

THE DIFFERENCE JESUS MAKES

Studies in the book of Hebrews

2. The necessity of hope (Hebrews 3-4)

I want to begin our time together in the book of Hebrews this morning with a question:

How important is heaven to you?

If you're a Christian here this morning, I wonder –

How often do you think about the future God has in store for his people?

How important is that to your daily life?

If you're not a Christian here this morning, I imagine the idea of heaven may well be one of those slightly awkward beliefs you've heard Christians have...

But that you're not sure what to do with...

You see, heaven gets a pretty poor press in our world.

We seem incapable of picturing it in our culture in any way other than a bright white, slightly boring place, where you play a harp.

According to one series of television commercials in recent years, heaven will be populated entirely of young-ish women who like soft cheese...

Which narrows the appeal of heaven even further...!

For many of us, 'heaven' is a little bit of a joke – and appears to be pretty irrelevant.

We're not sure what to do with it.

And it has to be said –

Christians, too, can feel pretty ambivalent about heaven.

We sometimes worry that life in heaven will be the equivalent of a regular church service –

Only longer – and perhaps with fewer notices...

It just doesn't sound that attractive.

Many Christians also fear – in the words of a now-famous phrase – that 'to be too heavenly-minded is to be no earthly use' –

That we shouldn't really think about heaven too much – and instead get on with the business of serving God here and now.

The charity Christian Aid, for instance, has the strapline – '*We believe in life before death*' –

A useful corrective to those who argue that people who believe in heaven will necessarily become unfeeling about the quality of life people enjoy here and now.

Heaven –

For both Christians and non-Christians in the modern Western world, we're just not sure what to *do* with it...!

As we turn to Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 this morning – we're going to see that the writer of this letter has a very different response to *heaven* –

To a Christian's *future hope*.

He argues here – and throughout this letter – that *the hope of glory – is absolutely essential to a healthy Christian life*.

He's not embarrassed about future glory –

In fact, he does his utmost here to lift his readers' eyes to the future God has in store for his people –

The future won for them by Jesus Christ – through his death and resurrection.

If you were here last week, you'll know that this letter to the Hebrews is written to a group of *discouraged and disillusioned Christians* –

To a group of Christians who are struggling to persevere in the Christian life, in the face of struggle, opposition and their own sense of weakness.

And we saw in chapters 1 and 2 that the writer's *remedy* for this discouragement –

Is a *fresh vision of Jesus Christ*.

In particular, throughout this letter, the writer keeps bringing his readers back to three core truths they will need to hold onto if they are to overcome struggle and discouragement:

- *Who Jesus is* –
- *What he has done for his people*, through his death and resurrection (more on that next week...)
- And crucially – *what he **will do** for his people in the future* –

That is –

Bring them into a glorious future!

First, *heaven* –

And ultimately, *a new creation free from sin and death*.

Now – you might expect a passage that points Christians forward to *glory* – to have an upbeat tone...

but we don't get one!

In contrast to the warm encouragements of chapters 1 and 2 last week –

This week, the writer of Hebrews is issuing *warnings – rebukes – and stark challenges* to his readers.

You see, the writer of Hebrews is convinced –

The future God promises his people – matters to our lives here and now!

In fact –

It matters ***enormously!***

If we begin to doubt that God really *is* leading his people into a glorious future –

That Jesus really *will* bring an end to sin and death and evil once and for all when he returns –

Then, the writer is convinced:

Our relationship with God is in *terrible danger!*

We will not be able to persevere in the Christian life when trouble comes – as it will...

And we will be guilty of *hardening our hearts to the promises of God.*

If you're a Christian here this morning, then the message of these chapters is clear:

We need to be looking ahead to heaven and the new creation – if we are going to be enabled to follow Jesus in our lives here and now.

And as I've heard that message ring out from these chapters this past week, I am convinced –

It's a message we need to *listen* to!

We've already seen this morning that in our modern Western culture, we are just not accustomed to thinking about the future Jesus will bring about for his people.

We instinctively think that all that matters is *the present – the here and now –*

The challenges and opportunities we face *today.*

For most of us – and I include myself in this –

The future God has prepared for us often seems pretty *irrelevant* to our lives.

We worry and pray and talk about the struggles and anxieties of *the present –*

But how often do we really think about the glorious future God has promised to every single one of us who has placed their lives in Jesus' hands?

The writer of Hebrews is convinced –

In order to live for Jesus in our lives *now* – we need to be people who look ahead to what Jesus *will do* for us *in the future* –

And if we begin to lose sight of that future – or worse, lose *faith* in it –

Then we are in terrible danger of ***turning away from the living God!***

So –

Let's look at the message of these chapters now.

