



# *Through cloud & sunshine*

HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12 | AUGUST 8, 2021



# *THROUGH CLOUD & SUNSHINE*

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Don't you wish sometimes that life came with an instruction manual? One of the really good ones, with lots of pictures and clear, step-by-step directions. Some instruction manuals are more mysterious than helpful. I have moved often enough to have way too much experience with Ikea's pictograms and cartoon drawings...flat-packed furniture of all kinds is hard to assemble...but I always struggle particularly with anything involving a lot of drawers!

It would be really nice if life came with a good, clear set of instructions for each and every situation we might find ourselves in. Think about it for a moment: in a world constantly full of questions and the unknown, do you not appreciate those fleeting moments when the lessons you need to learn are black and white; when there are clear-cut answers about what is right and what is wrong, what to do and what not to do?

Now, you may be expecting me to say that the Bible is life's instruction manual; lots of Christian leaders do say that, and many of us find that we do learn a lot about our how-to's and what-not-to-do's from Scripture. But the Bible does not directly answer every single question we may ever have; there are questions that come up in our modern world that couldn't have been asked even two thousand years ago. And its troubleshooting section is woefully vague, more general principles than specific answers...not nearly as clear-cut and nicely laid-out as we'd like it to be.

If you were to ask me why you or your loved ones were in pain or facing a scary medical diagnosis – I would be able to find many comforting and sustaining, hope- and peace-giving things in the Bible for you. If you were to ask me why bad things happen to good people or why we experience pain and suffering – I would have a good Biblical answer for you, about sin and the brokenness of creation in its relationship with God; I would encourage you to pray all your pain and anger to God directly, mincing no words with him, because I would believe that strengthening your relationship with God would be the only way to help you through...but as for that niggling question of “why,” a good and necessary reason for pain or fear or loss...I don't know that we'd be able to find an answer that would make us okay with suffering and uncertainty, or someone else's pain.

There are far more unanswered questions in this world than there are answered ones. And the unanswered ones are so often the really personal ones. They are the questions that do create pain in our lives. They are the questions that threaten our families, that cause us to experience loss and grief, and that make us wonder what we are supposed to believe in.

We all have these questions in our lives. And though we might want a direct, unequivocal answer from God in God's instruction manual for life, the Bible – many times, those questions remain unanswered.

Fortunately, the Bible is more than an uncommonly lengthy instruction manual for human life; it is no ordinary written document. The Bible is one of the ways God speaks to us, new and relevant even today. And bringing us into an encounter with the God who speaks is precisely what the writer of Hebrews believes is the first and most important thing we need to do in worship, and he or she is attempting to do just that in the first few verses of our reading this morning.

Hebrews is not our typical New Testament letter. There's no names of people or places to show who it was written for; no greeting from the author, whose identity is unknown. Aside from the very last few lines of the whole book, there's no sense that this really is a letter at all. Many scholars of the Bible believe that Hebrews is a sermon, actually, a written-down one; and that makes sense, because sermons are meant to let God speak through Scripture for a particular group of people, to communicate God's word, new and newly relevant, to the congregation. And that is how the preacher of Hebrews begins: reminding his congregation that God does speak, in every time period, how God has spoken in the past through the prophets, and again in a singular, extraordinary way through the Son.

Knowing that God spoke in the past, and hearing God speak again in the present, was vitally important, it seems, more important than anything else, for this particular group of Christians who worshipped together. It kind of makes you wonder what their congregation was going through, for their preacher to start his great sermon with that. We do get glimpses, here and there, of the situation the hearers of this sermon found themselves in. From comments and asides scattered throughout Hebrews, we can glean a bit of their history as a congregation and a sense of what is happening in the present that occasioned this sermon being sent to them.

The group had apparently been a rather successful mission church. At first, they had received the gospel message with excitement. The work of the Spirit among them seemed unmistakable, and their worship and life together full of vitality. Problems arose when that led to friction with people outside the community, who apparently found this enthusiastic group of worshippers with their strange new religion too peculiar to fit in. There were plenty of other, traditional religious options in most ancient cities, and that made them and their focus on Jesus a source of suspicion and controversy. There were threats made against the Christian group, and some were arrested; yet, in the face of hardship, the congregation rallied together, at least for a while.

Over time, though, feelings changed.

The excitement faded, and a restless sort of tiredness set into the congregation. The real crisis was not the persecution; it was apathy. Some simply drifted away; when asked why they no longer came to worship, they replied that they simply forgot, or didn't feel like it.

In Hebrews 10, the word used to describe it is "neglect."

