

The Need For Spiritual Focus

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[0 : 00] Now, I'd like us to return this morning to the chapter that we read together in Hebrews. We're going to look at one or two of the verses in Hebrews this morning.

Now, routine can be a good thing, and routine is a good thing in many ways, but it can also be a killer. It can lead to complacency, and it can lead to us being very thoughtless sometimes in our lives.

But it's kind of good, and it can also, if we're not careful, it can be bad. You know, often I'm walking back from the office here in the church back home, and I realise that I can completely disengage at that time.

I can be turning into Wanderpart Road, and I realise that I have no recollection of the previous ten minutes, that my brain has just been completely dead.

And I've been absolutely thoughtless, almost like these minutes haven't existed. I can't even remember having walked home.

[1 : 08] And sometimes it can lead to presumption so that I can expect when I get home that my dinner will be on the table like it is every night when I get home. And it's easy then to take that for granted, or not to think about the cost, the time of preparation, who has made it, and who has taken love and grace to do so.

Even the value of the food and everything that's involved in cleaning up. You know, we can become very presumptuous sometimes because of routine. I mentioned earlier to the kids about getting up in the morning, and what a great gift it is to be able to do that.

Yet sometimes when we get up, we don't think like that, and we can just absolutely expect it as our right. We can become complacent, sometimes even resentful about getting up in the morning.

We expect to be healthy. We expect another day, and we take it all for granted. And we can be mindless in the routine of living that we enjoy every day.

And in some ways I think that the book of Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who had got themselves into a bad routine, and they were in danger of reverting back to old pre-Christian days, pre-Jesus days.

[2 : 35] They were in danger of grumbling and taking Jesus for granted, not just taking Him for granted, but even giving up on Him because it was, in their day and generation, it was very difficult and tough to follow Jesus, especially when they either took Him for granted or took their eyes off Jesus.

And this letter to them was to shake them out of their bad thinking, to warn them with grace and with love, and to turn them with a fresh vision to look at Jesus and the wonder and the marvel of Jesus, that He was incomparable and that it would be crazy for them to give up on Jesus.

Now, this for us all has been a tough year. This is the last Sunday of 2020. And I guess most of us will not be unhappy to see the end of the year.

But it's easy for us at a time when life is difficult, and we've been reminded today that our lives are a lot more blessed in many ways and a lot easier than many peoples in the world in which we live today.

But even in our own lives, in times of difficulty, the temptation is to disengage, to give up on Jesus or on our spiritual lives because, well, you know, we've got other more important things to do.

[4 : 08] And sometimes to drift from Him and go back to old ways, unspiritual thinking. And so I want to challenge us all this morning to refocus on Jesus.

And if you've gone to over 2020, if you've gone to bad routines, if you've become complacent in your faith in Jesus Christ, or even you've, for all intensive purpose, given up on Him and given up on His people as well, then I would love it.

And I would love if you're watching this morning, if that's the case, and that Jesus has, for whatever reason, he has convicted you to just turn on the Internet and watch this morning.

Then just encourage you to refocus on Jesus Christ because He is the King of kings. There is in Him unsurpassed beauty.

He's unparalleled as God and Savior. And He is what will make for you. He will make 2021 worth living.

[5 : 17] And He alone will enable you to shine through these difficult days of challenge and of suffering to a greater or lesser degree.

So I'm just going to encourage you this morning to take away two phrases with you, two challenges to take away. The first is to be focused on Jesus.

And the second is to be vigilant about Jesus. So the first is to be focused on Jesus. And that's really what the author to Hebrews is saying at the beginning of this chapter.

Remember, there's not chapter divisions, of course, in the original, and he is following on from what he's already said. There's that link word, therefore, he's been talking about Jesus beforehand.

Therefore, he says, holy brothers and sisters, you who share in the heavenly calling, consider Jesus the apostle and high priest of your confession.

