

Sermon Preparation Notes - Hebrews Chapter 2

The structure of the chapter:

(vv1-4) Chapter one has emphasised the glory and majesty of the Son. Chapter two begins with the serious warning, that encountering such a glorious Christ demands an appropriate response to his message. An allegory is drawn with the O.T. Although the O.T. revelation was mediated by lesser beings than Christ (angels), God demanded that the Jewish people make an appropriate response to it. Shown by the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience contained in the Law of Moses. As the new revelation in Christ is greater than that of the O.T. it therefore demands a greater response and greater blessings for obedience and more serious consequences for disobedience will follow.

(vv5-18) There then follows a section emphasising the humanity and humiliation of Jesus in his earthly life and an explanation of why that humanity (incarnation) and humiliation were necessary and what they achieved in terms of the destiny of man and what they mean in terms of the ministry of Christ.

Verse by Verse Analysis:

(v1) **The Requirement of a Correct Response to the Message of Christ.**

Pay more careful attention - If under the O.T. covenant the people of God were required to respond appropriately, how much more are we required to make an appropriate response to the greater revelation which is in Christ.

To what we have heard - The transmission of the gospel was oral before it was written. The N.T. scriptures are a written form of the oral, apostolic tradition that was the foundation of the Church, but it is the oral, living word which is the original.

That we do not drift away - The surprising fact about backsliding is that it doesn't require any great effort at all. It does not require a great crisis of faith, or a serious moral failure to bring it about. Just simply not paying attention to our relationship with God is sufficient to cause us to backslide. The Greek word used has the idea of a ship anchored at port, but whose anchor comes loose allowing the ship to drift out to sea. The same word can also be used of a ring slipping off a finger. Simple inattention can cost us our faith. Carelessness kills.

The Hebrews of the O.T. often failed in their response to God's revelation and drifted away into idolatry. Most of the Hebrews of Jesus' time had failed in Jesus that which the O.T. revelation had pointed to. The Christian Hebrews likewise, are in danger of failing in their response to Christ's revelation.

(vv2-3) **The Consequences of an Inappropriate Response.**

As in chapter one, angels are contrasted with Christ. The O.T. revelation is characterised as being of angels, because they were thought to have been present at the giving of the Law (c.f. Deut 33:2). The N.T. revelation is greater because it is mediated to us by Christ himself.

The O.T. covenant focussed on a recompense of earthly blessings in exchange for observance of the Law (though it pointed ultimately to something beyond earthly deliverance). The N.T. covenant promises not salvation from earthly tribulations but from spiritual destruction.

Under the Law there were real and specific blessings for obedience and real and specific curses for disobedience (c.f. Deut 28). The blessings were the sign of God's favour. The curses were God's remedial activity to highlight failure, to call back to repentance, to re-establish the relationship with Him through obedience. Both are expressions of God's love, both indicate the reality that were God is concerned strict standards apply.

Under the N.T. covenant the focus is often more on the spiritual than the physical. However it is still true that blessings follow obedience and curses follow disobedience (c.f. Acts 5:1-10, 1 Cor 11:29-30, James 5:14-16). God's way of dealing with men has not changed. But as the promise of salvation from spiritual destruction is much more serious and significant than salvation from earthly hardships, so the consequences of disobedience are also much greater.

The 'great salvation' which we are offered thus demands a greater response on our part. Note that the author speaks now not in terms of obedience/disobedience but rather simply of a lack of attentiveness or an 'ignoring' of what Christ has revealed. An indication that backsliding is not often the product of an outright refusal of God, but merely an ignoring of what Christ has revealed to us. Given the magnitude of what has been revealed, of what is offered to us in Christ, this is an outrage and an offence to God. Therefore in one way the gospel message does not lessen our danger, it increases it.

(vv3-4) **The Confirmation of the Message.**
The N.T. revelation is trustworthy because;

- it was delivered by Jesus.
- it has been attested by witnesses.

Note that we see the trinity all at work here. The Lord (Jesus) delivering the revelation, God the Father attesting its validity by signs, wonders, and the Holy Spirit likewise validating the message through the gifts of the Spirit released in the lives of believers.

Human witnesses are also cited - those who had been seen and heard Jesus. These people (apostles etc.) were the originators of the tradition that founded the Christian Church and which is recorded in the written N.T. scriptures.

