

Hebrews 13

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[0 : 00] Now, could you turn with me to that passage that we read in Hebrews chapter 13, and particularly verse 8.

Hebrews 13, verse 8. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Amen.

From the 1960s onwards, a wind of change blowing. 44 years ago in 1963, Bob Dylan wrote a song, The Times There Are Changing, and he never wrote a truer word.

Time and change seem to go together. But over those last 40 years or so, the pace of change seems to have accelerated.

[1 : 18] Sometimes the wind of change seems to have reached hurricane proportions. The world we live in today is very different from the world then, and not just in terms of computers, telecommunications, and other gadgetry.

The attitudes and values are worlds apart. Of course, some of these changes have been clearly good changes.

For instance, the attitude of people in general to things like aid for the developing world. The attitude towards racism or the attitude towards care for the creation or the environment.

But these have not been the only changes. There have been many changes for the worse. A growth of materialism. A growth of materialism.

Of hedonism. Of simply the pursuit of pleasure as the purpose of life. The abuse of alcohol and drugs. The abuse of alcohol and drugs. Ruining many lives.

[2 : 25] The abuse of alcohol and drugs. Changed attitudes towards sexual morality. Destroying many families and homes and marriages. The attitude to the unborn. Causing people to have a lower respect for human life.

And people's attitude to the gospel. Although, in many ways, today there is such an ignorance of the gospel that there is perhaps a new openness to it.

Some would say that the church has just to adapt to these changes, whatever they may be. To adapt our message and adapt our lifestyle.

Now, if by that we meant that we must relate our message to this new and changed environment, I would agree. But if we mean by that that we must change our message to fit in with this new world, I would profoundly disagree.

Why? Simply because of the words of our text. Because Jesus Christ is unchanging. He is the same yesterday and today and forever.

[3 : 37] And He is our message. And He is the basis of our lifestyle. We are, of course, not only aware of change in the world around us.

We are also aware of change in a more personal way. As Robert Burns said in his rollicking poem, Tam O'Shanter, Naaman can tether time or tide.

Our lives are subject to the natural rhythms of tides and seasons, of weather, of birth and ageing and death. And the older we get, the more acutely we are aware of the ravages of time.

As Paul Simon said in a song long ago, time hurries on and the leaves that are green turn to brown. And they wither in the wind and they crumble in your hand.

An older generation on whom we once depended have gone or are going fast. People who once were our friends are so no longer.

[4 : 41] Dreams that we once had have turned to dust. How good it is to know that there is one who remains the same, unchanging, dependable.

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. I want to look with you tonight at this amazing statement in three ways. To look briefly at the statement itself and what we can learn from that.

And then to look at it in the wider context of the Bible. And finally, in the immediate context of this passage. First, the statement itself.

Well, in some ways it's very straightforward. It uses very simple language. And it is clearly, of course, talking about a person. It is talking about Jesus Christ.

The subject is clearly identified. And as these two names are used of Jesus. His own, we may say, personal name and his title. Jesus and then Christ.

[5 : 43] It's being described this particular person. To whom our attention is being drawn. This is, first of all, Jesus of Nazareth.

This individual who lived at a particular time of history and a particular place. This one who was born at Bethlehem. Who taught in Galilee and Judea.

Who was crucified outside Jerusalem. And who is risen from the grave. This one of whom the Gospels speak. They tell us about the history of his life.

It is this Jesus. And this Jesus is the Christ. The Christ is not so much a personal name as a title. It is the Messiah.

The long-awaited Messiah. The anointed one of God. Promised in the Old Testament in so many different forms. But united in this one person. Prophet, priest and king.

[6 : 44] The anointed one to carry out God's purposes in the world. And he is none other than the eternal Son of God. As this very letter makes plain.

Right from the very beginning of the letter. It speaks of the Lord Jesus as the Son of God. And it is this one. This Jesus. Who yes, is this historic person.

Who lived at a particular time in history. Who is also the eternal Son of God. It is this person. Who is the same. Yesterday. Today. And forever.

Again, very simple words. Describing, we would say, the whole of time. Time. Past. Present. Future. And it is saying to us that Jesus is the same.

No matter what time of history it has been. He has always been the same. He is the same today as he was then. And he will be the same in the future. But it is this little word that so easily we pass over.

[7 : 47] That he is the same. That actually is very interesting. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The expression used here is derived from a word that would normally be translated.

