



Fixated







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ADVENT MEDITATIONS  
FROM THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

TIM CHESTER

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## Fixated on Jesus

Somewhere in our attic is a book entitled *Young Man in a Hurry* by Iris Clinton. It's the story of William Carey, the self-educated cobbler who became a pioneer missionary to India in the eighteenth century. On the cover is a picture of a family in a small riverboat. They're distracted by a monkey on the bank, but what grabs our attention are two crocodiles in the foreground. I don't remember crocodiles featuring heavily in Carey's story, but they certainly add a dash of menace to the front cover.

The book was part of a series called *Faith and Fame*, Christian biographies designed to fire the imagination of children with zeal for Christ. *Young Man in a Hurry* certainly did it for me. I read lots of books in the series, but it's *Young Man in a Hurry* that stands out in my memory. I think my original copy fell apart, but recently I bought another copy – for old time's sake – when I saw it in a second-hand bookshop. William Carey has been one of my heroes ever since.

But how can we live like our heroes? How can we avoid the distractions of our culture – especially at Christmas when the trivial comes at us thick and fast? How can we free ourselves from the entanglements of sin? How can we persevere as Christians when life is tough or people around us are hostile?

The writer of the book of Hebrews has an answer to those questions and it's one that might surprise you. It's not a set of rigorous spiritual disciplines. It's not a three-month discipleship programme. It doesn't involve going to Bible college or locking yourself away in a monastery. His answer is simple – *fix your eyes on Jesus*:

*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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1–3).*

When you're running a marathon there's a moment – usually around the 20-mile mark – when you hit what's called 'the wall'. Suddenly your legs feel heavy and every step is an effort. At least this is what people tell me. I have no first-hand experience of 'the wall' – or of running a marathon for that matter.

Sometimes the Christian life can feel like running a marathon. The writer of Hebrews describes it as 'the race marked out for us'. Perhaps your first days as a Christian felt like a sprint – you were full of energy and ran for the joy of it. But perhaps after a while you settled down into a steady pace. After all, the finish line may not be round the next bend. Or perhaps you've just hit 'the wall'. It might have been brought on by disappointment – unanswered prayers, unrequited love, unfulfilled dreams, missed opportunities. It might be you've run into opposition from a world hostile to your faith. It might just be that you've already been running for the spiritual equivalent of 20 miles. Your soul feels heavy and every step is an effort. You've grown weary and begun to lose heart.

How can we run with perseverance? How can we keep going to the end? By fixing our eyes on Jesus, says Hebrews.

The word translated 'fixing our eyes' is actually two Greek words bolted together – the word 'looking' and the word 'from' or 'away'. So a literal translation is 'looking away to Jesus'. We're to look *away* from others things and look *towards* Jesus. It's about changing the direction of our eye line. It has the sense of focusing our vision. Think of a racehorse wearing blinkers so that it's not distracted from running the race. That's how we to run the race marked out for us. We're to be blinkered so that we have eyes only for Jesus. That means looking away from 'everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles' (v. 1) and instead looking to Jesus (v. 2).

We're to 'consider' Jesus, says verse 3. Jesus is to fill our thoughts. Hebrews uses similar language in 3:1: 'Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.' We're to glue our thoughts on Jesus. Maybe you put post-it notes on the fridge as reminders or write notes to yourself on the back of your hand. We're to do the mental equivalent with Jesus: we're to glue reminders of him in the forefront of our minds.

As you read these meditations, think about *from* what you need to turn. What is it that's distracting you from looking at Jesus? What are the things that are hindering you? What are the sins that are entangling you? And then consider to which aspect of Jesus you need to turn. Hebrews provides us with a rich and multi-coloured perspective on the person of Christ. So, as we read it, identify some aspect of the character of Christ or the work of Christ that particularly meets your current needs. Then fix your eyes on that thought. Use your imagination to bring Christ into the challenges you face. Let him meet your needs.

