

GOD WITH US

Part 11: LATER LETTERS

Message 5 – Hebrews The Supremacy of Christ Hebrews 1-4

Introduction

Hebrews is one of the deepest and most challenging books in the New Testament. It contains so much theology that is founded upon a profound understanding of the Old Testament religious system, and how that system prefigured the person and work of Christ, our great High Priest and atoning sacrifice. The book was written to Jewish Christians who were considering abandoning their faith in Jesus because of severe persecution, probably around the time of Nero's persecution of Christians. There has never been a consensus among scholars on the question of authorship. Suggestions have ranged from: Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Silas and a host of others. The author was in prison (13:18,19,23) and was writing to encourage these Jewish-Christians, probably scattered throughout the Roman empire, not to abandon their faith in Jesus; rather, to endure with persevering faith, even as their ancestors had modeled strong faith in past history.

While the author remains a mystery, the condition of the recipients is not hard to detect. We can get a feel for the spiritual condition of the audience by noting the many phrases the writer used as he exhorted them: *"neglecting so great a salvation"* (2:3), *"falling away from the living God"* (3:12), *"heart hardened by sin"* (3:13), *"coming short of God's rest"* (4:1), *"dull of hearing"* (5:11), *"needing milk, not solid food"* (5:12), *"wavering"* (10:23), *"forsaking the assembling together"* (10:25), *"throwing away confidence"* (10:35), *"growing weary, losing heart"* (12:3). Pressure from Rome was making it increasingly difficult to be a Christian and, as a result, some were fleeing for safety back into the "legal" religion they had come out of – Judaism.

The primary argument of the book is that Jesus Christ is superior to anyone or anything that they might turn back to – superior to angels, to Moses, to the O.T. priests, to prophets – and the New covenant of atonement and forgiveness is superior to the O.T. covenant

containing laws, rituals and symbols that pointed to the New Covenant. The word “better” occurs 13 times in the book. To put the theme in a phrase: The superiority of Christ calls for persevering faith. The great ‘hall of fame of faith’ (ch.11) is included to show what it looks like to keep our hope fixed on the promises of God in the troubles and trials of this life.

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I. The Superior Apostle of our Confession: 1:1 – 4:13

In the first section of this letter the author argues that Jesus is a superior apostle (“messenger”) of divine revelation – superior to other messengers such as prophets, angels and Moses. The key verse is 3:1 where Jesus is called the “apostle” of our confession. Jesus came from God the Father with the ultimate, final message concerning salvation, thus, we must continue to heed His words.

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (3:1).

A. Christ is Superior to the O.T. Prophets: 1:1-3

There is no formal introduction to this letter. Instead, the author dives directly into an explanation of the superiority of Christ. Here, he argues that Christ is God’s final “word” to humanity, surpassing in greatness all the many ways that God spoke in times past through the O.T. prophets.

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many

times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom also He made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:1-3).

"In these last days He has spoken to us by His Son . . .". Jesus is the final, climactic revelation of God to humanity. And who is Jesus? He is *heir of all things, creator of the universe, the radiance (reflection) of God glory, the exact replica of His divine being, the sustainer of the created order, the One Who purifies us of sins, the One now seated at the Father's right hand.* This passage, along with John 1 and Colossians 1, constitutes one of the loftiest and most important descriptions of the person of Christ. It is impossible to read this passage and miss the fact that Jesus is God.

The implication of this section is that the audience must continue to listen to Jesus and heed His words, rather than turning away from him back to the old, lesser forms of divine revelation.

What 'voices' capture your attention? If Jesus is God's final "word" to humanity, giving us a more complete picture of God than any other revelation, should not His voice capture our attention? Notice the admonition in 2:1 – "We must pay more careful attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." What can you do to pay more careful attention to the word that God the Father has given to us in God the Son?

B. Christ is Superior to Angels: 1:4 – 2:18

While Jewish people in that day did not worship angels, they certainly held them in very high esteem as divine servants and messengers. It was believed that angels gave the laws of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Heb. 2:2; also Gal.3:19; Acts 7:38,53; Deut.33:2). Yet, if Jesus is superior to angels, then it follows that His message should be given our highest attention. Why run back to the O.T. system, mediated by angels, when we have the N.T. system, mediated by Jesus, Who is God? A series of O.T. quotes are brought forth as referring to Jesus, the Son of God, all showing that He is both divine and far superior to angels.

