

Fix Your Eyes

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[0 : 00] Okay, but we aren't sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, but we have a good idea from internal evidence why this person wrote this letter. The writer is aware that the recipients of this letter are facing two grave dangers to their faith.

They're facing the danger of heresy and that of persecution. On the one hand, the recipients, probably Jewish Christians, are finding a couple of false doctrines enticing. That angels hold a dignity and position greater than that of Jesus Christ and that old systems within Judaism, like the priesthood and sacrifices and such, are still valid and ongoing.

Now, if these two things are truer, then Jesus is neither the Lord nor the Savior. On the other hand, these Jewish believers in Jesus had suffered much for their faith.

And according to the writer of this letter, they seem to be considering quitting the faith altogether. They are considering quitting the journey.

[1 : 07] So this book is full of warnings. So now go to chapter two. I'm going to look at a few of these warnings. Chapter two, verse one. Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

Chapter three, verse 12. Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. Skip ahead to chapter 10, verse 26.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left. And two more chapters ahead. Chapter 12, verse 25.

Yet another warning. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

Now, in order to drive home these warnings, the author uses some metaphors. One metaphor is that of Israel in the wilderness. Israel was freed from brutal captivity in Egypt.

[2 : 15] They were miraculously delivered from Pharaoh's army through the waters of the Red Sea. And they sang songs of praise and thanksgiving thereafter. And before no time at all, their songs were transformed into complaining and grumbling, wishing to go back.

They would say, there we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full in Egypt. God condemned that generation. God condemned that generation. And the writer of Hebrews compares his readers to Israel in the wilderness.

And he warns them in chapter 3, verse 16. Verse 19.

Okay, so who are these warnings for? The writer of Hebrews makes clear that he is talking to those who have already professed faith in Jesus Christ and have begun to follow him.

And they are members of his church. So it's not just the recipients who these warnings are for.

They're for you. They're for me. But I confess, I tend to zoom right past these warnings when I find them in Scripture.

[3 : 56] You know, once saved, always saved. I believe in the perseverance and preservation of the saints. I'm good.

But, you know, though the Bible is full of such assurances that he who began a good work in you is faithful and will carry it on to the day of completion, to completion of the day of Christ Jesus.

Those assurances don't make a fiction of the warnings here in Hebrews. There's a very real danger for those who profess faith to fall into the sin of unbelief.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we can understand the temptation of quitting the journey. We have wrestled with varying degrees of unbelief at one time or another.

For some of us, our unbelief is like a thick, creeping mist that moves in and out of our thoughts and feelings. Some days are sunny, but some days our faith feels muddy and hazy.

[5 : 00] And the object of our faith appears almost absent altogether. Or at the very best, Jesus Christ appears unclear or indiscernible.

For some, our unbelief is like piercing, scorching arrows of doubt lodged in our minds. Where we're questioning the basic tenets of the faith we grew up with.

Is the Bible even reliable? I don't know anymore. Does God really love me? I don't know anymore. Is there a life after death or a world behind the veil?

I don't know. Sometimes it feels like this is just all there is. Some of us are just fatigued. Hey, I've been running this Christian race for a long time.

For who knows how long. And I'm just tired. And I might just be ready to quit. I'm tired of being told what I can and can't do with my time, with my finances, with my body.

[6 : 08] You know, that guy over there, he's doing whatever he wants. And he seems pretty happy. But I, I'm just worn down. Worn down by the demands on me morally.

Worn down by being so different than the culture around me. Worn down by worrying what my neighbors or coworkers might think if they heard or saw what I really believed.

I mean, I think I could just check this whole thing. Or, you know, I could just modify it to fit my wants and my needs to make it more palatable to me and everybody else.

You know, perhaps your unbelief originates on a horizontal plane. You know, you love Jesus. But the church is a bunch of weirdos. And that's the best case scenario. Worst case, they're hypocrites who have hurt me.

And they've hurt the ones that I love. And if there were any truth to Christianity that God is love, it would seem that those who follow him would resemble him in that way, in some way.

[7 : 10] I think, I think all of us have experienced one of these at some time or the other.

Or perhaps even all of them. And all these doubts can feel like a great cloud of accusers. Give up, they cry. Forget God.

Hey, follow your heart. And in church, we feel most authentic when we sing, prone to wander. Lord, I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love. So the book of Hebrews is for us. And its warnings are for us.

Fortunately, it is also full of wisdom on how to heed the warnings. The writer of Hebrews uses another metaphor to encourage us to persevere in our faith.

[8 : 10] He's compared the Christian life to that of Israel in the wilderness. And he also compares it to something that the Apostle Paul liked to use as a metaphor.

And actually something that a lot of writers of this era like to use as a metaphor. And that's that of athletic competition. The metaphor is introduced in chapter 10, verse 35.

