

OUR GLORIOUS CHRIST

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
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No. 1: The Letter to the Hebrews
Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-3

Are you thinking of giving up on God?
You can't see the point of continuing.
Your faith doesn't seem very real or relevant.
God's commands for purity are just too hard.
Jesus' call to take up your cross is too difficult.

You are fed up with the ridicule you are getting at home or work. Maybe you said to yourself, "This is the last time I am coming to church."
Or perhaps you are thinking of giving up on your marriage or your family.
It is too much of a struggle.
You can't endure the tension any longer.
Or you are considering giving up on your calling, your service, your job or your schooling.

If that is the way you are feeling today then the book of Hebrews was written for you. It was penned around 70 AD to a group of Christians who had enough. They were thinking of quitting.

The writer's exhortation to these discouraged disciples is don't lose confidence but, **"Have confidence." (Hebrews 10:19)**

Don't withdraw from God but rather **"Draw near to God." (Hebrews 10:22)**

Don't fix your eyes on your problem but rather, **"Fix your eyes on Jesus." (Hebrews 12:2)**

Don't abandon your marriage **"but honor marriage." (Hebrews 13:4)**

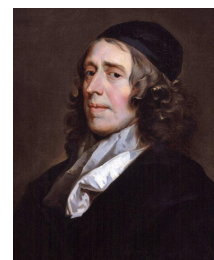
Don't forsake worship but rather, **"Encourage one another." (Hebrews 10:25)**

That is why we are starting a new series on The Letter to the Hebrews.

This will feed our souls for the next few months.

One of the great expositors on this epistle was John Owen. He was a brilliant scholar who was the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University in England.

His commentary on Hebrews is so exhaustive it fills seven volumes.



John Owen had a practice that I have found helpful. Before he began to study a passage of scripture, he would sit down at his desk, take out a piece of paper and write out questions he wanted to ask the text.

I have done a similar thing and on your outline you will find some of my questions that we will run through today.

First, WHY HEBREWS?

I chose the book of Hebrews because I think it is a great fit for our church.

First and foremost because **it is about Jesus.**

Jesus is the reason for this church. Jesus is why we exist. We would have no hope apart from him.

Our purpose at Autumn Ridge is to declare Christ's glory to the nations.

The second benefit of Hebrews is that **it is about scripture** and we are a Bible believing church.

Hebrews is a fascinating letter because its claims about Jesus are based on the Old Testament.

To grasp what the writer is saying takes careful study of God's Word but as disciples of Jesus we want to dig deep.

We desire to be people of the book.

We want to know our Bible for it points us to Christ.

The third benefit of Hebrews is that **it is about application.** This is true throughout the letter and particularly in the last three chapters.

We will come across the word "therefore" 16 times.

The writer is saying, "**Therefore** in light of who Jesus is live like this. **Therefore,** because of what of the Bible teaches do that."

It is immensely practical.

At Autumn Ridge our conviction is that the Christian faith is not to be a private thing. It is not just for church.

The Christian faith is so immense in its reach that it will impact all of life.

It will influence the way we vote and how we spend our money. It will determine the value we place on education and the role of the family.

It describes the importance of racial reconciliation.

Second question **WHO ARE THE RECIPIENTS?**

Many of the letters of the New Testament begin with a reference to the readers.

So there is Paul's letter to Timothy. Or Peter's letter to those in Pontus or Jesus' letters to Sardis or Philadelphia.

But that is not the case with Hebrews.

The traditional view is that this was a first century letter to a group of Jewish Christians who held similar views to those of the famous Qumran community which treasured the Old Testament scrolls and their teaching.

However, more recent scholars have suggested that the recipients could also have included Gentile Christians who were familiar with their Old Testament.

The truth is that we don't really know.

We don't even know where the recipients lived.

Some have suggested Jerusalem, others Alexandria or Rome. However, it is possible they didn't live in a major population center which is why the name of their church has been lost.

But the anonymous nature of the recipients is a good thing. It means we can identify with them.

Hebrews is a letter to the whole church which means it is a letter to us and I think the best way to read is to imagine it is being delivered to our home.

Incidentally I would encourage you to sit down and read it through in its entirety. It will only take you 30 minutes.

WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

Again we don't know. If you have an old King James Bible it says the author was Paul. But his name was added to the letter to get it in the Canon of Scripture.

Hebrews was left out of the early lists of the New Testament books. Then someone had the brilliant idea of attaching Paul's name to it. They thought this gave it a better chance of being included in the Bible. It worked!

But its style is not like Paul's.

Over the centuries people have made guesses.

The Church Father Tertullian said Hebrews was written by Barnabas.

Martin Luther suggested it was Apollos who Peter informs us **"Was mighty in the scriptures." (Acts 18:24)**

A German scholar called Harnack proposed it was Aquila and Priscilla. A more intriguing idea is that the letter was written by a woman.

