

“A CHANGELESS CHRIST IN A CHANGING WORLD”

Hebrews 13:5-8

There is a verse in our next hymn, Abide with Me, that beautifully summarizes today's text and message. It reads: “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. O Thou, who changest not, abide with me.”

Henry Lyte, the minister who wrote this hymn, based the lyrics on Luke 24:29; the words spoken by two disciples on their way to Emmaus, not realizing they were addressing the risen Savior. **“Stay with us,”** they said, **“for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.”**

That day and that entire previous week had brought many unwanted, frightening changes. On Palm Sunday the multitudes had praised Jesus. On Good Friday, the same multitudes had demanded His crucifixion. And when Jesus died on the cross, the hopes of the disciples had died too. **“But we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel,”** said the disciples from Emmaus.

But as the risen Jesus walked with those disciples, He told them, **“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?”** Could the Savior not say the same to us amid all the changes and worries of our lives? **“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe.”**

Henry Lyte wrote Abide with Me during a time of personal change and decay and great difficulty. In poor health for most of his life, Lyte suffered from various respiratory diseases, including tuberculosis. As his strength failed, he insisted on preaching a final sermon to his congregation, reassuring his concerned daughter that “it was better to wear out than to rust out.” On that same day, after that final sermon, Lyte penned the lyrics to Abide with Me.

Many of the lyrics in this cherished hymn foreshadowed Lyte's imminent death: “the darkness deepens,” verse 1; “swift to its close ebbs our life's little day,” verse 2; “I need Thy presence every passing hour,” verse 6; and “hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes,” verse 8.

Yet, despite all the changes in his life—indeed, to the day of his death in 1874—Henry Lyte held firmly to the hope of Christ's unchanging love, Christ's unchanging power, and Christ's unchanging presence. And so he wrote: “Change and decay in all

around I see. O Thou, who changest not, abide with me.” It is this personal plea, “abide with me, Lord Jesus; abide with me amid all the changes of my life;” that makes Lyte’s hymn and today’s text so comforting and so relevant.

For a moment, reflect on all the changes you’ve experienced in your life: the places you’ve lived; the friends you’ve had; the loved ones you’ve lost; the jobs you’ve held; the day you brought your newborn children into your home, and the day you tearfully watched them leave for a home of their own; the birthdays, the anniversaries, the good times and bad times. So many changes.

Consider how drastically the world has changed in your lifetime—the changes in technology, medicine, communications. Remember when there were only three channels on a black-and-white TV: ABC, CBS, and NBC? Remember when the only choices in network news anchors were Walter Cronkite and Chet Huntley and David Brinkley? Remember when people actually talked instead of texting, tweeting, emailing, and instagraming? Changes in the economy. Changes in weaponry. Changes in geopolitical enemies—the Cold War replaced by the War on Terror, and Common Sense replaced by Political Correctness.

Consider how this congregation has changed over the years. The visitors who came and went. The members who were called to their heavenly home. Or consider the various pastors who’ve stood in this same pulpit, as we’re encouraged to do by today’s text: **“Remember your leaders, who spoke the words of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith”** Hebrews 13:7. Changes.

The original readers of Hebrews were going through difficult changes too. So much of this inspired letter could be summarized with the phrases “don’t give up;” and “keep moving forward in faith.” In the beginning these Jewish Christians received Christ with great joy. They worshiped. They celebrated. They lived life in confidence. They delighted in being together in church.

Then suddenly, a terrible change in circumstances. The powerful Roman Empire began to vigorously persecute Christianity. Many of these Jewish Christians were tempted to surrender their faith rather than to suffer for it. As a result, we find such strong warnings in Hebrews as: **“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away,”** Hebrews 2:1; and, **“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God,”** Hebrews 3:12.

Yet, along with such solemn warnings, Hebrews contains many glorious and Christ-centered encouragements, including: **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by**

such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart,” Hebrews 12:1-3.

Growing weary. Losing heart. At times these words describe all of us. A few years ago, I had the privilege of working with a wonderful special education teacher named Donna. Talk about changes. Within a single month, Donna moved her entire family from Orlando to Winter Haven; started a new job; launched a new transition program; purchased a new home; located new schools for her own special-needs children; and after all this, had to hospitalize one of her children who was simply overwhelmed by all the changes. “Donna,” I said. “I am amazed you are holding up so well. How do you do it?” And she answered, “I cry a lot. And I pray a lot.”

If today you are going through difficult changes in your life—sickness, loneliness, debt, troubled relationship, temptation, unreasonable employer; don’t give up. Don’t despair. Don’t lose heart. For today the Spirit of God is calling you to fix **YOUR** eyes on Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfecter, the Starting-block and Finish-line of **YOUR** Christian faith.