We're to be fixated on Jesus. He's to be our first thought, our constant thought, our obsession. The writer describes his letter as a 'word of exhortation' (13:22). It's an exhortation above all to fix our eyes on Jesus. Here's how John Owen, the great seventeenth-century Puritan, put it:

*Make up your mind that to behold the glory of God by beholding the glory of Christ is the greatest privilege which is given to believers in this life. This is the dawning of heaven ... Let us regard it as our duty to meditate frequently on his glory. It is the neglect of meditation that keeps so many Christians in a feeble state ... A constant view of the glory of Christ will revive our souls and cause our spiritual lives to flourish and thrive. Our souls will be revived by the transforming power with which beholding Christ is always accompanied. This is what transforms us daily into the likeness of Christ.<sup>1</sup>*

That's what I want us to do – to meditate on the glory of Christ. Because if John Owen is right, then seeing the glory of Christ means seeing the glory of God. Meditating on Christ will give us a little foretaste of heaven and meditating on the glory of Christ will revive our souls and transform our lives.

Advent is the time when we celebrate the coming of Jesus, yet the big irony is that it so easily gets full of things that 'hinder' our view of Jesus. For many of us, Christmas is a busy time. I'm writing these words at the end of November, and it turns out, I've got just one free evening between now and Christmas Day. We're celebrating the birthday of Jesus, but he ends up not being invited to his own party. There was no room for him at the first Christmas, and if we're not careful, there's no room for him at our Christmases.

Looking at Jesus might not sound all that practical. But meditating on Christ is actually life-changing. Indeed, nothing is more life-

changing. Here's Owen again: 'Some talk much of imitating Christ and following his example. But no man will ever become "like him" by trying to imitate his behaviour and life if they knew nothing of the transforming power of beholding his glory.'<sup>2</sup> But don't take Owen's word for it. Listen to what God says: 'And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:18). How are we transformed? By contemplating the Lord's glory.

We're going to let the writer of Hebrews be our tour guide, showing us some of the key sights of the Lord's glory. Time and again, we're going to be invited to fix our eyes on Jesus.

The opening verses of Hebrews are like an overture to a musical. In an overture, you get a preview of what's coming. All the main melodies are mashed together so that, when you hear the tunes repeated later in the performance, they already sound familiar.

That's what the writer of Hebrews is doing here. He's giving us a preview of what's to come. These verses introduce us to the 'Son', and the sonship of Jesus is going to be a key theme of the letter.

And who is the Son? First, we discover he is the climax of God's revelation. That's why in these verses there's a strong sense of movement: from 'in the past' to 'in these last days', from 'our ancestors' to 'us', from 'the prophets' to 'his Son'.

It's a movement from promise to fulfilment, from provisional to final, from partial to complete. Jesus is not the replacement of the Old Testament, but he is its resolution.

This means that Jesus is *the final Word*. He's not merely the latest word with more to follow. He's the last word. There's nothing more to be said. God has spoken through his Son, so there is nothing more to add. We don't need to look elsewhere for more truth about God. We have the Son, who is God himself. Top that!

St Antony was an early Christian monastic who had such a reputation that three successive Roman emperors wrote letters to him. You can imagine the other monks gathering around excitedly when they heard that Antony had received another letter from the Emperor. These letters wouldn't have just dropped through the letterbox – they would have come with an imperial escort.

But here's what Antony said to his monks as they gathered around: 'Do not be astonished if an Emperor writes to us, for he is a man; but rather wonder that God wrote the Law for men and has spoken to us through His own Son.' In other words, Jesus is God's



letter written to communicate his love to us. And that letter was delivered in person – quite literally.<sup>3</sup>

The one phrase in verse 1 that appears to have no parallel in verse 2 is ‘at many times and in various ways’. All we get is the Son without further elaboration. The effect is to focus our attention on the Son alone. In the Old Testament, God communicated through dreams, prophecies, visions, miracles, words, appearances, tablets of stone, disembodied fingers, and so on. They were all amazing events to witness, I’m sure. But now God has gone further, deeper and fuller. He has spoken to us in his Son. Jesus is the full word, the fulfilment, the fullest revelation of God.

In the Old Testament, God’s promises were embodied in a whole variety of ways. No one person or symbol could do the job of capturing the full reality of God’s promise: the rescue of Noah in the ark showed God’s rescue from judgment, Moses revealed the need for a mediator, the sacrificial system showed how God dealt with the guilt of sin, the tabernacle was a promise of God’s presence with his people. We could go on and on, but the point is this: no person or symbol on their own could encapsulate the fullness of God’s purposes.

