



BEYOND
COMPARISON

HEBREWS

Introduction to Hebrews

If there is one simple sentence that can sum up the message of the book of Hebrews, it's "Jesus is better." Of course, the message implies more than that and suggests ideas that we will see are not so simple, this is the idea that Hebrews keeps coming back to.

Many claim that Paul is the author of the book of Hebrews. However, the author refers to stay anonymous, never giving their name, a practice vastly dissimilar from Paul. Additionally, the author harps on Jewish themes that are usually outside of Paul's interest. For that purpose, this study guide simply refers to the author of Hebrews as precisely that.

The audience of Hebrews are Jews who have come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. And it's upon that rich tradition of faith that the author continually draws from to highlight how Jesus has fulfilled every promise made to their people, has provided a way forward for their people, and how he is the same God who led them through the wilderness.

We all have varying journeys of faith and varying backgrounds when it comes to our faith journey. But we have one thing in common with these people from 2,000 years ago: in their situation and in ours, Jesus is better.

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Week 1 Day 1

Read Hebrews 1:1-2

In the Western world in which we live, we've become preoccupied with the idea of "proving" things. There are lots of cultural and undergirding philosophical reasons for this, but the way that our world has approached truth claims is that they have to be validated by their evidence. And in many ways, this is incredibly helpful. Courts of law need evidence to convict or acquit someone of wrongdoing. And if someone was convicted or acquitted of something with little to no evidence, we would see it, rightfully, as a miscarriage of justice. And we take this desire for evidence and we bring it into our religious journey, searching for evidence of the existence of God.

But one of the defining features of the first two verses of the letter to the Hebrews are the assumptions that the author makes. As William Johnsson says in the *Andrews Bible Commentary*, "the apostle makes no attempt to prove that God exists, nor does he try to establish the fact of divine self-revelation. He presupposes both..."¹ And perhaps this reveals to us a different way of thinking about God than we are used to in our Western culture. We often think we need to "prove" God, but those who wrote the Bible felt no such burden. For them, it was a given that God was and that God spoke, *because everything that they know of God had been revealed by God himself*.

And though our efforts at apologetics come from a good place, perhaps it would be a beautiful point of balance to adopt the mindset of the writer of Hebrews. We need not say anything for God, because God is more than capable of speaking for himself.

Reflection

How does the need for "evidence" of God play into your faith journey?

How do we walk the line between being rational, with our need for evidence, and the belief that God can reveal and speak for himself?

¹ William G. Johnsson, *Hebrews*, Andrews Bible Commentary: New Testament (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2020), 1824.

Week 1 Day 2

Read Hebrews 1:3-4

There's an urban legend of church history that describes a scene at the Council of Nicaea where Nicholas, bishop of Myra (who went on to fame as St. Nicholas) couldn't bear to hear Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, spread his teachings that the Son, the second person of the Trinity, was a created being in lesser form than the Father, so he slapped him in the face. It's a funny image of the person that we equate with Santa Claus physically attacking someone for spreading heresy. But based on a reading of these two verses of Hebrews, it's easy to understand why Nicholas became so offended by these ideas.

The writer of Hebrews, in no uncertain terms describes Jesus as "the exact representation of His (the Father's) being" (vs.3). And this is the inherent nature of the Son. As William Johnsson writes, "what God is, the Son is. Furthermore, the Son does not become the divine ray or inherit the divine nature. He was that way at Creation and Incarnation..."² For the original audience of the book of Hebrews, this was an important revelation because they were prone to think of Jesus along the same lines as angels, which the writer explicitly confronts in vs. 4. But in our own day, this insistence on a high Christology takes on a different, but still necessary form. We often think of Jesus as a social reformer, a great teacher, and someone who spread wisdom that is still beneficial today. And while all of these things are true, they only describe a small part of the whole. The whole story is that Jesus "is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (vs. 3). What Jesus says is not sage advice for how to live life, it is the revelation of God's Word in flesh.

Reflection

Why do you think there's a tendency to downplay Jesus' role as fully God, both in ancient times as well as our own?

Does it change how we view Jesus' teaching when we see it as instruction directly from God rather than just sage advice?

² Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1825.

Week 1 Day 3

Read Hebrews 1:5-7

When we think about the concept of heavenly beings, usually we think about things like power, glory and the ability to do the things that we can't do. And often that cuts into the way that we think about ourselves in relation to God; that God is what we are not and God can do what we cannot. As he himself declares, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8). But the author of Hebrews seems to be determined to make sure that while there is indeed a distinction between ourselves and angels, there is also a distinction between angels and God. And while this may seem like an easy point for us to grasp, it actually touched on a theological pressure point that was building in Second Temple Judaism.

George Knight writes that "during the period before the birth of Christ they (Jews) had developed an increasing interest in angels and their place in God's plan. Jewish writings depicted angels and protecting the pious and bringing their prayers before God, executing punishment in accordance with God's will, mediating God's revelation to humans, and, perhaps most pertinent to the argument in Hebrews, interceding between God and people."³ And as with many good things, this can be taken too far in our minds sometimes, and there's evidence in the New Testament that this had indeed happened as Colossians 2:18 cautions against the worship of angels.

The point in all of this is subtle, but enormous: humans have a tendency to not only worship God, but the things associated with God. Maybe we don't have the temptation to worship angels, but perhaps the Western church of the 21st century has our own version of things that are clearly not God, but that we see as inseparable from God. And the writer of Hebrews calls us to leave that idolatry behind and put only God in the place of supremacy.

Reflection

Why do you think that humans have a tendency to worship things that are God-adjacent in addition to God himself?

How do we distinguish between something good that points to God without making it an idol?

³ George R. Knight, *Exploring Hebrews: A Devotional Commentary* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2003), 40.

