Hebrews 6:4-6 *Glad You Asked: Persevere*

***Is it Well with his Soul?***One of the most famous and inspiring hymn origination stories is the one behind the hymn “It is Well.” Horatio Spafford was a wealthy and successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago in the 1860s. He was a member of a prominent Presbyterian Church and a significant financial supporter of the evangelist D.L. Moody. But then, a series of calamities came his way. First, he experienced the tragic death of his only son. Then the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 wiped out a good many of his real estate holdings and significantly damaged his financial portfolio. Sensing a need for some time away, he decided he and his family would accompany Moody and his music associate, Ira Sankey, on an evangelistic crusade in England.

When the time came to depart, however, he was detained by some urgent business, so he put his wife and four daughters on the ship *S.S. Ville du Harve,* promising to join them as soon as he could. During the crossing, however, the *Villle du Harve* was struck by another ship and sank, with 226 people losing their life. It has been called the most famous modern shipwreck prior to the *Titanic*.

Spafford’s wife, Anna, survived. She sent him a telegram that began: “Saved alone…” All four daughters had perished. The story goes that Spafford quickly got on another ship to join his wife; and when the boat reached the approximate spot of the tragedy, **he began to write these words:**

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

The hymn-writer Philip Bliss soon wrote a melody for the words, and in 1876 Bliss and Sankey published the song in a hymnal. It became immediately popular and has remained in use within the church for nearly 150 years now.

It is a beautiful song and a powerful testament to God’s grace in the midst of tragedy. I’m guessing many of you have heard the story of how that hymn was written before.

What many do not know, however, is the rest of the story. Because the last decade and a half of Horatio Spafford’s life is not nearly so inspiring. As it happened, he and Anna soon left their Presbyterian Church, basically ex-communicating themselves. They started what can only be described as a cult; with followers called Spafforites or Overcomers. Among other things, they became radical universalists who did not believe in hell, made many false predictions of the date of Christ’s second coming, and took extreme control of the personal life of their followers. They did away with marriage and assigned couples within the group to new pairings. Anna openly and flagrantly committed adultery claiming that it was evidence of her higher spirituality. They took children away from parents and assigned them to live with single women within the community.

Eventually—perhaps fleeing creditors, supposedly to prepare for Christ’s return—they moved their whole operation to Jerusalem and started an American Colony. There, in 1888, just a few days shy of his 60th birthday, Horatio Spafford died.

It’s a sad, disturbing story. It takes a lot of the shine off a hymn that has been an encouragement to millions over the year. It makes you wonder, was it ever really well with Horatio Spafford’s soul?

***Modern Examples***Today is our final week in a series we have been calling “Glad You Asked”. A couple of months ago we started encouraging you to submit questions about God, the Bible, and Christianity. Then we selected representative questions from what came in and have attempted to give Biblical answers. And let me tell you, the question for this week is a doozy. Here’s how it was phrased **when it was submitted**:

Recently there have been prominent people in the Christian community like Joshua Harris and Marty Sampson of Hillsong United who have announced they have fallen away from Christianity. As Calvinists we believe in the Preservation of the Saints; or “once saved, always saved.” These people must have truly believed at one time, right? Or at least they thought they did? The root of my question is this: how can I be assured of my salvation?

This is a doozy of a question, and I chose to tackle it because it brings up something I have been struggling with this past summer. There are two people named in this question, and it caused quite a stir when they publicly announced that they were walking away from their faith.

I didn’t know the name of Marty Sampson, but I know Hillsong United. That’s a group from Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia that has had a huge impact on the songs sung in the Evangelical Church. In early August, Sampson, one of the original members of the group, posted a now deleted Instagram announcement that began: “Time for some real talk. I’m genuinely losing my faith, and it doesn’t bother me.”

This came on the heels of an announcement that felt much more personal to me. Joshua Harris was a pastor at a church in Maryland that wrote several of the songs that we sing here at Hope, including “Behold our God” and “All I have is Christ” (Harris didn’t write the songs, but they came from a church he pastored). He was also an author. I used his book “Stop Dating the Church” extensively when I did a series of sermons called “I Heart Church” and his book “Dug Down Deep” has been the key textbook I have used for the Digging Deeper course I have been teaching for the past 10 years or so. Even though he’s a couple years younger than me, I have looked to Harris as a sort of “mentor at a distance” and when I was researching a sermon I would often check to see if he had any resources on the text.

So it was devastating to me in late July when he announced that he was separating from his wife, and then shortly after released a statement saying:

“I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is “deconstruction,” the biblical phrase is “falling away.” By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.”

