

Keeping Focus

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Living God, we believe that you got a hold of the author of the book of Hebrews and enabled him to think these magnificent thoughts and write these gorgeous words.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace you would help us enter into the reality of which they speak as never before. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

It all comes down to focus. Our well-being in this increasingly complex world all comes down to where we fix our eyes, where we fix our physical eyes, and where we fix the eyes of our hearts. During this period of uncertainty in the history of this congregation's ministry and life, the pastoral team has sensed that the Lord Jesus, as head of the church, is inviting First Baptists on a journey. On a journey of reading and studying and grappling with the New Testament document traditionally known as the letter to the Hebrews.

[1 : 22] And I've been asked to help in the journey. By serving as a kind of Barnabas, a son of encouragement to the team preachers, as well as preaching in the series once in a while, including today, launching us on our way.

I say preaching once in a while because that is all I can do right now, given the teaching and preaching commitments I've made since I retired as your senior minister 19 months ago now, especially at Cary Theological College, where I need to put together two video courses, one on Genesis 1-11, which I believe is the first half of the Bible, and the other on John 13-17, the Upper Room Discourse.

Cary will then use these courses in its emerging vision of making theological education more accessible worldwide. Why Hebrews?

It is a big letter. 13 very jam-packed chapters. An exquisitely beautiful piece of writing in any century of history.

In the words of New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, it is one of the most beautifully written, powerfully argued, and theologically profound writings of the New Testament.

[3 : 02] An intellectually and spiritually demanding document, and therefore a wonderfully invigorating document. Not for the fainthearted, yet strengthening the fainthearted like few other documents can.

So why do it? Why journey through Hebrews? The answer lies in asking another question. Why did whoever wrote Hebrews write Hebrews?

I say whoever wrote because in the final analysis, we simply do not know who wrote this document. Why did whoever wrote Hebrews write Hebrews?

Yes, it is a letter as traditionally understood. At least that is the way it ends. Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom if he comes, I shall see you.

Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. Grace be with you all.

Sounds like all the other New Testament letters, doesn't it? So yes, it is a letter.

[4 : 18] But it is a whole lot more than a letter. For this letter contains a full-blown sermon. Hebrews is a sermon sent in a letter.

The author explicitly names it as such. Chapter 13, verse 22. But I urge you, brothers and sisters, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

Briefly. This word of exhortation, or this word of encouragement, the phrase is used by the early church to describe its preaching.

And a brilliant, exquisite, life-transforming sermon it is. In my opinion, one of the most brilliant, exquisite, life-transforming sermons ever written.

In my mind, Hebrews is rivaled only by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5 to 7.

The Sermon on the Mount takes about 19 minutes to preach.

[5 : 30] I preached it out loud for this congregation in 2010. Hebrews takes about 75 minutes to preach out loud. Ready?

It goes like this. Just kidding. So why was it written? Why was it preached? Because the people whom the preacher of Hebrews loved were being tempted.

They were being tempted to no longer live by faith. They were being tempted to go back to religion, to go back to mere ritual.

Doing religion is always easier than living by faith. For the preacher of Hebrews, living by faith means believing that the invisible is more real than the visible and acting accordingly.

Hebrews 11, verse 1. Famous verse. Now faith is the assurance or substance of things hoped for, the conviction or evidence of things not seen.

[6 : 55] For the preacher of Hebrews, faith is the adventure of putting one's weight on the unseen and the not yet. And the people the preacher loved were getting tired of this adventure.

They wanted to go back to the easy way, back to religious ritual. And sadly, the consequences were beginning to show.

Contemporary preacher Thomas Long sums it up best.

They were tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus.

Know anyone like that? The Hebrews were disciples of Jesus who had a significant background in Judaism. They knew their Bibles, the Old Testament, pretty well.

[8 : 16] Yet for all their knowledge, they were holding back on all-out trust in the God of the Bible. The preacher says that they've been disciples for years and chapter 5, verse 12, ought to be teachers by now.

They ought to be eagerly giving away everything they've been given. The preacher says they had already tasted so many benefits of the gospel and had already paid the price for discipleship.