This might explain why the name was lost because people feared the letter would not be so well received in the early days if its main author was known to be a female because Paul said women were not allowed to teach.



I think Origen, the Church Father from the third century, nailed it when he said, "Who wrote Hebrews, only God knows for certain."

But again this lack of knowledge works to our advantage. We know that all scripture is inspired by God.

Therefore this is the Holy Spirit writing to Autumn Ridge.

This is truth for us today.

WHAT IS THE LETTER LIKE?

Some years ago I was at a meeting with Dr. John MacArthur who is a well-known California preacher.

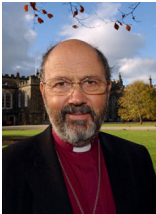
He used to be a frequent guest on the Larry King Show.

Someone asked him, "What is the meat of the word?"
 Dr. MacArthur answered, "The book of Hebrews."
 This is definitely not spiritual milk.
 It takes some chewing to get through.



Professor William Barclay begins his commentary by saying, "When we come to read the letter to the Hebrews we come to read what is for the person of today the most difficult book in the whole New Testament."

The young Charles Haddon Spurgeon agreed with this assessment. With typical humor he recalled his teenage feelings about the letter in his autobiography writing, "I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the epistle to themselves, for it sadly bored a poor Gentile lad."



Tom Wright says, "The letter to the Hebrews is one of the most bracing and challenging writings in the New Testament."

I promise you that the letter of Hebrews rewards careful study. There are spiritual lessons here not to be found elsewhere. The writer paints a portrait of Jesus that is truly magnificent.

So before we go further I want us to pause and ask the Holy Spirit to teach us all some profound truths from this extraordinary epistle as we study it together.

**Heavenly Father,
 We believe that your Holy Spirit caused the book of Hebrews to be written 19 centuries ago. You have preserved it for us today. We ask that you would give us eyes to see Jesus. Ears to hear what your Holy Spirit has to say, and a heart that will burn with love for you. Amen**

So we come to the last question **WHY SHOULD I KEEP GOING?**

Remember that Hebrews was written to those who were ready to give up. In the first three verses the writer gives us the best possible reason to keep going and that is because of Jesus. The author paints a compelling portrait of **our Glorious Christ**. This presentation of Jesus lifts our spirit, it warms our heart, and it stimulates our mind.

The opening verse tells us that down through the ages God has spoken to men and women through the prophets.

This revelation of God by the spoken word was authentic but it was only preparatory.

For when Jesus came God spoke fully and finally in him.

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” (vs 1-2)

Ezekiel portrayed the glory of God but Jesus reflected it. Isaiah expounded the holiness of God but Jesus manifested it. Jeremiah described the power of God but Jesus displayed it.

For Jesus was the greatest prophet of all time.

So let’s look at this description of Jesus and ask, “Why should I keep going?”

First, because **Christ is the heir of all things.**

“God has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things.” (v 2)

By describing Christ as the heir of all things the writer is telling us that the Lord Jesus will inherit not only this earth but the entire universe.

The son comes into a rich inheritance.

That is significant because in Romans we learn that we share this inheritance.

Paul explains, **“Now if we are children then we are heirs, heirs of God and coheirs with Christ.” (Romans 8:17)**

Sometimes we are tempted to give up because we just don’t have the resources to keep going. We don’t have the faith or strength or hope that things will be different. But, says the writer of Hebrews, you have Christ.

He is the heir of all things.

He can provide you with everything you need.

What is his is yours.

The old commentator John Trapp expressed this beautifully when he said, “Be married to this heir and have all.”

Second we should keep going because **Christ is the creator of the universe.**

“Through whom he made the universe.” (v 2)

It was by Jesus that the worlds were made.

John tells us, **“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:3)**

Colossians emphasizes the same truth, **“For by Jesus all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” (Colossians 1:16)**

Now if Jesus made the universe he made you because you are part of that universe. That means you are his workmanship.

He has created you for himself.

He is not going to abandon you.

He can make a new beginning for you.

He can give you grace to get through this time.

So don't give up for Christ is your creator.

The third reason we should keep going is because **Christ is the radiance of God's glory.**

"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." (v 3)

The Son is the shining reflection of God's own glory.

If you like Jesus is a chip off the old block.

Look at Jesus and it is like looking in a mirror at God himself. God's character is perfectly reproduced in Jesus.

It is interesting to consider that statement on this Martin Luther King weekend.

When Jesus appeared he did so as a dark haired, brown eyed, brown skinned, middle Eastern Jew. God could have chosen any race to represent him. His choice tells us a great deal about his love for all people because there are far more people in the world with dark skin than fair skin.

The Greek word for "exact representation" is "character" which is the origin of our identical English word.

Behind it lies the idea of stamping soft metal with a pattern.

Supposing an emperor wanted to make a coin. He would employ an engraver who would carve the royal portrait on a stamp made of hard metal.



The engraver used the stamp to make the coin.

