

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 2, Verses 5-9
Notes From Class on August 11, 2009
Last Revised on (August 16, 2009)

Good evening everyone.

Welcome to our continuing study of the New Testament book of Hebrews.

Before we get started, I'd like to make sure you have everything you will need.

You will need a Bible and, if you are not using the English Standard Version ("ESV") of the Bible, it will also help you to have the two handouts which are on the table by the door:

One is the ESV text for Chapters 2 and 3 of Hebrews, and the other is the ESV text for Psalm 8 on one side and the ESV text for the first four verses of the Gospel According to Luke on the other side.

Please get what you need. Then we'll get started.

Concerning Hebrews

As we have been discussing, Hebrews appears to be the text of a sermon, written in Greek, around the end of the First Century A.D.

Soon after it was written, this document was acknowledged throughout the Church as an inspired and authoritative text, and it has spoken with authority to Christians ever since.

The author of this sermon and those who first heard it were known to each other but we can not be sure who any of them were.

It is fairly clear that none of them had heard Jesus speak directly.

I say this because in Chapter 2, Verse 3, our author says, "how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,.."

This means that, like us, and like almost all Christians who have ever lived, the author of Hebrews and those to whom he speaks had been baptized into the Church after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the Church on and after the day of Pentecost, and so they had heard about what Jesus had said and done not directly, from personal experience, but indirectly through the testimony of witnesses, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Most Christians who have ever lived, have heard the original witnesses speak through the Bible, with the help of the Holy Spirit. This means that we are all about the same "distance"

from Christ. There is Jesus, there are the original witnesses, there is the Bible, and there are all of us Christians who read the Bible.

The author of Hebrews and his audience were a little different from us in that they lived at a time when the New Testament was still coming together and had not yet been completed. They had read the Jewish Bible which is our Old Testament. They had heard the oral testimony of the Christian Community of their day. They had probably read some of the written accounts that were then starting to be written. But they would not have read the entire New Testament, because it was only then being written.

I am reminded of what Luke wrote to Theophilus at the beginning of The Gospel According to Luke. Do you remember? Will somebody please read Luke 1:1-4 in English (ESV)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us,² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us,³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Thank you. Now will somebody please read that in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku). Thank you.

Luke and the author of Hebrews both wrote near the end of the First Century AD when people had begun to write down some of the testimony of the early church. Luke wrote for Theophilus and his companions an orderly account so that they might have certainty concerning the things they had been taught. This suggests, to me, that some of what had been written down was not well ordered and reliable.

But the writings which survive as our New Testament speak with a clarity and authority and a consistency that is unmistakable, and which the Church then and now could recognize.

Our author himself speaks with such clarity and authority and consistency.

Perhaps this is because he was someone close to the original witnesses, someone like Luke or Apollos, or Barnabas for example. All of these and others have been suggested as possible authors.

But whoever our author may be, he does not rely on his personal authority or official capacity to support any of his arguments.

This fact is underscored by the the fact that his name has been conspicuously omitted from the text. Indeed most of the documents which comprise the New Testament are unsigned. We have merely deduced the identities of the authors from what they said, or we think that we have!

This is a characteristic of Biblical writing, it seems to me, and of Biblical leadership, that it does not lean on personal authority, or official capacity, but takes its authority from the self evident truth of what is said and from the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church.

Our author refers to his listeners as "holy brothers who share in a heavenly calling" (3:1) who have been believers long enough that they ought to have become teachers by now (5:12) but he reckons they have become dull of hearing (5:11). He encourages them to listen more carefully to what they have already heard, lest they drift away from it (2:1) and warns them not to neglect such a great salvation (2:3).

These are not the sorts of things that one would say to a group of seekers or new believers!

On the contrary what we seem to have here is an inspired sermon spoken to a group of people who have long professed to be Christians and who are reasonably well informed about basic Christian doctrine and Old Testament Scripture, and who have or should have the ability to understand at the level required to become teachers, but who are not evidencing the degree of understanding and maturity that the preacher would like to see in them.

