

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Studies in Hebrews
Number: 17
Text: Hebrews 13:8; Matt. 11:2-6
Date: May 20, 2012 (am)

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THE UNCHANGING CHRIST

"There is nothing," wrote the great British preacher, G. Campbell-Morgan, "more certain or more impressive than the transitory nature of all earthly things. We change our calendars, and become conscious as we do so, that we ourselves have changed. Then we glance around us, and we find that there has been change everywhere. And even while we are in the act of thinking, we have changed again, and all around us is changing even as we look. Now, this fact of change is at once the salt and the poison of life. It is the salt of life preventing monotony, that deadly foe of the soul. It is the poison of life paralyzing effort, that vital ally of the soul. Change is of the very nature of life and is necessary to life. Change takes on the guise of death and checks the movements of life. Thus are we perplexed, and earnestly do we desire to find some center of permanence and some secret of perennial freshness."¹ With these opening remarks, he turned his attention to Hebrews 13:8. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" – this text has been a source of comfort and encouragement for Christians down through the centuries. It expresses the great truth of the Savior's unfailing reliability. But, as Hughes points out, "While it is a truth which applies to all ages and generations, it is not a statement in isolation; it belongs to the context in which it appears, and accordingly, we must first seek its significance within this particular setting. The point would seem to be that, in the case of the original recipients of this letter, he who *yesterday* was the source and object of the triumphant faith of those leaders who instructed them in the word of God (see the preceding verse) is still *today* the same all-sufficient and all-powerful Redeemer and Lord, and will continue so *forever*... Moreover, as many commentators have pointed out, the contextual connection is not only with what precedes but also with what follows; for, if Jesus Christ is unchanging, so also is the truth concerning him, with the consequence that there can be no place for differing and discordant doctrines (see next verse). In him we have the completion as well as the source of our faith (v. 2 above). The constancy of Jesus Christ, already announced in the opening section of the epistle (1:1 ff.), implied throughout, and now reaffirmed here, is inseparable from the constancy of his word."² Unfortunately, many evangelicals have a very distorted or poorly informed understanding of the Jesus of Scripture. People put together an amazing mosaic mental picture Jesus derived from popular cultural sources (songs, slogans, paintings, etc.) and end up with a *Jesus* that bears little if any resemblance to the Jesus of Scripture. Paul warned the Corinthians about the danger of worshipping a *false* Jesus (II Cor. 11:4). Philip Yancy has captured some of these popular misconceptions which include Jesus as Mister Rogers, a New Age Hippie, an eastern mystic, a political revolutionary, and even as someone who personified the agenda of the gay liberation!³ Of course there has been attempts at sanitizing the Jesus of the New Testament in order to make

him more appealing to the modern mind. Strenuous efforts are made to strip away the theological substance of what the Scriptures say about Jesus and simply recognize him as a great religious leader and role model. John Stuart Mill, the political economist, was strongly opposed to Christianity, but spoke of Jesus as being 'in the very first rank of men of sublime genius of whom our species can boast. When this pre-eminent genius is combined with the qualities of probably the greatest moral reformer and martyr to that mission who ever existed upon earth, religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in pitching upon this man as the ideal representative and guide of humanity.' The French humanist Ernest Renan said of Jesus, 'His beauty is eternal... Jesus is in every respect unique and nothing can be compared with him.' David Friedrich Strauss, a German theologian who delighted in trying to tear the New Testament narratives to ribbons, conceded that Jesus 'remains the highest model of religion within the reach of our thought.'⁴ The Jesus that we find in the pages of the New Testament is uniquely different from the popular Jesus that is commonly portrayed on the posters and coffee cups on display in the typical Christian book store. Are you ever troubled about Jesus? Does He ever *perplex* you? Are you wondering at His methods? Or to put it another way, do you have *doubts* about the Lord? Our word *doubt* is derived from the Latin word *DUBITARE*, which in turn has its root meaning in the word "two": two-ness or double-ness of mind. As Os Guinness puts it, "The heart of doubt is a divided heart,"⁵ Doubt is *not* unbelief. We can put the matter in this way: to believe is to be in one mind, to disbelieve is to be of another mind, but to doubt is to be *between* the two."⁶ Doubt is a halfway point and can go in either direction. Doubt can actually lead on to a deepened faith, or it can break down to unbelief. None of us are immune to doubt. Christians throughout the history of the church have had to overcome their doubts. It surprises many people to read that even John the Baptist (of whom Jesus said "among them that are born of women, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist;" Matt. 11:1) came under a cloud of doubt.⁷

