

**THE DIFFERENCE JESUS MAKES**  
**Studies in the book of Hebrews**  
**5. True worship (Hebrews 12-13)**

This morning, we come to the end of our series looking at the letter to the Hebrews.

If you've been here over the past five weeks, you'll have seen that this is a letter written to a group of discouraged Christians –

A group of believers who have grown disillusioned with the Christian life – and who appear ready to give up on following Jesus.

We don't know who wrote Hebrews –

But what we discover from reading over this letter is that the writer knew this group of struggling Christians well –

And so he writes this letter to encourage them to *persevere* –

To lift their eyes to Jesus Christ and to recognise the huge *difference* he has made to their lives!

Throughout this letter, the writer urges his readers to understand:

- ***Who Jesus is*** – the Son of God who humbled himself and became a man –
- ***What he has done for them*** – in winning *forgiveness* for their sin at the cross and in interceding for them before the throne of God as their great high priest –
- ***And what he will do for them, if they persevere*** – bring them into a *glorious new creation*, free from sin and death!

I hope we've seen in the course of this series that, even though Hebrews is a letter written to discouraged Christians...

It's actually a letter written for *every Christian*.

*Hebrews is in the Bible – because every Christian who lives long enough will face times of discouragement and struggle in their lives.*

Every Christian will experience times when they feel close to *losing heart* and *giving up* –

When they come close to *forgetting* who Jesus is, what he has done for them, and what he *will* do for them.

In short, every Christian in this room this morning needs to take on board the advice given in this letter –

As the remedy for the discouragement either they are *already* experiencing –  
*Or* the discouragement they will *one day* experience...!

So – the question facing us this morning from Hebrews chapter 12 and 13 is:

***How does the writer end this letter to discouraged Christians?***

*What is the advice – the counsel he leaves them with?*

*What does he want them to take away from his letter, to help them live for Jesus in the face of struggle and weakness?*

I want to suggest that the key to understanding these closing chapters of Hebrews can be found in chapter 12, verse 28:

*“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe...”*

We’ll be using this verse to guide our time in these chapters this morning...

I want to suggest that if you wanted to, you could paraphrase the writer’s closing advice to his readers as follows:

***The remedy for discouragement in the Christian life –  
Is to worship God with your whole life!***

He closes his letter –  
With a call to worship!

And that may come as a bit of a shock...!

Surely, responding to God in worship is the *last thing* a discouraged Christian wants to do –  
And so, isn’t it a bit insensitive of the writer to call these struggling believers to  
‘*worship God acceptably*’?

Doesn’t that just amount to placing another burden on their backs –  
At a time when they already feel so *weak*?

I believe Hebrews 12 and 13 forces us to ask the question:  
***How important is worship to living the Christian life?***

Now –  
The answer we give to that question depends a lot on your definition of ‘worship’.

For many Christians today, when we hear the word ‘worship’, we instinctively think of the use of music in church services.

So – in the Western church over the past few decades, we’ve witnessed the so-called  
‘*worship wars*’, revolving round the question:

‘Which is more appropriate to use when we sing praises to God?’

- Hymns – or modern songs?
- An organ – or a guitar?
- Should we stand relatively still as we sing – or should we lift our hands as an expression of worship?

If that is what worship is all about, then how you answer that question – *How important is worship to the Christian life?* – depends a lot on how important music is to you...

Some of us love to sing God’s praise –  
And have strong opinions on how music can help us praise God together.

Others among us may dislike singing –

We can take it or leave it – that it doesn't matter that much to us.

If worshipping God acceptably in Hebrews 12:28 is all about the use of music in church services,

then for some of us at least, it might not seem that important...!

BUT –

*Is that what worship is all about in these chapters?*

I believe the answer is 'no'!

Worship – in these chapters of Hebrews, and throughout the Bible –

Is about a lot more than simply how we use music in the times when Christians gather together.

