

The Changeless Christ in a Changing World

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes the importance of trusting in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and centering our lives on him, even in the midst of change, in order to face the challenges and changes of the world.

Duration: 30:41

Scripture: Hebrews 12:28, Hebrews 13:1-3, Hebrews 13:7-9

Topics: "Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the feeling of being left behind in a rapidly changing world, which many Christians can relate to. He emphasizes the need for the church to adapt and keep up with the changes around us. The preacher then reads from the book of Hebrews, specifically chapter 12 and 13, highlighting the importance of trusting in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. He encourages believers to live holy lives and to love one another, showing hospitality to strangers and caring for those in need. The sermon concludes with a call to move forward into the future together, centered on Christ and willing to bear the disgrace that He bore.

Transcript

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning, if you would, to the book of Hebrews, chapter 12, where we'll start reading at verse 28 and then into chapter 13 to the end of the 16th verse. Let us hear God's word together this morning. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, because God has said, never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me? Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you, consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods which are of no

value to those who eat them.

We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the most holy place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word this morning. Let's pray, shall we? Let your gospel come now, O Lord, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. In April 1991, Sergei Krikalev was launched into space by the Soviet Union to orbit the Earth for four months. While he was in orbit, however, something strange happened.

His country went out of business, and the technical system that was to bring Krikalev back to the Earth somehow failed. The collapse of the Soviet Union put the Soviet space program into jeopardy and into chaos, and with no means of returning to the Earth, Krikalev had to stay in orbit around the Earth, not for four months, not for five months, not for six months, but for a total of 10 months before they were finally able to bring someone in who knew how to work the equipment and to bring him back down to the Earth. In his book, *Winning the Values War in a Changing Culture*, Leith Anderson describes what faced Krikalev when he returned to Earth.

He came home, but home wasn't the same. His country no longer existed. Mikhail Gorbachev had been replaced by a previously marginalized Boris Yeltsin, who was now the president of the new independent nation of Russia.

In fact, when Krikalev returned, Gorbachev was off in the West signing multimillion-dollar book contracts, and his wife Raisa was in Paris shopping with her new American Express card. The Communist Party, of which Krikalev had been a proud member, was out of power and disrepute. Krikalev's hometown of Leningrad had been renamed to its original name of St. Petersburg, and inflation meant that his lucrative 500-ruble annual salary was now not enough to buy a Big Mac at the Moscow McDonald's.

The times had changed. In just ten short months, Krikalev's world had been turned upside down. Life had moved on, as it were, without him.

And Krikalev experienced what many Christians, I suggest to you today, feel. Especially here in North America, we live in a rapidly changing world. And the Church often seems to get left behind in its wake.

Things just don't seem to be the way that they used to be. A new world seems to be overtaking us. As we approach the eve of the 21st century, the pace of change only seems to accelerate.

Modern technology is increasing rapidly. I'm out looking and have begun the hunt for a new computer, and I'm kind of paralyzed because I know that the day that I buy a computer, the day after, it will be outdated. It will already be an antique.

The population is exploding. The world is on our doorstep. We live in a global village.

We all feel the changes. And at times, it unsettles us. At times, it confuses us.

And more often than not, it disturbs us. Change seems to roll over us. How do we respond to change? How does change affect the Church? What does it mean to be a faithful Christian in a changing world? I want to suggest to you this morning that our text in Hebrews 13 provides some help.

Verse 8 says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. In the midst of a changing world, Hebrews points us to the changeless Christ. The changeless Christ is the eternal one, the faithful one, upon whom we are invited to establish our lives in a changing world.

But we need to be clear because this text is not calling us to stick our heads in the sand. We can't ignore the changes of our world. We can't ignore what's going on all around us.

We can't deny the changes. We can't pretend as if they don't exist. But what the book of Hebrews gives us is a centering point to deal with the changes as they come upon us.

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians in the early Church about the year 60 AD. And it was written primarily as a warning against apostasy. Now, apostasy, I suspect as most of you know, is a falling away from faith.

It is the abandonment of faith in God. It is the leaving behind of right belief. It is turning your back on God.

But in Hebrews, apostasy is given a little bit more of a specific meaning than that. You see, the sin of the Hebrew Christians was that they abandoned their faith by sliding back into old ways of believing and old patterns of doing things. They slid back into the old rituals and laws of Judaism.

They went backwards. They were backsliders. Christ was not enough for them.

They were unwilling to move forward into the future. They wanted to hang on to their traditions. They wanted to hang on to all those things that they thought were so important to them.

And the writer to the Hebrews describes this as a retreat from faith rather than as an advance. They were unwilling to be what God wanted them to be where they were. They were content to stand still and to maintain the status quo rather than moving forward in obedience to their Lord, in obedience to what God would have them do.

