

# Hebrews

## Part 1 - When Christians feel a bit lost

What got me into Hebrews in the first place was the need to write a new introduction for my updated website. But that raised the question, “What was I actually doing a website for?”

In searching for an answer from some of my favourite Christian mentors I hit on this quote by one of them: “The main thing about being a Christian,” he said, “is to see that the main thing remains the main thing - that **at the heart and centre of your life is the simplicity that is in Christ**. I have noticed over many years of observation that when religion becomes complicated it is always a sign that it is **drifting away** from the realities and centralities of faith.”

I like that. Keep things simple. But what exactly did he mean by that phrase the “simplicity that is in Christ” (quoted from 2 Corinthians 11:3)?

“The answer from everywhere in the Word of God,” he continues, “is the daily companionship of the Lord Jesus. Do you sense, therefore, that Christ is yours all day long? Do you reckon upon that, think about that, and live out of that relationship and the expectation of his presence? We say Christianity is not a creed, that it’s living with a Person, but it’s so easy to **lose sight of that** in Christian activity, or in delving into the fascinating aspects of Scripture, or in the pressures of daily living. You can get so busy and worried, and so anxious about yourself and the things that are happening to you, that you lose the sense that **Christ is with you, and that he is adequate.**”

Well, that gave me some clear direction: anyone coming across my website I hope goes away thinking, “That’s right, Christ is with us and he is adequate, it’s as simple as that - and, what’s more, it’s all there in black and white in Scripture.”

Toward that end, therefore, I much appreciate the writer of the book of Hebrews, because in my mind there’s no better book in the Bible for boiling down WHY Jesus is so much at “the heart and centre of our lives,” and what makes him so “adequate.” Hebrews is chock full of basic, bedrock material about Jesus. And the reason for that is the Christians it was written to, because in **Hebrews 2:1** we get a hint as to why they needed Hebrews so much.

It was written to Christians who needed to “pay more careful attention to what we have heard, **so that we do not drift away.**” Well, that tied in exactly with the quote I used on my website about “drifting away from the realities and centralities of faith.” So here we have a group of Christians in Hebrews who actually illustrate this dilemma we face as Christians, that we can drift away from the centrality of our faith, the simplicity we have in Christ, and lose sight of him.

But “lose sight” of what about Christ? The answer given in Hebrews is simple: that we can lose sight of what Jesus is doing for us every day, which is lift us out of this reality into the reality he is living in, because that’s the reality we now live in with him. This is why he is ours all day long, so that this reality we live in here doesn’t take our eyes off the other reality he won for us by his death and resurrection.

So what was this reality he won for us by his death and resurrection? Well, it’s the reality we started off with in the Garden of Eden. What we had was a close, personal, lovely, unhindered, utterly free and open relationship with God. That was reality for us. God was right there with us.

Did the man God created in Genesis 2:7 need to pray, therefore? No, because God was there in person to talk to. Did the man have to ask in prayer what God’s will was, and then have to wait for an answer? No, again, because in **Genesis 2:15-17** God explained to the man face to face what he’d put him in the Garden for. God gave his instructions verbally and personally so that the man was left in no doubt what his will was.

But did God come across as dictatorial and demanding, so that making contact with him was something to be feared or avoided? Not at all, because in **Genesis 2:9** God creates a beautiful home for him with all kinds of “trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food,” and in **verse 16** he notes it was “not good for the man to be alone,” so he provides the perfect “helper” for him. So God wasn’t being distant or demanding. He was fully aware of the man’s needs and he was happily meeting each one in turn. Never did God come across as dictatorial or demanding, or as a God to be feared or avoided.

But did God come across as distant and detached? Not at all, because in **verses 19-20** God actually “brought the animals and birds he’d created to the man to see what he would name them.” That’s almost like asking someone else to name your new baby. But it shows that God wanted to share the joy of all these different creatures with their unique personalities and uses with the man. It was God’s pleasure, in other words, to involve man in what he’d made.

What we have in Genesis, then, is a lovely picture of God being utterly real and totally accessible to humans. There was no need for them to pray, meditate or do Bible study to make contact with him or know his will. Adam and Eve knew exactly what God had planned for his creation and what their specific purpose was in it, because God had told them in person. God made it very clear, therefore, that he loved them, and that he loved being with them.