And don’t think, “What good will focusing on Jesus do? Why should I fix my eyes on Jesus? That may have worked for Jewish Christians two thousand years ago, but how can it help me today?” This is how; as we are told in Hebrews 13:8, **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** He is our unchanging Savior. And there is no greater comfort amid a volatile, changeable world.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” A more literal translation of the Greek is: ‘Jesus Christ, yesterday and today the same, and to the eternities.’ The emphasis is on Jesus, then Christ, then the same for all eternity. And using the names “Jesus Christ” in this context is not superfluous. Nothing the Spirit of God includes in Scripture is superfluous. Each of these names for the Savior, JESUS and CHRIST, tell us something important about Him and something comforting for us.

First, JESUS is the same for all eternity. Jesus, of course, is the Savior’s personal name; a name especially associated with His incarnation and birth. As the angel Gabriel told Joseph, **“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins,”** Matthew 1:20-21. The name JESUS means Savior.

When you and I face changes in life, one of our greatest fears is that God will not understand our daily circumstances and personal feelings. He won't understand our frustration at work. He won't understand our struggle to pay the mortgage or to squeeze another mile out of the broken-down family sedan. He won't understand our fever or flu or diagnosis of cancer. He won't understand our aches and pains, temptations and weaknesses.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. JESUS does understand our human problems, because Jesus—the same Jesus who was born in a barn, died on a cross, and rose triumphantly from the grave on Easter morning—is Himself truly human. And His true humanity will never change. Never. **“To the eternities,”** as stated in our text. And this means that regardless of your stage or age in life, Jesus will always understand what you are going through, and will always be in a position to provide the right kind of help. According to Isaiah 53, Jesus not only had His problems, He carried all of ours.

The true humanity of Jesus is one of the great teachings of Scripture, from the ‘Seed of the woman’ in Genesis 3:15 to the ‘Word made flesh’ of John 1:14. It is also one of the great, recurring themes of Hebrews, because of all the changes the first readers of Hebrews were experiencing. ‘Yes, things are changing,’ the writer of Hebrews said in essence. ‘You’re going through so much pain and anxiety, even imprisonment and death. But your Savior, Jesus Christ, understands all of that because He Himself went through it.’

So we read in Hebrews 2:14-15, **“Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”** And again in Hebrews 4:15-16, **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”**

Second, Jesus is the CHRIST for all eternity. As you know, Christ is not a personal name but an official title. Like the Hebrew word Messiah, CHRIST means ‘The Anointed One’ or ‘the Chosen One.’

Just as the personal name JESUS reminds us that our Savior will always share in our humanity and always understand our human problems, so the official title CHRIST reminds us that the historical Jesus Christ will always be God's one and only way to salvation. And this will never change, because **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

This is why the Bible tells us so specifically and so consistently—John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”** Or John 14:6, where Jesus said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”** Or Acts 4:12, referring to the name of Jesus, **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”**

If we are honest with ourselves and honest with God, not a day will pass when we fail to confess with the tax collector in Luke 18: **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** ‘God, forgive me for using such language. God, forgive me for losing my temper. God, forgive me for turning away from that stranger in need. God, forgive me for losing myself in the pursuit of earthly pleasures and treasures. God, forgive me for not trusting in you when I got sick.’ Yet, what a blessed truth to know that in Jesus Christ we will always find forgiveness. Always. And this will never change, because **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

Third and finally, Jesus Christ is true GOD for all eternity. To declare that **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”** is also to unequivocally declare Jesus Christ to be true God. And the Bible does clearly, unapologetically declare Jesus Christ to be God in many passages. John 1:1, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** Romans 9:5, **“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised.”** Colossians 2:9, **“For in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”** And Titus 2:13, **“While we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”**

The Letter to the Hebrews also describes Jesus as true God, saying in Hebrews 1:3, **“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.”** And in Hebrews 1:8, referring to God the Father’s own testimony about God the Son: **“But about the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of Your kingdom.’”**

You and I change daily and constantly. We grow older, weaker, heavier, thinner. Our perspectives change. Our priorities change. Our interests, likes, loves, moods, commitments, circumstances, and health conditions change. Yesterday we were not the same as we are today. Today we are not be the same as we will be tomorrow.

Only of God can it be said: ‘He is always the same.’ And God does say this in His word. Malachi 3:6, **“I the LORD do not change.”** James 1:17, **“Every good and**

perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Theologians refer to this attribute of God as His ‘immutability.’ I prefer to think of it as an unending reason to rejoice. That God does not change means that He is always with us in our brightest moments and darkest hours. He is always leading us; always defending us; always providing for us; always rescuing us; always exercising all power in heaven and earth to force even the worst circumstances to serve our best interests. He is always loving us—even when we think He is not. No matter where you go, no matter what you do, no matter how long you live, this will always be true. This will never change, because God does not change. Because **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

He is our UNCHANGING CHRIST IN A CHANGING WORLD.

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