

A DESIRE FOR GOD

Hebrews 10

Procrastination is a side effect of the way we value things; it frames task completion as a product of motivation, rather than ability. We can see that very much in the case of getting homework done. It can take a lot of motivation to do something that we hate doing and may not do well. But it is more than that. We can be really good at something, whether it's cooking a gourmet meal or writing a story, but if we don't possess the motivation, or sense of importance, to complete the task, it'll likely be put off.

Writer Robert Hanks calls it “a Failure of appetites.” The source of this “appetite” can be a bit tricky. But one could argue that, like our (real) appetite for food, it's something that's closely intertwined with our daily lives, our culture and our sense of who we are. So how do you increase that “appetite”?

A powerful way is to connect the project to your self-concept. That can happen when you “identify sufficiently with your future self.” Connecting the project to more immediate sources of value, such as life goals or core values, can fill the deficit in subjective value that underlies procrastination. For instance it can be a lot harder to get up and go to class than to go to work. Missing classes may or may not affect our grades. But missing work can mean less in the paycheck. People with serious illnesses see the future in a different way than the rest of us. They have more motivation to appreciate little joys.

But what about an “appetite” for God? There is less and less motivation for people to go to church, not only because you don't have family or friends going or that there are other things to do on a Sunday morning or Saturday afternoon, but because it seems to fit less in our future goals. People die, but don't do it in front of our faces like they did when we didn't have modern medicine or when your country was the center of a war or famine or epidemic. We go on in our lives not having to think about it, but instead live for other things like good jobs, healthy families, and our recreation.

The writer of Hebrews was living in a world where the “appetite” for God was affected not by distractions, but by persecution. Hebrews, as its name implies, was written to Jews, specifically Jewish Christians. What they were facing was persecution as Christians. In the Roman Empire Judaism was a legal religion. The first Christians, like Jesus' disciples, were Jews. So Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism and had legal status. But as it gained more and more Gentile members, it was seen as a separate religion, an illegal religion. There was great temptation among Jewish Christians to fall back into Judaism to avoid persecution. To warn them the author of Hebrews writes:

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised. For, “In just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.” And, “But My righteous one will live by faith. And I

take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.” But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

The first quote is from Isaiah 26. The second is from Habakkuk 2. It is more familiar in the way Paul quotes it in Romans 1—“The just shall live by faith.” We may recognize those words as what triggered the Reformation that Martin Luther started. We live, not because of doing many good works, but by faith in what God has done for us in Jesus. To emphasize that Luther translated Romans 1—“The just shall live by faith alone.”

It can be easy to see that as the cheap way to get in. Just believe, and you will be saved. Do whatever you want; as long as you believe it will turn out.

But Luther’s problem wasn’t that he could not see that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins. The problem for him was, “If I am forgiven, how can I go on sinning?” The problem wasn’t becoming a Christian, but staying one.

For Luther that dilemma was caused not by not having an “appetite” for God, but ‘eating the wrong food’—thinking that God holds on to us only because we are good enough. For the people in the book of Hebrews the problem was seeing the present persecution more readily than the eternal life we have in Christ. But for us so often the problem is not seeming to have any “appetite” for God. How can we have an “appetite” when we are so stuffed with other things? Listen to what Hebrews says:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The first thing Hebrews points to is our Savior, Christ Jesus. The description Hebrews gives of Jesus as our High Priest is not just a story; it is exactly what happened. In the Old Testament the blood from the animal sacrifice was poured by the priest over the Ark of the Covenant in which were placed the Ten Commandments. God could look and see that the people had not kept the commandments, their covenant with Him. But the blood covered the Ark so that God did not see the sin. That was just symbolic of what Jesus did as both High Priest and sacrifice as He shed His blood on the cross, which covers us so that instead of God seeing our sin, He sees Jesus’ sacrifice for us. When we focus on Jesus, we realize how great He can be in our lives. He gives us the appetite to want to center our lives on our eternal life with God and His people, then on our present desires.

The next thing Hebrews show is how Jesus can be more and more real to our lives— “Spurring one another on toward love and good deeds,” “not giving up meeting together,” and “encouraging one another”— that describes what we are doing now and anytime we get together with others who share our faith in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews says about Jesus that He “made perfect those being made holy.” How can someone be made perfect, then have to be made “holy?” Jesus cried out in His dying breath from the cross, “It is finished,” which can also be translated, “It is perfect.” By His sacrifice Jesus covered all our sins. Though we still sin, that sin is forgiven by Jesus’ blood. The “being made holy” refers now to how we grow in our relationship with God. “Holy” doesn’t just mean “without sin.” It means “set apart.” The commands God gives us to follow His ways don’t keep us perfect. We still sin. Our forgiveness depends solely on what Jesus did for us on the cross. That is what got Luther all messed up. But as forgiven people we can now act as people “set apart,” as people of God. The salvation we have in Jesus moves, gives us “the appetite to not sit on our faith, but to live it out.

If someone saved your life, you would be so grateful to that person. But that gratefulness can wear out if you don’t see that person anymore. Being with God’s people, helps us to day after day see Jesus and what He has done for us. Then we have the “appetite,” the desire for Him.