

Hebrews 3 – “Fix your thoughts on Jesus”

Background

The letter called “Hebrews” was written, as its name suggests, to Jewish Christians.

They had grown up within Judaism, treasuring the Hebrew Scriptures, and particularly the first five books of our Bible, the Pentateuch or the books of Moses, known to them as the Torah – the Law.

And they had loved the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures; they had delighted in what God had done for his people in the past – his people of whom they were now representatives and heirs.

They had treasured the promises of God – all he had promised to do for his people, especially through the promised Messiah.

And now they had come to trust in the Lord Jesus – to own him as the Christ, the promised Messiah. They had come to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

But in this they remained in a minority amongst their Jewish people – even amongst their friends and neighbours. Not many years before, many had opposed Jesus and had been so angered by his teaching that they had him crucified – put to death at the hands of the Roman authorities. And now there were many in the Jewish community who were prepared to stir up similar trouble for these Jewish followers of Jesus. There were many who opposed them, rejected them and spoke out against them. There were those who made life difficult for them and who were beginning to persecute them. And it was only going to get worse.

And so these Jewish Christians had begun to ask whether they had really got it right. If they were on the right course, why was God making it so difficult for them? Was Jesus really the promised Messiah? Was it really worth it to go on following him? Perhaps it might be better to turn back to their previous Jewish faith – as if the Messiah had not come.

This letter is written to show them that they cannot and must not do that, for there is no one like Jesus.

That is the burden of Chapter 1. Jesus is greater than all the people who had brought God’s word beforehand at various times and in various ways. He is greater even than the angels. He is the unique Son of God, the Messiah.

And Chapter 2 develops this theme. Jesus is the Son of God who came from heaven and identified himself with us. He took upon himself our flesh. He became like us so that he might taste death for us. And by his resurrection from the dead he has destroyed the power of death. He came to save us from sin and death. He now lives as our great High Priest in the heavens, ever living to help us when we face any trouble or temptation that might tempt us to turn back from following him.

And so to chapter 3...

Hebrews 3:1-2a

Here are its opening verses (Hebrews 3:1-2a):

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him.”

I could stop here. This is enough of a text for a sermon – and it is the theme of the whole letter, for its message is summarised towards the end in Hebrews 12:2-3:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The whole theme of Hebrews is summed up in the opening words of chapter 3. Why look at the whole chapter?

But I am a man under authority – to preach from the whole of Hebrews 3 as part of your series on Hebrews. I shall do as I have been instructed.

Jesus Greater than Moses – verses 2-6

The theme of this chapter is that Jesus is greater than Moses.

Verse 2 begins with the suggestion that Jesus is like Moses:

“He [Jesus] was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house.”

Moses was faithful in all “God’s house.” The term, “God’s house” here refers to the “household of God” – the people of God. Moses was a faithful leader of the people. He led them out of Egypt, having confronted Pharaoh in the name of the living God. He led them through the Red Sea. He led them to Sinai to meet with God. He received the Law from the hand of God and delivered it faithfully to the people. He rebuked their idolatry and lack of trust in God. He led them through the wilderness for 40 years. He was a very great man who was faithful to God’s call upon his life.

But there are also great differences between Moses and Jesus vv. 3-6a:

“Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ‘Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house,’ bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house.”

Let me illustrate this from work. I work in an organisation where, among the many employees there are managers, directors and, at the top, a CEO. I am thankful to say that they are good managers; they are faithful to the calling of God for the work of Bible Society. But, at the end of the day we are all made of the same stuff. We are thankful for our leaders, but they are only human – and they are very conscious of this themselves.

So it was with Moses. He was a great leader, but he was made of the same stuff as those whom he led. He was one of the people of God, a member of the household.

But Jesus is different. He is the Son of God who *became* like us. He voluntarily took upon himself a human body and became like us in every way except for sin. But he remains one who is not like us; he is the living God, come in the flesh. He is the one through whom all things were created. And he is the one who is the creator of God’s house – the builder of the house. He is the one who creates the people of God: they are brought into being by him, through his death and resurrection; they are defined in him; they are redeemed through him; they are given life by him; they are his people.

And we are his people, just as the writer of Hebrews expresses it at the end of verse 6:

“And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.”

Returning to verse 1

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”

We are to fix our thoughts on Jesus. He is far greater than Moses. He is Lord.

He is called an “apostle”. That may seem a strange term for the Lord Jesus! The word means “one who is sent”. Jesus was sent into this world by his Father. He was not merely called from among men as Moses was, he was sent from heaven to be our Saviour.

And we are those who share in a “heavenly calling”. He has gone to glory for us and calls us to follow him. We are called to glory.

He is our “high priest”. He has offered the final and perfect sacrifice for sins and has now entered within the veil – into the presence of God – for us. He lives to intercede for us with the Father. And he always lives to help us in every trial, difficulty and discouragement we face because he has been this way before us. He lives to bring us safe to glory.

“Fix your thoughts on Jesus”, says our writer. How can you ever think of turning back to Moses? “Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses.” Jesus Christ is Lord.

Warning against looking back – verses 7-19

In his exhortation to these Jewish believers not to turn back from following the Lord Jesus, our author now quotes from Psalm 95, emphasising that these are the words of God given by the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 3:7-11):

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested and tried me,
though for forty years they saw what I did.
That is why I was angry with that generation;
I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.’
So I declared on oath in my anger,
‘They shall never enter my rest.’”

Here is a warning not to ignore the word of God – the things he has spoken to us. And particularly not to ignore this last word which God has spoken to us by his Son. But we must not miss the fact that this Psalm is also about Moses; it continues the theme of this chapter.