I’m not going to make this sermon about Marty Samson or Joshua Harris. I don’t know details about what is going on in their hearts, and I don’t know how their stories are going to end, either.

But they are examples of something we also see in Horatio Spafford: what are we to make of it when someone who appears to be a shining example of faith walks away from Jesus? We see similar things when a Christian leader has a moral failing—which can also be devastating--but in those cases the person presumably still believes in Jesus, they’ve just messed up. This feels different, somehow. What are we supposed to make of it when someone who had such a vibrant testimony for Jesus just stops being a Christian?

And this doesn’t just happen to people in leadership positions: what about that person you know who once seemed so on fire for Jesus, but now doesn’t seem to give God or the church a second thought?

***Truth Remains True***Before going on, let me address a question this raises for me, but which wasn’t in the original question: If a songwriter or author falls away, what should we do with the things they have written? In other words, even though I know about the final years of Spafford’s life, I still sing “It is Well”. Is that appropriate? What about Harris’s books?

It’s a tough question, and maybe now that you know the rest of the story you won’t be comfortable singing that song anymore. But I found this blog post by a man named Jack Lee, talking about Spafford, to be helpful:

Obviously, each situation is different and we should take each with a case by case basis. But, the great thing about believing in objective truth is that it’s objective. It’s not dependent on a man to be true. It’s dependent on God. The songs don’t change their lyrics even if their authors change their minds. Art stands on its own, as it should. It also highlights how God continues to redeem and create beauty out of our ugliness.

I don’t know if Spafford should be a hero of the faith or just a guy who wrote a great hymn. Regardless, that hymn has touched and encouraged millions enduring a trial, myself included. Those that have been encouraged need to remember that that glory and work belongs to God, not Spafford. …that Spafford was somewhat of a spiritual nut doesn’t change how that hymn has affected you or me. It just provides a little insight into how God uses truth to redeem and transform. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/chorusinthechaos/the-disturbing-past-behind-the-author-of-it-is-well-with-my-soul/>

Truth remains true, regardless of the actions or ideas of people after they write those words. I’ll keep singing “It is Well”, and I think it will continue to help me worship God.

In the same way, I don’t regret asking people to read Harris’s book or quoting from him in my sermons. I believed those words were a good description of God when I read them, and I don’t think they are any less true today. But, at the same time, given the controversy currently surrounding him, I probably won’t be assigning his book any longer unless something changes in his public position with regards to Jesus.

***Preservation and Perseverance***Now, let’s turn to the question that was submitted. The heart of the question—or, as it says, the root of the question—is about us. It’s one thing to speculate about other people who make shipwreck of their faith; but when we see it happen to others, it should really make us look at ourselves. How do we know that we are really saved? What kind of assurance can we have that we will stay faithful to Jesus?

The questioner correctly connects this question to an important hallmark of our faith. We are a Reformed Church, which means we have a Calvinist theology. And one of the so-called “five points of Calvinism” is the doctrine of the Preservation of the Saints; often summarized, as it says, by the saying “once saved, always saved.”

**Preservation** gets at the idea that God will hold onto us. He will preserve us. We believe that God is a BIG God, the most powerful Being in the universe. So if He wants us, if He claims us, then He’s not going to let us go. As Jesus says in the book of John, no one can snatch us out of His hand (John 10:28). If someone is a true believer in Jesus Christ, then he or she can have full assurance that God will preserve them to the end.

But this doctrine is also sometimes referred to as the **Perseverance** of the Saints. It’s the same doctrine, but the word perseverance gets at the idea that we must hold onto God. To persevere means to hang in there. Some people, as Jesus says in Matthew 7, are going to come to the day of judgment believing they were following Him only to be told that the Lord never knew them (Matthew 7:23). And so the saying “once saved always saved” also means that only those who truly belong to Jesus will persevere to the end.

Two words, and they seem to be saying opposite things: We must persevere in our faith, and God will preserve us in our faith. We must hold on to God; God will assuredly hold on to us. They seem to be saying different things, but both are true.

The part of the Bible where we see these two ideas most closely together—really, not as two ideas but as one idea—is the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a letter in the Bible (we’re not sure who wrote it) written to a group of people (we’re not sure where they were) who were under intense pressure because of their faith. In fact, they were under so much pressure—persecution and marginalization and so on—that they were tempted to just give up on Jesus and walk away. And so, the letter has two aims: to urge them to hang in there in faith (that is, to persevere); and to assure them that Jesus is strong enough to hold onto them (that is, the promise that God will preserve them.)

