

If Christ Seems Dull, It's Because You are Dull

Hebrews 5:11-14

Halifax: 27 November 2022

Introduction:

In our sermon series in Hebrews, we are presently in chapter 5.

- What a beautiful encouraging chapter it is.
 - In verse 1-6, we saw how the love of God the Father was manifested in appointing priests for us—in particular in appointing Christ to be our priest forever!
 - Then, in verses 7-10, we saw the glory of Christ in His service as our priest. We saw Him crying out to God with vehement cries and tears as He offered Himself for our sins so that He became all that we needed as a priest to take away our sins.
 - There is no one like Him. No one else could have done what He did.
- So much glory has been revealed in this chapter!
 - This week, we are challenged about how well we are receiving all of this.
 - There is much more about the glory of Christ to be revealed and we are given a pungent, searching inquiry into our readiness to receive it.
 - Like many of the Hebrews, you may be in a place spiritually where you are not prepared to benefit from this teaching.

Though our text is from v. 11 to v. 14, I will begin our scripture reading at Hebrews 5:1.

- Please give your attention. May the Lord bless you to hear as you ought to hear.

Hebrews 5:1-14: For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things *pertaining* to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. ³ Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer *sacrifices* for sins. ⁴ And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but *it was* He who said to Him: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.” ⁶ As *He* also says in another *place*: “You *are* a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”; ⁷ who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save

Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, ⁸ though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. ⁹ And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, ¹⁰ called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,” ¹¹ of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴ But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

And there we will end the reading of God's holy and infallible word.

- Thanks be to God.

As I have mentioned to you before, there is much debate about who wrote this letter to the Hebrews—we are not told in the letter itself.

- Was it Paul, Barnabas, Luke, or perhaps Apollos?
 - I find the arguments for Paul to be pretty compelling. It is clear from the contents that the original recipients knew who it was—but we really don't.
- Nevertheless, we do know the most important thing about the origin of this letter...
 - Ultimately, it is from the Holy Spirit—it is the very word of God intended not only for the original recipients, but for all who come after them.
 - Therefore, consider that, in verse 11, we see:

I. God's Spirit tells us that He has much more to tell us about the glory of Christ.

A. So much has been said about Him already!

1. From the very first, we were told that He is brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person—that after He had purged our sins, He sat down at the right of the majesty on high.
2. We were told of how He is superior to all the angels, and how He is God's Son whose throne endures forever and ever.
3. We were told how He became man, and then as man was given dominion over all creation, and how He was made perfect through sufferings that He might bring us to glory.
4. We saw that He is the apostle and high priest of our confession, superior to Moses as He is the one who not only is a minister over God's house, but builds the house out of sinners that He redeems.
5. We were told how He had entered into His rest, the same as God did after He created the world, and how He brings all who trust in Him into that rest.
6. He was called our great high priest who has passed through the heavens so that He is able to help us from God's throne of grace, sympathising with our weakness as the one who faced temptations that far surpass any we ever have to face.
7. Most recently, we have been told twice that God appointed Him to be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.
8. He has served as a faithful priest, learning obedience through the things that He suffered. In this way, He has been perfected to be everything that we need to save us from our sins.

B. There is so much for us to enjoy about Him as believers!

1. There is so much in Him to delight us, so much to love, so much to praise, so much to rest in, so much to benefit from, so much to fill us with gratitude.
 - Truly, in Him, we have all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
 - In Him, all the promises of God are yes and amen.
2. There is a surpassing excellence in Him for us to behold.
 - As I told you from the start, this book presents Christ as superior to angels, superior to Moses, superior to Aaron.
 - There is no one who even comes close to Him in excellence.

- It is clear that the Holy Spirit and the author who wrote this letter are on a roll, setting forth the beauty, the perfections, and the glory of our Saviour along with the blessings that come to us through faith in Him.

II. But the Spirit and the one who wrote this letter are grieved because the things they are eager to tell us about Christ are difficult to explain to us.

- Verse 11 goes on to say: **“of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain because you have become dull of hearing.”**

A. You see in this how the problem of getting through is identified.

1. It was certainly not from a dull subject matter.
 - It was not unattractive, unimportant, irrelevant, or unreliable.
 - We have already seen that the subject itself is surpassingly glorious.
2. Neither is the problem that the author lacks the ability to understand it himself.
 - Certainly the Holy Spirit understands it and can explain it in a way all ought to understand.
 - And as an inspired writer of scripture, the one who penned it may be said, as Luke said when he wrote, to have perfect understanding.
3. The problem is that the recipients of the letter have become dull of hearing—
 - Surely not all of them, but as a group, these Hebrew Christians had become dull of hearing.
 - I wonder, could this be said of us? “You have become dull of hearing.”
 - Could it be said of you? “You have become dull of hearing.”
 - Could it be said of me? “You have become dull of hearing.”
 - A literal translation is “lazy in the ears.”
4. This dullness is clearly not an intellectual problem.
 - It says that they have *become* dull of hearing.
 - They did fine when they started out—they took in the glory of the subject before them with eager delight.
 - They are perfectly capable of doing that now—but they have become dull of hearing.