Week 1 Day 4

Read Hebrews 1:8-9

Perhaps the most confusing of all Christian doctrine is the doctrine of the Trinity; the idea that there is only one God, but three persons. There are many in our own day who struggle not only with this concept, but with putting it into words that try to make sense of what we actually believe. But this is not just a modern conundrum, it's also been a historical sticking point for the Christian faith as well.

And perhaps the first misstep that we often take when trying to talk about the trinity is in trying to box it into our categories of understanding. But this quickly runs into problems because our categories of understanding can't grapple with things that are one but three and three but one. However, the beauty of a passage like the one before us is that it does not even try to begin making sense of the mystery of the Trinity, it simply asserts that the Trinity is. The Son in this passage, presumably Jesus, the second person of the Godhead is referred to as God. He is describe as ruling over his own kingdom with justice.

The western shape of our faith is often preoccupied with proving faith and giving good and logical reasons for belief. And while these may certainly exist, maybe something that we can learn from the early church is that sometimes mystery should not be and cannot be explained.

Reflection

At times, it seems that we are incredibly uncomfortable with mystery in our faith. Why do you think mystery when it comes to something like the Trinity appeals to us as something that needs to be solved?

In talking about the Trinity, we're often fairly comfortable saying that Jesus is God. However, as this passage would seem to indicate, it is also true to say that *God is Jesus*. How do you feel about this particular high Christology?

Week 1 Day 5

Read Hebrews 1:10-14

“High Christology” is the term that is usually used to refer to speaking of Jesus’ divinity in a heightened sense. And sometimes this may seem like a given, because the entire Christian religion hinges upon Jesus and his death, resurrection and ministry. But the author of Hebrews takes great pains in this introductory chapter to orient the readers/hearers of this message with an “exalted Christology.”⁴ The writer of Hebrews purposefully quotes Old Testament Scriptures that explicitly refer to God and uses them in reference to Jesus. In this particular passage, the writer is comfortable referring to Jesus as creator who he says “laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (vs. 10).

And overtly, I think that often we assume that we’re comfortable with the idea of an exalted Christology. But the implications of an exalted Christology are expected, yet profound. It means that Jesus doesn’t just give us a “gentler” picture of what God looks like, Jesus shows us what God looks like in actuality. What Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount is what God says and what God is like. The things that Jesus says and does that are difficult to put into practical application in our world is exactly what following God looks like. Exalted Christology is beautiful, but its implications go beyond what many of us are sometimes comfortable with.

Reflection

What do you think some of the challenges are to high Christology?

We’re often comfortable saying that the life of Jesus shows us a beautiful picture of what Jesus is like. But are we as comfortable with Jesus showing us what God is like?

⁴ Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1826.

Week 2 Day 1

Read Hebrews 2:1-4

There are many ways in which Jesus is “in vogue” in our modern world, even amongst those who have sort of cast off the religious trappings traditionally associated with him. Jesus has been seen as an enlightened teacher, a peaceful sage, or more recently, a culture warrior who agrees with our particular views on the world and societal battles happening around us. But it seems that each of these views takes a particular piece of who Jesus is while it fails to hear him wholistically. And this has typically been the human response to Jesus.

Here in the second chapter of Hebrews, the author urges their listeners to hear what has been spoken “by the Lord” (vs. 3) as opposed to “drifting away” (vs. 1) into a more comfortable, more familiar faith. And this phrase in vs. 1 is significant. As George Knight says, “the Greek word employed for drifting is pregnant with meaning. Indicating something flowing or slipping past...Thus it focuses on something carelessly or thoughtlessly allowed to drift away or become lost.”⁵ It seems that the author of Hebrews was afraid of Jesus being reduced to something less than he was in favor of a faith that was more familiar.

And it seems that this is a fear that would be valid for our own day as well. There are challenging points in the message of Jesus and the life of Jesus that are more difficult for us to put into practice than some of the nicer, easier things we like. And in this sense, perhaps the church has become equally as guilty in the way that we hear only a portion of Jesus’ teachings. But the witness of the book of Hebrews calls us to consider all of what Jesus said, and to not let it drift away from us, even if it’s difficult and challenging to our worldviews.

Reflection

Why do you think so many have such a high opinion of Jesus while not listening to everything that Jesus has to say?

How can the church better keep Jesus before ourselves in a way that is both comforting and challenging?

⁵ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 43.

Week 2 Day 2

Read Hebrews 2:5-8a

A constant mystery surrounding the place of Jesus in the Christian faith is how he can be both fully God and fully human at once. Historically there were worldwide church councils with representatives from the entire world devoted to figuring this problem out. There have been varying views and ideas presented over the years. Even within our own denomination, the debate around “the nature of Christ” has been long fought with intense conviction on both sides.

But despite the mystery that exists there, the writer of Hebrews, without explaining much of the mystery, says explicitly that humankind has been made a little lower than the angels (vs. 7). One can imagine that for the original audience hearing this letter read aloud the confusion upon hearing in chapter 1 that Jesus is superior to angels, but then in chapter 2 that humankind (of which Jesus became a member upon his incarnation) is lower than angels.

But perhaps the main point here is not to solve the mystery of Jesus’ incarnation (something that will be talked about in the next few verses), but to show the great care that Jesus has for humanity. In quoting Scripture, the author notes in vs. 6 that despite the finitude of humanity, we are still important enough for God to watch over, and indeed, important enough that God became incarnate for us. In vs. 7 in notes that even though we are lower than the angels, we have still been crowned with glory and honor.⁶ The point of all of this seems to be that even though humans are on a lower plane of existence than angels, we were still worthy of God’s action and God’s attention and that Jesus himself thought it was a worthy cause to share in our existence.

Reflection

Balancing what Scripture says about the finitude of humanity and the value of humanity can often be difficult. How do you think this passage helps?