This is a big, complicated doctrine—and Hebrews is a long and pretty complex book—but what I’d like to do is a quick survey of the book to show you those two things: perseverance and preservation. My aim is twofold: 1) warn you of the danger of drifting away and making shipwreck of your faith and 2) to assure that Jesus is a solid anchor and that those who put their faith in Him are eternally secure.

***The Danger of Drifting***First, **a warning against drifting**. There is a danger, a natural inclination in the human soul, to move away from God. We see that this was the problem in the Hebrews church in **chapter 2, verse 1:**

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

The imagery here is nautical, and we’ll see that several more times in Hebrews. For me, it helps to picture my Christian faith as a kind of boat. And this boat is in river. And our goal—the freshest, coolest, purest waters—if you will—are found upstream. The waters of hope and love and joy in Jesus are most cleanly experienced near the source of this river.

But downstream, where this river is constantly flowing, lies an ocean of selfishness. Downstream is an ocean of living for yourself, making your own rules, short-term thinking, and so on.

In this analogy, then, the idea is for our boat of faith to be constantly moving upstream, closer and closer to the source of our hope and joy and life in Christ. But the constant flow, the pressure, the general direction this world and our own sinful souls want to carry us, is downstream. Towards sinfulness, towards selfishness, away from God.

And the point is: unless we are paying attention and actively working against us, we will drift. The natural tendency is always downstream, away from God. And if we think that we can just coast, that we can live on past decisions to live for Jesus or things we heard at an earlier age but which we are no longer paying attention to, then we are deceiving ourselves. We will be drifting away from God.

We see a similar **idea in 3:6:**

**6**But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

You can think of a rope, running upstream. This rope is tethered to Jesus, like an anchor (we’ll see language to that effect in just bit). This rope will help us move upstream towards Jesus—but we must hold firmly to it. We must persevere. Hang on. **Verses 12-14**:

**12**See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. **13**But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. **14**We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

There it is again. Our natural tendency is to drift. We tend towards a sinful, unbelieving heart. We can be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. And in our conversations and life together we are just as likely to talk about the weather or the success or failure of our favorite sports teams as we are about the condition of our souls. But, the Scripture says, we must encourage one another. We must help one another to “hold…firmly” to what we believe about God.

Skip ahead a bit more, to **Hebrews 10:23-25**:

**23**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. **24**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **25**not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

We have this idea, sometimes, that hope is a kind of automatic thing. It just sort of happened to you, and it stays with you. But the writer says, on the contrary, that hope is something we are constantly drifting away from. Keeping hope is a very active thing. We must hold unswervingly to it.

And the same goes with love and good works. When we drift, we drift away from love. If we are just sitting there, then we are going to drift away from good deeds. So we must constantly be encouraging one another and spurring one another on, upstream, towards the things of Jesus.

One more verse about the importance of persevering, though they are all over this book. **Hebrews 6:4-6** is probably the most sobering of all:

**4**It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, **5**who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age **6**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.

These are the verses that appear to speak most directly to the examples we looked at in the beginning of the sermon, and they are alarming. But this isn’t just about making a post to social media where you renounce your faith; this is about what happens when you don’t stop drifting (2:1); when you don’t hold firmly to your confidence in Christ (3:6); when you forsake the assembling with other believers and encouraging one another (10:25). You are going to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and fall away from the living God (3:12-14).

In other words—even though you may have had your eyes opened to the gospel of Jesus, and you may have said yes to the offer of heaven, and you may even have shown evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in your life—if you allow yourself to drift down the river of sin with no zealous pursuit of holiness and growth in grace, there will come a "point of no return." This is the great folly of those who profess to be Christians but live a carnal life thinking that they will clean things up in their old age.

Here’s an example that John Piper uses—sticking with the river analogy but changing it slightly. Imagine there is a vulture which spots the corpse of an animal on a big hunk of ice which is floating down the river toward Niagara Falls. The vulture flies to the ice, lands, and begins to eat. He watches the approach of the falls and hears the warnings of danger, but tells himself that he still has time. Besides, he is a bird, and he has wings. He is destined for the sky. So he believes he can eat all he wants and then, at the last moment, flap his wings and fly. But when that moment comes, as the vulture finishes his feast and attempts to fly, he may find that his talons have frozen in the ice and he is dragged over the falls to his destruction. Piper writes:

And so it will be with people who have heard the warnings of Scripture to abandon their worldly lusts and pursue holiness, but who say, "I have wings, I am a Christian. I can fly anytime I want to." The day will come when they may try and will not be able to repent because they are so hardened and addicted to the world they can't even feel one genuine spiritual affection (12:17). <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-doctrine-of-perseverance-the-future-of-a-fruitless-field>

This is the warning against drifting. This is the Biblical call to persevere. To hold fast to the truth we profess in Christ. To be active in pursing holiness. To participate in the life of the fellowship of faith and stir one another in clinging to Jesus.

