

Introduction

Most if not all of us have heroes; men or women that we look up to or look back on as people who have made an impact on the world. For some it may be George Washington

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Who led the American colonies to victory over the hated British, or perhaps Martin Luther

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Who led the Reformation in the 15th century, or Martin Luther King

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Who led the fight for justice and racial equality in the 20th century, or Mother Theresa,

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Who served the poor unselfishly in Bangladesh, or Winston Churchill

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Who stood up to Hitler and the German Reich and rallied the British nation in its finest hour. But if you asked a first century Jew who they admired the most, they would almost certainly have told you that it was either Abraham, Moses, or David. These were the three greatest figures in Jewish history, and David's tomb is still a pilgrimage site in Jerusalem

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But of these three, Moses was the one who led the children of Israel out of Egypt, and it was Moses who received the law on Mt. Sinai

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and Moses who was responsible under God for leading the Israelites to the border of the Promised Land. So crucial was he to the establishment of the nation of Israel that one commentator said that if we had not known of Moses from the Bible we would have had to invent him to explain the existence of the nation.

The writer of the book we know as the letter to the Hebrews was writing to a group of predominantly Jewish Christians sometime in the second half of the first century AD, probably around 80 AD. It was a group that had become discouraged because of opposition and perhaps spiritual apathy, and the writer was concerned to warn them and encourage them in their Christian lives. He does this with direct warnings of the dangers of falling away, but most importantly with teaching about the superiority of Jesus Christ. So in chapter 1 we learn that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, and that he is superior to the angels, while in chapter 2 we are taught that Jesus is our pioneer and our liberator. As Chris taught us last week, he brings us freedom from shame, freedom from the fear of death, and freedom from helplessness. And now in chapter 3 the author brings the message home to his readers, who may well have been looking back to Moses and all the rituals and festivals and shared memories they had as Jews, and reminds them that Jesus is greater than Moses. Let us read Hebrew 3:1-6

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Therefore, holy brothers (and sisters), who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

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Prayer

The writer is writing to discouraged believers. Does that ring a bell with you? Are you facing personal troubles today that are making you wonder "Is this Christianity thing really true? Is it worth it?" Some of you may be facing pressures at work that are wearing you down, or even the loss of your job. Others may have serious illnesses in your own body or in that of a loved one. Some may be facing struggles in your marriage, or may have lost your spouse of many years, while others may be facing the prospect of going through life without a marriage partner. Others of you may be facing what the Puritans called "spiritual desertion" or "the dark night

of the soul” when you are walking faithfully with the Lord and yet you feel, because of your circumstances, as if God has abandoned you. And in the first century, when this letter was written, some Christians were facing imprisonment and death for their faith in Jesus Christ. And what is our writer’s advice to Christian facing trials? Does he suggest self-fulfillment seminars, or counseling, or shopping spree or a vacation, or a new spouse or a dive into Eastern mysticism, or any of the ways our modern self-help gurus might suggest? No, none of these. Writing to a discouraged and fearful group of Christians his advice – no, not advice but his *command* - is short and to the point:

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Fix your thoughts on Jesus

“Therefore, holy brothers (and sisters), who share in the heavenly calling, says our writer, – because of what I have already written, because Jesus is the heir of all things, because he is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, because he is greater than all God’s angels put together, because he suffered death and is now crowned with glory and honor, because he himself suffered when he was tempted and is now able to help those who are being tempted – therefore - fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.” So let us try to unpack this command and what it means to us today.

We will look at 5 aspects of this command:

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1. To whom is this command addressed?
2. On whom should we fix our thoughts?
3. Why should we fix our thoughts on Jesus?
4. Why is this important?
5. How do we do it?

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1. To whom is this command addressed?

Let us note first of all the recipients of this command. They are described in three ways

a. They are Christian *brothers and sisters*. They have been made sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ, and so they are brothers and sisters, part of the same family of God. They are not lone rangers, living their lives in isolation from one another, but they are members of God’s family. And that is true of all believers in Christ, so if you are here today and are not connected in some way with other Christian believers, you are missing out on a key part of your Christian life. I urge you, on the authority of God’s word, to get involved with other believers in some way. If you do not know how, check the BCF web site or talk to someone about joining a house group, or find another student and check out a campus Bible Study. And anyone can get involved today or next week in one of the adult education classes that are taught here every week; you will not only get excellent teaching, but you will make Christian friends in the class.

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Classes at 9:45 am are Reading and Praying the Psalms, Fellowship Hall, and 2 Corinthians (Class for Women), Room 201.