The tragedy of Scripture, therefore, is that it starts off with this amazing relationship that God gave us humans with him, but in only three chapters how soon we lost it - and how lost we humans have been ever since, including the Christians in Hebrews.

But the reason those Christians felt a bit lost is understandable. If, as many scholars believe, Hebrews was written around 67 to 68 AD, then the Christians it was written to had probably been in a church for thirty or more years already. They were mostly second-generation Christians by now, taking the reins from the elders who had grounded them in the basics of Christianity for many years. It was now their turn to become elders and teachers.

But something had happened, because instead of them being eager to teach they'd been "slow to learn," **Hebrews 5:11**. "In fact," the author of Hebrews writes in **verse 12**, "you ought to be teachers by now, but instead you need someone to teach you **the elementary truths** of God's word all over again."

So that's exactly what the writer of Hebrews sets out to do, which makes it highly relevant and very practical for Christians today who've *also* been in the church for many years and been well-grounded in the basics of Christianity. But, just like those Christians in Hebrews, the "elementary truth" of the very real, personal, loving and accessible relationship that God intended for us in Genesis gets lost along the way too.

And when that relationship isn't real it's easy to drift away, or seek more complicated versions of Christianity to fill the void. But at least we have a book in the Bible that tackles this problem, and it's written by a man with a pastor's heart, who understands the struggle we Christians have in God being real to us, and especially in a world that forces ITS reality on us every day too.

And that was the case for the Christians in Hebrews, because in just a couple of years time, in 70 AD, the Romans would strike with brutal power to smash the Jewish nation. They would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and millions of Jews would be slaughtered, just as Jesus had predicted in Matthew 24. So these were deeply worrying times.

It was also a confusing time for them in Hebrews, because Jesus had been raised from the dead, but here they were, thirty odd years later, and what difference had his resurrection made? Most of their fellow countrymen had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah, or jumped at Jesus' resurrection being the solution to all their problems.

But here **we** are, many years later, facing the same dilemma, that for all our preaching about Jesus being raised from the dead most of our fellow countrymen, and our own families, see nothing significant in it at all.

So if anyone can understand what those Christians in Hebrews were going through and how they felt, we can. We live in a similar world, where people can justifiably ask us too, "Why should we believe in Jesus as the resurrected Son of God when people all over the world are still suffering horribly, and chaos and corruption are increasing?" It raises the obvious question, that if Jesus truly is the resurrected Son of God with all the power and authority to put things to rights and bring evil to an end, then where is the evidence of it? Shouldn't the world be getting better? But instead, for both the Christians in Hebrews and us today, things only ever seem to get worse, not better.

And that can really take the wind out of our sails, and especially when resistance to Jesus comes from friends and family, who cannot for the life of them see why anyone would want to be a Christian when there is little to no evidence that Jesus is real at all.

How, then, can we give a reason for hope and for preaching good news when what we say about Jesus isn't making much difference in the attitudes of other people toward him? Or how can we say Jesus is at "the heart and centre of our lives," and he is "adequate" for all our needs as humans, when he doesn't feel like that in our own lives?

But it's questions like these that help us see why Hebrews was written. It was written for people who may even have begun to wonder if they'd made a terrible mistake believing Jesus was the Son of God. Maybe Jesus was only an angel or an archangel, as some in Hebrews believed, or only a great teacher or prophet, as some people believe today, because Jesus hasn't turned out to be anything like what God promised Abraham, that "through his offspring (which included Jesus) all people on earth will be blessed" (Acts 3:26).

It's not surprising, then, that Hebrews speaks of Christians becoming lethargic and feeble, because in their experience they couldn't see Christ at work at all, so why be a Christian?

To the author of Hebrews, though, that's no excuse. He takes them to task for being "slothful." He tells them to "give more earnest heed to the things you've heard," to "hold fast your profession," and not lose their confidence. He also strongly warns them against "neglecting so great a salvation," "falling short of the promises," "yielding to willful sin," "drawing back into perdition," and "refusing him who speaks from heaven."

