

Good morning everyone! For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mark Peters and I've been on sabbatical for the last four months.

In describing my sabbatical, I would say that it was a season of “**firsts**”—there were many things that my family and I experienced for the first time. In May, I painted the exterior of our house for the first time—it sure gave me a great appreciation for people like Tim who paint full-time. Standing on a ladder, up nearly 3 stories, and then leaning as far as I could—my prayer life grew in leaps and bounds. I think I aged 2 years in under than 2 weeks.

In July, we embarked on another “**first**”—we took a trip to our country's East Coast, but first we made a brief stop in Quebec. We walked the streets of Old Quebec City, enjoyed the food, and marvelled at the beautiful architecture.

From there we flew to Halifax and began to explore Nova Scotia.

- we visited Peggy's Cove;
- we went to Cape Breton Island and drove the Cabot Trail;
- we stopped in New Brunswick to see the Bay of Fundy and Hopewell Rocks;
- we explored Prince Edward Island and saw the stunning red sand near Cavendish. We live in a beautiful land, with a rich heritage—our trip to the East Coast awakened a deeper sense of love for this country.

In August we experienced another “**first**,” we left Vancouver by plane, flying over the Pacific, and landed in Maui. On one of the days we went to see the Haleakala Crater—it sits 10,000ft above the ocean and boasts one of the most beautiful sights on the entire island.

Every day we were at the beach—sitting, swimming, snorkelling, or surfing. If North Shore Alliance ever decides to plant another church, I'm going to recommend the location of Maui, and I'd be quite happy to go as the church planting pastor.

With every “**first**,” I was so aware that what I was experiencing was pure gift, and not just the places I visited, but the gift of time spent with family. Long walks with my wife, connecting with my kids, seeing friends and extended family—all of these things contributed to the rest and renewal I experienced. I am so grateful for the time I was given, and grateful to the staff and elders who filled my role while I was gone.

There is one other “**first**” I want to tell you about, and this first is the impetus behind the sermon I'm going to preach this morning. This sabbatical marked the first time in my adult life that I haven't been engaged in full-time work or school. You may remember that one of my plans for sabbatical was to set aside time for theological study, reflection, and writing. My study was in the area of the Incarnation and the Trinity, and while I feel I barely scratched the surface of these subjects, the Lord met me personally and powerfully.

Next Sunday we are going to be embarking on a Fall preaching series through the book of Exodus, but this morning I'm going to share some of my sabbatical reflections with you, grounding them in a series of verses found in the letter to the Hebrews.

illus: As I begin, let me tell you a story. For five days this Summer, my family was joined by my two brothers, their wives, their kids, and my Dad—we camped together in the Okanagan.

As we sat by the beach one day, my brother Chris began to talk. He had just come off hip surgery three weeks earlier and he was anticipating going back to work. When I asked how things were going at work, he just sighed—you know the kind; it was a mixture of frustration and despair.

To make a complex situation very simple, his company was an organizational mess. Lines of authority were unclear, a few of the managers weren't doing their job, people were jockeying for position and power, projects were ill-defined and poorly executed, there was a complete lack of accountability, and on the list went.

My brother has a sharp mind for leadership and he began to lay out a series of actions that he felt could bring clarity and change to the dysfunction. When he finished sharing his suggestions, I asked him the following question: *“If your leadership core were presented with solutions, to what they all agree are real problems, do they have enough health to act on them?”*

Chris didn't hesitate—*“I don't think they would or even could”*. Less than a week later he returned to work and was promptly told that the CEO had been fired, the shop my brother ran was being shut down, and his entire team would be terminated. Chris called me later that day to tell me the news and to ask me to pray.

If you were in my shoes, what would you have said? What did I say? I'll tell you how responded at the end of the sermon, but first we're going to play a little word association—when you hear the word **“confidence,”** what comes to mind? What sorts of things require **confidence?**

You're probably wondering where I'm going with all of this—I promise, I am leading you somewhere. At this time I want to invite you to open your Bible or your Bible App and turn with me to the Book of Hebrews—that's page _____ in the Blue Bibles.

I discovered this Summer that many of the authors who write on the Incarnation and Trinity refer to Hebrews again and again. Perhaps like some of you, I had read the letter to the Hebrews before, but never really studied it, and never heard it preached through. When you read the same Scripture over and over again, you begin to notice things—themes, patterns, repetition. I discovered that the word **“confidence”** is used seven times in this letter, and this notion is crucial given the recipients' circumstances.

The recipients of this letter are not named, beyond the generic title of “Hebrews”—most scholars believe it was written to ethnic Jews, living in Rome, who had made a decision to follow Jesus. But in following Jesus, they had experienced great hardship. There is historical evidence outside the Bible that confirms what Hebrews describes, many Christians were imprisoned or expelled from Rome—their property was seized, they lost everything because of their association with Jesus.

