

## Tuesday, December 15, 2020—Philemon, 1 Peter 1-2

Coming to know Jesus personally is a transforming experience. He brings the dead soul to life. He transforms a rebel into a family member. He removes shame and replaces it with honor. The guilty are forgiven.

This transformation means the one with no power or position suddenly has both. Paul saw this in the life of Onesimus. He was a slave belonging to Philemon but had run away and come to see Paul in Rome. While there, Onesimus became a believer in Jesus, and he was a great help to Paul's ministry while in prison. Paul knew Onesimus needed to go home and make his relationship right with Philemon, so Paul sent Onesimus with a letter that requested Philemon's grace to match that of Jesus. The gospel changes lives and repairs relationships the culture says are broken.

Peter saw this transformative power as capable of helping the outcast and persecuted to persevere in great trials. Despite their hardship, Peter celebrated the mercy, hope, and power they all had because of what Jesus had done (1:5-7). What Jesus had done to redeem the souls of man was something the angels found stunning (1:12). If the ones who saw the holiness of Jesus firsthand were amazed, those who received His holiness needed to walk in it (1:16) no matter the difficulty. God was going to use them in their faithfulness like living stones to build a spiritual house (2:5).

Pray that you will live in the transformation of the gospel so people see the good in you and praise God (2:12).

## Monday, December 14, 2020—Hebrews 11-13

The one who begins a new workout routine wants to see muscles develop after the first session. The one wanting weight loss steps on the scale expecting significant impact after having one healthful meal. The desire for positive results is good, but most are far too impatient.

Hebrews was calling believers to trust in Jesus and to persevere in difficult days. There was no reason to back to their old ways of sinfulness because that led to death. There was no reason to return to old Jewish practices because God had given the new and better way through Jesus. That new way required faith—persevering, patient trust in God.

Faith, Hebrews says, is being sure of what we hope for (11:1). We don't see it, but we know we have it. Hebrews reminds the readers of dozens of the faithful who trusted God, and God commended them. Some found great reward in this life. Some suffered terribly. All of them believed God. Without faith it is impossible to please Him (11:6).

These faithful examples can spur us on toward love and good deeds, throwing off sin and hindrances and running the race He has marked out for us as they did (12:1-3). Jesus gives us strength to resist sin and to endure hardship. The Lord's discipline is proof of His love for us and His design in us for righteous reward. His constant presence with us (13:5) is the strength and accountability we need for daily righteousness (13:21).

Thank God for love, righteousness, and power from Jesus.

## Sunday, December 13, 2020—Hebrews 8-10

The Christmas season provides ample opportunity for giving and receiving gifts.

Family, co-workers, and classmates exchange presents to fulfill a request on a wish list or to surprise someone special. Sometimes, when appropriate, the gift is used or repurposed. Most times, however, the gift is new. No one wants a gift that is useless or worn out.

Hebrews speaks of a new covenant that God had given to His people. The first covenant dealt with a tent and priests, but the ministry Jesus received and performed was superior (8:6). God had promised this new covenant and new spirit through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and this new covenant would provide lasting forgiveness (8:12).

God had used the regulations of the first covenant to prepare the people for the work Jesus would do with the new covenant. The earthly Tabernacle was a picture of the heavenly presence of God. Just as the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, Jesus went directly to the presence of God the Father, taking not the blood of an animal but entering by His own shed blood (9:1-14). Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant, standing before God as the representative for those who believe (9:24).

The people had to offer over and over the sacrifices prescribed in the Law. They did not cleanse forever. The sacrifice of Jesus, however, makes perfect forever those who are being made holy (10:14). His new covenant is the gift that keeps on giving all year long.

Embrace the new gift of Jesus. Encourage others to do the same.

Saturday, December 12, 2020—Hebrews 5-7

When babies are born, the expectation is that they will grow. Parents buy clothing, food, and toys for the current stage of life, but they begin looking for larger clothing and more complex toys and planning for increases in development and size. Not to grow would be a serious issue.

The writer of Hebrews wanted his readers to grasp the truth and majesty of Jesus and to grow in it. Jesus was God in the flesh, yet He Himself had to learn obedience through His suffering (5:8). He was not sinful, but He was not fully mature and able to do the work for which God appointed Him (5:1-6) until He endured and matured.