Psalm 2:7 *"For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become Your Father'?"*

2Samuel 7:14 – ***“I will be His Father and He will be My Son.”***

Psalms 45:6,7 – ***“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has set You above your companions by anointing You with the oil of joy.”***

Psalms 102:25-27 – ***“In the beginning, Lord, You laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But You remain the same, and your years will never end.”***

Psalms 110:1 – ***“Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet”?***

*Note above how in Psalm 45 and Psalm 102 Jesus is directly referred to as “God” and as “Lord.” Clear references to His deity.

- **Pay closer attention to Him!** The author now comes to the first of several serious *warning passages*. Because of who Jesus is, we must continue to listen to Him and not drift away.

“We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (2:1-4).

The Greek phrase “*drift away*” was used of a careless slipping away; eg. of snow slipping off a roof; of food slipping down the windpipe. The implication is that by *careless neglect* of the revelation we have been given in Christ we might gradually drift away from Him. If God’s former revelation, mediated through angels that were inferior to Christ, proved to be binding upon the nation of Israel (the Mosaic Law given at Mt. Sinai), then how much more shall this final word, spoken through God’s own Son, be binding on all who have heard it and responded to it.

It is important to always be strengthening our relationship with Jesus by means of daily time with Him. Take some time to evaluate your own relationship with Christ. Are you spending time with Him regularly? What can you do to strengthen your walk with Jesus? Are you drifting away from Him?

- Why Jesus had to become human. This section is an important digression within the main argument (that Jesus is superior to angels.) There were some who argued that Jesus' humanity made Him 'less than' angels; that His form of suffering and death portrayed humiliation by God rather than exaltation from God. The author explains why it was necessary for Jesus to "lower Himself" to live and die as a human being. Psalm 8 originally was a song celebrating the dignity of human beings ("man"). This author used it to refer to the ultimate man, Jesus, who for "*a little while was made lower than the angels*" (v.9) so that He could redeem us.

"What is man, that You think of him? Or a son of man, that You are concerned about him? You have made him for a little while lower than angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor; You have put everything in subjection under his feet" (Hebrews 2:6-8 in citation of Psalm 8).

No, in Jesus we do not *yet* see everything put in subjection under His feet because He is presently seated at the right hand of the Father "*waiting until His enemies are made a footstool for His feet*" (Hebrews 10:13). Why, then, did He leave His heavenly position of authority and dignity, humble Himself, and come into our world to suffer and die? The answer follows:

"But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of His suffering death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the originator of their salvation through sufferings" (2:9,10).

Jesus had to suffer death for our sakes. He had to go through sufferings in order to become the originator of our salvation. In short, He had to become a member of the human race in order to redeem the human race. He had to become "our brother."

“For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for this reason, He is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters . . .” (2:11).

In the Old Testament there is this concept of the “kinsman redeemer.” We see it at play in the book of Ruth. If an Israelite fell into hardship, it was the responsibility of the family members (kinsmen) to come along and lift that person out of poverty or hardship. The responsibility fell to the nearest relative, the “kinsman redeemer” (the redeemer from the family). Thus, to be our true redeemer, Jesus had to become “our brother,” or, a “member of our human family.”

The next paragraph is key as the author gives several reasons why Jesus had to take on real flesh and blood (i.e., become a member of the human race).

“Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, so that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For clearly, He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brothers so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (2:14-18).

- He had to share in flesh and blood to die a real human death.
- He had to die to break the power of the evil one over death.
- He had to be made like us so that He could become a merciful and faithful High Priest for us – mediate between God and humanity.
- He had to die to make propitiation (a satisfactory sacrifice) for sin.
- He had to be tempted so that He could sympathize with us and come to our aid when we are tempted.

There is so much here to celebrate, not the least of which is the fact that Jesus is our sympathetic High Priest Who has experienced temptation. We can find much comfort in the fact that Jesus does not condemn us when we are tempted; He sympathizes with us because He knows what temptation feels like. We do not have a harsh, unbending judge for a God; we have a merciful and faithful High Priest we can run to in times of testing.

