

Hebrews 13:7-16

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[0 : 00] A number of years ago, I was invited to a dinner by a friend, and he told me as we were walking! to the dinner that he also invited quite a well-known, outspoken atheist.

! This friend of mine hosted these dinners from time to time where he would invite people that he thought would have interesting things to say and perhaps disagree. And that there could be a bit of a discussion. Now the atheist in question was quite well known as a journalist and had written an article that week in a well-known paper where he talked about the God-botherers that he knew.

That was Christians who were trying to share the gospel with him and how critical he was of them. And we went round the table and everybody did their introductions.

And I was introduced as a Christian minister. And the atheist was across the other side of the table and at that point he looked up and his brow furrowed a little bit.

[1 : 11] And as you would expect then in this context with an atheist who was well known and a minister at the same table, it wasn't long before the inevitable happened and the conversation turned to the question of God.

Now we had a good-natured exchange, but one of his questions sticks out as I remember it all. We had gone back and forth about various things, the evidence for the resurrection, the integrity of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, those kinds of things.

And then he said to me, what would it take for you to lose your faith? What would it take for you to give up on the Christian faith?

Now it's interesting to me that he went down that route. He clearly thought that Christianity is simply a lifestyle decision. It's something that you do because you think it works for you in the here and now.

And as soon as it stops working for you in the here and now, that is if it doesn't deliver the health or the wealth or the happiness that you want it to, well then you just pack it up and walk away.

[2 : 21] What would it take for you to lose your faith? I said to him, show me the bones of Jesus. That has to be our answer, doesn't it, as Christians? If Jesus is in the grave somewhere, if he has not been raised, we're all wasting our time.

Show me those bones and I'll join you in the anti-Christian camp faster than you can say, make atheism great again. But there is something in his question, isn't there?

Because as he said himself, people do walk away from the Christian faith when things get hard. Do you ever feel like giving up?

Do you ever feel like it's just too much? It's perhaps the case that you've done that already in actual fact. In your heart, you have actually shut up shop and it's just a matter of time before your feet catch up with your heart.

Because it is hard to live as a Christian. It is hard to live the Christian life. Taking up your cross to follow Jesus, walking the path of rejection and suffering that Jesus walked is never easy.

[3 : 35] And it's especially difficult in our time and in our place. And that's why we're turning to the book of Hebrews on Sunday evenings for the next few months.

I'm going to do a bit of an introduction to the book this evening. I think it's good to do that in order to orient us within the book and understand it in context a little bit. It is one of the earliest letters in the New Testament.

I say letter. It is described by the author in chapter 13 verse 22 as a word of exhortation. And it is widely thought to be a sermon. The book of Hebrews is a sermon.

And it is written or preached to people, probably predominantly Jewish converts to Christianity, who are struggling. Chapter 4 verse 16. I'm going to reference lots of texts and move around things this

evening.

You don't have to follow, but if you want to, you can. Chapter 4 verse 16. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[4 : 39] Chapter 10 verse 32. But recall the former days when after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings. Sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction.

And sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison. And you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property. Since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Struggle, suffering, affliction, the plundering of your property because you named the name of Christ. Chapter 13 verse 3. Remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them. And those who are mistreated since you also are in the body. This is a sermon preached to Christians who are being persecuted, tortured, mistreated and abused.

Because they named the name of Christ. And the writer is exhorting them. In that context, not to lose faith. Not to give up.

[5 : 44] Not to walk away. And the sermon is a combination as we'll go through. We'll see it as a combination of warning on the one hand and encouragement on the other hand. So in the context it seems that there are people who are weary.

They are weary of standing up in this context and they might just give up. And he urges them not to drift away from what they've heard. Chapter 2 verse 1. Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it.

Not to neglect the message of salvation. Chapter 2 verse 3. How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? He urges them not to lose hold of their confession in chapter 4 verse 14.

To continue in the faith. Chapter 6. To not, chapter 12, grow weary and lose heart. Or, chapter 13, be led away by false teaching. It goes all the way through the letter, the sermon.

And when you think about those things, aren't they real dangers for us? In our day as we try and live the Christian life. At a time and in a place where you're treated with suspicion because of what you believe.

[6 : 54] And that's a good day. When you're worn down by the rejection and the marginalization. Simply because you follow Christ. Who among us doesn't feel the temptation sometimes in the face of all of this to say, I just don't want the hassle anymore?

But it's not just to the weary that he's speaking. There are also warnings to those who would choose a more overt kind of rebellion. If some are weary, he also warns the angry.

