

THE DIFFERENCE JESUS MAKES

Studies in the book of Hebrews

1. Jesus our brother (Hebrews 1-2)

This morning, we're beginning a new series looking at the book of Hebrews.

And we need to acknowledge right from the outset – *there's a lot we don't know about this letter!*

We don't know *who wrote it* –

It almost certainly wasn't the apostle Paul, but beyond that, we can't be sure who the writer is.

Various candidates have been suggested over the centuries – did Paul's companion Barnabas write it? Did Apollos, or Priscilla and Aquila?

We just don't know.

And we don't know which early group of Christians it was sent to – *who the original readers were.*

Some commentators suggest the letter is written to a house church in Rome, made up largely of believers from a Jewish background –

But, again, we can't be sure.

What we *can* be certain of, from even the briefest of readings of this letter –

Hebrews is a letter written to a group of discouraged and disillusioned believers –

A group of early Christians who appear to be close to giving up on the Christian life and walking away from it.

Now, before Wednesday this week, I was wondering whether it would be my job this morning to comfort discouraged and disillusioned England football fans –

But then you made it through to the knock-out stages of the World Cup, so you're doing ok on that one...

But – as with any bit of the Bible we look at as Christians, it's worth asking the question –

What has the message of Hebrews got to do with me?

If this letter is written to discouraged and disillusioned people – what relevance does that have for us today?

In a gathering of this size, I'm fairly confident that there will be Christians here this morning who don't need to think hard about that question.

Perhaps this morning, you feel pretty discouraged – pretty disillusioned with the Christian life –

Maybe with life in general.

Everything feels like a struggle – and sometimes you find yourself asking:

“Is this really what I signed up for when I put my faith in Jesus? Is God really keeping his end of the bargain and helping me live for him?”

“Why does everything have to be so *hard*?”

If that’s how you’re feeling this morning –

Then you’re in a very similar position to the original readers of this letter –

So – *the message of this letter is a message for you!*

BUT –

I want to suggest this morning that the message of Hebrews is a message for *all of us*

–

Both Christians – and those here this morning who aren’t Christians –

Both those who feel discouraged – and those who are very happy to be a Christian right now.

I hope that, alongside those Christians who feel discouraged this morning,

There are many of us who *don’t!*

But both this letter – and the rest of the Bible – is clear:

Every single Christian will face times of discouragement and struggle in their lives.

Every single Christian will experience moments when it feels like it would just be a whole lot easier if we just gave up living for Jesus,

and went back to living like everyone else does in our world.

So – if you don’t count yourself as a discouraged or disillusioned Christian this morning –

First of all, *thank God for that...!*

And then – listen to the message of this book, and view it as a sort of *preventative medicine* for the times that will come, when you too will be discouraged –

when you too may feel disillusioned.

I can say with confidence that every single Christian will face times of discouragement –

Because the New Testament is clear throughout –

The life of Christian discipleship is costly!

“*If anyone would come after me,*” says Jesus in Luke chapter 9 – “*he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*”

At the end of his life, the apostle Paul was able to say the stirring words –

“*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*” (2 Timothy 3:7)

Wonderful words, that I’m sure every Christian here would love to echo at the end of our lives...!

But listen again to what Paul is saying...

The life of the Christian is *a fight!*

It is *a gruelling race! A marathon, rather than a sprint!*

And as a result, we will regularly experience times of struggle –
Times when we may doubt that we can carry on.

It's important that we see in this letter –
The Hebrew Christians didn't start out discouraged!

Turn with me to chapter 10 and vv.32-34 (read aloud).

But over time, they had become discouraged –
And we get several signs of their discouragement and disillusionment in the letter.

For example:

- There were some of them who had given up meeting together (see 10:25)
- There were some who had stopped listening to the word of God – they just had no appetite for it (see 4:7)
- And there even appear to have been some who had walked away all together and gone back to their old life in Judaism (see 10:35-39)

The writer of this letter is writing to *discouraged and disillusioned Christians*.

So, if you're a Christian here this morning, you need to recognise that times of discouragement and disillusionment *will come* –
And if you're not a Christian here this morning, you need to see this too!

If you're here this morning and you're exploring the claims of Jesus and of Christianity –
If you're trying to assess whether the Christian life is for you –

Then, on one level, I'd love to tell you –
“Become a Christian – follow Jesus – and all your problems are over!”