I. JOHN'S IMPRISONMENT

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, John was imprisoned by Herod in the fortress of Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea.⁸ Matthew simply informs us that John was arrested (4:12). The circumstances are given in 14:3-5. Apparently John's imprisonment lasted at least a year, maybe 18 months, since it corresponds with Jesus' extensive Galilean ministry. John's prison was in all likelihood a cistern, which served as a dungeon. This cistern was of considerable depth, with no accessible light except through small holes in the cover at the top. We have to remember that John was what we would call the rugged outdoors type. Now he is confined in a deep, damp, hot, dark hole. Only a short distance is Herod's luxurious palace. Perhaps John can hear the shouts of wild revelry and drunken merriment.

II. JOHN'S INQUIRY

Verse 2 states that John heard about "the works of Christ." This phrase lit. means, "what Christ was doing" (NIV) "about the deeds of the Christ" (ESV), a reference not only to the miracles but also Jesus teaching. Also the use of "Christ" is significant, for it highlights Matthew's point – that Jesus is indeed the Christ. The question that John sends to Jesus is, in the Greek text, very emphatic, "Thou, art thou the one who was to come" – lit. He who is coming (Heb. 10:37) i.e. the Messiah (cf. Ps. 40:7; Ps. 118:26). Note particularly the expression, "or should we look for another." The word trans. "another" (KJV), "someone else" (NIV, ESV), is the Greek word *HETERON* implying that John expected Messiah to be doing something different than that which was characteristic of Jesus. Why would John ask this question? We must go back to the Baptist's preaching. John declared that Messiah was coming and referred to Him in terms of judgment (cf. Matt. 3:11-15). Where were the ax, fan, and holy wind and fire of judgment? On the contrary, Jesus was exercising a ministry of mercy, healing, and

went about teaching in parables. How does this square with John's message? John's question was out of a keen, honest, puzzled soul, and he was perplexed at the methods that Christ had adopted.

III. JESUS' RESPONSE

If we find John's question surprising, we are even more surprised at the answer of Jesus. But we must note carefully the Lord's gentle method in dealing with the sincere perplexity of his faithful servant. He describes His work in terms of a threefold movement that has an ascending scale of value.

A. Healing. "The blind...the lame...the lepers...the deaf..." This is not presented simply as a quotation from Isa. 35:5-7, but as a series of miracles given in the Old Testament to certify the Messiah. They are His credentials.

B. Resurrection. "The dead are raised." In Luke's account John's question to Jesus is immediately preceded by the raising of the Widow of Nain's son (7:11-18). Note that Jesus not only dealt with the effects of sin on the body, but with the ultimate effect of sin – death. "Death," said G. Campbell-Morgan, "is the issue of everything else, of sin, and of sickness, and of sorrow."⁹

C. Evangelization. The climax might surprise us, but the proclamation of the Gospel is Jesus' principal work. This, too, is rooted in the Old Testament concept of Messiah (cf. Isa. 61:1; comp. w/Luke 4:18, where Jesus states its fulfillment). In essence, all of these constitute what H.A.W. Meyer has called Jesus' *resume*.¹⁰

IV. JESUS' BENEDICTION

"Blessed is the man who does not stumble because of Me." The word trans. "stumble" (NASB), "offended" (ESV), "fall away" (NIV) is the word *SKANDALIZO* (from which our English word *scandal* is derived). This word is used in various ways. It can mean (1) to cause to stumble, cause to sin, cf. Lk. 17:2; Rom. 14:21; I Cor. 8:13; II Cor. 11:29, (2) to obstruct another's path, i.e. to cause to reject or forsake, Matt. 11:6, 13:21, 57, 15:12, 24:10, 26:21, 33. Its usage here means to be misled so that Jesus is rejected because He is not conforming to expectation. In effect, Jesus tells John's disciples to go back and tell John to look again at the things that are puzzling him. Jesus is doing the work foretold by the Old Testament prophets. Jesus is fulfilling God's purpose and He will eventually fulfill what John proclaimed – He will bring judgment (note the context of Isa. 61:1-5).

