

A Strategy to Cope

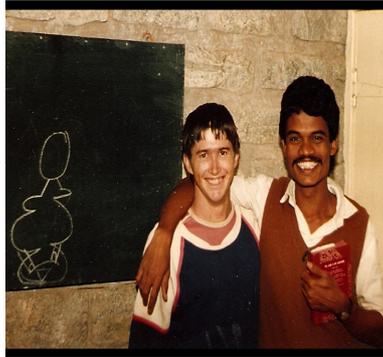
Hebrews 3:1-18

Preached at Poulner Baptist Chapel

24th January 2010

SLIDE 1

Please do turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 3.



SLIDE 2 (Picture of mebi)

I wonder how you have changed over the years. This is a picture of me back in 1985 when I went to India to do 6 months Community Development work in Bangalore. The guy beside me is one of the Indian natives I was helping. I often wondered what happened to the people I helped. Within the last week we have re-established contact after almost 25 years – he googled me! Praise God! His name is Rabi Choudhoury and he has his own ministry working among the unreached in the State of West Bengal, which border in between India and Bangaladesh. I am so glad and thankful to God that Rabi has gone on in the faith and not fallen away as I know some people I have.

So how can we, as 21st century Christians, keep from falling away. I would call it the COPE strategy: Consider, Persevere and Encourage.

Keep Considering! (vs1-6)

SLIDE 3

READ Hebrews 3v1-6

The first thing we do is to consider Jesus or as the NIV here puts it "fix our thoughts". Now remember, that these are Hebrew believers. I guess we would call them Messianic Jews today. They believed that Jesus was their Messiah, Saviour and Lord. They were obviously coming under pressure from their Jewish friends and leaders to deny this Jesus and return to the fold. They would have been told how great Moses was. In the previous chapter we read how Jesus is greater than the angels, because He is God, but was made a little lower than the angels when he became a man.

SLIDE 4 Moses was cool

In this chapter, we read a comparison between Jesus and Moses. Moses to the Jews, was like a superhero. Moses was revered because it was to him that God revealed His will. Moses was the key figure in the establishment of Israel as a nation – God's chosen people! Moses suffered persecution and rejection from the rest of the family of Israel. He had great zeal for God and was willing to sacrifice everything for God. He had fellowship with God. Yet all this is merely a shadow and a prophetic sign of what was to come in Jesus. Moses, we read in Numbers 12:7, was faithful to God's house, God's people. The house of God is the people of God. It was this Moses who was held in such high regard by the Jews, that some might well have been tempted to renounce Jesus and go back to the old ways.

God's Messiah would need to be greater than Moses, and Jesus is and was this Messiah. Later on in the book of Hebrews, we discover that Jesus is greater than Aaron through whom the law was ministered; but here we see that Jesus is greater than Moses, the lawgiver, the servant of the house of God.

Moses and Aaron represented God's house in Israel; Moses was the Apostle or Prophet and Aaron was the High Priest. Jesus, an Apostle and Prophet as well as being the High Priest, joined the two together. By Apostle, I mean as a Messenger - that's what an apostle is – a messenger or representative. As the Apostle of our faith, Jesus was faithful. Jesus was God's representative for us, making God known to us. Jesus was totally faithful, means to be both trusting and to be capable of being trusted.

Moses was the one to whom the Law was given – the Mosaic covenant under which the Jewish people lived. This covenant with Moses commenced with the stipulation "*Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to*

me." (Exodus 19v5). This covenant was to Israel in order that those who believed God's promise to Abraham, could know how to live rightly in accordance with how God wanted them to live.

SLIDE 5

This covenant with Moses covered the three areas of life:

- The commandments were given so they would know how to relate socially to God (Exodus 20v1-6)
- The judgments were given in order that they could relate socially to each other (Exodus 21v1 - 24v11)
- The decrees dictated their religious life so that God could be approached by humanity on His terms (Exodus 24v12 - 31v18).

This covenant that God made with Moses and the ancient nation of Israel was never meant to be as a means for providing salvation. It was given so that they could realize the helplessness and futility of their own efforts and their need of God's help. It was to serve only as a protective fence until the promised Messiah came; the long waited for Saviour of all humanity, so that the whole world, Jew and Gentile, could be made right with God through faith and faith alone.

SLIDE 6 **In Comes Jesus**

And that is where Jesus comes in. As their Messiah and Saviour, Jesus ushered in the New Covenant, which was promised by God through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

What are the features of this New Covenant or promise?

SLIDE 7

Four features of this covenant are:

- **Regeneration** –God will write His law on the hearts of people.
- **Restoration** - God will be their God, and they will be His people.
- **Promised Holy Spirit** – God will indwell people and they will be led by Him
- **Justification** – Sins will be forgiven and removed eternally

This new covenant is sealed only through the perfect sacrifice of the God-Man Jesus on the cross. His blood ensures the truth of this New Covenant. His death pays the penalty for the sins of all people who say yes to God and are ready to run the race and travel the course. This New Covenant finalizes what the Mosaic Covenant could only point to: the follower of God living in a relationship with God conforming to God's holy character. That is one very specific way of Jesus being superior to Moses! The original readers of this letter being God-fearing Jews would be aware of all this.