The writer of the Hebrews writes, You know, I love that, right?

Up until here, he's given us a lot of commands. Well, at least in this sermon, you've heard a lot of warnings. But he encourages us by giving to us our identity.

This is what you need to do. But remember, this is to whom you belong. This is who you are. You belong to the church. You belong to God's people. You belong to all those who have persevered right until the end.

[9 : 23] And then the writer introduces what we sometimes call the hall of faith. This is Hebrews chapter 11. These are those from the Old Testament who, through faith, persevered to the end.

I'm going to read a little lengthy passage. It starts in verse 33. This is poetry. Listen to this. They conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned. They were sawn into. They were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated.

Of whom the world was not worthy. Wandering about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.

[10 : 42] Brothers and sisters, this is to whom we belong. And then in chapter 12, we read, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

So what does the writer mean? That we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Now, he's not saying, nor does it say anywhere else in scripture, that those in heaven are observing what's going on down here, looking at our lives and cheering us on.

You know, like Abraham and David looking down, seeing Dan. Like, oh, Dan, you only did eight hours on your smartphone instead of nine and a half hours.

Good job today, Dan. Keep it up. That doesn't sound like paradise to me. And that's not what's going on here. The writer of Hebrews is simply staying within his metaphor.

Okay? The metaphor of the race. We are to be encouraged by all the runners who have run the race successfully before us. And we are to follow their example. We read that we too are also to lay aside every weight.

[11:59] We too are also to lay aside sin which clings so closely. What does it mean to lay aside every weight? Well, runners in the ancient Olympics would run naked.

Clothes were considered good. But ultimately, as an athlete, they impeded one's ability to accomplish the goal. Likewise, is there anything good that might distract us from the singular purpose of following Jesus?

Yes. Yes. Yes, there are. These are good things. Careers, relationships, hobbies, travel, and plenty of other things. Good things. Things created by God can distract us from our goal because we are prone to worship created things instead of the creator.

Sin, too, is something we are to lay aside. But some sin clings so closely that we may be unaware of it. An imitation of those who have gone before us can serve as a mirror for seeing our blind spots and besetting sins.

In scripture, we see those who have gone before us and their sins in gory, unflattering detail. And we see how they repented and how they set aside their sin, which clung so closely.

[13:25] All right. So we've moved through the first 11 chapters of Hebrews, noting that it's full of warnings, but we're encouraged to imitate those who have gone before us.

So let's talk about imitation for a second. Let's actually talk about discipleship, how we grow.

There's a three-step pattern that we recognize at Church of the Advent as a pattern of discipleship, a pattern of growth.

And it's almost identical to a pattern that musicians follow to learn how to play jazz. Now, the first of those steps you could call information. Now, musicians learning to play jazz, they first learn the basic vocabulary of jazz.

They learn the music theory that's particular to jazz. They learn the scales that are particular to jazz. You know, not just like the major and the minor, but the blues scale, the bebop scale, etc.

They learn the forms that a lot of jazz tunes follow. 12-bar blues, rhythm changes. And jazz musicians learn jazz history from its roots as field hollers and work songs on southern plantations to the very unique culture of New Orleans.

[14:40] And then as it spread up to Mississippi to Kansas City and Chicago, then across to New York and L.A. and around the world, and we learn all the important artists and what made them unique.

Louis Armstrong, D.C.'s own Duke Ellington, Byrd and Diz, Miles and Coltrane, Mingus and Monk, all necessary information for a musician learning how to play jazz.

Now, Christians, too, acquire and absorb information. We're pretty good at it, too, aren't we? Jesus told his disciples to go, therefore, into all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Paul, likewise, tells his protegee, Timothy, in his first letter to him, the things that you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses. Teach others, teach and trust to reliable men who will be qualified to teach others also.

And as Christians, we learn by reading the Bible, internalizing what it has to say. We get information by studying the Ten Commandments.

[15:44] We learn our ethics from the Ten Commandments. We learn our worship from the Lord's Prayer. We learn our beliefs from the Apostles' Creed. We learn the history of salvation as it unfolds through the Scriptures.

We learn the history of the Church through the ages. To put it concisely, mature disciples have sound doctrine. That's the first step. We call that information. Now, I'm going to skip the second step, which is imitation, and go right to the third step.

The third step you could call improvisation. Just as jazz musicians take all the basics they've learned and apply it correctly to improvising over a jazz tune, Christians take all that they know and apply it to living in the present day.

I know what vocation is, and this is how I will fulfill my vocation ethically as a Christian in this particularly difficult field. That's improvisation. I know what the discipline of Sabbath is.

I improvise by knowing how to keep Sabbath with my crazy DC schedule. So, the first step or the first pattern or the first step of the pattern of discipleship we see is information.

