

PREACHERS' STUDY PAPERS

HEBREWS

BOOK 1

CHAPTERS 1 - 7

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Preface

The book of Hebrews was written to encourage Jewish converts to Christ to continue to trust him and resist the pressures to return to the old way. One way or another this is an experience that born again Christians through all generations face. It is part of the spiritual warfare in which Christ's followers are engaged. The battle is for the mind and so it is not surprising that part of the enemy's strategy is to sow doubt. After the euphoria of conversion experience the enemy sets about his task to destroy the Christian believer's relationship with God. Often people who have been raised in a religious or secular system find pressures from their former life invading their relationship with Christ. The realisation that church life is so badly affected by human sin and that Christians are not always nice to each other dents the new Christian's enthusiasm and zest. Questions start to rise up in the mind, "Have I made a mistake?" The answer is given by the book of Hebrews.

The studies in Hebrews follow the same format as our other Preachers' Study Papers. We have included different styles in our suggestions of what could be preached. In some cases the pattern of the sermon follows the structure of the passage. In other cases the sermon picks up a theme in the passage and is then developed. Remember there is no set sermon, and how and what you preach will reflect your own personality and congregational needs. The object of these studies is to help the preacher to thoroughly understand what the passage means. With that done the preacher can then set about preparing a message.

We are grateful to Clifford Pond for providing material for these studies. Also we have drawn upon material from a series of lectures given by Leslie McDonald at the Grace Ministerial Academy, Manila in the Philippines. Our appreciation for this is owed to Brian Ellis.

Our prayer is that you will find the studies a deepening and enriching experience of Christ that you will be able to convey to your congregation.

Grace Baptist Mission
2009

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New International Version
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Abbreviations for Bible Books

Old Testament

Genesis	Gen.	Ecclesiastes	Eccl.
Exodus	Ex.	The Song of Solomon	Song
Leviticus	Lev.	Isaiah	Is.
Numbers	Num.	Jeremiah	Jer.
Deuteronomy	Deut.	Lamentations	Lam.
Joshua	Josh.	Ezekiel	Ezek.
Judges	Judg.	Daniel	Dan.
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hos.
1 Samuel	1 Sam.	Joel	Joel
2 Samuel	2 Sam.	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obadiah	Obad.
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jonah	Jonah
1 Chronicles	1 Chr.	Micah	Mic.
2 Chronicles	2 Chr.	Nahum	Nah.
Ezra	Ezra	Habakkuk	Hab.
Nehemiah	Neh.	Zephaniah	Zeph.
Esther	Esth.	Haggai	Hag.
Job	Job	Zechariah	Zech.
Psalms	Ps.	Malachi	Mal.
Proverbs	Prov.		

New Testament

Matthew	Matt.	1 Timothy	1 Tim.
Mark	Mark	2 Timothy	2 Tim.
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philemon	Philm.
The Acts	Acts	Hebrews	Heb.
Romans	Rom.	James	James
1 Corinthians	1 Co.	1 Peter	1 Pet.
2 Corinthians	2 Co.	2 Peter	2 Pet.
Galatians	Gal.	1 John	1 John
Ephesians	Eph.	2 John	2 John
Philippians	Phil.	3 John	3 John
Colossians	Col.	Jude	Jude
1 Thessalonians	1 Thess.	Revelation	Rev.
2 Thessalonians	2 Thess.		

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THE READER AND THE WRITER



The book of Hebrews

This book exalts Jesus Christ, so our study of it must lead us to honour and love him more and teach us how to encourage others to do the same.

In this introduction we will consider:

- 📁 The nature of the book
- 📁 When and to whom it was written
- 📁 The writer – who was he?
- 📁 A suggested outline
- 📁 The message of the book and its method
- 📁 Quotations from the Old Testament
- 📁 Lessons for preachers

1. The nature of the book

From earliest times Hebrews has been called a letter, but it is not a letter in the usual form. There is no greeting at the beginning or signature at the end, and yet it is more intimate than an “open letter” (13:1, 22, 24). The writer himself calls it an “exhortation” (13:22, see 5 below). We will simply call it a book.

2. When and to whom it was written

There is general agreement that –

(a) It was written before A.D. 70

In A.D. 70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, its temple and its people. Hebrews is full of references to the sacrificial system of the temple following, as it did, the pattern of the Old Testament tabernacle. If the book had been written after A.D. 70 it is very unlikely that reference would not have been made to the destruction.

In chapter 8 verses 4 and 5 reference is made to men who offer gifts prescribed by the law and serve at the sanctuary. The verbs “offer” and “serve” are in the present tense, indicating that the Levitical system was still functioning. It would cease in A.D. 70. Also 8:13 speaks of the Old Covenant with its ritual as soon to disappear. This seems to be a prediction of A.D. 70.

- (b) It was written for Jewish Christians who were suffering persecution. The detailed use of the Old Testament suggests that the readers would be Jews, and the assumed knowledge of the gospel suggests that they were Jewish Christians. At one time they had faced persecution and hardship with courage, but now they were in danger of deserting Christ and returning to their Old Testament roots (10:32–36, see also Matt. 24:9-12).

The greetings from Italian believers (13:24) may suggest that the readers lived in Rome. The persecution arose from two sources.

- i. The Roman authorities because, as Christians, the readers of Hebrews refused to say that Caesar was Lord.
- ii. Jewish zealots who regarded Jews who became Christians as traitors. In the case of the readers of Hebrews it was mainly persecution that tempted them back to Old Testament law and ritual. But even apart from persecution there is always a tendency among us to look to laws and rituals we can keep, instead of to Christ. This was already happening in early Gentile churches (Gal. 3:1-4; 5:1-6; Col. 2:16-23). We see, then, that Hebrews is not merely a matter of history, but asks important questions of us today.

3. The writer – who was he?

Until the 17th century this book was known as “the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews”. Despite this, there are good reasons for doubting that Paul wrote it. The main reason for this doubt is that the style is not like that of letters we know that Paul wrote. (Paul signed his letters – 2 Thess. 3:17) In fact, whereas Paul seems to have been careless about style (1 Cor. 2:1), the writer of this book was very careful and elegant in style. Some people think that this can be explained by the difference in subject matter, but the contrast is too great for this. From the evidence in the book itself, we can describe the writer as:

- a Jew well versed in the Old Testament
- a Christian who saw Christ in all the Scriptures
- a teacher with a pastoral heart
- someone familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (see 6)
- neither one of the twelve nor an eye-witness of Christ (2:3) but one familiar with the movements of the apostolic missionary team (13:23)
- someone known to the readers, possibly one of them, but at the time of writing detained elsewhere (13:19-23)

- someone familiar with persecution. He frequently identifies himself with his readers and their troubles by the use of “us” and “we” (12:1-2; 13:13-14).

So who was it? Apollos, Silas, Luke, Barnabas have all been suggested, but the fact is that we do not know.

4. A suggested outline

The writer does not offer a clear structure, but as we read the book the following suggested outline may be discerned

The teaching	The application
God has spoken through his Son (1:1-14)	beware of the consequences of not adhering to his teaching (2:1-4)
The Son became man (2:5-16)	therefore he is able to help (2:17-18)
Christ is greater than Aaron (4:14 – 5:10)	there is no salvation apart from him (5:11 – 6:20)
Christ’s priesthood is everlasting (7:1-24)	therefore we can have confidence in him (7:25-28)
The New Covenant is better than the Old (8:1 – 10:8). So we see that the warning passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-39; 12:14-29) are not to be put in brackets, but are the very essential aims of the writer. Likewise the encouragements such as 2:17-18; 7:25-28 and 10:19-25	therefore persevere (10:19-30) therefore follow good examples (11:1-40) therefore look to Christ (12:1-4) therefore bear the fruit of faith (12:5-29)
Closing exhortation and greetings (13:1-25)	

5. The message of the book and its method

The message of Hebrews is that the Lord Jesus Christ is so great and glorious, and the benefits and blessings to be found in him are so satisfying of our spiritual need, that to turn away from him, for whatever reason, is very foolish and will have the most fearful consequences. Therefore, whatever our circumstances, we must fix our eyes on Jesus.

The writer himself calls his work an “exhortation” (13:22) which tells us that the purpose uppermost in his mind was to appeal to his readers not to turn away from Christ despite the severity of their sufferings.

6. Quotations from the Old Testament

The writer quotes freely from the Old Testament to illustrate and to give authority to what he is saying about Jesus Christ. These references are of three different kinds.

- (a) Some were clearly prophetic. We call them Messianic because it is clear the Holy Spirit revealed things about Jesus Christ far in advance of his coming. We find examples of this in 1:5a, 13; 2:6-8, 12; 5:5-6; 10:37-38.
- (b) In others, things that were spoken of Jehovah in the Old Testament are applied here to Jesus Christ. These confirm to us that he is God. See 1:6; 8-12.
- (c) There are others where the Old Testament reference is to someone at that time, but our writer takes the words and applies them to Jesus Christ – 1:5b; 2:13; 10:5-7. It is difficult to see the basis on which these applications are made. Three comments may be helpful –
 - The Holy Spirit has authority to lead the writer to whatever words he chooses and from whatever source.
 - He makes his teaching clear. We can be sure that the Holy Spirit guided the Old Testament writer in such a way that his words could be used in the New Testament.
 - We must be careful in using words and illustrations from the Old Testament to be sure that the lessons we draw from them are consistent with New Testament teaching. For example, if we use Esther 5:2 to illustrate God’s favour held out to us, we must be sure to distinguish our God from a heathen tyrant.

We may notice the pastoral wisdom of the writer of Hebrews in using the Old Testament itself to show the folly of returning to it. There are sometimes differences in our versions of the Bible between an Old Testament text and its quotation by the New Testament writer. When this happens the reason, most often, is that the quotation is not taken from the Hebrew but from a Greek translation from the Hebrew known as the Septuagint (LXX ¹).

Sometimes the New Testament text differs slightly from both the Hebrew and the LXX. None of this affects the authority of what is

¹ LXX are the Roman figures for 70. There is a tradition that says that seventy Jewish scholars worked on the Greek translation, hence the use of LXX.

written in the New Testament, because the Holy Spirit has directed the writer in such a way as to fulfil his purpose.

7. Lessons for preachers

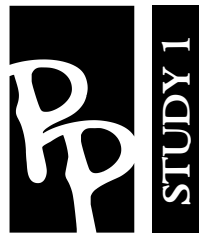
A consideration of the suggested outline above yields a number of instructive pointers for preachers –

- when expounding Scripture we must always view a text in its context. This means asking ourselves the question why our passage is there and what was its original purpose. For example in the book of Hebrews it is very easy to be so fascinated with a passage about the glory of Christ that we neglect the purpose for which it was originally given.
- we should never teach doctrine without showing its practical importance
- we should apply the message as we proceed rather than leave all the applications to the end
- our applications over a period of time should be in the nature of both warning and encouragement
- our exhortation should be grounded in sound teaching giving it an authoritative basis

The practical application of the message is a vital element of good preaching. It has serious doctrinal consequences. The message must enable Christian believers to grow in grace and to become more Christ-like. This maturing is called *sanctification* and begins immediately we are justified (saved). Sanctification is the essential proof that we are justified. To claim to be justified with no evidence of godliness is a sham. To attempt to live the Christian life without being justified is futile. Therefore our doctrine must be applied.

THE GLORY OF GOD'S SON

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Hebrews 1:1-3

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Assurance
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The writer does not begin with some kind of introduction, but he immediately lays a foundation for all that follows. His readers are suffering persecution and are in danger of renouncing their Christian profession (10:32-36), so he compels them to face the fact that if they do they will be going against the very authority of God himself.

We can follow the sense of the passage by linking two clauses like this; “God ... has spoken to us by his Son (1:1-2)... we must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard” (2:1). The statement of Christ’s glory (1:1-3) and his superiority to angels (1:4-14) leads to the argument that if the word given through angels was authoritative, how much more was the word through the Son (2:1-4). Therefore what are the consequences of failure to obey his teaching? This theme is near the surface throughout the first part of the book (1:1-4:13), and the writer returns to it toward the end (12:25-27).

What these verses mean

Verse 1

In the past God spoke

The writer’s intention throughout the book was to show the incompleteness of the Old Testament Scriptures. Knowing that this would be a

sensitive issue for the Jews to whom he wrote he began with a clear dogmatic declaration that God himself was the author of the Scriptures. (See also 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-21.)

to our forefathers

The nation of Israel. The reference to “our forefathers” makes it clear that this book (possibly in the form of a scroll) was sent to Jewish believers.

through the prophets

All through whom God spoke in Old Testament days.

at many times

During the period between Moses and Malachi.

and in various ways,

Not the ways God spoke to the prophets such as in visions and dreams, but how God through the prophets communicated the message to the people in different forms such as laws, visual aids, poetry and history.

Verse 2

but in these last days

“In these last days” means the period between our Lord’s first and second advents (Acts 2:17; 1 Tim. 4:1). The emphasis here may be on the fact that Christ’s ministry came at the end of Old Testament history after 400 years of silence since Malachi.

he has spoken to us by his Son,

God has spoken finally. No longer does God speak by prophets i.e. by men, but by a Son. Having made it clear that the Old Testament stands as the Word of God, the writer now begins to show that God’s Son is the final authority. Because of who he was, the Son was able to declare the full meaning of the Old Testament and in himself to fulfil all that is foreshadowed (Matt. 5:17-18). The word “spoken” refers not only to the words of Jesus during his earthly ministry, but also to the extension of that ministry through the apostles (2:3; John 16:12-15). In speaking “by his Son” there is a sense of finality. “Son” can never refer to an inferior being because a son is of the same nature as his father. Christ has the same nature as God (John 1:1-3; 5:18; 10:30). What follows expands on this.

whom he appointed heir of all things,

We cannot know the full significance of this phrase as it belongs to a future glory we cannot yet comprehend. The idea seems to be linked to our Lord’s being the firstborn (Col. 1:15-18), which means holding a position of honour and heirship. Christ is said to be heir of creation;

the renewed world will be his (Col. 1:16; Rev. 11:15). He is also heir of God's kingdom, his people (Ps. 2:7-8; John 17:2, 6, 24). Those who share Christ's suffering will share his glory (Rom. 8:17-18).

and through whom he made the universe.

Within the mystery of the Trinity the Son carries out the divine purposes both in creation and in redemption (Gen. 1:1; John 1:3; Col. 1:15-16; 2 Co. 5:19).

Verse 3

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,

The Son's eternal glory is a perfect reflection of the being of God. Just as the rays of the sun are the sun itself beaming out, so the Son eternally beams out the majesty and mind of God. This glory was veiled and yet in measure expressed in Jesus Christ and was recognised by his disciples (John 1:14, 18; 14:10, 24; Col. 1:15).

sustaining all things by his powerful word.

The world is not like a wound-up clock left to unwind on its own. The Lord's hand is constantly maintaining it, mostly by natural laws and, at times, by miracles. His care is over all, ensuring that God's purpose in all things is fulfilled.

After he had provided purification for sins,

This is an astonishing leap from eternal glory to the pain and shame of the cross. The plan of salvation was made in eternity. This purification includes cleansing the heart from sin, but it has primary reference to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, putting away the barrier of sin between us and God. He alone could do this for us.

he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

The action of sitting down shows that the task has been completed. This is in contrast to the Old Testament priests whose work was never finished. Christ sat down, signifying the completeness of his atoning work (8:1; 10:11-12; 12:2; Mark 16:19; Col. 3:1). The great theme of the finished work of Christ is worked out in detail later in Hebrews (7:25-10:1). He is now in the place of authority over the church and the world (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:18) fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 110:1. The very people who are persecuting the readers are under Christ's authority and are doomed to failure and defeat.



Summary

The writer begins his book with a bold foundational statement. In the past God spoke to his people through prophets, but now in the last days he has spoken through his Son, Jesus Christ. Christ was fully qualified to elaborate on what the prophets had said in the Old Testament because Christ was involved in the creation of the universe. Being from heaven and in the eternal presence of God Almighty, Christ was able to give insights that no man could give. The things that Christ taught and spoke about were final and completed all that we on earth need to know. 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. This is one of the most exalted descriptions of the glory of Christ to be found in all the Scriptures. The writer's purpose was to show that the Son is superior to the Old Testament prophets.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – The Glory of Christ

Introduction

Christianity is Christ. Christianity rests entirely on the fact that he excels all others in personal majesty and universal authority. This is demonstrated in Hebrews 1.

1. **The glory of Christ is seen in his person.**
 - (a) He is equal with God – the second person of the Trinity.
 - (b) He exactly represents God – his outshining.
2. **The glory of Christ is seen in his fulfilment of all God's purposes.**
 - (a) The one for whom all things were made – his inheritance.
 - (b) The one who carried out all God's plan of salvation.

Application – therefore Christ is to be:

- Worshipped – praised, loved, trusted.
- Obeyed – submitted to, served.



Focus Point: Assurance

The author of Hebrews wrote to encourage Hebrew Christians wavering in their faith. Their faith was being undermined by intense persecution. Those who were behind these attacks were traditional religious Jews trying to persuade their fellow countrymen to give up their faith in Christ alone and return to the old religion. Behind all this was the enemy of God and our soul, Satan. He is just as active today trying to undermine the faith of those who have trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation. It has been, and still is, a common problem amongst Christians that they can lack assurance in their faith and face the temptation to give up. This is part of the spiritual warfare of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Ephesians.

The Bible tells us two things that God wants his children to know. Firstly, that they are going to heaven and secondly, that he cares for them until they get there. Having assurance means to be sure of these two things. The Bible gives us many promises on which to base our assurance. John 10:28 is an example, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” Assurance is a feeling of certainty, both emotional and spiritual, that is rooted in what God has done for us in Christ. Assurance is not the same thing as faith. Our faith may be weak with many doubts and we might lack assurance. What matters is that there is a genuine faith even though there may be accompanying doubts. A person with a strong faith will have fewer doubts and be more assured in the promises God has given in the Bible. Such a person will find himself in the same place as the person with a weaker faith, full of doubts and not so sure about how everything will work out. One has assurance, the other lacks it, but both have a faith.

Lack of assurance arises from insecurity

If eternal life were only for those who never had any doubts then no-one would go to heaven. When we die all our doubts will die with us. Paul writes, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Co. 13:12b). It is helpful to remind ourselves that insecurity is only temporal and will no longer be with us once we die. Whilst it may touch us here on earth, Peter sets out clearly that our ultimate destination is not based on our being sure but on God’s decree (1 Pet. 1:3-5). Here are some of the symptoms of insecurity:

The fear of death

Many Christians are afraid of death in the sense of what happens after we die. We are all apprehensive about dying because we do not know how we will die. Death could be sudden or drawn out and painful. But the fear of death that causes insecurity is where we are not yet sure that we are in Christ. It may be because we still doubt God's ability to keep us from falling away. Or it could be because we have not yet understood the gospel properly. A person may fear being punished or being excluded. The fear of death is overcome by the sure knowledge that Christ has conquered death for all who believe.

The fear of life

This usually accompanies the fear of death and is present when the believer is not sure about God's preservation in this life. Peter writes that the believer has an inheritance in heaven that cannot perish and is being kept. During this period the believer is shielded in this world by God's power so that he can take his reserved place. The protection of God comes about through the faith of the believer (1 Pet. 1:4-5). God's shield does not give immunity from trials. God uses such difficulties for our good and our assurance arises from knowing that all our trials are in the plan and purpose of God (Rom. 8:28).

The fear of unbelievers

When Jesus was arrested the disciples fled because they did not understand what was going on. It was only after the resurrection that they began to understand the purpose of Jesus' death. They were different men after Pentecost. Peter, the one disciple who denied Jesus three times, wrote later that the believer should not be frightened but be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks him to give a reason for what he believes (1 Pet. 3:14-15). King David wrote that if we trust in God, we will not be afraid, especially of what mortal men can do (Ps. 56:4).

A lost sense of vocation

There is a strong link between knowing and serving. Being sure that Christ has gained our eternal inheritance, our hearts are filled with gratitude and we want to serve him. This is clearly seen in our thinking, lifestyle and commitment. There are those who can be called "Sunday Christians". They do everything that is convenient to them and come to church on a Sunday out of duty. Their minds are given over to worldly pursuits and they do not speak up for Christ. A true believer will use whatever their position in life is (banker, teacher, plumber etc.) as being within their sphere of service for Christ.

Little interest in the Bible

The Bible tells us all about our future inheritance. It tells us about the glorious riches which are ours in Christ. It is giving us information about the family that we belong to. It tells us how as family members we should live in this world. It is natural then that we should want to read the Bible. We want to find out what God is saying to us. We are in a living and loving relationship with him and all relationships thrive on active communication. If we do not read the Bible then we miss out and cannot know very much about the blessings of assurance.

Worldliness

The apostle John writes, “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 John 2:15). Worldliness is about covetous desires, being captivated by material things and being proud of what we are and what we have. It is about attitude to money, position and possessions. When Christians are taken up with these things they become insecure. Their lives are centred upon earthly things instead of heaven. There is little incentive to live pure and holy lives.

Basis of assurance

Take the Bible seriously. Read it on a regular basis; get to know God’s promises both in the Old and New Testaments. Understand God’s verdict of “not guilty” for those who have been justified by Christ’s death on the cross. Know that you can rely on God completely and that he will not suddenly change his mind and the rules. Appreciate that your faith to believe has been given to you as a gift. Be assured that the Holy Spirit has marked you with a seal, confirming you as genuine and guarding you against theft (being taken away by another).

The above notes have been taken from a book titled “How Can I be Sure?” written by Frank Allred and published by Grace Publications (ISBN 0946462 577).



Over to you

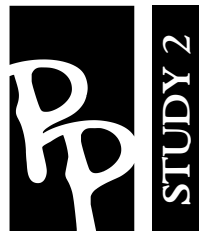
What is the spiritual state of the congregation you are ministering to? Are there some people who profess faith but lack assurance? Are there others who are under pressure to give up? How will these opening verses of the book help you in your sermon preparation to address such people?

Have these opening verses impressed upon you the majesty and greatness of Christ? Is this how you have presented Christ to your people or is there a need for a radical change in your preaching? If there is, don't be ashamed or embarrassed but give praise to God.

What do these verses teach us about the way God speaks to us today? Does your Christian community think in a different way?

THE SON –

SUPERIOR TO ANGELS



Hebrews 1:4-14

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: Revelation: general, special and progressive
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The message of Hebrews is that the Lord Jesus Christ is so great and glorious that nothing else can surpass him. In our study passage the Son is demonstrated to be superior in every way to angels. This is important because angels were involved in the giving of the law at Sinai (2:2; Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19), so they were greatly revered. Not only so, there were people among the Jews at that time known as Essenes, who thought very highly of angels. In 13:9 the readers are warned against being “carried away by all kinds of strange teachings”. These may have included a heresy that made Jesus Christ no more than one of a number of angelic mediators between man and God. No wonder the writer takes time to show the Son to be infinitely superior to angels, and so his Word is to be heeded more than theirs. This general statement is followed by confirmation from the Old Testament. Christ’s superiority arises in two ways –

1. He was made for a time lower than the angels (2:7) in order to accomplish our salvation, but then he became infinitely greater (1:3; Phil. 2:9-11).
2. He is the Son of God from eternity and the angels themselves are part of his creation. His “name” is his status – his standing in the universe.

What these verses mean



1. Angels are not sons (1:4-5)

Verse 4

So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

This verse forms the transition from the opening of the book to the next section of verses 5-14. At the time it was written people thought highly of angels. It was believed that at the end of time God would send two Messiah figures. A kingly Messiah would be subordinate to a priestly Messiah, and both would be under the authority of the archangel Michael. The writer demonstrates the superiority of the Son to the angels. Jesus Christ has a superior name to that of the angels because of who he is and his redemptive work. The Son has been appointed heir of all things by virtue of the fact that he alone is the eternal Son and has obtained an eternal inheritance. The spirit world was fully aware of who Jesus is, as demonstrated by the demon in Mark 5:7.

Verse 5

***For to which of the angels did God ever say,
“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father”?***

The writer quotes from Psalm 2:7. This is the first of seven quotations that the writer uses in this first chapter of the book. David is the author of Psalm 2. As well as being king of the nation he was also a prophet (2 Sam. 23:2; Acts 2:30). The quotation from Psalm 2:7 may have referred to a king of that time (it could have been David himself), but here and in other places in the New Testament it is applied to Jesus Christ. At first sight this seems to raise questions, and some people may have suggested that it means our Lord became the Son of God at his birth (Luke 1:35). Others have thought that this happened when he was baptised (Matt. 3:13-17). But in the New Testament where Psalm 2:7 is actually quoted, Paul associates it with the resurrection of Christ. The same apostle helps us further in Romans 1:4 where he says that at the resurrection our Lord was declared to be the Son of God. We conclude that this quotation does not mean that Jesus Christ became the Son of God at any time in his earthly life, but that his resurrection declared him to be what he already was.

Or again,

“I will be his Father, and he will be my Son”?

The second Old Testament quotation is a reference to 2 Samuel 7:14 where the prophet Nathan is conveying God’s message to David about the future of his kingdom. At first sight he seems to be referring to David’s son Solomon. This may be so, but when we note that Nathan is speaking of an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam. 7:13, 16) we understand why it is seen as pointing on to Jesus Christ (Luke 1:32-33). When Christ came he lived in relation to God as Son to Father (John 15:1; Luke 22:42). No angel was ever called the Son of God.



2. Angels worship the Son (1:6-7)

Verses 6-7

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God’s angels worship him.”

7 In speaking of the angels he says,

***“He makes his angels winds,
his servants flames of fire.”***

These two quotations from Psalm 97:7 and Psalm 104:4 are saying the same thing. Far from angels being superior to Christ or even his equal, they acknowledge his divinity by worshipping and serving him (compare Isaiah 6:1–3 with John 12:41).

“Firstborn” – see note on 1:2b-3. The Son has the position of pre-eminence in the universe and in the church (Col. 1:15, 18). Among the Israelites the firstborn son had special privileges. He succeeded his father as the head of the house and received a double portion of the inheritance. It is in this sense of privileged position that Israel is called firstborn (Ex. 4:22) as is our Lord here and in Romans 8:29 and Colossians 1:15. The people of God, the church, are also referred to as the firstborn in 12:23.

In the LXX of Psalm 97:7 “gods” is translated “angels” which is the correct translation. In the LXX of Psalm 104:4 “messengers” is translated “angels” which is what the messengers were. In Psalm 97:7 the worship is to be offered to Jehovah. Here this worship is given to the Son. This confirms the Son to be God, since it is blasphemous to worship anyone but God.



3. Angels have no authority (1:8-13)

Verses 8-9

But about the Son he says,

***“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever,
and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom.***

***⁹ 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.”***

In contrast to angels who must serve and worship, the Son occupies a position of everlasting power and authority and has the right to receive the homage of angels and men. The quotation is from Psalm 45:6-7 where some royal marriage may be in mind. But the language is such (for ever and ever) that the writer of our book rightly sees it as a Messianic prophecy (applying to Jesus Christ). Unlike the kingdoms of this world which rise and fall, the kingdom of God, over which Christ rules, will last for ever.