But that would be dishonest of me – and that would deny large bits of the Bible, like this letter to the Hebrews!

Jesus is always very honest –
There is a cost involved in following him! It will not always be easy!

But he is also clear –
A life lived for him is actually *the only life that will truly satisfy us!*

The only life that will truly give us joy and hope!
The only life that will set us free from our sin and selfishness, to love and serve God and to love and serve one another!

That's what the writer to the Hebrews believed –
And he wrote this letter to act as a *remedy* to discouragement and disillusionment among Christians.

So – let's look at the opening chapters of it together now.

In the opening two chapters here, the writer sets out his stall for the rest of the letter.

According to the writer, the remedy for discouragement and disillusionment in the Christian life is not to start with yourself, as we might expect –

To begin reflecting and asking questions about the reasons why you feel discouraged or disillusioned...

No –

According to the writer of Hebrews, what a group of discouraged, disillusioned Christians needs to see, first and foremost –

Is *the character of the God in whom they have believed – as he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ!*

We need to have our eyes opened afresh to *Jesus Christ* –

Who he is –

What he has done for his people at the cross and the resurrection –

And what he will do for his people in the future – by leading them into glory!

So that is where the writer begins –

Not with *us* – but with *God*.

So – what does a discouraged Christian need to hear?

First of all, he or she needs to hear verses 1-3 of chapter 1 and realise:

- **God has reached out to you and wants you to know him**

Read vv.1-2 aloud.

The beginning of the book of Hebrews is similar to the beginning of the Christian life – in that *God makes the first move!*

God reaches out to us and speaks to us –

God reaches out to us and wants us to know him.

God has spoken!

He does that in at least two ways, according to these verses:

First of all, God has reached out to us -

- **Through the Scriptures (v.1)**

Which here refers to the Old Testament –

Read v.1 again.

God has spoken to us!

That is such a precious truth – but it's one I suspect every Christian in this room takes all too easily for granted...!

God hasn't left us in the dark about himself –

He hasn't left us to blind guesswork when we try to discover who he is and what he wants from us –

God has spoken!

God has revealed himself to us in his word!

That's why we look at the Bible together every Sunday morning and evening!

That's why our mid-week homegroups look at the Bible together –

That's why we try to read our Bibles when we are on our own – however falteringly...

Because God has spoken in his word!

When we forget that, then reading the Bible just becomes a chore – something we know we probably should do, but certainly not a joy –

Or worse, we begin to believe that it's totally irrelevant to our daily lives – that we need something more practical, less difficult to help us in our lives...

But the writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers here –

God has spoken to us through his word!

God wants us to know him!

Throughout this letter, the writer demonstrates his belief that the Old Testament is actually written for *Christians* –

That it's written for *us* – and that God has deep and life-changing truths to tell us through his word!

And we'll see more of that next week.

But for now, we need to recognise that ***God has spoken in his word –***

God is reaching out to us and wants us to know him!

And that is a huge encouragement to discouraged and disillusioned people...!

In the midst of discouragement – in the midst of depression, whether brief or long-term, our hearts seem to mock us, don't they?

We instinctively feel that no-one cares about us.

We just take it as a given that we are on our own –

That we're cut off – from God, from other people, from any sense of meaning or happiness...

And we are completely alone.

If you are familiar with that feeling at all, then please –

Look again at what the writer of Hebrews is saying to us!

You are not alone!

You are not cut off from God! God is not indifferent to your struggles and your fears!

God wants you to know him – and he has made the first move by revealing himself to you!

God is reaching out to you –

Through his word –

And supremely, through the living Word – Jesus Christ, his Son!

- **Through Jesus (vv.2-3)**

Right at the outset of this letter, the writer wants to lift our eyes to Jesus as the *supreme revelation of the character of God*.

If you ever feel that God is cold or unfeeling towards you –

If you ever feel that God is indifferent to our world and all the injustice that goes on in it –

Then the writer to the Hebrews urges us:

Look at Jesus – and see the character of the living God in all its fullness!

By verse 2, the writer has turned to Jesus –

Because he knows that *only a knowledge of Jesus Christ can transform weak, discouraged people – into people who rejoice in God even as they struggle –*

Into people who will persevere and trust in God for the rest of their lives – no matter what discouragements will come.

