

thrive

AUG-OCT 2019

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THIS ISSUE

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HEBREWS TO JUDE

- words of life

In this edition of *Thrive* we return to the New Testament and read through the letter to the Hebrews as well as the epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude. These biblical writers bring a different and complimentary perspective to that of Paul who wrote the other New Testament epistles and they are full of profound lessons for us today. I have drawn a lot from these books and I am confident that they can be as life changing for you as they have been for me. So, join me again in this edition of *Thrive* as we continue reading the Bible together.

MJ

Hebrews 1-2

We don't know who wrote Hebrews but we know why. This letter to the Hebrews is an appeal to Jewish Christians to withstand the temptation to play down the importance of Jesus. The higher the status that Jewish Christians accorded to Jesus, the more opposition they aroused from their fellow Jews. They might have regarded Jesus as just another prophet or even an angelic being of some sort and this would be enough to keep the peace with other Jews. But the moment they exalted Jesus to the position of Lord over all creation and the very incarnation of God himself, they deeply offended their fellow Jews. So the writer of Hebrews reminds them that Jesus is so much greater than the prophets, the angels and even Moses himself. Let us recognise that it is still tempting today to play Jesus down. You can talk about God but there is something about Jesus that people stumble over. Perhaps it is because Jesus brings God closer than what people are comfortable with. Perhaps it is because Jesus is the answer to a problem that people don't want to admit they have. Perhaps it is because Jesus confronts people with a summons that they don't want to obey. Whatever the reason, we must not shy away from associating ourselves with Jesus. An indistinct God who is out there somewhere will not be very confronting for people. But, in Jesus Christ, God becomes very distinct and his call becomes very clear. In Jesus, God is speaking with greater clarity than in any other act of divine revelation.

Read Hebrews 1-2

Ask God to give you opportunities to share your faith in Christ with others.

God has spoken. He has spoken through prophets who were uniquely called to write down his words to be enshrined in Scripture for subsequent generations. God's greatest act of communication, however, was through Jesus Christ. Jesus was not just another messenger like the prophets. And he was even more than an angelic messenger. John refers to Jesus as 'the Word'. He is, in other words, the perfect expression of who God is, and his life and teaching are the perfect example of what God wants. The writer of Hebrews wanted to underscore the superiority of Jesus. He refers to Jesus as "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being". Jesus not only came to us in the past, he is still with us. Jesus is present with us and even *in us* by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is 'Christ in us' (Colossians 1:27), so he is referred to in the New Testament as the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11). This means that Jesus is still present and is still revealing God to us. You cannot know God just by reading the Bible. You need the illumination of the Holy Spirit. You need the Holy Spirit to help you understand the truth. The only way to understand truth is to embody truth, it is to become true. It is only as the Holy Spirit shapes you in conformity with God's will that you become truly human. To *be* the truth is the only way to *know* the truth, just as loving someone is the only way to know what love is.

Read Hebrews 1

Ask God to teach you, lead you and shape you.

Defeating Darkness – Psalm 149

When reading the second half of Psalm 149 you may wonder what possible relevance this could have to us. Is it our job “to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples”? Before we can apply this to us now, we must first understand what the psalmist was talking about then. The psalmist prays these words in the understanding that God’s ultimate desire is to purge the world of evil and injustice and to use his people to do this. This plan has not changed, although we now have more clarity about how this is to be done. Throughout his teaching and ministry, Jesus made it very clear that our real enemy is a spiritual one, Satan. Jesus also demonstrated how we are to fight this spiritual enemy. Paul echoes this understanding when he says that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). When Jesus spoke of “binding on earth” (Matthew 16:19), he was echoing the imagery of this Psalm and he is clearly speaking in spiritual terms. Psalms like this remind us that we are engaged in a spiritual battle. This is no cause for alarm because Satan has been disarmed by Christ’s work on the cross. But it remains for us to take the victory that Christ won wherever God sends us through prayer and faithful witness. Wherever we shine light in love and grace, darkness is defeated. Darkness can never overcome light, so never fear the forces of darkness. Just focus on shining as a light.

Read **Psalm 149** and ask God to make you shine brightly in your circumstances.

