

2 Peter 1

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[0 : 00] How do we make sure we don't fall away from our Christian faith?! It might not be a question you've given much thought to you before, but the Bible is full of warnings to professing Christians not to fall away.

The Bible doesn't just warn people outside the church, it repeatedly warns people inside the church not to fall away. And that's not surprising, is it? Because professing Christians fall away all the time. We keep hearing stories of deconversion, don't we? Well-known people posting on social media saying that they've left the faith. And for every celebrity deconversion, there are hundreds of ordinary people leaving the faith.

I don't think stats are always helpful, but I heard one estimate, this is in the US, that for every individual who becomes a Christian, fall, leave. Another survey say similar things about our country at the moment too.

People are falling away in our churches in huge numbers. Even in strong churches, even in churches like this one, the devastating truth is that it's almost certain that some of us in here will fall away and prove that we were never truly saved.

[1 : 22] How do we make sure that we don't fall away? I think one of the reasons we don't often ask that question is because we know that the Bible also teaches that those who are truly in Christ will never fall away.

For true Christians, Jesus says, No one will snatch them out of my hand. The calling of God is irrevocable. You can't be truly joined to Christ and then be ripped apart from him.

True Christians persevere until the end. But the Bible has this category of person who's in the covenant, in the community of God's people, in the church, externally, but they're not actually one of God's elects, one of God's chosen people.

And they turn out to be covenant breakers and fall away, just like in Israel. There were the people of Israel, but not all of them were the true Israel, true believers.

It's the same in the church today. And the fact that they fall away proves that they were never truly united to Christ. They were never truly a Christian.

[2 : 31] As John says in 1 John 2, verse 19, They went out that it might be plain that they all are not of us. So the danger is real that some of us in the church will fall away and prove we weren't ever truly in Christ.

These warnings aren't hypothetical. They are real warnings to make sure that we don't fall away.

Because the means that God uses to keep us going until the end is that he warns us.

And then he works in us by his spirit. So we hear these warnings and we make every effort to keep on growing in Godliness. You know, sometimes we think that falling away is an intellectual issue.

It's all in your brain. I stopped believing because I realised that the evidence for the Christian faith didn't stack up. Well, the Bible is much more realistic. Falling away isn't primarily an intellectual issue.

It's a moral issue. It isn't mainly about what you think. It's about your heart. Sin is what causes people to fall away. Listen to how Peter describes falling away in chapter 2, verse 20.

[3 : 44] For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world, through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

People fall away because they get entangled with sin and overcome. We've been reading the Pilgrim's Progress in our evening services and it's so helpful because it shows that the Christian life isn't a case of praying a prayer one time, asking Jesus into your life and then just sitting back and waiting to go to heaven.

No, it's more like a journey with dangers and battles where we have to make every effort for godliness if we're going to make it to the end. When Peter wrote this letter, there were false teachers saying, it doesn't matter how you live.

You can live however you want. That's an incredibly dangerous teaching because being casual about sin is the road to falling away. Despite the scariness of this issue, Peter is writing to believers with great confidence.

He has a reassuring message for us this evening. He says, if X happens, you will never fall. There's a key to persevering in the faith and Peter is confident that we will grasp hold of it.

[5 : 04] Not because of our ability, but because of Christ's divine power. So what is this key? Well, have a look at verse 10.

If you practice these qualities, you will never fall. If you practice godliness, you will never fall. Peter's big message is this.

Growing godliness will keep us from falling away. And we're going to see that our efforts for godliness are based on Christ's power. So let's take a look.

We're starting in the middle of Peter's speech that goes from verse 3 to verse 11. We're going to be looking at verses 5 onwards. But just a quick recap. This morning we saw in verses 3 to 4 that godliness is the goal of the gospel.

Verse 3, Christ's divine power has granted us all things for a godly life. That's the goal of the gospel, our godliness. And as verse 4 describes it, it's sharing in the divine nature, which means to become morally good like God.

[6 : 11] So godliness is the goal and it's Christ's power that secures that goal. And that's very clear in verse 3, his divine power. And it's really important for us to start there because Peter's going to talk a lot about our efforts.

And we need to understand the basis for all of that is Christ's power. In fact, Peter couldn't make that clearer. Look what he says in verse 5. For this very reason.

What do you expect him to say next? He's just said his power has given us everything we need for godliness. So for this reason, let go and let God.

Sit back and enjoy the ride. No, it's the exact opposite. Because the power of Christ is at working you for godliness, make every effort.