TRANS> He expands on this.

B. If they had continued as they started, they would have become teachers by now.

1. This is not necessarily the office of a teacher, though some would have been that.
 - This refers to what all who belong to Christ should become—those who are able to edify and benefit others by telling them of Christ and His ways.
 - What a useful thing this is!
 - Think of it—
 - to have a hand in showing the lost the way to Christ that they might be saved. What a privilege that is.
 - to have a part in encouraging another believer... and to show them the glory of their Saviour so that they love Him better and serve Him better.

- Think what a great influence the church would have if all who had known the Lord for a year or two were able to teach others.
 - And some of these Hebrews would have become officers in the church—
 - perhaps a pastor, a seminary professor, a missionary, or an elder, whose office is to shepherd souls.
 - What about you?
 - How long have you been a believer?
 - Are you able to teach others?
 - If not, why not? Have you become dull of hearing?
 - Our church is desperately short of elders—should some of you men be qualified to serve by now?
 - What about some of you women? You are not called to serve as elders, but you are certainly called to teach others informally.
2. What is the case instead with these Hebrew believers and with some of us?
- a. He says, **“by this time you ought to be teachers, but you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God.”**
 - They are back on the ABCs.
 - Are you spiritually like a twenty-year-old who still needs to master the alphabet? You are still in the first-grade reader when you ought to be reading great books?
 - You read, “This is Bill. Bill can run. Watch Bill run.”
 - You are an adult and you are stuck there!
 - Spiritually, you are still working on rudimentary Bible knowledge.
 - You can’t even tell someone else how to be saved or show them what the Bible says about sin and their need for Christ.
 - You have no idea why we observe the Lord’s Day or what baptism is.
 - You don’t know the difference between justification and sanctification.
 - You don’t know who Moses was or why Israel was in the wilderness for forty years—things that a well-taught five-year-old might know.
 - You are, as it says, still needing to learn the first principles of the oracles (revelations) of God.
 - b. He illustrates this pitiful condition with food.
 - Verse 12, from the middle, says, **“and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”**
 - Notice that he speaks of regression.
 - He says that they have ‘come to need’ milk. The implication is that they were at a place before where they were ready to start moving on to solid food—to greater things—to learn richer things about Christ and His glory, about serving Him, about His benefits.
 - But now they need to be grounded in the basics again.
 - Their sluggishness has caused them to lose what they once had.

- c. This is tragic.
 - If you are in this state, you can hear a sermon on the glory of Christ or read a passage that sets forth His beauty and miss the whole thing.
 - You are befuddled and lost. To you, it all sounds the same.
 - You find preaching impossible to understand and you blame the preaching even though there are simple believers, new believers, who are able to understand perfectly—not because they are smarter, but because they are eager to hear what the Spirit says.
 - I don't say this to excuse bad preaching, I say this to attack dull hearing, because that is what is being attacked in this passage.
 - One man said he had heard lots of people complain about preaching being bad, but he had never heard a believer confess that he was dull of hearing—that he has lazy ears.
 - It is true that with God's word, we are speaking of things that are not of this world.
 - Some preachers wrongly resort to entertainment—telling stories that are nice to hear, but don't even illustrate anything.
 - It is tragic to have Bible reading, family worship, Psalms of praise, many sermons—and be so dull of hearing that you get little out of them.
 - Some people would give up all their life savings and go without food for a while if they could own and read a Bible—but you can't even find time or inclination to read God's word each day—and when you hear it read at church, you don't even pay attention.
 - You have another voice going on inside your head—you are thinking about what you want to do next week, or about a purchase you want to make, or about a problem at work that needs to be solved.
 - God's word is opened and you might as well not even be there.
 - You have no idea what the sermon was even about.
 - You are depriving yourself of the knowledge of the glory of Christ and His saving work—still on milk and the ABCs when you might be enjoying steak and lobster, fresh fruits and vegetables, rich truths about your Lord that would have filled you with joy and delight...
 - You might have been able to be a blessing to others—to your children, your spouse, your Christian friends, to unbelievers.
 - But instead, you are unable to say anything worth saying about the Lord.