[6 : 15] Think about Jesus. Fix your thoughts on Jesus. Be focused on Jesus. That is really the whole point of, that's the whole point of the Bible, but it's the whole point of Hebrews especially.

And what we find here is a call towards focusing on someone and something other than yourself.

You know, sometimes people will say, maybe in sport or in your job or when you're trying to concentrate on something.

People will say, come on, come on, you've got to be focused. Get focused. And that's very much an internal thing. It's a call to yourself.

Come on, come on, get focused. And it's something that's about our internal self-discipline. And in a sense, there's an element of truth in that for this, but this is not a do-it-yourself call.

It's a call to just, come on, buckle up and be focused yourself. It's a call to be focused on someone other than yourself. It's a call to an intentional spiritual relationship with Jesus.

[7 : 25] In other words, it's looking away from yourself. And this is the primary and basic and fundamental focus of our faith.

Jesus Christ remains and always will remain the focus of your faith and mine. And the previous two chapters of Hebrews, by way of introduction, the writer is expressing the supremacy of Jesus to anything that the Jewish people had in the Old Testament and were potentially tempted to go back to.

He is so superior to Moses. He's superior to the angelic beings because he is the living God. He is glorious. He is infinite.

And he is full of grace and glories. He's not an Old Testament character. He's not just a better Moses. And we are not to focus on any person or even any vague spiritual reality, but we're to focus on Jesus Christ.

That is what is being the Holy Spirit is saying to us here. He's the builder of our spiritual lives. He's the builder of the kingdom of God.

[8 : 44] We're the house. He is the God who is the builder. He is, as we're told there, He is the one who is the apostle of our faith and the high priest of our confession.

So it's an unusual description of Jesus to call him the apostle. Just really means the sent one. And that is exactly what he is. He has been sent to us. And as we put our trust and faith in Him, He is in our hearts and in our lives.

He's our high priest. That is, He's the one who has represented us before the Father. Great thing, isn't it? That Jesus represents us before the God of the universe, before whom we will stand on that great day, and He stands in our place because He has offered Himself as our substitute.

He has taken, He has paid the price for everything that separates us from God, and He has made that way open, and He intercedes for us. He prays for us, you know.

It's a great thing, isn't it? I've said it again and again here. It's great to be prayed for. It's great to know that someone's praying for you. Well, here's Jesus Christ. He's the King of kings, and He prays for us.

[9 : 55] He intercedes for us every day before the Father. And you know, you can't take, you can't take, and I can't take my attention, and you can't take your attention of Jesus Christ.

You never graduate beyond Him. He is infinitely rich, and even the best, the most spiritually powerful sermons you will ever hear over a lifetime will only ever be just skimming the very barest surface of the character of Jesus Christ.

And He is the one that we are to focus on. And so if you don't remember anything else today, just remember that. Be focused. You focus your life on Jesus Christ. May you be one who considers Him, who fixes your whole being on your relationship with Jesus Christ, which is beyond yourself. Now, how exactly do we do that? How exactly do we do that? Well, we use our minds. It says, consider Jesus.

Now, considers kind of, it seems to me to be, my great Greek expertise, quite a weak word to use here, because it's an, in the original, it's an intensive verb.

[11:18] It's to think about, it literally means to think about from up to down. It just means to really be concentrated, to be attentive, to seek to understand and consider closely.

It's not just a passing thought every so often, but it's an intentionally real thinking through who Jesus Christ is.

You know, I'm sorry, but we have to grow in our relationship with Jesus, and that will take time, and it takes effort. It takes us to change, so that we are focused on Him and use our minds to do so.

You know, you get married in a day, and we've had some lovely weddings, even under lockdown here in St. Columbus this last year. It takes one day to get married. It takes only a moment really to get married, but it takes a lifetime being married.

And the same is true, we come to Jesus Christ in an instant when we put our faith and trust in Him, but it takes a lifetime of using our minds to consider Him and to listen to the Holy Spirit.

[12:30] Verse 7 tells us there, therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, God speaks to us through His Holy Spirit and encourages us to consider Jesus, and that is going to take time and effort and a sacrifice of love as does marriage.