True worship – in the pages of Scripture – is about:

*How we live our whole lives in response to the mercy of God, expressed to us in Jesus.*

As a result, worship will *include* the times when we gather together as Christians – and how we use music in those times...

*But it also includes a whole lot more than that!*

And there is a real danger when we begin to think of 'worship' simply in terms of how we 'do church' together...!

I want to pick out just two passages in the Bible that challenge our often small view of worship –

One from the Old Testament – the other from the New.

First of all –

**Amos 5:21-24**

*"I hate, I despise your religious feasts;*

*I cannot stand your assemblies.*

*Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,*

*I will not accept them.*

*Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,*

*I will have no regard for them.*

*Away with the noise of your songs!*

*I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

*But let justice roll on like a river,*

*righteousness like a never-failing stream!"*

The Israelites in Amos' day were pretty skilful in their religious observance.

Their church services were impressive –

And just from looking at how they gathered together for corporate worship, you might have assumed they were godly people.

*But God sees through their religious observance!*

He isn't impressed with 'noise of their songs' or 'the music of their harps'.

What he wants to see in the lives of his people is a concern for '*justice*' in God's world –

What he wants to see in the lives of his people is the '*righteousness*' that can only come as they humble themselves before God and ask him to *change* them...!

***According to Amos, true worship is about a lot more than how we 'do church' –  
It involves our whole lives!***

Similarly, in **Romans 12:1**:

*"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."*

According to the apostle Paul, the worship God wants his people to offer – is ***their whole lives!***

'*Offer your bodies as living sacrifices*', he told the Roman Christians –

What he means by that is:

"Wherever your body happens to be – worship God with it!"

Whether you are at home –

Or at work.

Whether you are with other Christians –

Or whether you are the only Christian present.

Whether you are:

- Changing a nappy
- Writing an email
- Standing by the school gate
- Giving a presentation
- In the pub
- On the football pitch

*Offer your bodies as living sacrifices!*

*Worship God, wherever you are – with everything that you are!*

That is true worship, according to God's word –

And it is with a call to this life of worship that the writer of Hebrews ends his letter!

So I want to ask this morning:

***Why is this call to worship God with our whole lives, good advice for a group of discouraged Christians to hear?***

Let's look at these chapters together now...

First of all, we need to see that the writer's call to worship God here isn't given in a vacuum – It doesn't come out of nowhere.

When the book of Hebrews – and any other bit of Scripture – calls us to worship God, it is *always* in response to what God has already done for us!

And Hebrews 12 and 13 is no different!

### **Hebrews 12 & 13 – True worship**

- ***'since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken...'* (12:18-24)**

With that evocative phrase, the writer is referring back to vv.18-24 of chapter 12 – Where he draws a *vivid contrast* between the access to God enjoyed by the Israelites in the Old Testament –

And the access to God that Jesus has won for everyone who trusts in him today.

In those verses, the writer compares *two mountains* –

- ***Mt Sinai*** – where God met with Moses and the people of Israel, and gave them his law –
- ***And Mt Zion*** – where God will welcome every man, woman and child who puts their faith in Jesus Christ and the salvation he has won for them!

If you look closely at the two descriptions of these two mountains, you'll see that the writer mentions 7 features of each –

And he is determined that his readers recognise just how *better off* they are in their relationship with God, than the Israelites in the Old Testament were!

Now, we need to be clear about something...

The writer of Hebrews has a very high view of the Old Testament.

He is convinced that it is the living and active word of God –

And he quotes from it extensively to lead his readers to Jesus.

So – in vv.18-21, he isn't seeking to *dismiss* the covenant God made with Israel at Mt Sinai, as if it was *unimportant...*

No – what he wants his struggling Christian readers to see is:

The fantastic *difference* Jesus has made to the relationship between God's people and the living God!

Read vv.18-21.

The descriptions of Israel at Mt Sinai make it clear that it is a *terrifying* thing for sinful human beings to approach a holy God.