God wanted to forgive us but he could not leave the just punishment for our guilt unpaid. Justice is not an external standard that God submits to. It is who God is. He is justice. So God would have to *fulfil* justice in order to forgive us. It would not have been just for God to send a third party to receive the punishment in our place, even if that were a perfect angel. No court of justice would allow an innocent man to take the punishment of a guilty man because justice demands that the guilty one must pay the price of his crime. The only one in the universe who can bear the consequences of the law of God in our place is the God of the law. He can do this because he himself is justice. God therefore became incarnate in human flesh in order to take the punishment that we deserved. If Jesus Christ was not *fully God* he could not have justly taken away and exhausted the full punishment for the guilt of all mankind. But he also had to be *fully man* in order to receive that punishment because only a man can die. There may be times in life when you feel that your guilt is too great for God to forgive. If you ever do feel this way, ask yourself this question: Is the worth of Jesus' death more or less than your guilt? Let me assure you that his death is infinitely greater in worth than the weight of any number of offenses that you may have committed. There is no sin too great for God to forgive.

Read Hebrews 2

Thank God for giving you a clean slate today.

Intuitively there is something within people that tends to back away from Jesus. Many people are comfortable with a remote and abstract God but Jesus represents a God who has come to us. He represents a God who is making an absolute claim on our lives. Most people want a God who doesn't interfere too much with their lives. They are happy to observe a moral law and even participate in religious ceremonies, but as soon as God comes and knocks at the door to establish his Kingdom in our lives, they recoil. The writer of Hebrews was addressing the temptation of his Jewish readers to back away from Jesus and return to their moral law and religious ceremonies. We should not think that this temptation is not as real for us as it was for them. One of the greatest temptations that Christians have faced, and continue to face, is the temptation to regress from being a disciple of Jesus to an observer of a moral and ceremonial based religion that essentially keeps God at a 'safe distance'. Is Jesus really the Lord of your life? Are you following him or are you chasing your own goals and hoping that Jesus will follow you? If you find that you have become distracted and have let your commitment to Jesus slip, then know that God doesn't want to condemn you. You don't have to change to be forgiven. You just have to turn back to Jesus, and he will lead you step by step to a fuller life in which you will rest in his purpose for you.

Read Hebrews 3

Commit yourself to Jesus and ask him to lead you through the next step that he wants you to take.

God wanted to lead the Israelites to a place where they could live in rest. To live in a state of rest is to live, as it were, in the flow of God's purpose. It is to lean into this purpose and let this purpose carry our lives forwards. To be at rest is to be like a plant in the right environment which grows uninhibited to reach its potential and to bear the fruit it was made to bear. A plant does not exhaust itself to grow and bear fruit. In the right environment, it does this naturally. This is rest. God's purpose is the environment in which we must rest and where we will grow and bear fruit. When God called the Israelites to enter into the promised land (their place of rest, where they would fulfil God's purpose) they became fearful and would not follow his lead. As a result, something very tragic happened. Instead of leaving the desert to enter the fertile land of Canaan they turned back and wandered around and around in the desert for the rest of their lives. This is the sad fate of many people. They will not entrust themselves to God, but instead they let their own ambitions and fears dictate their path in life. As a result, they end up wandering around and around in a desert-like existence. Their lives bear little or no fruit and they live without direction or purpose. If you feel that this has been the case for you to any extent, then I have good news. It is never too late to start again.

Read Hebrews 4:1-13

Ask God to lead you and make you fruitful for his purpose.

OUR HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

One of the purposes of this letter to the Hebrews is to show how Jesus Christ fulfilled the symbolism of the temple system. The temple was officiated by a priesthood under a high priest whose job it was to represent the people as a whole. The high priest in Jerusalem would present sacrifices on behalf of the people and intercede before God for the people so that God would bless them. The writer of Hebrews wants us to see that the high priesthood was a symbolic institution that points to the real high priest who is Jesus Christ. Jesus ascended into heaven and now is seated at the right hand of God and never ceases to plead our case. If you are like me you will feel your imperfections very keenly. But Jesus keeps affirming before God that our sins have been paid for in full. Not only this but Jesus appeals to his own righteousness which is credited to our account and asks God to bless us in accordance with that. There is a lot of attention being given to your life in heaven right now. Jesus is naming you before God as you read this, and he is asking God to answer you with blessing whenever you pray. So go ahead and ask God to bless you and make you fruitful. Think of who else needs something from God and pray for them. Be bold before God because Jesus is pleading your case right now. Raise your expectations of what God will give you. Ask and keep asking until you see God changing your world and even then keep on praying for more.

Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Pray to God with specific requests for yourself and others.

Hebrews 6 sounds a harrowing warning: “It is impossible for those who... have shared in the Holy Spirit... if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance.” The writer wanted his Jewish readers to realise that reverting to the old covenant faith is not a viable option. If they rejected Jesus and resisted the gift of the Holy Spirit, then they would leave themselves without hope. It is Jesus alone who can save us from sin and it is the Holy Spirit who brings us to repentance and faith in Christ. If we reject Christ and his gift of the Holy Spirit then we are burning the bridge and blocking up the road that leads us to restoration. This passage is not putting limits on how much God can forgive. God can forgive any and every sin because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross. But if we reject Jesus and we reject the prompting of the Holy Spirit then we cut ourselves off from the means that God made for our salvation. The writer of Hebrews is addressing Jews who, having received Jesus and having been filled with the Holy Spirit, want to go back to a faith without Jesus. He is addressing people who will reject Jesus and still feel that they can be God’s people. No, once you have tasted the truth, you are accountable for it. You can’t go backwards and think that everything is alright. As long as a person thinks he is alright without Jesus, he condemns himself.

Read Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart more to God and to what God wants to show you about yourself.

God is My Help – Psalm 54

Psalms like this one, in which the psalmists are facing some dire threat, have a wonderful feature in common, and one that we can learn from as we face various challenges. In each case, the psalmists remind themselves of who God is to them. The psalmist says here in Psalm 54: “Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.” For all that was bad about the psalmist’s situation, it nevertheless gave him a clear opportunity to experience the reality of what he was declaring about God. God will often allow us to face hardships so that, whatever else might be the case, we get to feel our need of him. We need God *all* the time, it’s just that we don’t always feel that need. It is often when we are stretched to the limit of our capacities and when we face overwhelming threats that we are reminded that we cannot control our own destiny. However bad your situation might be it may well be giving you an opportunity to reconnect with God. This doesn’t make the situation good, but it does mean that good can come from it. Because of our proneness to fall back into independence and autonomy, regular reminders of our dependence on God can be valuable. Your life belongs in God’s hands. Let every circumstance remind you to keep it there.

Read **Psalm 54** and ask God to reveal himself to you in your circumstances.

The position of high priest was a matter of contention in Israel at the time when Hebrews was written. The ruling high priest was not of the ideal priestly lineage: the line of Zadok, who was a descendent of Aaron. This was a big issue for many and some even broke away from temple worship altogether because of it (i.e. the Essenes at Qumran). So how could Jesus be the ultimate high priest if he was not of the order of Zadok, or Aaron or even a Levite!? The answer is that Jesus belongs to an order that transcends these orders. He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. This name means 'King (Hebrew: Melech) of righteousness' (Hebrew: Zadok). Melchizedek is a shadowy figure referred to in Genesis 14:18-20 who was both the king of Salem (Jerusalem long before it was an Israelite city) and a priest, and one to whom Abraham paid great honour. The writer of Hebrews plays a big trump card here and it is a genuine one. Jesus was not so much descended from Melchizedek, as a priest of that type. He is both the *king* (of Jerusalem and the world) and the *high priest* belonging to a priesthood that stands well above a mere human priestly dynasty. The point is that Jesus *is greater* and the covenant that he mediates is *better* by far. So whatever expression of favour you find in the Old Testament narratives, whatever blessings you see God pouring upon his people under the old covenant, that is *the least* that God will do now. He wants to give us *much more*, not less than that!

Read Hebrews 7

Pray for what you most want to see God do in your life.