And the author of Hebrews urges these believers then to grow in Christ, to move forward in faith, to look to the future by centering their lives on Christ. He is the same yesterday and today and forever. Faith is a forward-looking adventure, being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Faithfulness to Christ does not entail standing still and staying put and sticking your head in the sand. But faithfulness to the changeless Christ takes place in a changing world with all of its challenges. The book of Hebrews is not a call to complacency, but a call to commitment.

And this text in Hebrews 13 helps us, I think, understand how we can be both faithful and yet deal with the changes which are taking place all about us. And let's look a little more carefully at the text and try to draw out what I think are some of the lessons here. First of all, this text urges us to trust in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, to trust in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ in the midst of life.

In the midst of a changing world, Jesus, the writer says, is the faithful one. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. The changeless Christ is the faithful Christ.

In verses one to six, the emphasis is on the unchanging faithfulness of Jesus in the midst of daily living. In these verses, the writer sets out a series of concluding moral exhortations to his readers. And in a world of sin and evil and moral chaos, he says Christians are called to holiness, to live holy lives.

What does he say? Loving each other, providing hospitality, caring for prisoners, honoring marriage, keeping free of the love of money, not becoming consumed with materialism, being content. Why? Well, the answer comes because God has said, never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.

So we say with confidence, the Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid for what can man do to me? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. He is the faithful one.

Jesus will help us. Therefore, we need not be afraid of the world, of the future, of the changes which press in upon us. Jesus is with us.

As we seek to struggle to live in holiness in the midst of life, Jesus is faithful to his people. You know, sometimes we take this text, Hebrews 13, 8, and we kind of think that it makes Jesus into a kind of uncaring and unfeeling and unchanging and immovable Christ, a kind of moral caretaker of the universe who never changes. But the changeless Christ in Hebrews is one who struggles with us faithfully in the midst of life, whose faithfulness never ceases.

We live in a world of changing values. It often seems to many of us that tomorrow's values are yesterday's sins. We live in a changing culture where everything seems to be up for grabs.

There don't any longer seem to be any absolutes. The cultural pressure on the church is immense. The cultural pressure upon Christians is incredible.

If you're trying to raise children today in today's world and in today's culture here in the city of Toronto, you'll know what I'm talking about. In such a context, it's easy for Christians to become discouraged, to become disillusioned, to become reactionary, to become cranky, or on the other hand, to accommodate and to give in. And what we are called to here is faithfulness in the midst of the challenges.

Faithfulness in the midst of the changes. How should we respond? Hebrews calls us, first of all, to trust in the faithfulness of Christ to us, to move forward in faith. We don't live, you see, by abstract values, but we live in a relationship to Jesus Christ.

And we are called to conform our lives faithfully to the one who is faithful to us. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Trust in his abiding presence in the midst of the changes of life.

But secondly, we are urged in this text not only to trust in the faithfulness of Christ, but to affirm the centrality of Christ for faith. We are called to confess the centrality of Jesus for the faith in the midst of false teaching. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

His truth does not change. The changeless Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. In the context of verses 7 to 10, I think the writer makes this abundantly clear.

Because verse 8 appears there in the context of a warning against false teaching, a warning against false doctrine. Remember your leaders, he says, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of

their way of life and imitate their faith.

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching. Strengthen your hearts by grace and not by ceremonial foods and laws and rituals. The writer reminds his readers that when their leaders first spoke the word of God to them, the subject of their preaching was Jesus Christ.

Christ alone. Christ all for salvation. And this Jesus, whom their leaders preached to them, is still the same Jesus.

Just as he was preached to them yesterday, so he is the same Jesus today, and so he will be the same Jesus tomorrow. The gospel that announced Jesus is still the same gospel. As the writer says in the opening chapter of Hebrews, Jesus is the heir of all things and the radiance of God's glory.

Earth and heaven may perish, but Jesus remains forever the same. And therefore, they should not fall back into the old way of doing things. They should not fall back into their old belief patterns, into their old ceremonies, into their old human traditions.

But they should move forward in the faith of Jesus Christ and facing the inevitable changes which confront us in our personal lives and in our life as a church requires us at all costs to center our lives on Jesus. He is the center of our faith. He is the standard by which we measure all things.

He is the truth against which we judge all truth. And if we center our lives on Christ, and I want you to get this, not to miss this, if we center our lives on Christ, it's going to mean for us change. Because we are called to conform our lives.

Individually and as a congregation to the changeless Jesus Christ. We are called to move away from the old patterns and the old ways which are not of Christ. We are called not to slip back into the old way of doing things or the old ways of believing.

Centering on Christ means change and growth moving forward in faith so that we can be faithful to Christ in our world. Our children love to sing. And sometimes when we're driving in the car, especially if we're on a long trip somewhere, they like to take music tapes with them and they like to listen to the music tapes.