SLIDE 8

They would also be aware that it is sin, which separates humans from God and as a consequence leads to both a spiritual and physical death (*Romans 3v23, Romans 6v23, Isaiah 59v2*). In the Old Testament, sins were dealt with by blood sacrifices of atonement as coverings for sin (*Leviticus 17v11*), for without the shedding of blood there could be no remission of sin (*Hebrews 9v22*). A blood sacrifice is God's way of dealing with sin. These blood sacrifices of the Old Testament signified several things:

- It provided a covering for sin.
- It showed the great cost of sin.
- It was an exchange or substitution.
- It was only always going to be a temporary measure, as it pointed forward to Jesus' death and it needed to be done over and over again.

So how is Jesus better than Moses? The answer lies in the solution to sin. The ultimate solution to sin lies not in the continuing animal sacrifice under the Covenant with Moses, because as the writer later in *Hebrews 10v4* stipulates the blood of animals cannot take away sin but was only ever going to be a veneer or a covering. That was why it was necessary to repeat time and time again!

SLIDE 9

It is only through the victorious death of Jesus, that sin is permanently taken away (*Hebrews 9:v11-15, 26-28*), because Jesus is the permanent sacrificial substitute! It is as if the writer is saying give up on Jesus, stop considering Him and you would still be in your sins – that's the way the original readers would have understood it!

And as for us?

SLIDE 10

As followers of Jesus Christ we are built together so that the Spirit of God may join us together in love. Both individually and as a group, we are the house of God. Jesus said, "We will come and make our home in you". We know Jesus has been faithful as a Son over God's people. We celebrate His faithfulness at Easter, when we acknowledge and rejoice at the sacrifice He made for us. We remember it in the act of Communion, which we will have later. Jesus suffered persecution and rejection from his peers. We know Jesus was godly and full of zeal for God, and was willing to sacrifice everything for God and his people. We are the house of God. And yet, do we not reject Jesus sometimes, or do we keep on considering? Do we give Him and trust in His faithfulness to complete the good work he has started in us?

SLIDE 11

This NIV translation has “fix your thoughts”. Here is how the New King James Version puts verse 1 “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus”. I personally think that that is a better way of putting it. And not only because it has the word partakers in there!

To “consider” has a much broader meaning than just “fixing your thoughts” as the NIV puts it. It means to seek, to fully understand or comprehend as well as fixing thoughtfully. To consider means to contemplate, to think about, to persevere with, to concentrate on and to fix eyes and thoughts upon. We have to allow Jesus Christ to permeate every aspect of our life, if we are to be partakers of Him. To consider not just how Jesus would do something, but how Jesus would think. What attitude would Jesus take? What would Jesus not do? Just as the Hebrews receiving this letter were told to do, in their race of the life following Jesus, we too are to hold fast to our courage, but only by considering Jesus and trusting in Him relying on the Holy Spirit to help us as we ask Him.

This phrase “*to consider*” is perhaps the central theme of the book of Hebrews. We are to consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. Jesus was faithful to the purpose of His Coming to be among people. His purpose in coming to earth, as a mere man, was to die for sins and be raised up on the third day so as to be victorious over death and sin. This Jesus perfected our human nature in His life of simplicity, suffering, devotion and obedience. He now lives at the right hand of the Father in heaven, to communicate to us His life and blessedness through the indwelling Holy Spirit. We must therefore consider Jesus in everything we do, every thought we think and in every attitude. This is the aim of the writer to persuade these Hebrew Christians that if they knew Jesus to be the faithful, compassionate Almighty apostle and priest in Heaven, then they would find everything in Him that they needed for life. Moses couldn’t help them, but Jesus could! Moses had died, they could perhaps visit his tomb if they wanted to. But Jesus, well, Jesus’ tomb was empty! Jesus is alive! The life of these Hebrew Christians would be united with their faith, and united with the life of Jesus whom their faith would glorify God. To these Hebrew Christians their salvation was based on Jesus, but to renounce Jesus and go back to following Moses was apostasy. Moses couldn’t offer salvation because the Law was not meant as a means of salvation! But what about you? Are you trusting in this Jesus for salvation or are you even subconsciously relying on your own good works or something else?

That was what these believing Hebrews were to do – consider how vastly superior Jesus is to Moses. We also are to consider how superior Jesus is to all other things that would try to entangle us and allure us away with false promises.

Keep Persevering!