The Son is spoken of as God, but there is another who is to him “your God”. He is by nature truly God, and yet within the being of God he is one of the three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Trinity (John 10:30). The important thing is that the Son has an eternal kingdom, but the text also tells us that his reign is “righteous”, which means “straight”, like the sceptre in a king’s hand. The writer uses the word “companions” from Psalm 45 to apply to the angels, to show that Christ is pre-eminent and not that the angels were Christ’s friends. The Father loves the righteousness of his Son and poured upon him the Holy Spirit (oil of joy) as a result of his obedience on the cross. For Christ the cross meant unspeakable agony, but it led to the joy of victory and success (12:2; Phil. 2:9-11).

Verses 10-12

He also says,

***“In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.***

***¹¹ They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.***

***¹² 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.”***

The Son’s superiority to angels is further demonstrated by a quotation from Psalm 102:25-27 (LXX). Once again words addressed originally to

God are applied to the Son, giving us an incidental indication of his deity.

Here are things that could never be applied to angels

- the creation of the world (see also verse 2).
- bringing an end to the world (not in man's power either!).

Such is our Lord's greatness that to him the world is like outworn clothes to be discarded when they have served their usefulness.

Verse 13

To which of the angels did God ever say,

“Sit at my right hand

until I make your enemies

a footstool for your feet”?

Psalm 110 was much on the writer's mind (1:3, 13; 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 17, 21; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2). He had our Lord's authority for applying verse 1 to himself (Matt. 22:42-45). The Son is seen in the place of supreme authority and of triumph over all his enemies. Putting a foot on the neck of a victim was a sign of his complete submission. Every power, physical or spiritual, secular or religious, political or ecclesiastical will be entirely subdued and banished. No angel has anything like such authority.



4. Angels serve believers (1:14)

Angels serve believers

Verse 14

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

In 1:6-7 the angels worship and serve the Son. Here they serve those who are saved by the Son. The one who “sends” is greater than those who are “sent”. “Inherit” stresses the fact that salvation is an unearned gift. It also links those who are saved (heirs) with Christ, as co-heirs with him (1:2; Rom. 8:17). Far from angels vying with Jesus for status, they are not even on the same level as believers (1 Co. 6:3). “Salvation” is seen as completed when the “heirs” enter their final inheritance in glory.



Summary

This is the beginning of a message to some Jews who had professed to be Christian, but who were tempted to turn from Christ back to their Old Testament roots because of severe persecution. To do this would mean regarding the Old Testament prophets as at least equal to or even above Jesus Christ (Study 1). In this study a return to old ways would expose them to similar ideas about angels. The first thing the writer does is to exalt Christ above the prophets and angels, and in the process he gives an unsurpassed description of our Lord and his glory. The writer supports this by reference to seven Old Testament texts, proving that in returning to the Old Testament his readers would not escape Jesus Christ, but rather be led back to him.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Jesus, the everlasting Son of God (Heb. 1:4-14)

Introduction

The message is based upon seven quotations from the Old Testament. These texts are there to remind us of whom we have trusted for salvation, reinforcing the basis of our faith. The Christian believer today is under the same pressures as the Hebrew Christian believer was in the first century. The world will not accept the Christian faith as the only way and points to all the other religions as being equal. Many societies refuse to accept the conversion experience of a person to Christ and pressurise that person to renounce their new found Christian faith. Hebrews 1:4-14 helps us to resist such attacks upon our faith by pointing us to the superiority and everlasting qualities of the one in whom we have put our trust.

1. God proclaimed Jesus as his anointed Son

The writer quotes three Old Testament passages to stress that Jesus is superior to all the angels. For those early Jewish believers who trusted Jesus as the Messiah, the pressure being put upon them was teaching that Jesus was a ministering angel. The aim of the quotations in verses 5 and 6 was as follows:

- The declaration by God the Father that Jesus was his Son (Ps. 2:7). Jesus was the first to rise from the dead. He was leading the way for

all his people to follow. God had foretold this through David, that upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ God would confer upon him the status of Sonship, being the firstborn, that is representing a new humanity.

- The second quotation was from 2 Samuel 7:14 in which Nathan told King David that one of his descendants would build a house for God's name and would receive the throne of an everlasting kingdom. The first part was fulfilled in Solomon, David's son. The second part, everlasting Sonship, was fulfilled in Jesus. No angel or any other being can be compared with him.
- All will acknowledge God's Son. "Let all God's angels worship him" is a quote from the LXX version of Deuteronomy 32:43. In Psalm 97:7 the same phrase is used, "Worship him, all you gods!" The context of Psalm 97 (and surrounding psalms) is God's judgement. The one whom angels worship is coming to judge the world.

2. Jesus' kingdom is for ever

We find three Old Testament quotations in verses 7 to 12. The first one in verse 7 is from Psalm 104:4. The angels are limited because they are created servants. This is in contrast to Psalm 45:6-7 where, to the Son, God declares that his throne will last for ever. Jesus Christ being seated on the throne is King of this kingdom. The quotation from Psalm 45 also tells us that this kingdom will be righteous. There has been no human kingdom or empire that has lasted and not been corrupt. The third quotation from Psalm 102 contrasts the everlasting nature of God's kingdom with the temporary nature of this world. The pressure Christians are under is to give up trusting one who rules supremely, perfectly and whose rule will last for ever. They are being pushed to something else that is temporary and of much poorer quality.

3. All will be subject to King Jesus

The final quote is from Psalm 110 where the Messiah is invited to be seated at the right hand of the Father. It is an exalted place in recognition of what the Son has achieved through his incarnation and death for sinners. Being seated on the throne is not the end. The enemies of Christ have yet to be made his footstool. In the culture of the East at that time victorious generals placed their feet on the necks of defeated enemies to show that their conquest was complete. We live in the transitional period between Christ's being seated with his Father and his final conquering of all his enemies. In this period God is gathering his church. Upon his return King Jesus will bring about the completeness of his kingdom, which will be everlasting. Are you under pressure to give all this up for something less?



Focus Point:

Revelation: general, special and progressive

In the realm of disciplines such as science man investigates and discovers new things. Man cannot do that when it comes to finding out things about God (theology). Man cannot possibly have any knowledge of God unless God makes himself known. Left to himself man would never have discovered God.

God has revealed himself to man in two ways.

1. **General revelation.** This comes through nature that is around us, human consciousness and in the facts of experience and history (Ps. 19:1-2; Rom. 1:19-20, 2:14-15). However, much of this is obscured by the blight of human sin. As one theologian puts it, "The handwriting of the Creator was not entirely erased, but became hazy and indistinct." General revelation is now unable to convey any fully reliable knowledge of God and spiritual things. We cannot use it as a foundation on which to build our understanding of God's purposes. General revelation does serve a purpose for man to appreciate God's nature of everlasting power. Man knows God's law and in part lives by it (Rom. 2:14) in the general operation of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 6:3). The general revelation of God does form the background for his special revelation. It would be difficult to fully understand special revelation without God's general revelation.
2. **Special revelation.** God has revealed himself in a special way. This is embodied in the Bible. This means that the Bible is the book of God's special revelation. Whilst general revelation is addressed to all intelligent creatures, accessible to all human beings, special revelation is directed to a special class of sinners, to whom God would make known his salvation. Special revelation became necessary because of the entrance of sin into the world. Man became spiritually blind, subject to error and unbelief, unable to understand God. It became necessary for God to reinterpret the truths of nature, to show that there was a way out for man from his fall into sin and for him to be rescued from the power of error.

Special revelation then is God's showing his plan for rescuing sinners and the world. It renews the man and his mind, persuading his will to that which is good. Special revelation fills man with affections that are godly and prepares him for his heavenly home.

Progressive revelation

The Bible gives us a gradual development of the revelation of God's truth which we might call progressive revelation. We have a perfect example of this in Hebrews 1 where a further and fuller content of Old Testament texts is shown. When the Holy Spirit directed the minds of the Old Testament authors, they did not always understand the full prophetic nature of their writings. Nathan and David could comprehend that Solomon would build the temple and that David's lineage would be established on the throne of Israel. It is only from the New Testament that the full significance of Nathan's prophecy is revealed and Christ is seen as its ultimate fulfilment concerning an everlasting kingdom. Progressive revelation is not progress from error to truth but is rather like an embryo becoming a full-grown person. This means that we should always interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament revelation.



Over to you

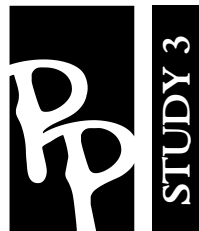
Can you identify what pressures exist for your congregation that challenge and undermine their faith? How can you help them using this passage?

This passage relies heavily on quotations of verses from the Old Testament. How well are you acquainted with the context from which the quotes come? Has this particular study helped you see the difficulty of handling God's Word without understanding the proper context of a passage?

Does the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ feature in your regular preaching? Is Christ the one to whom you direct people's attention or do you tend to chastise people for their failings?

EXHORTATION — THEREFORE

ADHERE TO HIS TEACHING



Hebrews 2:1-4

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Angels, miracles and eternal security and final perseverance
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

This short section of the book develops a new stage in the argument. The author has been explaining that Jesus, the Son of God, is greater than the angels. In chapter 1 he showed that the Son is divine. None of the angels occupies an everlasting throne exalted above the entire creation. At this point, in the opening four verses of chapter 2, the writer pauses before going on to deal further with the Son's being greater than the angels. We have an application arising from chapter 1. God has spoken through his Son so it is sheer folly not to adhere to what he says. All along the writer's thrust has been that God is now speaking to mankind through his Son. We ignore this message at our peril. According to these four verses those who do not give heed to God's Son will not escape the consequences.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

The word "therefore" makes the connection between doctrine and practice. Remember the context of this book - those of a Hebrew upbringing who had trusted in Christ as Saviour were under pressure

to give up their new faith and return to their original roots. They were in danger of drifting away, like a boat that was not tied to its moorings, so could be lost with the strong currents of the water, especially during a storm. The challenge to these Hebrew Christians was that they must secure themselves to their spiritual anchor. The anchor is God's truth that they had heard and on which they must rely.

Verses 2-3

For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?

We now see why the writer was so keen to show the Son to be superior to the angels. They are not mentioned in the account of the giving of the law (Ex.19,20), but from Deuteronomy 33:2, Psalm 68:17; Acts 8:38-53 and Galatians 3:19 we learn that they were involved. The argument is that if breaking the law, in which angels were involved, merited God's judgement, much more so would failure to adhere to God's great way of salvation. God took strong action when the Israelites neglected the truth they heard from Moses and rebelled against the message that God had sent them through angels (see Judges 2:10-15 as an example). The salvation is here described as "great" because it rescues sinners who are condemned as criminals on death row. Instead of receiving the punishment of eternal death the sinner is pardoned absolutely and completely.

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord,

The way of salvation was the word that came to us through God's Son. The message that God has "spoken to us by his Son" (1:1-2) is now identified as the "great salvation" he proclaimed (John 3:16). It is the total work of saving sinners from the guilt and power of sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

was confirmed to us by those who heard him.

The readers of the book are reminded of the authenticity of this great salvation. The salvation was first declared by the Lord himself (Mark 1:14-15; Matt. 4:12-17, 23-25). The very same gospel (good news) of salvation in Christ alone was declared by the apostles, "those who heard him". The apostles were personally acquainted with Christ, having heard him speak and seen the miracles which he accomplished, and were witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 1:22-23; 10:39-42). The apostle Paul was reckoned as being a witness to the Lord's resurrection and having received his Word directly from him (1 Co. 15:8; 11:23; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 3:1-5). He always affirmed that his apostleship was directly from God and Christ (Rom. 1:1; 1 Co. 1:1; 2 Co. 1:1; Gal. 1:1, 12; Eph.

1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1). The gospel which was preached by the apostles was then heard by the writer and those to whom the book was written. Like many others who heard the apostles preaching the gospel in those early days, they believed, for they witnessed the manner in which God “confirmed” or authenticated the message.

Verse 4

God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles,

Salvation through Christ was endorsed by miracles and spiritual gifts (John 10:37-38; 1 Co. 12:27-30). This was the divinely chosen means of confirming that the message of salvation through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ is of God, and that the messengers of this Word were sent by him (2 Co. 12:12). God had performed wonderful signs and miracles when he first established his first covenant with Israel at the time of the exodus (Ex. 14:21, 27).

and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

A further affirmation that this way of salvation was great and genuine was through the appearance and demonstration of “gifts of the Holy Spirit”. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are found in a number of places in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Co. 12:4-11; Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). During the days of the apostles the church in general was enriched through a variety of gifts both ordinary and extraordinary (1 Co. 1:5, 7). These gifts are imparted according to the sovereign will of God (1 Co. 12:11). The gifts were never to be viewed as an end in themselves or for personal aggrandisement, but were to be regarded as purely supplementary to the gospel (1 Co. 12:28-13:3; Gal. 3:5). Although these Jewish believers had witnessed the power of God firsthand and perhaps had been the recipients of some such gifts, they were always to remember that salvation is through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ and by holding fast to him (Col. 2:6-8).



Note: The Trinity involved in our salvation

In verses 3 and 4 the writer testifies to all three persons of the Godhead being involved in the message of salvation.

The Lord Jesus Christ
First announced the message
(verse 3)

God the Father
Testified to the message
by signs, wonders and various miracles
(verse 4)

The Holy Spirit
Confirmed the message
by distributing gifts to believers
(for their encouragement and edification)
(verse 4)



Summary

Here in the opening verses of chapter 2 we see the writer showing a true pastoral spirit. He begins to set before his readers the implications of the errors that his readers were under pressure to follow. The danger they faced was to give up the Christian faith and go back to their Old Testament upbringing. In the light of the teaching that

Jesus brought this would be to deny the eternal Son of God his rightful position and authority. In chapter 1 the writer demonstrated from the Old Testament Scriptures that the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is the sovereign Lord of redemption and creation. The Lord Jesus is the one by whom the angels were created and whom they now serve (chapter 1). The writer now applies the teaching. If the angels were involved in the giving of the law that involved God's judgement, how much more will be the punishment if God's own way of salvation is ignored? God's salvation is described as great because the punishment for breaking God's law is eternal banishment from God in hell. Careful attention has to be given to this way of salvation otherwise there is the danger of drifting away. The only safe way to pay careful attention to the teaching of Jesus Christ is to study it, to be committed to it and to adhere to it.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – A Christian and his Bible

This sermon outline covers a much wider amount of Scripture than is contained in the passage of this study. The sermon theme arises out of the passage and includes other relevant Scripture.

Introduction

The Word of Christ means the whole Bible. Our Lord gave authority to the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-18). We have his words in the Gospels (Matt. 7:24-27). He gave his Spirit to lead the apostles in his truth (John 16:12-15).

1. His truth will last for ever

Because of who he is – the eternal Son of God (Heb. 1:1-4; Matt. 24:35). Therefore it speaks to every generation (1 Pet. 1:23-25).

2. We can be drawn away from his Word

By persecution – as were the readers of this book of Hebrews.

By the pressure of popular opinion (1 Co. 1:21; Eph. 4:14).

By personal ungodliness (2 Tim. 4:10).

3. The danger of neglecting the Word of Christ (Heb. 2:1-4)

We may drift away from Christ himself.

We may prove not to be Christians at all.

4. We take heed to the Word of Christ

Just as we need regular meals, so we need to read his Word regularly (Ps. 1; 1 Pet. 2:2).

By shaping our minds by its teaching (Rom. 12:2).

By applying it to every part of life (Col. 3:16-17).



Focus Point:

Angels, miracles and eternal security and final perseverance

Angels

In the beginning God created a host of spirit beings (Ps. 148:1-5) without bodies and able to move swiftly and freely from place to place (Is. 6:1-2). A large number of these beings rebelled against God with their leader, Satan. They continue to oppose the Lord and his people, and they are called devils or demons (Luke 10:17-20). Those who remained loyal to God are angels, some of whom are seraphim, cherubim and archangels (Is. 6:1-2; Dan. 10:13; Luke 1:19,26). They serve the Lord and his people with speed and faithfulness. Angels are not to be worshipped (Col. 1:18) but we are to be thankful for their ministries and can learn from their diligence (Matt. 4:11; Heb. 1:14). See also Focus Point on Angels in study 18 of the Galatians PSPs, Book 2, pages 166-167.

Miracles

In the New Testament what we call miracles are given three different names, indicating three purposes God intends by them –

Miracles draw attention to the fact that it is God at work because what is done is impossible to humankind. See also the Focus Point in Study 10 of the Galatian PSPs, Book 2, pages 88-90 for a fuller discussion of miracles.

Wonders refer to the effect of what has been done. Those who have seen them are full of awe and amazement.

Signs was John's favourite word in his Gospel and it means that what has happened is proof of the divinity of Christ (John 2:11). It is also used for the vindication of the apostles (2 Co. 12:12) and the gospel itself (Heb. 2:3-4).

Since neither Christ, the apostles nor the gospel need vindication any more, miracles are no longer needed for that purpose.

Eternal security and final perseverance

The Scriptures teach that once we are united to Jesus Christ through faith, we are secure in him and will be enabled by the Holy Spirit to go on in the Christian life to the end of our days on earth. This is called eternal security which is worked out in our persevering in godliness, and is based on such texts as Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 10:27-30; Romans 8:1,35-39; Philippians 1:6 and Colossians 1:21-23. Alongside this clear teaching we have to set two possibilities.

Backsliding – a true believer may, for a time, fall away from the Christian life and even be guilty of gross sin, such as David in his adultery (2 Sam. 11-12) or Peter in his blasphemous denial of the Lord (Matt. 26:69-75). Such people eventually, by God's mercy, return to the Lord.

Apostasy – a person may make a public profession of faith in Christ and may even occupy a responsible position in a church, but then fall away altogether and even deny the faith. Notice the example of Saul (1 Sam. 9-31), Balaam (Num. 22-24), Jude 11, and Judas. Such people were never true believers (Matt. 13:20-21; 1 John 2:18-19). This is the



Over to you

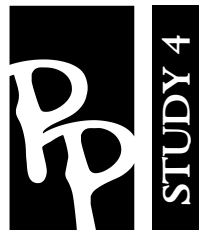
Are you doing all you can to encourage your people to read the Bible regularly and systematically, and to apply its teaching to their lives?

Are you, in your ministry, giving as much stress to the need for believers to persevere in godliness, as to the fact that those who are truly saved through faith are eternally secure in Christ?

It is not easy to tell the difference between a backslider and someone who never had a living faith in Jesus Christ, but we need to work out how we will deal with the problem as it arises. How would you approach this problem?

THE SON BECAME MAN

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Hebrews 2:5-18

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  Two suggestions of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point 1: The defeat of Satan
-  Focus Point 2: The priesthood
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

As we study this book we do well to remember that it was addressed to Jewish Christians who were suffering for their faith and were tempted to desert Christianity and return to Old Testament religion – Judaism.¹ Sometimes, as in our first study, the writer warns them of the serious consequences of doing that, but at other times, as here, he encourages them to remain true to Christ and find strength and courage in him. So the key to this passage is at the end, “he (Christ) is able to help those who are tempted”. The purpose of vv.5-18 is to show that Christ is able to help effectively because he became man and experienced human suffering. But he was destined for glory through suffering, which is true for all believers in Christ.

¹ Judaism of New Testament times was the Old Testament religion with traditions and the detailed interpretation of different laws. The Hebrews to whom this book is addressed would have been brought up in Judaism. The problem was that such people believed Judaism was faithful to the Old Testament. This is why Jesus clashed so often with the Jewish religious leaders of his day

What these verses mean

Verse 5

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking.

Christ became man so that he could die to save sinful people. All that the writer has said about the superiority of the Son over angels comes to a climax in a statement that means that the Son is responsible for every aspect of salvation. This leaves angels a very long way behind. The angels have not been appointed by God to rule “the world to come”, for God has not made the world to come subject to angels. The world to come will be ruled by man in his glorified state. Whilst the rule of man in that world is still future, “the world to come” has already been inaugurated by the Lord Jesus Christ. The writer refers to that world, writing in the present, “about which we are speaking”. He has not been writing of future things but of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, which is of the present, and of the need to persevere in the Christian faith.

Verse 6

But there is a place where someone has testified:

Here is an extended argument based on Psalm 8:4-6 and is another remarkable example of an Old Testament writer’s statement being taken beyond his immediate experience to say things about Jesus Christ who would come centuries later (1 Pet. 1:10-12). The writer does not mention who the “someone” is, nor the location of the “place”. He did not need to give such details because his Jewish readers knew the Old Testament Scriptures. David is the author of Psalm 8 where he meditates on God’s care for humankind and was led to truths about Christ’s humiliation and the glory that would follow. The argument is not easy to understand but it would seem to follow like this –

- Man was created lower than the angels – unlike them he was subject to physical limitation.
- At the same time he was given authority over the world (Gen. 1:27-28).
- But man lost that authority when he fell (Gen. 3), so he cannot control himself (Rom. 8:20-22). Note: This is the only explanation of the present state of the world that fits all the evidence.
- Christ came and, like man, was subject to physical limitations.
- The authority man forfeited and is unable to regain Christ has taken on our behalf as our representative (1 Co. 15: 25-28). The crowning finds its final fulfilment at the end of time when there is the great

restitution or reconciliation, and paradise is regained (Rom. 8:21; Eph. 1:10; Phil. 2:9-11; Acts 3:21).

***“What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?”***

In Psalm 8 David meditates upon a question concerning man. This psalm exalts the greatness of God in creation, and reminds us of much that is said in the book of Genesis. All that God made is a reminder of his glory and power, and the climax of it all is the human race (Ps. 8:3). Compared with the heavens, the moon and stars, what is man that God should concern himself about him? The phrase “son of man” is here used to describe any and every child of man in his weakness.

Verses 7 and 8

***You made him a little lower than the angels;
you crowned him with glory and honour
and put everything under his feet.”***

The answer is that God has done more than simply take notice of humanity. He has given man dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28). Of all created things human beings are the most exalted, being made in God’s image. God has appointed them to be the under-stewards of the natural order. Tragically man rebelled against God and because of his sin now has to face death. The privilege of having dominion over all things has been temporarily removed, but will be restored. This reinstatement of man’s dominion will be achieved by the Lord Jesus Christ coming to the earth. During this period man is placed below the never dying angels. The meaning of the Greek word “a little” is “for a little while”.

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.

Man was made in the image of God, but that image is now spoilt because of sin. Instead of being in control over the natural order man is now found at its mercy. He cannot master the power of the elements such as the oceans, mighty rivers, earthquakes, volcanoes and weather. He is helpless against their forces. Man cannot even control himself and is reckless with the natural world. When the original state of creation is finally restored, man will have dominion again over everything, nothing will be left out. That is to come and, until it does, we live in the fallen world with little visible evidence of the original relationship between man and the natural world.

Verse 9

But we see Jesus,

The key to things being restored to their original order is the Lord Jesus Christ. David, when he wrote Psalm 8, expressed more than he knew at the time. He marvelled at the vastness of the heavens and God's appointment of feeble man to supervise things on earth. Words that were written of man first became true in one who took upon himself the nature of man. David, without fully realising it, was writing about the Lord Jesus Christ and the description of verses 7 and 8 applies to Christ as well. But now all the attention is turned upon Jesus Christ.

who was made a little lower than the angels,

Jesus became the Son of Man in order to retrieve the glory lost by Adam and Eve. In becoming man Christ took upon himself a nature that was capable of dying. The angels did not have this characteristic and so, for this short period, Christ was made lower than the angels.

now crowned with glory and honour

The temporary period is over and Jesus now reigns in triumph in the glory of heaven (Rom. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:6-9) as the ruler of all principalities and powers (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20-21). This came about not by some military or political success, rather the exact opposite – humiliation and death. The humiliation is shown in the lower position he took in relation to the angels. In order to receive this “glory”, our Lord first had to suffer so that many might be saved. No cross, no crown.

because he suffered death,

Our Lord's assumption of glory depended on his “obedience to death” (Phil. 2:5-11).

so that by the grace of God

There is no salvation apart from Christ's suffering for us. The phrase “by the grace of God” means the whole scheme of salvation is entirely on the basis of God's mercy. There is no trace of any human effort or merit involved.

he might taste death for everyone.

“Taste” is used to show us that Christ went through a real experience of suffering, not something trivial. “Death” was at the very heart of man's salvation. We are not saved by the teaching of Jesus, his life or his miracles, but by his death (Rom. 5:6-8). The term “everyone” would be in keeping with the Lord's statements and use of the same term in John 6:37-40. Every single one whom the Father has purposed to save is entrusted to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, and for these he “tasted death”. Every one of these will come to Christ in saving faith, will be

kept by Christ to the very end, and will be glorified to take their place in the new heaven and earth, restored to that original position to reign with Christ in dominion over all things (Gen. 1:26, 28; Rev. 21:1; 22:3-5). Because the Lord Jesus Christ already reigns in triumph and is superior to the angels, the redemption and glorification of his people are fully guaranteed.

Verse 10

In bringing many sons to glory,

We have seen in the previous verse that Christ's death was on behalf of certain people. Now we are told that this meant their "salvation" and that they would be brought at last to glory. This means that by becoming one with Christ believers are adopted as sons (John 1:12; Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:5-7). It is only Christ who can secure this sonship which is sovereignly and graciously bestowed by God (John 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1). In being made one with the Son of God we anticipate glorification, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:16-18, 23) and the blessedness of his presence for ever.

it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Salvation begins with God, the creator and sustainer of all things. He is the offended one and yet it is he who provides a rescue plan for the offenders. This is "the grace of God" we have in verse 9. The term "author" indicates the one who carries out the plan. Our Lord was already perfect in every way, but in order to become our Saviour, he had to suffer. Being made perfect means that Christ displayed his perfection whilst being limited by his human form and going through suffering. Without suffering he would not be "complete" as a Saviour. Christ as man completely identified himself with his people.

Verse 11

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.

In order to suffer and die for us, our Lord had to become one of us. So these verses begin an extended explanation of his becoming man and the blessings that follow. The word "holy" is another way of describing our salvation. Its object is to make us fit for God's holy presence by delivering us from the guilt and pollution of sin. We can describe what is going on as the Son's sanctifying power, setting apart for God a distinct people. Setting apart is what the phrase "made holy" means. The people of God are sanctified through the shed blood of the Son by

becoming one with him through faith (John 17:19; Acts 26:18; 1 Co. 6:11). Being set apart to God as a distinct people covers all aspects of their relationship to Christ. The distinction of God's people being shaped more and more like Jesus is likened to being in the same family.

So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

Through taking on a human form Jesus became one with those whom he came to save. These were given him by the Father, and through his sanctifying work the elect (the ones God chose to give to his Son) become one with the Son (John 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 20-22, 26). Jesus so identifies with his people that "he is not ashamed to call them brothers", never abandoning them at any time, even in the darkest of times (Heb. 13:5b-6). No matter what their inconsistencies and frequent failures (Matt. 28:20; John 20:17; Rom. 8:29) no-one can snatch them from Jesus' hand (John 10:28).

Verse 12

He says,

***"I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."***

The reality of our Lord's humanity is so important that three Old Testament scriptures are quoted in support. The first quote is from Psalm 22:22. Christ's use of this psalm (Matt. 27:46), and other allusions in the psalm to his suffering, gives warrant for the use of this verse to reflect his embracing of his people as "brothers" – as human as they. This is breathtaking, that the Lord, the creator of the universe, should stoop to be a brother to unworthy sinners!