The gospel message had seemed promising at one point, but over time, the actual experience of life in Christian community seemed to fall short of what they had hoped it would be. The passion and the excitement, all that energy and drive inspired by that breaking good news and their life together...the learning and working, the worshipping and praying that seemed to be the answer to all life's questions...all lost, as interest and commitment faded, as perseverance and endurance waned.

Whoever this long-ago sermon-writer was, he or she was a courageous and inspiring preacher. Courageous, because the writer openly and honestly names the problem, the thing that's caused all this disillusionment and apathy. It takes courage to name the problem, to refuse to talk around the elephant in the room. And they're inspiring, because they still manage to lead us to an answer that builds up our faith and fills us with hope.

The opening lines of this sermon do indeed focus on how God has spoken and is speaking to his people, pinpointing Jesus as God's fullest expression of all God wants to say. It's Jesus who bears the stamp of God's very being, who is God's agent of creation, who frees us from sin by his death, and is the one through whom God's lordship over God's kingdom is exercised. This is a statement or confession of faith, like our Apostle's creed, but in the poetic form

of a hymn. And like a creed or a hymn, it gives voice to the faith of the congregation.

And then, we have some more poetry, linking this inspiring confession of faith with the uninspiring situation of the congregation. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet.”

That bit of poetry may sound familiar to you; it’s from Psalm 8, which is a short but powerful psalm celebrating God’s majesty and wondering that he not only bothers with us, but that he created us for glory and honour. And more even than this, the psalmist – King David, by the way – marvels that God has entrusted us with responsibility for his good creation. And here comes the courageous moment, because instead of skirting the issue, going from high point to high point, the sermon-writer looks down into this congregation’s dark valley and acknowledges that at present we do not see things that way.

God may intend people to have glory and honour, but you wouldn’t know it by looking at their unhappy, dispirited congregation. Their experiences of conflict and marginalization, along with the current disillusionment and neglect, seemed anything but glorious.

But we do see Jesus, on the other side of his own suffering and yet with us in the midst of ours.

Elsewhere and rather famously in Hebrews, we are encouraged to run the endurance race of a life of faith; here, Jesus is envisioned as the pioneer of that pathway. Jesus did not try and escape suffering, but entered fully into the situation of those who are suffering. And the goal was – and is – to chart a course through that difficult landscape in order that we may follow, sharing Christ’s confidence that God’s will for us continues to be glory, not dishonour, and life, not suffering.

At present we do not yet see everything...but we do see Jesus.

We may never be able to fully understand this world that we are living in; the really good instruction manual for life with pictures and a comprehensive trouble-shooting guide at the back...there is no such thing. We may experience

suffering and heartache, and not fully understand the details why. We may not know how to help people in their times of need, or be able to take away their pain. But in the midst of all of it, we can still see Jesus. We can read the stories in the gospel; we can learn about Jesus' life. We can try to live our lives in ways that reflect the light that Jesus brought into this very dark world. We can believe in the resurrection, not only in the resurrection of Jesus or our own resurrection at the end of this world, but also in resurrection right now – the potential for healing and newness and abundant life – in our own lives, today.

So often, especially with the added burdens of this past year and a half, we find ourselves stumbling around in the dark trying to navigate a very uneven path; our sermon-writer knew what he was talking about when he wrote of endurance races and the need for a pioneer, a trail-blazer who goes ahead of us. We are imperfect people, gathered together into an imperfect church, a foothold of God's kingdom in an imperfect world. We all have moments of pain, fear, doubt and confusion, and we cannot always easily find God in the midst of the chaos around us.

But in those moments, we can still see Jesus. We can still see the exact imprint of God's very being, born into the flesh of a child, who lived as a human being just like us in this imperfect world. We can still see the exact imprint of God's love for us, which was so deep that God came into being in the form of a life that we could see and understand and mirror in our own actions. We can still see the exact imprint of God's justice and mercy, who – in his human life among us – resisted oppression, showed compassion and believed reconciliation was possible. We can still see the exact imprint of God's grace that is still very much alive and at work in our lives today. We can still see Jesus.

So in a world full of chaos and confusion, where the unknown often far outweighs the known, where the clouds of apathy and disillusionment too often darken our skies, we are called to look deep into our faith and remember that we can still, always, see Jesus. We can remember what he did, the lessons that he taught and how he called others to stop what they were doing and follow him. We can remember that he used the imperfections of this world and the people in it to foster hope and healing. We can read the words that Jesus spoke as recorded in Scripture and then speak them in our own lives. And we can live a new, abundant glorious life, because he pioneered for us the way to do it. And through it all, we will see Jesus. Thanks be to God! Amen.