

Chapter 6 – Inheritance is not to be missed - Hebrews 2

Having launched into an exaltation of Christ as the one who both obtained and announced the inheritance which God first spoke to us about through the prophets, the author moves directly to his purpose in writing the letter: that we should give careful attention to what we have heard lest we drift away. This, as we shall see, was a repeated failing of the Jews. They received God's word, often with signs and wonders, and yet they so often failed to respond or they fell short in their faith and perseverance. The Jews who had so much history with God nevertheless failed to learn the lessons. The question is, will we?

Prayer

I hope you thought about the pattern of Paul's prayers that we looked at briefly in the last chapter - thanksgiving, remembrance and confidence. Why not practice that now? You could *thank* God for his Holy Spirit given to reveal the glory of Christ to you. Then you could *remember* before God the times when He has spoken to you through the scriptures and those times when He has opened your eyes in the study of His word. And finally, you could express your *confidence* that He will help you now as you continue to study His letter to the Hebrews.

Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 2 by again reading through and noting any surprises or questions. These are the surprises and questions that strike me in chapter 2.

- V1 What does he mean by "drift away"?
- V3 Escape from what? Who is "we"? Believers? Unbelieving Jews? Someone else?
- V3 What is this *great salvation* announced by Jesus?
- V5 Where is he speaking about the world to come?
- V7 Having spent Chapter 1 saying the Son is above the angels, he now says he is lower!
- V8 Is he saying that at the present, not everything is subject to Christ?
- V10 Can we mess up His efforts to bring many sons to glory?
- V10 Why is suffering fitting for Christ?
- V10 Why did Jesus have to be made perfect? How was he made perfect by suffering?
- V10 In what way is Jesus our pioneer?
- V11 Jesus not ashamed of us! Astonishing!
- V15 Slavery to fear of death? I thought we were formerly slaves to sin.
- V17 Why a high priest?
- V18 How does He help those who are being tempted?

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with the Old Testament passages quoted in this chapter which are Ps 8, Ps 22:22, 2Sam 22:3, Isa 8:17f. Other background is found in Deut 32:2, Num 15:30, Isa 42:7, 61:1.

Structure

Now we turn to the structure of the chapter. My medium-brush structure for this chapter was "Warning to heed. Jesus suffered in order that He might sanctify us." It is sandwiched between two chapters that set forth the supremacy of Christ. So, the fine-brush structure might go as follows:

- 1:1-2 God speaks to us today through His Son
 1:4 -14 who is far superior to the angels
 2:1-4 so heed the message for you will not escape the consequences of neglect.
 2:5-9 For, although Jesus was made lower than the angels for a while, now the whole world has been subjected to Him.
 2:10-18 This temporary humbling was completely appropriate, for Jesus became flesh and suffered to save and help mankind.

In constructing an outline, we must try to preserve the flow of the argument as it runs from section to section. This is the most difficult part of bible study, requiring patience and prayer. It is detective work and involves trying and testing various possibilities until we find an argument that explains the flow of thought. And then we must be on the look out for better arguments and ready to revise our previous conclusions.

Argument

My outline argument for chapter 2, along with the evidence that supports it, is as follows:

The author has spent chapter 1 arguing for the supremacy of Christ over the angels (Heb 1:4) in order to convince his readers that they should leave behind the Mosaic Law given through angels (Heb 8:13, Heb 2:2) and give full attention to the New Covenant announced by Christ (Heb 1:2; 2:1, 3). But in arguing this supremacy, the author must deal with the fact that, for a while, Christ was made lower than the angels (Heb 2:9). He therefore argues, first, that this humbling was temporary (Heb 2:9) and then that it was both necessary and appropriate (Heb 2:10, 11, 14, 16-18) pointing out that it was men and not angels who were the beneficiaries of Christ's work (Heb 2:5, 16).

With this argument in mind, everything in the chapter makes sense. We can see the reason it is there. We may find we want to revise our statement a little as we go further into the letter, but for now it seems a very good fit and should give us an excellent framework as we dig deeper into the detail.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 2:

We must pay close attention to the gospel announced by Christ, for we shall not escape the consequences of neglect. For although Jesus was made lower than the angels for a while, now the whole world has been subjected to Him. This temporary humbling was completely appropriate, for Jesus became flesh and suffered to save and help mankind.

