

Cold Engine, Flat Battery?

- If any of you have ever had an older car, you'll notice the turn of the seasons:
 - as the nights get colder, the car is harder to start in the mornings!
 - most often it does get there, but splutters and falters, and coughs....
- Sometimes **we find it hard to get going**, to to keep going, to run smoothly:
 - find yourself saying, "I can't do this - I can't take the hassle, the stress, the hard work for no apparent reward"
 - maybe its at **work**, demands, pressure, unrealistic expectations;
 - maybe its at **home**, coping with the kids, caring for someone who is now less able, even with a tough period in your marriage;
 - maybe its simply the combination of **all the little things** that life can sometimes throw at us;
- **I can't do this!**
- The writer to the Hebrews was writing to some people who were faltering, who were stuttering and struggling to keep going
 - and in particular who were struggling with their faith, finding it hard to keep following Jesus
- He is exhorting them to keep going, to push onwards - with particular reference to three different kinds of situation where they could be coming a cropper:
 - those who were **faltering in the face of apathy**;
 - those who were **faltering in the face of temptation**;
 - those who were **faltering in the face of opposition**.
- His response in all three cases is to **draw their attention back to all that Jesus has done for them** - all that he has been writing about for the last ten chapters! (*We've come to a turning point in the book - become less theological, fewer references to priesthood and sacrifice and so on, and more down to earth advice - but its all "in light of" what has gone before.*)
- Lets see what he had to say to each of these groups of faltering people, and hopefully also what God has got to say to us when we struggle and falter, in life and in faith.

Faltering in the Face of Apathy

- First group of falterers are **those struggling to be bothered, struggling to see the point in keeping going with their faith**
 - reference to them particularly in vs.23-25, maybe also 22
- These were the ones who'd perhaps joined the church in a fit of enthusiasm, or because their friends or family were doing it
- But their enthusiasm was waning. They'd lost touch with the point of it all:
 - they were starting to neglect one another - **not looking out for fellow believers** - early church marked by this love and concern (remember Acts, believers sharing all their possession so poor were OK?)
 - they were also starting to **neglect to meet together**, to worship together - and as a result they were losing their grip on the **"hope we profess"**, losing day-to-day contact with God himself
- **They were becoming apathetic, neglectful of that which had once been vital and vibrant for them.**
- Writer to the Hebrews was worried that, like coals plucked from a fire, on their own they would gradually lose their heat, cool and eventually be extinguished.
- We see exactly the same danger round about us - only around half of the members bother to come to Sunday worship.
 - for some they are unable - age and infirmity make getting out hard
 - but for many it is simply apathy - a forgetfulness of their earlier faith

- How does the writer to the Hebrews address the situation?
 - does he go and harangue them? Shout at them? Guilt trip them?
 - **no** - though he doesn't avoid confronting the issue plainly either!
- What he does do is **draw their attention back to Jesus Christ and all that he has done** - all that we owe to our great high priest.
- Look at **vs.19-21**, and then **v.22**:
 - reminder, summary of all that Christ has done - opening a new and living way to God, through the curtain (**probably allusion is to curtain Temple, though some have argued for curtain of death: curtain was the clear route for High Priest into God's presence...**);
 - **"So let us draw near to God... Let us hold firmly... Let us not give up the habit of meeting together..."** (v.22-25)
- Apathy simply isn't in the picture when we realise, when we appreciate what Jesus has done for us:
 - forgiving us, winning us entrance into the presence of a God so Holy he can't stand sin, giving us the gift of joy and peace and perfect love in his presence throughout eternity!
 - **"We have complete freedom to go into the Most Holy Place... we have a great priest..."** (v.19,21)
- That has implications for our response when we find ourselves struggling in our faith, or when we are dealing with others who are in that situation:
 - **look to Jesus Christ, and all that he has done;**
 - **remind ourselves, or the other person, of the hope we profess - complete freedom from guilt and from God's wrath, the prospect of heaven, and the certainty of relationship with the Living God now!**