Chapter 10, verse 32. But remember the former days when after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property. Accepted joyfully the seizure of your property.

That line challenges me every time I read it. And yet, these Hebrews were being tempted to give up. They were being tempted to no longer live by faith and to go back to mere religion.

[9 : 37] So the preacher preaches. Oh, how he preaches. With one overarching goal in mind. To stir up their faith and to empower them to stay in the adventure.

Chapter 10, verse 35. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. You have need of endurance. So do we.

So do I. So do you. We have need of endurance to keep pressing into the unseen and the not yet. How?

How do we endure? How do we stay in this adventure of radical faith? The preacher of Hebrews answers by keeping focus.

Chapter 3, verse 1. Consider Jesus. Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. And chapter 12, verse 3. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

[10 : 44] Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. Focus, says the preacher of Hebrews. You're losing your way because you are not focusing.

Focus on Jesus. Keep the focus on Jesus. The only way you're going to stay alive in this adventure is you have to focus on Jesus. The implicit question being, on whom else should we focus?

I mean, who else is worthy to be the center of our vision? One of the powerful politicians of our day?

One of the famous athletes of our day?

One of the leading scholars of our day? One of the dominant scientists of our day? Of whom else, of what else, should we fix our minds? Who can compare with Jesus?

Who can handle any closeness to Jesus? Who can hold a candle to Jesus? Whatever I'm trying to say. There simply is no one else in all the universe.

[11 : 48] We have need of endurance, he says. So consider Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Which the preacher does right from the beginning of the sermon called Hebrews.

In the first four verses of the sermon. which is in the original one sentence. One elegantly composed sentence.

One sentence designed to rivet our attention on Jesus. God, says the preacher, after he spoke long ago to the ancestors in many portions and in many ways, in these last days, has spoken in son. That is how the text literally reads. In son. Not just in a son. Not even in his son. But in son. The great claim with which Hebrews begins is the great claim underlining all of the Bible and thus the Christian faith.

The claim that the living God has spoken. The living God has spoken for God's self. The living God has chosen not to be hidden, but to open up and reveal God's self.

[13 : 06] As Francis Schaeffer used to say in the last century, he is there and he is not silent. The living God is there and he is not silent. The awesome, holy, invisible, transcendent God has not left us to grope in the dark and try to figure out who God is and what God is like.

God has spoken for God's self in creation, in historical events, in commands and promises, in and through many prophets. But now, in these last days, as the preacher puts it, God has spoken in son.

Up till now, says David Gooding of England, God's speech has been piecemeal and progressive. But now God's speech is full and final.

And that speech is a person. Son. God's full and final speech is a person. I mean, how could it be otherwise? The personal speech of a personal God about a personal God has to be a person. Not an idea, not a principle to live by, not a force, but a person. The living God's full and final speech is Jesus. Consider Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

[14 : 27] On whom else should we fix our eyes? So, in the opening sentence of this exquisite exposition, the preacher tells us why Jesus is the full and final speech and why he deserves to own our undivided attention.

The preacher gives eight reasons. In one sentence, eight profound declarations about Jesus' son. Ready? Or listen. As the preacher puts it in chapter 2, verse 1. We must pay closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away.

Okay. Declaration number one. He is the heir of all things. Astounding declaration.

Jesus Christ is the heir of all things, meaning he is the rightful owner of all things. All things. Is that not a bit of an exaggeration?

[15 : 38] Not at all. Everything. Heir of all things. Jesus' son owns it all. All the stars? His. All the planets?

His. All the mountains and seas? His. All cats and dogs and whales and elephants? His.

Shangri-La? His. Wall Center? His. Trump Tower?

His. Ridley Hall? His. White House? His. All people? His. Donald Trump? His.

Justin Trudeau? His. King Jamal? His. Vladimir Putin? His. Sidney Crosby? His. Marcus Stroman? His. Adele? His.

The list goes on and on and on. You? His. I. His. His. His. Your children? My children? His. Your grandchildren? My grandchildren? His.