These “Hebrews” were understandably weary, afraid, and uncertain about their future. Some of these Christians considered abandoning their faith in Jesus. Their property was at stake, their lives were at stake—was following Jesus worth it? If we were going to lose our home, our job, and be thrown out of this city, would we remain true to Jesus? How do we live with **confidence** in the midst of difficulty? Let's find out.

1. Hebrews 3:1, 6 says, “*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... Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.*”

Remember who you are brothers and sisters—you’ve been called by God, set apart for Him. **Remember** that this world in its present state, and your circumstances, will not last forever—an eternity free from strife awaits. And **remember** who is leading you—the **Lord Jesus Christ**. He is our **Apostle**—sent of God, sent for us, He’s out in front of us leading the way. Jesus is our **Apostle** and our **High Priest**: He is both God come near, and fully Human—He stands with us and for us, presenting our needs to God our Father. **Remember** these things and hold on to your **confidence**—you are not alone.

2. Hebrews 4:14-16 says, “*14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. 16 Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*”

Jesus, the One in whom we trust, is the Son of God—He has ascended into heaven and lives in the closest possible communion with the Father and the Spirit. This Jesus, our great High Priest, knows all about human frailty—He experienced fear, doubt, pain, and temptation firsthand. And because He has not shed His humanity, He continues to represent us, bringing our needs to the Father.

The “throne of grace” speaks of God’s being, for the One who sits on this throne is Himself the God of Grace, Mercy, and Love. In the Old Testament, only the high priest was invited to enter the manifest presence of God—and that once a year—but with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, we have been granted unlimited access to God.

The Greek word for “**confidence**” was a term expressing the “free speech” enjoyed by citizens in the public forum, but when adopted by the author of Hebrews, it expresses the “free speech” we enjoy with God. When we approach God in prayer, we approach the One who loves us—not because He must, but because He is willing; not because we are deserving, but simply because He is Love. And when we come to the Triune God of Grace, we come as we are, not as we wish we were.

illus: When I was young and my parents invited guests over for dinner, we knew that we were expected to present well. Our hair was combed, dirt was scrubbed from our faces, ripped jeans and sweaty t-shirts were replaced by something clean and fresh smelling—I suspect our guests appreciated the efforts.

But when we come to God, no such action is required. We don’t need to clean ourselves up; we are already considered “presentable” because we are united to Jesus—we’ve already been cleansed and clothed in His righteousness. We don’t need to coax God into being gracious; by nature He is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Because of who God is, we can approach Him with **confidence** in our time of need.

3. Hebrews 10:19-23, “**19** Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have **confidence** to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, **20** by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** 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. **23** Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

Once again we are reminded to **remember** who Jesus is and what He has done on our behalf. If I can put it like this, don’t try to work up a **confidence** in your standing before God, instead, place your confidence in Jesus’ standing before God—place your **confidence** in what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Atonement has been made and sin has been paid for. Where Jesus stands, we stand with Him; what Jesus has gained, He has gained for us. *Dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless [we] stand before the throne.*¹

4. Hebrews 10:32-35 says, “**32** Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. **33** Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. **34** You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. **35** So do not throw away your **confidence**; it will be richly rewarded.”

Life can be difficult, yes. Pain and sorrow may abound it’s true, but remember Jesus and take heart. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart—Jesus has overcome the world. Vs. 37 goes on to say, “*In just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.*”

The author now pleads with his people—don’t throw away your **confidence** in Jesus; don’t be short-sighted. Your pain is for a moment, but life with Jesus is forever—think about today in light of eternity. Jesus remains trustworthy and true—there is no other rock upon which to base our lives; all other ground is sinking sand.²

5. Hebrews 11:1-2, 6, “*Now faith is **confidence** in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*”

Faith, by its very nature, has a forward looking quality to it; faith celebrates in the *present* the coming reality of future blessings. And what makes this faith reasonable is that it’s grounded in God’s being and action—let me explain.

illus: if I were to ask you how you know that your parent, or grandparent, or spouse, or friend loves you, you would not point to

¹ Edward Mote, lyric taken from *On Christ The Solid Rock I Stand*.

² Ibid.

scientific data. You would point to specific experiences of the other person that demonstrated love.

Faith is grounded upon objective truth and subjective reality. The biblical revelation of God gives us reason for **confidence**—He has revealed Himself as good, merciful, loving, wise, and strong. And our personal encounters with God further strengthen this **confidence**—God demonstrates His faithfulness which gives us courage and **confidence** to trust Him in difficulty, to trust Him for a future that is beyond our grasp.

6. In the concluding chapter of **Hebrews**, chapter **13:6**, we read the following: “*So we say with **confidence**, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’*”

Application: In the final ten minutes, I want to share with you how these words from Hebrews intersected my life during my sabbatical.