Why do you think it’s important to emphasize both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus?

⁶ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 47.

Week 2 Day 3

Read Hebrews 2:8b-9

For a long time, the world has run on the concept of hierarchy. The Romans had household codes that determined the flow of authority within a family and a home.⁷ Systems of government operate on varying levels of authority and who has the ability to wield that authority. And even churches have ecclesiastical structures with varying degrees of hierarchy and authority. And certainly, in our chaotic world, there are times that this hierarchy is absolutely necessary to establish a good public order as well as for organizations to remain cohesive and united in what they say and teach.

But recently there has been an effort to use Jesus' incarnation as a tool to maintain a hierarchy within the body of Christ as it pertains to individual people, specifically men and women. There are those that argue that even within the Godhead, the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, and that if there is a hierarchy within God himself, there must be a hierarchy within humanity. However, that idea seems to be easily defeated by one little phrase here in the book of Hebrews. "But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels *for a little while*, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death" (vs. 9). This verse has so many enormous truths packed into one short sentence. Firstly that Jesus, God himself, did intentionally lower himself below angels, but secondly that this was only a temporary existence.

The point that the author of Hebrews is making writ large in chapters 1 and 2 is that Jesus is nothing less than the God of Israel, the agent of creation who rules the universe with truth and justice. And while our desire for authority and hierarchy may lead us to exploit authority for our own gain, Jesus willingly lays his authority down for a little while on our behalf.

Reflection

Do you think it makes much of a difference as to whether there is a hierarchy in the Trinity?

What do you think the theological implications are of Jesus being eternally subordinate to the Father?

⁷ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 46-47.

Week 2 Day 4

Read Hebrews 2:10-13

There are many who read this passage and hang themselves up on the strange wording of vs. 10, that God has perfected Jesus through his suffering. For many who are uncomfortable with the idea of a high Christology, they see this as proof that there is a hierarchy within God's self where Jesus is a little lower than the Father. However, this contradicts the entire point of the argument that the author of Hebrews has been making in the verses prior; that Jesus is God himself.

But the actual argument that this text is making is a foundational, but often missed piece of New Testament theology. In the ancient world, it was considered not just weakness, but proof that a particular deity was in fact not a deity if they experienced suffering. This is evident in a plethora of early Christian literature. In Justin Martyr's dialogue with Trypho, Trypho calls Jesus "dishonorable and inglorious."⁸ Justin Martyr, again, dialoging with the Roman world, acknowledges that the Romans considered Christianity "madness" because of the place given to Jesus, who was crucified.⁹ But this is a key piece of Christian theology. The writer of Hebrews, in this passage identifies Jesus precisely in his suffering. In the foundational passage of the apostle Paul's theology, he notes that Jesus' emptying of himself which led to his death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8) was precisely *because* Jesus was found in the form of God.¹⁰

In other words, the New Testament reveals the strange truth that God's power and God's very identity is revealed not necessarily in his ability to use his strength and omnipotence in order to overpower, but in his ability to unjustly suffer that which someone else deserves.

Reflection

If God's identity is found in Jesus' suffering, does that change the way that you think about God?

How do you balance God's omnipotence in his ability to create (something the writer of Hebrews refers to) with his willingness to suffer under someone/something else?

⁸ Quoted in Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 50.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This point is made beautifully and convincingly by Michael G. Gorman in his book *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2009), 22-25.

Week 2 Day 5

Read Hebrews 2:14-18

None of us likes to be judged. Whether it's for the strange things we do, the way we live our lives, the choices we make, or our views on certain subjects, all of us want to escape the judgmental eyes of those who could tell us that the things we think and do are wrong and/or lacking. And if we're afraid of human judgment, then divine judgment seems all the more scary. And this is often how passages like this current passage are thought of. Any mention of Jesus as a great high priest automatically invokes images of judgment. The purpose of the high priest in the Old Testament was to *mediate* between God and the people. In a very specific sense, the high priest mediated God's judgment through offerings and on the day of atonement.

Yet that is not at all what this text is communicating. This text is not reminding us about the judgment of God for the things that we've done wrong, but its emphasizing that Jesus, precisely because he has been made "fully human in every way" can be "a merciful and faithful high priest in service of God." This doesn't paint the picture of a judgmental, vengeful God who is waiting to pounce on any little thing that we do wrong, but this reveals a God whose entire relationship with his creation has been built on mercy, to the point that he has become one of us in order to be merciful to us!

How would our talk of God change if we looked at God's judgment through the lens of this text? How would we talk about God's judgment if we spoke about it in light of a God who is not vengeful or vindictive, but a God who is merciful and gracious because he too had experienced all of the struggles of being human? The beauty of this text is that it reveals to us a God who is not high above us, waiting to condemn us when we make a mistake, but a God who is close to us and with us in all our struggles and suffering.

Reflection

Why is the concept of judgment so scary sometimes?

Often when this subject is brought up, someone will inevitably say that we're being "soft on sin." How do we balance a God who is merciful and gracious and a God who is also just in all that he does?

Week 3 Day 1

Read Hebrews 4:1-5

Something that's clearly either lacking or misunderstood in our modern world is the concept of rest. In the hustle culture in which we live, rest is often aligned as unproductive weakness. But the opposite can also take affect where there can be too much value placed on rest at the expense of neglecting the things that need to happen in our lives. Rest is often a confusing topic for us. And this present chapter of Hebrews is all about rest, and for many of its readers, it's been confusing for a long time.¹¹ However, once you grasp what the author is pushing us toward, this becomes a chapter that pairs the beauty of Sabbath rest in the present with the hope for ultimate rest in the future.