The Detail

Having made good sense of chapter 2, we could move straight on to chapter 3, but the warning is to pay careful attention to what we have heard! So we will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 2.

Heb 2:1-4

⁽¹⁾ "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

⁽²⁾ For if the message spoken by angels was binding,¹ and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ⁽³⁾ how shall we escape if we neglect² such a great salvation? This salvation, which was

¹ I refer you to our previous discussion of the role of angels in bringing the Law: see footnote 1 of chapter 5.

² The NIV has *ignore* here, but most translations and commentators prefer *neglect*. I have taken the liberty of inserting *neglect*.

first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.^[4] God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

The First Warning

The first sentence of this chapter presents us with a difficulty, for it introduces a warning with the possibility of “drifting away” and suffering inescapable consequences, yet neither those in danger of drifting, nor the thing they might drift from, nor the consequences of drifting are spelt out. We must give careful consideration to this grave warning, which is only the first of six found in the letter. We will come back to this later, but, for now, we must resist the temptation to get lost in the detailed examination of this warning until we have a better grasp of the rest of the chapter. We must see the context before analysing the text. In view of our promised return, at this stage let us observe simply that the warning reads like a head-line in the flow of the book’s argument. 1:2 “God has spoken”, 2:2 “We must pay careful attention to what He has said.” The truth and authenticity of the message has been verified by eye-witnesses and by the Holy Spirit in signs and wonders.

Heb 2:5-9

⁽⁵⁾ It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁽⁶⁾ But there is a place where someone has testified: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? ⁽⁷⁾ You made him a little lower than the angels³; you crowned him with glory and honour ⁽⁸⁾ and put everything under his feet.” In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. ⁽⁹⁾ But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Jesus, made lower than the angels

The writer now moves towards the presentation of the Son as our great High Priest, which will occupy his thoughts through the rest of the letter. He will argue that the Son had to become a man to fulfil this role (v14) and since that places Him lower than the angels, contrary to all that he has been arguing up to now, he must address this problem.

He first makes the case that the world to come is subjected to Christ, not to angels. (*The world to come* is the world of these last days, which started with the birth of Christ and will be consummated at His return.) He had been speaking about the world’s subjection to Christ in chapter 1:10-31. To substantiate his claim the author quotes Psalm 8. This Psalm describes man as being crowned and having all things subject to him. The author points out that this is not fulfilled with respect to mankind:⁴ “Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.”⁵ He therefore applies this Psalm to Jesus, saying that He is “now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

Heb 2:10-18

⁽¹⁰⁾ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. ⁽¹¹⁾ Both the one who makes men

³ Some versions have “God” in Psalm 8. The Septuagint, used by the early church, has “angels”.

⁴ That was the original created intention, but man lost this authority through the fall. It is now recovered by Christ.

⁵ Some commentators take this to be referring to Christ: that we do not yet see all things subject to Him. But this surely goes against Jesus’ claim in Matt 28:18 and the apostle’s teaching, e.g. Eph 1:21 Christ is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”

holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

⁽¹²⁾ He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.” ⁽¹³⁾ And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again he says, “Here am I, and the children God has given me⁶.”

^[14] Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— ⁽¹⁵⁾ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ⁽¹⁶⁾ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s⁷ descendants. ⁽¹⁷⁾ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ⁽¹⁸⁾ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Jesus identifies with those He saves

The discussion of the quote from Psalm 8 leads directly into a discussion of the identification that Jesus makes with humanity. In this passage the author points out four reasons for the Son becoming, for a while, flesh.

1. To “taste death for everyone”, that is, to die on their behalf (v9).
2. To “bring many sons to glory” (v10).
3. To destroy the devil (v14).
4. To “become a merciful and faithful high priest” (v17).

We will look further at some of these points, but we are now in a position to revisit the opening warning, and ask, “Who is the author addressing?”

Revisiting the Warning

Who is being addressed?