This message preached 2000 years ago speaks to us in almost the same way and for almost the same reasons as it spoke to its original listener. There are, of course, some language and translation issues which we have discussed and which we will continue to deal with as we study Hebrews.

In a nutshell, our author wrote in Greek and quoted from a Greek version of the Old Testament, whereas we read modern English or Japanese translations and our translations of the Old Testament take as their starting point the Hebrew rather than the Greek Old Testament. These differences present no very great problem to our understanding so long as we are aware of them and take them properly into account.

There may be a few other differences in perspective, between we modern Christians and those who first heard this sermon. Last week, for example, we spent quite a lot of time talking about angels, because I suppose that many modern readers make the mistake of not believing in angels or, at least, of not taking angels seriously enough, which might cause us to misunderstand this sermon on some points, particularly in the first two chapters where angels are much in view.

If you need to review the material on angels which we discussed last week, please see the notes posted on the Google group site. To summarize very briefly what we discussed last week: angels are real, they are important, they exist for the benefit of Christ and Christians, and what the author of Hebrews says about them is consistent with what the whole Bible says about angels.

Furthermore, and this is of immediate importance for our study, our author and his readers understood that angels played a part in transmitting Old Testament scripture and, perhaps also, in administering the affairs of men in this age of the world.

At a time somewhat later than when Hebrews was written, there would be some heresies in the church involving angels that needed to be put down. Those heresies basically involved people making too much of angels and obscuring Christ in the process, which is always bad, and something that no proper angel would ever wish for! But our author certainly never

makes that mistake. He never speaks of angels in a way that obscures Christ or detracts from his glory. On the contrary he lifts Christ up far above the angels.

Neither does our author in this sermon seem to be defending the church against false teachings related to angels. Both the author of Hebrews and his readers seem to have an appropriate understanding of angels. We might even say that Hebrews is one of the books of the Bible that is most helpful to us in establishing a proper angelology. OK, now, let's get into the Bible and tonight's study.

Chapter 2: Verses 1-4

Last week our reading crossed into Chapter 2, which begins with the word "therefore" referring back to some or all of what was written in Chapter 1.

The sum and substance of Chapter 1 and indeed of the whole Book of Hebrews is the Unqualified Supremacy of Christ.

In other words, the thought that Jesus, after he had made purification for our sins, rose from the dead and was lifted high above everything on Earth, and higher than everything in the Heavens, much higher even than all of God's angels. Jesus sits at the right hand of God, something only God's Son can do! Jesus is God!

So this big thought, the unqualified supremacy of Christ, is behind and above and beside and in front of what we are reading now in Chapter 2 and in all of Hebrews. Never lose sight of it.

The very final thought of Chapter 1 was about the angels, of whom the author asks rhetorically, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? He means to say that this is exactly what they are: spirits sent by God to serve those who are to inherit salvation. He expects those to whom he is speaking to readily acknowledge the truth of this statement. This may be the particular thought leading to the "therefore" that begins Chapter 2.

Taking these two thoughts together, the risen Lord Jesus Christ is above everything in all creation and all the angels have been sent out to serve for the sake of those of us who are to inherit salvation (i.e. Christians).

"Therefore," he says in Verse 1 of Chapter 2, "we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." (2:1)

I am just not sure how much to read into this.

Does he mean to say that we must all pay closer attention to what we have heard because our Lord is so worthy of praise and highly exalted and because even the angels are spirits sent to serve those of us whom he has saved, so that for us to neglect such a great salvation would make us guilty of ingratitude?!

Well, as a Christian preacher addressing a Christian congregation, surely he means to say at least that much. To encourage them to be diligent and faithful and thankful and humble

But does he also mean to say that they might actually, finally, irrevocably slip away? that they might really fail to inherit salvation if they don't pay closer attention to what they had heard and if they should continue to neglect such a great salvation? Does he mean to warn or even frighten his listeners, and Christians of all time, in that way?

What do you think?

[n.b. the class expressed affirmative and negative opinions on this point]

It really kind of depends, doesn't it, on where one is spiritually when one hears these words spoken.