What the Israelites saw at Mt Sinai was blazing fire, darkness and gloom.

What they heard was the sound of rushing wind, a trumpet blast, and a voice speaking words of such holiness that they begged it to stop.

What Moses and the Israelites experienced at Sinai was, above all – ***fear!*** (v.21)

Now –

Contrast that with vv.22-24

The description of Mt Zion here is characterized, not by *fear* – but by ***celebration!***

What we see at Mt Zion is not darkness and gloom –

It is '*the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God!*'

What we hear is the joyful song of '*thousands upon thousands of angels*', celebrating the goodness and grace of God!

What we experience is not the fear of being consumed by a holy God –

But the *assurance* of having our '*names written in heaven*' –

Of belonging to '*the church of the firstborn*' –

Of belonging to Jesus – '*the mediator of a new covenant*' (v.24)!

God is still holy! He is still '*the judge of all men!*' (v.23)

But thanks to Jesus, we now know that God is able to ***give*** sinful men and women his holiness – if they place their trust in Jesus!

And we can also know that those who have lived by faith in Jesus and who have gone ahead of us – have already been '*made perfect*' –

Just as we will be one day – when we see God face-to-face!

This is an awe-inspiring picture the writer paints for his readers –

Including *us!*

You may feel discouraged now –

*But just look where you're headed!*

You may feel a long way off from God right now, as you struggle to live for him –

But in reality – and thanks to Jesus – you actually have ***full access*** to the living God and all that he has won for you through Jesus!

You may feel alone and cut off from the world around you –

But in reality, thousands upon thousands of angels are standing alongside you, *willing* you on in dependence on God's grace!

In reality, '*the spirits of righteous men made perfect*' – that '*great cloud of witnesses*' in 12:1

–

Is standing with you, *urging* you to keep trusting in the God of all faithfulness – because in the end, your labour for him is *not* in vain!

If you're a Christian here this morning, the writer of Hebrews has the same message for you!

***You are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken!***

Everything else in life *can* be shaken –  
Everything else in life is fragile and transient.

Whether your job – your future plans – your health – your family...

*But the future hope that awaits you cannot be shaken!*

It is kept for you – completely secure in heaven –  
and one day you will enjoy all the blessings and richness of life in the heavenly  
Jerusalem – the city of the living God!

If you are trusting in Christ, you *already* have a share in that great city –  
You *already* have full access to the God of grace!

So –  
***Take heart from that!***

***Rejoice in what Jesus has won for you!***

***Rejoice that you are never alone as you live for him and worship him!***

And –  
***‘Be thankful’!***

That’s the next bit of v.28...!

- ***‘...let us be thankful...’ (12:14-17)***

Hebrews is a letter full of the promises of God –  
Of the glorious future that awaits all God’s people.

But it is also a letter full of *warnings* –  
And this call to be thankful – is one of them!

It looks back to vv.14-17 of chapter 12 – and the example of *Esau* in the Old Testament.  
Read vv.14-17.

Esau was the twin brother of Jacob –  
And he is referred to here as a powerful example of the danger of *thanklessness* – of  
*ingratitude* in response to the grace of God.

The story the writer refers to here can be found in Genesis 25.

Esau was the firstborn son of Isaac – and as a result, he was in line to inherit everything from  
his father –  
And the inheritance rights he enjoyed were no ordinary rights...!

They were the *great promises* God had made to Abraham, Esau’s grandfather –

To make his name great and make him a blessing!  
To bless all peoples on earth through him!

Basically, God had promised to *save the world through Abraham's family!*

Because, through Abraham's descendants, Jesus would ultimately come into the world!

As the oldest son, Esau enjoyed the privilege of being part of God's great salvation purposes

–

As well as being part of the glorious future we've just been looking at in vv.22-24...!

*And what did Esau do with this privileged position, given to him by God?*

v.16 –

he sold his inheritance – *'for a single meal'*.