So we use our minds, but we also use our words to consider Jesus. That He's the, we're told, verse 1, that apostle and high priest of our confession.

And we know that as believers, we don't only believe in our hearts, we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord. And the more we confess Him, the more we are challenged to, the more other people know that we follow Jesus, the more we are challenged ourselves to live up to our calling and to follow Him.

He becomes more real, the more we talk about Him, the more, I think, especially the more we talk about Him together as Christians. I'll say a little bit more about that later. Why He matters to us as we verbalize and as we work out and think through and argue why He matters to us, then He becomes more of a focus for our lives.

So we use our minds to consider Him, we use our words to focus our attention on Him, and we use our life. The introduction of this chapter says, therefore, holy brothers and sisters, that is, those who are set apart, whose lives are set apart, not just for the hour of worship on a Sunday, not just with Christian people, but in our workplace, in our decisions, in our ambitions, in our careers, and all that we are and all that we do, that we are set apart to be Jesus followers in our love, in our ethics, as He goes on to say in different places, say in verse 6, for example, that we're faithful, because Christ is faithful, we are to recognize that we're to hold faster confidence in our, and our boasting in our hope.

[14:38] So we're to have courage, we're to have grace, we have humility, we're to have focus on the hope that is ours by the way we live.

So therefore, our lives, our words, and our minds are to help us to be focused on Jesus Christ.

In other words, our Christian relationship with Him is not to be thoughtless. We're not to simply drift through life and be careless and indifferent and complacent.

And we have God's Spirit in us to enable us to be focused. We have to do that.

That's the challenge that we have, and He is worthy of that. He is worthy of being followed. He's worthy of us considering Him thoughtfully and carefully, and fixing our eyes on Jesus, whatever else we aim for and look for in 2020-21, may we be people who are focused that we are focused on Jesus.

[15:56] A great word, isn't it, that we focus our lives on Jesus. So be focused is my first challenge to myself and to us all in 2021, because we know that the temptation is otherwise.

If we're honest, the temptation is otherwise. And the second thing is to be vigilant. It's not unrelated.

It's quite similar in many ways. But in verse 12, we have this beginning of this section, take care, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God.

So be vigilant, take care is what is being spoken of here. Because the example from the Old Testament, particularly from the Israelites in the desert, was that they fell away.

Take care lest any of you have an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God. Falling away is the same word for apostasy.

[17 : 13] And that's the lesson, the solemn lesson that is taught from the Old Testament Israelites in the desert. All they had was religion. They didn't have trust.

They didn't trust in the living God. They had unbelieving hearts. They looked like they believed sometimes, but their hearts were indifferent to the living God.

They didn't love Him and they didn't serve Him. They very quickly grumbled against Him. And what the writer and for the Holy Spirit particularly is warning against here is allowing unbelief to, allowing our hearts to remain hardened by sin.

Because we misunderstand grace and we deny our responsibility before the living God. It's a very solemn and it's a very challenging word that we have here.

But it's a warning, a warning that's given in love. Not only to be focused on Jesus, which is so great, but also to be vigilant and to be very careful.

[18 : 34] And there's a couple of things I want to say about this. The first is that the Bible makes clear that that as believers it's our personal responsibility.

No one else can do it for you at that level. There's a really personal element towards this. Take care, be watchful is what we could translate that as.

And he says, take care lest there be any of you an unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

And the earlier on it speaks about the Israelites in the desert. Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion when your fathers provoked the living God.

And there's this element of personal responsibility. Don't harden your own hearts. In other words, what I'm going to say is provocative and it's looking at it from our point of view.

[19 : 38] But unbelief, you can never blame God for your unbelief. You and I are culpable for not believing and letting our hearts become hardened.

It's not neutral. It's not unimportant. And it's not God's fault. It's not God's, it's not good enough, in other words, to argue God's sovereignty because we have our personal responsibility.