Right from the outset of the letter, the writer wants us to see Jesus –

Who he is –

What he has done for us –

And what he *will* do for us –

Put simply, the writer wants the Christians reading this letter to know with confidence that:

- **Jesus Christ is on your side**

And because knowing that Jesus is on your side is so fundamental to his remedy for discouraged and disillusioned believers,

The writer of Hebrews is determined that his readers *get Jesus **right!***

He is determined that we understand *who the real Jesus is –*

So that we will trust in the real Jesus, and not in a ‘Jesus’ of our own making...!

So, in vv.2-14 of chapter 1, the writer emphasises that Jesus is:

- **Fully God – with the power to save us (1:2-14)**

We could preach a dozen sermons on the descriptions of Jesus in verses 2 and 3 alone –

But let’s quickly get a flavour of what the writer is telling us here.

Jesus is ‘*the heir of all things*’ (v.2)

Everything in the universe belongs to him!

He also ‘*made the universe*’ (v.2) –

Jesus was present with his Father at the creation of the universe, and in fact the whole universe was made through him!

v.3 has the wonderful description of Jesus as *'the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being'* –

God's glory shines most clearly in the face of Christ!

If we want to know why God is glorious –

if we want to know why he deserves our lives and all our praise –

All we need to do is *look at Jesus!*

v.3 also tells us that not only did Jesus create the universe, he also *sustains* it *'by his powerful word'* –

an amazing picture of his power and dignity!

Jesus has *'provided purification for sins'* (v.3) – something we'll return to in the coming weeks –

And now is seated *'at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven'*.

The writer leaves us in no doubt here –

Jesus is the Son of God!

He just does not compare with the angels in heaven (see vv.4-14) –

Jesus is fully God!

But amazingly – even as we begin to take on-board these majestic descriptions of Jesus – we haven't yet got the full picture!

In chapter 2, the writer goes on to tell us that, as well as being fully God – with the power to save us –

Jesus is also:

- **Fully human – with the compassion to help us (2:16-18)**

As we read over this letter in the coming weeks, I hope you'll notice something –

The name 'Jesus' just keeps on coming up...!

'Jesus' is the human name for the Son of God –

The name given to him by his human parents – albeit under the instruction of an angel...

You can't read this letter to the Hebrews without realising that –

*The humanity of Jesus is deeply **precious** to the writer – and he is convinced that his readers need to see it!*

The Son of God – the one who created the universe and who sustains it by his powerful word –

Is both *fully God* – and at the same time, *fully human!*

And that is an awe-inspiring truth!

v.14 –

'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity...'

v.17 –

When he humbled himself and entered our world 2,000 years ago, Jesus was *‘made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God’*.

We’ll explore more on Jesus as our great high priest in the coming weeks...

But what we can see here is an amazing truth that every person here this morning needs to grasp:

Jesus knows what it is to be human!

He became one of us – and is one of us still!

Read v.18.

Jesus knows what it is to suffer –

And he knows what it feels like to be tempted into sin!

Jesus knows that the life of obedience and faith is costly!

And so he is able to help us face up to temptation – and overcome it!

Let me just ask you:

Is this the Jesus you believe in this morning?

Fully God – and fully man?

You see, there is a huge danger for every Christian – and that is that we *get Jesus wrong!*

That we forget who Jesus really is!

All too easily, we emphasise one of the two natures of Jesus over the other –

At a tremendous *cost* to our relationship with him!

We see that in church history –

And we see it in our own lives.

For example –

In the year 325 AD, an early council of the church met in Nicaea, because there were people going round saying that Jesus was not fully God –

And from the Bible, they had to correct that.

Then, in the year 451 AD, another council had to meet in Chalcedon, because there were people going round saying that Jesus was not fully human –

And, again from the Bible, they had to correct that!

And we’re not that different today!

For some of us, we emphasise Jesus as *fully human* –

And so, Jesus becomes our mate – our best friend –

Someone who listens to our problems – who never challenges us – who cares about our problems, but can’t really do anything about them...

For others, we think of Jesus as *fully God* –

So, he is certainly powerful and holy – but he’s ‘up there’, in heaven, and our struggles must appear pretty insignificant to him...

We need to recognise from this opening section of Hebrews –

Neither of those extremes tells the whole story!

*We need to get Jesus **right**, if we are going to persevere in our relationship with him!*

The writer to the Hebrews tells us – *Jesus is fully human.*

He was ‘tempted in every way, just as we are’ (4:15) – and he really *did* suffer when he was tempted!

That is a truly staggering truth about him – but it’s one we need to take on-board!