Himself. And that suggests to us a brilliant idiom in English for what is being said here. We talk of someone just being himself.

In other words, it is the very opposite of being a chameleon. Someone who changes what he is or how he appears to people in different circumstances.

If someone is just himself, then he is always the same. And that is the idea here about Jesus. We could translate this saying, Jesus Christ himself.

Yesterday, today, and forever. He is always himself. And that is the great thing that we need to focus on tonight. This Jesus, who is always himself.

[8 : 45] This is the one that we need. I want to look with you next at this great statement in the wider context of biblical teaching. And in two particular ways.

First, Jesus is always himself in holiness. And I make this point against the view that is so often expressed that when we speak of things like holiness, righteousness, or God's judgment, or God's anger, God's wrath, that we are speaking of the God of the Old Testament.

And then when we come to speak of Jesus, we are speaking of someone very different from that. But of course, that is absolute nonsense. Jesus has always been the same. Jesus has always been the eternal Son of God.

And he has exactly the same attitude to what is wrong now as he had then. He is just as holy now as he was then.

He is eternal God from all eternity. He has been holy, righteous, and pure. And unconditionally opposed to evil. Even before evil was created. Even before evil came into the world.

[10 : 02] Even before it was expressed. Jesus was eternally holy and opposed to everything that was evil.

We see that holiness of the Lord Jesus Christ expressed in the Old Testament. We see it in the character of God being expressed. That holiness that drove Adam and Eve out from the Garden of Eden after they had sinned against God.

We see it at the time of the flood in God's judgment against sin. We see it in the Exodus when God judged the land of Egypt and brought the people of Israel out of Egypt.

We see it in the entry of the people of God in the Old Testament into the Promised Land. In that judgment on the inhabitants of the land of Canaan that God in his patience and loving kindness had postponed for hundreds of years.

But ultimately his holiness was revulsed by the incredible evil and sinfulness of that society.

[11 : 12] That we know now through things like the discoveries of archaeology from the ancient world. Practiced human sacrifice and particularly child sacrifice. We see it in all these episodes in the Old Testament.

But we see this holiness and this revulsion against sin. We see it in the life of Jesus as well. We see it in his anger at the Pharisees. Those who were the religious leaders of the time.

Who ought to have known better. Who ought to have expressed the real mind of God on things. And yet had so confused the issue with all their additions to God's law.

We see the anger of Jesus blazing against that in various occasions. We see it too for instance in his cleansing of the temple. When another group basically were the object of Israel.

Those Sadducees, that high priestly class that governed the temple and abused it for their own profit. And we see the anger of Jesus again blazing at that abuse of this place that was to be a house of prayer for all the nations.

[12 : 17] And they had made it a den of thieves. We see the same holiness of Jesus in his speaking of the reality of hell. For there is no other person in the whole of scriptures who speaks of it most clearly and most searingly than the Lord Jesus Christ.

We see it too in Jesus' own personal shrinking from identifying with sin in the garden of Gethsemane. For I think that was mainly what that struggle was about.

The Lord Jesus Christ of perfect purity was being called upon in this great eternal plan of God. To so identify with sin that he became the sin bearer.

And that he would be treated as sin. He became sin for us. And so we see the very holiness of the Lord Jesus Christ in that revulsion against sin and that struggle that took place there in Gethsemane.

And yet in his great love for us, he identified with sin. He took sin upon himself. He became sin for us. He is always himself.

[13 : 31] He is still the same. He doesn't change his character or his standards, his values, because of the winds of change. These winds of change may blow, but he remains the same.

He is still as holy now as he was then. He is still as revulsed by sin as he was then. He is utterly and absolutely opposed to evil, to sin and to falsehood.

So we don't need to be blown around by every changing opinion and fashion if we know the Lord Jesus Christ as a rock on whom our life is based. He is the North Star.

You can guide your life by him. And that's what we need to be persuaded of today. That he is the same yesterday, today and forever in this area of holiness, of righteousness and of truth.

But then also we can say in the context of the whole of the Bible that Jesus is the same. He is still himself in love. We know from what we're taught in the New Testament in the first letter of John that God is love.

[14 : 46] And that is saying that God in himself in his own intrinsic nature is love and always has been from all eternity. And Jesus speaks of the love that the Father had for him before the foundation of the world.

And so that love is eternal. The Lord Jesus is himself in love. He has never changed and he never will change. He never can change.

