then to identify ourselves with him so that we will serve him wholeheartedly. The Hebrews author wants us to wonder for ourselves “how could I even think about walking away from Jesus only to return to my former way of life and thinking?”

When a person rejects the faith, God's heart is grieved; and if we share His perspective, our hearts will grieve as well. Why? Because, as Peter shares with us in 2 Peter 3:9, *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* If we’re going to remain strong in our faith, we must be absolutely clear about who Jesus is. The author of Hebrews makes that happen, assuring us that Jesus is the Savior and an excellent spiritual guide. We do well to follow him and not give up.

Back in the 1920s, a preacher named James Allan Francis, wrote these well-known words: “He was born in an obscure village. The child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where he worked in a carpenter shop, until he was thirty.

He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his

enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind's progress. All the armies that have ever marched. All the navies that have ever sailed. All the parliaments that have ever sat. All the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of mankind on earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.”

God has spoken to us through Jesus; let's stand strong with him, we'll be glad we did.