It’s difficult to live life in the absence of **confidence**—without **confidence** it’s difficult to try something new, to make significant decisions, to commit to a relationship, to a university program, or a job. For this reason, parents, grandparents, coaches, and employers are constantly trying install **confidence** in the people around them.

We’ve all said the following to someone, even if that someone is ourselves: *everything’s going to be just fine, you can do this, you’re ready for this, you’ve done this before, you’re going to do well. You don’t have to be the best just do you best. You’re smart, strong, likeable, talented, musical, athletic*—we fill in the appropriate adjective based on the situation being entered. This kind of thinking

encourages an inward turn—we turn within hoping to find an inner strength, expertise, or courage to enter a situation that is beyond us.

The letter to the Hebrews prescribes a very different turn. Instead of an inward turn, we are invited to turn to Jesus. Hebrews 3:1 says, “*fix your thoughts on Jesus...our Apostle and High Priest;*” Hebrews 12:2 says, “*fix your eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfector of your faith*”.

illus: When I left on my sabbatical, everything was planned out—significant time spent with family, in theological reflection, and in self-reflection. Self-reflection is a regular part of my life with God—in prayer, through Bible reading, and journalling I regularly invite the Spirit to help me look within. I look to see what still needs to be transformed, strengthened, or submitted to Jesus.

Like some of you, I can be really hard on myself, and self reflection can lead to discouragement and redoubling my efforts—*I’m not doing enough, I’m not gifted enough, or smart enough*. Early on in my sabbatical, I began to make this inward turn, and I distinctly heard Jesus say to me, “*Mark, stop looking within, look at Me.*” A week or so later, I was listening to a lecture in which the teacher said, “*For every time you look at yourself, or your circumstances, you need to look to Christ 10 times.*” These words shaped my time away.

For nearly four months now I have been gazing at Christ, and not surprisingly, the more I have looked to Him, the less I have lived with discouragement or worry. Instead of a self-confidence, what has been growing in me is a Christ-confidence; I’ve been able to rest in His exceeding goodness, faithfulness, mercy, love, power, and wisdom.

I've been living in the confidence that Jesus is out in front of me and my family, He's out in front of our Church—He knows the future, He's sovereign over all the things I cannot control. I've been living in the confidence that Jesus has gone before us—He has passed through the heavens, bearing our humanity—and He now sits at the right hand of the Father. Even now He is praying God's best for us. And this confidence in Him is leading me to peace—I don't need to strive or control when I know that God is with me and for me.

The message of Hebrews has been life-giving to me and I trust it will be for you—don't look within, look to Christ.

Conclusion: As I conclude this morning, I want to return to the conversation I had with my brother. That night on the phone I did more listening than talking, but a few days later I sent him an email and this is what I said:

Hi Chris,

I wanted to encourage you with something that God has been speaking to me about this Summer. Lately I've been studying the letter to the Hebrews and throughout the 13 chapters the word "**confidence**" keeps popping up—I believe this is a word the Lord wants you to hear.

Hebrews 11:1-2 says, "*Now faith is **confidence** in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for*". These "ancients" are the people of faith that the O.T speaks about: Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and on the list goes. These faith-filled people didn't always have an

easy life—sometimes they didn't know what God was doing, where He was leading them, or when He would fulfill His promises.

Hebrews 11 is a record of those who believed without seeing and acted on God's promises long before they were fulfilled. Noah had the faith to build a boat in the middle of a desert because he was confident in what God had foretold; Sarah believed God for a pregnancy at the age of 90. At times faith is entirely unreasonable; He invites us to trust Him for the incredible—for things that actually require His Powerful Presence to bring about. I am praying this **confidence** for you, Jen, Julia, and Eli.

Clearly the "**confidence**" spelled out in Hebrews is of a different sort than the kind we speak of in our own culture. We speak of self-confidence—a confidence in our own gifts, abilities, or expertise, a confidence in our ability to control our circumstances and shape our destiny. The ancient men and women of faith did not place their confidence in such things—self-confidence tends to shatter when we experience difficulty, set-backs, and loss.

Hebrews 4:14-16 say, "**14** Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. **16** Let us then approach God's throne of grace with **confidence**, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Our confidence is in Christ, our Faithful and Merciful High Priest. Jesus is standing in for us, He is interceding for us, and because Jesus

has full access to the Father—and we with Him—God's throne is a place of mercy and grace; we can **confidently** ask for the help we need. I am praying that you, Jen, Julia, and Eli will live with this confidence.

Hebrews 13:6 says, "we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid." I'm proud of you Chris and will stand with you in prayer throughout this season of the unknown. Christ is with you and for you—may this give you **confidence** and courage in the days ahead.

Love, Mark.

My dear people, if you are searching for stable ground, for a confidence to move forward in life, I plead with you, do not turn within, look to Christ, consider Christ, trust Christ—all other ground is sinking sand.

Pray

Worship

Benediction