Genesis 25 tells us he came home from hunting, famished –

He begged his brother Jacob to give him some stew –  
And Jacob took his chance!

He would give Esau some stew if, in exchange, Esau sold Jacob his birthright.

And Esau's response?

Genesis 25:32 – *'Look, I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?'*

And he sold it to Jacob.

For a single meal, Esau gave away the right to inherit the promises of God.

For a meal that satisfied his hunger just for a moment, Esau *'missed the grace of God'* (v.15).

*Esau despised his birthright!*

He just didn't see the value of what God had given to him, until it was too late!

He didn't *thank* God for his grace –

He lost sight of it!

All he wanted was food here and now –

comfort here and now –  
satisfaction here and now –

and so, he *missed out* on God's future blessing!

The writer of Hebrews urges us –

***Don't be like Esau!***

Instead, ***be thankful for all God has given you –***

***For the future he has in store for you!***

***Don't give that future up, for brief, momentary pleasures...!***

If you despise the grace of God –  
*God will reject you* – just as he rejected Esau.

‘*Let us be thankful*’, the writer of Hebrews urges us!

Let us value all that Jesus has won for us!  
Let us value *the grace God has shown to us – and the future he has secured for us!*

And in response,

- **‘*let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe*’ (ch. 13)**

Don’t be like Esau and just live for the moment –  
Instead, ***worship God with your whole life, in response to all that he has won for you through Jesus!***

That’s what chapter 13 is all about!

We could spend weeks in this chapter, exploring together what a life of worship *looks like*...

- In our relationships
- In our marriages
- In relation to money
- In relation to church life

And we’ll explore some of that in a moment...

But for now –

*Can you see why the writer is so keen to urge his readers to live lives of worship to God for his grace?*

He knows how easy it would be for his readers simply to *brood* in their struggles and weakness.

All that he has taught them throughout this letter about the character of Jesus and the great salvation he has won for them will be of no value –

*If they don’t live their lives in response to Jesus! In response to that great salvation!*

I hope we’ve seen in this letter –

The writer of Hebrews is gentle with his readers!

For every warning he gives them –

There is *encouragement!* There is a rich description of God’s grace!

He’s not interested in shouting at them and bullying them into living holy lives –

He knows that true holiness is only possible in dependence on God’s strength –

In dependence on God’s Spirit.

So –

The commands contained in chapter 13 are not the writer placing extra burdens on his readers’ already weak shoulders...

No – the life of worship he calls his readers – including us – to here is ***the only life that is worth living!***

These are not harsh, restrictive commands tacked on to the end of the letter –  
These are ***life-giving, life-enhancing commands!***

And if we follow them, in dependence on God's grace, they will lead us to enjoy the new life Jesus has won for us –  
Both *individually* – and *corporately!*

The question that stands behind the teaching of chapter 13 is:  
*Do we really believe that the life God calls us to here – truly is the best life we can live?*

The writer of Hebrews is convinced that it *is...!*

A life of worship to God will

- *Listen to God's word -*
- *Believe what he says -*
- *And obey him, always in dependence on his grace!*

That is the life the writer describes in chapter 13...!

Just a few examples of the life of worship we are called to here...

- *Love one another (vv.1-3)*

Whether those you already know (v.1) –  
Those you have only just met (v.2) –  
And those believers you may never meet, who are suffering for their faith (v.3).

*'Keep on loving one another as brothers'* (v.1)  
Because the Christian life can be *hard!*

We are not in the new creation yet –  
And life in this fallen world will be a struggle!

So, ***love one another!***  
Support one another! Encourage one another!

***Pray for the persecuted!***  
Those in prison – those who risk everything for following Jesus!

***And welcome strangers!***  
You do not know for what purpose God has brought them into your life – so *worship God* in your dealings with them!

- *Honour marriage and family life (v.4)*

The culture we live in fluctuates between two extremes when it comes to marriage.

People either worship it –

(I'm thinking of romantic comedies, Jane Austen novels and a general fear of singleness...)

