

Hebrews 2

M. W. Bassford, 5-15-11

Over the past several months, in our Sunday evening lessons, we've examined the book of Deuteronomy and its many applications to our lives today. Now that we're through with Deuteronomy, the most logical place for us to head is the book of Hebrews. Just as Moses' farewell address might be called "the book of the old covenant", Hebrews is the book of the new covenant. It examines the underpinnings of our relationship with God in a way that no other book does.

Hebrews is the only book of the New Testament with a completely anonymous authorship. The author never supplies his name in the text, nor does tradition assign it to a particular figure in the early church. Many have argued that the author was Paul, and certainly the author displays at least familiarity with Paul's writings. He also knew Timothy. However, the evidence is far from conclusive. For one thing, the style of the book of Hebrews is much less emotional and more analytical than Paul's work tends to be. Also, he speaks of Timothy having been released from prison, and nowhere in Acts or Paul's writing do we see Timothy being imprisoned in the first place.

Regardless of who the author was, we are able to determine some things about him and the time in which he was writing. First, it is nearly certain that he was a Jew. The whole epistle is directed toward Jewish Christians, the author speaks of them as sharing a common heritage with him, and he displays a detailed familiarity with the Law of Moses that no Gentile would have been likely to possess. Also, because the author speaks of the sacrifices of the temple continuing up to the time in which he was writing, Hebrews must predate the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.

Even though we can narrow down the original audience and the time of authorship, Hebrews is vital to us all. It tells us of the work of Christ in a manner that no other book does. Let's look, then, at Hebrews 2.

Our Great Salvation.

Hebrews 2 begins by emphasizing the greatness of our salvation. This is apparent from the words of Hebrews 2:1-3. In Hebrews 1, the writer spent a great deal of time illustrating Christ's superiority over angels. This is important because whereas the law of Moses was delivered by angels, the law of Christ was delivered by Jesus itself. Because the messenger is superior, it logically follows that the message is superior also. Christ trumps Moses.

However, even though the law of Moses was an inferior law founded on an inferior covenant, the Hebrews writer is at pains to point out that it was not to be taken lightly. Over and over again, the Israelites of the Old Testament made this mistake, and over and over again, their wickedness aroused the wrath of God and led to dreadful punishment. There's a religious myth floating around that the Old Testament God was the God of wrath, but the New Testament God is the God of love. Hebrews, however, makes exactly the opposite point. The writer tells us that if those who violated the lesser law were punished so harshly, then if we drift away from the greater law, we can expect a greater punishment. The point is, friends, that the law of God isn't anything to fool with. Either we obey it, or else.

We need to give this level of respect to the law of Christ because of the certainty with which it was delivered. Consider, for instance, Hebrews 2:3-4. First, Christ Himself took on the burden of teaching His disciples. Then, after He ascended, His apostles picked up where He left off. However, God's chosen messengers weren't left to their own devices. Neither Jesus nor those whom He sent had to rely only on their skills of persuasion. Instead, God gave gifts of the Holy Spirit to the bearers of the gospel, so that they could work miracles that would testify to the truth of their message. This only makes sense. After all, if some man shows up in Joliet claiming to have a new revelation from God, we can safely ignore him. However, if he goes down to the cemetery and starts raising dead people, something else is going on.

This text is important because it tells us that the purpose of those miraculous spiritual gifts was to confirm the word. Jesus and His disciples didn't travel around healing the sick simply because healing the sick was good. They did it to lend credence to the word they revealed. Today, however, the revelation of the word is complete. It does not require additional miracles to confirm it, and because the time of revelation has passed, the time of miracles has passed too.

From there, the Hebrews writer shifts to a discussion of the author of salvation. We read his words on the matter in Hebrews 2:5-9. The centerpiece of this discussion is a quotation from the Old Testament, from the eighth Psalm. On its face, Psalm 8 is about both the insignificance of mankind before God, yet also the glory that God has given mankind. The Hebrews writer reveals, though, that the Psalm has a second, more deeply spiritual meaning. In it, "son of man" doesn't just refer to the children of men. It refers to the capital-S Son of Man, Jesus Himself.

From there, the text proceeds to describe three things that God has done/will do for Jesus. First, God made Him lower than the angels for a little while. Second, God crowned Him with glory and honor. Third, God put all things in subjection under His feet. As the Hebrews writer points out, this process has not yet been completed. All things are not yet in subjection beneath the feet of Jesus, nor will they be until He has defeated death at the end of time.

However, the first two things have already happened. Jesus was made lower than the angels for a little while when He became flesh and dwelt among us. Likewise, Jesus has already been crowned with glory and honor. This wasn't because He did some traditionally noble thing. Instead, Jesus was made King because He suffered and died for us. Because of His exaltation, His death can now serve as the substitute for the death that all of us have earned because of sin.