And I remember about a year and a half ago when we were driving home from Princeton, I think we listened to every tape at least three times that they had. Those of you who have little children will know what I'm talking about. When we run out of tapes that they can sing along with, and when they run out of songs that they can sing themselves, one of the children will inevitably say, well, dad, we could always sing Jesus Loves Me.

That's kind of their favorite hymn, their favorite song that they always go back to. If all else fails, if you run out of other music, other tapes, we can always sing the Jesus song, that Jesus loves me. That's not a bad thought.

In the midst of the changes and the challenges of life, if all else fails, that's what matters. That's what counts. Remembering the Jesus song, that Jesus loves us, that we are to center our faith upon him as he calls us forward into the future.

Keep remembering Jesus, the center of our faith and of our life. And then thirdly, I want to suggest to you this morning that in this text, we are urged not only to trust in the faithfulness of Christ, not only to center

our lives upon Christ, but we are urged to follow the example of Christ. In verses 11 to 16, the writer develops a rather elaborate image that we don't have time to go into in detail this morning, but it's the image of Jesus suffering outside the city gate.

In the Old Testament, the scapegoat was sent outside the camp of Israel to bear the sins of the people outside the camp, outside the gate. And in the New Testament, Jesus bore our sins outside the gate of Jerusalem, outside the city gate. And the writer says, let us go to him.

Let us go to Jesus and follow his example. Let us bear the disgrace he bore. For here, we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

The writer is exhorting us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to live outside the gate, outside the city gate. The changes which confront us in the world are fleeting in the face of eternity. Because when you are outside the city, outside the gate, it gives you a new perspective.

A thousand years are but a day to the Lord. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. And you see, Christian faith is faith which looks at things from outside the city gate, from the perspective of eternity.

Let us follow the example of Jesus, the writer says, and go outside the camp where we can get this perspective, where we can get our focus right. Let us bear the disgrace that Jesus bore. You know, when you think about it, this image is very powerful because we are living at a time when the church is no longer in the center of the city.

We are living at a time when the church is no longer at the center of the camp. At the crossroads of civilization, as it were. The world is pushing us outside the gate.

And a lot of people are getting upset about this here in Canada, about the church's loss of power and prestige in the culture. But perhaps what is happening is that we are being pushed right back to where the church was in the New Testament era. On the margins, outside the gate, at the edge, where we can get the right perspective.

The perspective of eternity. It is from this vantage point that the church can remember that it is not building here a building, but rather that we are building an eternal city. It is here that we get the perspective of things of eternal value.

There is a city to come. That we are not hunkered down here to protect our own traditions. But we are called to go forward in faith to proclaim the glory of Jesus Christ.

And it is precisely there and then that we can confront and face the challenges and the changes in the world with new power. Without being swallowed up by them. Without denying them.

For Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Outside the camp. Outside the city gate.

In his book, *Dying for Change*, Leith Anderson tells the story about a candidate who was being interviewed by a pastoral search committee. And I want to tell you that this was not my experience. But I wanted to share this story this morning.

When asked what his priority would be if he came to be the pastor of this church, he responded by saying, I intend to bring this church into the 19th century. Someone thought that he had misspoken. And so they

said, don't you mean the 20th century? And he responded, no, we're going to take this one century at a time.

You see, God is calling us as a Christian community to look at the church, to look at our church, to look at this congregation from the perspective of eternity. From the perspective of the Jesus who is the same yesterday and today and forever. And when you do that, some of the things that you think are so important suddenly take on a whole new view.

Styles of worship, forms of Christian education, strategies for mission, things that sometimes have been shaped by our own traditions don't seem so important any longer. They are relativized by our view of the city that is to come and by the Christ who was and who is and who forever will be. His glory, you see, is all that matters.

His praise is what ought to consume us. The extension of his kingdom ought to be our supreme concern. Henry Ford once said this about companies, about business companies.

And I think what he said about businesses is true of the church. A company, he said, needs to be rejuvenated constantly by the influx of young blood. It needs smart young people with the imagination and guts to turn everything upside down if they can.

But it also needs old fogies to keep them from turning upside down those things which ought to be right side up. Above all, it needs young rebels and old conservatives who can work together, challenge each other's views, yield or hold fast with equal grace, and continue after each hard-fought battle to respect each other as friends and as colleagues. Can we move forward into the future together that God has for us? Can we face the changes that are all about us? Can we trust in the faithfulness of Christ? Can we center our lives on Christ? Can we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, even if it means going outside the city gate to bear the disgrace that he bore? Can we discern the times? And can we know what the changeless Christ would have us to do? In short, dare we trust the changeless Christ in a changing world? Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, we worship you and praise you this morning as the one who was, the one who is, and the one who is to come. You are the lamb forever on the throne, and we worship you this morning. Help us to trust you, to trust in your faithfulness, to walk by faith and not by fear, to center our lives on you, and to follow you wherever you will lead us.

For we pray in the name of our Savior. Amen.

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