He is love. And we see that love, yes, in the Old Testament. In the midst of all the judgment and all the anger of God against sin. There is hope and there is grace and there is forgiveness and there is an expression of love.

God has never changed. Yes, Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden. But God had already put between them and Satan and enmity that put them back on his side.

And so that he was then beginning to work again with the human race. And there was a section of that human race that trusted in him and followed him and looked to him.

[15 : 49] And so right on through the flood and the exodus and the exile and all these great historical events of the Old Testament, we see that love of God being poured out even in the midst of the struggle and the trouble and the judgments.

God preserving a people for himself. God forgiving. God reinstating. And God bringing to fulfillment the great promises that he had made. God loving.

God loving. But we see that love of God supremely, surely, in Jesus coming down. In Jesus, the eternal Son of God coming down from the glories of heaven down to this earth.

Down into the misery and trouble and hurt and heartache of this poor lost world. We see that great love of God in Jesus taking a human nature, becoming one of us and living amongst us.

We see this great love of Jesus in his mixing with sinners. In his reaching out to the outcast, the corrupted and the defiled. We see that love of God in Jesus Christ in his coming to be the Savior of sinners.

[16 : 59] We see it supremely in Jesus taking our intolerable burden of sin upon himself. Dying in our place and enduring the penalty of our sin.

Jesus is still the same in love. He's still the same tonight. Tonight he still reaches out in love to you. For he came into this world for this very purpose.

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. And so tonight you can be assured that Jesus is still the same.

He's the same in holiness and he's the same in love. He is still the same Savior as he was then. As we read about the people whose lives he transformed while he was here on earth. We know that still he has that same power tonight.

To touch your life and to touch mine. To transform us and to bring us into fellowship with himself. To restore us if we've fallen. He is still the same. And then I want to look with you at this great statement about Jesus in the immediate context of the passage.

[18 : 08] And then it's been justifiable to do what we've done. To look at the statement in itself. And to look at it in the context of the whole Bible. Because this great statement seems to stand out like a sore thumb in this passage.

It's almost as if you might think it's not connected with what's around it. You know the previous verse is talking about the leaders consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

And then suddenly just out of the blue there comes Jesus Christ. The same yesterday, today and forever. But it would be wrong to just think that it is a great towering statement just in isolation from everything else around it.

It does have very much a root in the context here of what is being said. And I want to look with you now at that. In the immediate context here, the verses immediately preceding this particularly, they are dealing with two great problems that we have.

And these are the lack of love and fear. And it's in these contexts that this great statement is made. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

[19 : 26] First of all, this great problem of the lack of love. Right at the beginning of the chapter, the theme is love. Keep on loving each other as brothers.

Now that is a way of translating what is one particular word, which is brotherly love, or literally Philadelphia in Greek.

And that of course is directed particularly to fellow Christians. It is the love of the brother Christian. And although that is the focus here, yet of course love goes wider than that.

But that is the focus here. Keep on loving each other as brothers. And of course, as we look at the world, we know that one of the great problems in the world is the lack of real love. One of the great problems in our own hearts is the lack of real love.

And this is what is being addressed here. And throughout this context, as we come down to the verse that is our text tonight, we are thinking of the fact that against these great problems, this great lack of love, Jesus Christ is the same.

[20 : 35] Different aspects of love are mentioned here. For instance, hospitality is mentioned in verse 2. Do not forget to entertain strangers.

For by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Now again, the word that is used here is very interesting. This word that is translated here to entertain strangers, it literally is love of strangers.

And in Greek, it is philosenia. And it is the very opposite of a word that has entered our language, which is xenophobia, which is the hatred or fear of strangers.

And this is the very opposite of that. It is the welcoming of strangers, it is a love towards a stranger. Now, we know that what is being referred to here is the fact that in the Old Testament times, people like Abraham and Lot, through their hospitality, entertained angels.

Those who had come as messengers from God, this amazing reality. But what is being emphasized is that we today still need to show the same kind of hospitality and love of strangers.

[21 : 48] We see it, of course, in the case of Jesus. Although Jesus was sent specifically, as he said himself, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, yet time and again, we find him relating to people of other nations.

We think of him dealing with the woman that he met at the well, a Samaritan woman. We think of him dealing with a Roman centurion. We think of him dealing with a Syrophenician woman.

We think of him dealing with the man Legion, who was on the other side of the Sea of Galilee and possibly non-Jewish. And so, we see Jesus interacting with all these different people and showing love towards them, welcoming them to himself.