Don't, he says, chapter 3 verse 12, have a sinful and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. Don't harden your heart in disobedience like the wilderness generation.

Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 10, don't willfully persist in sin. Chapter 12, 25, don't reject the God who speaks from heaven. Now the strength of the exhortations as the warnings in the context of the book.

These pleas that the author makes suggest that there is active, hard-hearted walking away from God that's happening in the community as well. And of course we see that too in our context.

[8 : 07] People get angry when God doesn't deliver the life that they want him to give. And resentment begins to build. Bitterness begins to grow in the heart.

And then unlike the weary who drift away, the angry, well they run away. In fact, they don't just run away metaphorically, they also slam the door as they leave.

It's actually got a name that in our day, it's called deconstruction. There are people now who make a name on social media talking about deconstructing. And the deconstructing Christian is, or can be very often, an angry soul.

So the author is saying, however people might plan to leave, don't go. Don't do it. And his warning and his encouragement, his impassioned pleading, come in the rhetorical form we'll see of an argument from the lesser to the greater.

So it's a kind of, if this, well then how much more that. And what he's doing is showing off and highlighting the greater so that you can choose the greater and the better and leave behind the lesser.

[9 : 17] It's a bit like if you can swim the channel, how much better, how much more is using a boat or that kind of thing. The lesser to the greater.

And the point of the comparison in the book of Hebrews is the old covenant with its forms and structures. The priests and the angels and the sacrificial system and the food laws and so on. From the lesser to the greater Christ. The old covenant and Christ. And the author is saying, here is the headline of the book of Hebrews, Jesus is better, way better.

That's it. Jesus is better, way better. And that's why you don't go. Now it's important in talking like that, that I don't make that sound trite. Jesus is better, way better.

You can put that on a hashtag and it's as cheesy as you like. It's important that that's not the case. Because for our Jewish hearers here in the context of the book of Hebrews, the pressure that they would have been under to go back is almost impossible to overstate.

[10 : 21] Their whole identity was wrapped up in their religious culture. The pressure to turn back would have come from all sides. Family and friends, the religious and political authorities.

They would have been accused of betrayal, blanked by family in the street. They would have lost absolutely everything that was familiar to them and that was of value to them. The draw to go back, the draw to say, you know what, it's just not worth it, would have been very hard to resist.

But even with all of that, this sermon pleads, don't go back. That's our first point. First headline, don't go back. The writer brings the comparisons.

So we'll read through the letter as we go through. We'll see the word of God comes in the Old Testament through prophets and angels and Moses and the law. It comes to us now, chapter 1, verse 2, through the Son of God, through Christ.

The old forms, which of course did serve their intended ends. It was still the word of God under the old covenant. But those old forms give way to that which is greater.

[11 : 28] Christ, the living word of God, the creator of heaven and earth. Angels will come up a lot, certainly in the early chapters of the book.

Angels were ministering spirits, we're told, chapter 1, verse 14. Jesus is the Son of God. Moses was a servant in God's house, chapter 3.

But Jesus is both the son and the builder of God's house. Joshua brought Israel into the rest of the promised land, which the people later lost. But chapter 4, Jesus entered into the heavenly rest of God that is secured in heaven for his people for all eternity.

The priests, they served in the temple where they made sacrifices for their own sin and for the sin of the people, where they offered up prayers on the people's behalf. But Jesus, chapter 5, chapters 8 to 10, offered himself as a sacrifice once and for all to take away sin for all time.

The old covenant, it served a purpose. It was designed to function for a time and a place, but it was always intended of a shadow of the reality that was to come.

[12 : 39] And the author to the Hebrews holds out Christ and he says, why would you go back to the shadow when you have the reality? Why would you go back to the temporary when you have the permanent, the real?

There's no comparison, he's saying, don't go back. Now, let's be perfectly honest.

For most of us, I doubt Israel's old covenant structures hold the sort of draw that they would have done for the first hearers of the sermon. But for our brothers and sisters who have been converted from other religions, that draw to go back is very powerful.

It would be so easy to do that. Don't go back. Don't go back. Don't go back. But also for us all, the circumstances of the opposition might be different, but any opposition is tough.

The rejection of friends or family because we want to follow Christ. The hostility in the workplace. These things do pressurize us to step back from Jesus.

[13 : 44] They pressurize us. If we step back into the old patterns of life, we do it very quietly and politely, we'll never come into any difficulty. In fact, what can start to be just being a bit more discreet about your faith, playing it more sensibly, being wise, being prudent.

Well, actually in the end, that leads you off course completely. There is pressure. There is pressure. Pressure to go back to the old way of life. And the author to the book of, the writer to the Hebrews says, don't go back.