What about us, in this group here tonight? Some of us may never have professed a faith in Christ, even though we already believe. Others may have professed their faith many times starting long ago but now are not so sure what they believe. Still others may enjoy various degrees of assurance regarding their salvation, some perhaps wrongly!

Our author, like all preachers, knows that he is addressing a mixed group. And the Holy Spirit by whom these words are inspired knows everyone who will ever hear these words spoken, including each one of us!

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we study the Bible together tonight, I pray that you will use these words of yours to meet each one of us where we are and how we really need to hear you speaking to us now. Please bring us conviction of sin and disbelief, repentance and greater faith; please bring us forgiveness and assurance of pardon, and even a healthy fear of slipping away from you, in the right measure to each person. Please O Lord let each of us and all the world know the greatness of Christ and the great salvation that belongs to his disciples. And please make each of us and all of us truer and better disciples of Christ than we have been until this night. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

OK, then, wherever we are coming from, we will benefit from paying much closer attention to what we have heard and from being warned to be careful not to neglect it or drift away from it!

What we hopefully all have heard by now is something which our author calls, in verse 3, "such a great salvation."

If we should neglect this great salvation which we have heard, we shall never escape, he basically tells us.

We read in verse 2 that the message declared by angels, that is the Old Covenant, justly punished every transgression and disobedience,

and while the Old Covenant provided sacrificial means for atoning for various sins, as our author will speak of more in future chapters,

the penalty for neglecting these provisions, for wanton disobedience of YHVH under the Old Covenant was death, being "cut off from the People," God's People.

How much more certain, then, and how much more terrible and just will be the punishment for those of us who neglect God's Son and drift away from the Great Salvation which he has accomplished.

It was declared at first by the Lord, himself, meaning the Lord Jesus Christ. (3b) It was attested to us by those who heard the Lord declare it, meaning by the Apostles and other eyewitnesses (3c) And God also bore witness to it by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit. (4)

We Christians should know all of these things, and more, from reading our Bibles, and from living our lives as Christians. But do we know? Do we really?! Are WE paying close enough attention?

If so, tell me this: What is it that we need to escape (be saved) from and how does the Son of God save us from it? Last week the class came up with various answers to these questions, all of which were good. But if we scan ahead toward the end of Chapter 2, we will see more precisely what is in the mind of our author.

He means to say that we need to escape (be saved) from death, the inevitable consequence of sin. To be free from death and to be free from sin are effectively the same thing. The wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23a). To be free from death and sin is to be free from Satan, because corruption and killing are his only "powers." So to be free of any one of these, implies that we are free of all three. Therefore we are free from fear also.

The great salvation of which they have heard is the good news that Jesus has already conquered death by making purification for sins; so that no disciple of Jesus shall ever be swallowed up in death, but all shall instead be forgiven and made perfect as he is perfect and live with him eternally. Thus we are already free from Satan and sin and death and fear.

To neglect this great salvation, to not pay close attention to what we have heard, to wander away from Christ, is to remain captive to Satan and sin and death and fear.

Who needs it! Better by far to follow Jesus, to be saved, to escape.

But where shall we escape to? That is where our author looks to next.

Chapter 2: Verse 5

Will someone now please read verse 5 in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. And now will someone please read verse 5 in English (ESV).

Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking.

Thank you. Putting together all that we have read through 2:4, it seems that the prophets, the angels, and the law all had the single purpose and effect of moving God's people forward toward the great salvation accomplished by Christ.

Jesus has made purification for sins, and sat down at the right hand of God, and he rules everything in all Creation, on Earth and in the heavens, eternally.

But we don't see much evidence of this in this world in which we live presently. What's up with that!?!

In Chapter 1, we read that the earth and the heavens were made by Christ and that they would eventually wear out, like a garment, rolled up, and changed, while Christ remains the same forever. Remember?

Perhaps the world we live in now is about worn out and will soon be rolled up and replaced by another better world.

In verse 5 of Chapter 2, as we have just read, the author begins to look forward into this "world to come"

This certainly means that we are speaking of something that has not yet come, so a future world.

Will that future world be the same as the present world, or will it be different and, if it is different, how so?