And so, the context here is speaking probably about, in the first instance, welcoming Christians who've come from other places, because there was quite a bit of travel in the ancient Roman world, as we see from the Apostle Paul and people like Lydia, a seller of purple, and Priscilla and Aquila.

These people moved around. And so, what has been emphasized here is that Christians should welcome other Christians, no matter what nationality they're from or what cultural background. And this is one of the great things that should be a great reality in the Christian church.

[23 : 02] We should see this breaking down of those barriers, those racial barriers, and barriers of colour and all the rest of it, that have so bedeviled the world. In Christ, we are all one.

That's the emphasis of the New Testament. But also, of course, there surely should be a welcoming of those who are not yet Christians. Every church service should be a welcoming place, not only for the people who already belong, but it should be a welcoming place for people who as yet do not belong.

They should be made to feel welcome, that we're concerned for them, and that we want the very best for them. And not only in our church services, but in all that we seek to do as a Christian church. Because remember, we are sent into this world, we are placed in it as a missionary organisation.

Jesus said, go and make disciples of all nations. And so it's not enough for us to be content that we've got a great congregation or a great church. We want constantly to be reaching out to others.

So this emphasis of the love of strangers is a very important one. And we see it in this fact that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's still the same now as he was then, in wanting to welcome strangers.

[24 : 15] Only now it is through your hands and your feet that he does this, welcoming others. And then there's an emphasis here on being concerned for those in prison.

Remember those in prison, in verse 3, as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering. Now particularly this would have been referring in the first instance to persecuted Christians.

People who were imprisoned wrongly, perhaps. Like the Apostle Paul himself was imprisoned wrongly because of his faith. But also, surely there is a concern for all those in prison.

We know that we ought to be concerned today for those who are persecuted for their faith throughout the world. And many are in many different cultures and countries. But also we should be concerned nearer home for those who are in prison.

Those who are imprisoned for their crimes. Because it doesn't actually say here, you know, your fellow Christians who are in prison. And of course it is great that there are organizations like Prison Fellowship and so on, that reach out to people in prison.

[25 : 25] And that's something that we should think about as Christians. That there but for the grace of God go I. Any one of us may, through a different course of events in our lives, have ended up there.

And we as Christians should be concerned for them. Remember the Lord Jesus Christ was concerned for John the Baptist when he was in prison. When John sent messengers to him, expressing some doubts and questions that he had concerning Jesus.

Jesus took those seriously and he sent back his messengers with a great message of confirmation and of love for John. So in the same way we still should be concerned for Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.

He still has that heart for the downtrodden, those who are unjustly imprisoned and also those who may be justly imprisoned. For even right at the end of his life, it was a fellow prisoner that he led to faith in himself.

As that thief on the cross beside him saw in Jesus the King of Kings. Then there's another area of love mentioned here and that is the area of marriage.

[26 : 34] In verse 4. Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure. For God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

Now of course this is speaking about the great need of purity in the area of sexual relationships. And it's against the background of the abuse of this great gift that God has given to us.

If we think today is bad, we need to read back about the first century Roman Empire and see that conditions were even worse there. Yes, there were all the things that we have today, adultery, prostitution, homosexuality.

But something that still today would be very strongly disapproved of was approved of in the ancient world. I refer to pedophilia.

And so the ancient world was in many ways even worse than the world today. These things were not just tolerated but many of them were accepted and approved of.

[27 : 41] But of course we know that none of this can happen with impunity. Because God will ultimately judge. And God will bring to judgment all who live.

But we're called here to focus not on the abuses but rather to focus on the positive. The marriage bed honored by all.

The marriage bed kept pure. The Christian way is to emphasize the great benefits of marriage. Jesus himself did that. He taught God created them male and female in the beginning.

He said that, quoting Genesis, Man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and those two shall be one flesh. There he was emphasizing this is what God's will is.

And so he is still here teaching at this point in history. He's teaching that marriage is honorable. The marriage bed undefiled. And we should hold it so. So there's this great tremendous positive emphasis.

[28 : 43] Jesus is still the same in this regard. He's emphasizing that in this area of the love in human relationships. His standards are still the same. And we've got today to try to resist the great monolithic emphasis that is pressing in all around us.

To consider all these things just a matter of personal taste. But instead we must realize that we're all answerable to God in this area as in every other. Jesus doesn't change his standards simply because the world has changed its standards.