For us too there can be no doubt about the validity of the message of Christ. We still have the confirmation of the eye witnesses - their tradition preserved for us in scripture. We still have the confirmation of God at work in the World. We still have the confirmation of the Holy Spirit giving gifts for the upbuilding of the Church.

(vv5-10) **The Glorification of Christ and of Man.**

Why is it serious that men respond appropriately to the revelation which comes through Christ? Because their participation in man's glorious eternal destiny hangs by it.

The author reminds us of the exalted position that Man and woman's were given by God - to rule over the creation (c.f. Gen. 1:28; 2:15, 19-20). Although the angels are greater than man in many ways, yet man has been granted by God greater rôle and a more glorious position than them.

Verse 8 begins by summarising the glorious, breath-taking position that man has been granted by God. However there is then the crashing reality check. This is not how we experience the world.

The tragedy is that through sin man has lost his glorious position and authority. The world as we experience it is therefore a world out of control, or rather a world controlled (in a limited way) by a being who opposes God and therefore desires the destruction of man - the pinnacle of God's creation.

This is the disaster of human existence, we were created for greatness, but we experience weakness, disappointment and failure. We were created for glory, but we experience shame. We were created to rule, but we live as slaves.

Verse 9 explodes with the phrase 'But we see Jesus!' Why is this significant? Because Jesus is the evidence and the proof that our terrible, hopeless situation is about to be redressed. What is true for man only in promise, we see fulfilled in Jesus: what we see in Jesus, will be made true in man.

God is not leaving us in our mess and shame. He has stepped into history and has worked a miracle. We are being restored. Shame, weakness and slavery will soon be a thing of the past. Our future is all glory!

Jesus has come and shared our condition of being lower than the angels - yet now he is crowned with glory and honour. How did this happen - through Jesus suffering and dying on a cross. His death was (in some way which the author doesn't explain) a sacrificial act on behalf of all mankind.

The author links the process of glorification to the experience of suffering. This is one of the key messages of Hebrews. It is shown as having been the case for Jesus. It will be shown to have been the case for O.T. believers. It will be shown to also be the case for those Christians to whom the author writes.

'bringing many sons to glory' this was the purpose of Jesus' mission to earth. To re-establish man in his God-given position as ruler and sovereign of the created world.

(v10) **The Process of Glorification**

It would have been shocking to the first hearers of the book of Hebrews, to have this statement that God perfected the Son through suffering. The prevailing ideas in Greco-Roman culture was that the gods were removed from all suffering. Surely this is the very condition of god-likeness, no longer to be subject to the pain and suffering that strikes ordinary mortals?

The first part of the verse seems to underline this. God is the one for whom and through whom everything exists. The implication then is surely that such a God is above and beyond the reach of all suffering?

The author reveals to us the amazing truth about Jesus' perfection and glorification:

- It shows God's will for man - God's project is 'to bring many sons to glory'. As Jesus has entered into the presence of God on high (Heb 1:3) and has been crowned with glory and honour so God's purpose is that this might also be the experience of men and women.
- It shows Jesus' solidarity with his Church - Jesus expresses his solidarity with men in following the same path to perfection / glorification that they do. Since Jesus is the firstborn son, the firstborn among many sons (c.f. Romans 8:29), his perfection must also be the model and example of ours. As men need to be perfected in their humanity, so did Jesus. Perfecting speaks of completeness, full moral maturity or having completed a full set of initiations. It can also have the connotation of a 'perfect' animal for sacrifice. It is also a word used in terms of the consecration of priests. Therefore we can see a reference to Jesus' priestly role, something developed up in v11 and v18.
- It expresses Jesus' leadership of his Church - Leaders and pioneers should, by their example, show the way to those who follow them. Thus in the process of his perfection Jesus shows how we too can follow the path to glorification.
- It is through sufferings - Note the plural. The O.T. had predicted that the Christ would suffer before being glorified (c.f. 1 Peter 1:10-11). Why is suffering essential to the perfection of the saints? (c.f. 2 Tim 2:12, Psalm 119:67,71, Romans 5:3-5, 1 Thess. 3:2-5, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:10)

(vv11-13) **Our Brotherhood with Christ is Established.**

Both the one who makes holy (Jesus) and those who are made holy (believers) are of the same family. The word for brothers means literally 'from the same womb' (c.f. Revelation 12:17).

The word 'holy' is drawn from the language of the temple and priestly sacrifice. To make something holy is to dedicate something in the created realm to God, to set it apart uniquely for God's use and purposes.