III. How does one end up in this dreadful condition?

- A. It comes from believers not applying themselves to know and practice the truth.
 - Look at verse 13 & 14.
 - 1. Verse 13 says: **For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.**
 - What does it mean to be *unskilled* in the word of righteousness?
 - It means that you have not trained yourself to live according to God's word.

- The Bible never talks about hearing merely for the sake of hearing.
 - When Jesus gave the great commission, He did not just say to make disciples by teaching them all that He had commanded.
 - It is a great mistake to think memorising His commandments is enough.
 - Jesus said rather to make disciples by teaching them *to observe* all that He had commanded them.
 - Moses said the same thing—he spoke of learning to do.
 - Not just learning to know, but learning to do—learning what to believe and learning how to live.
 - I noticed a young man in our church a few months ago who seemed to have a lot to say about the sermons he had heard.
 - I would hear it from his prayers and his conversation.
 - I asked him about it and he informed me that was writing down application from each of the main points in the sermon and then praying for those things over the course of a few weeks and trying to implement them.
 - He was being the opposite of a dull hearer.
 - It was so different from the typical young adult who day-dreams and can't even tell you this afternoon that this morning's sermon was about being a dull hearer—even if asked why the author of Hebrews said the things he was teaching were hard to explain.
2. Verse 14 speaks of using your senses so that they are exercised to discern both good and evil.
- It reads: **But solid food belongs to those who are of full age** [full age is the word that we keep finding in Hebrews that speaks of perfection or reaching a goal. We have seen it said of Jesus—that He was made perfect (complete, all that He needed to be) through suffering.]
 - So again, verse 14: **But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.**
 - Maturity comes by exercise.
 - You have to be diligent in hearing and understanding the word—what it calls you to do—and then you have to be diligent in doing what it says—you have to train yourself to do it.
 - As James says, you must be doers and not hearers only.
 - The word *exercise* is the language of the gymnasium.
 - No one can walk into a gym and be proficient at basketball, the rings, or wrestling, without first training...
 - first learning the basic rules and fundamental skills, not just about them, learning how to do them—becoming proficient by practice.
3. What will happen if you neglect your training—or if you show up, but do not apply yourself.
- What if you are indifferent and have no heart to learn?
 - You will never get beyond the basic rudiments—you will still be in training—you will still be on milk and never progress to solid food.

B. Examine yourself.

- Are you growing in your faith? Are you growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Are you learning what is pleasing to Him and walking in it?
 - If not, why not?
- 1. Is it because, in the things of the LORD, you are one who looks for what is easiest instead of what is best? Think about that.
 - What is your response when you face something difficult that God wants you to do?
 - Do you ask, “What is the easiest way?” or “What is the best way?”
 - Is it, “What will be the least trouble?” or “What will honour God?”
 - Do you run away from problems instead of running to them to try to solve them with God’s help?
 - Do you take on service opportunities and challenges, or do you avoid them?
 - Do you let a little difficulty prevent you from doing what is good? from spending time in God’s word? from going to church? from telling a friend about Christ? from going to a brother who is drifting?
 - Really—think about what you are doing. Does tiredness keep you from church that would not keep you from work—or from visiting family—or going on a day trip that you had planned?
 - You will never grow up if you don’t press on in what is hard when the hard thing is the will of God or something that would be good to do.
 - Maturity does not come from running away and avoiding, but from facing and working through, from pursuing and taking things on.
 - It is for your own good—there are glorious things to learn about Jesus Christ and glorious things to walk in and glorious things to teach others.
- 2. Maybe you are someone who has no goals at all.
 - You just let life happen.
 - You never set out to do anything in particular for Christ—even basic Bible reading, tithing, regular prayer, and regular church attendance are not on the agenda.
 - And when you do read or go to church, you don’t apply anything you have heard—you just take it in like a passive sponge and then forget all about it.
 - There is no exercise.
 - It is time to get up and start striving for excellence in your walk.
 - It is for your own good—there are glorious things to learn about Jesus Christ and glorious things to walk in and glorious things to teach others.
- 3. Perhaps you are one who has great goals—you talk of all the great things you are going to do for the Lord...and they are good things.
 - You take great pride in all these things that you fully intend to do...
 - But then you never get around to doing them.
 - Indeed, if you did even half of what you planned to do, you would be doing quite well!
 - But instead, you actually feel virtuous about your plans rather than your actions.
 - Really, think about this. If this is your problem, you will be prone to deny it.