Verse 13

And again,

"I will put my trust in him."

This second quote is from Isaiah 8:17, when in a time of national crisis Isaiah puts his trust in the Lord. This is the appropriate attitude of humans and our text applies it to the man Jesus. Like Isaiah, he had faith in God – he was one with his people.

And again he says,

"Here am I, and the children God has given me."

This quote is also from the same eighth chapter of Isaiah, verse 18. The Lord uses Isaiah's words. Like Isaiah, he shares family life – the Christian family. The Father's children are given to the Son to be his brothers. The importance of all this is that the Son became a real man, not an angel pretending to be a man, but a man with a real human nature.



NOTE: It is good to note in passing that Christians are those whom the Father gave to the Son before the world began. This is mentioned four times in our Lord's prayer in John 17:2,6,9,24.

Verse 14

Since

The author resumes his reasoning, the word “since” being the connecting word.

Verse 9: The Son became incarnate so that he might suffer and die.

Verse 10: Therefore is able to bring “many sons to glory”.

Verse 11: These he presents as his “brethren”, and these he sanctifies.

Verses 12 and 13 provide the scriptural proof to show that the Saviour and the saved are one, completely united.

the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity

“The children” are flesh and blood, and he himself likewise shared in the same. The Son became human as his “brethren” are human. We are human for this is the way that we are by nature, but he is not. He is the eternal Son of God, but he came into this world and “shared in the same”; he came and took upon himself human nature, becoming truly human (Heb. 10:5-6; Luke 1:31, 35; John 1:14; Phil. 2:6-8; 1 Tim. 3:16a). In this way Jesus, the Son of God, became one with us.

so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil –

As a man, in his death, Jesus Christ provided the answer to the power of Satan and the fear of death. The phrase “destroy” means to render powerless or ineffective. Apart from Christ Satan has the power to ensure that sinners are consigned to hell, but through his death on our behalf, the Lord has provided the way of escape from sin and its consequences (1 Co. 15:54-57; Col. 2:15). The Lord Jesus Christ came into the world that the devil and his power, death, are made impotent (1 John 3:8) and eventually both will be destroyed together (Rev. 20:10). Death is conquered by the Lord Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection.²

Verse 15

and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Slavery is being apart from salvation in Christ. In such captivity death is fearful because of the judgement to come and because there is no

² For further reading see *Life by His Death* (Grace Publications – ISBN 0 950547638). You can send for a free copy to Grace Baptist Mission. The address details can be found at the front of this study book.

escape from it. Through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ the stranglehold of sin and death is broken for he brings deliverance to the captive (Is. 42:7; 61:1; Luke 4:18-21) and defeat to the devil (Col. 2:14-15). The believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is no longer in fear of death, the sting of death being disarmed (1 Co. 15:55). Christians, that is those who have been freed from the captivity, may still fear the process of dying because it is an unknown way, but this fear is accompanied by certainty of the “glory that will be revealed in us” (1 Thess. 1:10; Rom. 8:18).



NOTE – this would be a positive message to those readers who feared death because of their faith.

Verse 16

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants.

It is possible that some of those who read this were open to the idea that Jesus was but one of a number of angelic intermediaries between man and God, so the writer makes the real human nature of Christ absolutely clear. Christ did not come to assist angels since they are not guilty before God and therefore they do not need to be rescued. The object of Christ’s attention was Abraham’s descendants. The Lord Jesus Christ became man so that he would be able to take each believer by the hand and effectively deliver him from eternal condemnation. This he does not do for angels but does do on behalf of those who are “the seed of Abraham”. This is not referring to the physical descendants of Abraham (for many of them died in unbelief and were separated from God). The true descendants of Abraham are those who receive salvation through faith alone (Gal. 3:7, 9, 29).



NOTE – the whole of this passage (1:1-2:18) demonstrates that the writer was aware of two heresies that would vex the church. One, that Jesus Christ was man and not God. The other that he was not human but some kind of divine or spirit being. He was both God and man in one glorious yet mysterious person.

Verse 17

For this reason

To make this deliverance from death effective for all his people verse 17 provides the means that were followed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

he had to be made like his brothers in every way,

The Lord Jesus Christ not only became flesh and blood but he also

assumed human feelings. This is what he was “made” in his incarnation. He was not this way by nature for he is the eternal Son of God. The words “in every way” mean that Christ as man must share in the circumstances, temptations, sorrow and pain of other men. What the writer is saying here is that the Lord Jesus Christ became truly human. There are three exceptions in his humanity. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin; he lived his life suffering temptation but was entirely without sin; and his death was for the sins of his people.

in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God,

In this verse the writer refers to the Lord Jesus Christ for the first time as high priest. He has already indicated that the Son purifies from sin (1:3) and also sanctifies (2:11). As a high priest he is “merciful and faithful” for he lived in a body of flesh in a most hostile environment (2:14; 4:15; 5:7-8; 12:2-3). In having experienced life in this world, he is fully sympathetic towards his brethren (4:15) and, therefore, his brethren are assured that he knows and understands their circumstances. He will show all due mercy and faithfulness in fulfilling his office as high priest on their behalf.

and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

The work of the high priest had two main elements: “atonement” (17) and instruction and encouragement (18). Christ’s high priestly service to God included both his obedience to the Father, and his provision of a way of reconciliation to God. The gospel is not, first of all, a message about man’s relationship with man, but about our relationship with a holy God. Christ’s first function as high priest was to make propitiation³ for the sins of the people. It is through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that the righteous judgement of God against sin is turned away (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The Lord Jesus Christ alone can make propitiation for our sins and this he does through the sacrifice of himself. It is this perfect sacrifice which makes atonement for our sins and delivers us from the just wrath of God (Rom. 5:8-11). Man cannot make propitiation for his own sins. Only God can initiate this work and he does this in his grace (Rom. 3:24-25; 5:8; 1 John 4:10).

³ The NIV translation we are using as our text has the word “atonement”. In other translations the word “propitiation” is used. This is a specific English word used to describe a process of appeasement, by a sacrifice where the wrath of God is turned away. Many languages do not have an equivalent word and have to translate propitiation as “atonement”.

Verse 18

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

The second function of the high priest is emphasized in verse 18. Once again the author focuses upon the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. This high priest is different from all others, and also the angels. Jesus was tempted, tested and tried throughout his life (Matt. 4:1-11; 26:36-46) and his dying on the cross involved the most intense suffering (Ps. 22:1-21). The message to suffering Christians was not a promise that the Lord would take them out of their troubles, but that he would be more than adequate to understand their pain and to strengthen and encourage them. He was able to do this because he not only died for them but came alive again for ever. The word “able” shows that he has both willingness and ability to help. The Greek word translated “to help” conveys the idea of ropes that strengthened a ship that was in danger of foundering in a storm (Acts 27:17).



Summary

The writer of Hebrews continues with the theme of the superiority of the Son to the angels. He begins to lay before his readers the implications of the errors should his readers continue to cling to them. Their convictions denied the eternal Son of God his rightful position and authority. The Hebrew believers would have been puzzled, because of the pressure of the old religion they were under, about the relationship between Christ and the angels. They knew that the hierarchy represented in the Scriptures runs from God, who is spirit, to angels, who are spiritual beings, to humans, who have physical bodies. The Son of God became man in order to provide salvation for humankind. In the process he endured much suffering without which he could not have fulfilled his purpose. Because of this he is able to understand the plight of suffering Christians and to enable them to persevere. Christ's sufferings led to glory, and so will the sufferings of Christians lead to their entering glory.



Two suggestions of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – A Christmas sermon – the Son of God became man

Introduction

He came to save the lost (Luke 19:10)

The shepherd sought the sheep (Luke 15:3-7)

1. The fact of the incarnation

The Son of God became a man (John 1:14; Heb. 2:14).

- The conception was miraculous (Luke 1:35) – but his birth was natural (Luke 2:7).
- He was a real man (John 1:14) – he lived, spoke, ate and drank, was tired, felt pain, appreciated human friends - he felt as a man feels.

It is right to say that he was God as though he were not man, and man as though he were not God.

2. Applications for us

- He gave dignity to mankind (Heb. 2:16)
 - ❖ so we should not harm ourselves
 - ❖ so we should not harm others
- he left us an example (1 Pet. 2:21-23)
- he came to save us by dying in our place (Heb. 2:10)
- he returned to heaven with a human body leading the way for all his people (Phil. 3:21; 1 Co. 15:20)
- for him the way to glory was through suffering – so is ours.

Theme: The fruit of Christ's suffering

Introduction

We trust in all that our Lord is and has done in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. We cannot think about everything all at once, so here we consider especially the pain he endured.

1. Our Lord's life was one of suffering – (2:10; Is. 53:3).

We can focus on

- the desert temptation (Matt. 4:1-11)
- the agony of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46)
- the crucifixion (Matt. 27:33-50; Ps. 22:6-21; Is. 53)

His pain was not diminished because he was God, but rather more intense because of his total aversion to sin. On the cross he was identified with the guilt of sin that he did not commit. His whole being would feel absolute revulsion.

2. In verses 10-18 we see five fruits of his suffering

- putting away the wrath of God (2:17)
- deliverance from the fear of death
- Satan's power cancelled (2:14-15)
- bringing his people to glory (2:10)
- strength for his people now (2:18)

This is an example for us of using our suffering for the help of others (2 Co. 1:3-7)



Focus Point 1: **The defeat of Satan**

In many parts of the world there are evangelical Christians who practise what is known as Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare. They believe that satanic forces control whole communities, tribes and cities, and that those forces must be defeated before the areas can be evangelised. So they hold extended prayer sessions and marches to bring about this defeat.

But this ignores the fact that Satan is already a defeated foe. The first promise in the Bible was that Christ would destroy the evil one (Gen. 3:15). Our Lord confirmed that he would do this (John 12:31) and Paul said it happened on the cross (Col. 2:15). Our business is to preach the gospel which includes the victory of Christ over Satan's power, praying the Lord to give power to his Word.

Satan is the personal name of the head of demons. Demons are limited by God's control and have limited power. Satan can only do what God gives him permission to do (Job 1:12; 2:6). Demons are kept in eternal chains (Jude 6) and can be successfully resisted by Christians through the authority that Christ gives them (James 4:7).

Though the power of demons is restrained the Scriptures are clear that we must take seriously demonic involvement in human society. Paul warned Timothy that some would depart from the faith and follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons (1 Tim. 4:1). Yet whilst the New Testament writers recognised the influence of demonic activity in the world, the emphasis is upon the Christian believer to grow in holiness and faith. The focus is upon the Christian to accept responsibility to obey the Lord and not shift the blame for any personal misdeeds to some demonic force. The problem for the believer is the sin that remains in the person's life and not the influence of demons. But our sin does give a foothold for some kind of demonic

influence in our lives. That is why Paul writes that no opportunity is to be given to the devil (Eph. 4:26-27). The breastplate of righteousness is to be used against the wiles of the devil (Eph. 6:14).



Focus Point 2: **The priesthood**

Ever since Adam sinned against God and was excluded from God's presence (Gen. 3:23-24), people have realised that they could not approach God without some kind of mediation. Even in tribes not yet reached by the Bible, there is almost always a recognition that the god has to be appeased in some way, and very often there are those set apart as priests whose main purpose is to provide that means of approach.

In the Bible, immediately after Adam's fall, we find Cain and Abel offering their sacrifices to God and this practice continued (Gen. 8:20-22; 12:8) until God gave Moses the complete pattern of worship we find in the books of Exodus (25-40), Leviticus and Numbers. We call this system the Aaronic priesthood because Moses' brother Aaron and his successors were called to sustain and operate the whole programme.

A priesthood is necessary because sinful man cannot approach God in his own way or on the basis of his own worth. Nowadays many people see no need of a priesthood, because they do not give full recognition to the holiness of God or their own sinfulness, which is offensive and repulsive to him. We all need a priest who is a mediator between us and God. The instruction given to Moses also teaches us that the priest must represent the people in God's presence, and that he can only do this by means of the offering of a sacrifice.

In the New Testament we see Jesus Christ as the one and only priest because all that the Aaronic priesthood did and stood for is once for all time fulfilled in our Lord. It is this that is worked out in the book of Hebrews. Because of this we need now no other priest but Christ, and so no sacrifices are needed, because his sacrifice was "once for all time" (Heb. 10:12). The sacrifice he offered was of himself on the cross. It is for this reason that the New Testament does not describe Christian ministers as priests, but simply pastors, elders or overseers.



Over to you

Do you give full weight to the humanity of Jesus, so that your people have no difficulty in believing that he really understands their trials and has the love, wisdom and ability to help them?

What has been the basis of your preaching salvation? Has the death of Christ on the cross been central to your teaching? Does this study help you to have a clearer understanding of what you should be preaching?

What effect do you think the humiliation and death of Christ and the resulting crown of glory should have upon Christian believers? Is it a problem for the male members in your society and culture to act in a humble way?

THE SON —

GREATER THAN MOSES



Hebrews 3:1-6

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: The church
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The writer of this book is alarmed that some believers, under the stress of persecution for their faith, are tempted to turn away from Christ and go back to their former Old Testament religion. So step by step he shows how Christ is, in fact, the complete fulfilment of the Old Testament and is therefore in every way superior to it. The writer warns of the consequences of departing from Christ, but he also shows the amazing benefits of remaining true to him. Moses was a great Old Testament hero, so it was necessary to show our Lord's superiority to him, which is what we find in this study (3:1-6). The purpose here is not only to magnify the greatness of Christ in itself, but also to develop the theme of 1:1-2:4, namely the serious consequences of rejecting the authority of Christ through disobedience, a theme which the writer treats more fully in 3:7-4:13. The verses of our study passage set out the argument that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is greater than Moses. This is a very big challenge because, apart from Abraham, no-one was more highly esteemed among the Jews than Moses. This was because he led the people out of Egypt and also because, by him, God gave his law.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling,

This is a tactful beginning because there is a great deal in the verses that follow that will shock the readers and will be hard for them to accept. So the writer begins with words that should encourage them. The phrase “holy brothers” shows that the readers belong to a great company of people who love them, and of whom Christ is not ashamed (2:11). “Holy” assumes the readers of the book are true believers, who have been set apart for God and are special to him.

fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

The fixing of our eyes on Jesus is the theme of the book of Hebrews (12:2). The writer is saying that in view of the greatness of Christ that we have already seen, don’t be diverted from him. Christ unites the two functions of apostle and high priest. He is an apostle who speaks to the people from God (specially sent) and is the high priest who represents his people before God. The writer has no reason whatever to be ashamed of Christ, but rather he gladly speaks about him with boldness by confessing his name.

Verse 2

He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house.

Before showing Christ as superior to Moses, the writer continues his tactful approach by stressing the faithfulness of Moses to the work God gave him to do. Jesus, too, was faithful, but whereas Moses served God’s people (God’s house), Jesus was directly responsible to God himself (the one who appointed him). In two respects the work Moses did was preparatory to the work of Christ. Moses led the people out of the slavery of Egypt, prefiguring our Lord’s rescuing all his people from the slavery of sin. Moses and other Old Testament patriarchs were included in this rescue from sin. The second preparatory work was God’s using Moses to give us his law, foreshadowing Christ whose Word has the final authority (Matt. 5:17-20). In Scripture “God’s house” most often refers to a household and not to a building. Here the phrase means the people of God (Num. 12:7), and it is a picture of the church, like a temple, bride or body. After Pentecost the “people of God” would include Gentiles as well as Jews (Eph. 2:14-19).

Verse 3

Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses,

Having reminded his readers that both Jesus and Moses were faithful in their respective spheres of responsibility, the author points out the difference between the two. Moses was a leader among God's people, but he was also one of them, subject to the Lord. This difference is now illustrated by the building of a house.

just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the builder of the household of God while Moses was only a member of the household. Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ must be given the greater honour. He is the builder of the house as foretold by the prophet (Zech. 6:12-13). God promised David that the Son, one of his seed, would build his house (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Chr. 17:11-12). It is the Son of God who is building the church of his people (Matt. 16:18), which is both the household and dwelling place of God (Eph. 2:19-22). This is the temple of living stones built upon the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4-6).



NOTE: New Testament church elders are leaders of the people, as Moses was, but they must always remember that they are also one with the people – both shepherds and sheep – and that Christ is the head of the church whom all must obey.

Verse 4

For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything.

The writer of the book draws attention to the builder of the house or household. In the physical realm the builder has to resort to existing materials. However, God is able to build whatever he purposes, whether in the physical or spiritual realm. The meaning is that because God created all things he is able to build whatever he pleases. He is the sovereign God and he alone is the builder of his house, or household, and none other. In the mind of the author the Lord Jesus Christ is clearly recognised as being God, and it is he, the eternal Son of God, who is the builder of the house, whether the house existed under the old covenant, or presently under the new covenant. There is but one house and the Lord Jesus Christ as the sovereign God is the builder of the house. Perhaps we could think of God and his Son in the sense that an architect and a builder can both be responsible for the same building.

Verse 5

Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,

While Moses was faithful in his place in the house he was but a servant. Most certainly Moses was a great man and occupied a unique position in the history of Israel, but he was only a servant within the house of God (Ex. 14:3; Num. 11:11; 12:7; Deut. 34:5; Josh. 1:2). In this way the writer of the book establishes the difference between the Son and Moses. The Son is the builder of the house and Moses, on the other hand, was a servant in that house.

testifying to what would be said in the future.

Further, Moses as a faithful servant in God's house was a faithful witness by pointing to the future. Moses testified to the prophet who would succeed him and who would declare God's Word with complete finality (Deut. 18:15, 18-19; Acts 3:22-23). Moses made known that he would be followed by one who was far greater than himself and who is the focal point of the law (John 5:45-46). Moses also acknowledged that the One of whom he spoke would bring an even greater revelation (Heb. 1:1-2). By implication this means that the revelation through Moses was incomplete. The writer is also emphasising that the revelation through Moses and the revelation spoken by the Lord are a unified whole. All the prophets bore testimony to Christ (Luke 24:44, 47; John 5:39; Acts 10:43).

Verse 6

But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house.

Much as the readers rightly admired and revered Moses, the folly of any idea of going back to him (Old Testament law and regulations) is exposed. The author concludes his point concerning the relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of the household and Moses as a servant in the household. He also shows the greater importance of this teaching as far as his readers are concerned. The Lord Jesus Christ, as the eternal Son of God, is both the builder of the house and Lord of the house. As the Lord of the house he is therefore superior to Moses. Whatever ideas the readers may have entertained regarding Moses, they must make sure that they understood that even though he was a great man, he was only a servant of the Lord of the house. They must look beyond Moses to the one to whom Moses bore testimony with all the prophets.

And we are his house,

God is establishing his household, which is formed of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Pet. 4:17). The house of God

and the church are the same body which bears testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious head, through his Word (1 Tim. 3:15-16).

if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

The sign of a true child of God, belonging to his household, is perseverance in the faith, described here as holding on “to our courage and hope”. It is only through cleaving to Christ by faith that we are assured of our place in God’s household. The writer is indicating the necessity of persevering in the Christian faith to the end. Through perseverance we demonstrate the reality of our profession of faith in Christ. To fail to endure in the faith creates a large question regarding the genuineness of one’s claim to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The readers of the book were in danger of falling away from which there was little hope of deliverance should they return to the ways of Judaism. Whether it was because of sheer spiritual indifference and apathy, or because they feared further suffering at the hands of persecutors, or perhaps a combination of both, does not make any difference. “The hope of which we boast” is an implied rebuke to those who seemed ready to be ashamed of Christ. Failure to hold on then was the mark of unbelief.



Summary

In studies 2 and 3 (1:1-2:4) the point made was that Christ is superior to angels, so listen to him. Here at the beginning of chapter 3 the author has emphasised that Christ is superior to Moses. If Moses was to be obeyed, then Christ must be much more so. For the Jewish person Moses was their leader and law-giver. The writer does not need to belittle Moses as he writes about Christ. In fact Moses was a forerunner of Christ as he led the people out of captivity in Egypt, pointing to Christ’s saving his people from the captivity of sin. Moses was commended by the writer of the book of Hebrews for his faithful service. The picture used is the building of a house and then its functioning as a household. Moses served as a faithful servant for a temporary period. Christ is the builder of the house and faithfully oversees it for eternity. Those who are part of this eternal household are those who, by faith, trust and persevere in Christ. They hold on firmly. Those who are tempted to give up and go back to following the old ways (Old Testament laws given to

Summary continued on page 50

Summary continued from page 49

Moses) will show that they were never part of this household. These verses prepare the way for what follows (7-19) with its warning of the consequences of not “holding on” or “hearing his voice”, but turning back.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: The church is the household of God

Introduction

The church is likened to a body, a bride, a temple; here it is seen as a household or family.

Sometimes a business that has been run by the same family for many generations is called “a house”. It usually has a great reputation and plentiful reserves. We can think of the church like that.

1. Its Founding

It is “God’s house” because he founded it. In Isaiah 43:1 the word “created” means formed, founded. The household is as secure as God himself, having his protection and his resources.

2. Its Features

It includes all who are born again, having faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:12-13). It embraces Jews and Gentiles out of every nation (Rev. 7:9; Eph. 2:17-19). It stands for biblical truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Christ is its head (Col. 1:18; Matt. 16:18). God uses many like Moses to help in the work (Num. 12:7).

3. Its Future

It is secure. It cannot become “bankrupt” or be “taken over”. It has all God’s resources. Christ is the heir (1:2) and we are co-heirs (Rom. 8:17). All his people can say, “I will dwell in the house(hold) of the Lord for ever.”



Focus Point: The church

In our study passage there are several references to “God’s house”. What does this phrase mean? There are also a couple of references to

those who build. It is easy to see how the phrase can be interpreted to mean a physical building. Historically buildings have been referred to as God's house. The word "church" is commonly used to depict the building designated for Christian worship. In some cases, usually in evangelical circles, the Old Testament word "tabernacle" is used to describe the physical place of worship. This leads to the physical buildings being looked upon as being special, even to the extent of being mystical. We find nothing like this in the New Testament. Those who look upon buildings for worship as something special are adhering to Old Testament concepts, which have been superseded with the coming of Christ.

So what is the New Testament teaching? The emphasis is on people and not buildings. The phrase "God's house" means the same as "church". The latter word comes from the Greek "ekklesia", which means those who are called out for a particular purpose. It is those whom God has called together into an assembly. Christians are called to assemble together in Christ's name for prayer, praise, edification, evangelism and mutual help.

The New Testament uses the word "church" in several different ways:

- A meeting of Christians in a particular assembly, for example at Corinth (1 Co. 11:18). The reference there is to one congregation where there were divisions.
- All Christians living in a particular place, as in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). The persecution was against all Christians who would have belonged to different congregations.
- A house-church. In Colossians 4:15 Paul sends greetings to the church that meets in Nymphas' house.
- A number of churches. John wrote to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 1:4).
- The universal church. The worldwide church is being built on the rock of Jesus Christ and no enemy will overcome it (Matt. 16:18).

Different word-pictures are used to describe the church. The one we have in our study passage, "God's house", is an example. Other phrases used are the people of God, the body of Christ, the bride, the temple of God, the pillar and support of the truth, the flock of Christ.

There are four essential features of God's true church.

1. It is **apostolic**

Christ chose twelve men to be with him throughout his earthly ministry. They heard and saw what Christ did. They were eye-witnesses of his physical resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Christ also

chose Paul after his resurrection to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15-16). Christ commissioned these men to preach his gospel to the world. Jesus promised his apostles that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth (John 16:13) resulting in their authoritative teaching that we find in the New Testament. The apostles occupied a unique historical position standing between Christ and all subsequent generations of men. The church is therefore built on the foundation of the apostles and Jesus Christ himself is the main cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). Any church that claims to be apostolic must submit completely to the biblical testimony of the apostles. That is not the same as church tradition, which means the customs and practices that have been handed down in an unwritten form over the centuries. Each church should ensure that only genuine born again believers, those who have turned to God in repentance and those whose faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ, are allowed to become church members. This is not followed in many places and therefore inevitably brings division and conflict within the church.

2. It is **one**

Today there are many different churches and denominations, many claiming to be the true church. Jesus prayed to his Father that the unity that exists between the Father and Son, and between Christ and his believers may be understood and practised between believers (John 17: 21-23). Why is there such an apparent mismatch between what Jesus prayed about and the divisions that exist in Christendom today?

Paul writes that there is one body and one Spirit. Believers are then encouraged to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3-6). This stems from the way the person becomes a believer in Christ and what takes place. It comes about when a person is born again of the Holy Spirit. Such a person becomes joined to the Lord in one spirit (1 Co. 6:17). This means that a person becomes united to God in such a way that his whole being becomes God-centred, leading to a complete change in behaviour, values and views. Not only is the person united to God in one spirit, but also becomes united to all those who have shared in the same life-changing experience.

Some of the divisions that have taken place occurred needlessly because they were over secondary issues concerning points of doctrine. Some separation has occurred because of error and heresy. An example of this was in the twentieth century when some Protestant denominations became so theologically liberal that they denied almost everything in the Bible. There was no hope of

reforming the corrupted parent body and new ones had to be formed. The unity that Christ prayed about was true unity in the Holy Spirit of all born again believers. The New Testament call for unity is for born again believers to keep and maintain the fundamental oneness of life that the Holy Spirit has given.

It is along these lines that the sixteenth-century Reformers distinguished between the “invisible” church and the “visible” church. The invisible church is the one made up of all those who are God’s elect, born again believers who are truly one in Christ. They will be found across the different churches and denominations. The visible church is a mixed company of people of those who are born again of the Spirit and those who are not. This is what the world sees, the whole mixture of churches and different groups, at times warring against each other. It is essential that born again Christians strive to show and preserve unity with all those who believe the basic doctrines of salvation (the Trinity, the gospel of God’s grace through faith, the deity of Christ, the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible and the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross for our sins). This should lead to a visible union, though they may be from different groups or denominations. They will differ on secondary issues, such as church government, mode of baptism etc., but their duty is to demonstrate and preserve unity in a visible and public manner.

3. It is **holy**

A church is a gathering together of those who claim to believe in and follow Christ. Such people should demonstrate in their lives that they are obedient to Christ’s commandments (1 John 2:4-6, 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:9). This does not mean that a true church will be perfect or that its members are sinless (1 John 1:8). A follower of Christ will not want to continue in ways of sin as though it were a normal thing to do. Such a person hates sin but is not immune from its temptations and will sometimes fall. Since a church is a gathering of individual Christian believers it follows that the quality of the spiritual life in a given church will be no higher or lower than that of its members. We have an example of this in the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2-3). Christ knew the details of their service to him and to some of the churches he gave warnings. To the church at Ephesus he told them to repent or he would remove the light of his presence (Rev. 2:5).

A church (a group of believing people) will eventually cease to be Christ's church if they are not holy. That means that such a group is to be separated from the ways of this world by its members showing through their words and by their actions that they belong to and follow Christ. A church may meet and hold services but may be disowned by Christ. Without holiness of life and purity of doctrine Christ refuses to acknowledge any gathering of people as a true church of his.