[16 : 32] We are all His. As Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper used to say, there is not a single inch of the universe over which Jesus Christ cannot say, that is mine.

Jesus' son, heir of all things. Of whom else can this be said? No one.

So keep the focus on Him. And, declaration number two. Jesus' son is the one through whom God made the world, which is why He can be heir of all things.

He made all things. The Creator owns what He creates. It's all His handiwork. It's all the work of the one born in the manger. It's all the work of the one who traveled the dusty roads of Galilee.

It's all the work of the one who hung on a tree. He made it all. Well, everything is stamped with, this belongs to Jesus. And, everything in the universe is stamped with, made by Jesus.

[17 : 38] Everyone is stamped at the deepest recesses of our being, made by Jesus. I've used the illustration before. Lift the collar on the back of your blouse or shirt.

The tag reads, Soen in Malaysia. Or, Hijo in Mexico. Lift the collar on the skin of any human being. And, the tag reads, Fashioned by Jesus. Put together by His love. Huge implications.

Like, I'm not an accident. Neither are you. I'm not the product of some impersonal random process. Neither are you.

There are no accidental human beings. Everyone who was born was born because Jesus wanted them to be born. Which means, We find our reason for being when we find Him.

[18 : 37] Or, better yet, We find our reason for being when He finds us. And, which means, The wisest way to live is Jesus' way. E. Stanley Jones Used to emphasize this a whole lot in his ministry in India.

Everything is made in its inner structure to work Jesus' way. Everything is made in its inner structure to work Jesus' way. Or, it does not work.

Relationships, marriages, families, schools, business, governments. All designed to work in Jesus' way. Or, they do not work. As we are sadly witnessing in the world today.

Through whom God made the world. Of whom else can that be said? No one.

So, keep the focus on Him. Declaration 3. Jesus is the radiance of God's glory. Oh, my. Huge metaphysical implications.

[19 : 43] The word glory refers to God as God is in God's essence. Glory is God as God is. The word radiance literally means shining forth.

It is the nature of light to shine forth. Light, simply because it's light, shines forth. No one needs to tell light, shine forth. It is the nature of God to shine forth.

God, simply because He is God, shines forth. No one needs to tell God to shine forth. It's the nature of God to radiate. And God's radiating, God's shining forth, is Jesus, the Son.

It is the nature of the living God to shine forth. And that radiance is Jesus Christ. This word radiance also means mirror.

The point being that when God looks into the mirror that is Jesus, God sees Himself. When God fixes His eyes on Jesus, God sees Himself.

[20 : 49] Of whom else can that be said? No one. So keep the focus on Him. Declaration number four. Jesus' Son is the exact representation of God's nature.

Again, huge metaphysical implications. The word nature refers to God's substance, to God's inherent being, to that which makes God be God.

The word exact representation is the word from which we get the English word character. It's used of the image left on a coin after being stamped by a die.

Someone takes a die, say, of Caesar, stamps it into silver or gold, and on the silver and gold, we see the character of Caesar. God wants to give us a character of God's self, so He gives us Jesus. Jesus is stamped with the very being of God. When we look at Jesus, we see what God is like. God is just like Jesus. Well, that's a stunning declaration, isn't it?

[21 : 56] The greatest compliment we can ever pay any human being is, you are just like Jesus. You are so Christ-like. Well, it turns out that the greatest compliment we can pay the living God is, you are just like Jesus.

You are just as Christ-like. Exact representation of God's nature. Of whom else can that be said? No one.

So keep the focus on Him. How are you doing? Don't worry about grasping it all. And don't even worry about retaining it all.

Just let it wash over you and convince you that the invisible is more real than the visible in any moment of your life. Praise God.

Declaration number five. The Son upholds all things by the word of His power. Oh, my goodness. Upholds all things.

[23 : 02] All things. Or you can translate it, bears all things. Both in the sense of bear up and bear along. Jesus the Son bears all things up and bears all things along to their inherent destiny.

Which is to say that if Jesus Christ were ceased to exist, so would all things. If Jesus were ceased to be, everything would collapse into nothingness.