That's our first point. Make every effort to grow in godliness. It's easy to mishear what Peter's saying. Especially when he starts talking about falling away and we're thinking, oh my goodness, this sounds like the only thing that's stopping me from falling away is my effort.

[7 : 19] That is not what Peter is saying. The reason for our effort is that God has secured our godliness by his mighty power. In other words, our effort is the result of God's grace, not the way to earn God's grace.

And that's really important. Let me say that again. Our effort is the result of God's grace, not the way to earn God's grace. So this is not an anxiously working to earn God's favour.

It's working based on the confident assurance that Christ's power is at work in us. For this reason, make every effort. Let me ask you this.

Does this fit with your conception of the Christian life? Effort. Straining, sweating, strenuous pursuit of a goal. Peter says Christians must put in effort.

The result of grace, the result of our union with Christ, is that we become athletes, workers, those who sweat in order to gain godliness.

[8 : 21] So are you putting in effort? Is godliness your goal? What are you doing to grow? What is your game plan? Well, Peter wants to help us with that.

He gets practical. What does this actually look like on the ground? What is meant by this godliness, this divine nature that we share as Christians? Well, we saw this morning that it's the moral excellence of God.

But now Peter gets into the nitty-gritty. Godliness isn't an abstract, up-in-the-clouds type of thing that doesn't touch reality. It's earthy.

It's earthy. It's practical. There are concrete things to aim for. It's a bit like the gym. During the pandemic, I got into powerlifting. I had a basic home gym.

And when I'd go and train, I didn't just go and pick some random exercises. Do a bit of squats and then some pull-ups. I had a plan. I had goals and a plan and a list of exercises that I was going to do that day.

[9 : 25] I knew what weight I was going to put on the bar and how many reps I was going for. When you've got a goal, you make a plan. So here's Peter's plan for our growth in godliness.

Have a look at verse 5. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

Now Peter isn't saying that you need to add these qualities in this order, as if you can't add self-control until you've added knowledge, or you can't add knowledge until you've added virtue. No, this language of adding is to show us that this should always be increasing. Add this and add this. Keep adding and growing and gaining more and more. But it is significant that the list starts with faith and ends with love.

Faith is the first one because it's the root of all the rest. You can't grow in godliness, you can't even begin in godliness without faith. Faith is the way we access Christ's power for godly living.

[10 : 41] It's the starting point of the Christian life which leads to godliness. Faith hears the word of Christ. It hears that Jesus is Lord, the Christ, the Son of God, who came to save sinners.

And faith believes and calls on the name of the Lord to be saved. It receives Christ as he is offered in the gospel. And that forces us to ask, is that you?

Have you received Christ? Have you heard the gospel and believed the incredible news that God offers you reconciliation with him? That even though you've been a rebel against God, he offers you in Christ a way back.

Because of Christ's finished work, you can be embraced by God today. Have you received Christ? All that we've been saying about godliness is utterly impossible until you've been joined with Christ through faith.

You can try all you want to add virtue and self-control and love. I can tell you now it won't work. It's only Christ's divine power that can make sinners godly.

[11 : 50] So faith is the starting point. Secondly, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue. Virtue is an old word that we don't really use much anymore.

But what it really means is moral excellence. Excellence of character. In fact, it's the same word used in verse 3 about Christ's glory and excellence.

And moral excellence means obeying God's law, the perfect moral standard. So when you meet a virtuous man or woman, they stand out, don't they?

We want to be with God's help, those who stand out in our communities. That our friends and our family can genuinely say, he or she has excellent character.

Think of Jesus, our perfect model of virtue. He always does what is morally right. In his days on earth, he always chose the good path. He obeyed God's law fully.

[12 : 49] He said to his fiercest opponents, which one of you convicts me of sin? And there was silence. Now we will never reach his perfect ideal in this life.

But in our union with him, we can increase in virtue. I don't know most of you very well yet, but I've already seen in my short time here, examples of virtue.

So let's be keen for God's law. Like the psalmist in Psalm 119, who meditates on it when he wakes up and when he goes to bed at night. He loves God's ways and his rules and his laws more than a stash of gold.

If we're asking God to earnestly, teach me your law. If we're hungry to grow in virtue and we're meditating deeply on God's law, we will grow.

Thirdly, knowledge. Supplement your faith with virtue and virtue with knowledge. Knowledge here is a different word to the one in verse 3.