If it feels the like this chapter picks up in the middle of an argument, it's because it does. The previous chapter talks about how God's people were unable to enter God's rest (in this case defined as entering the land of Canaan) because they didn't believe his promises. But the author begins this chapter with the promise that the promise of entering God's rest still stands, with the appeal to believe God's promises where previous generations have failed. And while the author was not offering them entry into a literal Canaan, what the author was promising their audience was that God is still capable of fulfilling his promises, even for eternal freedom and rest, even when it seems impossible. All we need to do, unlike previous generations, is believe that he can and he will.

Reflection

Do you think, like God's people on the border of Canaan, we sometimes have trouble believing that God will actually fulfill his promises to us?

How does it make you feel that rest is something that God has specifically promised?

¹¹ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 73. Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1830.

Week 3 Day 2

Read Hebrews 4:6-7

Sometimes things seem too good to be true. The cynics among us usually say that if things seem like they are too good to be true, they probably are. And often when dealing with the promises of God, we find ourselves among the cynics. One can certainly imagine that this was the case for the children of Israel dealing with all that God had promised them, despite the fact that they had witnessed their liberation from slavery, seen the Red Sea split, had food provided for them daily and even witnessed God's very presence on Mt. Sinai. Despite all of those things, they had trouble believing the promise that God not only had a perfect land for them, but was going to give it to them despite whatever challenges were ahead of them. But for them, the challenges were greater than God's promises.

But this text reminds us of the faithfulness of God despite our unfaithfulness to him, with the author of Hebrews telling us that "it still remains for some to enter that rest" (vs. 6). For the audience of this letter, Jews who had come to believe in Jesus the Messiah, this section is talking about both their family heritage and their faith heritage. These weren't just random people to them who had not believed in the promises of God, these were their ancestors, and this was their heritage of faith. But the promise that the author of Hebrews points them to is the promise of a God who continues to offer them the rest that their ancestors rejected. And through the confusing discourse about "today" in vs. 7, the author of Hebrews is highlighting the fact that God continually offers rest to his people, even when he has been discarded and disbelieved.

This message of a God who is patient and faithful in our unfaithfulness reveals a steady and abiding God and a steady and abiding faith where we often create urgency and anxiety. Perhaps there would be fewer cynics among us if we were to focus on God's continual offer to give us rest.

Reflection

Why do you think that there is often a tendency to disbelieve God despite all that he has done for us?

How do we balance the “apocalyptic urgency” that highlights much of the NT, as well as our Adventist outlook with the patient, abiding faith that we see presented here?

Week 3 Day 3

Read Hebrews 4:8-9

I can remember the early days of the “kickstarter” phenomenon well, where a person, group or company with an idea to make a product would crowdsource the funding for the project, with each “donor” being promised a specific return based on how much they invested. I had friends investing in different musical projects, limited edition prints of books, to even a specific printing of the Bible. But the basic idea behind those projects was that if you were to pay a specific amount of money up front, you would get a greater reward further down the line.

And that’s very similar to what the author of Hebrews is saying here in vss. 8-9 of chapter 4, though it may not look like it from the outset. But the biggest indicator of the authors point is the linguistic shift that he makes in vs. 9, a shift that is not very apparent in English. But all throughout Hebrews 4, the specific word that has been used for “rest” is *katapausis*,¹² a word literally just meaning “rest.” But in vs. 9, the author shifts to the word *sabbatismos*, a word that, as it appears, has undertones of the idea of “sabbath.” It seems that what the author is implying is that the weekly Sabbath rest is just a foretaste of the eternal rest that God continues to promise his people. In other words, Sabbath in all of its goodness, when its celebrated in goodness and grace with community, is a glimpse of heaven.

Reflection

For many, Sabbath has been a day of joy and gratitude. Unfortunately for others, sometimes Sabbath is a mandated day of legalistic striving toward God. Do you think this passage changes the narrative on what the experience of Sabbath is *supposed* to be?

Does your current experience of Sabbath make you look forward to an eternal Sabbath? If not, what needs to change about it?

¹² Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 75. Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1830.

Week 3 Day 4

Read Hebrews 4:10-11

If you're anything like me, then a lot of times you like to get things done yourself. You encounter a problem to be solved, something to be put together, something to figure out, and you immediately jump in and start using your own intellect, experience, skill, etc. to get things done. I approach many problems in my own life this way, but there have also been times that I have found myself approaching spiritual situations this way, where instead of trusting in God, or asking God to help me fix something, I've tried to figure things out on my own first.

And this is exactly what this text is addressing. The backdrop for everything in the beginning of chapter 4 as it talks about God's promised rest for his people is the failure of God's people to trust him as they entered into the Promised Land. And their mistrust of God was borne out of their inability to figure out how *they* were going to solve the problems that were in front of them. They looked at fortified cities, large armies and giants and rightly looked at themselves and said there's no way that *we* can do this. But their key misstep was that God had not asked *them* to defeat their enemies in their own power, he had asked them to trust that he would defeat their enemies for them. These are the "works" that Hebrews refers to in 4:10.

The author of Hebrews again sees God's people on the borders of God's promises and is calling his people to rest from their works. And those "works" are not good deeds, acts of obedience, or their commitment to a specific set of ethics and way of life. But rather, they are called to rest from their desire to trust in their own power to fulfill God's promises, and instead to allow God to do what he has promised.

Reflection

Why do you think we have the tendency to try to figure things out on our own, even when it comes to matters of our faith?

In the 21st century Western world, what do you think it means to "rest from our work" and trust God's promises?