4. It is **universal**

The good news that Christ came to preach was for all men and women regardless of their nationality, social position, colour or moral condition. The Christian faith is not racially exclusive (Matt. 28:18-19). One of the true marks of an apostolic church is that it refuses to identify itself with any particular nationality or class of people. It is a missionary church, opening its doors and its heart to all men everywhere. Read James' comments in the second chapter of his letter concerning the subject of favouritism.

Source: *Foundations of the Christian Faith*; Roger Weil (Grace Publications)



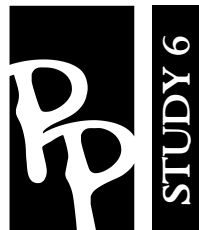
Over to you

If you are a leader in your church do you act as a ruthless manager or a humble servant? As you answer this honestly in your own heart see passages in Matthew 20:25-28 and 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.

What impression do you give to your congregation about what the church is? Do you make out that the building in which you meet is some special, sacred place? Do they understand that it is they who are supposed to make up the church?

Can you identify things that people in your congregation cherish which challenge the superiority of Christ? They will never admit such things openly. How are you going to deal with the problem?

WARNING AGAINST UNBELIEF



Hebrews 3:7-19

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to section 3:7-4:13
-  Comment on spiritual rest
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Final judgement
-  Over to you

Introduction to section 3:7-4:13

This whole section will take up two studies and is the application of 3:1-6 (study 5). It follows the same argument as we found in 2:1-4 that Christ is superior to angels. Consequently if the word through the angels carried authority, how much more does the Word through Christ, the Son. In study 5 the writer demonstrated how Christ is greater than Moses, the revered leader who led Israel out of captivity in Egypt. If people were punished because of their disobedience to Moses, and their refusal to enter the promised land, how much more serious the consequences for those who refuse the gospel through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This part of the book is one fairly long argument or appeal; it is one whole piece and does not divide easily into parts. The outline on the next page may help us to follow the reasoning:

3:7-11	A warning based on the example of Israel's failing at first to enter the promised land because of their unbelief.	Study 6
3:12-15	Exhortations based on the fact that the day of opportunity to enter gospel rest is still open.	
3:16-19	Heart-searching questions designed to expose hard-heartedness and unbelief.	
4:1-2	The gospel is still preached and the day of opportunity is still here.	Study 7
4:3-7	Argument developed from God's rest on the 7 th day of creation.	
4:8-11	Argument further developed from the experience of Joshua.	
4:12-13	This whole argument is the Word of God to the readers of this letter, and as such, it searches them to reveal their true spiritual state.	

Comment on spiritual rest

There are many references to “rest” in these verses, so we need to be clear as to its meaning. Having been rescued from slavery in Egypt, the children of Israel should have been ready to occupy the promised land, but many of them failed to do so because they were hardened in unbelief (Num. 13-14). The land God promised was described as a place of “rest from their enemies” (Deut. 12:9; Josh. 23:1). The writer of Hebrews uses this as a picture of our salvation. Having been rescued from the slavery of sin, we find “rest” in Christ. He argues that there was more to the rest of the land God promised than merely taking possession of a piece of land. This was understood by some of the Old Testament writers, as one of the Psalmists refers to a “rest” being available to God's people. There is still a “rest” in the gospel in New Testament days.

So we conclude that the promised rest is spiritual. Further evidence of this is that at least Moses and Aaron, and perhaps others, died in the desert, but they were not smitten with unbelief and undoubtedly entered God's spiritual rest. Our rest in Christ is a place of peace and security that comes from total reliance on him for deliverance from sin

and all its consequences. Just as God rested on the seventh day of creation to contemplate his completed work, so we can enter into rest. This rest moves a person away from the constant labour of trying to please God to earn his/her salvation (4:10). This rest is a total satisfaction in Christ and his finished work for us, not merely on one day of the week, but every day. This we enjoy by faith now in anticipation of the perfection of this rest in glory.

What these verses mean

Verse 7

So, as the Holy Spirit says:

The words that follow are quoted from Psalm 95:7-11 and were therefore given by the Holy Spirit. This is one of many confirmations that the writers of the Old Testament were guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). The implication is that the Spirit is still speaking through the writer of this book.



NOTE: – for explanation of differences between the wording of the quotation here and our Old Testament see Point 6 “Quotations from the Old Testament” in the Introduction on page 4.

“Today, if you hear his voice,

Our writer borrows the urgent appeal the Psalmist made to the people of his day to press home his message. “Today” implies there may not be a tomorrow.

Verses 8-9

do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, ⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me

The Psalmist used the example of the people of Israel under Moses (Num. 13-14). Because of their unbelief God barred them from the land he promised Abraham, called here his “rest” (Deut. 12:9; Josh. 23:1). Just as the people in the desert hardened their hearts in unbelief, and similarly the people in the Psalmist’s day were tested, so the readers of Hebrews were in danger of the same by turning away from Christ.

and for forty years saw what I did.

This spirit of unbelief characterised the Israelites throughout the entire forty years of the wilderness journey. The rebellion at Meribah was not an isolated event (Ex. 17:7). The hardening of the heart was a process which lasted throughout that generation. There was not a single day that passed without God’s showing his mercy as bread dropped from

heaven, clothing never wore out, and God manifested his power, protection and guidance by way of the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night (Deut. 2:7, 8:2-4). However, such expressions of God's mercy, in general, were received in unbelief and with stony hearts throughout that forty-year period (Acts 13:17-18).

Verse 10

That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.'

This verse has the phrase "That is why" ("therefore" in other translations), which is not found in Psalm 95 and is inserted by the author of the letter. He has done this to draw the conclusion, or emphasise the result of the unbelief and hard-heartedness of the Israelites. God was disgusted with the people. The reference to the Israelites' always going astray in their hearts indicates that by rejecting the Word, their thoughts and emotions habitually departed from God's revealed path (Is. 53:6; Ps. 119:176). The unbelieving Israelites made no attempt to be informed of the ways of God. They preferred to remain in ignorance of their sins and failed to appreciate the manner in which God was providing for them during the wilderness journey. This is characteristic of the unbelieving heart of the natural man (Rom. 1:18-21; Eph. 4:18). The more the Israelites rejected God's Word, the more their unbelieving hearts were hardened and darkened in ignorance.

Verse 11

So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

The terrible consequences of unbelief are announced. God did not suddenly explode in anger as a man but he acted according to a solemn oath (Deut. 1:34-35). This reflects the intensity and depth of God's displeasure. While God never takes pleasure in punishing the sinner (Ezek. 18:32; 33:11), sin must be punished (Ezek. 18:4, 20, 23). Because of unbelief the Israelites disqualified themselves from the blessings of Canaan and brought themselves under the judgement of God. God's judgement was that they would not enter his rest. This came when Israel had the opportunity to take possession of the land but refused in unbelief and disobedience (Num. 14:22-23; 26:64-65a; 32:11-13).

What follows is an extended appeal to them to think again, or else they would also suffer God's wrath. It is a three-fold appeal for them:

- Not to turn away (3:12)
- To encourage one another (3:13)
- To hold on firmly (persevere) (3:14-15)

Verse 12

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

A solemn warning now follows. They are to take heed, or take care. It is not simply a matter of whether these Jewish believers return to Judaism or not. To turn back from the Christian faith involves the greatest danger imaginable for they would be manifesting the very same marks of the unbelieving Israelites who failed to gain entry to Canaan. Faith in God is to be exercised by the heart, or the inner being of the individual. It is only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that the heart is cleansed from an evil conscience. Turning aside from the Lord Jesus Christ is turning away from the living God. Any god other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the true and living God. Therefore to turn from him is to turn to vanity and emptiness, for all other gods are false (Acts 14:15; 1 Thess. 1:9). Further, the living God will not tolerate any rival to hold sway in the hearts of his professing people (Ex. 20:2-3; Deut. 5:6-7).

Verse 13

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

The readers are shown how they ought to help each other. Individual Christians are to help one another for we are all members of the one body of Christ (John 13:34-35; Rom. 12:5; 1 Co. 12:12-14, 25-27; 1 Thess. 4:18; James 5:16; 1 Pet. 4:9-10). In this instance the readers are to encourage and strengthen each other in the Christian faith (10:24-25). They are to engage in this Christian activity on a daily basis while it is called "Today". During the wilderness journey of forty years the Israelites frittered away countless opportunities to encourage one another and instead spent much of their time complaining about what they perceived to be difficulties along the way. We must be careful that we do not postpone encouraging our fellow believers because eventually it will be too late, the day of opportunity will be lost forever (10:24-25; 2 Co. 6:2). Failure to encourage may end with hardened hearts through the deceitfulness of sin. Sin does deceive and will quickly turn the heart into a rebel (Gen. 3:1-6). To persist in sin and disobedience to God's Word will result in a hardened heart which cannot be changed (6:4-6, 10:26-27; 2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Verse 14

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

The writer takes up again the concept of the believer's being one with

Christ. As Christ identified with those he came to save and they have become one with him in his sanctifying work (see 2:11), so believers are united to Christ as the body is to the head (Rom. 12:5; 1 Co. 12:27; Eph. 4:15-16; 5:23, 30). However this only becomes clear if we hold firmly to the end. Our profession of faith and participation in the ordinances and other Christian activities will prove to be empty without that determination to persevere to the end. Paul warns his Corinthian readers of the ever present danger of relapsing into the old ways like the Israelite unbelievers (1 Co. 10:1-5). They did not turn out to be genuine and showed that their faith lacked substance, falling into all manner of sin (1 Co. 10:6-10).

Verse 15

As has just been said:

**“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”**

In order to inherit the promises it requires spiritual application and diligence in a spirit of steadfastness or stability. Psalm 95:7 is quoted again to remind the recipients of this book that rejection of the Word of God constitutes rebellion. They must listen to what God is saying and apply his Word to their lives.



What has been said calls for self-examination; it is the Word of God doing its work. So in the final verses of the chapter and our study we have three questions, two of which are answered by further questions, with a final word of conclusion. The author's object is to make plain his reasoning by applying to the present attitude of his readers the lessons learned from the unbelieving Israelites.

Verse 16

Who were they who heard and rebelled?

The meaning of the first question is clear. It refers to the unbelieving Israelites who having heard the Word of God rejected it in unbelief with a rebellious spirit. It was as if they were daring to challenge the very authority of God.

Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?

The writer answers the first question with another question to make his readers think much more intently. That entire generation which did not truly believe had seen the very might of God displayed on their behalf as the Lord triumphed over the gods of the Egyptians. God had led his people out of cruel bondage as victors in battle, and on through

the Red Sea, destroying the pursuing Egyptian army in the process (Ex. 12:31-36; 13:21, 22; 14:19-31). Although having witnessed such an awesome display of the power of the Almighty and his covenant faithfulness, the people were unmoved, and persisted in unbelief. There were exceptions, of course, such as Moses, Caleb and Joshua, and perhaps others who died of natural causes during the wilderness journey. But the very large majority remained a sin-hardened people.

Verse 17

And with whom was he angry for forty years?

The second question is asked. The hardness of heart of the Israelites was a long-term condition, persisting for a lifetime, and manifested by a refusal to trust the Lord.

Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?

The writer supplies the answer to his second question. These Israelites failed the forty-year period of testing for they were persistently stubborn. The heart which refuses to acknowledge the goodness and longsuffering of God will experience even greater condemnation (Rom. 2:4-5). We can never escape our accountability to God, and for this reason God's judgement fell upon those unbelieving Israelites.

Verse 18

And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?

The third and final question is posed. Once again the meaning of the question is perfectly clear. God had promised the land of Canaan to his people and where there was failure to exercise faith with obedience he had determined that all such individuals would not be allowed entry to that land. The answer to the question then is "those who disobeyed" (Num. 14:22-23). Unbelief will not only disqualify the individual from the blessing of God but it also guarantees the wrath of God (John 3:18, 36). The writer equates unbelief with disobedience (2 Thess. 1:8). There is no such thing as a persistently disobedient believer. Wherever there is genuine faith there will be obedience. For example see Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9:6.

Verse 19

So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

There is a clear conclusion to be drawn from the experience of the unbelieving Israelites. If the readers of Hebrews fail to persevere in the Christian faith they will be showing the evidence of unbelief. Just like their forefathers who were unable to enter Canaan because of unbelief, they too will be barred from entry to the eternal rest of the new heavens

and new earth. The Lord Jesus Christ has secured for every believer a place in this eternal and glorious rest. This rest is of perpetual blessing and is so much more than the rest of the physical land promised to Abraham's descendants. Moses could only lead the people to Canaan, the land of earthly blessing, but our Lord Jesus Christ leads his people to the heavenly country of unending blessing. In this way the Lord Jesus Christ is superior to Moses. This hope must never be lost through carelessness, indifference or unbelief.



Summary

In the opening six verses of chapter 3 (Study 5) the writer pointed to the Son's superiority to Moses. This the writer showed by comparing the two. In our present study there is a change in emphasis. Moses called the people to believe the Word of God, warning them of the terrible consequences of unbelief and disobedience. If it was true with those who heard the word declared by Moses, so it is the same with those who profess to believe in the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ. The author challenges his readers with a warning using Psalm 95. Israel failed to enter the promised land of Canaan because of their unbelief. He then exhorts them not to turn away, but to encourage each other to carry on and persevere. To make his Hebrew readers see the danger that they were in if they turned away from the Christian faith the writer concludes with three questions. The example of unbelief that kept the Israelites out of Canaan is to be applied to the Jews who had professed faith in Christ. Going back to Judaism would be a sign of unbelief, a failure to trust in the promises of God through Christ. This would result in their failure to enter the eternal rest of the new heavens and new earth.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – The consequences of unbelief (Heb. 3:7-18)

Introduction

It is so important that we listen to the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ, believe it and continue in it. The Israelites who were delivered from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses are a prime example of those who heard the Word of God and witnessed the power of God but who did not truly believe. The Israelites were persistent in their

unbelief and disobedience throughout the wilderness journey. Therefore they died in the wilderness and were not allowed to enter Canaan. The writer of the book uses the example of Israel to emphasise the importance of continuing in the Christian faith. Failure to endure will result in the same tragic consequences - disqualification from the glorious hope of eternal life.

1. The case stated in the Word of God

- (a) The writer introduces the quotation of Psalm 95:7-11 as being spoken by the Holy Spirit. This means that this is God's Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:15-17). This is not mere human opinion.
- (b) In the Psalmist's day his listeners were exhorted to hear the voice of God. This meant listening to the Word of God and obeying it with a believing heart.
- (c) To fail to respond to the voice of God means the heart will be hardened in unbelief and disobedience.
- (d) The Israelites in the wilderness manifested unbelief and disobedience at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1-7) and did so repeatedly throughout the forty-year wilderness journey (Acts 13:17-18). It was not an isolated case.
- (e) Their hearts had never been changed. They were ignorant of God's ways and they did not wish to be any different (Rom. 1:18-21; Eph. 4:18).
- (f) God resolved that they would not be allowed to enter Canaan, the land of blessing (1 Co. 10:5-6).

2. The severe warning

- (a) Any who profess faith in Christ are warned against having a similar heart of unbelief.
- (b) To fail to continue in the faith is to turn aside from God.
- (c) Believers should endeavour to encourage one another to persevere in the faith for believers are one with Christ (Heb. 10:24-25). This should be observed every day or whenever necessary.

3. The terrible consequence of disobedience, or conclusion of the teaching

- (a) God has called us to faith in Christ through his Word, e.g. Acts 16:30-32.
- (b) God will judge all who do not believe and obey his Word, i.e. continue in the Christian faith (Acts 17:31).
- (c) God will judge all who remain unrepentant and unmoved by the goodness and blessing of God (Rom. 2:4-5).



Focus Point: **Final judgement**

There was real danger for those of a Jewish upbringing who had become followers of Jesus Christ to return to their old roots. Highlighting the disaster to give in to such temptation was the purpose behind the writing of the book of Hebrews. In our present study the consequences of giving up are clearly set out. The writer uses the historical example of the Israelites who rebelled against God and because of their disobedience did not enter the promised land of Canaan. The application to the readers of Hebrews was that disowning Christ was rebellion against God which would result in their being denied entry into the spiritual promised land of a new heaven and a new earth. They will be judged as everyone will, but they will have to account for their unbelief. What is this judgement? When will it take place? Let us have a look at what the Bible teaches.

The fact of the final judgement

The Bible declares that there will be a final judgement of believers and unbelievers. They will stand before the judgement seat of Christ in resurrected bodies and hear his proclamation of their eternal destiny (Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 2:5; Rev. 20:11-15). This is called the final judgement because it is the coming together of all God's blessings and judgements throughout history. God brought about blessings and deliverance from danger to those who trusted him. Examples are Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. God also brought judgement on those who persisted in disobedience and unbelief. The judgements included the flood, the dispersion of the people after the tower of Babel, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. These judgements continued through history upon individuals and nations. But the final judgement is still to come (2 Pet. 2:9-10).

The time of the final judgement

The final judgement will occur after a set period (termed a thousand years¹ in Revelation). There will be rebellion when Satan will be loosed from his prison and will come out to deceive nations. He will gather them for battle but God will decisively defeat this final rebellion (Rev. 20:9-10). Judgement will then follow. No-one except God knows

¹ This period is also referred to by theologians as the millennium. There are different views held about the millennium and the second coming of Christ. For a discussion of these positions see Focus Point on the Second Coming in the Preachers' Study Papers on James (Study 15, page 134).

when these final acts will take place. Many have tried to work these things out from the Bible but all their calculations have come to nothing. Every generation over the centuries has thought that it was about to happen in their lifetime. Today is no exception. The Bible instructs us to live as if the final judgement is about to happen, but we have no idea when that will be.

The nature of the final judgement

Jesus Christ will be the judge

He will judge the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1). Jesus has been ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead (Matt. 25:31-33; Acts 10:42). This right to judge the whole universe is something that has been given by the Father to the Son (John 5:26-27).

Unbelievers will be judged

The judgement will include the dead, great and small (Rev. 20:12). That means that all unbelievers are included. Every man will be judged according to his works (Rom. 2:5-7). The judgement of unbelievers will include degrees of punishment because the dead will be judged by what they have done (Rev. 20:12-13). Jesus taught about the servant who knew his master's will but did not act according to it. He would receive a severe beating. But he who did not know and acted against his master's will, will receive a lighter beating (Luke 12:47-48). One can see the severity this principle held for Israelites rescued from Egypt and Jews who professed Christ. It applies to all who have heard the gospel and rejected it.

No stone will be left unturned. An account will have to be given for every word said, deed done and thought (Eccl. 12:14; Matt. 12:36). On the day of judgement the secrets of people's hearts will be made public (Luke 12:2-3).

Believers will be judged

All shall stand before the judgement seat of God and give an account to God (Rom. 14:10-12). In Matthew 25:31-46 we have the picture of the final judgement where the shepherd (Christ) separates the sheep from the goats.

Believers then will be judged. Their judgement will not be the same as that of unbelievers. For the believer judgement is to be an evaluation of their Christian life to establish the level of reward. Believers should not fear that judgement will bring them eternal condemnation (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1). The day of judgement can be looked upon as one in which believers are rewarded and unbelievers punished (Rev. 11:18). Whilst the unbeliever will have to account for all their deeds, words

and thoughts, Scripture informs us that for believers their sins are not brought out for remembrance (Mic. 7:19; Ps. 103:12; Is. 43:25; Heb. 8:12). The believer will want to please God and accept what God says through his Word. Knowing of the final judgement the believer will have a motive for godly living.

Scripture teaches that there will be a degree of reward for believers. Paul writing to the Corinthian Christians tells them to be careful how they build the church (1 Co. 3:12-15). Poor work will be burnt up but the believer himself will be saved from the fire. Jesus told the parable of the ten talents (Luke 19:17, 19) to teach degrees of reward for believers at the judgement. However, we must not misunderstand what the new heavens and new earth will bring for the believer. Each person will experience joy that will be full and complete for eternity. Happiness will not depend on what rewards we have but in taking delight in God and rejoicing in the status and recognition God has given us.

Angels will be judged

Rebellious angels have been put into gloomy dungeons to be kept until judgement (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). This means that rebellious angels (demons) will be subject to judgement on the last day as well. The position of righteous angels is not clear from the Bible. Paul makes reference to believers judging angels (1 Co. 6:3). The text does not give us enough information for us to be certain of the situation for righteous angels on the last day.

Source: Foundations of the Christian Faith; Roger Weil (Grace Publications).



Over to you

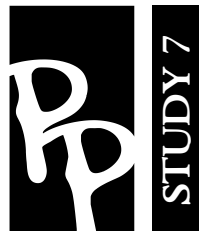
Are there people in your pastoral care who have come to faith in Christ from another religion? Do they face pressure to return from the people they have left? From what you have studied from this passage how are you able to help them?

Do you recognise the sin of unbelief in your congregation? How does this passage help you to deal with this issue?

Do believers in your church realise the important role they have in encouraging and strengthening fellow Christians? If not you have a lot of work to do. Where will you begin?

ENCOURAGEMENT TO

ENTER CHRIST'S REST



Hebrews 4:1-13

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: The Sabbath
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Here is the final application of the superiority of Christ to Moses. Moses was not able to lead the people of Israel into the promised land of rest, but in Christ there is spiritual rest today. This is now argued and enforced by reference to God's rest on the seventh day of creation and to Joshua's experience. The message of the rest and of the dire consequences of failing to enter into it is like a sharp sword that tests the human conscience and leaves us without excuse.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

The writer now explains more clearly what he had in mind concerning the word "rest". In the previous section he emphasised the need to persevere in the Christian faith. This was based upon the fact that most of the Israelites who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt had failed to enter the promised land because of unbelief. This spirit of rebellion in refusing to obey the Word of God through Moses had brought on them the severe judgement of God. They died in the wilderness before they reached Canaan. This is what is meant by the

phrase “to fall short”. Canaan represented the picture of the “rest” of eternal blessing. The promise of entering eternal rest therefore has not changed or fallen by the wayside. It still stood and the readers of this book had to realise that forsaking the Christian faith in favour of Judaism would result in failure to enter the eternal rest. They would be found to have fallen short of entering eternal rest. By not listening to the Word of God through the Lord Jesus Christ they would be showing that they were of the same mould as the Israelites of old and unworthy of eternal life. God has promised eternal rest for all who persevere in the faith.

Verse 2

For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

The “rest” promised to the people of Israel pointed to the “rest” promised in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:28-30). Just as the promise held out to the Israelites was both rescue from slavery and entry into the promised land (Ex. 6:6-8), so the gospel is about both rescue from the power and consequences of sin and entry into the “rest” of peace and assurance in Jesus Christ. The people in Moses’ day failed to grasp the whole message by faith; this must not happen either to the readers or to us.

Verse 3

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

The key to understanding this passage is in the words “my rest” that are quoted from Psalm 95 in this verse. Once again the writer is emphasising that the promises of God are to be received through faith. It is faith in these promises which the people of God have in common.

“So I declared on oath in my anger,

“They shall never enter my rest.”

Psalm 95:11 is quoted again to establish the truth that God does have a rest for his people, “my rest”. The context is that of the Israelites’ wandering for forty years in the wilderness without any clearly defined objective. The principle established was entry to God’s rest being barred on the grounds of failure to persevere in the faith. This is just as applicable now as in the days of the unbelieving Israelites. Nothing has changed in any way. The promise of rest is entered through obedient faith and the rejection of the promise in unbelief is met with the judgement of God.

And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world.

This rest has been in existence for man to share since the creation of the world was finished. Once God had completed his creation work then he rested. Everything that God had purposed to create was finished and every part of the universe reflected the glory, majesty and wisdom of God as one perfect and complementary unit. There was nothing lacking and nothing which spoke of chaos and disharmony.

Verse 4

For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.”

All that God had undertaken had been accomplished within six days. It is God’s rest into which the believers enter, the rest he enjoyed after six days of creative work. Each of the six days had an end (Gen. 1:5-6, 13, 19, 23, 31), but the seventh day of rest had no end (Gen. 2:1-3). God rested forever from creation work, satisfied and delighted with its completed perfection.

Verse 5

And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”

The writer, to confirm the point that entry to God’s rest is by faith, once again quotes Psalm 95:11 and the relevant words, “They shall never enter my rest.”

Verse 6

It still remains that some will enter that rest,

This means that there is a rest which is different from and far greater than the earthly promise relating to the Israelites’ entering Canaan. Others will enter this rest and it will be continual for the writer informs us that it still remains. It was available in the Psalmist’s day, for the readers of Hebrews and is still available for us living now.

and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.

This is a reference to the majority of adult Israelites who came out of Egypt and who died in the wilderness because of persistent unbelief, rebellion and disobedience. They were condemned by God in their unbelief, dying in the wilderness and not being allowed to enter the rest of Canaan (Heb. 3:16-19).

Verse 7

Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before:

***“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”***

The promise of rest still remains for God continues to speak about his rest many years after the events of the wilderness journey. God spoke through King David. By the time of David, the Israelites had been living in Canaan for about 250 years. The promise of earthly rest had been fulfilled but God still speaks of a greater rest which remains to be entered through faith. And God speaks of that rest “today”, providing the present hearer of his Word with the opportunity to enter his rest by faith. So once again the appeal is repeated, “Do not harden your hearts.”

Verse 8

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.

The argument here is that although Joshua did lead people into the promised land of Canaan, its significance is not to be limited to that historical event. The reason for this is that there continues to be a promise of rest for the people of God. This rest is experienced by all who trust wholly in the work of Christ to be saved from their sin (Phil. 3:4-9). If under Joshua's leadership Israel had found complete fulfilment of the promise of rest, then God would not still speak “about another day”. The “rest” of Canaan was only symbolic of the eternal rest which believers have in Christ (Heb. 11:13-16; 12:18-24; 13:14).

Verse 9

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;

The author makes this conclusion. It is God's intention that his people share in his Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:2). The exhortation is to strive to enter this “rest” (Luke 13:24). Many people have a great struggle to rid themselves of every vestige of self-trust and simply rest in Christ. This is not the Sabbath rest of this creation but one that is eternal and glorious. This is promised to “the people of God”. The people of God are a clearly identifiable group, a people constituted under the terms of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:8-12), renewed inwardly, loving God with all their heart, walking humbly and obediently, knowing the Lord personally, cleansed from their sins and fully forgiven. These people are sovereignly chosen by God from all cultures of the world (1 Pet. 1:9-10), worshipping God acceptably and declaring his praises.

Verse 10

for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

Just as God ceased from his labours on the seventh day, so all genuine believers who enter the rest of God cease from their works. Those who die in Christ enter the glory of heaven and are pronounced as being “blessed”, the Holy Spirit declaring of them, “They will rest from their labours” (Rev. 14:13). This is where the rest of God is identified from a heavenly perspective. However, believers first enter the rest of God in this life when they come to Christ in saving faith (Matt. 11:28-30).

Verse 11

Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

While we are still living in the body of flesh we still have to toil and labour, experiencing suffering in the process. This makes the prospect of entering the heavenly rest all the more attractive and gives the believer incentive to persevere in living a godly life no matter what the cost (Rom. 8:18). One of the most encouraging and beautiful aspects of life in the new heavens and new earth involves the release from everything that has caused the believer pain and suffering while living in the body of flesh (Rev. 7:13-14, 16-17; 21:4). This release is not to an existence of inactivity but to one of continuous and unbroken service and worship of the living God (Rev. 7:13-15; 22:3-5). This is the eternal rest that God promises to those whom he claims as his people (Rev. 21:3). The blessing of the “rest” of God begins in this life and will be fully realised in the new heavens and new earth. If we fail to be diligent to the end there is the danger that our profession of faith will prove to be false. This would mean that we would be no different from the unbelieving Israelites who fell short of the promised land, just as unbelieving and just as disobedient.