Now, whatever struggles you have with that and whatever struggles we have with God's sovereignty which we utterly believe in and our responsibility which the Bible clearly teaches, however that doesn't seem to match, the Bible argues both.

No one else can fix your eyes on Jesus. You have that responsibility. From our perspective, we have that responsibility.

The Bible makes that abundantly clear. So we have a personal responsibility to be vigilant, to take care, to be watchful as we fix our eyes on Jesus.

[20 : 53] Now, the great thing about this is along with this personal responsibility to maintain our relationship with Christ, to grow our faith, to be reliant on Him, which is the kind of paradox of all that I'm saying is that we have responsibility, but yes, to be reliant and to be dependent on Jesus Christ who's the author and perfecter of our faith and who is glorious and who makes all these promises.

And we have that personal responsibility, but also we have that great responsibility to do it together, to do it together.

Verse 13 he says, but exhort one another every day as long as it's called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. So that says lots of things.

It says lots of things about our spiritual relationship with one another. It says lots of things about our honesty, about our vulnerability, but above all it says lots of things about just being together as Christians, exhort one another, which is a great word because it's the same word that's used of the gift of the Holy Spirit, or the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit Himself, the paraclete.

It's the kind of verbal form of that word. So that we are to, it just means that we're to come alongside one another, you know, it's often translated the Comforter in John's Gospel, particularly when Jesus speaks.

[22 : 28] So we play the role in many ways, or we mimic the role of the Holy Spirit. We come alongside one another.

We encourage one another. We come close up impersonal. We exhort one another. Even sometimes we warn one another.

And isn't that, there's a brilliant balance there, isn't there? Between our personal individual relationship with Jesus, and the fact that we're not alone in this walk, and we're not to be alone, not only are we never alone because, like I said to the kids earlier on, that we wake up with the Holy Spirit in our, the life of God through the Holy Spirit in our hearts by faith every day, if we are Christians, if we trust in Jesus.

Not only do we have that never-alone-ness, but we ought to have the never-alone-ness of being, encouraging one another in the Christian family.

We are to be like the Holy Spirit with one another. So our faith then is personal, but it's not private.

[23 : 38] And it has this, we're not soul traders with heaven. We're not lone rangers in our Christian lives. We are to help one another every day against unbelief.

See how spiritual that is? That that should be an element of our fellowship, of our community, of our life with other believers.

It's not simply friendship, because we get on well together. We go to the same church, or we've been together for a long time, or we do happen to worship together. But it's more than that. It's more than simple friendship.

There's this great spiritual dimension where we are in the trenches together. We are battling unbelief together. None of us are so proud and independent.

We say, I have moved beyond not believing. I'm a strong Christian now. Unbelief shows itself in many, many different ways. And it can come in the form of pride or legalism or self-right, whatever it might be.

[24 : 43] It's not sometimes the stripped back simple understanding of what we sometimes would take unbelief to mean.

But we are to come together against unbelief, and we need that encouragement. We are a called out people. We share, as we're told here, the heavenly calling.

Verse 1, never used, share in this. We share in a heavenly calling. All of us in our lives, most of us are fulfilling that heavenly calling on our own because of the nature of the world in which we live, because of our work, and because of isolation just now particularly.

But nonetheless, we are to see and recognize the importance of what we share in Jesus Christ, that we share that heavenly calling. Indeed, verse 14 says, we share in Christ Himself, for we have come to share in Christ.

There's no greater bond than that bond we have with believers. And so we are to live out our battle against unbelief, and we're to encourage one another every day as a people.

[25 : 56] Now that starts in our families. It starts in your marriage if you're married with your husband and wife, that you're to be spiritual encouragers, you're to battle against unbelief together.

Also in the church community, as a praying family together, worshiping together, growing together. It's been brilliant this last year to see how the pastoral teams and people within each pastoral area, so often helping one another spiritually.

So brilliant. Keep that going. Develop it. Mature it. Look pastorally over one another. Speak to one another spiritually.