Classes at the 11:15 are Old Testament Survey Room 142, Exodus (class for women), Room 201, Book of Luke Room 202.

I was talking with one of the team of teachers of an adult class the other day, and he told me that he takes 3 weeks to prepare his lesson, so that is a measure of the quality of teaching that goes on in these classes. Take advantage of it!

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Get connected! Be the Christian brother or sister that you are!

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b. They are *holy* brothers and sisters. This does not mean that they were perfect, without sin, but it does mean that they were (and we are) set apart and separated to God.

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c. They (and we) share in the heavenly calling. What does this mean? It means that they and we too have been called from heaven; God has spoken to us by His Son Jesus. And we are also called to heaven; like Paul who said

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“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:14)

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2. On whom should we fix our thoughts?

“Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.” Our passage tells us three important things about Jesus.

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a. First of all it is the very human Jesus who lived among us and worked among us and suffered among us and died for us. He knows our weakness and He fully understands our needs. He loved us so much he would rather die for us than see us go to hell.

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”Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” Heb 2:18
But the writer tells us two additional things about Jesus; he is the *apostle* whom we confess

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Apostle means "one who is sent", and it is only used here to describe Jesus. He was sent by God to live among us and to die for us; he not only proclaimed the truth, he *was* the truth.

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He is also the *high priest* whom we confess. In the Jewish religion the high priest was the only person who could go into God’s presence on the Day of Atonement and offer a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people, and he could only do that once a year. But our Lord is not a human high priest; he is the great High Priest who made sacrifice once and for all for us. This truth about Jesus is a major theme of the book of Hebrews, so I will only add here that the Latin word for priest is pontifex, which literally translated means *bridge builder*. Jesus is the bridge builder *par excellence*, who bridged the immense gap between sinful man and holy God with his cross

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3. Why should we fix our thoughts on Jesus?

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a. Because he is greater than Moses. As we learned earlier, Moses was the great leader of Israel, the one who was faithful to God in God’s house of Israel. The word house, by the way, means family or clan, not a literal house. In England we speak of the House of Windsor, meaning the whole royal family; a better word might be household. Moses faced up to Pharaoh

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He led the Israelites through the Red Sea

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And he brought them the Law of God from Mount Sinai

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And God says this of Moses

Num 12:6-8

"When a prophet of the LORD is among you,

I reveal myself to him in visions,

I speak to him in dreams.

But this is not true of my servant Moses;

he is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak face to face,

clearly and not in riddles;

he sees the form of the LORD. (NIV)

No wonder the Hebrews looked up to him as the one who under God founded the nation and had a special relationship with God! So when our writer says that Jesus is greater than Moses, it really means something. Moses was one of a kind, with a more intimate relationship with God than any other prophet, but Jesus is even greater.

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b. Because He is worthy of more honor than Moses. Moses, we are told, was faithful in all God's house, but he was not the builder of the house; the building was done by God. But Jesus was the builder of the house, in the sense that it was his sacrifice on the cross that opened the way into God's family for all who believe on Him.

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c. Because He is the Son. Moses was a faithful servant, worthy of the highest honor a servant can receive. But Jesus is the Son of God, and He is worthy of all the honor due to a son.

"A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free." John 8:35-37 NLT

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d. Because He is our Lord. We are told "And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast." Heb 3:6b So we are part of the Lord's household. What does that mean? To the Hebrew Christians it meant that they were no longer castaways, cut off from their Jewish heritage and practices, and excluded from the synagogue. They were members of a much better household; the household of God's children, overseen by their Lord and Saviour. And this is true for us too. No matter what trials we are going through, however deep the waters seem to be, we are members of God's house, which is His church.

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4. Why is this important?

So what is the big deal? Why is it important to fix our thoughts on Jesus? It is because of the last few words of verse 6. "And we are his house, *if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.*" It would be nice if this verse ended after the first five words "And we are his house". That is an easy verse to preach on! But it does not stop there; the text goes on to add a condition: *if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.* So there is a tension here.

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On the one hand we are assured of our place in God's kingdom with verses such as "He is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb 2:18); we are called "holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling" (Heb. 3:1); "And we are his house" (Heb. 3:6)"we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens" Heb 4:14.