Faltering in the Face of Temptation

- Second group are dealt with in **vs.26-31**.
- Problem here is rather different - those **faltering in the face of temptation**.
 - **"keep on sinning..."** (v.25)
 - rather than encouraging, exhorting his readers as he did with those struggling with apathy, **he presents a stark warning**
 - presents **a warning of what will happen to those who turn their back on Christ, who reject his offer of forgiveness, who spit in his face!**
- And that warning is **terrifying**:
 - **it is indeed "a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"** (v.31)
 - especially for one who has rebelled and spurned God's offer of reconciliation
- Perhaps at a casual glance this may be an intensely worrying passage for all of us:
 - haven't we all sinned since becoming Christians? haven't we all, then, treated as a cheap thing the blood of God's covenant, the blood Christ shed for us?
 - don't we all, then, stand in danger of God's sure judgement?
- However, more careful examination, particularly of the words used in the Greek, makes it clear that that isn't what is in mind.
 - it is the most severe form of **apostasy, a conscious rejection of God's offer of salvation**, of Jesus' death on the Cross that this warning is directed at;
 - not the temper driven hurtful words, later repented of, or the on-going struggle with persistent sin
 - **but those who consciously reject and turn away from God's saving mercy in Christ**
- Such conscious apostates were and are unlikely to be reading through the letter to the Hebrews!!
 - **so it must be here for some other purpose!!**
- That purpose is **to serve as a warning of the seriousness of sin**, of the sneaking, creeping, insidious power it has - the writer chooses to paint his picture in the starkest terms, but the **cancer of rejecting God** is close to home too.
 - **beware!** says the writer - **sin is not to be trifled with!**

- That warning is pointed in our direction too:
 - don't we often trifle with sin?
 - it doesn't really matter if I occasionally lose the rag - everyone does, & God will forgive me...
 - I struggle so much with laziness, carelessness with others feelings, selfishness... is it really so bad, can't I just learn to live with it?
- **Sin, full-grown, leads to death**
 - you've been forgiven, washed clean - don't trifle with that which nearly killed you!
 - heart book, given to folk who've had a heart attack: rigid regime - don't play games, this is serious!
- Same for us!
- Another aspect of this is the contrast the writer implicitly draws between the "new and living way" of v.20.
- The stark warning is made all the more stark because it is against the backdrop of free forgiveness, of complete freedom from the power of sin to go into the Most Holy Place - not yet as sinless, but as sin-covered.
- So, when we falter in the face of temptation, writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to resist:
 - with a stark warning of the seriousness of sin and its consequences;
 - and more importantly by putting that warning in the context of the offer of a way back to God, of cleansing, of forgiveness when we stumble.
- So, when faced with temptation - resist!
 - when you do falter, as you will on occasion, come back to Jesus
 - come back to that cleansing he offers, repent, turn from your sin
 - don't play games with it, but turn from it

Faltering in the Face of Opposition

- The final group of falterers that the writer addresses in this passage are those **faltering in the face of opposition**.
 - see, eg, v.33...
 - for the Hebrews, at least some of that opposition seems to have been of the direct kind - prison, confiscation of property, public ridicule - some kind of organised persecution
- But his challenge to keep going in the face of opposition is just as pertinent to us - **do we not also face opposition?**
 - perhaps its suffering of a different kind, illness, accident, age? - depriving us of opportunity to serve in way we'd like?
 - perhaps its the opposition, the struggle it so often is to be a Christian in a hostile environment - school, work - slagging, peer pressure (lottery syndicates, crude humour, ...).
 - perhaps its even the opposition of family or friends who feel threatened by your faith and make life difficult.
- The writers encouragement to keep going takes two forms:
 - first, he encourages them to remember - how they succeeded in keeping going in the past; (v.32-34)
 - second, and mixed in with the way he calls on them to remember the past, he is drawing their attention to what is really important - to doing God's will, to receiving what he has promised, to their faith and hope (see esp end v.34)
- Essentially he is saying - "remember last time.... you had your priorities right, you were living and operating in God's light - so do the same again, remind yourself of all that God has done, of all that he has promised to you who have faith - doesn't that put your present struggle into perspective?"
- Have patience, keep going - for the reward is great - the complete freedom to come into the Most Holy Place we have in Jesus is far more wonderful and important than even life itself!

Firing on all Cylinders

- Three groups of people, all faltering in different ways:
 - faltering in the face of apathy;
 - faltering in the face of temptation;
 - faltering in the face of opposition.
- In each case, but in different ways, the writer draws attention back to Jesus Christ:
 - back to all that he has done for us, all that his sacrifice on the Cross and his position as our Great Priest has achieved for us - if we will but have faith
- Writer doesn't want his readers to be faltering, spluttering along like a poorly maintained car engine.
 - he wants them to be running smoothly, all cylinders firing, and full-power available when they need it
 - he knows that, like a car, they need to have the right fuel, the right maintenance
- I've got two different relatives who, on separate occasions filled their petrol engined cars up with diesel - in case you don't know, this is not a good idea - fairly expensive bad idea, in fact
 - if you don't put the right stuff in, if you don't keep it properly maintained, then it won't work
- Its the same with our faith - we need to keep our eyes set, our focus and attention and hope centred on Jesus Christ
- wherever we feel we are faltering, whatever our circumstances, lets put it in the context of all that Jesus Christ has achieved for us, qbl let us hold firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise.
- Let is be said of us that **"We are not a people who turn back and are lost. Instead, we have faith and are saved." (v.39)**