Week 3 Day 5

Read Hebrews 4:12-13

Generations of people have read Hebrews 4:12 and used its sword imagery to invoke all sorts of proclamations on the effectiveness, offensiveness and purpose of God's word. But the part that most of this imagery seems to ignore is the statement that vs. 12 opens with; "the word of God is alive and active." As a conclusion to everything else that has been said in Hebrews 4, this is really no surprise, because it's a summary of everything we've seen. God is still holding out the promise of rest to his people, despite the fact that it was rejected in years past. In other words, God's word didn't end or finish there. It's still alive and still reaching out to people in whatever situation they may find themselves. As George Knight says, "it (God's word) presents men and women with living issues..."¹³

And yet, a common mistake that readers of the Bible make is that of anachronism, relegating its message to a specific time, place and audience. Or if anachronism is avoided, we sometimes get to a place where we're so familiar with the message of Scripture that we make no attempt to see what that message means to our present situation. But for the word of God to be alive and active, we have to trust that it has something to say to our world at present. As an example, Adventists have spoken for a long time about what *constitutes* a human soul, arguing from Gen. 1 and 2 that a physical body and the breath of God creates a living soul. But what does that same text mean in the age of artificial intelligence? What does it mean that humans were formed by the hands of God and given the breath of God in a world where machines can do most of the tasks that we've previously assigned to people?

I think this is closer to what Hebrews 4:12-13 are talking about. God's word continues to be relevant to our experience and our world.

Reflection

What do you think it means for the word of God to be "alive and active?"

¹³ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 78.

How do you think we can avoid the pitfalls of anachronism and over-familiarization of Scripture?

Week 4 Day 1

Read Hebrews 10:1-10

One of the blessings and strengths of Protestantism and its effect on the history of Christianity is its emphasis on the individual experience of salvation. Rather than the individual having to continually attend to the rituals of the church or the faith in order not lose salvation, Protestantism asserted that there was assurance of salvation for each individual believer.¹⁴ But the exact nature of this salvation and its status as a gift has been debated over the years by various Protestant sects. And those Protestants (like Adventists) who are descended from the Arminian/Wesleyan theological tradition put special emphasis on personal holiness as a result of salvation. And sometimes, because of texts like Heb. 10:1-10 and their misinterpretation, we tend to get the process a little bit backward.

One reason for this is what we find in verse 10: that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the boy of Jesus Christ, once for all.” Older translations of the Bible used the word ‘sanctified’ where the NIV uses “made holy.”¹⁵ Many took this to mean that “sanctification,” that is the process by which an individual becomes morally upright, etc. was a result of the death of Jesus. Though this looks innocent on the outset, the effect is that many used this verse as a weapon for manipulation to determine whether or not a person was truly “saved,” based on their own holiness. But as George Knight notes, the word used here simply means “set apart.”¹⁶ In other words, Jesus’ death is not the *end* of our sanctification, it is the beginning and the foundation of it. And Jesus invites all of us to journey closely with him because of what he has done for us.

Reflection

How would you define sanctification?

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), 137-138.

¹⁵ Notably the New King James Version.

¹⁶ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 171.

Why do you think that sometimes we have a tendency to manipulate the salvation process to require more of people than Scripture does?

Week 4 Day 2

Read Hebrews 10:11-18

One of the most frustrating things that we can do as people is to make the same mistake twice. Sometimes these are harmless mistakes, but other times they are mistakes with far ranging consequences. But in many of the ways that we experience sin and its fallout is with a cycle of repeating failures.

And that's very similar to the way that the author of Hebrews describes anything but Jesus that we would try to make the solution to the sin problem. In verse 11, it talks about the repetitive cycle of sacrifices being made day after day with a human high priest who attends over the same thing all the time. But the problem with these things is that, as the author of Hebrews says, it "can never take away sins" (vs. 11).

This is contrasted with Jesus, presented as high priest here, who makes only one sacrifice and then "waits for his enemies to be made his footstool" (vs. 13). In using this phrase, the author of Hebrews invokes the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, describing a God who will rise up to meet and defeat his enemies. But what the author of Hebrews asserts is that this is a battle that has already been fought and won. In this sense, sin is not a problem that persists, but an enemy that has been defeated.

Reflection

What do you think the author means that Jesus waits for his enemies to be made a footstool?

How can we speak about the defeat of sin on the one hand while we still experience the very real effects of it?

Week 4 Day 3

Read Hebrews 10:19-25

The concept of an angry deity is almost as old as humanity itself. From the gods of the Ancient Near East that needed to be appeased so that one could have the basic necessities for human survival, to the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon that were mostly motivated by self-indulgence, even the Christian conception of God has often fallen into this category, such as with Jonathan Edwards famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Humanity seemingly relates to the concept of deity as if they are angry with us.

And it would appear the author of Hebrews is familiar with a faith that also views the God of Israel through this lens. George Knight comments on the memory of faith that the author and their audience would have had in mind in thinking about the way that God relates to his people, especially as it relates to the sanctuary: “the people could not go near Him. Only the priests were allowed into the sanctuary, and only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, but even then only once a year. Dire consequences awaited those who trifled with God’s holiness.”¹⁷ But here, Hebrews paints a *different* story. Now, instead of staying at a fearful distance, we can confidently enter into the Most Holy Place, the presence of God himself because of the body of Jesus that has been sacrificed.

This is a simple yet incredibly profound thing that the Bible is pointing us toward. God is not far off, but he has deliberately and specifically come near to us. And not only do we not need to live in fear of him, we can comfortably enter into his presence with confidence.

Reflection

Why do you think it seems to be part of the human religious tradition to be afraid of the divine?

What do you think it means to “have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place?”

¹⁷ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 179.

Week 4 Day 4

Read Hebrews 10:26-31

William Johnsson nicely summarizes the shift in tone between the passage we just completed and the one we're exploring now: "From some of the most reassuring words of the NT to its sharpest warning- the change in tone is abrupt."¹⁸ And it is abrupt indeed. The previous passage spoke about not being afraid of God and being able to come close to God with assurance while this passage warns us that a point can come where "no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (vss. 26-27). If we felt any confidence in coming close to God in the last passage, it's probably gone by the time that you get to this passage.