[13 : 50] Verse 3 was talking about the decisive knowledge of Christ that every believer receives when they're converted. But this knowledge in verse 5 is something we're to grow in. It's a good question to ask yourself.

How much have I grown in knowledge since I became a Christian? Do I know Christ better now? Do I understand the gospel more deeply? Do I have more wisdom and discernment in the Christian life?

That's one of the reasons why we're people of God's word. Do I spend a lot of time listening to God speaking to us through his word read and preached and Bible studies and all of that?

We do that partly because we want to fill our minds with more knowledge of Christ. It's easy to think it doesn't really matter too much if I understand the book of Ezekiel or if I understand the doctrines of the faith.

I have a relationship with Jesus and that's all that matters, isn't it? I love him, he loves me. Why do the hard work of knowing and understanding stuff? Well because we're getting to know Christ. [14:57] That's how we get to know him relationally. Through his work, through our minds, learning and grasping his revelation of himself. Grow in knowledge.

Fourthly, self-control. Here we're talking about restraint of our emotions, our impulses, our desires. Are there desires in your life that control you rather than you controlling them? Maybe it's food or sexual desires or shopping. Or you consistently fail to control your emotions. Anger rises up quickly. Some of you younger ones, maybe self-control might be something you need to work on.

It could be laziness. It could be staying in bed too long, playing too many computer games or watching TV shows late at night. Whatever it is, Peter wants us to sit down and think, what is it that takes control over my life?

Where do I want to grow in self-control? So we've had faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control and now steadfastness. This is talking about holding out in the face of difficulty.

[16:11] Life is tough sometimes. I don't know what's going on in your life at the moment, but I know that we're all facing some kind of suffering as we live in a fallen world.

But the Christian has a different reaction to suffering than the number neither. It hurts the same amount, but there's a steadfast endurance that comes from a deep trust in God.

And that's not saying just tough it out. This means hoping in God for the fulfilment of his promises when things look like a disaster. It means clinging on to the fact that not a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our Father in heaven.

That means every bit of suffering that the Christian goes through is on purpose. It's working for our ultimate salvation. Small things and big things.

Failing an exam or getting a bad diagnosis. Suffering that seems to go on and on. It's no mistake. It's from the hand of a loving and wise Father.

[17:17] Working for our ultimate salvation and good. That is why the Christian can grow in steadfastness through suffering. Next is godliness.

Peter's been using godliness as this kind of umbrella term. The ultimate goal that we're heading towards. And he started in verse 3 saying, Christ's power has given us everything we need for life and godliness or for godly lives.

So it means all of these qualities. But Peter also uses it here more specifically. He's describing our attitude and behaviour towards God. And that word can mean piety or devoutness.

It's an awesome respect towards God demonstrated by a life of devotion to him. And when you meet someone who reveres God, it affects their whole life, doesn't it?

We can be earthy, real people and still be captivated with God and with the life to come. Next is brotherly affection.

[18:23] When you become a Christian, you're immediately part of a new family. An isolated Christian is an oxymoron. Because God doesn't save individuals to be Christians on their own.

He's making a society, a body, a family. And Peter says here we should grow in family affection for other believers. We should love the church.

Church is messy, isn't it? And we get on each other's nerves sometimes and we let each other down. But we're family. And the affection that we have for each other is supposed to grow more and more.

And that means let's be involved in each other's lives. Having each other round. Eating together. Being a family. Finally, love. Love is the crowning virtue.

It's the one that encompasses all the others. The whole of God's law is summed up in love for God and love for others. We must grow in love. Do you remember what Jesus did before he was betrayed?

[19:30] It says in John 13, having loved his own, he loved them to the end. The king of the universe took a towel. He got on his knees and washed the dirty feet of his disciples.

A job that even an adult slave wouldn't have been asked to do. It was too humiliating. And this was a picture of what he was about to do.

The greatest act of love. To lower himself to a degrading, humiliating death in order to wash us. That is what love does. That is what love does.

And he calls us to do the same. To lay down our lives, our desires, our selfishness. To serve the brothers and sisters just like he did. Supplement your faith with love.

So we've been seeing that we need to make every effort to grow in godliness. And so far, Peter's been looking at it from the perspective of God's power.

[20 : 29] Saying, grow in godliness because Christ's power has secured that God. But now he looks at it from the other perspective. The other side of the coin. He says, grow in godliness because it will keep you from falling.

Now before we get into this, it's helpful to see that Peter isn't just contradicting himself. He's not saying, on the one hand your perseverance depends fully on God.