[16:54] The third step is improvisation. Now, I skipped the second step, fittingly, because I think most of us have a pretty good grasp of steps one and three.

Information comes easily for us enough. And improvisation comes easily enough, too, being an individualistic culture that we are. I skipped the second step because I think it's the step most of us tend to skip.

Now, jazz musicians do not skip this step. This is the most important step. When I was a music student in the 90s studying jazz, way back in the 1990s, we enjoyed making fun of a certain soprano saxophone player who was very popular on top 40 radio stations back then, and we felt probably unfairly disdain for him.

Not because his music was cheesy, which it was, nor because he was classified as a jazz musician at Sam Goody's and Tower Records, and he was not a jazz musician.

We didn't like the guy because he had a reputation for saying, it starts and ends with me. Now, I don't know if that's true or not, and that's why I haven't named him.

[18:09] I probably shouldn't name him anyway. But that was his reputation. It starts and ends with me. He was reputed to have claimed that he was completely independent of influences, that he never patterned his playing on another player, that he was not indebted at all to any other musician that may have gone before him.

And this struck us as preposterous, because no one learns jazz this way. My teachers had me listen to and transcribe, note for note, J.J. Johnson's solo over the blues tune, Billy's Bounce, Miles Davis' solo over the tune of So What.

I bought an anthology of Charlie Parker's transcribed solos and learned to play those along with him. I mean, how else would a jazz player learn about note selection and space, about phrasing and pace, about how to swing?

You learn improvisation through imitation of those who have done it best. And you gravitate to certain player styles that you admire, and after imitating them, you develop your own voice and style.

Now, this is exactly how the Bible teaches discipleship. We don't grow by making our way through the world on our own in isolation.

[19:19] It doesn't start and end with us. We imitate others. We immerse ourselves in Scripture and follow patterns of holiness and perseverance in others that we see in the Old and New Testaments.

We familiarize ourselves with the saints of the early church who suffered much and died for the faith and who studied Scriptures diligently and preserved the faith for later generations.

And we imitate each other, too. At least, I imitate you. Because when I see Church of the Advent, I see people living in their vocations in a very difficult city, doing it faithfully.

I see people at Church of the Advent who extend mercy to those who need it, who are passionate about justice and speak out on behalf of those who are oppressed and marginalized.

I see you take people into your homes that need a place to stay. I see you provide meals for one another when things get rough.

[20:39] You are an example of perseverance. And I imitate you. Now, if we're on pilgrimage, what is the promised land?

If we're in a race, what ultimately is the prize? If we want to heed the warnings of Hebrews and stay on target, if we want to arrive with the rest of the saints at the finish line, then the writer of Hebrews gives us the key.

I shy away from saying this is a key or the key, but this is the key. Chapter 12, verse 2. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus had no cloud of witnesses cheering him on. It was in isolation that he perfectly obeyed his father on our behalf. His destination on earth wasn't paradise, but it was the cross.

It was the shame and the ignominy of the cross. On the cross, our sputtering attempts to run this race are replaced by his unwavering devotion to his father.

[22 : 06] On the cross, our doubts and our unbelief, that punishment they're deserved, are exchanged with God's, with Jesus's confident commitment to his father.

father. We fix our eyes on Jesus, beautiful Jesus, who died for us, who struggle with crippling doubt and unbelief.

We fix our eyes on Jesus, beautiful Jesus, for us, for us who are tempted to quit, for us who are constantly distracted by all the shiny things of the world, for us to whom sin can sing, for us to whom sin can cling so closely and bog us down.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. This is how we heed the warnings. This is how we persevere. Allow yourself to be allured to him, to be wooed by him.

Build time into your life. Build unhurried time into it and wait there and let your soul be re-enchanted. Stay there until you know that Jesus loves you.

[23 : 21] Hear him say, experience him saying, all that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me.

Everyone who looks on the Son, who fixes their eyes on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we are so distracted.

Lord, we are so excited. This world is so noisy. It is a din, a cacophony, both orally and visually, but especially spiritually.

We feel tugged in every direction. Many of us feel like giving up. So as we fix our eyes on you, Jesus, would you be faithful as we know you are faithful and show yourself to us, reveal to us your beauty, your glory, your majesty.

[24 : 50] Can we be transfixed by you, Jesus? Loved and served and healed. Can we be transfixed by you, Jesus? Jesus, who lived faithfully and obediently all the way to the cross and died for us.

Jesus, can we be transfixed by you who rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven where you sit at the right hand of the Father? Can we be transfixed by you like all of those who have gone before us who have been faithful to you?

Thank you. Thank you for their examples. Thank you, most of all, Jesus, that even when we doubt and even when we fail, you still love and accept us.

Nothing can separate us from the love of the Father because of what you have done for us. Amen.