First we want to know, who is the author warning? Who can drift away? The opening chapter indicates that the author has had Jews in mind; God spoke to their forefathers through the prophets (1:1). But is he now addressing unbelieving Jews or his fellow Nazarenes?⁸ My first instinct, on reading chapter 1 and up to verse 4 of chapter 2, is that the author is addressing his unbelieving Jewish friends,⁹ urging them to heed the prophecies about Christ and accept Jesus as their promised Messiah. But when, in an earlier chapter, we looked at the evidence for who the letter was addressed to, we concluded it was addressed to believing Jews. Let us look at the evidence from the first part of the letter:

- a) Looking back to chapter 1, we can see that the author expects his readers to be receptive to his arguments. He does not make any attempt to justify his assertion that the Son of God has spoken and he is free in his Christocentric¹⁰ interpretation of the Scriptures.

⁶ In the Hebrew of Isa 8:17f, these words appear to be spoken by Isaiah, but in the Septuagint it is the Lord who speaks them.

⁷ Gal 3:7 “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.”

⁸ Jewish believers in Christ.

⁹ That is, Jews who did not believe in Jesus as God’s messiah.

¹⁰ See “The Christocentric interpretation of Scripture” in chapter 5.

- b) The author mentions “those who will inherit salvation” (1:14)? However, a reference to the elect does not mean that the whole letter is intended specifically for them. He could write about lions, without implying his readers are lions.
- c) Moving forward to chapter 2, we observe that the author uses the inclusive term ‘we’ throughout the warning. This suggests that he includes himself (and therefore also other believing Jews) in the warning. But equally, ‘we’ could simply be a device to help his readers feel the author is sympathetic to them.
- d) In 2:2 the author recalls the consequences of disobedience to the Law, clearly indicating a Jewish reader, but not necessarily a believer in Christ.
- e) 2:3-4 indicates believers in Christ or at the very least, Jews who are very sympathetic to the Gospel. Some argue that we *neglect* something we have, not something that we could have, and that therefore he must be addressing believers who are *neglecting salvation*. But equally, we can say that sympathetic Jews *have* the gospel, which is *salvation, first announced by the Lord...* It has been promised, preached and demonstrated to them. If they neglect to believe and embrace it, they will not escape.
- f) 2:5-9 and 10-18 seem to be addressed to believers.

Looking forward

The evidence from chapters 1 and 2 for who the first part of the letter is addressed to is inconclusive. However, as soon as we read on to chapter 3 and beyond, we have to conclude the author is addressing fully-fledged believers who *confess* Jesus as their *apostle and high priest*. Furthermore, there is absolutely no hint that he is now addressing a different group of readers. On the contrary, he is bringing his discussion with them to a point, with the phrase, “therefore, holy brothers...” (3:1). I conclude that from chapter 1, through chapter 2 and into chapter 3 the author is addressing Christian Jewish believers; the *Nazarenes*.

But if the warning is addressed to true believers, what does it mean? That Christians can lose their salvation and are punished, like Jews under the Law, for disobedience? Or have we misunderstood the nature of the warning?

What does the warning concern? – v2

Concluding that the warning is addressed to true believers, we ask, “What can a neglectful believer drift away from that would incur loss?” Could it be eternal salvation itself? This is how some commentators interpret it, but is this consistent with the rest of the letter and other scriptures?

Loss of eternal salvation?

I am a believer who has, in the past, “been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit and tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age” (6:4). Let us suppose I have become somewhat disillusioned with church, disappointed at my loss of the zeal I started out with and am now drifting away from the vision I once held to. We all know people like this. What am I to make of this passage if it warns of the possibility of drifting away from eternal salvation? How can I respond? I could make a new confession of faith. But I have not renounced my faith, I have simply become jaded. So how can I respond?

I could try harder. So, let’s suppose, I go to church more often, read my bible more regularly, pray more frequently. But then I hear the preacher say, “Salvation is not by works but by faith alone. Trying harder to please God will make no difference; all that is dead works. It is faith that pleases God.” What am I to do? I hear the warning not to drift away from salvation, but I do not know how to secure it! How can I demonstrate that I have heard and responded to this warning? When I say, “I was drifting and in danger of losing my salvation, but now I am regular in prayer/at church/in

giving..." then the apostle Paul replies, "We are saved by faith, not because of works, lest any man should boast."¹¹ Yet Hebrews warns me I am in danger of drifting away! I am trapped. How am I to respond to the warning? I can practice the spiritual disciplines because they are good for me, but they cannot re-secure my salvation, for salvation is the gift of God and is not by works.