If Jesus needed maturity, then every one of His followers has to expect the same. The writer of Hebrews was frustrated because they were not maturing (6:1). They were revisiting basic concepts rather than taking those foundational realities and learning deeper truths and becoming more like Christ in every area of life. There were many who were like the Israelites on the cusp of the Promised Land. They saw the great promises of God but realized it would take hard work and great faith and decided to remain comfortable rather than conforming to His call.

Jesus Himself is our Great High Priest (7:21-22) who is in the presence of God the Father. He has great plans for us. He wants us to come before the Father and to live in the fullness of His blessing. Pray that you mature into that fullness.

Friday, December 11, 2020—Hebrews 1-4

We don't know the identity of the author of Hebrews, but we can be certain of his intention. He wanted to make much of Jesus and the work He did to provide salvation and holiness for those who believe. As Paul lifted up Jesus in his letter to the Colossian,

so does the author of Hebrews.

The readers lived in a culture that revered and even worshiped angels. To be sure, angels were God's messengers. Angels had important position in the Kingdom, but to no angel did God ever say what He said to Jesus (1:1-14). God magnified Jesus above everyone and everything.

Angels delivered binding messages, and angels delivered the message about Jesus. Angels did not deserve worship, but they did deserve respect. Jesus, however, deserved worship and obedience. Only to Jesus had God subjected the world to come (2:5). No angel took on flesh and suffered the way Jesus did (2:14-18). Only Jesus can sympathize with us.

God calls the church to encourage one another (3:13) during their difficult days to remember how Jesus Himself suffered and that He is able to empower, encourage, and help in time of need (4:15-16). Sin is tempting and deceptive, and suffering can lead to weakness that causes stumbling and drifting from faith. He uses His word, sharper than any double-edged sword, to deliver truth, convict of sin, and direct His people (4:12).

Thank God for a sympathetic High Priest who knows what it means to suffer. Thank Him for His word that gives truth for living.

Thursday, December 10, 2020—Colossians 1-4

Some say, "Out of sight. Out of mind." This was not true for Paul and the Colossians. Though he was in a Roman jail and had never visited the church in Colosse, Paul did not forget these people. He heard often of the way God was glorifying Himself through this church, and Paul rejoiced.

Though he could not see God, Paul had seen Jesus, who was the image of the invisible God (1:15). Jesus had come to have first place in everything (1:18) and had reconciled believers to Himself (1:22). Having Christ in them was the hope of glory (1:27), so Paul labored to admonish and to teach Christ so the church would be perfect in Him (1:28-29).

Paul urged the Colossians to continue growing in their faith. From the root would come His fruit. God had made them alive in Christ, so the religious traditions or cultural expectations did not define them. Only Christ gave them the power to be holy and faithful (2:1-23). Through Christ, they could put to death sin that tempted them and live in unity, love, and righteousness (3:1-17). Christ changed everything about them.

Prayer would be the conduit for their power as disciples and witnesses, and Paul asked for them to pray the same for him. He sent them greetings from the disciples who served him in Rome because, though separated by hundreds of miles, they were united in faith and purpose.

Because of the greatness of Jesus, do the work He calls you to do (4:17). Pray for disciples around you to be faithful to their call.

Wednesday, December 9, 2020—Philippians 1-4

They say absence makes the heart grow stronger. While in a Roman prison, Paul was separated from most of those with whom he had planted churches and expanded God's Kingdom. To some of those, he wrote letters. His letter to the church in

Philippi was filled with joy.

Imagine that. In jail, Paul had joy. These people were so faithful to Christ and to Paul they moved his focus from chains to celebration. He knew Jesus was still at work in them and prayed they would become more like Him, filled with the fruit of righteousness for His glory (1:11).

He wanted them to have joy as well. He told them Christ was using Paul to tell the gospel to those he encountered in prison. He was growing in boldness and courage and concluded to live was Christ and to die was gain (1:21). The Philippians could have the same assurance in struggle (1:29).

Nothing would be more pleasing to Paul than for the Philippians to take on the mind of Christ (2:5-11) and consistently work out the salvation He planted in them (2:12-13). Their unity and humility combined with growth in mind and spirit would help them avoid and rebuke false teaching. Knowing Christ and becoming like Him was the highest goal (3:13-14).

The joy of Christ allows His people to worry about nothing and pray about everything (4:4-9). They can be content in all circumstances, knowing they can do all things through Him (4:13) who supplies (4:19). Praise God for this joy that comes only through Jesus.