Well, for one thing, the author tells us, the world to come has not been subjected to angels.

I am not certain, but I think our author means to say that this present world in which we now live has been subjected to angels. That thought is present in Deuteronomy. 32:8, Daniel 10:20, Ephesians. 6:12 and possibly elsewhere in scripture. But our author is not here stopping to examine the angelic administration of this present world. Remember: he says that it is the world to come of which we are speaking presently.

And what he wishes to say is that it is **NOT** to angels that God has subjected the world to come. This may also suggest that the world to come is not subjected to the message declared by angels (2:2), which is the Law. This would seem to be consistent with the teaching of the whole Bible, that in some future time and place we will not need the Law because it will be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33)

But it here clearly is implied that the world to come has been subjected to some authority, just not to angels, and not to Law, and certainly not to lawlessness or to Satan which, along with death and fear, have been overthrown, escaped! And all worlds that there are or ever will be are subject to the eternal rule of Christ. So what's left? To what/whom has the world to come been subjected?

Already we have enough information to know that the author means to say that the world to come has been subjected to redeemed Man, always, of course, under the supreme and eternal authority of Christ, who alone never changes. The angels may or may not be there. All we know for certain is that the word to come has not been subjected to them, but to Man.

Now in Hebrews 2:6-8a our author explores this idea more fully with a citation from Psalm 8.

Chapter 2: Verses 6-8a

Will somebody please read verses 6-8b in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku).

Thank you. Will somebody please read those verses in English (ESV)

It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet."

Thank you. We again see how unconcerned our author is with identifying the texts from which he quotes.

"It has been testified somewhere....," he says, leaving it to us to identify Psalm 8.

Psalm 8 is inscribed as a Psalm of David. It is interesting that our author does not mention David. I think this is because he knew that his readers would recognize this as a Psalm of David without being reminded.

At the same time, the looseness with which our author handles this citation, even skipping out part of the passage he cites and possibly paraphrasing slightly at one point, shows that it is not his intent here to exegete Psalm 8 but, rather, to use Psalm 8 and even to embellish it so as to make a particular point. (Calvin)

We do this all the time, ourselves, when we preach and teach. And it is OK to use and embellish Biblical texts to make a point, so long as the point we are making is consistent with the whole Bible and so long as we do not distort the sense of the passage we are citing but, rather, bring it out more fully, which is precisely what the author of Hebrews accomplishes here.

He has reached out to this popular Psalm of David, which most of his readers probably recognized and may even have sung often enough to know the words. He must therefore mean to evoke the mood and content of the entire song, and not just the fragments he quotes, so it is fitting for us to read out the whole Psalm, too, and to bring the feeling of this whole Psalm into our discussion:

Will someone please read Psalm 8 in English (ESV)

- ¹ O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

- You have set your glory above the heavens.**
2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.
3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
4 What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
9 O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Thank you. Now in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku).

So what is happening here with this Psalm? The words are being spoken in the voice of David whom the people would recognize as being a prophet as well as a poet.

David is observing the greatness of God and his creation and, in that context, recognizing the insignificance of Man, and expressing his wonder that God even cares for man, and his still greater wonder that God has subjected creation to Man..

And yet there is a strange tension here: between the insignificance of man in God's creation, which we observe and feel, and the significance of man which we feel but do not observe.

The greatness of man is an as yet largely unrealized greatness, which is perhaps best revealed in the life of David himself. If ever there were a man who had ruled on this Earth under God it was David. His son Solomon may have been wiser and greater in some ways, but was not more godly. Who else can compare with David? Adam maybe, who ruled the whole world under God in the beginning...

But exceptional men such as these only serve to prove the rule that this world has never been ruled by Man under God, at least not to any great extent or for any great length of time. David and Solomon ruled a tiny piece of the Middle East for a short time. Adam ruled the whole world, in some sense, but it was only he and his wife living in a tiny garden at the dawn of time. All of these men sinned grievously, separating themselves from God insofar as it is possible for men to do that.

So finally the voice that speaks in Psalm 8, even though it is the voice of one of the most Godly men and Kings of Man who has ever yet ruled on this planet, is the voice of one who

did not fulfill his own poetic vision except in the most preliminary and fragmentary and temporary way.