But now all the stories of the Old Testament have converged into one single moment, and that moment is the first Christmas Day. The work of Jesus is so rich, deep and all-encompassing, that it needed all those pictures to prepare for it. But Christ comes to complete and fulfil them all.



## Reflection

Fix your eyes on Jesus this Advent. He is the one in whom God has spoken. Looking to Jesus may not answer every question you have – the Gospel accounts of his life include no information on



cooking a turkey or finding a present for your mum. But they do answer the questions that really matter: who God is, who we are, how we can be reconciled to God and live for him. Jesus is 'the way and the truth and the life' (Jn. 14:6), so find your big questions answered as you look to him.

Centuries of dramatic revelations in miracles, dreams, prophecies and visions have all been fulfilled in Jesus, for Jesus is the full and final Word from God (vv. 1–2).

But what comes next? What would you expect if you were reading this letter for the first time? Surely you would expect a summary of Jesus' teaching or a list of his sayings. If God has spoken through his Son, then tell us what the Son has said.

Instead what we get is a description of the Son. We don't get his words; we see his glory.

That's because the Son is not simply the messenger, he's the message. God's word to us is Jesus himself. In fact, the phrase, 'he has spoken to us by his Son' is literally, 'he has spoken to us *in Son*'. In other words, 'Son' is the language that God speaks. I speak English. You may be able to speak in other languages. God speaks in 'Son'. It's almost as if he was translating himself when he spoke through dreams and prophecies. The Son is God's native language, for the Son is the eternal Word. He is God's eternal act of self-expression.

And what do we see in the person of the Son?

First, we see the 'heir of all things' (v. 2). Who is this world for? How can we have a sense of purpose? The answer is Jesus. Jesus is the heir of all things. All things come to him.

The world is for Jesus. History is moving to a point where Jesus will be proclaimed as Lord, every knee will bow before him and every tongue confess his name, all nations will belong to him and all creation will be his. And our lives, therefore, need to move towards this point as well. Jesus is to be the goal of each day we live and breath we take.

But Jesus is not only the end of creation, he's also the origin of creation. Hebrews continues, 'through whom also he made the



universe' (v. 2). All things not only come *to* Christ as the heir, but they come *from* him as the creator.

The writer started by emphasising that Jesus is the final Word. In terms of God's communication to humanity, the prophets came first, and Jesus came second. But in another important sense, Jesus actually came first. He may be the last Word, but he was also the *first* Word. He is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet (Rev. 22:13).

Jesus was not an after-thought. He's the Word God has always spoken and therefore he precedes all created things. More than that, he is the Word through which all created things were made.

So Jesus is the primary Word in two senses: he is both *before* all and *above* all.

Over forty years ago, the Dogs Trust created the famous slogan 'A dog is for life, not just for Christmas' as a warning against giving a puppy as a present to those who were unable or unwilling to look after it for its lifetime.

In a much richer and deeper way, we could say the same about Jesus. Jesus is for life, not just for Christmas. He's not just the reason for the season; he's the meaning of everything. He's not just the point of Christmas; he's the purpose of life.



## Reflection

Do you feel purposeless or lost this Christmas? Fix your eyes on Jesus, the goal of creation. All of history is moving towards him, and you can be part of that movement. In doing so, you will find meaning and purpose – real meaning and eternal purpose.

God's glory is the sum of all his perfections. His glory is his perfect love, perfect power, perfect justice, perfect goodness, perfect patience, perfect wisdom and so on. Imagine all the perfections of God's character brought together and put on display.

But, of course, there's no end to God's perfections. God's love is boundless, his power is almighty and his understanding is unlimited. There isn't a gallery or theatre big enough to showcase God's perfections. The Bible says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps. 19:1), but it also says, 'The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you' (1 Kgs. 8:27).

And yet, according to Hebrews, the perfections of God's glory are perfectly displayed in Jesus.

The glory of God is often associated with the imagery of light. If you heat up a filament, then it produces light. It's as if the glorious perfections of God are so concentrated, they begin to produce light. As a result, the glory flows from God in the same way light radiates from the sun. And verse 3 says that radiance is Jesus. All the glory of God is packed into the person of Jesus.