I conclude, therefore, that this warning cannot concern the risk of losing eternal salvation by drifting, since there is no biblical way for a Christian to respond. Doing something to ensure one's salvation is contrary to the Gospel. The warning must be referring to something other than Christians drifting from eternal salvation.

Lets look at the passage carefully again:

Heb 2:1-4

^[1] "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

^[2] For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ^[3] how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"

The Israelite example

In verse two "the message spoken by angels" is a reference to the Mosaic covenant given to their forefathers. Here, the author is making a parallel between God's dealing with the Jews under the old covenant and his dealings with believers under the new. His warning is that if the Nazarenes neglect their salvation, which is greater than their fathers', they will suffer a comparable yet still more serious fate. But what was the fate the Jews of the old covenant suffered? The author tells us "every violation and disobedience received its just punishment." There is no mention here about losing salvation. The Jews who "neglected their salvation" so to speak, under the Mosaic covenant received the punishments that the law meted out to them, and bore the curses that it pronounced.¹² But they continued to be members of God's chosen people and, as such, there was always restitution and forgiveness available for them by means of the sacrificial system.¹³

Consider the example of the Israelites wandering for 40 years in the desert. These were people who had demonstrated their lack of gratitude and weakness of faith in God in countless ways since he saved them from oppression in Egypt. They had even made an idol for themselves and forgotten God completely while he was delivering the covenant to Moses. Yet still God did not abandon them. He called them his chosen people and remained with them in the desert, fed them and fought for them in war. However, because of their fear and lack of faith, God denied them entry into the Promised Land, but never did he leave them, and their children inherited Canaan with God as their champion. The example of Israel in the desert is not of disobedience resulting in loss of salvation, but of loss of inheritance. When God poured out His wrathful judgement upon Israel for its idolatry, sending them into slavery, He went with them and kept covenant with them. Foreseeing their future exile the Lord said to Moses, "When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath." (De 4:30-31)

If the Jews under the old covenant were so securely God's children, how could the greater salvation, which we have in Jesus, be less secure?

¹¹ Eph 2:9

¹² The conditions for the nation as a whole are laid out in Deuteronomy 28.

¹³ Except in the most serious offences, where they could be cut off from God's people or stoned to death.

Loss of inheritance?

Drawing on this parallel with the Israelites under law, which the author makes, we can put forward the theory that the author is addressing believers, warning them of possible loss of inheritance resulting from disobedience, or drifting.

In the last chapter we looked at the meaning of the phrase “inherit salvation” which occurs in the last verse of chapter 1 - the verse immediately preceding this warning. We noted that there is an eternal inheritance, which we will receive following the judgement day as a reward for how faithfully we live our lives.

Could this, and the other warnings in the letter, refer to a loss of reward; a loss of inheritance rather than a loss of eternal salvation?

Notice that, whereas the writer talks about punishment for disobedience to the law, he does not mention *punishment* concerning believers. He is unspecific, simply saying, “how shall we escape?” Believers are not punished for sin, but we may well suffer the consequences of it.¹⁴ The NT teaches that we cannot lose what we already have¹⁵, but we may not receive what could have been ours.¹⁶ This is a severe consequence, since it entails an eternal loss. The inheritance is infinitely superior to that promised in the Law, and so the loss of that inheritance must also be infinitely more serious.

Conclusion regarding the warning

My conclusion is that the warning is addressed to true believers in Christ. It warns of loss of inheritance; those who neglect their great salvation will fail to receive all that God intends. A believer, reading this warning, has a ready way to respond in repentance and prayerful obedience, coming to the throne of grace to find mercy, grace and help in time of need.¹⁷

Review

We can now revisit our list of surprises and think about what other riches lie in this passage.