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And Jesus himself said (John 10:27-28) "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

But on the other hand the letter is full of warnings that the real test of our faith is whether or not we remain faithful to the end. Probably most of us can think of a friend or relative who professed faith in Christ and who appeared to be a believer, but who subsequently fell away and renounced his or her faith. Jesus himself told the parable of the sower and the different soils:

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Matt 13:3-9

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear." NIV

The rocky soil and the thorny soil are examples of people who hear God's truth and appear to believe it, but they never go on to produce any spiritual fruit; they drop out when the going gets tough.

The late English theologian F.F. Bruce comments on the repeated insistence of the letter "on the fact that continuance in the Christian life is the test of reality" (and goes on to say "the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints has as its corollary the sanguinary teaching that the saints are the people who persevere to the end.")

So fixing our thoughts on Jesus is important because it enable us to have an eternal perspective on our lives; it lifts our minds from the problems and trials that we all face at one time or another, and many of us are facing right now, and it enable us to focus on the ultimate reality of Jesus Christ, His death for us, His coming again, His faithfulness, His love, and His power.

Craig Massey, in his book "Adjust or Self-Destruct", tells the story of a 9-year old girl who was dying of leukemia. Even though she was so young, she had a strong faith in Christ, and before she sank into her final

coma she said to the members of her family standing around her bed “I’m going to be the first one to see the Lord Jesus Christ. What would you like me to tell him for you.” That young girl had fixed her thoughts on Jesus, and He sustained her in her hour of death.

And let me say a word to those of you who are grieving for that relative or friend who has apparently lost his or her faith. Don’t give up on them! Pray for them, for the Lord to call them back to himself and to a life of faithful service to God.

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Billy Graham’s son Franklin rebelled and wandered away from God; he was expelled from LeTourneau College, finally graduated from Appalachian State University, and then decided to tour the world. His parents, and especially his mother, never stopped praying for him, and finally God met him at age 22 in a hotel room in Jerusalem. He now heads the Christian ministry Samaritan’s purse and preaches for Christ.

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How do we fix our thoughts on Jesus?

Let me say at once a very obvious thing, and that is that it does not mean that we should spend every waking minute thinking about Jesus. Quite apart from the fact that this is impossible, it would also mean that none of us could ever think about important subjects like chemistry. And since my last message was on the subject “Your work matters to God”, I obviously believe that it is important that I do spend some time thinking about chemistry, and that you spend time thinking about your work, whatever it may be.

But I also need to confess that this is a difficult part of the sermon for me, because I am not very good at fixing my thoughts on Jesus, and I can go for hours without thinking of him. So let me, in the spirit of one beggar trying to help another beggar find food, try to help you and me figure out some ways to do this.

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a. By spending time in His word

This is an obvious one, but we must not neglect it. Make sure you spend time each day reading the Bible and thinking about its message. I recommend a systematic reading plan, rather than jumping around from one book to another. Beverly and I use the guide “Encounter with God” by Scripture Union, which takes you through the Bible in 5 years and has helpful commentaries on each day’s reading.

b. Memorize key verses

Again I confess that I am not an expert at this, but even I have memorized key verses like Matt 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." NIV

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c. By spending time in prayer. This again is an obvious one, and the only comment I will make is that prayer should not be confined to a daily “Quiet time”; it should be part of all of our lives. “Pray continually” says Paul in I Thess 5:17

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d. By being aware of God’s presence at all times. Brother Lawrence, a lay brother in a Carmelite monastery in Paris in the 17th century, wrote the classic Christian work, *Practice of the Presence of God*, detailing how to gain that constant and comforting connection to God by doing everything from washing dishes to praying in a deliberate consciousness that he was living in the presence of God.

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e. By meditation. This is the hardest one for me; when I try to meditate usually one of two things happens; I doze off, or my mind wanders to some problem I am facing. So I am not a good guide to meditation, but Christian teachers assure me that it is a good thing to do.

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f. But there is one thing we can all do and that is to remind ourselves regularly of the price paid for our salvation. How do we do this? One way is to join your fellow believers in the Lord’s Supper, which is celebrated every week at 9:00 am in the chapel. On the first Sunday of every month there is a nursery for young children at 9:00 am, and since next Sunday is February 1 here will be a nursery next Sunday. I invite all of you to join with us next week in fixing your thoughts on Jesus as he commanded us to do in remembrance of Him.

Conclusion (Piper)

What are you hoping in this morning? Where are you looking for confidence. In yourself? In shrewd investing? In physical fitness programs? In hard work? In luck? The Word of God to you this morning is, "Fix your thoughts on Jesus." And hope in him. Then you will be part of his house and he will be your Maker, your Owner, your Ruler, and your Provider.