A SUPERIOR COVENANT

Hebrews 8

TUESDAY
13 AUG

The writer of Hebrews wanted to show his Jewish readers how Jesus fulfils all of the symbols contained in the temple, the priesthood and sacrificial system of the old covenant. They were inclined to keep holding on to those symbols, but the author shows how absurd this is. It is a little like reading the TV guide but never watching television. The purpose of the former is to point to the latter. Once the program that you want to watch has started you can put down the TV guide; its purpose is fulfilled. The priesthood and sacrifices of the old covenant were just symbols prefiguring what was to come. Now that Jesus has come these things are made redundant. It is important to always remember that we are members of a greater covenant than that which the Old Testament believers participated in. This means that when we read of their experiences and how God favoured and blessed them, we should not expect less than what they had. If you feel that you do have less than what the average Israelite had then you have an appeal to make to God. The nature of the upgrade of the new covenant is that the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit that Moses, David and the prophets experienced is deposited in the hearts of *everyone* who is under the new covenant. What was the experience of a particular few under the old covenant is now to become the norm for everyone. Again, if this is not your experience then you have an appeal to make to God.

Read Hebrews 8

Pray to God for empowerment and fruitfulness
and appeal to Hebrews 8 as you do so.

The complex annual ceremony of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) was a symbolic representation of what Jesus did. He rose from the dead having paid the full price for our sin and ascended to heaven to perpetually plead our case before God. And the case that Jesus pleads is this: "I have earned for this person the full unlimited favour of God. So let nothing hinder this person from being blessed with every spiritual blessing." This is what the author of Hebrews means when he says that "Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance". God really wants you to receive something from him. Jesus paid for your guilt to make this gift available to you. And his gift is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It remains for you now to *receive*. You can receive new life if you are willing to forsake the old life. You cannot have both the new and old for the one negates the other. God calls you to come with those old worldly ambitions and to give them over to him to replace them with something far better. He wants to empower you with a new heart and new desires. He wants to lift off you the onerous yoke of worldly striving and release you into the life you were made for. True liberation occurs when your desires match your God given destiny. This is the work of the Holy Spirit: to bring your desires into alignment with your destiny.

Read Hebrews 9

Ask God to align your desires with what he wants to give you.

THE GRACE ZONE

Hebrews 10:1-18

THURSDAY

15 AUG

Jesus' death is sufficient for all the sins of every person for all time. To be a Christian is to live in this reality. It is to live in the context of a relationship of perpetual grace with God. The supply of grace cannot run out because the source is infinite. This means that when we fail, it is safe to go to God with our failure. This is very counter-intuitive for us. Our immediate response to our own guilt is to avoid God. Jesus has brought us into God's household and we are therefore in a 'grace zone'. In this zone, our sins, when brought out into the open, do not attract condemnation but *grace*. When we confess our sins, God rushes to us to extinguish the guilt in order that this sin may no longer have power over us. He doesn't rush to us with judgement but with salvation. This doesn't mean that God is not displeased when we sin. But he is displeased because every sin expresses *mistrust* at some level. Sin is not just a moral failure. Sin is essentially a relational breakdown between us and God. God is grieved over our sin not just because we have done something bad but because we have thereby rejected *him* in some way. He therefore comes to us, not to push us away, but to draw us back. He wants to repair the broken relationship. It doesn't matter how serious the rift is. God's desire for reconciliation is greater than any breach we may have caused.

Read Hebrews 10:1-18

Confess your sins to God.

FRIDAY
16 AUG

BOLD ASSURANCE

Hebrews **10:19-25**

Draw near to God. It is so simple yet so deeply counter-intuitive for us. We have a tremendous opportunity to walk closely with God every day. God wants us to draw near; to know his presence and to live by his Spirit and in his strength. He doesn't just want us to know *about* him. He wants us to experience him with more immediacy than we experience the physical world around us. He wants to be present within us. But there is something in us that resists the Holy Spirit. It is something that, if we are to really know God, we must overcome. On the one hand we get so used to living independently of God and so attached to our autonomy that we become control freaks. We are, therefore, irrevocably disinclined to relinquish the right to rule our lives. We cannot let go. On the other hand, we struggle to believe that the way is really open to us. Our sense of failure makes us God-shy and we cower away in dark places feeling that we are unacceptable to God. These issues effectively paralyse us spiritually. They keep us at a distance from God. But God wants to change this. He wants to break this paralysis and inspire in you a childlike faith. He wants to convince you, if you are willing to be convinced, that the way is wide open and you may come boldly and unreservedly to him. Are you willing to be convinced? So come to God with the bit of faith you have and let him grow that into a childlike boldness.

Read Hebrews 10:19-25

Ask God to take hold of you by his Spirit
and fill your heart with his assurance.