C. Christ is Superior to Moses: 3:1 – 4:13

The writer has been defending the superiority of Christ as compared to O.T. prophets and to angels. Now the comparison turns to the most revered individual in the Old Testament, Moses, the very one through whom the Laws of God were given to the people of Israel. Moses was a highly revered “apostle” (messenger) of God’s truth to humanity. Jesus, however, surpasses Moses in greatness.

In the midst of this comparison between Jesus and Moses, the author will make a comparison between ancient Israel (who failed to heed God’s Word through Moses, thus failed to enter the “rest” of the Promised Land) and the current audience (who were in danger of failing to heed God’s Word through Jesus, thus failing to enter the “rest” of relationship with Him and a place in the promised land of eternity).

The opening verse of this section seems to be a fitting “key verse” for the entire book of Hebrews. The writer in calling people to “consider” (ponder deeply) Jesus Who is the superior “apostle” (messenger) and “high priest” (mediator) of the covenant between God and humanity.

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession: Jesus” (3:1).

- Jesus and Moses – the two house-builders. The comparison now turns to Jesus and Moses.

“He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold firmly to our confidence and the boast of our hope” (3:2-6).

In Matthew 12 Jesus said three times that “*something greater is here,*” referring to Himself – something greater than the temple, greater than Jonah the prophet, greater than king Solomon. Similarly, in Hebrews 3, the author is arguing that *someone greater is here* – greater than even Moses.

Moses is likened to the builder of a house; while Jesus is likened to the house itself (His body, the church on earth, being the “house” that we as believers belong to). Moses served God faithfully to help build the “house of Israel.” Jesus served God faithfully by creating in Himself the “house of God,” the body of believers on earth, the Church.

- **Warning to the “house” of Jesus.** In ch.2 the writer slipped in a warning about drifting away from Jesus. Now we come to the second warning passage. Israel had turned away from the voice of Moses and asked to go back to Egypt (see Exodus 17:1-7). This was a grave act of rebellion that was repeated multiple times, ultimately resulting in the first generation of Israelites being judged by God so that they wandered for 40 years in the wilderness and forfeited the right to enter the Promised land (see Numbers 10-14 for that story).

The warning passage begins with an important conditional clause:

“whose house we are, IF we hold firmly to our confidence and the boast of our hope” (3:6b).

We are members of Christ’s house IF we hold firmly to our confidence and hope in Him (3:6 and similarly 3:14). There are two ways to understand this and similar “conditional clauses” regarding salvation and the “security of the believer.” **The first** is to say that we must hold fast in order to *keep* our salvation, with the corollary idea that if we do not hold fast then we *lose* our salvation. On this view, salvation is conditional, based on perseverance, and it further leads to the loss of the “security of the believer” (the once-saved, always-saved idea).

The second (and the view I take) is that this “holding firmly” is the *proof or evidence* that we are truly members of His house; that the Holy Spirit lives within us and is giving us the power to persevere in the face of trials. On this view, when someone “throws away their confidence and hope in Christ,” this is evidence that they were never truly indwelt by the Spirit; that they were never really members of His house in the first place (see Colossians 1:22,23; 1Corinthians 15:1,2; and, most clearly, 1John 2:19). This second view will be explained going forward as we encounter other difficult “warning passages” in this book.

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as on the day of trial in the wilderness, here your fathers put Me to the test, and saw My works for forty years. Therefore, I was angry with this generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they did not know My ways’; as I swore in My anger, ‘They certainly shall not enter My rest’” (3:7-11 in citation of Psalm 95:7-11).

The “congregation” of believers in the current situation was in danger of mirroring the unbelief of the ancient congregation in the wilderness, a congregation that did not know God’s ways” and, thus, failed to enter the blessing of God’s rest (the Promised land).

- **Continued warning against unbelief.** The warning passage continues and becomes even more serious. There is the danger that a person’s heart might become “*hardened by the deceitfulness (trickery) of sin.*” The antidote to that is to keep on “*encouraging one another day after day*” (3:13).

“Take care, brothers and sisters, that there will not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another every day, as long as it is still called “today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we keep the beginning of our commitment firm until the end, while it is said, ‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.’ For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose dead bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief” (3:12-19).