Those who wish to enter into the presence of God need to be made holy. What was symbolised in the temple by the giving over of gifts as sacrifices, is accomplished spiritually in the NT. by the giving over of oneself. Sanctification is no longer obtained by the exchange of possessions, but by the transformation of humans.

Jesus' identification with us in his incarnation is so complete and intense that, (in spite of our weakness, failure and sin), standing before all the angels of glory Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers! Our oneness is so complete that we, as truly as Jesus, are of God! It is in the light of this truth that Jesus looks on us, and loves us and deals with us.

Verse 12 is a quote from Psalm 22, the psalm that Jesus quoted from on the cross (he quoted the first and last lines - my God, my God why have you forsaken me / he has done it). This psalm also contains the prophecy of lots being cast for his garments (v8). Therefore it is natural to make Jesus the speaker of this quote.

Verse 13 is a quote from Isaiah 8:17-18. Isaiah was someone who also experienced the rejection of men and had to trust God in difficult circumstances.

Thus these citations are all quotes that would be recognised and accepted as messianic and which reveal the paradox of being vindicated by God whilst being rejected by men.

Jesus is therefore yet again presented as our example. If Jesus could trust God whilst suffering at the hands of men, if Jesus could have faith in God when hope seemed dashed, then so should we. Man is no longer outlawed, nor cast out of the kingdom of God, he is once more a son.

(vv14-15) **Death is Destroyed, Fear's Slavery is Broken.**

In first century Greco-Roman culture fear of death was very prevalent. The inscriptions upon tombstones have quality of despair and hopelessness about them.

"Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Of course he knew they had had gods, he knew they had had a religion, but their gods had proved questionable, and no hope emerged from their contradictory myths. Notwithstanding their gods, they were "without God" and consequently found themselves in a dark world, facing a dark future. 'In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus' (How quickly we fall back from nothing to nothing): so says an epitaph of that period."

[From a sermon given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 30 November, the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle, in the year 2007, by Pope Benedict XVI.]

Jesus death and resurrection accomplishes two things;

- victory over the cosmic forces opposed to God (and hence to man).
- the psychological transformation of the human spirit.

Because death no longer has dominion over man, we can be free from fear. The 'brothers' are therefore liberated from an emotion which distorts their existence, a 'fear of death' that has made them 'subject to slavery' all of their lives.

Fear tends against courage and boldness because the fear of death affects all choices and decisions in life. But this need no longer be the case for Christians. We can be freed in our emotions from the chronic fear which has blighted our lives. This new psychological freedom will then be expressed in new behavioural choices, a new courage and holy boldness in life.

(vv16-17) **The Subjects of Salvation.**

The activity of Christ is not abstract but specific. It is a specific, historic group of people that the pioneer of salvation has 'grasped' (the Greek word translated 'helped' can also have the meaning 'grasped' or 'taken hold of'). Therefore those who were 'held' in slavery by their fear of death, have now been 'released' from it by being 'grasped' by Christ.

The mention of holiness in v11, with its reference to temple worship is now developed. Christ is shown to have acted as a high priest in atoning for the sins of man. The sacrifice of atonement was when blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat in the temple in order to obtain forgiveness (c.f. Exod. 25:16-22, Lev. 16:2-28).

Jesus is referred to as 'high priest' this is the first of 17 times in the book of Hebrews that this title is ascribed to Jesus. No other N.T. book refers to Jesus in this way, it is a unique feature of Hebrews. Christ is designated in this way because the main theme the author wishes to emphasise is how Christ completes and supersedes the O.T. revelation.

An interesting contrast can be made between the merciful high priesthood of Jesus and a remark by the 1st century Jewish philosopher Philo who states that the high priest should not show his feelings *"He will have his feelings of pity under control."*

(v18) **Why Christ had to Suffer.**

We now have the explanation for the statement in v10 that it was 'fitting' for Christ to be perfected through suffering. He has suffered in order to be able to understand the human condition, in order that he might deal mercifully with our weakness.

In his humanity Christ suffered in his temptation. It is certain that we cannot begin to imagine how distasteful temptation must have been to someone who shared the divine nature, for someone to whom all sin was violently abhorrent.

Because Christ has really suffered temptation and because he has successfully resisted it in his humanity, he can offer us real help and assistance in our own daily struggles with sin.

Christ our high priest thus takes on the responsibility for our spiritual life as 'someone who knows'. Someone who has successfully faced every trial possible for man. Someone who can pray for us in heaven knowing what we need and how to bring us through to victory.