There has only ever been one man, so far, who was perfect and capable of Godly rule. I mean David's greatest son, Jesus of Nazareth. But he never ruled this world for a moment. This world would not recognize him. It killed him. Before he died he went out of his way to emphasize to his disciples that his kingdom was NOT of this world.

That is why this world has been subject to angels and law, the author may mean to say...

Now remember what set up this citation from Psalm 8: it was the preceding thought that it is not to the angels but rather to man to which the world to come has been subjected.

Amazingly David sensed this! He believed in the love of God for himself, for the sons who would follow him, and for the race of Man generally. This surprised and amazed David precisely because he could not see evidence of it in the world in which he lived, or in himself.

His vision expressed in Psalm 8 was both poetic and prophetic and evidence of his deep faith in God and in God's gracious character.

Psalm 8, verse 5 reads "Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings." Here the ESV translates the Hebrew word "elohim" as "heavenly beings." This is perhaps more naturally translated as "God" but might also be translated as "angels" which is how the Greek Old Testament (LXX) reads, as cited also by the author of Hebrews.

It seems to me that any of those readings captures the sense of David's song as he looks prophetically and poetically into the world to come, where Man will be surprisingly and amazingly exalted, far beyond anything we actually see now in this world.

And because David can see that future with the eyes of faith, that perception of man's worth already lives in David's heart, even in this world. He doesn't know how, he can't know how, but he knows nonetheless that God is in control and mindful of man, and that things are going to work out. So David can sing this song, despite what he sees in the world!

What about us? Is it enough for us to read Psalm 8 and see the world with eyes of faith and sing with David despite what we see? Is our faith that strong?

Maybe. Sometimes. But we're going to need to face the fact that David is dead. He trusted God until his dying breath. But it was his dying breath. He never saw in an ordinary way that which he saw with eyes of faith: the exaltation of Man.

What's up with that? Did David believe in eternal life? In the world to come? Did he expect to live again?

Yes! And so did Able, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and countless other men of faith, including those of whom we read in the Old Testament, as our author will say in detail in Chapter 11.

These men were commended and earned their place in the world to come by remaining faithful to something which they could not see clearly, at all.

But we have a great advantage, even over David, and even over Moses and Abraham and these other great men of faith, whose example is set before us in the Old Testament. We have the testimony spoken of above, by and about Jesus Christ. The Son of God became a man (and not an angel) so as to make purification for sins, our sins. That's how much God cares for Man.

And this Jesus was a man like us in every way, except without sin. He was born, he lived, he suffered, he died, but he is is alive, and has ascended to heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God, above all the angels. We know that death has been conquered, because we know that he is alive.

David lived in sin and died with some modicum of honor and hope. Jesus lived without sin and died without any honor. But his death was suffered on behalf of everybody, satisfying every just requirement under the message proclaimed by angels, that is the law, that we be punished for our transgressions and disobedience.

Making it possible for David's vision to become a reality, that we may also be raised to life in the world to come, which is not to be subjected to angels, but to us, redeemed man, under the Lordship of Christ.

This is the great salvation that we dare not neglect. As we know this is our inheritance, we do not need to fear anything in this world. But we can know for certain that David sings for us too!

Indeed the Gospel of Jesus Christ is hidden, and therefore revealed, in his song!

Chapter 2: Verses 8b-9

Will somebody please read verses 8b-9 in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Will somebody please read that same passage in English (ESV).

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Thank you. The author to Hebrews is here making the same points which we have already made in reading Psalm 8.

He notes that whatever is said about Man in the psalm, is said first and foremost of Christ.

Just as Adam was the first man, Jesus is the first redeemed man, and the Redeemer and Lord of men.

Even he to whom everything in all creation is eternally subject was made a little (while) lower than the angels. And this is part of his crown and glory and honor. Because his death was on behalf of everyone and therefore his resurrection also. We may all live and rule with Christ in the world to come, if only we will listen closely to what we have heard and not neglect such a great salvation.

Questions?