CONCLUSION: Is it not the case that our greatest disappointments come because of misguided or misunderstood expectations? We are called to *trust* in the Lord. We are *not* called to always understand – which, it seems, is what we often expect. We want to have a complete understanding of God's ways. J. I. Packer has captured this in a beautiful illustration in his classic *Knowing God*. Packer uses the York train station in England as his illustration. Unless you are privileged to be up in the high-ups of the signal box where the entire diagram of the various tracks are in complete view, you could have little, if any, concept of the overall movements of the trains. Packer goes on to warn that this is how many people *expect* to understand God's providence in dealing with His people and they end up baffled because things do not go as they expect.¹¹ The storms of life will come and go. Dark nights will invade the soul and threatens to overwhelm us. The Lord Jesus calls us to commit ourselves to His sovereign and loving care. Note His parting words in Matt. 28:20 in "the Great Commission." He assures His disciples that He will "always" be with them. This expression, *PASAS TES HEMERAS*, lit. "the whole of every day," is referred to in Greek grammar as the accusative of respect. This means that Jesus has promised to be with His own on every kind of day, regardless of type of day, be it good or bad – Jesus will never leave us alone (cf. Heb. 13:5). It is a call to canny realism about the storms of life and the stress of doubt. It is a call to trust the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever. The epistle to the Hebrews repeatedly affirms the uniqueness of Christ as Raymond points out, "This may be seen

from the fact that, as a *Son-revelation* and the final and supreme Word of God to man (Heb. 1:2), he is the Heir of all things and the Father's Agent in creating the universe. He abides as the perfect Radiance of God's glory and the *very Image of his nature* (v. 3). As God's Son, he is superior to the angels; such that it is appropriate that they be commanded to worship him (v. 6). He is the Yahweh and the Elohim of Psalm 102, who eternally existed before he created the heavens and earth (Heb. 1:10), and who remains eternally the same though the creation itself should perish (1:11-12; see 13:8)."¹² The force of all this is summed up by Harris, "So also the eternity of Christ's reign implies the immutability of his person."¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit* IX (Pickering & Ingles, 1934), p. 65.

² P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary On the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 570.

³ P. Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 19.

⁴ As cited by John Blanchard, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Evangelical Press, 1989), p. 23

⁵ Os Guinness, *Doubt* (Lion Publishing, 1987), p. 17.

⁶ The concept is captured in other languages as well. The Chinese speak of a person with "a foot in two boats: And the Navajo Indians of "that which is two with a person." Cf. Guinness, *op. cit.*, and his article in *Doubt and Assurance*, ed. R.C. Sproul (Baker, 1993), p. 33.

⁷ Many of the early Church Fathers and some of the Protestant Reformers as well as the highly respected C.H. Spurgeon, contend that John the Baptist himself never had any doubts, rather he wished to have his *disciples'* doubts dealt with by Jesus. Verse 4, "go and tell John," would seem to favor the interpretation that was indeed John who was in doubt.

⁸ *Antiquities of the Jews* (XVIII, v. 2), in the *Works of Josephus*, trans. By Wm. Whiston (rpt. Hendrickson, 1980), p. 382.

⁹ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Crises of the Christ* (Revell, 1933), p. 297.

¹⁰ H.A.W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book On the Gospel of Matthew* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1990) p. 270.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 1973), p. 94.

¹² R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 275.

¹³ M. J. Harris, *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Baker, 1992), p. 214.