We can’t just sit still in our faith. Either we are pressing upstream into our confidence and hope in Jesus; or we are drifting downstream to our destruction.

***The Anchor for Our Souls***So that’s the warning for us to persevere. And it’s in Scripture for good reason. But there is also a promise in the book of Hebrews, and it is a huge promise. It’s **an assurance of security**. Jesus has already done everything necessary for our salvation, and He’s a solid anchor for all who put their faith in Him.

We see this theme throughout the book as well. **Consider 3:1:**

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.

One of the themes of this book, and one of the reasons it is called Hebrews, is the idea that Jesus is the great High Priest who has made the once-and-for-all sacrifice for our sins. There’s no need to keep going back to the temple and offering sacrifices again and again, because everything has already been paid by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. Here’s the idea, again, **in 4:14-16:**

**14**Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **15**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. **16**Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

We can approach the throne of grace with confidence. We don’t always need to be wondering if we are doing enough. We don’t need to be concerned that some last-minute technicality will reveal that we don’t belong to Jesus. Everything that needed to be done has been done. We can hold firmly to the faith we profess.

In Hebrews 6, just a few verses after the sober warning that it is impossible for those who fall away to be restored to faith, **the author writes this:**

**9**Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. (6:9)

Then, he goes on to talk about the surety of God’s promise, and he picks up the nautical imagery again. **Verses 18-20:**

**18**God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. **19**We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, **20**where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf.

Jesus is our anchor, firm and secure. Everything about our natural life is pulling us downstream to the ocean of sin and selfishness. But we have a rope, tethered to Jesus, and He is a solid anchor. He’s already done everything that needs to be done. We are secure in Him.

I have to tell you, as a pastor, one of the most heartbreaking things for me is when I stand at the door at the end of the service and people come through to shake my hand and then they say something like: “I hope I have done enough to get into heaven.” Several people have said that to me over the years: “I hope I have done enough.” And I want you to see, it’s not about what you have done. It’s about what Jesus has done. Jesus has done everything we need, and if you are holding on to Him then you are secure. He’s a solid anchor. He will hold you fast.

One more passage, some of the more well-known verses in Hebrews. **Chapter 12:1-3:**

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **2**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. **3**Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This is the end of the great Hall of Fame of Faith, where the author seeks to stir up our faith and endurance by recounting the stories of so many in the Old Testament who kept fighting upstream even when they couldn’t see the end of their faith. And as the final entry in this Hall of Fame, if you will, the author talks about Jesus.

And sometimes it is tempting to think that these verses are calling us to imitate Jesus. That the way to run the race with perseverance is to take the example of Jesus and just try harder to be like Him. Be more loving of sinners, be more tender with children, do a better job of turning the other cheek, forgive your enemies. The better job we do copying Jesus the better we run the race.

But that’s not the point here. We are not being called to fix our eyes on Jesus so that we can imitate Him more. We are being called to fix our eyes on Jesus because He’s already done everything that needs to be done. He’s the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He’s already endured the cross. He’s already run the race. And it’s in what He’s done that we find our security. It’s by the victory that He has already won that we can be sure of our own victory.

The question we started with asked whether or not we can be sure of our salvation. And the answer is “Yes! Absolutely Yes!” Jesus has already run the race. He’s endured the cross for us. He will preserve us. Not one that the Father has given Him will be plucked from His hand.

But still, we must persevere. Claiming Jesus is not an excuse for drifting. We can still make shipwreck of our faith, but if we do, that’s not on Jesus. That’s on us. John Piper puts it like this:

Persevering does not earn your participation in Christ; it verifies your participation in Christ. Perseverance is not a payment for getting into Christ. It is a proof that you are in Christ.

So the person who drifts along in sin and makes no business in life of holiness does not fall out of Christ. He was never in Christ to begin with. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-doctrine-of-perseverance-the-future-of-a-fruitless-field>

It is possible to lie to yourself, and lie to others, and even convince the world of your commitment to Jesus Christ; only to find in the end that it was never real. That is, apparently, what happened to those men we talked about at the beginning. The warnings in Hebrew are serious warnings to check your heart and hold fast to your faith and to guard against drifting away.

But if you have fixed your eyes on Jesus, if you have become convinced of what Jesus has done, than you can be 100% confident that He will not let you go. He is a solid anchor, firm and secure. He will complete His good work in you (Phil.1:6). He will equip you with everything good for doing His will. (Heb. 13:21). He will keep you from falling (Jude 24). He will hold you fast.

He will preserve you. So persevere.