But we have to look closely at the passage to see what it's really trying to say. As George Knight helpfully tells us, there is no doubt in this passage that the audience is people who already believe in Jesus and are already part of the faith.¹⁹ Therefore, this is not a "fear tactic" method of evangelism, but rather addressing people who already have experienced the closeness with God described in the previous passage. Secondly, the key word for interpreting this passage is the word "deliberately" in vs. 26. That is, someone who purposefully and deliberately goes against God after having experienced him. And while we all battle vices and will for as long as we're alive, this passage describes a person who actively and deliberately works against God's purposes or tries to thwart God's purposes. And the good news: the very fact that we're reading and discussing this passage together, even the very fact that we're being troubled by this passage, means that we are not actively working against God's purposes, but trying to better understand him. While there are ways to try to thwart God, God is still inviting us to come near to him.

Reflection

What's your immediate reaction to these passages about unpardonable sins?

¹⁸ Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1851.

¹⁹ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 184.

What do you think it means to actively work against God?

Week 4 Day 5

Read Hebrews 10:32-39

One of the main interpretive bridges to cross when reading the New Testament is the place that Christianity occupies within the culture. In the Western world, though we can decry the amount of influence that Christianity has on the culture and talk about how it's less than it once was, Christianity still has a privileged place in our world. Phrases from the Bible are part of our everyday vernacular, in the United States we have a "National Cathedral," something that communicates the importance that Christianity has in our own society. And from a very basic perspective, being a Christian in America is not an outright threat to our safety.

However, this wasn't the case for the audience of Hebrews. The author, in these few verses, reminds them of everything that they have suffered as a result of their faith, even going to prison and having their property confiscated by the Romans. And it's against that backdrop that the author of Hebrews urges them to keep their faith.

These are two entirely different conversations when they're had in differing contexts. For the audience of Hebrews, faith was not one option in a marketplace of practices, it was something that they suffered for. This doesn't lessen the negative experiences that we can have in our world, but what it should do is open our eyes to different ways of reading the Bible. But this is another beautiful part of Christianity. We are invited to experience faith alongside the perspective of someone else in addition to ourselves.

Reflection

How do you think reading the Bible changes when we read it from the viewpoint of a minority, persecuted faith?

Does reading this passage about the backdrop of danger and persecution change how we read the previous passage about having lapses in the faith?

Week 5 Day 1

Read Hebrews 11:1-3

One of the things that we often do in approaching the Bible is to expect earlier definition for things to remain constant throughout. And while it is true that the Bible is the singular product of a singular God that reveals this God in his goodness, we must also understand that the Bible was written by multiple authors with differing understandings of concepts and language. A prime example of this is the usage of faith throughout even the New Testament itself. In Paul's writings faith is often equated with trust. In James, faith is an intellectual assent to something that even the forces of evil demonstrate. In the synoptic gospels, faith is linked with trust in Jesus' healing ability.²⁰ All of these things are true despite the various ways in which they express faith. And this beautiful chapter of Hebrews adds more layers to the definition of faith.

It's been clear throughout the whole letter that the audience of the book of Hebrews is embattled in some sense for their faith. As George Knight says, "Hebrews speaks to men and women who perceived the forces arrayed against them to be overwhelming..."²¹ In this sense, faith must speak to the crisis of a situation, and most importantly it must provide *hope*. And that's exactly what this chapter of Hebrews sets out to do as it describes faith. Faith begins with the understanding that "the universe was formed at God's command" (vs. 3). Faith understands that throughout various historical points in God's interaction with his people, God has continually been present and faithful. Faith in Hebrews 11 seems to lean into the belief in God's ever-present faithfulness with his people.

Reflection

²⁰ Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1853.

²¹ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 191.

Do multiple definitions of faith help define faith for you, or does it make faith a little bit messier?

How can seeing how God has interacted in times past add to our sense of our own faith?

Week 5 Day 2

Read Hebrews 11:5-7

One of my favorite parts about learning about different languages is the different idioms that you come across. Each language has unique ways of expressing things that we all experience, and exploring these idioms adds a certain richness to the way that we look at life. One such idiom is the way that the New Testament uses the word *peripateo* which literally means “to walk” to describe life. There’s a certain physical quality to life described this way, but it also implies that life is a journey that doesn’t sit still. And in continuing to describe what faith looks like, Hebrews 11 refers specifically to “walk” of life.

The writer of Hebrews appeals to this audience, struggling with the consequences for their faith, to look into the life of Enoch. In their faith tradition, their minds would have immediately gone to Genesis 5 which describes Enoch “walking” with God. Though their faith tradition was Hebrew in origin, the language that they spoke every day and that this letter is written in, was Greek. In appealing to the image of Enoch walking with God, the author is doing much more than simply telling them to have what seems to be unshakeable faith as Enoch did, the author is inviting them to truly walk with God. To live their lives, difficult as they may be in those moments, purposefully in the presence of God. The writer is encouraging them that the simple act of walking, “living” as they understood it, was something that was done in the presence of God and with God.

In our modern church cultures that often put emphasis on the things that we must “do” in order to show that our lives are acceptable to God or that we’re seeking God in some way, perhaps we need to return to a more simple idea that the author of Hebrews presents here: the first step of faith is walking with God, living and journeying with him.

Reflection

What do you think it means to “walk” with God?

Why do you think that we tend to complicate our ideas surrounding God, rather than sitting with simple ideas such as the one presented here by the author of Hebrews?

Week 5 Day 3

Read Hebrews 11:8-12

Sometimes to live in our world is to experience your limitations, and often our limitations are formed by the things that we believe to be possible and impossible. And many times that experience is a frustrating one, because we can either be frustrated or heartbroken by the things that we can't do. But in this particular part of Hebrews 11, the author of Hebrews points to the story of Abraham as an example of faith grappling with what is thought to be impossible.