Help one another overcome unbelief. Don't be surprised if people need help to overcome unbelief. We all need that. And it's a great antidote to unbelief.

Because usually what we find, isn't it, if we are spiritually cold, if we are far from God, how does it present itself? We don't pray, we don't fix our eyes on Jesus, and we get as far from the church, from other Christians, from the Bible as we can.

[27 : 09] And so we need that time together. And I think the prayer times we've had this year have been really vital in helping us through this difficult time of isolation and separation.

But take that initiative to pray together. When we're not praying formally at meetings, think of one or two people that you can join together with in prayer.

Join us when you can on a Wednesday, on a Friday morning. We'll try and be flexible to meet the needs of timing and everything else. Because there's always a danger of recoiling into yourself or into the world or becoming complacent or having bad routines or falling into unbelief, because we

fail to recognize the remaining sin within us and the remaining unbelief.

And we fail to value Jesus and what it cost Him to enable us to live. We can't underestimate the power and darkness of death and sin when we think of what it took to set us free.

And therefore we need to be vigilant and we need to fix our eyes on Jesus. And that vigilance is something we're to do, and this is again, I said, again and again in Scripture, something we do daily, but exhort one another every day as long as it's called today.

[28 : 34] So let's live with that sense of daily being vigilant and daily fixing our eyes on Jesus. I know that's hard, but not even so much daily thinking away into some kind of future, but one day at a time is really behind that thinking.

One day at a time, we wake up in the morning, we're thankful that the Holy Spirit is with us as we wake up, and that God is with us, and that we have life and by His grace health, and even when we don't have health, we have the hope of perfect completeness in the future and strength through our sufferings.

Help us to fix our eyes on Jesus so that we can say, well, the Holy Spirit was with me as a believer every day I woke up in 2020, and He'll be with me in 2021.

And Jesus finished working the cross for me yesterday is no more finished than it will be tomorrow, and that I am redeemed by His grace and by His love.

And today I get up and I will battle unbelief. And I will battle against complacency and against sinful tendencies, so I need to live in God, and I need to fix my eyes on Jesus, and I need to use my mind, and I used to use my words and how I confess Him in my life with fellow Christians and also with unbelievers that they know that I belong to Jesus, so that my words and my life come under His Lordship.

[30 : 24] And daily as I do that, may I see not only how I need others to help me in my walk of faith, but how can I help someone else to battle unbelief?

How can I help someone else who I know and love who is a Christian not to give up this year? How can I encourage and be encouraged to have a good routine, to overcome bad routines?

And how can I be encouraged and how can I encourage others to dig our roots deep, deep, deep into the living water of Jesus Christ, so that even in a time of drought, the I and we and they can bear fruit?

So isn't it great we fix our eyes on Jesus? In other words, we don't just intentionally, we're not intentionally selfish in our survival, but we also fix our eyes on each other.

And we allow others to fix their eyes on us because we need the encouragement of each other this year. And a united church will be our, a united gospel community will be a community that fix their eyes on Jesus and take care and exhort one another every day.

[31 : 48] That exhortation, that spiritual conversations is so vital in our Christian church today, probably more vital than ever.

And I don't think we're that great at it because we can have a deep private faith, but somehow we feel the vulnerability or false piety of speaking about Jesus is maybe looked down on sometimes by others.

May that not be the case, but may be the case that we share and talk about Jesus who is so precious to us and grow in grace.

And if you don't know Jesus or if you've drifted from Jesus, if you've fallen away from Jesus Christ, then please take heed of the warnings of scriptures and come back. His arms are open to receive you.

And if you've never come to him, this is the time, is it not? Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. These are the words of the Holy Spirit.

[32 : 55] We all have a hard, unbelieving heart unless Jesus will come in his life giving power, forgive us and renew us. Amen. Let's pray.

Mother God, help us to know you and to love you better. Help us to serve you, to follow you, to fix our eyes on you, to be focused and to be vigilant.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.