SLIDE 11

READ Hebrews 3v7-12, 15-19)

And then after considering Jesus, these Hebrew Christians were to do something! They were to persevere in believing. The writer now warns these Hebrew believers against the sin of unbelief, which is the hardening of their hearts. The writer quoting from Psalm 95 reminds them of the way Israel rebelled against God in the desert. He warns them not to be like their forefathers, who did not trust fully in the Lord their God. From Psalm 95, he proceeds to remind them of their ancestors' deeds of unbelief. The privilege of the house of God is in hearing God's voice. By choosing not to listen to God's voice, peoples' hearts grew hard and cold. These words are of course written to believing Christian Hebrews, not unbelieving Jews, and are as appropriate for us today, as it was for them when they received it.

As the people of God today we need to be ready to listen to God's voice. As we see God working in us, our trust and belief in Him grows. If we do not believe in Him to help us, then of course our hearts will harden against him. As we grow and run the race, willingly sacrificing what needs to be sacrificed, we realize the glory and majesty of God, His holiness and perfection, His love and tenderness, and gladly listen to hear what He says to us, and willingly receive what He gives us.

When you pray, do you have your Bible open? When you read your Bible, do you do so prayerfully and considerately? Bible reading and prayer go together! Unbelief stops a person from holding fellowship with God. Our God is alive, not a dead idol on the shelf or in the bank. This church of Hebrew believers, for all their Christian profession and religious exercises, were in danger of falling away from God, due to their not believing totally in Him. God would not abandon them, but they would abandon God!

We need to take care, in case we also fall into unbelief. Unbelief and falling away act upon and react to each other. If we have any unbelief in our hearts tonight, then let us ask God to give us a heart that believes in Him so that we may not fall away from Him. And what is one of the main ways we can stop from falling away or letting others fall away into unbelief?

Keep encouraging!

SLIDE 12

READ Hebrews 3v12-14

So we keep on considering Jesus. We persevere in our believing in Him. Now thirdly, to show we are considering Jesus and are persevering in our believing Him, we are to encourage and be encouraged! In verse 12, we read, "See to it, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God". This means, that we are not only to take care of our own hearts, but as verse 13 goes on to say, we are to encourage and ensure no one is in danger of falling away. We who are believers, have to make sure that each one of us is staying on the path that leads to life, that is, the race towards Jesus.

This group of Hebrew Christians were to help and encourage each other! And so are we! For us, maybe it is by phoning somebody you haven't seen in a while or to phone somebody you get a random thought about! If we see a brother or sister that we know is starting to fall out of the race, we need to do all we can to stop them falling away. We need to encourage them, to continue considering Jesus and believing in Him. We all know of people who are new believers, full of joy and zeal for God, that end up falling back into unbelief, unable to hold fast to the end. To some degree, it is because the Church body has failed to encourage them to continue on in the race. It is our duty, and our daily responsibility to encourage people on in the race or the journey.

However, to encourage is not just these easy things. To encourage can also mean to rebuke, to correct in love. I look back at my tutor, during my first stint of Bible College back in the 1980s. His name was Ed. Ed the head we called him. We had weekly tutorials then. Every week he would get me to read a chapter of Knowing God by JI Packer and a chapter of Mere Christianity by CS Lewis. Then during our tutorial I would have to try and explain what I learnt from both those chapters. It was a slog at times I tell you. Sometimes I would get a clip round the ear for being stubborn or just being plain thick! But it gave me a good grounding for my Christian thinking and life of discipleship to Jesus.

Or I think back to my dear friend Rose, a kind and dear elderly lady from the church I used to attend back in the 80s. She would have us young adults back to her house overlooking the ocean for coffee after church on a Sunday evening. She would always be loving, caring and encouraging to all people – ready to lift them when they were down and eager to cheer from the sidelines. She was also a tough cookie at times and if we got out of line, she would say so in no uncertain terms! Not so much an arm around the shoulder then but a good swift kick! Both methods of encouragement when required!

When we see somebody sinning or contemplating sinning, our reaction should be to gently encourage him or her not to continue in pursuit of that sin. Therefore in considering Jesus, believe in Him and encourage others to do the same. That is the purpose of encouragement mentioned here.. Let all of us give ourselves to the service of Jesus to watch over other people: let all the fresh grace and deeper knowledge of Jesus we see, be for the service of those around us. Where will you and I be spiritually next year, in 10 years' time, in 25 years' time? Will you be able to honestly say to yourself at that time, I have grown spiritually and haven't fallen away?

If you are here tonight, would call yourself a Christian, and you are unsure where you are, then do this. Look back and remember what Jesus has done for you. Consider Him as you look back to your first profession of faith in Him. Consider that just as He died, you died in the waters of baptism. Consider that just as He rose to physical life, you rose from the waters of baptism and will also rise again when you physically die. Consider that just as Jesus will be glorified, so too will you be glorified before the Father – if you hold out until the end. Be assured of who you are – you are a child of the living God – hold out to the end. He has a firm grip on you, so maintain your grip on Him! Remember who you are!

The way to cope with the rigours of 21st century life as a Christian believer is to keep considering, keep persevering and keep encouraging.

Thank you... Let us pray.