The author brings up three different events in Abraham and Sarah's experience that would have been seen as dealing with the “impossible” in their time. The call to leave their home and go to where they were strangers with the faith that God had a place for them that they couldn't see (vss. 8-10), the promise that God would give a child to Sarah (vs. 11) and the promise that this childless couple beyond childbearing age would be parents of a great nation (vs. 12). For most of us who would find ourselves in such a situation, we would rightfully mourn the circumstances that prevented us from keeping what we thought to be home, or led to a certain childlessness. And indeed, there's a certain way of navigating the world that grapples with circumstances beyond our control.

But what the author of Hebrews seems to be pointing to is a specific faith that believes God is *able* to reverse these circumstances, even if he chooses not to. For many in this audience, despite the fact that God could miraculously turn their persecution around, he didn't and many of them still went through persecution. For many who experience heartbreaking circumstances, those circumstances still need to be navigated. But the key here seems to be what we find in vs. 10 – that Abraham was looking forward to a future that hasn't even happened yet. Part of believing that God can do the impossible beyond our limitations is having

faith that one day all of these things will be accomplished, whether in this world or the next, even if they haven't happened yet.

Reflection

What do you think is a healthy way to interact with the belief that God can do the impossible?

Can our faith in God to do the impossible lead to a sometimes unhealthy belief? What does that look like?

Week 5 Day 4

Read Hebrews 11:13-16

For most of us, the concept of promise implies that the person who made promises to us will fulfill them. If we were to be removed from them in some way, or in the case of the present passage, pass away before those promises were fulfilled, we would more than likely generally think that the promises were unfulfilled. But the way that the author of Hebrews describes faith in God's promises seems to push things in an unexpected direction.

And that direction is truly unexpected. As George Knight says, "'These all died.' Now here is a discouraging thought. God's faithful ones were not exempt from the common problems of humanity – including death."²² However, the difference noted in Hebrews is that when they died, "they died in faith" (vs. 13). And as the author of Hebrews continues to tell us, "they did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance..." (vs. 13).

And here is the difficult part of what Hebrews 11 contributes to the discussion of faith. Just because these promises remained unfulfilled during the lifetime of our ancestors of faith did not mean that the promises remain unfulfilled. And in their experience of God, they did not view the promises as unfulfilled, but rather, *they accepted them from a distance*. What Hebrews again calls us to is a *journey* with God. And in this difficult sense, this is a journey that we're called to that extends even beyond our own lives. And it's a journey that calls us to have faith, even sometimes from afar.

²² Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 205.

Reflection

How do you think a text like this changes how we relate to God's promises? Are God's promises to us still valid even if we don't get to experience them in our lifetime?

How do you feel about seeing God's promises "from afar?"

Week 5 Day 5

Read Hebrews 11:23-29

For the audience of this letter of Hebrews, there was no greater hero in their tradition of faith than Moses. It was Moses who, according to popular legend of the time, had purposefully and distinctly tossed aside membership in the Egyptian royal family.²³ Moses had led his people out of Israel as God's spokesperson. Through Moses, God displayed his power in parting the Red Sea. Moses met with God's terrifying presence on top of Mt. Sinai and had been given the law and covenant that God made with his people.

And far beyond being an inspirational figure of faith that their people strived to emulate, Moses was an important figure for 1st century Judaism because he and his family "were not afraid of the king's edict" (vs. 23). For many in the 1st century, they saw themselves living parallel lives to their ancestors. They may not have been actual, physical slaves, forced to meet brick quotas under threat of violence and death, but they did live in a world that was hostile to their faith, and they had to submit to the rule of an empire whose head saw himself as a god in his own right. Hence, in the story of Moses, they saw someone who resisted "empire" as a faithful servant of God that inspired them to do the same for themselves.

And there is a lesson of faith to be found in this story. Faith for Moses and his family did not see Pharaoh and his edict to kill newborn babies as ultimate. 1st century Jews and Christians did not see Caesar demanding worship for himself as ultimate. Faith grows mature when it is able to see through the urgency of a present situation to see the reality beyond and behind it.

²³ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 213.

This is what God called Moses to, what he called the audience of Hebrews to, and what he calls us to in the 21st century.

Reflection

How do you think faith compels us to see the “ultimate” behind and beyond a given situation when, like for Moses and the 1st audience of Hebrews, the urgency of the situation takes over?

Do these multiple definitions of faith make faith more clear or more difficult for you?

Week 6 Day 1

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

One of the longstanding traditions of the ancient world that has been lost to a large degree in our contemporary world is the concept of “apprenticeship.” A person would often spend years working with and being the assistant for a master artisan or craftsman, slowly acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to one day work on the craft on their own, during which they would then take on their own apprentice and the craft or trade would continue on through time.

And that is exactly what the author of Hebrews appeals to here in the first three verses of chapter 12. Chapter 11 has been all about those who have gone before and demonstrated faithfulness, and we have been watching them as an apprentice watches a master, while we all watch the greatest master, Jesus (vs. 3). But as the author of Hebrews says, it is time for them to stop watching the example of their ancestors of faith and to start living it for themselves. The author encourages his audience to throw off everything that holds them down and to run their own race, keeping in mind the example of those that came before them. And as George Knight says, they “sorely needed such an example. Threatened and discouraged because of the judgments and treatment toward them by the larger non-Christian community in which they existed, some of them became tempted to ‘drift’ out of the faith...To such, Christ illustrates how to persevere until the end.”²⁴

²⁴ Knight, *Exploring Hebrews*, 225.

The call that the author of Hebrews gave to these original hearers is the call that God still gives us today: to emulate Christ and be inspired by our ancestors of faith, but to make our faith our own.

Reflection

What do you think “faith apprenticeship” looks like?