And on the other hand it depends on your own efforts. No, it depends completely on God. But the means that God uses to keep us persevering is not that he zaps you and makes you automatically godly.

No, he works in us so that we keep on making the effort to grow in godliness. And he uses these warnings and these encouragements to stir his people to grow in godliness until the end.

Have a look at verse 8. Now I used to think that that meant throwing godliness so you won't be one of those Christians who is a genuine Christian, but they're not as fruitful as they could be.

[21 : 48] But actually the danger here is not being less fruitful than you could. The danger is not being saved at all. And this will come out more in the next verses, but this fruit metaphor is one that Scripture uses repeatedly to talk about who is a true child of God and who isn't.

How will you know them? By their fruit. This is the way Jesus talks about fruit. John 15. I am the true vine and my father is the vine dresser.

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

For apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

Jesus says you can be in the church, in the vine and yet not bear fruit. And these fruitless branches demonstrate that they were never truly Christ's.

[22 : 55] And so instead of remaining in him and growing in godliness, they fall away. They're chopped off and thrown into the fire. And that's what Peter's talking about with his fruit metaphor.

So he says in verse 8, If all these qualities we've listed are yours and are increasing, that growth in godliness keeps you from being a fruitless branch, which gets chopped off because it's not united to Christ spiritually.

Growing in godliness keeps you from falling. Now again, we need to be really careful to not get this the wrong way round. It's not that we earn our place in god's church by being fruitful.

It's a bit like an apple tree. How do you know that the tree in your garden is an apple tree? Well, because it produces apples. Not figs, not bananas, but apples.

Apples demonstrate and prove that it's an apple tree. But it doesn't become an apple tree because it produces apples. It's the other way round, isn't it? It produces apples because it is already an apple tree.

[24 : 02] We produce fruit because we are saved, not to get saved. But Peter's point is, don't stop growing in godliness.

Don't fall away from Christ. If you keep growing in godliness, that will keep you from falling away.

Look at verse 9. Peter says the whole point of your salvation was to wash you from your sins.

So if after a while you say, I can't be bothered anymore with growing in godliness. It's too difficult.

Sin doesn't matter that much anyway. Peter says that's like a pig who's had a wash and decides to go and roll in the mud again.

That's what he says in chapter 2. He says people who fall away, chapter 2 verse 20, We have been cleansed from our sins by the precious blood of Christ.

How can we turn back to live in sin again? Verse 10 is the key summary verse of this passage.

Look down with me to chapter 1 verse 10.

[25 : 35] Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election. For if you practice these qualities, you will never fall. Confirm your election.

Again, we're getting that strange combination of God's action and our action. If God is the one who elects, he chooses, he calls us who he saves.

None of us would ever be saved unless God chose to pour his mercy out on us. Unless he called us irresistibly to himself. And yet Peter says, confirm your calling and election.

Peter's basically saying there, prove. If you're an apple tree, prove it by producing apples. You don't earn your election.

If you're in Christ, God chose you before you did anything, good or bad. But here's the thing. How do we demonstrate our election? By the fruit of a growing volume.

[26 : 33] That's the result of salvation. So Peter can say in verse 10, if you practice these qualities, you will never fall. For in this way, there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It's a bit like a marathon. I don't know if any of you have taken part in a marathon before, but in a marathon there's something called a sweet bus. And a sweet bus is the bus that collects the runners who are unable to finish the race.

Because every single marathon there are those who decide to give up along the way. And when you're slowing down and struggling and looking like you're about to stop, the sweet bus creeps up next to you and asks you if you want to continue.

The thing is, with a marathon, you have to keep running. You can't stop and take a rest and say, I'll just recover my energy and keep going in a minute. That strategy almost never works.

If you stop, you'll never get going again. You lose your momentum and you end up on the sweet bus. Do you know what happens to those runners? Their record gets stamped as E-N-F.

[27 : 48] Did not finish. Did not finish. Christian life is a marathon. We can't stop and take a rest when it gets hard. We have to keep growing in godliness.

We have to keep pressing forwards and moving onwards or we'll end up the same way. Did not finish. But by God's grace, that will not be us.

Christian, Christ's divine power is at work for your godliness. So make every effort. As he works in and through our efforts, as we practice these qualities, we will never fall away.

He will present us blameless on that last day. Growing in godliness by Christ's power will keep us from falling. Let's finish with these words ringing in our ears.

His divine power has given us all things for a godly life. So make every effort to grow in godliness. Let's pray.