- Perhaps your problem is that you are always looking ahead to the great things that you are going to do—tomorrow—or next week—or next month,
 - But you never do the next thing that God has given you to do.
 - You don't become a great missionary until you first learn to take out the garbage and to clean your room and to do your homework on time.
 - If you can't see the connection, it's because you are still immature.
 - So do the next thing—you will reach great things by doing the next thing.
 - It is for your own good—there are glorious things to learn about Jesus Christ and glorious things to walk in and glorious things to teach others.
4. Or maybe you are someone who is full of excuses.
- Instead of seeing yourself as a ruined sinner who has been redeemed by Christ and who has the Holy Spirit at work in you to enable you to will and to do of His good pleasure,
 - You view yourself as lacking ability—that you are not smart enough, or that you are damaged goods, permanently twisted so that you can never make much progress... you have been so badly wronged...
 - Perhaps it is your parents or you spouse that prevents you from being godly... or all the pressures that you face—
 - Or that you don't have or didn't have good teaching—or that there is no one to mentor you, to help you, befriend you, keep you accountable.
 - I say, you need to put away all your excuses and recognise that you have a divine Saviour who is at work in you and who has given you all that you need for life and godliness. Really. You need to accept that.
 - Your excuses are just your own foolish way of justifying yourself in your own mind—of finding moral justification for your laziness.
 - Confess your laziness and ask Jesus to justify you.
 - He is your Saviour—look to Him—lean on Him—and start training.
 - Soon you will make incredible progress. So get on with it.
 - It is for your own good—there are glorious things to learn about Jesus Christ and glorious things to walk in.
5. Maybe the reason you don't go on for the Lord to maturity is because the truth is that you don't want to grow up.
- You don't want to know the truth because you don't want to be responsible for knowing it.
 - This may have been a major problem with these Hebrews.
 - They were dull of hearing because they did not really want to learn about Christ and how He is superior to Aaron—because learning that would mean that they would have to give up their Jewish traditions.
 - There was a transition time when they kept going to the temple and offering sacrifices, but as they learned more about Christ, the sacrifices had to go.

- Their families might not mind them being Christians so much until it meant that they stopped going to the temple and started hanging out with Gentile believers...
 - So instead of learning the glorious things they are being taught about Christ, the writer is concerned that they will choose to remain ignorant.
 - As Elder Alexander often points out, people are clever.
 - They know what changes they will have to make if they come to believe certain things, so they avoid learning—they want to stay ignorant.
 - They know the implications of learning too much of what the Bible says about marriage, or work, or worship, or baptism and parental responsibility, about covenant succession, about the Lord's Day, about going to a church that will discipline them if they go astray...
 - They'd rather avoid all that, they'd rather remain ignorant about some things.
 - But if you think that way, you are just kidding yourself.
 - This passage teaches you that you are responsible not only for what you know, but also for not knowing what you ought to have learned a long time ago!
 - You only relieve yourself of responsibility by remaining ignorant in your own imagination.
 - In reality, you become more and more responsible for being dull of hearing so that you don't get on with Jesus.
 - So stop kidding yourself and start applying yourself to understand what God wants so that you can grow to maturity and stop being a baby.
 - It is for your own good—there are glorious things to learn about Jesus Christ and glorious things to walk in.
6. Perhaps you are not maturing because of envy.
- That's right—envy can keep you from maturity.
 - You see the unbeliever and you envy him because he does not have to swim upstream in a downstream world.
 - He can just go with the flow and be thought well of, but you have to serve the Lord.
 - You look at other believers who are not devoted to the Lord—and you envy them.
 - But you should rather pity them because they are not going on with our Saviour Jesus Christ.
 - They are not beholding His glory or growing in His grace.
 - If you are at some half point, you are in a miserable way because you are neither going with the world nor with Christ—you can enjoy neither.
 - The solution is to repent and give yourself wholly to Christ.

- When you do that, there will be trials, but as you cling to Christ and push through them, you will mature—you will see His glory and you will be glad.
7. Perhaps the greatest problem of all that keeps you from maturity is that you lack faith.
- You don't believe that God's way is better.
 - You don't believe that following Christ will make you happier and better than anything else you can do.
 - You continue to believe the lie that avoiding the things you find hard to do for Him will make you miserable.
 - You think that if you get started, God will not help you and see you through.
 - But this passage teaches you that there is a lot more to Christ and His glory than what you have yet seen.
 - There is so much more to Him, and the Holy Spirit is eager to show you His glory if only you will stop being dull of hearing.
 - Come to Him, and He will deliver you from dull hearing.