Verse 12

For the word of God is living and active.

The connection between these concluding two verses of our study and what has gone before is the heart-searching that has been involved. The writer's words were the Word of God subjecting his readers to serious self-examination as to the reality of their faith. The writer describes the Word of God as living and active. The Word of the living God cannot be anything else for it flows from the very being of God. God and his Word are quite inseparable. The Word of God is not a fixed or dead letter but is full of power and vigour. It is the instrument through which God created the world (Gen. 1; Ps. 33:6; Heb. 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5) and through

which he sustains the world (Heb. 1:3; 2 Pet. 3:7). His Word is the means through which he awakens the soul to new life and will call the entire world to judgement at the last day. The Word of God never fails in all that God purposes to accomplish (Is. 55:11).

Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow;

The writer likens the Word of God to a sword that always penetrates the depth of our innermost being, “soul and spirit”. The Word of God cuts in both directions, to save and to judge (John 6:63; 12:48; 2 Co. 2:14-16) and never loses its sharpness. It cuts deeply into the being of those who hear it. The Word of God is so sharp that it cuts right through the outer defences and enters the innermost recesses of the heart and mind. Just as the sword of steel cuts through flesh and bone, exposing the marrow, or inner part of the bone, so the Word of God penetrates the conscience of the individual, producing genuine faith (Acts 2:35) or angry rejection and hostility (Acts 5:33; 7:54). It can be very painful, leaving us with nothing to say.

it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As the Word of God cuts into the individual in its dynamic power it discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. Surgery and X-ray machines may be able to bring to light the malfunctions and diseases of the physical and inner organs of the body but only God’s Word can reveal and expose the deepest thoughts and motives of the person. God does not look on the outward form but upon the heart, in a way that no other can (1 Sam. 16:17; Jer. 17:9, 10; Rev. 2:23).

Verse 13

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

What the description of God’s Word in verse 12 means is emphasised in that nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight (Ps. 139:7-12). If God’s Word has such penetrating power then it means that God is able to use it to examine the innermost recesses of the soul. We cannot possibly escape giving account to him who knows the extent of the wickedness of our hearts. This is what David acknowledges in Psalm 139. But as we stand destitute and helpless in our depravity, we may cast ourselves upon the mercy of God and cry to him for cleansing according to the merits and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through cleaving to him alone we will enter the bliss of God’s eternal rest, even though we are most unworthy of such blessing (Ps. 139:17-18, 23-24).



Summary

The key word of this passage is “rest”. The book of Hebrews was written for those of a Jewish upbringing who had put their trust in Christ, but were now under pressure to give up and return to their old religious ways. They would therefore have been familiar with the Old Testament. The writer has been showing these Jewish Christians that the one they have trusted in, Jesus Christ, is superior to anyone else. He is superior to Moses, the famous patriarch of the nation. The context of our study is the refusal of the people to listen to Moses. As a result they did not reach Canaan, the land promised by God to Abraham for his descendants. Entering the land was described as finding “rest”, from the long journey and battles.

This idea of “rest” is a picture of a more perfect and permanent “rest” based upon God’s resting after his work of creation. The seventh day of rest continues unlike each of the six days of creation that had an end. In the same way that those who rebelled against God’s instructions did not reach the “rest” of the land of Canaan, so too those who do not follow God’s way will not have the eternal “rest” of heaven. Psalm 95:11 is quoted to show how seriously God looks upon this matter. God’s way is through faith in Jesus Christ (the gospel – good news). Giving up following Christ will put these Jewish professing Christians in the same position as that of their stubborn forefathers in the desert of Moses’ day. There will be no false believers who will enter the eternal “rest” for God’s Word searches and exposes our true nature. Nothing is hidden from God and he will know whether we have truly followed the path he has set – trusting only in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for salvation.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Gospel rest

Introduction

The invitation of Christ – Matt. 11:28-30

- (i) The world is full of people who are restless and stressed.
- (ii) They resort to many kinds of help – music, sport, entertainment, religion, drink, drugs, therapies.

(iii) True rest is found in Christ because he deals with our relationship with God.

The rest Christ gives –

- is not an escape – he gives rest in the midst of our problems.
- is not primarily physical – it has to do with the heart – but it has beneficial physical effects.
- is deliverance from the guilt and power of sin.
- is satisfaction with the work of Christ for us in his life and death.
- is freedom from fear of condemnation.

Application

We must strive to enter this rest because we naturally cling to the idea of saving ourselves.



Focus Point:

The Sabbath

Mention is made of the Sabbath in verse 9 of our study. It is in the context of the Sabbath-rest and God's resting on the seventh day after he finished his work of creation. The word "Sabbath" means putting an end to something. The Sabbath was the day which put an end to the week of work – a rest day. The seventh day of creation was the climax of God's creative acts. People work to provide themselves a living and need a time of rest. God gave the Sabbath to the Israelites as a day of rest soon after they left Egypt to remind them that they were slaves in Egypt and God had rescued them (Ex. 16:23, 29). The Sabbath was not to be just a day of rest from the weekly labours but time to spend with God, to rejoice over his creation and to think about him.

The Sabbath was a day that belonged to God (Lev. 19:3; 23:3). God has the right to demand people's obedience. Those who broke the Sabbath day denied God's rule over them and this was punishable by the death penalty (Ex. 35:2). The Israelites did not always keep the Sabbath and became lax in applying the required punishment. This was the situation in Jeremiah's and Nehemiah's days. Even when the day was kept it was mere ceremonial and out of duty. To many it got in the way of business and making money.

In the period between the Old and New Testaments the Jews attended the synagogues on Sabbath days, but their emphasis was more on study

of the law than on the worship of God. Many extra traditions were added to biblical laws, including those that made Sabbath-keeping more rigid. By the time of the coming of Jesus there were many regulations and rules that the Pharisees and Sadducees enforced. Jesus spoke against these extra rules and restored the true meaning of the Sabbath day for people to use (Mark 2:27). Jesus said that he was the Lord of the Sabbath which is similar to the Old Testament teaching that God was Lord of the Sabbath because the day belonged to God.

In the early days of the church Christians met for worship on the Lord's Day, that is Sunday rather than on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. The Lord's Day was not a new Sabbath. The early Christians believed that the Sabbath was fulfilled in Christ (Col.2:16-17). The Sabbath was a picture of heaven, which is the final rest to come (Heb. 4:1-11). The words "Lord's Day" appear only in Revelation 1:10. It means Sunday, the day dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead that day. The resurrection revealed Jesus as Lord.

In the early church worship took place on Sunday evenings (Acts 20:7-12) because Christians would have had to work during the day. In the second century, which was not long after Revelation was written, the Lord's Day became an official name for the special day of worship amongst Christians. It was not until a hundred years later that Sundays became a holy day (holiday) in the Roman Empire.

Although the Sabbath has been fulfilled in Christ, it still teaches Christians today that:

1. There is a need for regular physical rest.
2. Work is not the whole of life and there is a need to spend time thinking about God in worship, individually and with others as a church.
3. Christ is the place where spiritual true rest is to be found. He gives believers rest now as they trust him for their salvation and will give them rest in its fullness in the glory to come.

Source: A Dictionary of Bible Knowledge; I. Stringer (Grace Publications)



Over to you

Do people in your church know how to encourage one another in the spiritual life, and are they willing to offer and to receive warnings about wayward conduct? What is your responsibility in cultivating such a spirit?

Your ministry puts you under a great amount of stress that can have serious consequences. How do you learn to rest in the Lord with your heart and mind, even in your most demanding times?

How is Sunday looked upon in your church? Is Sunday a day that is used as God intended?

CHRIST THE SON,

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST



Hebrews 4:14-5:10

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  Background note on Christ's priesthood
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point 1: Christ's temptations
-  Focus Point 2: Melchizedek
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

We begin a new section of the book. Hebrews was addressed to Jews who professed to be Christians, but who, because of persecution for their faith were tempted to defect from Christ and return to their Old Testament roots. The writer's way of replying to this danger was to extol the glory of Christ as the eternal Son of God. He has done this by showing that Christ is superior to prophets, angels and even to the great and revered Moses. We are now to see how much greater Christ and his priesthood is than Aaron and his priesthood. Various aspects of this theme are worked out from 4:14 to 10:18. There is no doubt that the Aaronic priesthood at its best was very wonderful, and persecuted Jewish Christians were tempted to look back to it with nostalgia. It was therefore very important for them to be reminded that Jesus Christ was superior even to Aaron in every way.

Background note on Christ's priesthood

We are about to explore a large part of this book that shows in detail how Jesus Christ fulfilled the priesthood and its sacrificial system of worship in the Old Testament. This is the only place in the New Testament where this subject is dealt with in detail, with the exception of brief references such as 1 Corinthians 5:7 and 1 Peter 1:18-19.

In the Old Testament the tribe of Levi was set apart to provide for the religious life of the nation (Num. 3:5-13), and from this tribe the family of Aaron was to provide the priests, one of whom was the high priest. He was one of the most important people in the nation, and was quite stunning when he was fully attired in his garments of glory and beauty (Ex. 28:1-30). The office continued into the New Testament, but by then it had been corrupted, being gifted from one influential person to another. High priests were involved in the unjust treatment both of Jesus (John 18:12-14; 19:23) and of the apostles (Acts 4:5-7).

Sinful man needs a mediator between himself and a holy God who must punish sin. This mediation was provided by the priests by whom gifts and sacrifices were made to God. These were not simply presents to please and placate the wrath of God as in pagan religions, but the actual judgement of God on the sins of the people was deemed to have been borne by the animals killed as sacrifices. This idea of substitution is consistent throughout the Bible (Is. 53:6) and finds its complete and final fulfilment in Jesus Christ (John 1:29; Rom. 3:25; 1 Pet. 3:18).

The distinctive teaching of Hebrews is that Christ is not only the perfect sacrifice for sin offered once for all (10:12), but also that he himself is the priest who offers it. The main focus is on the role of the high priest on the Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus 16. On this one day in the year he went with the blood of sacrifice into the innermost part of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, and sprinkled the blood before the Lord to make atonement for the sins of the people. All this was a kind of visual aid pointing to the reality which was of the crucified Christ entering the very presence of God with his own blood, there to mediate for his people (9:11-12). Because Christ is the complete and final fulfilment of this Old Testament office, he is called in the Hebrews our "great" high priest.

What these verses mean



1. Our sympathetic high priest (4:14-16)

Verse 14

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

Perhaps the readers were being taunted by their Jewish persecutors that, as Christians, they lacked a visible, wonderfully clothed high priest. The answer is that though he is invisible, Christ has surpassing greatness. The description of Jesus as a “great” high priest is to emphasise that he is greater than Aaron. Aaron and other Old Testament priests were limited to going into the Holy of Holies of the temple once a year. They went in to atone for the people’s sins and then came out. This was repeated the next year. By going “through the heavens” Christ entered heaven itself and stayed there (Lev. 16:15-17; Acts 1:1-11; Heb. 7:25). As the Son of God he was not only greater than Aaron but also unique as being both God and man. Therefore there is every good reason why these Hebrews should “hold firmly” and persevere in following Christ and not turn back (2:1; 3:6, 14).

Verse 15

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.

“We do not” and “who is unable” is a double negative that strongly emphasises the positive nature of our Lord’s sympathy (2:18). Even the best of the high priests were but human and therefore limited in their experience and their ability to understand other people’s problems. The Lord’s sympathy is with our weaknesses. He not only knows what we are suffering, but feels the pain with us (Acts 9:4). He was familiar with the same kind of physical pain and emotional stress that are involved in our experiences. Yet whilst he understands and knows what we go through Christ is different from us in that he was without sin (7:26; 2 Co. 5:21). This is vitally important for our salvation. The sacrifice that he offered of himself had to be perfect, without blemish (Ex. 12:5; 1 Pet. 1:19).

Verse 16

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The astonishing result of having such a high priest is that every believer

in the Lord Jesus Christ may come boldly to meet with God. Through the Lord Jesus Christ we have access into the presence of God and may approach his throne. The throne speaks of authority (Matt. 28:18; John 17:2) and those who are persecuting the believers will, in the end, be defeated. The throne is described as the “throne of grace” where Christ sits at God’s right hand (1:3). For those who come to God trusting in Christ it is not a throne of judgement, but is transformed into a place from which pardon and strength are freely given. This is something not even the high priest of the old covenant could do. The cross has opened the way for Christ’s people to approach God in this manner (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Heb. 10:19-21). Now we can come and dare to approach God with confidence and boldness to receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need. No time is unacceptable, improper or inconvenient. In the frailty of our flesh we are to acknowledge our need of God’s assistance to live for him. We are assured that we will be shown mercy and receive that required help, for in the Lord Jesus Christ we have a high priest who is completely sympathetic to the weaknesses of his brethren.

Chapter 5



2. Qualifications of the Old Testament high priest (5:1-4)

Verse 1

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

If people are to place all their confidence in Christ as their great high priest, then they need to be assured that their trust is well placed. The writer aims to give them this confidence by showing how suitable Christ was to fulfil this office, and then by stressing the importance of his appointment to it by God himself. Consequently, we see in verses 1-4 that the Old Testament high priests were ideally suited to their task and that God appointed them to it. In verses 5-10 these things are applied to Jesus Christ. In this verse we see three characteristics about the Old Testament priest. Firstly, he was a man (not an angel) as only a man could represent other men before God. Secondly, he was a representative of the people before God. The high priest was the mediator they needed. Thirdly, the high priest provided for the salvation of the people by offering gifts and sacrifices to God on their behalf.

Verses 2 and 3

He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

The fourth characteristic of the Old Testament priest was that he understood the needs of the people. Being human, he shared their experiences and their failures. Because of this he needed to make offerings for himself (Lev. 9:7: 16:6), but at the same time, he was able to sympathise with them and help them.

Verse 4

No-one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.

The fifth characteristic of the high priest was that he was appointed by God (Ex. 28:1). No-one outside Aaron's family was allowed to take this office (2 Chron. 26: 16-21). In New Testament times, this principle had been violated and influential people gained control of this office and gave it as a favour to their friends.



3. The validity of the priesthood of Christ (5:5-10)

Verse 5

So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

“You are my Son;

today I have become your Father.”

The author of Hebrews emphasises the way in which the Lord Jesus Christ conformed to the scriptural pattern. Firstly, in this verse he did not seek the office of high priest of his own will. He never sought to glorify himself as he emphatically declared (John 8:54). In the Gospel of John alone there are repeated statements made by the Lord in which he defines the whole purpose of his mission in terms of glorifying his Father (John 7:18; 8:42; 9:4; 10:18, 25, 38; 11:42; 12:28, 44-45, 49-50; 14:7, 9, 13, 24, 31; 15:8, 23; 16:27-28; 17:1, 4-5). The calling of Jesus Christ to the office of the great high priest came from God the Father. The writer quotes from Psalm 2:7 written by David who was a prophet (2 Sam. 23:2; Acts 2:30). The quotation may have referred to a king of that time, but here and in other places in the New Testament it is applied to Jesus Christ. At first sight this seems to raise questions, and some people have suggested that it means our Lord became the Son of God at his birth (Luke 1:35). Others have thought that this happened when he was baptised (Matt.3:13-17). But in the New Testament where

Psalm 2:7 is actually quoted, Paul identifies it with the resurrection of Christ. The same apostle helps us further in Romans 1:4 where he says that at the resurrection our Lord was declared to be the Son of God. We conclude that this quotation does not mean that Jesus Christ became the Son of God at any time in his earthly life, but that his resurrection declared him to be what he already was.

Verse 6

And he says in another place,

***“You are a priest for ever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”***

A second quotation is given, this time from Psalm 110:4, that Christ is a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. His roles as Son and priest are inseparable in our Lord Jesus Christ, this being clearly implied at the very outset of the book (1:2-3). The author of Hebrews will deal fully in chapter 7 with the subject of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ being after the order of Melchizedek. At this point the writer is simply stating that it was God who had spoken so clearly that there would be such a priest and it is in the Lord Jesus Christ that these prophetic words find their complete fulfilment.

Verse 7

During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

The author turns from the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ to the period of his earthly life. He was truly human (2:14-16; 4:15; John 1:14). In his humanity the Lord Jesus Christ offered up prayers and petitions, maintaining fellowship with his Father showing his complete trust in and dependence upon the Father (Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:28-29; John 17:1). It is likely that the writer had a particular occasion in mind when referring to loud cries and tears. This was when the Lord Jesus Christ was facing the cross and agonized in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37-44; Mark 14:33-39; Luke 22:40-44). This was the moment of crisis. He knew he would become that sacrificial lamb upon whom the guilt and condemnation of sin would be placed. He understood the indescribable horror of the darkness of separation from God as he was judged in the place of his people. Christ was heard by the Father for God was able to save him from death. This does not mean that the Lord Jesus Christ prayed for deliverance from dying. He knew that he had come into the world for this very reason and was prepared to lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:15, 17-18; 12:27-28a; 17:1). God’s plan of salvation revealed through the prophets spoke clearly of the death of

the promised Saviour (Luke 24:25-26, 44-46). The Lord spoke frequently to the disciples of his impending death and resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 34; Luke 9:22; 18:31-33). If the Lord Jesus Christ had not died on the cross then his entire mission would have been a failure. While not being spared from dying he was delivered from the stranglehold of death through being raised from the dead by his Father. He rose in triumph the third day which was the proof of the success of his work (Acts 2:24, 30-32; 3:15; 10:39-40; 13:29-30, 33-34, 37).

Verse 8

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered

The writer continues to focus upon the humility of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the eternal Son of God and through suffering as a man he learned obedience. As the eternal Son of God he would not have had to be obedient for he was one with God. But in identifying with his brethren in their fallen state he had to learn obedience. This he did through his total submission to the will of God to die on the cross (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 10:9; 12:2). Through his obedience many of the disobedient are made righteous (Rom. 5:19).

Verse 9

and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

The Lord Jesus Christ is perfectly qualified to be our great high priest for he is the perfect sacrifice for sin. The sacrifice of himself was the culmination of his earthly ministry so that he could cry out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). There was no part of his life and work which spoke of failure or lack. His sufferings did not deter him from dying on the cross and instead demonstrated his glorious perfection. No matter how intense the test, his perfection stands up to the closest scrutiny. There, the writer concludes, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. He has demonstrated his complete competence to be the source of salvation which sinners need. Salvation flows from him to all who obey him.

Verse 10

and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The readers of the book are reminded that they cannot afford to waver but must persevere in the Christian faith (2:3; 3:12-13; 4:11). The Lord Jesus Christ alone is called by God as high priest. This was prophesied before he came into the world. The words were spoken by David in

Psalm 110:4 and constitute a declaration by God that the Aaronic priesthood would be replaced with something more permanent. This the author discusses later in the letter. That priesthood only served to prepare the way for the working out of God's eternal purpose of salvation in Christ, this plan being conceived before the world came into being (Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:19-20).



Summary

The author of Hebrews has already referred to the Lord Jesus Christ as the high priest in 2:17. He is described there as being merciful and faithful in this office. Now in our present study the Son is shown as being superior to Aaron because he has made an eternal and effective sacrifice to deal with sin. It is in the capacity of high priest that Christ has been able to accomplish this work. He is sympathetic to our needs and able to identify with our difficulties because he took upon himself a frail human body when he came to this earth. Christ is perfectly qualified to be a high priest, meeting more than the demands of the Old Testament priesthood. Christ was chosen by God to a priesthood that would be everlasting. Having identified himself with human beings, Christ, the Son of God who was equal with God, put himself under his Father's authority. His obedience came out of his suffering and his perfection stood up to every test. The Lord Jesus Christ, through his perfect life, then his sacrificial death and resurrection, showed that through him eternal life is gained. The Lord Jesus has been truly exalted in our study passage.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Jesus Christ, the merciful high priest (Heb. 4:14-5:10)

Believers are to give their full attention to Jesus Christ in his role as the great high priest. Eternal life is only found through faith in the once and for all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in his capacity of high priest that he has been able to accomplish this work.

1. Jesus Christ is our sympathetic high priest

- (a) He has entered the very presence of God to appear on our behalf. The high priests of the old covenant could never do this.
- (b) This high priest was fully tested and proved to be perfect without any defect whatsoever.
- (c) Because he was just like ourselves, living in a body of flesh, he is fully conversant with our weaknesses. Therefore he sympathises with his people, fully understanding the extent and intensity of their trials.
- (d) Because he conquered sin in the flesh he is able to help his people. No one else can do this.
- (e) Therefore we can approach the throne of God with assurance. Christ is there and through him we obtain mercy and find grace and exactly the help we need. No other high priest could do this for us.

2. Jesus Christ is eminently qualified to be high priest

- (a) The high priest is to serve as mediator between God and men.
- (b) He gave himself as a sacrifice on behalf of his people.
- (c) He has compassion on his people.
- (d) He did not take this office for himself.

3. Jesus Christ is fully authenticated to be high priest

- (a) He was appointed to this office by God. He constantly emphasised that he had come to do the will of the Father.
- (b) Only Jesus Christ is declared by God as Son and priest.
- (c) Throughout his earthly life he demonstrated his true humanity through prayer and trust in the Father.
- (d) He was completely obedient to the Father and through suffering demonstrated his absolute perfection.
- (e) The offering of himself was the perfect sacrifice for sin. He fully completed the work entrusted to him by the Father, and his final words were the climax to his earthly life.

Therefore he is the source of eternal salvation.



Focus Point 1:

Christ's temptations

Christian teachers have discussed at length, the degree to which our Lord's sufferings and temptations were genuine, bearing in mind his deity and the certainty of the outcome. In the end this is a problem of understanding the relationship between our Lord's human and divine natures, which, we should admit, is beyond our grasp, and it is irreverent for us to probe too deeply into this relationship. There are, however, a number of things we can say with a large degree of certainty, and which will prevent us from serious mistakes.

1. We must never let go the fact that Jesus was truly human (John 1:14) as we saw in our Study 4 (Heb. 2:5-18).
2. Our Lord's sinless nature contained nothing that responded to temptation.
3. If we say that his temptation was real and powerful, we are not saying that he was not sinless (John 8:46; 2 Co. 5:21; Heb. 7:26).
4. The severity of the temptations in the desert and in Gethsemane is confirmed by the need of angelic ministry to strengthen him (Matt. 4:11; Luke 22:43).
5. When our Lord faced the temptation to turn back from God's way (the very test faced by the readers of Hebrews), he suffered the greatest possible "anguish" (Luke 22:43-44, Heb. 5:7).

Our Lord's temptations were genuine, no less acute than ours, but more than likely much greater.



Focus Point 2:

Melchizedek

Melchizedek suddenly appears once and only briefly in the Scripture (Gen. 14:18-20). Some people have wondered if he were a supernatural being. Others have thought that he might be another Old Testament appearance of our Lord, such as in Exodus 3:1-3. (We call such appearances Christophanies or Theophanies). Abraham certainly treated him with respect, but he did not offer him any kind of worship. In Hebrews 7:3 Melchizedek is said to be "like the Son of God". So it seems best to see Melchizedek as a normal human person about whom we know nothing apart from these three verses.

The writer of Hebrews points to Psalm 110:4 as God's declaration that Christ would be a priest "in the order of Melchizedek". He goes on to show that this was higher than Aaron's priesthood, and he works this out in detail in Hebrews 7. Because there is no record of the origin or the death of Melchizedek, he became a picture of a priesthood that would be "for ever" (5:5).

Melchizedek was both a priest and a king which those in Aaron's line could never be. See for example 1 Samuel 13:11-14 where King Saul is rebuked by Samuel for carrying out a priestly function. The consequences were serious. In Hebrews 4:16 our Lord is seen as a priest on his throne. His was an order entirely superior to that of Aaron.



Over to you

How confused are people in your community with the role of a priest? If you are a church leader do your people look upon you as a priest? How does this passage in Hebrews help us to work these issues out?

Do you or any of your church leaders wear special garments for church services? Does your understanding of New Testament priesthood help you to explain your answer?

How would you describe what the role of a church leader should be?



Hebrews 5:11 – 6:3

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Teaching the whole counsel of God
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Before continuing to develop the theme of the significance of Melchizedek the writer pauses for reflection. In Melchizedek the author will open up for us an understanding of the person of Christ and his saving work. This he will do through demonstrating that Christ is superior to Aaron and that the priesthood of Christ has replaced the priesthood of Aaron. This will be a difficult topic for the recipients of the letter to understand because of their failure to have made any progress in their spiritual lives. So before beginning his exposition of the superiority of the priesthood of Christ, the author will once again confront his readers regarding their spiritual lethargy for this is the root of their problem. This is a long section and will take up our next three studies. It might be helpful to divide up the topics like this –

- 5:11-6:3 immaturity as a reason for backsliding (Study 9)
- 6: 4-8 the terrible danger of final apostasy (Study 10)
- 6: 9-12 the need for diligence in spiritual matters (Study 11)
- 6: 13-20 grounds for encouragement and certainty (Study 12)

In the verses of our present study the writer rebukes the readers for their spiritual immaturity. They are seen as spiritual babes because they are not growing or advancing in their understanding of the faith.

This is dangerous because we do not stand still spiritually; if we are not advancing we are falling back and are in danger of the apostasy that is dealt with in Study 10.

What these verses mean

1. Spiritual maturity (5:11-14)

Verse 11

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.

The writer wants to take his readers on to deeper truths, but he cannot do so because they are so slow to learn. The problem is not that the deeper truths are obscure or especially difficult to understand. If they had not been so spiritually lethargic they would soon have learnt (1 Co. 2:12). The subject being referred to (*much to say about this*) was Melchizedek and this will be developed further in chapter 7 of the book of Hebrews.



NOTE: Those who do not grow in understanding biblical teaching are often the most prone to listen to teachers of heresy, or to lose their interest in the Christian faith when their lives become difficult. The tree that has the deepest roots is the least likely to be uprooted by strong winds. It is easy to see how this would apply to the readers of Hebrews.

Verse 12

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

The Hebrew Christians are compared to small children who are forgetful. They had been professing believers for some time and by now should have matured to spiritual adulthood. They ought to have been able to teach and explain some deeper Christian doctrine. The tragedy was that they still needed someone to ground them in the basic teaching of God's Word. Had they, like children, now forgotten much of what they had once known? Such forgetfulness may be caused by the evil one (Matt.13:4, 19) and could easily lead to the apostasy described in 6:46. Whatever the circumstances, the writer states that his readers were in spiritual infancy and had to be fed the Christian basics in their simplest forms instead of deeper truth.

Verse 13

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.

Just as infants tend to reject good food, so a sign of spiritual immaturity is a dislike of solid food. As the baby grows so it requires many more nutrients than milk alone can provide and develops a digestive system which can deal with solid food. Spiritually, solid food is biblical teaching and the milk is staying with the simple gospel. These Jewish believers had not developed spiritually and were just like babies who still required a diet of milk. They had not grown, moving on from milk to solids, from basic teaching to deeper truth. The “teaching about righteousness” may be best understood in the light of Philippians 1:9-10.