The coin gave the exact impression of what was on the stamp.

The word "character" was used in the ancient world to refer to the accurate impression left by the stamp on the coin.

So this is what the writer is saying about Jesus.

It is as though the exact imprint of the Father's very nature and glory have been precisely reproduced in the soft metal of the Son's human nature.

Theologian N.T. Wright has a helpful comment here.

He imagines that an emperor had been waiting for a long time to tell his subjects who he was and give them a good idea of his character.

But suppose the metal stamp hadn't been invented yet. The emperor was only able to send out drawings or sketches which might tell people something but they wouldn't give them the full picture.

Then at last came the possibility of stamping his image on metal.

An original picture is exactly reproduced.

So the writer of Hebrews is saying God had for a long time been sending advanced sketches of himself to his people through the prophets but now he has given us his exact portrait so we see that the whole sweep of biblical history comes to a climax in Jesus.

So we can keep going in this difficult world because Jesus is God. He said, **"If you have seen me you have seen the Father."** In coming to Christ we have all the resources of God himself.

There is no reason to be discouraged.

Then we should keep going because **Christ is the sustainer of everything.**

"Sustaining all things by his powerful word." (v 3)

Jesus keeps this world together or as Paul puts it,

"In him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17)

Science has found many answers to the mystery of the universe and has discovered many of its laws.

Behind these laws is the Lord himself by whose hand the universe is maintained.

Recently there has been talk about finding the God particle or Higgs Boson.

The writer of Hebrews is anticipating that discussion when he said that Jesus sustains everything.

He is the mysterious force of the universe.

Now this is enormously encouraging.

If Jesus can sustain the universe he can certainly sustain you and me.

If he can keep the world going he can keep our marriage going. He can give us the resources to try again and not give up.

The writer of Hebrews has still more to say about our glorious Christ. He tells us we should keep going because **Christ is the purifier of sins.**

"After he had provided purification for sins..." (v 3)

Notice this is something that has happened in the past. Jesus has already done this.

Now it is really important we grasp the implications of this. Here is a lady who has run up a huge debt.

She knows she can't pay it.

Fear starts to dominate her life.

She won't go out because she doesn't want to spend any more money. She won't answer the door in case it is a bill collector. She won't open her mail because she can't bear to see how the interest is piling up. In addition to all this she is alienated from her father because of her past behavior.

This goes on for years and then at a family gathering she happens to learn that her father has paid off the debt. When she inquires when this happened she discovers it was years ago. None of that worry was necessary.

No one was after her.

She has been debt free for decades.

Well on the cross around 33 AD Jesus provided purification for our sins.

He anticipated every bad thing we would ever do and he washed it away so that it no longer exists.

Sometimes we are tempted to give up is because we have messed up so badly we think there is no coming back.

We have been unfaithful in our marriage or unfaithful to God. We may have spent time in prison or we have been involved in behaviors that make us very ashamed.

The devil tells us we are worthless but Jesus tells us we are worthy because of what he has done for us.

He died on the cross for our sins.

They are all paid for so we don't have too.

We can make a new start.

We can have a new life when we come back to Christ.

Then we should keep going because **Christ is seated at the place of authority. "He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." (v 3)**

That statement would make any Jewish reader sit up and pay attention.

They knew that the high priest went into the presence of God once a year to make a sacrifice.

But he could never sit down in the Holy of Holies because there was no chair.

Its absence was deliberate.

It meant that the priest's work was never done.

But on the cross Jesus cried, "It is finished."

He had made the final sacrifice.

There was nothing more to do and so Jesus sits down at the place of privilege which is the right hand of God.

In the ancient world it was the king's most trusted advisor who sat on his right hand.

He alone was allowed to bring petitions to the king.

Citizens would come with their requests and if a trusted advisor approved he would whisper them into the king's ear.

So Jesus sits at the Father's right hand interceding. We bring our requests to him and he whispers them to his Father.

He has been doing this since his ascension to heaven.

His purpose in that place of power is to gather the prayers of God's people and present them to his Father.

That is why we never need to give up because we have a representative in heaven. We have someone on our side, and not just anyone, but a great high priest.

So instead of giving up we look up to the one on the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

We bring all our petitions to the Lord Jesus.

We ask him for whatever we need.

On this Martin Luther King Weekend we need racial reconciliation. So let's pray for a deeper spirit of understanding among all Americans.

Let us pray for forgiveness for past evils like slavery and for friendship to develop among all the peoples of the planet.

So the good news of Hebrews is that we can endure because Jesus endured.

So the writer gives us this profoundly, practical advice.

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

This is our glorious Christ. I commend him to you. If you don't know him, embrace him today. He will see you through your trials. He will help you to endure. And if you have drifted apart from him, then come back. Renew the relationship. Walk through this year with him. You will discover that whatever the challenge is his grace, mercy and love will sustain you. For this is our glorious Christ.