If he says that primarily to those tempted to return to Judaism, he tells us all, point number two, don't go anywhere else.

Don't go anywhere else. The first audience here were tempted to go back to their old religious identity and their old structures. And he says to us, in light of all of this, don't go anywhere else. Not those structures, nowhere else. So, are you looking for God? You find him in Jesus. Chapter one, verse three, he is the radiance of the glory of God on the exact imprint of his nature. [14:56] And he upholds the universe by the word of his power. Do you want to hear God speak? Do you want to hear the voice of the living God?

Will you hear his voice in the words of Jesus? Chapter one, verse two, long ago and many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son.

If you're looking for God, you find him in Jesus. If you want to hear God speak, you hear him speak in Jesus. Do you want a relationship that connects you with the very source of reality?

So much of what we pursue in life is born out of a quest for meaning and significance. And a quest for that which is real. That which won't just slip through our fingers in life. Who are you?

What are you? Are you just a warm skin bag of protoplasm? Or are you something else? Well, the relationship that actually establishes your identity and defines your reality is found only in the Lord Jesus.

[16:09] Chapter one, verse eight. But the son of the son, he says, your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. And then one, verse 10.

You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning. And the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain. They will all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up.

Like a garment, they will be changed. But you are the same and your years will have no end. The one at the center of reality is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the eternal sovereign God.

He defines all reality. And where else can you go to resolve the problem at the center of who you are?

That problem that exists in all of us, the problem of sin. That issue that we just can't seem to shake off, the issue of guilt, the issue of shame.

[17:13] We know, all of us, that even on our best days, we say and do things that we regret. And we try all kinds of things to suppress the shame that that brings up.

But sadly, like one of those beach balls, when you get into the swimming pool and you take the beach ball and you push it under the water, you hold it there, it always finds a way to break out and get back onto the surface again.

It just keeps resurfacing. Your sin and your guilt, whatever you try to do to suppress them, can only be dealt with in one place. And that is in Jesus.

Chapter 10, verse 12. And verse 12. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.

For by a single offering, he has perfected, perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

[18:16] And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us. For after saying, this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord, I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds. Then he adds, I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

No more. You can know God. You can hear his voice. You can be forgiven every sin and reconciled to God.

The relationship that you were created to enjoy, but it is only possible in one place. Through one man. In and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is supreme and sufficient for these things.

So don't go anywhere else. That's the heart of the argument of the book of Hebrews. But as we study it over the coming months, my hope is that the way that the preacher frames this argument, this exhortation will also help us in three other really important ways.

So first of all, this book I hope will help us to better read our Bibles. Better read our Bibles. The Old Testament I want to say is something of a closed book to many Christians.

[19:29] But the book of Hebrews quotes the Old Testament in almost every chapter. He takes extensive Old Testament quotes and shows us how Jesus fulfills them and how they were speaking about Jesus.

Hebrews will help us understand the way different elements of the Old Testament foreshadow or point to things in the New. Something that theologians call typology. So for example, chapter 3,

verse 7 and following.

Turn over to chapter 3. You'll see there verse 7 and following. There's this extended quote from Psalm 95. Now why is it that he is quoting there Psalm 95? Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts in the rebellion, on the day of testing, in the wilderness, and so on.

This text is speaking about the children of Israel and how they hardened their hearts during their years in the wilderness. And how God rebuked them for this. And our writer then applies this to his hearers in their situation.

Chapter 4, verse 3. For we who have believed enter that rest as he has said, As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter their rest. And what's he doing? Well, what he's doing there is he's telling us that the Old Testament people in the wilderness are a type of the church.

[20 : 45] And the warnings not to walk away, as many of them did, still apply. The warnings to them apply to us.

Because they are a type of the church. The tabernacle is another example. Chapter 9 tells us about this earthly place of holiness. Where God's presence was experienced.

And where atonement for sin was made. And we're told that this structure, this tabernacle structure in the Old Testament was symbolic for its time. That is, it was a type of Christ.

The true and better holy place where God, we meet with God and through whom our sins are dealt with. Interestingly, chapter 10, 24 tells us that it's also a type of heaven.

But we'll deal with that when we get there. Now, it's important to say this isn't a strange code that we need to crack. It is just regular biblical terrain. It is reading the Bible the way the Bible is supposed to be read.

[21 : 46] But it is unfamiliar to many of us. For a couple of reasons. And one of those is that we normally start the book. When we come to the Bible, we start the book in the wrong place. We start it at the beginning of the New Testament.