This is particularly interesting to us because of its interaction with the false doctrine of premillennialism. Among many other strange things, premillennialism teaches that Jesus does not currently reign as King. They say that God's plan was for Him to take up His reign as an earthly king 2000 years ago, and that wicked men frustrated God's plan and forced us into Plan B, the church. According to them, Jesus will only begin to reign when He returns to earth and sets Himself up as King in Jerusalem. That false doctrine, however, runs into terrible problems with this passage. According to the text here, it is Jesus' crowning as King that makes it possible for Him to taste death for everyone. If Jesus is not yet King, then neither is He able to die in our place, and we are all still dead in our sins. That would be a huge, indeed insoluble, problem for all of us. Thankfully, God's plan is not diminished by false doctrine, and Jesus blesses us as King today.

God's Plan.

Indeed, Jesus' death on the cross was not some accident. Instead, it was God's plan and intention from before the beginning of time. Look with me at Hebrews 2:10-13. This passage describes both God's desire and God's resources. His desire was to bring many sons to glory, to make it possible for all of His people to join Him in heaven. In terms of resources, what He had to work with was Jesus. However, before He came to earth, Jesus was not yet suited to lead others to salvation. He had to be perfected, completed, and what completed Him was His suffering on the cross.

Jesus was willing to undergo that suffering because of the commonality that we share with Him. Unlike anything else in the physical creation, human beings have a soul. Each one of us carries within us the breath of God, so our essence is the same as the divine essence of Jesus. Jesus wouldn't have been willing to come to earth to die for cats and dogs, but He was willing to die for us, to recognize us as His brethren, because of the divine spark that we share.

Jesus' attitude here should define our attitude both toward ourselves and toward everyone else. Jesus was willing to give Himself for us not because we were worthless, but because we were valuable and precious. Repeatedly, the worldly and wicked refuse to recognize this value that every person possesses, but it is present nonetheless. No matter how wretched we may become, we cannot quench the divine spirit within us, for it is as eternal as God Himself is. Anyone who shares in that spirit is, by any reasonable standard, the most important thing on earth.

We learn more about how God's plan worked itself out in Hebrews 2:14-16. Even though mankind had souls just like Jesus had a soul, there was one significant difference. We were fleshly beings, and Jesus was a spirit being. The next step in Jesus becoming like us was for Him to put on flesh and blood. Once He did that, He became just as mortal as we are. However, even though this mortality made Christ vulnerable, it also made Him uniquely powerful. If He were to die, in that death, He could accomplish two transformative things. First, He could defeat the devil, the one who wielded the power of death. Second, He could free those who had been enslaved by the devil because of the fear of death. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, if there is no resurrection, if we have nothing to hope for, we might as well be wicked. We might as well live it up in what brief time we have before death comes and squashes us. However, if there is a resurrection, suddenly we have an alternative. Suddenly we have a reason to live for something more than animal pleasure. And so, because Jesus rescues us from death, He also rescues us from the slavery of the devil. None of this applies to the other servants of Satan, the fallen angels. Jesus being found in the likeness of men does nothing for them. However, for those of us who share in the faith of Abraham, it is all the help that we could ever ask for.

The third and final element of Jesus being made like His brethren is found in Hebrews 2:17-18. It wasn't enough for Jesus to carry the divine spirit like we do. It wasn't even enough for Him to put on flesh and blood like we have. That process was only completed when Jesus learned to suffer like we suffer, and in that suffering, He learned what it was like to be tempted. It is true that His suffering never led Him to sin, but it taught Him to understand why we might sin when we are tempted, and to feel compassion for us when we do sin. In heaven, God is not susceptible to temptation, but on earth, Jesus was, and that experience changed everything. It fitted Him to become High Priest, someone who could offer an eternal sacrifice for all the sins that God's people committed. Only after His crucifixion was Jesus both willing and able to serve in that role. He had become like us in everything, so that He could help us in everything.

When I think about these things, I cannot help but be awed by the wisdom of God's plan. As the Bible presents Him, God is very different from us. Our ways are not His ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts. He cannot sympathize with those who do evil because evil is so repugnant to His nature. Nothing that we could ever do could bridge the gap between us and a God like that. However, Jesus is the bridge. He is the only One who can truly understand both God and man, because He is the only One who has ever been both God and man. Even though He lives in heaven now, He still gets us, and even though we don't deserve it, He is eager to save us from ourselves. What a joy it is to know that in our spiritual battles, we can seek the help of such a perfect Savior!