Hebrews 3-4 – A warning against unbelief

If you were here last week, you'll remember that the focus of chapters 1 and 2 was *the character of Jesus* –

Who he is –

And what he has done for those who trust in him, in bringing them into the family of God.

And the writer carries on with that theme in 3:1 –

Read aloud.

He then goes on to contrast Jesus with Moses – the great leader and law-giver of the Hebrew people.

From what little we know of the Christians this letter is written to, they seem to be drawn from a largely *Jewish* background –
So, Moses would have been a revered figure to them.

The writer wants them to know that, as faithful and honourable as Moses was –
Jesus is greater! (v.3)

And the references to Moses lead the writer – from v.7 onwards – to quote from Psalm 95 from the Old Testament –

A psalm that reflects on the generation of Israelites who were led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses –

But who, because of their sin and unbelief, never got to see the land God had promised to them.

Read vv.7-11.

Throughout this letter, the writer quotes from the Old Testament at length time and time again.

In spite of the fact that he is a Christian, writing to Christians –
He is convinced that Christians need to listen to the Old Testament.

In a very real sense, passages from the Old Testament – like Psalm 95 – are in fact written *for Christians!*

They're written – *for us!*

Psalm 95 isn't just an historical record of the Israelites rebelling against God –

It is the word of God for the discouraged Christians who were the original readers of this letter –

And it is the word of God for *us, today!*

The writer expresses his view of the Old Testament powerfully in chapter 4, vv.12-13 –
Read aloud.

The Old Testament – including Psalm 95 – is ***the word of God*** –

It is '*living and active – sharper than any double-edged sword – it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*'.

And as such, the writer assures his readers –
Psalm 95 was written *for you!*

To expose your hearts and act as a warning!

Why a warning?

Because you are not that different from the Israelites in the desert – who grumbled against God and refused to believe that he had the power to keep his promises!

Remember –

This letter is written to a group of discouraged Christians.

I hope we saw last week, in chapters 1 and 2, that the writer's first instinct is to *encourage* them!

To lift their eyes to Jesus!

But here in chapters 3 and 4, he follows up on that encouragement – with a *warning*.

There comes a point when a struggling, discouraged Christian –
Is in danger of becoming an *unbelieving Christian*.

When genuine struggle in the Christian life –
Tips over into *unbelief*.

And the essence of unbelief is not a lack of faith, as such –
It is *the refusal to trust God and to believe that his purposes for you are good*.

Let me repeat that:

The essence of unbelief is the refusal to trust God and to believe that his purposes for you are good.

And that is what the Israelites were guilty of, according to Psalm 95.

Psalm 95 is a meditation on events recorded in the book of Numbers, chapters 13 and 14.

- **Israel in the desert (Psalm 95; Numbers 13-14)**

The story so far...

Through Moses, God has rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt –
And now, a matter of months later, they had reached the border of Canaan – the land
God had promised to give them as their new home.

In Numbers 13:1, God tells Moses to send spies into Canaan to explore the land before the
Israelites would take possession of it.

The spies returned 40 days later, with the report that the land was rich and fertile – '*flowing
with milk and honey*' (Numbers 13:27) –

And a solid example of its fertility was that it took two men to carry a single cluster of
grapes back to the Israelite camp (see 13:23).

Canaan would be a wonderful new home for the Israelites –
Every inch the glorious place God had promised them it would be!

But very quickly, there was a problem.

Most of the spies who had explored the land began to say that the Israelites could not take
possession of it.

The inhabitants of the land were much too strong, they said –
There were too many of them –
Their cities were fortified and large....

As wonderful a land as Canaan was, the Israelites had to accept the fact –
They could never take possession of it.

Numbers 13:31 –

'We can't attack these people – they are stronger than we are.'

And Psalm 95 is clear –

In this, the Israelites were guilty of **unbelief**.

They just could not believe that God had the power to keep the promises he had made to them and give them this land –

Instead, they 'hardened their hearts' – and they refused to enter the land God had promised them.

God's response to their unbelief is recorded in Psalm 95 (look at v.10 of chapter 3 here...)

Read vv.10-11 – from *'That is why I was angry...'*

And *why* was God so angry with the Israelites for their refusal to enter the promised land of Canaan?

Numbers 14:11 tells us (on-screen):

'How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?'

At the heart of the Israelite's fear of the inhabitants of Canaan –

Was a refusal to believe in the living God –

Worse – a contempt for the living God!