Verse 14

But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Solid food is for the spiritually mature. It is through the teaching ministry of the church that believers are enabled to grow in the things of God (Eph. 4:11-16). Each believer is to mature individually, and in this way the entire body grows together. Without regular instruction, the believer will slip into this state of spiritual lethargy which had occurred in the experience of those to whom the author was writing. This was why they were exhorted to remind one another of their responsibility to be a real part of the local body of Christ, attending meetings regularly (Heb. 10:24-25). Through the regular ministry of the Word of God the mature believer then becomes proficient in being able to distinguish between truth and error. There are no short cuts or easy solutions. Hard work and determination are to replace the laziness and indifference which grip the mind of the immature (2 Tim. 2:3-6). It is the man who meditates on the Word of God day and night who knows the blessedness of belonging to the Lord. He always remains stable, dependable and consistent in all the trials and testings of life (Ps. 1:1-3; Col. 3:16). Nor will he be carried off into error by false teaching, for he recognises it for what it is (Eph. 4:14).

Chapter 6



2. The need to mature (6:1-3)

Verse 1

Therefore

Having diagnosed the spiritual problem of his readers, spiritual immaturity, the author now exhorts them to aim at spiritual growth.

These two short parts of the book are linked together by the word “therefore”.

let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity,

The spiritual progress of these Jewish believers was retarded and they had to recognise this in order for the situation to be corrected. If they remained in their present condition they would be no different from the unbelieving Israelites who were unable to enter Canaan. The writer is very direct in his exhortation. They must move on from the basic essentials of Christian doctrine. The writer includes himself among those who must be progressing towards maturity. Maturing spiritually is growing into Christ-likeness and must always be the objective of every believer (Eph. 4:13, 15; 2 Pet. 3:17-18; 1 John 3:2). As the growth is spiritual, it can only develop through the unseen and inward work of the Holy Spirit.

not laying again the foundation

This growth takes place as believers give themselves to being taught the Word of God (Acts 2:41-42). Maturity, then, is accomplished through the faithful teaching of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:20-21, 27). Once the foundation has been laid then further construction is to follow. The writer sets out six of the basic doctrines, or the “foundation” of the Christian faith, which they should have moved beyond.

of repentance from acts that lead to death,

Repentance was the major theme in the preaching of John the Baptist. The Lord Jesus Christ also called sinners to repentance (Matt. 4:17; 9:13; 11:20-21; 12:41) and instructed the apostles to preach the message of repentance as an integral part of the gospel which is to be declared to the whole world (Luke 24:46-47). Therefore the apostles obeyed this command and never failed to preach repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22). Repentance was understood as being evidence of conversion and the work of God’s grace. It means turning completely around, away from the previous way of life. The old life was full of acts that alienated man from God so his entire life or being is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:12). Natural man is deserving of death (Rom. 1:32; 6:23) and all his activity is marked by deadness and is meaningless (Acts 14:15; Rom. 1:21-24). It is only through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that the sinner is cleansed from dead works to serve the living God. Repentance is a complete change of mind in which the sinner turns from his works of death to the living God.

and of faith in God,

Faith towards God and repentance go together; they are inseparable (Mark 1:15). While John the Baptist is usually known for his calling to repentance, he also preached just as clearly that people were to believe in the One whose way he was preparing (Matt. 3:11-12; Luke 3:16-17; John 1:15). It is only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we may know God (John 14:6; 5:23-24). The apostles always called sinners to confess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 3:16, 19; 13:38). Faith is a complete trust in God in a humble spirit of submission.

Verse 2

instruction about baptisms,

The word baptism is in the plural and may be referring to the cleansing ritual of the law (Heb. 9:10, 13; also Mark 7:4, 7). More likely it is referring to the teaching that had to be given to new believers regarding the difference from the initiation ceremonies practised by the Jews at the time of the New Testament and which had no connection with Christianity. There was also teaching to show the necessity of faith in Christ as a requirement for the baptism of John to be valid (Acts 19:3-5). Without faith in Christ this baptism was invalid. All believers were to confess faith in Christ through baptism (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36-37; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 32-33; 18:8; 22:16).

the laying on of hands,

The significance of the laying on of hands is difficult to identify. It may have been connected with the baptism of new believers and their reception into the body of Christ (Acts 8:16-17; 19:6). In the case of Paul it took place prior to his being baptised (Acts 9:17). It would appear that there is a connection with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, but Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit before they were baptised (Acts 10:44-48). On most occasions there is no mention of hands being laid on those newly baptised (e.g. Acts 2:41; 16:15, 33; 18:8). Laying on of hands was a sign of blessing (Matt. 19:13-15) and of healing the sick (Mark 6:5; 16:18; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 28:8). Hands were also laid on those who were commissioned to the work of the Lord (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 2 Tim. 1:6).

the resurrection of the dead,

The resurrection of the dead was foundational to the apostolic message of the gospel and is the hope of the Christian (John 5:28-29; 11:25-26; Rom. 8:11; Acts 24:15). The Christian faith would be meaningless without the resurrection (1 Co. 15:1-4, 13-18).

and eternal judgment.

The doctrine of eternal judgement is clearly related to the resurrection of the dead. Believers are delivered from eternal condemnation on the grounds of the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; Rom. 5:9; 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:10). Believers will be judged on the day of judgement in the sense that their lives will be assessed and rewarded accordingly by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:21, 23, 34; Rom. 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10). The unbelieving will be judged and punished accordingly for their works, sins and unbelief, every single individual being accountable to God (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 11:22, 24; 12:36; 25:30, 41, 46; John 5:22, 26-29; Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5; 2 Pet. 2:9; 3:7; 1 John 4:17; Rev. 20:11-15).

Verse 3

And God permitting, we will do so.

The Lord will guide the teachers as to the right time to embark on deeper teaching. Spiritual growth or maturity is not an option. It is vital for it is only the spiritually mature who will persevere in the Christian faith and realise the hope of the resurrection, entering God's eternal rest. If the readers of Hebrews fail in this regard then they will face eternal condemnation because of unbelief. Spiritual progress must be desired and should not be something that can be looked upon only if there is an occasion and opportunity. What the writer is saying is that our spiritual development is wholly dependent upon the grace of God. Lack of spiritual growth may be proof that such a person was never a true child of God.



Summary

The author of the book showed in the first part of chapter five that the Lord Jesus Christ is of a priesthood that is different from the priesthood of Aaron. It was important that the readers of the book understood the difference between the two priesthoods for it is relevant to their spiritual condition. The Hebrew readers who had made a Christian profession of faith were indifferent as to whether they persevered in their faith or not. They were in great danger because they were like infants who were not growing. The subject of Christ's priesthood was important for them to understand, but they were unable to grasp these truths because they were spiritually immature. By now

Summary continued on page 95



Summary continued from page 94

they should have grown sufficiently to be able to explain basic Christian doctrine. Instead they were only capable of the simplest of teachings, like babies only able to take in milk. They needed to move on to the solid food of Christian teaching, progressing beyond the foundational teaching. Spiritual growth comes through listening to, and the study of, God's Word. The Holy Spirit accompanies such diligence and the believer grows to distinguish good from evil. If there is no spiritual growth then things are not right and may be highlighting that true spiritual conversion has not taken place.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – The need to advance in the Christian life

Introduction

The need to advance in the Christian life is important because where there is life there must be growth. The absence of growth raises serious questions. Just as a lion will pick off the weak animal in a herd, so those who do not grow are easy prey to heresies and persecution.

The reasons for failure to grow

These can be seen in this passage of Hebrews 5:11-6:3.

- (a) Low understanding: because of spiritual lethargy there is reluctance to learn.
- (b) Forgetfulness: because of this there is need for constant attention to the Scriptures and teaching.
- (c) Poor appetite: our appetite for spiritual food may result from lack of love for the Lord, and too much love of the world.
- (d) Lack of exercise: if our faith is not being tested, it will become weak for lack of use.

Remedy

- (a) In order for believers to mature they must move on from basic doctrine. The goal of the believer must be maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:13, 15; 2 Pet. 3:17-18; 1 John 3:2).
- (b) Maturity cannot be achieved through a believer's own effort. It is a gracious work of the Holy Spirit in which believers are carried forward as they diligently listen to the Word of God (Acts 2:41-42).

Conclusion

Spiritual maturity is not an option. Only the spiritually mature in the faith, and only those who persevere in the faith enter the eternal rest. Spiritual development is wholly dependent upon the grace of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. It does not happen in a vacuum and it is vital for the professing believer to use all available means for spiritual growth.



Focus Point: Teaching the whole counsel of God

There was a farewell meeting organised between Paul and the elders from the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:13-18). It was a sad occasion because it would be the last time Paul would be with them. Paul had spent a total of three years with the Ephesus church, during which time they had known much blessing. God did miraculous things through Paul. For two years Paul taught daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, but it wasn't easy work as there was opposition. Where God is at work there is always opposition. In this case the enemies of God caused a riot to the city. So the time Paul spent in Ephesus was a precious time for the church because of the blessings and the truths of God that Paul taught them.

In the farewell meeting Paul encouraged the leaders to continue in the work. The church would be invaded by those who will want to destroy it; therefore the leaders were to guard the flock. The Holy Spirit had appointed them in this leadership role and they were to copy Paul in the way he taught them. Paul taught them for three years, night and day, with tears. During this time he brought before them the whole counsel of God, all that he wanted his children to know. This is what preachers and teachers are responsible for with their congregations.

The Holy Spirit has recorded for us this meeting at Miletus and the words Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders. What Paul was saying was that he had been careful to teach the whole of God's truth to the believers at Ephesus. When Paul was teaching, he had the Old Testament (on which he was an expert). The rest he had been taught by Jesus in the wilderness of Arabia after his conversion at Damascus. God gave him insight into his truth and these truths have now been put together into the New Testament. Today, we have the Bible, which is the complete Word of God and we neither add to it nor take anything away from it.

So we are talking about teaching the whole of the Bible, all its truths. This then requires careful planning and preparation; we need to think about our sermons and Bible studies. In our preaching and teaching we need to cover the complete pattern of Christian truth. This then means that our people need to hear sermons and studies that follow on from each other. It will help them to see how successive Bible truths relate to each other.

How do we go about preparing our teaching ministry in such a systematic way?

Preach through a Bible book

Preach through a Bible book, paragraph by paragraph or chapter by chapter or through a self-contained section of Scripture. For example you could take a psalm, or the Lord praying in John 17. This is the idea behind these Preachers' Study Papers to help you to work through the Bible in a consecutive way.

Preach on a Bible subject

Take a subject and show how God's revelation on that subject increased as Scripture developed e.g. the use of a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin.

Preach through the life of a Bible character

Choose a character, such as Joseph and then look at his life, incident by incident. See how that person grew spiritually or look at the way the person went wrong.

There are a number of advantages of a planned approach to preaching. It prevents the preacher from repeating one or two favourite subjects and forces him to deal with subjects that are not easy. It shows the believer the fullness of Scripture and how it relates to every aspect of our lives. It encourages the believer to think ahead and study for himself the next section of the Scriptures. It saves the preacher/pastor from criticism that he chooses a particular text to attack the congregation.

In recognising the value of consecutive study, the pastor has to ensure that the people are getting a healthy diet. When we think of our bodies and healthy eating we make sure that we have a variety of food. Where possible we try not to eat the same food, but vary it for good health as well as for satisfying our taste. We need protein and vitamins. It is the same with spiritual nourishment. We must avoid always being in the Old Testament or New Testament, or studying doctrinal subjects, or studying a character. If a series is getting long, we need to stop and do something else for a while.

In considering a healthy spiritual diet, we need to consider all the people in the congregation. Some will need milk whilst others require solid food. Christians who are young in the faith will need simple teaching, whilst older ones need deeper spiritual truths. We have to remember all these things in preparation. As we prepare, our trust must be in God and not ourselves. We are just the messengers; the Holy Spirit will take God's Word and apply it to the minds and hearts of the listeners, but we are required to do the work first, as the workmen of God.

Through your programme of planned preaching and teaching you will have desired to cover the complete range of Christian truth. But you will only have just started to scratch the surface. We can get an overall understanding of God's truth but the truths are so deep that we will never get to know them in their fullness. The wonderful thing about the Bible is that you read it again and again and each time you read it you discover new things you had not seen before. You may have read the passage many times and you may know the story, yet the Holy Spirit can reveal something new to you every time. It will be the same when you are preaching the whole counsel of God.



Over to you

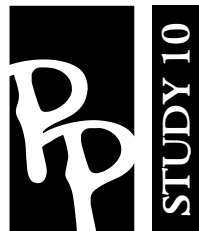
How do you decide what you are going to preach about?

What do you do in your preparation to make sure that you are feeding everyone in your congregation?

What attention do you give to your people in the way they listen to God's Word? Do you get any feedback? Are you seeing spiritual growth within your people?

THE TERRIBLE DANGER

OF APOSTASY



Hebrews 6:4-8

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Apostasy
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

These five verses have been a cause of great distress among Christian believers because, at first sight, they seem to teach that it is possible for someone who is born again to fall away from Christ and be eternally lost. To avoid this conclusion, some people have thought that the word “if” (6) means that the writer is using an argument from something which would never happen (hypothetical case). But this does not really help us because the word “if” was not used by the writer in the original Greek language, and a better reading would be “and, falling away”.

When we are trying to understand a passage of Scripture, it is very important for us to remember that since it has but one author, and that author is God himself (2 Tim.3:16), one passage will never contradict another. In this case, if we say that the passage teaches that true believers can be eternally lost, we are making it contradict the consistent teaching in other places that cannot be misunderstood, that true believers will never perish (Ps.37:28; Isa.43:25; Jer.31:3; John 3:16; 10:28-30; Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). We have to conclude that, despite first sight appearance, the people described here are not true children of God. This should not surprise us as there are quite a number of examples in Scripture of people who seemed to bear marks of spiritual

life, but who later proved that this was deceptive (Balaam in Numbers 22-24; Revelation 2:14; Saul in 1 Samuel 9-31; Simon Magus in Acts 8:9-24). See also the Focus Point on eternal security and final perseverance in Study 3, page 30).

Our passage can helpfully be understood in the light of our Lord's parable of the sower or perhaps better called a parable of soils (Matt.13:1-9; 18-23). In this parable the growth of a genuine crop depends on the condition of the soil into which the seed is sown. Our passage returns to this in verses 7-8. If the soil is not properly prepared, the growth may look right but in the end will prove to be only temporary.

What these verses mean

Verse 4

It is impossible

The readers of this book had to be awakened from their spiritual stupor and alerted to the imminent danger. They must not be allowed to think that they can remain in this state of immaturity, simply marking time as beginners in the faith. If these Jewish believers do not move on in the Christian faith they will place themselves beyond the hope of restoration. It will be impossible for them to renew their repentance. Here we will see five ways in which a person may appear to be a true believer but may not be lasting.

for those who have once been enlightened,

The writer is not saying that this describes his readers. Both before and after verses 4-8 he speaks of "us" and "you", but here it is "those". He is speaking of a possible situation, but in verse 9 he will say that he does not think it applies to them. In New Testament times those who were baptised as believers were known as "enlightened ones". This phrase in our text may refer to those who were baptised but were not true believers, or to those who knew enough of the gospel to know that they should commit themselves to Christ, but failed to do so.

who have tasted the heavenly gift,

To "taste" means to experience something without having the full benefit of it. We can taste some food and acknowledge that it is good, yet we do not eat the meal from which our bodies will derive the goodness that will sustain life. It is possible to be in the midst of Christian believers and witness the joy and hope of eternal life and be excited about it. The heavenly gift is tasted but not experienced within.

who have shared in the Holy Spirit,

Jesus describes a group of people who will claim that they did many

things for the Lord, but the Lord will say that he never knew them (Matt. 7:21-23). Judas Iscariot experienced spiritual gifts, but knew nothing of an inward work of regeneration.

Verse 5

who have tasted the goodness of the word of God

It is possible to know the Bible thoroughly, to be a master of theology, to enjoy the Bible as literature, history or a text-book on morality, or to receive comfort from it, and yet still not be united to Christ as Lord and Saviour.

and the powers of the coming age,

This means the spiritual world which is timeless (see the note on 2:5 in Study 4 page 32). People sit in congregations and see people converted and their lives transformed, and yet they themselves still remain outside of the people of God.

Verse 6

if they fall away,

The magnitude of the danger is now made clear. The exalted experiences of verses 4-5 should lead to repentance and faith in Christ (Rom. 2:4), but all too often they don't (Matt. 13:20-21) with distressing consequences (1 John 2:19). The falling away is just like the seed that was sown in rocky places. The readers were being subjected to persecution and tempted to fall back to the Old Testament religion. Unless they were deeply rooted in salvation experience they could easily give in to such pressures.

to be brought back to repentance,

By falling away they would be brought much closer to apostasy. Once in apostasy it would be impossible to bring back anyone to repentance. Anyone who turns away from Christ resorts to the impossible position of salvation by works. They do not fall away from salvation because they were never saved. This is not saying God refuses a repentant sinner. Such a person is so dead-set in constant refusal to acknowledge a personal need of Christ that he or she has become too hardened against repentance i.e. to turn completely around and follow Christ.

because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

For one to come under the powerful influence of the gospel and then to turn away or fail to produce lasting fruit is sin of the very worst kind. To try and restore such as have made profession of faith is impossible because they would be making a mockery of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and bringing the message of the gospel into disrepute.

Carelessness, indifference and spiritual laziness are sins of a greater degree than are generally recognised. To turn away from the gospel on whatever grounds demands the severest judgement of God (Heb. 10:26-31). Such an attitude insults the sovereign and gracious work of the Holy Spirit, and the benefits and blessings which his presence brings (Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10). This is the sin which leads to death and eternal condemnation for it is sin against the light and power of God (1 John 5:16). Some of the people who cause the greatest problem for churches are those who once professed Christ but then have turned away from him. They say, “I tried it (Christianity), but it didn’t do anything for me.” In so doing they are taking sides with those who crucified our Lord, and bringing his name and gospel into disrepute.



NOTE: Who are these bringing the gospel into disrepute?

They are those who one way or another, and for one reason or another, have abandoned the grace they once knew and even professed to experience. They are often people who sit around us in church every Sunday. These people are inside, not outside; or at least they were inside and some are now outside, and if there are any still on the inside they are heading for the outside. They have experienced so much. They knew what it was to have an understanding of the message of Christ, they experienced times when the Spirit of God was real and present, and convicting them of sin. They perhaps even went through a time of repentance and they loved to listen to the Word of God. But then, all that once was so dear to them they trod under foot and rejected the Christ who they claimed had died for them. They never really found salvation, though it looked very much like it, and in fact for a time they believed that they had received forgiveness. That is frightening.

(Brian Edwards: *Grace – amazing grace*)

Verse 7

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God.

This is a parabolic¹ illustration of the teaching of verses 4-6 to underline for the reader the importance of the lesson. The rain falls on the ground quite indiscriminately, watering whatever is growing. In the

¹ Parabolic is an adjective of the word “parable”. A parabolic illustration is a story to help explain spiritual truth.

case of the cultivated crops of the farmer this promotes growth and a harvest that is truly beneficial through the blessing of God.

Verse 8

But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

On the other hand the same rain causes the weeds to grow. The weeds are removed and because they are undesirable, disposed of. The writer is perhaps recalling the mist which watered the earth in its unfallen state when everything was very good (Gen. 2:6) and also the curse of God upon the earth as a result of sin (Gen. 3:17-18). The life-giving message of the gospel produces a harvest of genuine believers but unfortunately spurious professions of faith appear at the same time. It says that where there is no good crop, there is no real spiritual life (John 15:5-6), illustrating that if professing believers do not go on with the Lord, then, despite their profession, they are not true believers and they are under the wrath of God.



Summary

In our previous study we saw the danger of spiritual lethargy. That is now taken a stage further with our present passage, as we see the consequences if there is no spiritual growth. The writer is emphatic with his opening statement, "It is impossible." There is no way that a person can be brought back to repentance once they have passed a certain point. This boundary marker is characterised in five ways. The first mark is that the person will know something of the truth of the gospel. The second mark is that the person will have tasted something of the joy and hope that believers around will have expressed. Thirdly, the person will have experienced God working through his Spirit, seeing people coming to faith after hearing the gospel. Fourthly, the person may well be familiar with the Bible. Lastly, by witnessing those who put their trust in Christ, this person will have seen something of the workings of the kingdom of God. The coming of Jesus established the kingdom of God upon the earth and this kingdom points us to its dominance and perfection in the days to come. The combination of all these experiences without any spiritual growth demonstrates the

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falsehood of any professed faith in Christ. Using an illustration from nature the writer points out that the rain that falls on the ground produces a good crop and also weeds. The preaching of the gospel will produce a harvest of true, repentant believers and, at the same time, temporary, false worshippers. The latter is described as apostasy and those who do not grow spiritually, but remain as infants, are heading in this direction.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Natural or spiritual faith

Introduction

Faith or belief is a normal part of natural life. However this is not the same as saving faith, which is the gift of God as a part of the new spiritual life of his people.

Natural faith – we see this when

- (a) people speak of having faith but do not say what or whom they are trusting.
- (b) there is a kind of hopefulness or optimism that painful experiences will not happen or will soon be overcome.
- (c) people believe in God, and that Jesus Christ performed miracles, but have no personal faith in him (John 2:23-25).
- (d) people appear to be Christians, but their profession of faith does not last (John 6:66; Heb. 6: 4-6).

Spiritual faith – we see this when trust is directed at Jesus Christ both as Lord and as Saviour (Acts 16:31).

- (a) It arises from a very deep sense of spiritual need because of the wrath of God (Acts 2:37).
- (b) It gives rise to a life that grows in Christlikeness (2 Pet. 3:18).
- (c) It perseveres in the face of discouragement, opposition and painful circumstances (Acts 16:22-25).

Conclusion

Both types of faith will be found in the congregation. Only one type of faith will stand the test of time. The other will lead to a falling away, where trust will be in tradition and ritual. There will come a point when the faith that is not in Christ will pass the point of no return. Do not allow yourself to reach that boundary.



Focus Point: Apostasy

The word “apostasy” comes from the Greek word “apostasia” which means a *fall away from*. The word was originally used of desertion of a post of duty, or of a revolt. In the Bible it refers to a departure from the true faith. Such action is a deliberate denial of once professed faith.

Apostasy differs from heresy in that the heretic denies some aspect of the Christian faith, but retains the name Christian.

When a person transfers from one denomination to another of the same faith it is not apostasy. It is also possible for a person to deny the faith, as Peter did, then reaffirm it at a later stage.

God accused the leaders and people of Israel of turning from their faith to various forms of idolatry (Is. 1:2-4; Jer. 2:1-9). King Ahaz was unfaithful and closed the temple (2 Chr. 29:19). The most notorious example we have in the New Testament is Judas Iscariot. Others include Demas (2 Tim. 4:10) and Alexander (1 Tim. 4:10). The apostle John gives us a helpful description of those who have apostatised. He describes the people who have left the churches having never really belonged (1 John 2:18-20).

For one to come under the powerful influence of the gospel and then to turn away, or fail to produce lasting fruit, is sin of the very worst kind. To turn away from the gospel on whatever grounds demands the severest judgement of God imaginable (Heb. 10:26-31). This constitutes the unpardonable sin, for such an attitude insults the sovereign and gracious work of the Holy Spirit. There are many benefits and blessings which the Spirit’s presence brings (Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10). This is the sin which leads to death and eternal condemnation for it is sin against the light and power of God (1 John 5:16). It was the same spirit that caused Esau to act in the way he did regarding the birthright and afterwards there was no way that the situation could be rectified (Heb. 12:16-17).

Source: Dictionary of Theological Terms M.E. Manton (Grace Publications), Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (Paternoster).



Over to you

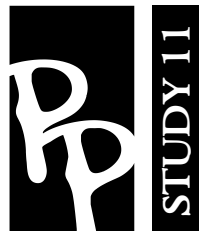
Have you faced the disappointment of people you were so excited about falling away, their faith seeming to be so short-lived? Were you perplexed by it and could not understand what was going on? Has the study of this passage helped you to see what was really going on? How?

Do you blame yourself when people do not respond to the messages you bring before them? How does the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23) and the illustration of Hebrews 6:7-8 help you?

How will your understanding of this passage help you in the way you deal with your people? Were you too harsh before, frightening people that they could lose their salvation? Were you not serious enough with those who show little spiritual progress? How should you proceed?

EXHORTATION AND

ENCOURAGEMENT



Hebrews 6:9-20

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: The ascended Christ
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The warning of verses 4-8 has been very challenging, and it may even be that some of the readers whose faith was real and genuine had been driven to question whether they were true believers. But, as we see throughout the book, the writer blends warning with exhortation and encouragement. In our study passage we have the exhortation (6:9-12) followed by the encouragement (6:13-20). The purpose of verses 4-8 (Study 10) had not been to drive true believers to despair, but to encourage them to self examination (2 Co. 13:5) and to perseverance in their faith. They were not to give in to the pressure of turning back but to go on to maturity (2 Pet. 1:5-10).

What these verses mean



1. Exhortation: the need for diligence (6:9-12)

Verse 9

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation.

By addressing the readers as “dear friends” the author speaks as the hopeful pastor who understands that only God knows who is the

backslider and who is an apostate.¹ The writer is confident that they had not slipped into the irretrievable state of apostasy and wants to encourage his readers that they do not fall into the category of those he has just described. The better things he mentions are true repentance and faith in Christ, perseverance in godliness and gospel witness (John 15:8; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; 3:18). This will be demonstrated by the readers as evidence that they are truly saved by trusting in Jesus Christ.

Verse 10

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

A person who is truly trusting in Christ for salvation will have their life changed. It will be seen in their life and how they mix with people. In the previous verse the writer said that these things accompany salvation. Work and love are now mentioned. This could be just something as straightforward as natural kindness, a willingness to help fellow believers. All this shows evidence of true faith. God notices all these things and does not forget. This does not mean salvation is merited by works, but that works are the evidence of spiritual life (Matt. 25:31-46). These Hebrew readers had helped and served Christians in the past and God would not overlook this.

Verse 11

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.

As a true pastor the writer longed that each one of his fellow believers would make progress instead of remaining in their present stunted condition. By saying “each of you” he was addressing each believer individually. They were not to hide behind the activity of others. Each must prove the genuineness of his own faith. The evidence of their faith in Christ for salvation, as seen in their attitude towards others, must be continuous to the end of their earthly life. This is what the writer means by being diligent to the very end. The motivation for such a lifestyle comes from looking forward to what is to come in the new heaven and new earth. This looking forward is what the New Testament writers describe as a hope which is certain to take place. The final proof that this hope is sure is not what believers have done in the past, but what they go on doing to the end (Matt. 24:13; 2 Pet. 1:10).

¹ See Focus Point on Eternal security and final perseverance in Study 3, page 30 for an explanation of backsliding and apostasy .