So in this whole area of our lack of love, Jesus is still the same. That loving God who speaks to us and can lead us into the expression of love in our lives.

But there's another area here and that is fear. And fear is a great reality in our lives today. In spite of the many ways in which perhaps we have tried to overcome it.

In verses 5 to 8 we have various kinds of insecurity as the background to what is said here. And I think again of some words from Robert Burns in his great and very simple poem, To a Mouse.

[29 : 58] But Mousy, thou art nay thy lane, in proving foresight may be vain. The best laid schemes of mice and men gang after glade.

And leave us not but grief and pain for promised joy. Still thou art blessed compared with me. The present only toucheth thee. But oh I backward cast my ee on prospects drear.

And forward though I cannot see, I guess and fear. These words express very powerfully the insecurity of the human condition.

The fear about the future. And all sorts of insecurities that we have. Here in this particular passage there is the fear of poverty as the background in verse 5.

Keep your lives free from the love of money. And be content with what you have. You see, so often we think of the love of money, literally here it is the love of silver. We think of it as a temptation of the wealthy or the rich.

[31 : 00] But of course it's not, it's a temptation of everybody. And because we are poor, we think our situations, our problems will be solved. If we have money, it will be solved by silver.

And if we are more wealthy and rich, we think our problems will be solved by more silver. And so it's a problem and a temptation of everyone. And there is this fear of poverty.

And that was something that was particularly being addressed to the people at this time. Because there was fear of economic discrimination and oppression against Christians.

Simply because they were Christians. And that's true in other parts of the world still today. It may be true in this country. That because you're a Christian and you take a stand over something, you may be discriminated against.

We know that recently that's been happening in Christian unions and certain universities. Because they're Christians and because they want to teach what the Bible says, say in the area of human relationships that we've just been talking about.

[32 : 00] They've been discriminated against. Now, in the same way, that can happen in the situations of employment as well. And so there can be this fear of impoverishment in various ways.

And there's a great temptation to compromise our faith out of this love of money. So that we won't suffer economic consequences. That's the kind of background to what is being said here.

But you see, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. And he's still the same. So no matter what temptations you may confront, no matter what problems you may confront, or discrimination or opposition you may confront, Jesus is still the same to be with you.

And to be with you in that problem. And never to leave you. There's another fear mentioned here in verse 6. And that is the fear of man.

In verse 6 we read, So we say with confidence, The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? You see, the background to this is that we are afraid of man.

[33 : 12] We are afraid of the opinions of others. We're afraid of the fact that people may sneer at us, or mock us, or oppose us. And we may be tempted then to constrain our faith or our expression of faith because of that kind of pressure.

And so there's this fear of man. But we're told here that the Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. Because the Lord is my helper, he takes away all fear.

If God is for us, who can be against us? Jesus is still himself. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's still able to support us in those situations and against those kind of pressures.

Also in this passage there is another fear. The fear of the loss of leadership. In verse 7. Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life.

And imitate their faith. Here these leaders are being spoken of basically in the past tense. They are the leaders who gave a good example, who led well. And now they've gone.

[34 : 21] And so people may have this fear of the loss of leadership. People who have given leadership and now they're no longer here. Whether through death or moved away or whatever. And we know that kind of feeling.

We know leaders who are no longer with us. And perhaps not only official leaders like people like ministers and elders. But people who are strong Christians. And we have this fear of being leaderless without reliable guides.

Now here it's been drawn to our attention that we have a responsibility. We have to remember their teaching and the outcome of their way of life. And to imitate their faith. Not to be just pessimistic and down because we no longer have these leaders.

But to step up ourselves. To follow their example. And perhaps ourselves, if called by God, to become leaders also. But there's another aspect to it.

And this is where we see our great text coming right into this context. Yes, circumstances in this life may change. Yes, people on whom we once depended may no longer be here.

[35 : 27] But Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus is still himself. He is the great leader that you can trust in and that you can rely on.

And that you can look to for guidance. He is the same. He is himself. Jesus. Yesterday, today, forever.

Jesus is the same. All may change, but Jesus never. Glory to his name. Jesus, you see, takes away all those fears. If we know him as the one who remains himself.

In a song called, Forever Young, Dylan sings, May you have a strong foundation when the winds of changes shift.

There is no more reliable foundation than Jesus, Who is himself yesterday, today and forever. Always himself.

[36 : 26] Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens. Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day. Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away. Change and decay in all around I see.

For thou who changest not, Abide with me. Find with me. Find with me. Find with me.