They refused to believe that God had the power to overcome his enemies and give them the land he had promised them –

They demonstrated *contempt* for the God who had rescued them from Egypt and made them his own!

And God punished them for that by forcing them to wander in the desert for 40 years – until that entire first generation of Israelites who had left Egypt had died out –

And it was to their children that God finally gave the land of Canaan.

Why does the writer of Hebrews refer to this rebellion in the desert, over 1,000 years previously?

Because he fears that his readers are in danger of falling into the same unbelief as that generation of Israelites!

Read v.12.

- **A warning for the Hebrew Christians**

The writer knows that they are discouraged –

he knows that they are struggling to keep living for Jesus, in the face of persecution and suffering and the ridicule of the world –

And his first instinct is to speak words of comfort to them! (chapters 1 and 2)
To reassure them that God was on their side –
That Jesus *does* have the power and the compassion to *help* them!

BUT –

Psalm 95 is a stark warning to these Hebrew Christians –

Don't allow your discouragement – to tip over into unbelief!

Don't respond to the struggles of the Christian life – by beginning to doubt God's promises and his good purposes for his people!

Because if that is your response, you will be just like the Israelites in the desert –
You will be guilty of treating the living God with contempt –
And God punished the Israelites for that!

Read vv.16-19.

Don't let unbelief disqualify you for the glorious future Jesus has won for everyone who trusts in him!

And this warning for the Hebrew Christians – stands as a warning for every community of believers throughout history which faces times of struggle and discouragement –
Which basically includes every community of believers in history –
Including *us, here today!*

- **A warning for us**

Unbelief – the refusal to trust God and to believe that his purposes for you are good –
Can develop slowly and gradually over time.

We saw last week that every Christian and every group of Christians will face times of struggle as they live for Jesus –
Times when the Christian life feels like a *fight they cannot win* –
Like a race they cannot complete.

And, if we're not careful, we might begin to think more about our struggles –
And less about the God whose grace is sufficient for us in the midst of those struggles.

You might begin to doubt that God really *can* help you –
That his purposes for your life – or the lives of struggling Christians around you –
really *are* good.

Perhaps the struggle just feels too much –
And you stop believing in the power of God to help you.

I wonder –

Is that how you are feeling this morning?

The writer of Hebrews knows that at least some of his readers are feeling like that –
So he *warns* them against it –

And then he goes on to *remind* them of just what God *has* promised to those who put their faith in him...!

What God has promised his people

For Christians, our ‘promised land’ is no longer the land of Canaan, as it was for the Israelites.

No – God has promised to give us something far greater –
THE NEW CREATION!

Back in chapter 2, verses 5-8, the writer was already looking ahead to this new creation as:

- **A world free from sin and death (2:5-8)**

In 2:5, he lifts our eyes to ‘*the world to come*’ –

And by quoting from Psalm 8, he assures us that in that world, ‘*everything will be subject*’ to God’s people!

He acknowledges in v.8 that ‘*at present we do not see everything subject to [humanity]*’.

We live in a world cursed by sin –

And the evidence of that curse can be seen all around us in the natural world.

From natural disasters, like floods, tsunamis and earthquakes –

To more mundane evidences of the Fall, such as sunburn and nettle stings.

The 18th century evangelist George Whitefield put it memorably when he would remind his hearers –

“*Dost thou know why the wild animals fear and growl and shriek at thee? Because they know thou hast a quarrel with their Master!*”

In a profound way, we are *alienated* from the natural world because of our sin.

But because of his sacrifice on the cross for us, Jesus has secured a new world for those who trust in him –

A world free from sin and free from death –

A physical creation where we will enjoy all the goodness of God’s creation, finally liberated from the curse of sin.

Then, in chapter 4, the writer describes this new creation as:

- **A place of rest (4:1-11)**

Read 4:9-10.

Just as God rested from this work of creation in Genesis chapter 2,

So Christians will one day enjoy rest from the struggle against sin and a hostile world

And they will live in close community with the God who alone gives rest!

God's 'rest' is described as a place here –

The place where God has lived and reigned ever since completing his work of creation.

So, to 'enter God's rest' – is to arrive at the place where God dwells –

And the greatest thing about that place of rest is that – ***God will be there!***

That is in keeping with descriptions of the new creation we get elsewhere in Scripture –

For example, in the book of Revelation, where at the end of time, instead of Christians going up to heaven –

Heaven comes down to earth – and God will restore his fallen world into a glorious new creation, where he will dwell with his people!

That God describes the future he has in store for his people as a place of rest –

Is deeply comforting for tired, struggling believers!