Verse 12

We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

The readers of Hebrews were in danger of being overcome by their laziness. If they did not change the spirit of apathy would quickly stifle what little remained of their spiritual life. The antidote to carelessness is to copy fellow believers who have patiently endured through the most difficult of circumstances. So often we think that our own situation is the very worst imaginable. The word “imitate” means to mimic, or to follow the example, and is a common New Testament concept (1 Co. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; 1 Pet. 3:13). Later on in 13:7 the readers were exhorted to follow the example of their elders. Old Testament men and women of faith are mentioned as such examples in chapter 11. Each one patiently endured in the face of difficulty. Sometimes this involved terrible suffering. But they all obtained the inheritance promised by God. There is no such thing as universal salvation. Salvation is only for those who persevere in “faith and patience”. None of us will be saved unless our lives are consistent with the profession we have made.



2. Encouragement: certainty and security (6:13-20)

Having faced his readers with the dire consequences of turning away from Christ, and exhorted them to go on with him, the writer now gives them further encouragement to persevere because of the certainty of the security that true believers have in Jesus Christ. This all depends on the trustworthiness of God's promises, which is first illustrated in the experience of Abraham (13-15) and then is shown to be focused in our Lord Jesus Christ (16-20).

Verse 13

When God made his promise to Abraham,

One of these heroes of the faith, described in chapter 11 to be imitated, is Abraham. He is put forward as an example of one who through faith and patience received the inheritance promised. The promise made to Abraham was two-fold. Firstly that Abraham would have numerous descendants. Secondly, that through him all nations would be blessed (Gen. 22:16-18).

since there was no-one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself,

In the human world mankind can only make an oath by something which is greater than themselves. Because there is nothing greater than

God, God condescended to make an oath by himself. By saying that God swore by himself the writer is informing us that God made an oath which simply means that if his promise failed then he would no longer be God. God did not have to swear by an oath because his word is sufficient. But the oath was added to give full assurance of its certainty and fulfilment. God made his promise doubly sure in order to strengthen Abraham's faith.

Verse 14

saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants."

The occasion quoted is from Genesis 22:16-18 which took place when Abraham offered up his son, Isaac, in obedience to the command of God (Gen. 22:1-2). What God required of Abraham appeared to go against the promise that Isaac would be the first of an innumerable company of descendants (Gen. 12:2-3; 13:15-16; 15:5, 18; 17:7-9, 15-16, 19, 21; 18:18-19; 21:12). Abraham really did believe that God would keep his word and fulfil the promise through Isaac no matter what God was commanding him to do through this particular test. He was totally convinced that God would do what he said he would do. What is significant is that God reaffirmed the promise with an oath after the trial of Abraham's faith. The promise affirmed by the oath has special emphasis, "surely", meaning most definitely. The repeat of the words "bless" and "many descendants" indicates the fullness and greatness of the blessing.

Verse 15

And so after waiting patiently,

Waiting patiently was a challenge to the readers that they should believe in God's faithfulness. Like Abraham they should persevere through every test and trial to the end. If they were longingly looking back to the Old Testament, then they were to take note of the example of one of its heroes.

Abraham received what was promised.

Abraham waited some twenty-five years before he saw God bless him with the promised son (Gen. 12:5; Gen 17:1, 21). Abraham was not put off by the long delay. Humanly speaking every passing year made it less likely that Abraham and Sarah would have a child. But Abraham held on to the promise of God, patiently persevering through the trials and time itself until he actually held the baby boy, Isaac, in his arms. Then when Isaac was growing into manhood, Abraham was required to offer him up as a sacrifice. Abraham's faith remained as strong and firm as ever, not faltering for an instant at God's command. Abraham received

the gift of his son, a second time as it were, as one raised from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19). Through patiently enduring Abraham obtained the promise.² So many of Abraham's descendants failed to exercise the same faith as their forefather and therefore did not obtain the promise, dying in the wilderness. The recipients of Hebrews were on the pathway of following the wrong example and must be alerted to their terrible danger.

Verse 16

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.

We now have the application of the significance of God's oath. When disputes and differences occur between fellow men, then these matters may be resolved through the taking of an oath. The statements made under oath are reckoned to be binding and absolute. In his fallen state, man has to make an oath by something which is greater than himself, the sworn testimony then being received as being trustworthy. God's bare word is enough to guarantee its truth, but he has condescended to our weakness by confirming it with an oath. All God's purposes of salvation are focused by oath in Jesus Christ, and there is no way he will swerve from them.

Verse 17

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

God does not wish us to be left in uncertainty. He wants all the heirs of the promise to be in no doubt that his purpose to bring us to glory will not fail. The heirs are all true believers in Jesus Christ. The heirs began with Isaac and continue down to the present, the Lord Jesus Christ being the focal point of the promise (John 8:56; Gal. 3:7-9, 16-17; 2 Co. 1:20). All believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are reckoned to be the descendants of Abraham, who are the heirs of the promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:26-28).

² There are two ways in which Abraham received the promise. The first was through the birth of Isaac after 25 years and reaffirmed through Isaac's preservation at Mount Moriah to keep the family line. The second was through faith, believing that the full promise would be fulfilled beyond his lifetime (Heb. 11:13). Indeed this was the case hundreds of years later when the Lord Jesus Christ was born as a man. He was the seed that was promised through Abraham's family lineage. Christian believers living today come from all different nations, tribes and tongues and are a fulfilment of the promise given to Abraham.

Verse 18

God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie,

When God speaks there is no need for him to make an oath for he does not need to support his Word as man does. God cannot lie (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2). God's Word is absolutely true and completely trustworthy. But when God affirmed his Word to Abraham with an oath he was doing this for the benefit of others. God's Word is true, and his oath which confirmed that Word is also true.

we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.

We have a description of a Christian as one who flees for refuge. The writer may have had the prophecy of Isaiah 4:6 in mind, seeing its fulfilment in Christ. The readers may have been passing through a storm, but the Christ they are tempted to desert is, in fact, their refuge. In the refuge of Christ we find salvation and deliverance from the wrath to come (Matt. 3:7; Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). Our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ, for he alone brings about our deliverance so that we can be with him in glory (John 14:3; 17:24; 1 Thess. 4:17). We look to Jesus to be made like him (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2). This hope is one of indescribable beauty and blessing (1 Co. 2:9) and it forms an inheritance which is indestructible and which will never diminish in value (Pet. 1:3-4). Such a hope can be taken hold of by faith, and in view of God's having doubly guaranteed such blessing, we can be absolutely certain that it will be completely realised. So what God says that cannot be changed, altered in any way or fail, is so that we might be greatly encouraged.

Verse 19

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

The writer continues with the theme of the certainty of the believer's hope in Christ. Perhaps there was much insecurity generated by the hostile environment in which the believers lived. Their world was filled with uncertainty. The hope which we have in Christ is described as an anchor of the soul. It is rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ and is immovable and unailing. Our entire being or "soul" is firmly fixed in him. No matter what tides, currents and storms of this world may overwhelm the believer, the anchor of the Christian hope remains sure and steadfast because it is in Christ. This is in stark contrast to all the false and failing hopes which worldly philosophies have to offer.

It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain,

Two illustrations are blended in this verse to describe our hope in Christ: a ship's anchor and the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. Just as a ship's anchor is buried and unseen so the high priest, on behalf of the people, went through the curtain in the temple to meet with God and was unseen. The Christian's hope then is a certainty they have and an assurance that Christ, though unseen, is their representative secured safely to God himself (12:2).

Verse 20

where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.

The Christian hope is not an empty hope because Jesus Christ has gone before us. He is not only our representative but he is also our forerunner. He has not forgotten his people but instead he goes ahead to prepare the way for each one of his followers (John 14:2-3; Heb. 7:25). We may look to him with calm assurance and endure as he did, that we may also enter God's rest (Heb. 12:1-2). He is already at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 1:3; 4:14) and guarantees the place of his people with him (Heb. 2:10-13; John 17:24). As the Lord Jesus Christ is the one who went before us it is implied that many more will follow after him.

He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

The final point is that he has become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. What is unique about the Lord Jesus Christ, and is in contrast to the priesthood of Aaron, is that he opens the way to God's immediate presence for all his people. Aaron could not do this and his priesthood was temporary. It concluded at the coming of Jesus Christ to this earth who replaced the temporary with something permanent.



Summary

The writer does not believe that the readers he is addressing are guilty of apostasy. He addresses them as dear friends and is confident that they are meant for better things that come with being followers of Christ. They had become spiritually immature and had not advanced in the Christian faith. They clearly had served fellow Christians, which God will have observed, and would not forget. So the writer's desire is that they should continue loving others as

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long as their lives last. This would show their true situation. If their trust is totally in Christ then it will be certain that their hope for eternal salvation will come true. Such an attitude will guard them from slipping spiritually. They would be following the examples of those who had lived before them, Old Testament characters that they were familiar with. The example to these people was that they would inherit God's promises, not in their lifetime on earth, but later. These heroes believed this and continued to the end of their life. Abraham is cited as an excellent example of how God's promises to him were fulfilled. It was not in his lifetime but these readers were witnesses to the promise being fulfilled in Christ. To help Abraham trust in these promises God also swore the promises by an oath, though he had no need to. He did this to give them confidence for their hope. The certainty of this hope comes about because Jesus has already gone before. He has been raised from the dead and is now in heaven at God's side. He is therefore a strong and trustworthy anchor for their souls. He has led the way that those who trust him will also go. This is not a temporary arrangement, but permanent, like in the eternal order of Melchizedek.

This brings us to the end of a long application of the teaching that Jesus Christ is greater than Aaron (4:14-5:10). There have been solemn warnings, but also exhortations and encouragements. These were all designed to prevent the readers from turning away from Christ.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Laying hold of the unchanging promise of God

Introduction

In the immediately preceding passage the author of the letter searches the hearts of his readers by indicating that it is possible to witness the power of God first hand and not be a believer. This was the case with the Israelites during the wilderness journey and also many of those who were present at the feeding of the five thousand. The purpose of the teaching is to warn and alert the readers of the letter to persevere in the faith. It is not an indication that the author of the letter questions the

validity of his readers' profession of faith, for he now encourages them to take a firm hold of the promise of eternal life in Christ.

1. Things that accompany salvation

- (a) The writer is referring to the evidence of the grace of God in the lives of his readers.
- (b) God had begun a work in their lives and will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6).
- (c) They had courageously identified with their persecuted brethren (Heb. 10:32-34).
- (d) Therefore they should shake themselves from their present lethargy and press on with a full conviction of the promised hope (Rom. 8:18, 23-25).

Application

There is no place in the Christian life for laziness or indifference, but we should follow the example of believers who have lived earlier who through faith and with patience persevered to the end.

2. The example of Abraham

- (a) God made a promise to Abraham that he would be blessed and have many descendants (Gen. 17:4-6).
- (b) Abraham's faith was greatly tested when he was commanded by God to offer up Isaac. In response to Abraham's obedience God assured him that he would be truly blessed and his descendants would be multiplied (Gen. 22:16-17).
- (c) Abraham never lost hope through the long years of waiting. Nor did he think that God's promise would fail when he was required to offer up Isaac. Instead he patiently persevered to see the promise realised (Rom. 4:18-21).

3. God reinforced his promise

- (a) Disputes between men are settled through sworn testimony to affirm the truth, swearing by what is greater.
- (b) God swore by himself to affirm his promise to Abraham. He guaranteed and provided even greater assurance that Abraham would be blessed and his descendants multiplied.
- (c) This was to encourage all the people of God to patiently persevere to the end, for God's promises are as unchanging as God himself.

4. The forerunner within the veil

- (a) The hope of eternal rest is sure and steadfast being rooted in the unchanging promise of God (2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:2).

- (b) The hope is fixed in the Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 1:27; 1 Tim. 1:1).
- (c) This hope is an anchor of the soul confirmed in the very presence of God.
- (d) The Lord Jesus Christ has already gone before his people and is now in the presence of God. He is the guarantor of the glorification of each one of his people for believers will follow him there (John 14:2-3).

Application

Let us take a firm hold of the unchanging promise of God and focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 3:1; 12:2), patiently persevering to the end. God's promise will be realised in us.



Focus Point: The ascended Christ

In our passage the author encourages the Hebrew Christians to continue to trust Christ as an anchor because Christ has already gone to God's inner sanctuary (6:19-20). The Old Testament description of the most holy part of the tabernacle is used to describe the place where God is, to which we have no physical access whilst living on this earth. Now Christ is there, present with God. He went there after he ascended into a cloud watched by his followers (Acts 1:9). The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus went there for us (6:20), i.e. for all who have fled to Christ for refuge (6:18). Jesus has led the way for his people to follow. This is the certain hope for the Christian (6:18-19). Why does the writer tell his readers that they can have great confidence (6:18)?

1. Christ ascended to a place

For forty days after his resurrection Jesus appeared to his followers on the earth. Then he led his followers to Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, and he left them as he was taken up in a cloud. This event took place to show the disciples that he went to a place. Two men in white robes addressed the disciples and asked them why they were standing there. The robed men confirmed that Jesus had been taken to heaven but will return some day in the same way. Jesus' resurrected body was different in many ways from the body that was crucified, but was still limited in that it could only be in one place at any one time. This means that Jesus went somewhere when he ascended into heaven.

2. Christ received glory and honour

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he received glory, honour and authority that had never been his before, as one who was both God and man. Before Jesus died he prayed that God would glorify him in God's presence with the glory that he had had before the world was made (John 17:5). Peter, when he preached on the day of Pentecost announced that Jesus was exalted at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33). Other similar statements are made in the New Testament (Phil. 2:9; 1 Tim. 3:16; Rev. 5:12).

3. Christ was seated at God's right hand

When Christ ascended into heaven he sat down at God's right hand. The Old Testament said that the Messiah would do this (Psalm 110:1). Hebrews 1:3 confirmed that this took place. This sitting down at the right hand of God signified the completion of a task. This was the rescuing of men and women from the kingdom of darkness. This is often described as Christ's work of redemption (he bought back his people by paying the ransom price of death with his own life). Sitting at God's right hand is also an indication that Christ received authority over the universe (Eph. 1:20-21; 1 Pet. 3:22). One aspect of his authority is to pour out the Holy Spirit on the church, which began on the day of Pentecost. Jesus is not fixed to that one place nor is he inactive. He is described as walking among the seven gold lampstands in heaven (Rev. 2:1). Like a human king who does not sit on his throne all the time but engages in many royal duties, so it is with Jesus Christ. He is engaged in many other activities in heaven as well.

4. Significance for us

Believers are united with Christ in every aspect of his work of rescue. His going up into heaven foreshadows our future ascension into heaven with him. That is why the emphasis in the book of Hebrews is to follow all of Jesus' steps with our eyes fixed firmly on him. He persevered, so must we. He was willing to give up everything for his people, so we must be prepared to give up everything for him. He was hated by the world, so we must be willing and ready to be hated by the world. We are identified with Jesus, he is our refuge. One day he will take us to be with himself.

Jesus' ascension gives us assurance that our final home will be in heaven with him (John 14:2-3). Jesus has gone before us so that we might eventually follow him and live with him forever. The fact that Jesus ascended into heaven and achieved that which was set before him gives us that great assurance that we will eventually go there as well.

We have union with Christ in his ascension. This means we share something with him now whilst upon this earth. This is his authority to contend against the spiritual world of wickedness (Eph. 6:12). Christ gives an indication of this in his message to the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:26-27). Sharing in Christ's authority over the universe will be more fully given in the age to come (after his return). We will even judge angels (1 Co. 6:3). These are amazing promises of our future sharing in Christ's sitting at the right hand of God. We will not fully understand this until the age to come, but it fills us with confidence and hope now to endure with Christ to the end of our earthly lives.

Source used: Bible Doctrine, Wayne Grudem (IVP).



Over to you

Do you think it is possible for us to so concentrate on one kind of person that we neglect others? For example, are you so keen on the conversion of unbelievers that you neglect those who are already Christians?

Are there people in your congregation who seem to want to give up the Christian faith? How does this passage help you in dealing with them?

How certain is the hope of your people? Do you need to bring before them the ascended Christ?

MELCHIZEDEK INTRODUCED



Hebrews 7:1-10

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Verbal inspiration of Scripture
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Reference has been made to Melchizedek in earlier chapters of Hebrews (5:6, 10; 6:20). Now the writer explains why it is said that our Lord is a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. The writer is showing his readers that Christ's is an everlasting priesthood. The teaching of chapter 7 is based on the three verses in Genesis 14:18-20.¹

Abraham (his name was changed from Abram in Genesis 17:1-8) was returning from a military exploit to rescue his nephew Lot. He was met by Melchizedek, who gave him physical refreshment of bread and wine and blessed him. Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils he had gained. As in all our interpretations of the Old Testament we need to take care how we handle the detail and avoid fanciful ideas that have no New Testament warrant. This applies here, especially to the bread and wine. Some teachers have thought this is an obvious reference to

¹ ¹⁸Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.

²⁰ And blessed be God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”
Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

the Lord's Supper, but this is to ignore the fact that the writer to the Hebrews makes no reference to such meaning at all. The bread and wine were no more than normal means of refreshment.

There are two elements in this account that support the contention that our Lord is greater than Aaron, because he is in the line of Melchizedek.

- i. The absence of any reference to Melchizedek's birth or death.
- ii. The fact that Abraham gave him a tenth of his spoils.

The readers who were tempted to return to Old Testament religion may well have been asking how Jesus Christ could be a priest at all, since he was not a descendant of Aaron. They would find the answer to that question in what follows.

What these verses mean



1. The person of Melchizedek (7:1-3)

Verse 1

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High.

Melchizedek resembled Jesus Christ in that he was both a king and a priest. The writer does not develop this theme here because it was not necessary for his argument. The Aaronic priesthood never involved kingship, and indeed, at least two kings were punished for intruding into the work of priests (1 Sam. 13:8-14; 2 Chron.26:16-21). But in Jesus Christ the offices are combined (4:14-16; John 18:37; 1 Tim.2:5; Ps.110:2-4). Salem was most probably Jerusalem. In the midst of prevailing idolatry Melchizedek worshipped the most high and supreme God, the living and true God.

He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him,

Melchizedek met Abraham returning from the battle. Chedorloamer led his confederacy in victory over Amraphel king of Sodom and his allies. In defeating the king of Sodom, Chedorloamer plundered the people of Sodom, and in the process took captive Lot, Abraham's nephew (Gen. 14:1-12). Once Abraham had been informed of what had happened, he assembled a small army, pursued the attackers, and under cover of darkness, began a successful attack, which was completed close to Damascus. Abraham freed Lot and all the other captives, and also recovered everything which had been carried off. As Abraham was returning in triumph he was met by Melchizedek, who welcomed back the victors with bread and wine, and invoked God's blessing upon Abraham (Gen. 14:13-20).

Verse 2

and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything.

Abraham presented Melchizedek with a tithe of the items they had plundered. While tithing was ratified by the law, it was practised before the law was given at Sinai (Gen. 28:22). No information is provided in the Scriptures regarding how this practice came into being prior to the giving of the law.

First, his name means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace”.

The writer goes on to give the meaning of the name Melchizedek, “king of righteousness” and of Salem, “king of peace”.

Verse 3

Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life,

In the purpose of God nothing was recorded in the Scriptures of the family background of Melchizedek, nor of his birth and death. This is in complete contrast to the record of all other believers who lived during this early period of time (Gen. 5:1-22; 10:1-32; 11:10-26, 27-32). In the case of Levitical priests their proof of genealogical descent was the only means of validating qualification for the priesthood (Ezra 2:62-63; Neh. 7:63-65). The point being made is that as far as Melchizedek is concerned there is no record of family connections. It does not mean that he did not have a father or mother. Nor does having neither beginning of days nor end of life mean that he was never born and never died. What the writer is showing is that the priesthood of Melchizedek was not determined according to any family links. Similarly, as there is no record of Melchizedek's birth and death, his priesthood can be reckoned as timeless.

like the Son of God he remains a priest for ever.

The purpose of God in not having any background of this man included in his Word is that Melchizedek and his priesthood should be regarded as being typical of the person and priesthood of the eternal Son of God. Melchizedek then is a type of Christ, made like the Son of God and one who functioned as a priest-king. The Lord Jesus Christ is the messianic King who remains forever.



2. The greatness of Melchizedek (7:4-10)

Verse 4

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!

In this part of the book the writer develops the theme of the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham. Abraham is the patriarch (ancestral founder) of the Hebrew people, and one who was regarded by the Jews as being the father of their nation. Abraham is the one from whom all Jews were descended (Matt. 3:9; John 8:33-39; Rom. 9:7). Abraham was also known as the friend of God (2 Chr. 20:7). But Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe of the spoils to indicate that this man was greater than Abraham.

Verse 5

Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham.

The practice of tithing was ratified by the law and was binding upon all Israelites with the exception of the Levites. All areas of income were to be tithed without any discrimination whatsoever, monetary equivalent also being permissible (Lev. 27:30-33). The tithes were to be presented to the Levites (Num. 18:21-24), who in view of their being consecrated to the work of the tabernacle, followed by the temple, were barred from owning or inheriting any land (Deut. 10:8, 9; 12:12). The Aaronic priests were to be given a tenth of the tithes received by the Levites (Num. 18:1-7, 25-32; Neh. 10:37-38). All of the Levites and priests, like the other tribes, were descended from Abraham. They were all brothers, but Aaron and his sons acted on behalf of God, so they were superior in status to the givers of tithes, even though they descended from Abraham and were their brothers.

Verse 6

This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.

The writer now points out that Melchizedek, who does not have any genealogical connection with the Levites, was given tithes by Abraham. Melchizedek also blessed the one who had the promises. Abraham was the man with whom God had entered into a covenantal relationship with promises (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:4-8; 22:16-18) and he was blessed by Melchizedek.

Verse 7

And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater.

Here is the author's inspired conclusion that the lesser is blessed by the greater. Obviously, the one who blesses is superior to the one being blessed. In this matter Melchizedek is clearly seen as being greater than Abraham. If Melchizedek is greater than Abraham then it follows that

Melchizedek must be greater than Levi who was descended from Abraham. This the author reasons in the following verses.

Verse 8

In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.

The wording of this verse strongly suggests that the Levitical system was still functioning at the time when this book was written and the temple in Jerusalem was still standing. This would have been before AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple. The priests who collected the tithes, both in the Old Testament era and at the time of writing, were mere mortals, each one being claimed by death. On the other hand, Melchizedek also received tithes but the Scriptures do not say anything about his death. The point is not that Melchizedek did not die but that he is typical of a priesthood that is eternal and not characterised by death. It is an abiding priesthood (Heb. 6:20; Ps. 110:4) and therefore greater than the Levitical priesthood in which all priests eventually die.

Verses 9 and 10

One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, ¹⁰because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

The writer makes one further point in the last two verses of our passage to prove that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of Levi. Levi, the great-grandchild of Abraham, although not yet born at that time, is fully identified with his great-grandfather. Therefore, as Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek, so Levi in Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek. Just as Levi is identified with Abraham, so the implication is that Levi is representative of all priests descended from him. In this way Melchizedek is reckoned greater than all other priests, for they gave tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. Similar reasoning is found in the New Testament regarding the solidarity of the human race in Adam, that when Adam sinned all sinned (Rom. 5:12), and that the death of Adam meant the death of all (1 Co. 15:22). The same is true regarding all who are in Christ. They are made alive (1 Co. 15:22) because Christ lives, and they are made righteous because Christ is righteous (Rom. 5:16, 18). It might be thought that the Lord Jesus Christ would be identified with Abraham in exactly the same way as Levi for his lineage is also traced back to Abraham (Matt. 1:1; Luke 3:23, 34). However it appears that the author anticipates this objection as he reminds his readers that the Lord was not born into the tribe of Levi, but Judah, and was not of the priestly line. (See Study 13, verses 13 and 14).



Summary

Just as the priesthood of Melchizedek did not depend upon physical descent and was quite unrelated to the tribe of Levi, so the same is true of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ for it is according to the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek was both priest and king. In the midst of prevailing idolatry, he worshipped the most high God, the true and living God. Abraham gave him a tithe from the spoils of battle, showing the superiority of Melchizedek. The omission of any information concerning Melchizedek's birth, lineage and death was to emphasise the eternal nature of the priesthood of God's Son. The author of the book was stressing the truth that priesthood away from the Levitical priesthood has always been within the purposes of God. This priesthood would always supersede that of Levi. Further, this priesthood is seen as being greater and of an enduring nature. Therefore, the readers were urged to hold to that which is of everlasting value and only found in Christ and his priesthood. To go back to Judaism would be a return to a priesthood which was only temporary and inferior, and always marked by death. The Levitical priesthood could not function indefinitely within the eternal purposes of God because of its imperfections.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – The king of righteousness and peace (7:1-10)

Introduction

The author in this passage of Hebrews demonstrates the superiority of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ over the priesthood of Aaron, the first high priest of the old covenant. The author's purpose is to demonstrate that should his readers return to Judaism they would be returning to what has been superseded, for it has fulfilled the role assigned to it in the eternal purposes of God. We, like the recipients of the book, need to understand that in Christ we have a glorious High Priest who provides eternal blessing for his people. His priesthood was not a second plan but was fully anticipated in the Old Testament Scriptures.

1. The person of Melchizedek

- a. He is identified in Genesis 14:18-20. He was priest of the true and living God and was king of Salem, meaning peace.
- b. He blessed Abraham when Abraham returned from defeating the four kings (Gen. 14:19-20).
- c. Abraham gave him a tenth of all the spoils (Gen 14:20).
- d. There is no record of Melchizedek's parentage nor of his death. This does not mean that he did not have parents and did not die. What it does show is that his priesthood was not determined by earthly relationships and that his priesthood did not terminate with his death. All other important Old Testament people have their genealogy and death recorded.
- e. We do not know who Melchizedek was, nor is it necessary to know. It is his priesthood which is being emphasised by God in his Word.
- f. As a priest-king he was unique and was a type of the priest-king yet to be born.

2. The greatness of Melchizedek

- a. Melchizedek was a superior priest to Aaron and all other priests of the old covenant
- b. Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek and as the head of Israel represented all Israelites, including Aaron and his descendants. Aaron through his great-grandfather Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek.
- c. Melchizedek blessed Abraham; the greater blesses the lesser.
- d. Melchizedek had no earthly connections to Aaron. Therefore his priesthood is distinguished from Aaron's priesthood.

3. The greatness of Christ who was typified by Melchizedek

- a. The Lord Jesus Christ is the anticipated priest-king.
- b. He is the promised source of righteousness (Jer. 23:5, 6; 33:15, 16).
- c. He is the promised king of peace (Is. 9:6; Ps. 72:7).
- d. Under his rule his kingdom is filled with peace and righteousness (Is. 9:7; Ps. 72:7).
- e. Through the sacrifice of himself he makes peace with God for his people (Col. 1:20; Rom. 5:1) and provides righteousness for his people (Rom. 3:24-26).
- f. He is the eternal Son of God without beginning or end (Heb. 1:8-9; John 1:1-3) and because he conquered death his priesthood is everlasting, never to be terminated by death (Heb. 1:3) as was Aaron's.

Conclusion

Because the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ is everlasting so as the priest-king he provides eternal blessing, peace and righteousness for all who trust in him and persevere in the faith. Aaron and his priesthood could never secure such blessing for that priesthood was not of eternal duration.



Focus Point:

Verbal inspiration of Scripture

We have the Scripture's own testimony about itself and that is that it comes from God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). In the Timothy reference Paul writes that all Scripture is God-breathed. In some translations the phrase used is "given by inspiration of God". But what does this mean in detail?