He and no one else holds it all together. Oh, that is such good news. I do not have to hold myself together.

What a horrible burden to bear. The burden of holding my life together. Jesus relieves me of that burden. He bears me up and bears me along.

He bears you up and bears you along. He bears up our children. He bears up our grandkids. I've got nine of them. I can't bear them myself. But He can.

[24 : 13] And He will bear them long after I'm gone. All of reality is held together by Jesus. And if I fall apart, I fall apart into the embrace of Jesus Christ.

He upholds all things by the word of His power. Simply by speaking. Let there be and there was. Let there continue to be and there is. Jesus speaks and He keeps the world turning.

Of whom else can that be said? No one. So keep the focus on Him. Declaration number six.

Jesus' Son has made purification for sins. Literally it is. He Himself has made purification because no one else could. The one who made all things and maintains all things comes to purify all things. He comes to cleanse us. That is, He comes to deal with sin. He Himself. For no one else can. We try, but we do not make it.

[25 : 23] I mean, tell me about it. Sin is just simply too much for us. And the older I am getting, the more I realize that I am simply no match for the power of sin.

But He has. Sin has spoiled what He has made and so He comes to cleanse it. I love the way theologian John Webster puts it. The world is retarded in attaining its perfection by the fact that fellowship with God is polluted.

What is needed, therefore, if the world is to reach its consummation are not only conservation and governance, but cleansing. Cleansing.

This will be a major theme of the rest of Hebrews. The preacher will sound this note again and again. Chapter 9, verse 14. Jesus' blood cleanses our conscience.

Chapter 9, verse 26. But now, once at the consummation of the ages, He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And then, chapter 10, verse 10.

[26 : 24] One of the greatest verses in the whole Bible. 10, 10. We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. He has cleansed us for no one else could.

He has made purification for sins. Of whom else can that be said? No one. So keep the focus on Him. Declaration number 7.

Jesus the Son sat down at the right hand of majesty. He sat down because He is tired. Burying the world would be very tiring.

Sat down. Why? Because He has completed the crucial work He came to do. It is finished, He shouts from the cross. All that is needed, all that needed to be done in order to cleanse us and bring us into the fullness of His plan for our lives has been done.

He sat down. The human priest who ministered in the Jerusalem temple stood. Hebrews 10, verse 11 and 12. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time after time the same sacrifices which can never take away sin.

[27 : 45] But He, Jesus, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time sat down at the right hand of God. Finished. So He sits down. And therefore, He calls us to draw near.

Chapter 4, verse 16. Draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. He sat down.

It also means that He's been installed on the throne of the universe. He who dies to cleanse us is risen from the dead and exalted to the highest place and He therefore, chapter 7, verse 25, is able to save for all time those who draw near to Him.

Of whom else can that be said? No one. So keep the focus on Him. And declaration number 8.

Jesus is much better than the angels as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. We'll deal with this more fully next Sunday. For now, we only need to know this.

[28 : 56] For those whom the Hebrew sermon was preached, they believe that angels served as mediators between God and humanity. It was thought that angels brought God's message to humanity and angels brought humanity's message, i.e. prayers, to God.

Jesus now serves in that role because He does it better. For unlike the angels, Jesus knows what it means to be God. And unlike the angels, Jesus knows what it means to be human.

And because He's both God and human, He is now the perfect mediator between God and humanity. Of whom else can that be said?

No one. No one. No one. So keep the focus on Him, on Jesus, Son, heir, through whom the world was made, radiance of God's glory, exact representation of God's nature, upholding all things by the word of His power, making purification for sin, sitting down at the right hand of the majesty at high, better than the angels having a more excellent name.

And that is only the first sentence. Let us pray. What a sentence it is, O Lord.

[30 : 30] What a sentence. Designed to rivet our attention on Jesus Christ.

So we pray that the very reason that you inspired this sentence might be realized in each of us in these coming days, whether at work or play, alone or with others, in the daytime and at night.

Grant that you are our vision. Amen.