Hebrews, then, is the pouring out of a pastor's heart to those in his care to get them back to basics and the bedrock of what it meant to be a Christian. It's copybook stuff for all Christians in any age whose faith has been shaken or shattered by expectations not being met, whether it's Jesus not returning, family and friends not responding, the world not getting any better, horrible abuses still occurring, personal circumstances not improving, healings not happening, opposition to Christianity increasing, and Christianity itself being a confused, divided mess of outdated traditions and hope-destroying fears.

And just like today, the Christians in Hebrews were also being drawn in by the surrounding culture. Many of them were ditching Jesus for what had given their lives meaning and purpose before, like the law and their Jewish rituals. It was so easy for them to do too, because the Temple was still standing and most of the country was still going along with the same old customs they'd practiced for centuries. And Jesus hadn't returned as promised to lift them out of their world and into the bright new age either, so perhaps it was no longer valid, they'd made a mistake, so back they should go to their old beliefs.

And we could think the same thing, because it's nearly two thousand years since Jesus was resurrected to a position of great power, so where's this bright new age we keep preaching about? The world is still full of corruption and greed. Terrible natural disasters are on the increase. And where are whole cities and countries being permanently transformed to Christianity? Life can feel horribly disheartening for us Christians too, therefore, because what are we being Christians for if there's no obvious evidence that Jesus is real?

Or could it be, just like those Christians in Hebrews, that we're looking in the wrong place for Jesus being real? I ask that, because the author of Hebrews takes them back to the "elementary truths," which we know to be the very personal relationship God wants with humans, that Adam and Eve lost out on. And Jesus is now the key to that personal relationship, because he's the one, as **Hebrews 7:25** states, who "lives to intercede for us." So that's what we should be looking for in what Jesus is doing. What he's alive for is to restore the relationship with God that we lost in the Garden of Eden. And his love of life every day is that we in his church especially experience it.

And, fortunately, the author of Hebrews summarizes what Jesus restored for us in the church to experience, in **Hebrews 10:19-22**. “Therefore,” he writes, “since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.”

He goes right back to the relationship we now have with God because of Jesus. We can “draw near” to him, just like Adam and Eve could. And we can draw near with total confidence too, no matter what our situation or need. It’s as simple as that. That’s “the simplicity that is in Christ” that Paul and my Christian mentor talked about. It’s knowing we can enter right into God’s presence just as freely and easily as Adam and Eve could go up to God in the Garden of Eden and talk with him about anything.

That’s what’s been “opened for us through the curtain.” We can step right through into the Holy of Holies where God met with the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. And since Atonement has been done for all humans by Jesus’ sacrifice, and because Jesus is also now our High Priest, it means that anyone can go right into the Holy of Holies with Jesus to talk with God. The curtain has been drawn back and we can peek in, and there the Father is, beckoning to us with a huge smile, and he’s saying, “Come on in my lovely child, what’s on your mind?”

So I wondered how those Christians in Hebrews reacted to that. Did they understand the enormous weight that had been lifted off their shoulders knowing Jesus was their High Priest accompanying them into the Holy of Holies and that’s all they needed for an audience with God? And Jesus would always be there with them to meet God, no matter how embarrassing their lives had been. He was always there beside them so they could walk into the Holy of Holies “in full assurance of faith,” because this was now the “new and living way” Jesus’ sacrifice had made possible.

But would realizing this have made any difference in the lives of those Christians in Hebrews? Well, has this understanding made any difference to me? Am I, as my Christian mentor wrote in his introduction to Hebrews, “trusting in Jesus’ death on the cross and his bodily resurrection as the full and complete ground of my salvation, or am I still looking to some act by me or some ritual or sacrament to give me the confidence to enter his presence?” Well, am I? He also asks if “I habitually turn to Jesus as our great high priest, to find inner strengthening to face pressures, resist temptations, conquer guilt, or achieve self-control in daily situations.” Well, do I?