Whenever there's a solar eclipse, we are warned not to look directly at the sun. We're supposed to make a box with a pinhole that projects an image of the sun onto a screen. We might say the same about God. Don't look at God with the naked eye or you'll be blinded by the brightness of his glory. Don't go too close or you'll be consumed by the intensity of his holiness (Ex. 33:20).

But we *can* see Jesus. Jesus displays the image of God in a form we can see. 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us', says John 1:14, 'we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son'.

John Calvin echoes this when he writes, 'The radiance in the substance of God is so mighty that it hurts our eyes until it shines on



us in Christ'.<sup>4</sup> Without Christ, the glory of God makes us shrink back from God, but when we look at God's glory *in Christ*, we are drawn to his beauty and love.

The writer of Hebrews continues, 'He is the exact representation of his being' (v. 3). In doing so, he uses the language of ancient blacksmithing. When you minted coins in the ancient world, you had a die with an image cast into it. You took a disc of metal, placed the die over it and whacked it with a hammer. The image of the die would be pressed into the metal to create an exact copy on the coin.

Jesus is an exact representation of God, minted in human form. Except, Jesus is not replicating a *picture* of God, he replicates the very *being* of God. Indeed, the one he replicates is invisible. In Jesus, then, the spiritual being of the invisible God takes on human flesh. God becomes visible in the life and person of Christ.

When my wife and I go on long car journeys, we listen to an audiobook. But a novel often takes over twenty hours to read aloud, so we usually go for the shorter, abridged version. I once pitched the creation of some abridged Christian classics to a publisher, but they said that people don't like abridgements because they're never sure that they're getting the real thing. It's like watching a movie with someone who's read the book: they always go on about how different it was from the original.

It's all well and good saying that Jesus reveals God, but what if he's the abridged version? What if he's missing something out? Many people assume that Jesus is the gentle version of God, but the 'real' God is harsh and distant. So they doubt whether the Father really loves them, takes pleasure in them or welcomes them. But the writer of Hebrews is setting out in clearest possible terms that Jesus is the unabridged version of God. Nothing is left out. He is 'the *exact* representation of his being' (v. 3).



Think of the stories of Jesus in the Gospels as a revelation of God's character. Let's relate to God like the children whom Jesus refused to send away, or like the crowds upon which he had compassion, or like Peter whom he welcomed back after his denials.



## Reflection

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Do you feel unloved? Fix your eyes on Jesus, the exact representation of God's being. Hear in Jesus' words God's welcome; see in Jesus' actions God's love.

*Do you feel fragile?* Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by life, and you're powerless to change it. However hard you work, you can never get on top of your to-do list. However much you do for others, you can never quite sort out their problems. It feels like you're running to stand still or as if you can't hold everything together.

But there is someone who can. We've already seen that the Son is the 'heir of all things' (v. 2). Now we discover that he's 'sustaining all things' (v. 3). The Son's work of creation didn't stop when the world was made. Creation is a dynamic, on-going act of love. Jesus continues to hold everything together.

If the Son were to stop sustaining all things, then the world would disintegrate into a chaotic mush of sub-atomic particles. The structure of atoms is held together by his word. The worldwide ecosystems that support life are maintained by his word. If the Son were to stop his sustaining work, then the chair on which you sit would dissolve into a cloud of chaotic energy. The gravitational forces holding the universe together would collapse into an enormous black hole in an accelerated act of entropy.

When the Son became human, he didn't stop being God. His divine nature wasn't limited when he took on human flesh at the incarnation. The Son's divinity was and is active outside his human nature. He was and is both truly human and truly God.

When Paul says in Philippians 2:7 that Jesus emptied himself or made himself nothing, he meant that Jesus lost his divine privileges. But Jesus didn't stop being God. He didn't take off his divinity and put on humanity instead. Not only would that imply that he wasn't truly God when he was on earth, it would also imply that he's not truly human now. If the only way that Jesus could become truly human was to stop being truly divine, then the



only way he could be exalted again as God would be by taking off his humanity.

Instead, Jesus emptied himself, not by subtracting something from who he is, but by *adding* something – humanity with all the potential vulnerability and pain that can bring.

So the Son became, and continues to be, both truly God and truly human. And that means the Son continued to fulfil his divine work; he continued to sustain all things by his powerful word.