That last line is important. They were not able to enter (the Promised land) because of UNBELIEF. See also 4:2 where the writer notes that God’s Word did not benefit them because it was not united with faith (trust) in the hearts of the hearers. When we read the O.T. story, it appears that the Israelites were not able to enter because of DISOBEDIENCE or REBELLION. But the author’s point is a profound one (and an important aspect of N.T. theology of salvation). Belief is a root that produces the fruit of obedience. On the other hand, unbelief is a root that produces the fruit of disobedience. What we, as humans, can see in other people is the fruit of their lives (obedience or disobedience; allegiance to Christ or turning away from Him). But what God sees is the heart that is producing these actions (belief or unbelief). This is why we find such strong ties between belief and obedience in so many places in the N.T. As James puts it succinctly: *Faith without works is dead being by itself.* Or, as John puts it: *If we say we love God, we must love other people.* In the book of Hebrews, the “fruit of a believing

heart” is “persevering faith” that endures regardless of the circumstances. This is why the great faith chapter (ch.11) is so critical to the overall argument, because it gives example after example of people who held on to their hope in God (persevered) regardless of what happened to them in this life, thus giving evidence of the reality of faith in their hearts.

- Warning to be diligent to enter God’s “rest.”

In the O.T. story of Israel, they failed to enter the “rest” of the Promised land. In Hebrews, the idea of “rest” becomes a metaphor for fellowship with God.

“Therefore, we must fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also did; but the word they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united with those who listened with faith. For we who have believed enter that rest . . .” (4:1-3).

In v.3 the verb “believed” denotes a past, point-in-time action. The verb “enter” denotes a present, ongoing action. The overall idea is this: “*We who have come to that point of placing our faith in Jesus Christ are continually entering a state of rest with God.*” In this sense, the “rest” of the believer is ongoing fellowship with God in this life, leading to ultimate and final fellowship with God in the next life. It is “*the spiritual rest of the soul in fellowship with God which has come to pass through a definite personal contact with Jesus Christ*” (Thomas Hewitt, *Tyndale Commentary on Hebrews*, p.92).

A complex argument follows in which the author makes the point that the divinely offered “Sabbatical rest” was not limited to the “rest” offered to Israel in Joshua’s day (as they prepared to enter the Promised land). He points out that the concept of a divine “rest” originated before Israel in the book of Genesis, on the 7th day of creation. The idea of “rest” was later repeated as an offer to God’s people in King David’s day, hundreds of years after Israel’s occupation of the land (4:7 citing Psalm 95:7). Thus, the “rest” is a metaphor for God’s ongoing offer to humanity of fellowship with Him through the reconciling work of Jesus.

“Consequently, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore, let’s make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following the

same example of disobedience” (4:9-11).

How were these people to make sure that they were entering God’s rest? By holding on to their faith in Christ, making sure to stay in tight knit fellowship with one another (see 10:24,25) and encouraging one another to remain steadfast in faith, regardless of the circumstances.

- **The power of God’s Word.** Stepping back from the details of the author’s line of reasoning, remember the big picture: Jesus is the superior “apostle” (messenger) of God’s final “word” (revelation) to humanity. In summary, the author reminds the readers that the “word of God” (the living Word, Jesus, to be sure, but also the written Word) has the power to discern the inner thoughts and intentions of human hearts. God is not so concerned with what is going on in the external activities of our lives; rather, He is much more concerned with the *condition of our hearts.*

“For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we must answer” (4:12,13).

The overall intent of the first 4 chapters may be summarized as this:

Do not neglect God final, supreme “word” given to humanity through the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. If you do neglect this “word of God,” you will fail to enter God’s promised rest – fellowship with Him in this world, and eternal fellowship with Him in the next world.

In the next section of the book, the author will explain in detail how Jesus is our superior High Priest.

Discussion Questions

1. There is much here about the superiority of the Person of Christ. What did you learn about Him that you did not previously know?
2. How does the idea of the superiority of Christ apply to our lives (beliefs and/or actions) today?
3. There is great emphasis in Hebrews on the danger of drifting away from Christ. What have you found to be most helpful in keeping your walk with Jesus strong?
4. Talk about the comfort it is to you that Jesus is a merciful and faithful High Priest who can sympathize with everything you are going through.