If I don't, then what's holding me back? Am I, perhaps, as he continues, "allowing the world and its culture to lure me into practices or deeds that are inconsistent with the new life we have been given in Christ?" Do I still depend on my own coping methods, for instance? Or have I, he continues, "recognized the loving hand of God upon us in the midst of hardships, disappointments and trials, as strengthening us and also giving us opportunity to display his character to those who are near us"? So, which of those two is it?

These are all powerful questions, but they fit the tone of Hebrews to wake us up to what God has provided for us in Jesus. They took me back to my website introduction again and the questions asked there: "Do I sense that Christ is mine all day long? Do I reckon upon that, think about it and live out of that relationship and the expectation of his presence? " Or have I "lost the sense that Christ is with me, and that he is adequate"?

While thinking about these things I happened across a British booklet in my bookshelf that was first published during the later years of World War 2. The title on the front cover is, "We have a Guardian," and to quote the first page it consists of "numerous forthright statements by Cabinet Ministers, Clergy, Senior Officers of the Fighting Services, Journalists and others, all expressing their profound conviction that at various critical stages during the war God intervened and gave us victory, despite our mistakes and folly."

All the stories in the booklet are fascinating, from the storm that wrecked the Spanish Armada on its way to conquer England, to "the Miracle of Dunkirk" following a National Day of Prayer, but the story that stood out most for me was "The Epic of Malta."

Malta was this tiny island fortress in the Mediterranean, but it gave Britain a vital naval base for wreaking havoc on the ships supplying the German forces in northern Africa. But it also made Malta a lightning rod, and on June 11, 1940, Italian bombers zeroed in on Malta and for the next two years flew more than 2,000 bombing missions to pound Malta into rubble.

It was at the height of these devastating bombing raids that the Governor of Malta made an amazing broadcast in which he said: "I am convinced that God for Christ's sake still does answer prayer." So he encouraged his people to ask God for help, because it was his firm belief - expressed later in his book *A Very Present Help* - that "God, the solver of problems, does not change. He is the same today as he has ever been, and 'his hand is not shortened that it cannot save'. The difficulty is likely to rest **with us**, therefore, in that we do not exercise the **simple faith** that lays hold on that power."

And on that point he continues, “We have found how prone we are to limit the help that God gives. But his help is never limited. He can help us all day, all week, all month and all year, and he’ll go on helping us for as long as he sees we need it. This is one of the lessons he graciously taught us in the Siege of Malta,” because “we asked God to help us, and we watched him do it.”

What a story, then, this would have been for the writer of Hebrews to tell, because it illustrates exactly what he was getting at. Yes, the Christians in his care were all under enormous pressure from growing world chaos, and yes, they felt disheartened because their own hopes and expectations had been dashed, but what were they Christians for? What are any of us Christians for?

The answer in Hebrews is a real eye-opener. We’re Christians, **Hebrews 12:22-24**, because “we have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless thousands of angels in a joyful gathering. We have come to the assembly of God’s firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. We have come to God himself, who is the judge over all things. We have come to (join) the spirits of the righteous ones in heaven who have now been made perfect. We have come to Jesus, the one who mediates the new covenant between God and people, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks of forgiveness instead of crying out for vengeance like the blood of Abel” (from the New Living Translation).

This is why the Governor of Malta prayed for help, because as a Christian his eyes had been opened to this amazing picture of God’s world. And this is what Jesus lives for to help us see too, that we now have what Adam and Eve lost, only in so much more detail and colour, because we also see we’re in the company of thousands of angels and all those others before us who faced the same struggle in this world that we do, but trusted in Jesus to lift them out of it into the world he won for us where we now live with him.

Every day, then, we weigh this reality we live in here against the reality we are actually living in. It’s like each day waking up and being handed an old-fashioned pair of scales, with a dish on each side. For the Christians in Hebrews the dish on the scale representing this world quickly dipped as the worries and dashed hopes of this existence took first priority. For the Governor of Malta, on the other hand, it was the other dish that dipped, the one representing the world Jesus now lives to lift us into, because he saw the simplicity we now have in Christ, that all we need do is trust Jesus and he will make the world we’re now living in **with him** our reality. And this, for the author of Hebrews, was what he so desperately wanted his people to see. And how he goes about it is what we’ll get into next....