As a result,

*Your struggles with sin and with unbelief are not insignificant to him –
Jesus has been there ahead of you! He knows what it’s like!*

BUT – he does not *just* sympathise with us –

Jesus is also fully God.

Jesus *did not sin!*

He triumphed over sin through a life of obedience to his Father and through his death and resurrection – so that sin is now a defeated enemy of Jesus’!

And as a result, in dependence on his Spirit, we too can defeat sin in our lives – and say ‘no’ to it!

The writer to the Hebrews wants us to *get Jesus right!*

Because he is absolutely convinced that the only remedy for discouragement and disillusionment in the Christian life –

*Is a **fresh vision of Jesus Christ, our great high priest –
Fully God – and fully man –***

And the knowledge that this same Jesus is on our side!

Only as a human being could Jesus fight with sin and temptation – and take the punishment that sinful humanity deserves on the cross.

Only as the Son of God could he rise again from the dead and free those who trust in him from sin, death and judgement once and for all!

This is the Jesus who alone can give us new life!

And the writer urges us throughout this letter –

Don’t turn away from Jesus!

Remain in him and persevere for him – and you will receive mercy and grace to help you in your time of need!

More than that –

Remain in Jesus – and not only will he help you live for him in *the present* –

He will also give you *a glorious future!*

The future Jesus has in store for his people is a theme that comes up again and again in this letter.

The writer wants us to see that Jesus is not content just to lavish his grace and mercy on us here and now.

No – one day, he will free us from this life of struggle and sin – and bring us into a glorious new creation –

free from death and evil –

where we will enjoy life as it was always meant to be lived – in close relationship with the God who made us.

We'll return to that glorious future Jesus has in store for his people next week in chapters 3 and 4...

But for now, in vv.10-13 of chapter 2, the writer reminds us that we can experience a measure of this glorious future here and now...!

Let's be clear - we don't live in the new creation yet –

We aren't free from death and evil yet –

But from the moment we place our trust in Jesus, we become *children of God* –

We become *Jesus' brothers and sisters* –

And the writer presents this as a foretaste of our future glory!

- **Jesus has brought you into the family of God (2:10-13)**

v.10 reminds us of the purpose for which Jesus humbled himself and entered our world –

'to bring many sons to glory'

To adopt ordinary men and women who put their trust in him – into *the family of God*.

And v.11 makes it clear just what an awesome privilege that is!

Read v.11 aloud.

Do you see what the writer is telling us here?

If you have placed your trust in Jesus – however falteringly, however weak and discouraged you may be feeling –

You have been *'made holy'* –

You have been set apart for God!

And you are of the same family as Jesus Christ!

Just think about that for a moment!

Jesus Christ –
The holy Son of God –
The perfectly obedient Son of Man –

Is not ashamed to call you his brother!
To call you his sister!

Not on the basis of your own performance, but on the basis of what *he* has done for you!

Jesus is not ashamed to call you brothers and sisters!

That would have been an amazing word of encouragement to the discouraged Christians this letter is written to.

In their weakness and disillusionment, I'm sure there would have been many times when they felt ashamed to even call themselves Christians –
And they would have concluded that Jesus must feel the same.

BUT – just look again at what the writer of this letter says to them!

Jesus is not ashamed of you!

He has made atonement for your sin through his death – and now he is bringing you into glory!

And as you wait for that glorious new creation, Jesus – your brother – has the power and the compassion to keep you!

And that is the message of these opening chapters of Hebrews for every single one of us this morning!

If you're a Christian, you are a *child of God* –
And Jesus is not ashamed of you.

He has won salvation for you and he will bring you into glory.

So –
Hold fast to him! Don't turn away from him!

***He is not ashamed to call you his brother – his sister –
So do not be ashamed of him!***

Stay close to him – and all the more as you experience struggle, weakness and discouragement!

Jesus is our merciful and faithful high priest –
He has made atonement for our sins at the cross –
And because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

What do discouraged Christians need to hear?

What does every Christian here this morning need to hear?

God has not abandoned you –

He wants you to know him!

God has reached out to you in the person of his Son Jesus – fully God and fully man –

And every follower of Jesus can know with confidence that Jesus is on their side –

That Jesus is committed to helping us live for him!

He has already made us God's children –

And afterwards, he will lead us into glory.

Take heart from that –

And go to Jesus today, to receive mercy and find grace to help you in your time of need.