There's this big bit to the left that we kind of, we find the New Testament difficult to properly understand. Because there's this big bit to the left that we haven't read. One author says, Far too many Christians think that the New Testament is a course that has no prerequisites.

When in fact, jumping into New Testament studies without Old Testament grounding is like going straight from nursery to graduate physics. In order to get a grasp of our New Testaments, we need to understand better the Old Testament.

And Hebrews will help us like very few other New Testament books to do that. One of the other big problems is that we come to the New Testament with our own ideas. We approach it from the perspective of a modern mind and a framework that is shaped by the modern mind.

Which means when we come to bits of the New Testament that we don't understand or we don't particularly like. Well, we kind of reject them and we try and find a way to work around them.

Hebrews will help us with this terrain.

[22 : 56] We want to better know our Bibles. But, we want to better know our Bibles. Not as an end in itself.

But secondly, to better know the Christ of our Bibles. We talked a lot during the Advent season about the miracle of the virgin conception and the deity of the Son of God born at Christmas.

But what is actually the significance of this? Do we really know the Christ that we profess? Hebrews tells us, chapter 1 verse 3.

He is, the Son of God is, the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature. And He upholds the universe by the word of His power.

After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. Having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

[23 : 58] Jesus the Son is very God of very God. All of God is in Jesus, although Jesus is not all of God. He is supremely sovereign. He rules and He reigns.

He is glorious and exalted above all things. After 2 verse 9, we are able to see Jesus at the center of the world, at the heart of the promises of God, at the pinnacle of all that is. He is the Lord of all.

He is Lord of every square inch of the created order. The distance from where we are this evening to the sun is 93 million miles. The distance to the farthest planet, Neptune, is nearly 3 billion miles. Do you remember the NASA ultimate fool discovery back in 2019? A small icy world, 6.5 billion kilometers from the earth.

Jesus is Lord over it all. Do you have a big enough Christ? Do you have a Christ who is Jesus, the sun, the air, the one who is fully human, but who at the same time is supremely glorious in power and wonder?

[25 : 07] Do you have a Christ that you can actually fear? A Christ who brings you to your knees in worship. And therefore, a Christ that you can actually trust in and through the hardest and the darkest times.

A Christ that you can lean on and know that you are safe when the opposition comes. When the hostility for naming His name comes your way.

Hebrews will help us better know Him. And then thirdly, and finally I hope, the plan is that if we get Hebrews into our bloodstream, it will help us better persevere in good faith.

Better persevere in faith. So as I've already pointed out, the goal of this word of exhortation is to keep us going with Jesus. To know that in the face of trials and temptations, in the face of the overwhelming desire that sometimes creeps in to give up.

Jesus is the bearer of a greater hope than any other that is out there because He is the high priest of a greater covenant. And He wants this knowledge to spur us on.

[26 : 16] Look, you might have stumbled into the new year, spiritually speaking. You might have pulled up. You might have stopped running altogether. You've only come to church tonight because you haven't yet worked out how you're going to tell people that you've given up, but you've given up.

The book of Hebrews calls you to start running again. To start running again. The preacher uses exactly that metaphor actually in chapter 12. There is a great cloud of witnesses who have gone ahead of us.

The church in every age that has gone ahead of us, and they are willing us on. They are saying to us, Jesus has gone ahead of you. He has finished the race that is marked out for you, and He is summoning you.

So run with endurance. The race marked out. Keep going. Don't give up. Don't go anywhere else. Hebrews, the book will reframe our suffering.

You don't give up for no reason. You give up because it's tough. Well, the trials that you are suffering aren't meaningless. They are the Father's loving discipline. And actually, He has given them to you as part of the means by which He deems that you will get to glory.

[27 : 26] In His infinite wisdom, He has decided that your struggles, whatever they are, are part of what is required for you to get to heaven.

That's really difficult for us to accept unless we do so by faith. And whatever you are enduring, whatever it is that you are struggling with this evening, Hebrews 13, 14 reminds us that it is only for now.

It is on the clock, and it will one day come to an end. Here, we have no lasting city. If we want to make heaven in the present, we can't do it.

There is no lasting city here. Suffering, sadness, pain, even death. They belong in the now, in the city that doesn't last.

And so we seek the city that is to come. We persevere so that just as we suffered with Jesus here, we will triumph with Jesus there.

[28 : 28] That's why we keep going. Just as we suffer with Him here, we will triumph with Him there. So, it was a bit of a Bible study this evening.

It was a bit of an overview. We jumped around a bit. The bottom line is this. Don't go anywhere else. Because Jesus is better.

Way better. Let's pray together.