How do we balance being inspired by our ancestors in the faith while making our faith our own?

Week 6 Day 2

Read Hebrews 12:4-11

If there are no parts of the Bible that disturb us, then I would argue that we are not interacting with a God who is wholly other than us, but rather a God of our own making that does all of the things we want or expect him to do. And this passage in particular is a passage that both disturbs us and reminds us of a God who knows of purposes that we don't, and sees things that we do not.

It's disturbing to read a passage that is about God's “discipline,” and even more disturbing to hear the author of Hebrews essentially tell us that these difficult things are actually good for us and that we should humbly accept it. And there's a degree to which this is true. Bill Johnsson helpfully notes for us that the word that Hebrews uses here for “discipline” is the same word from which we get the concept of “pedagogy” – that is, the science of learning.²⁵ Discipline is there so that we learn. And the author of Hebrews acknowledges that this can be a painful process for all of us, saying that “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful” (vs. 11).

And while it can be difficult to talk about God in this way, all of us can attest to difficult experiences that we have gone through in life that have formed us and shaped us for the better. And after having just finished a chapter on the great heroes of faith and calling the audience to

²⁵ Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1857.

now live their own lives of faith, the author of Hebrews reminds us that God has purposes for some of the things that we go through, and that we should continue to trust him.

Reflection

How does the concept of God's discipline make you feel?

What are some ways in which difficult experiences shape us for the better? Is it always the case that they do shape us for the better?

Week 6 Day 3

Read Hebrews 12:12-17

One of the most stark differences between the Christianity of the book of Hebrews, which was a small, powerless, voiceless minority in its world, and the Christianity of the world in which we live, which has determined cultural values and enjoys a place of prominence in our society is the effect that our voice has. Simply put, 1st century Christianity had no voice that would prevail in the public setting. Our primary figure, Jesus, had suffered the most shameful death that the government of the day could give. We were not largely made up of the rich and powerful within society, but by those who were estranged and cast off by polite society in many cases.

And this context is important for understanding what is said in this passage. When the early Christian church is told to "make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy" (vs. 14), for them this would have meant putting up with the shame of being ridiculed by their society while still living out the values that distinguished them from that society. However, in the western world where Christianity has an enormous influence, many Christians have read this chapter as a call to transform society into a holy thing so that we *can* live in peace with everyone. This is the result of reading Scripture through our cultural experience rather than the cultural experience in which it was written.

If we allow Scripture to speak in its native cultural tongue, this is a call for believers to maintain our holiness, our values, our ethics, while understanding that we may be ridiculed for doing so, but to live peacefully with those who would ridicule us. And perhaps this is a lesson that our contemporary church in the west needs to hear.

Reflection

How do we live peaceably in a society that is hostile to us, as the audience of the book of Hebrews did?

What's the balance between living in peace with everyone while maintaining our own holiness?

Week 6 Day 4

Read Hebrews 12:18-24

Human nature usually refers to displays of strength to communicate why a particular person or group should be listened to. We certainly find ourselves doing this politically, militarily, interpersonally within our areas of expertise and so on. It reveals that there is a deep and abiding belief that strength is the basis upon which we build belief and trust.

And this is precisely what the author of Hebrews is referring to in this passage in speaking about the characterization of religion as these people knew it. Theirs was a religion to be believed and listened to because, according to them, it had been revealed in strength. It had been revealed on a mountain covered with thunder, lightning and terror. They couldn't even approach the mountain without dying themselves, and a voice spoke from the mountain telling them to obey what they heard. If there was any reason for listening to and obeying a deity, this was it. But not according to the author of Hebrews. For them, the better option was the one revealed through Jesus. Not a God who could or should be obeyed because he was far off and powerful, but a God who should be followed because he has come near. They are invited not to Mt. Sinai where God displayed his power, but to Mt. Zion where God's presence is and where he wants them to be with him.

Bill Johnsson says “now, God is truly accessible. It is not a terrifying mountain; it is the place of God’s presence...It is a place of grace – not of fear...”²⁶

Reflection

Do you think that we’re drawn to strength more than mercy?

What does it mean to believe in a God who is close and merciful rather than a God who is far off and vengeful?

Week 6 Day 5

Read Hebrews 12:25-29

As we close our study of the book of Hebrews, we do so on a passage that highlights what the author of Hebrews does so often, and seemingly so well. They highlight one aspect of who God is while switching gears very quickly. And indeed, that’s exactly what happens in these few verses. The last few verses spoke of a God not to be feared because of his power, but a God to come close to because of what he has done for us. And now we come onto this passage that talks about shaking and judgment, and that because God can do these things, we should worship him with reverence and awe. The quick change of subject often leaves us confused and with an unclear picture of God. But I would argue that what is actually being shown here is a good and beautiful thing.

The first thing to pay attention to is the authors insistence that everything can be shaken except the kingdom (vss. 27-28). While we often picture ourselves in this circumstance and situations that we need to go through, what’s revealed here is a Kingdom that is unchanging. There have been many who have been hurt and even harmed by people throughout the centuries claiming to speak for God. What this text indicates is that those things and those people can and *should* be shaken, but the Kingdom is not and has never been shaken by them. It continues to abide in all of its goodness.

²⁶ Johnsson, *Hebrews*, 1858.

And the response to this, says the author, is not fear and trepidation, but rather reverence and awe. We often mistake awe as a type of fear or terror when it comes to God, and reverence goes alongside that. But what we are revering according to this passage is a God who simply is who he says he is and has done what he has said he will do. And what he's done is offered his very self as a better sacrifice, a better priest, a better king, and a better covenant to invite us to come close to him. And this is something that will never be shaken, and that is worth celebrating.

Reflection

Does the concept of God “shaking” things comfort you or make you afraid?

What do you think it means to worship God in reverence and awe?

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