In fact, we *need* to know that God will give us life and rest – if we are to be those who keep going for Christ to the very end...!

I hope we are beginning to see why knowing the future God has in store for us is so important to the writer of Hebrews, when dealing with discouragement.

Why does future glory matter?

Looking ahead to the glorious future Jesus has won for us reminds us, firstly, that:

- **God's purposes for you are good.**

If all we see and think about in our lives as Christians is the struggle with sin –

The hostility of the world –

The discouragements that can come from living in a fallen world as fallen people –

Then we will quickly *lose heart* –

And we will quickly begin to doubt the goodness of God!

The writer of Hebrews doesn't tell his readers that their struggles aren't real –

That they should just switch off from them somehow –

No – he acknowledges that they will suffer when they are tempted – just as Jesus did (2:18)!

What he *does* do is assure them that their struggles here and now *do not tell the whole story* –

And that *they will not have the final word!*

- **Struggles and discouragement will come to an end**

And if we are going to persevere for Jesus, we need to see that, don't we?

We live in a world of terrible injustice, where the strong trample upon the weak –
Where sickness and death separate us from loved ones, and seem to mock us –
Where we are forced to live with the consequences of our sin – and the consequences
of the sin of those around us!

BUT –

This world will not have the last word!

‘There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God’ –

And when we see Jesus face-to-face, struggle and pain will finally be at an end.

God will wipe every tear from our eyes –

And we will enjoy life with him in a glorious new creation!

A third reason why looking ahead to future glory is so important in the Christian life is that
only then will we see clearly that:

- **We will not find true satisfaction in this world**

That’s a sobering truth – but also a liberating one!

Stop looking for heaven here and now –

You’re not there yet!

Life will not be perfect this side of the new creation –

So, don’t expect it to be!

Instead, learn to enjoy the small, imperfect foretastes of glory that *do* exist, here and now...!

- *No friendship will fully satisfy you here and now –*

You are a sinner, and so are your friends!

So – stop trying in vain to make them perfect –

And instead, enjoy them as they are!

- *No marriage will be perfect, here and now –*

So, accept the imperfections of your partner – and learn to enjoy the gift of marriage for what
it is –

Something imperfect – but a powerful sign of God’s love and mercy,
and of the perfect marriage that awaits all of us, with Jesus Christ as our bridegroom!

- *No job – no home – no children – no holiday will fully satisfy you here and now –*

Full satisfaction is only to be found in the world to come – in the new creation!

So, accept the imperfections in all these things –

Enjoy them for what they are –

And keep looking ahead to the perfect new world Christ has in store for you!

Only the living God can truly satisfy us.

In the words of Augustine –

‘You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.’

And God’s word tells us here –

He *will* satisfy us! In the new creation!

So –

Look ahead to that day – and put your faith in his ability to keep his promises!

An ability he demonstrated powerfully when he raised Jesus from the dead!

The writer of Hebrews is clear –

Every single Christian – if they are to persevere for Jesus – needs to be reminded continually of the future God has in store for them!

And, according to chapter 3:12-14 –

That is where we come in!

- **So – encourage one another daily!**

Read 3:12-14.

Sin is deceitful (v.13) –

It will tell you you’d be much happier if you just turned away from God –
If you just went along with the world around us and the life it claims to offer us.

We will need one another’s help if we are to *see through* that lie –

And hold firmly to Jesus, right to the end!

The Christian life is never meant to be lived in isolation –

God has given us one another to *help and encourage one another* –

And we need to pray that, as a church, we will grow in the sort of mutual encouragement the writer describes here...!

- *Fight with sin together!*

Call sin – ‘sin!’

Help one another see through it!

Talk about its deceitfulness – confess to how attractive it can look –

And then remind one another that it only leads to *death!*

- *Listen to God’s word together!*

On Sundays – in homegroups –

In prayer triplets and reading groups.

Allow God's living and active word to expose your heart – and lead you to Jesus, our great high priest!

- *Look ahead to God's rest together!*

A key part of this encouragement must be to lift one another's eyes to the glorious future God has promised us as Christians –

Won for us by the cross of Christ!

So –

Will we be a church family that talks about heaven and the new creation together?

Will we remind one another that one day, we will see Jesus face-to-face –

And that on that day, we will finally understand just how deeply we are loved by him?

God's purposes for you are good –

And he has the power to keep every single one of his promises!

So the writer of Hebrews urges us –

Don't fall into unbelief, as the Israelites did!

Turn to the living God – and *hold fast* to him!

Place your trust in him – and look ahead to the future he has in store for you!

Or as the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:58 –

“...stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”