Or they despise it –

So, for some, marriage is *irrelevant* – and remaining faithful to one sexual partner your entire life is somehow *unnatural*.

The Bible warns us against both attitudes towards marriage!

*Don't worship marriage!*

It is not the 'be all and end all' of life! Apart from faith in Jesus, it will not satisfy you!

*But don't despise it, either!*

Honour it, as a gift from God – and as a picture of God's covenant love for his people!

Following on from that,

*Be faithful in marriage!*

God is your faithful marriage partner, and he calls you to be faithful to marriage as an act of worship to him!

v.4 – '*God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*'

- *Learn to be content with what you have (v.5)*

*'Keep your lives free from the love of money' –*

A fight that I think can get harder, the older you get and the more responsibilities you have...!

How can we fight against the love of money, in a world that tells us we need plenty of it to be happy?

The answer vv.5-6 gives us is – ***grasp hold of the faithfulness of God!***

v.5 – '*God has said, "Never will I leave you..."*' [to the end of v.6]

God will not abandon you!

God will help you and provide for you!

So, don't fall into the trap of loving money –

Instead, grow in your love of *him!*

There is so much we could say from this chapter about the life of worship God calls us to –  
And how that will affect our attitudes towards:

- Church leaders
- The Bible
- The people God has brought into our lives to encourage us to live for Jesus.

I just want to finish our time in Hebrews with *two reminders* that chapter 13 gives us for why, even in the face of discouragement and struggle,  
Christians can live their lives as acts of worship to the living God.

First of all, we can live lives of worship in the face of struggle and a hostile world –  
Because ***Jesus has gone ahead of us!***

vv.10-14 begin by contrasting again the access to God enjoyed by the Israelites in the Old Testament,  
with the access we now enjoy, thanks to Jesus.

v.11 tells us that, in the old sacrificial system, the bodies of sacrificial animals were burned ‘*outside the camp*’, as a sign that the sin of the people had been removed from them.

Then, v.12 links that Old Testament practice to the death Jesus suffered in our place at the cross.

Read v.12.

Jesus was crucified ‘*outside the city gate*’ –  
He suffered the punishment for our sins, and was despised and rejected for it.

But in suffering outside the city gate, he will bring everyone who trusts in him to ‘*an enduring city ... the city that is to come*’ –  
What 12:22 describes as ‘*the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God!*’

***Jesus suffered outside the city –  
To qualify us for the city of the living God!***

What that means for our lives here and now is spelt out in v.13...

A Christian is a disciple of Jesus –  
And Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him!

*Don't expect to find life easy here and now!*

*Don't expect to be welcomed by people or to be honoured for your faith here and now!*

Instead, be people who are prepared to ‘*bear the disgrace Jesus bore*’ –  
To be branded *fools* for following him!

And if and when that happens, ***take heart!***  
***Jesus has been there ahead of you!***

He knows what it's like and he is able to *help* you as you face hostility and ridicule –  
And afterward, he will take you to a place of *joy*, that will more than make up for any times of struggle or rejection you may experience in your lives today!

And then – in vv.20-21 – we have the great words of blessing that remind us of the *basis* for the life of worship this letter calls us to...!

We can live lives of worship to God, even as we face times of discouragement and struggle –  
***Because the God of grace is committed to equipping us for that life – and working  
in us what is pleasing to him!***

Read vv.20-21.

With these closing words, the writer ends his letter to discouraged Christians with some glorious reminders.

### **God is the source and giver of peace!**

He raised Jesus from the dead –

And that same power is at work in us, today – empowering us to live for him as we trust in him!

### **Jesus is our great shepherd!**

And we can trust in him to *care* for us –

*Protect* us –

And *lead* us to the home God has prepared for us!

### **We are not left alone, to live for Christ!**

God is at work in us – and if we only go to him in our weakness, rather than brood in it –

Then he will *keep* us –

*Transform* us –

*And bring us home!*