Psalm 95 mentions Meribah (Psalm 95:7c-8):

“Today, if only you would hear his voice,
‘Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness

These names have been translated by the author of Hebrews to bring out their significance. But the names in Psalm 95 tell us that a particular incident is in the mind of the psalmist and of the Holy Spirit who moved him to write. You will find this incident recorded in Numbers chapter 20.

The Israelites were in the desert in a place where there was no water. Hear their complaint against Moses in Numbers 20:2-5:

“Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarrelled with Moses and said, ‘If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no corn or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!’”

They seem to think that it would have been better if they had not started out on this difficult and trying journey; it would have been better if they had stayed in Egypt; it would be better if they were dead.

Moses and Aaron seek God's face and they are told that he will provide water for the people from a rock. Moses has simply to speak to the rock in the name of God and water will gush out from it.

(Incidentally, Paul sees this and other descriptions of water from a rock as pictures of Christ. He is, and always was, the source of living waters for his thirsty people. He was the rock that was always with them; "that rock", says Paul, "was Christ" – 1 Corinthians 10:4.)

So what does Moses actually do? Numbers 20:9-11 tells us:

"So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank."

Moses did not speak to the rock as God had instructed him, he struck it with his staff. His faithfulness failed him at this point. Listen to the response of God, Numbers 20:12-13:

"But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.'

"These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them."

Moses failed to be perfectly obedient to the Lord and as a result he was not able to lead them into the Promised Land; that fell to Joshua – but more of that in Hebrews 4.

Now the point is this: we have one who is far greater than Moses; one who was perfectly faithful to all that God had given him to do. We have a great Saviour who has gone before us into all the promises of God – into the life of the age to come, resurrection life. He has entered glory on our behalf and is determined to bring us there too – that we may see his glory. He became like us and was not ashamed to call us brethren because he, the Son of God, was determined to bring many sons to glory (Hebrews 2:10). He has determined that he will be "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

Therefore, says the author of this letter to Hebrew Christians, do not be like those Israelites spoken of in Psalm 95 – the Israelites of Numbers 20. "Fix your thoughts on Jesus" our faithful Saviour and go on following him faithfully.

How can you turn back to Moses who, for all his greatness, was a flawed human being like us.

But Christ has come – the one in whom all of the promises of God find their fulfilment. Fix your thoughts on him and follow him. Don't look back. Don't turn back.

Returning to verses 1-2

And this is the same word that God, by his Holy Spirit, has for us today (Hebrews 3:1-2a):

"Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him."

Let me conclude with a word of personal testimony.

25 years ago I was the pastor of a church in London. I had led the church for eight years. We lived in a house belonging to the church and we had little money of our own. We had two fairly young children – they were 11 and 9.

The pressures of the work affected my health and I ended up in hospital with pneumonia. I decided that I just could not carry on and I told the congregation one Sunday night that I was standing down from the ministry.

This was a very traumatic time for us. It was traumatic not only in that we were faced with practical issues to which we had no immediate solution: Where would we live? How would I now support my family? There were even more disturbing spiritual issues.

I could not understand what God was doing with our lives. It did not seem to make any sense. It seemed to me that either I had failed God or that he had failed me – and I could not be reconciled to either of these conclusions. Where was I to go? What was I to do?

There was one text of Scripture that came back to me time and time again during those days. It's found near the end of John chapter 6.

Jesus has been teaching about himself as the bread of life come down from heaven to give life to the world – another echo of Israel's years in the wilderness. He tells the people that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have life.

The crowds were offended, and “from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66). Jesus turned to the twelve and asked them whether they were also going to leave him. As ever, it is Peter who answers. He says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

At that time, Peter was probably just as confused as the crowd by what Jesus had been teaching them. But he could not drift away with the crowd because he did know this: there was nowhere else to go; Jesus had the words of eternal life.

This text came back to me again and again at that time. I did not know what God was doing with me – with us. I felt confused and even angry. But I could not get away from this truth: there was nowhere else to go but to turn to Jesus.

This is a vital lesson to learn. When difficult days come and we seem to be walking through a fog – walking in darkness, we can trust Jesus. There is nowhere else to go for there is no one else like him. He alone has the words of eternal life. All we need is to be found in him; he is the bread of life and the river of living water. We may not be able to see the way ahead but we know who has gone this way before and who can lead us on into the light – for he is the light. He has said that he will never leave us or forsake us. He will bring us safe to glory.

There is no alternative (as someone used to like saying). “Fix your thoughts on Jesus.”

Nor is this to be a lonely pressing on to glory. The Israelites on the desert travelled together towards the Promised Land. All too often they encouraged one another in rebellion and so discouraged one another. By contrast we are to travel together and encourage one another (Hebrews 4:13-14):

“Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we have at the first.”

We are called to encourage one another to fix our thoughts on Jesus. Determine to make this your aim and your daily practice.

A few years after I stood down from the ministry, a song was written by Graham Kendrick which I love because it so perfectly expressed all that I had felt; all that I needed to remember. This song has encouraged me to fix my thoughts on Jesus, and it is with this song that we close this evening. It reminds us that there is nowhere else for us to go and no one else to whom we can turn but Jesus. Nor is this a counsel of despair, rather it is the recipe for peace and for joy.

For the joys and for the sorrows
The best and worst of times
For this moment, for tomorrow
For all that lies behind
Fears that crowd around me
For the failure of my plans

For the dreams of all I hope to be
The truth of what I am

For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus

For the tears that flow in secret
In the broken times
For the moments of elation
Or the troubled mind
For all the disappointments
Or the sting of old regrets
All my prayers and longings
That seem unanswered yet

For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus

For the weakness of my body
The burdens of each day
For the nights of doubt and worry
When sleep has fled away
Needing reassurance
And the will to start again
A steely-eyed endurance
The strength to fight and win

For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus

Peter Misselbrook – 06/04/2014