When it is said that God breathed out Scripture it means that the words of the Bible, in their original, are the very words that God wanted spoken. It includes the very words used by the writers (Ps. 119:160; Matt. 4:4; Rev. 22:18-19). We call this **verbal inspiration**.

The doctrine of inspiration does not mean that God dictated the words for the people to write. God took up the character and circumstances of each writer. Indeed it was God who created their characters and circumstances in order to use them in the task of writing Scripture, as he wanted it written. Each man wrote according to his God-given character, God breathing through him. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for "breath" and "Spirit" are the same. The breath of God is often used as a way to describe his creating power (Job 33:4; Ps. 33:6).

God used different means (Heb. 1:1) to inspire the writing of Scripture. God spoke through dreams and visions. At other times God was in direct contact with the writer. God oversaw such writings as court archives (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles) to produce the Scriptures.

The Lord Jesus Christ underlined the importance of every word being inspired when he said "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen" will disappear (Matt. 5:17-18). We can go even further to illustrate why all words in Scripture are God-breathed. In Matthew 22:31-32 the whole argument is based not just on the word used, but its tense also. In this case it was important to use the present and not the past tense (therefore there is a resurrection now, and those who have died are still alive). In another example we have in Galatians 3:16 the argument

based on whether the word in the original text was in the plural or the singular. It was singular and so pointed to one person, who was Jesus Christ. And then, amazingly in Hebrews 7:1-3, the argument rests on what the Scripture does not say about the birth or death of Melchizedek. The Holy Spirit supervised the production of Scripture to the extent of what he included and what he left out. Therefore, it is important for us to give careful attention to every detail of the Word of God, especially when we are preparing sermons.

The church has always taken the position that the Scriptures are God-breathed. The early church did not need to develop this doctrine to the extent it exists today. This is because with the development of science and new ideas in the sixteenth century, the Bible as being God's Word was being challenged. The Bible as being the inspired Word of God came under further attack in the nineteenth century through liberalism.

Source:

A Dictionary of Theological Terms (M. E. Manton), *Grace Publications*,
A Dictionary of Bible Knowledge (I. Stringer), *Grace Publications*,
Evangelical Dictionary, *Paternoster*.



Over to you

There is a tendency within human beings to be religious by keeping to a set of rules, following rituals and performing ceremony. It will express itself in many forms of life, not just church type activities. What pattern of “religion” is prominent in your society? How does it affect your congregation? Are there those you minister to who hanker to go back? How are you going to deal with such people?

Does Christ's everlasting priesthood have any place in your people's thinking? What impact do you think it would make upon them if they really understood Christ's eternal superiority?

CHRIST'S EVERLASTING

PRIESTHOOD



Hebrews 7:11-19

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Christians and God's law
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

In the previous study the writer dealt with the parallels and contrasts between Melchizedek and Jesus Christ. Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, demonstrated by Abraham's tithing the spoils of war to Melchizedek and Melchizedek's blessing Abraham. Continuing with Melchizedek, the writer emphasises in our present passage that Jesus Christ's priesthood is superior even to that of Melchizedek. If the readers of this book had given sufficient consideration to the very Old Testament Scriptures to which they were tempted to return, they would have asked themselves why the psalmist in Psalm 110:4 spoke of a priesthood other than Aaron's. If Aaron's priesthood had been God's last and final provision, why did the Old Testament itself anticipate a priesthood other than Aaron's?

What these verses mean



1. The change of priesthood (7:11-14)

Verse 11

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come – one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?

The Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood was given to the people by God through Moses. It had its purpose but it was not perfect because it was but a signpost to God's final provision and not the provision itself. Perfection is only achieved when people are able to enter the very presence of God with their consciences at peace. This state could not be achieved through the Levitical priesthood; it was faulty and the law given to Moses at Sinai showed up all the failings. Some other priesthood was required that was capable of bringing the people into the presence of God perfectly. God made such provision and it was in the order of Melchizedek and not that of Aaron.

Verse 12

For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.

The writer draws the conclusion that if there is a change of priesthood, something which God had revealed would occur, then it means that there is also a corresponding change of the law. This is because priesthood and law are inseparable. In this section of the letter the writer will demonstrate the difference between the two systems. Under the old priests and people alike were violators of the law, and therefore no perfect sacrifice for sin could possibly be offered. Under the Mosaic law there was a continual repetition of sacrifices which bore unending testimony to the imperfection of the system. With the change of priesthood and law the Lord Jesus Christ has provided a perfect sacrifice for sin which never needs to be repeated.

Verses 13 and 14

He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no-one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

Christ was not of the tribe of Levi (a descendant of Aaron), but of the tribe of Judah. In being from the tribe of Judah, the Lord Jesus Christ has absolutely no connection with the tribe of Levi and would not have

been able to officiate as a priest under the old system. The promised deliverer would be of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David (2 Sam. 7:12-13; Is. 9:6, 7; Mic. 5:2, 4).



2. The priest with an indestructible life (7:15-17)

Verse 15

And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears,

Now the writer comes to the point that he had been hinting at and the most startling fulfilment is pointed out. The writer of the book provides the explanation of the fulfilment of the prophecy in Psalm 110:4. The significance of the prophecy was, without question, one which would have been difficult to grasp. What had not been clear previously is now obvious for all to see. Another priest has arisen in the likeness of Melchizedek. In verse 3 Melchizedek is said to be like the Son of God. The meaning of this is that Melchizedek was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ in his priesthood for there is no record of the commencement and termination of his priesthood. Here the Lord Jesus Christ is in the likeness of Melchizedek.

Verse 16

one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry

The new priesthood is not based on law at all. It is of an entirely different order. The writer firstly deals with the negative aspect in comparing the priesthood of Christ and the Levitical priesthood. The Lord Jesus Christ has not come according to the law of an earthly commandment. According to the law of Moses only those who were direct descendants of Levi could serve as priests, and for this reason genealogical records were of great importance. Those records provided proof of descent and qualification for the priesthood. Just as Melchizedek did not have any connection with the tribe of Levi, so the same is true of the Lord Jesus Christ. The term “basis of a regulation” refers to the legal requirement involving parentage within the tribe of Levi. The priesthood of Melchizedek and, therefore, the priesthood of Christ, was not according to such earthly lines of succession for their priesthood was not affected by death. In the end, although the ancestry of our Lord was instructive (he came from Judah and was king as well as a priest), such things were of little importance.

but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.

Secondly, we have the distinctly positive feature in that the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ has the power of an endless life. The life of the Lord Jesus Christ is indestructible. This is in keeping with what is proclaimed by God in Psalm 110 now quoted in the next verse.



3. The priesthood of Christ accomplishes its purposes (7:18-19)

Verse 17

For it is declared:

“You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

Although the Levitical priesthood had been functioning for centuries it was imperfect. This is implied by the writer in verse 11 but at this point he bases his argument upon the fact that the Psalmist through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit spoke of the priesthood which was after the order of Melchizedek. In Psalm 110 the writer declares that the priest of this order will serve for ever. If the Levitical priesthood were to be regarded as permanent and irreplaceable God would not have revealed that there would be a priest of another order who would continue for ever, and who would not be a Levite. In this way the Lord Jesus Christ is completely different from all Levitical priests.

Verse 18

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless,

The writer uses very strong language to show that so far as a way to God is concerned, the law has been set aside; it is weak and useless. The reason was not in the law itself but with those who were to conform to the law, sinners. The law was weak in the sense that it could not save sinners for it was powerless to change them (Rom. 8:3). The law was not designed to do this work, but was given that sinners would know exactly how they should live as far as God's moral standards were concerned. Failure to live according to those requirements meant they would suffer the just consequences. The purpose of the law then is to expose sin in the heart and actions of the sinner, to condemn sin and bring the sinner under condemnation and move the sinner to seek forgiveness and salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 7:24-25; Gal. 3:23-24).

Verse 19

(for the law made nothing perfect),

What the writer of the book was concerned about was that his readers would understand that the laws regarding the Levitical sacrificial

system could not deal with the basic problem of sin in man's relationship with God. Later in the book the writer states that the animal sacrifices could not possibly take away sin (Heb. 10:4). These animal sacrifices could not cleanse the conscience from the guilt of sin and therefore could not obtain eternal redemption and qualify each one to serve God (Heb. 9:12, 14b). The constant repetition of the animal sacrifices was a daily and powerful testimony to their complete ineffectiveness and inability to make the sinner perfect.

and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

The old system prepared the way for something that was much better to come. God had declared that a new priesthood would be established which would be truly effective in dealing with sin and reconciling sinners to God. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who has purged us from our sins, and who has made atonement for the sins of his people (2:17). This he did through the sacrifice of himself, once for all (7:27; 9:26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14). This enables his people to enter into the actual presence of God through drawing near to him. Under the old system the way into the very presence of God was barred and the high priest was unable to take those whom he represented within the veil. But through Christ every believer has access to the throne of grace, whether Jew or Gentile (Eph. 2:18). He is the only way to the Father (John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). He has made his people members of the household of God (3:6). He is the forerunner who will be followed by every one of his people into the very presence and glory of God (6:19-20). The recipients of the book were in grave danger of throwing away all of this by imagining that they would be much safer by returning to the old ways of imperfection and uncertainty. In thinking in this way they were grossly mistaken for the old ways were no longer existing, having been replaced by God with something which is far better.



Summary

The readers of the book of Hebrews were in grave danger of throwing away all of the benefits of their Christian faith by imagining that they would be much safer by returning to the old ways. In thinking in this way they were grossly mistaken for the old ways were no longer existing, having been replaced by God with something which is far better. They were under pressure to go back to an imperfect and uncertain

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Summary continued from page 103

priesthood. The law given to Moses was for a temporary period and could only emphasise man's inability to keep God's standards. The priesthood operating under this law was also limited in all its human weaknesses. The temporary and ineffective were replaced by God with the everlasting and perfect. The priesthood is no longer of the line of Levi but of the order of Melchizedek. Jesus Christ is of that order, a priest not by belonging to the tribe of Levi, but by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed. Christ fulfils the purpose of priesthood by bringing men into God's presence. Therefore, the Hebrew Christians are urged to hold fast with complete confidence to what they have come to possess in Christ, which is certain and unailing.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – The new and everlasting priesthood

For many Christians today the arguments for why the Hebrew Christians should not return to their former Old Testament practices may appear not relevant to their own situation. All Christians are under pressure to give up and not maintain a godly and faithful life. The priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ is important for all believers to understand. It is crucial to their prayer life, assurance and faith. To see how the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ was anticipated in the Old Testament Scriptures through the priesthood of Melchizedek shows the unveiling of God's great plan of salvation. The imperfection of Aaron's priesthood shows that any man-created religion is doomed.

1. The need for a new priesthood

- (a) God had revealed that there would be a new priesthood (Ps. 110:4).
- (b) The new priesthood would be filled by someone out of the tribe of Judah and not Levi. This one would be a descendant of David. Psalm 110 is applied to the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 12:35-37).

2. The priest with an indestructible life

- (a) Melchizedek was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no record of the commencement or termination of his priesthood.
- (b) The priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ is not according to genealogical records, as was the Levitical.

- (c) The priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ is according to the power of an endless life. Through death he conquered death and now lives for ever. He is exalted at the right hand of the Father having completed his work of sacrificing (1:3-4). His present intercessory work implies that he is a living and triumphant Saviour and high priest.
- (d) Because he rose again in power he guarantees that he is a priest for ever never to be replaced because of death. This, God declares to the world (Ps. 110:4).

3. The priesthood of Christ accomplished its purpose

- (a) The old priesthood according to the law could not secure perfection (7:11). Therefore all previous rules and regulations of the Levitical priesthood are annulled, declared void by God.
- (b) The purpose of the law was not to save but to reveal God's moral standards (Rom. 7:7-11), to condemn sin and show to the sinner the need of forgiveness and salvation through faith in the promised Redeemer.
- (c) The Lord Jesus Christ cleanses us from our sins (1:3), having made effective atonement for the sins of his people (2:17).
- (d) This is the better hope, for through faith in Christ we are fully reconciled to God (10:19-22).

Conclusion

Hold fast to Christ to the end and do not neglect the salvation that is only found in him.



Focus Point:

Christians and God's law

The very strong language in Hebrews 7 must not be thought to teach that Christians can dispense with God's law revealed in the Old Testament. The teaching in Hebrews 7 is that the Old Testament system of sacrifices was in itself useless apart from the coming "one sacrifice for ever" of our Lord Jesus Christ (10:12). Furthermore, now that he has come there is no more need of such sacrifices. Indeed, any additional ones are an insult to him!

But there have always been people who have argued that since we are saved by faith in Christ and not by works, Christians have no need to obey the law. Does not Paul say that we are not under law but under grace (Rom.6:15)? This is called antinomianism (against the law), and

some have even gone so far as to say that we are free to live sinful lives because Christ has saved us. There are three things to be said about this.

1. There is no salvation in any sacrificial system. Christ's sacrifice alone makes atonement for our sins. But there are many lessons to learn about the sacrifice of Christ from the Old Testament rituals, as we see in these chapters in Hebrews. For this reason we retain all the instruction in Exodus and Leviticus for our edification.
2. There is no salvation in keeping the Old Testament commands (Eph.2:8; Rom.3:20). But one purpose of our salvation is to enable us to aspire to keeping the law (Rom. 8: 3-4) and this is confirmed by the way Paul applies the law to his readers (Eph. 4: 25-28; 6: 1-3). The law is still our standard especially as we see it lived out in the life of Christ.
3. The law is also a means of convincing people that they need salvation (Rom.3: 20; 7:7).

For all these reasons we still need the law though we are not saved by it.



Over to you

What kind of pressures are your congregation under to give up the Christian faith? Maybe your society is “Christian” by name and those who claim a conversion are looked upon as religious freaks. How does this passage help you with your people?

Is there a danger that some of your people are looking to religious deeds and keeping rules to be accepted by God? Why is this wrong and how would you address these people?

JESUS CHRIST, A PRIEST

.....
BY GOD'S OATH - FOR EVER



Hebrews 7:20-28

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Covenants
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

In this part of the book it is shown that the priesthood of Christ is unchangeable. It has already been reasoned that his priesthood, which is after the order of Melchizedek, is superior to the priesthood of Aaron. Also, under the Levitical priesthood there never was perfection. This is implied because God had revealed that another priesthood would be raised up which had no connection with the old system. Further, it is clearly stated that the One who would be according to this priesthood would live for ever and that he would make an effective sacrifice for sin, which would actually reconcile sinners to God. The revelation that God would provide such a priest is in the form of an oath that is eternally binding.

What these verses mean



1. The priesthood of Christ is established by an oath (7:20-22)

Verse 20

And it was not without an oath!

In these verses the writer makes another application of the prophecy of Psalm 110:4 to show that the priesthood of Christ is superior to the old priesthood. The priesthood of Christ is based upon the oath of God. This distinguishes the priesthood of Christ from the Levitical priesthood.

Others became priests without any oath,

The Levitical priesthood had not been established according to any oath. That priesthood was according to physical succession, each priest being a descendant of Levi. In the appointing of the descendants of Levi as priests they were consecrated, but God did not confirm them into office with an oath (Ex. 28:1, 41; Num. 3:2, 3, 5-10).

Verse 21

but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

In the case of the Lord Jesus Christ he was made a priest through the oath of God. The writer quotes Psalm 110:4 saying

***“The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest for ever.’”***

The quotation provides the biblical proof regarding the priesthood of Christ being based upon the oath of God. It is God alone who has determined that his Son should be such a priest and declares this to the Son in the form of an oath, or sworn testimony. This in itself shows that the priesthood of Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood. But God adds, “and will not change his mind”. God’s oath is eternal and quite unchanging. There is absolutely nothing that can alter such a declaration or prevent its fulfilment. The meaning is that because what God has sworn is eternal and unchangeable, the priesthood of Christ is eternal and unchangeable. This is quite different from the Levitical priesthood which was not based upon any such oath and must be regarded as being of a temporary nature only. This also means that the priesthood of Christ is superior to the former priesthood and has not only replaced it but has been established upon the unchangeable oath of God.

Verse 22

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

This leads the writer to form the conclusion that Jesus is the one who guarantees this better covenant with God. Because of the imperfection of the sacrifices made under the law and the inability of the law to save sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ brought in a better hope. Now it is stated that the priesthood established through the unchangeable oath of God provides a priest who is the guarantee of a better covenant. The better covenant is based upon the better priesthood. Jesus is the personal guarantee of the terms of the new and better covenant, secured on the ground of his perfect sacrifice. The Lord Jesus Christ is the guarantee that the better covenant will never fail. We know that it will never be replaced because the guarantee is a priest forever according to the unchangeable oath of God. The better covenant is identified as the new covenant in 8:6-13.



2. The permanent high priesthood secures eternal salvation (7:23-25)

Verse 23

Now there have been many of those priests since death prevented them from continuing in office;

Under the Levitical priesthood there was a multiplicity of priests, no one in particular being able to continue in office indefinitely. Every single one was mortal and eventually died being no different from those they represented. Death was the reason why the legal line of succession had to be carefully observed.

Verse 24

but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood.

The Lord Jesus Christ is not affected by the Levitical priesthood regulations for he is of a different order (7:14-16). His priesthood will never be terminated by death for he has come on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (7:16). He continues forever after the order of Melchizedek, and therefore his priesthood is permanent and will never be interrupted by death. This high priest will never be removed by death and his office filled by another. He is the one and only priest. His death on the cross is the foundation of his effective ministry, for he rose from the dead, conquering death, to become the triumphant and glorious high priest of his people. The priesthood of Christ, in contrast to the Levitical priesthood, will never pass to another for it is perpetual and therefore superior.

Verse 25

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him,

The conclusion is that all who come to God through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ are assured that he saves them for ever for he brings sinners to God. It is only through him that we have access to God (7:19; 4:16; 10:22). He saves for ever through that once and for all sacrifice for sins made on the cross, which is never to be repeated (9:25-28; 10:10, 12, 14; 1 Pet. 3:18). He saves those who come to God through him, for he is the only mediator between God and men (John 14:6; Rom. 8:34; 1 Tim. 2:5; 1 John 2:1-2). He calls sinners to come to God through him. There is no hope in trying to come to God through anyone that is subject to death.

because he always lives to intercede for them.

The Lord Jesus Christ is able to save completely because he always lives to make intercession for those who come to God through him. He ever lives at the right hand of the Father, where he intercedes on behalf of his people (John 17; Rom. 8:32-34). There is absolutely no person, power or force in the entire universe that can wrest his people from the security of the hand of God. His contact with the Father is immediate and unbroken. His priestly ministry on his people's behalf is never-ending, and therefore the salvation which he secures for them is absolute.



3. The characteristics of our high priest (7:26-28)

Verse 26

Such a high priest meets our need

The writer now focuses on what the Lord Jesus Christ is in his person. He is exactly the type of high priest that we need in our lost estate, sinful and under the condemnation of the guilt of our sins.

- one who is holy, blameless, pure,

Christ is so different from all the Levitical priests. His character is full of nothing but moral perfection. In relation to God he is holy, and is identified as the "Holy One" (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27, 31; 3:14; 16:35, 37) and was recognised by evil spirits as such (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). The Lord Jesus Christ is able to save us for he is harmless, blameless and perfectly innocent. Pilate could not find any fault in him (Luke 23:4,14,22). All of the Levitical priests were to be without blemish and defilement outwardly (Lev. 21), but inwardly they were just like any other, stained by sin.

set apart from sinners,

This does not mean that he does not have anything to do with sinners, or that he is now in the glory of heaven while sinners are only to be found on earth. He came into the world and fully identified with those he came to save, regarding them as his brethren (2:11, 12). He was criticised by the self-righteous because he fraternised with sinners (Matt. 9:10-11; 11:19; 21:32). The Lord Jesus Christ is separate from sinners in the sense that he is not sinful like we are, including all of the Levitical priests. He is in a class of his own. The Lord Jesus Christ in his humanity has proved his moral worth by being completely without sin (2:10; 4:15; 5:8). By virtue of his moral qualities he was able to offer himself as that perfect sacrifice for sin. It was only such a sacrifice that could atone for our sins, and therefore he is most fitting as our high priest.

exalted above the heavens.

This is a reference to the resurrection, ascension and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. This reflects the supreme perfection of our great high priest, testifying to the reality of his person and work. We have a great high priest who is exalted far above all else (Eph. 1:20-22; 4:10; Phil. 2:8-10; 1 Pet 3:22).

Verse 27

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day,

In view of his perfect innocence he is quite unlike the Levitical priests. Christ does not need to offer up sacrifices daily as those high priests did. The high priests were sinners like anyone else and in just as great a need of reconciliation to God. Sacrifices had to be offered on a daily basis because of sin (Ex. 29:38-42; Lev. 6:8-13).

first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people.

Although the high priests may not have offered these sacrifices themselves, they would have been identified with the priests who did do this. The high priest most certainly had to offer personal sacrifice for his sins on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:6, 1) and then present a sacrifice on behalf of the people (Lev. 16:15-16).

He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.

There is no necessity of the Lord Jesus Christ to make further sacrifices for he is without sin. His sacrifice was morally perfect; therefore he sacrificed once for all when he offered up himself. The Levitical priesthood was marked by the constant repetition of sacrifices (10:1, 3). Our Lord Jesus Christ made but one perfect offering, the sacrifice of

himself which effectively deals with sin. This means that there is absolutely no place for any other sacrifice to be made. The old way has become totally obsolete, never to be revived.

Verse 28

For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak;

The writer concludes this part of the book with another contrast. He is referring to the fact that the Levitical priests could not continue in office because of death (7:23) and that they were sinners and had to offer sacrifices on their own behalf (7:27). Therefore they were incapable of being able to offer a sacrifice of infinite worth and of eternal effect. The Levitical priests served as appointed by the law but the Lord Jesus Christ served according to the word of the oath, a reference to Psalm 110:4. The plural word “men” reminded the readers of the multiplicity of priests under the old system and of the one supreme Son of the new and better covenant.

but the oath, which came after the law,

The declaration of the oath came after the law, meaning that the oath replaced the word of the law, which governed the priesthood. The new priesthood, which is after the order of Melchizedek, was necessary because the former priesthood could not provide perfection, the effective removal of the problem of sin, its guilt and condemnation.

appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever.

The law appointed as high priests men and the word of the oath appointed the Son. Although the Son experienced pain, suffering, testing and trial of the severest nature he was found perfect, living in complete submission to the will of the Father (2:9; 5:7-9).



Summary

We have seen that Melchizedek and his priesthood gave a better and more accurate preview of Christ and his priesthood than the Levitical (Aaronic) system. We have also seen that by saying that Christ's priesthood is in the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110: 4,) even while the Levitical system was still in operation, the Scriptures themselves anticipated a radical change from the Old Testament sacrificial system. As a way of acceptance with God, this meant that once Christ came, the old system was redundant. The great difference between the two systems is that the Old Testament priests died

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while Christ's priesthood is for ever. The Levitical priesthood was an earthly ministry that showed the truth of the reality to come. The sacrificial work of Christ was a heavenly ministry that saves sinners and was established with a solemn oath. Aaron's descendants (the Levites) became priests without such an oath but were appointed by the law. Their sacrifices could not save. They had to continually repeat their sacrifices, pointing to the perfect priesthood to follow. The priesthood of Christ was established by an oath on a permanent basis and his sacrifice was once and for all, not to be repeated. Christ is the kind of priest we need because he is blameless and untainted by sin. He has been set apart and through his death, resurrection and ascension has been given the highest place of honour in heaven.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – A perfect priest

Introduction

The basis upon which we are saved and reconciled to God is vital for us to know and believe. If we make a mistake here we could be influenced by man-centred religions. There is always the temptation to want to revert to a religion that appeals to the physical senses rather than to keep to the simplicity we have in Christ.

1. Established for ever

Religious systems are inadequate for they place responsibility upon the worshipper to conform to the rules that are specified by that religion. Such systems are inadequate because they cannot bring the person closer to God while the huge gap created by sin remains. A religious system has to be maintained by many religious leaders, for they are limited to being in one place at a time. By comparison God has set up a way, through his Son Jesus Christ, that meets the need of worshippers and brings them into union with God. It is a permanent arrangement.

2. The limitations of man's way

The priests of Israel had their limitations. There was a long succession of them, they grew old and died. That is still true today;

anything based on human beings is limited. The work of the gospel has to be rooted in biblical truth and principles. Looking to man-made methods or personalities is short-sighted. Building in such ways is using the flammable materials of wood, hay and straw (1 Co. 3:12).

3. Not to be repeated

The futility of trying to please God through our own efforts and works is shown up by the daily repetition of the sacrifices the priests had to carry out. The sacrifices could never bring about reconciliation between a holy God and sinful man. There is a way whereby such reconciliation can take place. It is through a high priest who carried out one sacrifice, for all time. That was Jesus Christ, sent from heaven by God to save men and women. He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). He obeyed God and turned away God's anger. He is our perfect high priest.

Conclusion

Hebrew Christians were under pressure to give up their faith and return to their old religious ways. They had not fully understood how faulty was the old way and how perfect was the road they were on. We also need to stay firmly on the highway to heaven, which is through Christ alone. If you are on another track, then it is vital to get on the proper and perfect road.



Focus Point: **Covenants**

In normal human relationships a covenant is an agreement between two parties of equal standing to act together in a certain way. But when the Bible speaks of a covenant between God and his people, it is between One who is unspeakably great and holy, and humans who are corrupt and infinitely inferior to him. A human similarity was a covenant imposed by a conqueror on his captive people in ancient days. The victorious king would often promise many benefits, such as provision and protection, and then at the same time require submission and obedience of his new people on pain of punishment.

God's covenants are similar to that, as we see in his covenant with Noah (Gen.9: 1-17), with Abraham (Gen.17: 1-14) and with Moses (Ex.19: 19). The new covenant is of the same kind (Jer.31: 31-34). God does not come to us saying that if we will obey him he will save us from our sins. Rather, he says, "I will overpower your resistance to me and make you

my people. I will forgive you and provide all you need.” He goes even further, promising that he will give his Spirit to his people enabling them to obey his laws and precepts. We speak of saving grace and of enabling grace.

The Bible is divided into two testaments (covenants).

There is but one saving covenant based on the death of Christ (Matt. 26: 28), and the old one given through Moses was a preparation for the one to come in Christ. The old is now redundant as a way to God, but is instructive as a visual aid, and its moral precepts abide for all time.

The new covenant is made with those who are united to Christ by faith. It reflects the covenant made in eternity between the Father and the Son in which the Son undertook to die for all those given to him by the Father (Heb. 13: 20; John 17: 2; Eph. 1: 4). This is why he is said to be its guarantor. Our part in it does not depend on our ability to keep God’s law, but on Christ, who has done so on our behalf.



Over to you

What religious pressures do your people find themselves under? How could the content of this study help you in pastoring such people?

Are you ever tempted to follow the latest methods followed by a church in your area? They seem to attract many people to their services. How should you approach such a matter?

Does the office of priesthood confuse your people? Do they really understand that we have a high priest who is at God the Father’s side and who intercedes for us? What about us? Peter says we are royal priests (1 Pet. 2:9)!

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