The baby in the manger held the atoms of the manger in place by his mighty word. As a human being, he was genuinely weak and vulnerable, but as the divine Lord, he moved the stars across the sky, including the star that signalled his birth. This is the Son's power.

But this truth also reveals his love. When the soldiers spat on him, when their whips bit into him, when they drove the nails through his wrists, his divine power was giving them breath.

Today Jesus is still the powerful Word who sustains all things. Just as he once brought order from chaos, fullness from emptiness and light from darkness, so he continues to sustain order against chaos, fullness against emptiness, and light against darkness.

And Jesus sustains his people. Jesus speaks to you through his word to order your chaos, fill your emptiness and lighten your darkness.



## Reflection

*Do you feel fragile?* Then fix your eyes on Jesus, the one who sustains all things by his powerful word. Let his powerful word sustain you. Hear him speak to you – right now – through the words of Scripture. Let him wrap his arms around you as you hear his words of love. This Christmas, relax into his embrace as you hear words of power.

In Jesus we have a final word because in Jesus we have a finished work: 'After he had provided purification for sin' (v. 3). Notice that the phrase is in the past tense. The work of purification is done and dusted. There is nothing more to add. Every priest in the Old Testament had to offer sacrifices day after day, but Jesus 'offered for all time one sacrifice for sins', and afterwards 'sat down at the right hand of God' (10:12).

This means we've reached the 'last days' of history (1:2). There's no next stage in the story of salvation other than for Jesus to return to wrap up history. We're in the final era. It's a fact we still mark today by dating our years from the first Christmas. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of '*these* last days' to make it clear that we're not talking about some point in the future, but the very age that we live in. Two thousand years might seem like a long time, but it's the final chapter before the end of the story. The only reason for delay is to give people a chance to turn in faith to Christ before time is up.

Verse 3 literally reads, 'Having made purification ... he sat down.' The main verb in the phrase is not 'providing' or 'purifying', but 'sat'. That's the big idea. The key action is not purifying, but sitting. The key place is not earth, but heaven. This is one of the special contributions that the letter of Hebrews makes to our knowledge of salvation: *the saving work of Christ takes place in heaven*.

There's not much to see on earth. The early Christians left behind all the visual props of Judaism. They had no priest, no temple sacrifice and no sanctuary. In fact, their religion was so stripped back that their neighbours assumed they were atheists.

Perhaps that's how you feel when you meet with your church. Your building and service may not look impressive – not compared with the entertainment offered by the world.



But the message of Hebrews is this: our priest and our sanctuary is in heaven. The action that counts is not what we see on earth, but what is taking place in heaven right now. Even our sacrifice, which was offered once for all on earth, is presented to God in heaven (9:24).

Think about the Old Testament sacrificial system. The sacrifices took place on a bronze altar outside the entrance to the tabernacle (Ex. 40:6–8, 29). On the Day of Atonement, the sacrifice was made outside the tabernacle and then the blood was carried into the tabernacle by the High Priest and sprinkled on the atonement cover (Lev. 16:15). That was the moment when purification took place.

In the same way, Jesus offered himself on earth to make atonement for sin and then entered heaven to be our atonement.

Again, once a year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place through the shedding of blood. As he did so, he wore a breastplate inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (Ex. 28:15–21). There was a moment every year when the names of God's people appeared in God's presence.

In the same way, Jesus carries the names of God's people with him into heaven. The names of God's people appear in God's presence inscribed on the hands and heart of Jesus. And this is not just one moment in a year, this is forever. Jesus is both the sustaining power of creation and the sustaining presence of the church.

But just as the final word speaks with on-going power, so his finished work also has on-going power. Two thousand years ago, the disciples saw Jesus ascend into the sky. As he passed through the clouds, he entered another dimension. He entered heaven to appear before the Father. And as he did so, he bore your name. In that moment your name appeared in heaven, and it has never left and it will never leave.



## Reflection

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Do you feel guilty or dirty? Then fix your eyes on Jesus. See him sitting at God's right hand for his work of purification is complete. Come to him in faith, and you can be sure that the price of your sin has been paid in full. The specific sins that haunt your memory are done and dusted. Let Jesus cleanse your conscience and purify your soul.