What is this great salvation? - v3

What is this great salvation that was announced by the Lord, to which God also testified by signs and wonders and gifts of the Spirit¹⁸? It is interesting to note that Jesus did not teach about the cross and His atoning sacrifice. He never explained to His disciples how He would take the punishment for their sin upon Himself on the cross. John the Baptist describes Him as the Lamb of God, but that is as close as we get in the gospels. Likewise, the gospel preached by Peter in his first sermon¹⁹ makes no mention of atonement or justification or Jesus taking the penalty for our sin. It was only later, as the apostles studied the Old Testament under the guidance of the Holy Spirit²⁰, that these

¹⁴ God does not punish Christians for getting into debt by over spending on their credit card, but they do have to live with the natural consequences, which may include loss or even punishment by a human court. There will probably also be eternal consequences in terms of loss of reward for not being a faithful and generous steward. I highly recommend Randy Alcorn *Money, possessions and eternity*.

¹⁵ **Mt 6:20** “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” And **1Pe 1:4** “... an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you,”

¹⁶ Heb 6:10-12; Col 3:23f;

¹⁷ Heb 4:16

¹⁸ Peter uses the very same phrase in his first sermon, Acts 2:22.

¹⁹ Acts 2:14-36

²⁰ Jn 16:12-15; Gal 1:11ff

great truths came to light, and it is the purpose of our author to shed light on another whole new aspect of the work of Christ: His High Priestly role.

So what was the gospel announced by the Lord? It was that He is the promised Messiah sent by God to save His people from their sins²¹ by announcing acceptance, forgiveness and eternal life to all those who repent and believe in Him²². It is the most wonderful message of peace with God²³ through a cleansed conscience. His death and resurrection was God's way of both condemning sinful man²⁴ for his rejection of Christ and also God's proof that Jesus was indeed His Son and is now exalted as Lord over all²⁵.

This is indeed a great salvation, and it was the fulfilment of the great promises of old that the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. The coming of the Spirit was proof to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, fulfilling Joel's²⁶ and many other prophecies. Most translations have *gifts* of the Holy Spirit in v4, but the Greek word is simply *shares* or *distributions*. I think that, along with Acts 2:33, the writer is referring not to *gifts* of the Spirit such as tongues etc., but to the various *occasions* on which God poured out His Spirit in great measure upon those who put their faith in Christ. We see this in Jerusalem at Pentecost in Acts 2, then in Samaria (Acts 8:17), then in the gentile Cornelius' house (Acts 10:45) and after that throughout the world. It is the coming of the Holy Spirit in salvation that is the confirmation of the gospel first preached by the Lord.

Yet there is more still to the greatness of this gospel. It was first announced by the Lord and attested by signs and wonders, but the full depth and height and greatness of the gospel comes by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Paul prays often for his churches that they may receive the Spirit of revelation to know more of God and grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ²⁷. The letter to the Hebrews does much to reveal more of the wonder of our great salvation.

The effectiveness of Christ's salvation – v10

This chapter emphasizes the God-centeredness of salvation. It is *Christ* who brings many sons to glory. He is the *pioneer* of salvation. He *makes* men holy. He is *unashamed* in calling them brothers. We are Christ's children, whom God has *given* Him. He has *freed* us and is able to help those who are tempted. Many people think the warning passages in this letter teach that one can lose one's salvation. We will examine each warning as we come to it and see for ourselves, but we must notice along the way how confident the writer is about the effectiveness of Christ's saving work. We have seen that in this chapter there is no suggestion that we can thwart Christ's salvation, undo God's calling and cancel the work of Christ by drifting away. The passage is entirely about the effectiveness of Christ's salvation. Christ and Christ alone is the foundation of our confidence as adopted sons. The anchor of our hope is Christ,²⁸ not our performance in making sure we do not drift away.

²¹ "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Lu 19:10)

²² "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Joh 3:16)

²³ "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you..." (Joh 14:27)

²⁴ "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (Joh 3:19)

²⁵ "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Ac 2:36)

²⁶ Joel 2:28-32

²⁷ Eph 1:17; 3:18.

²⁸ Heb 6:19

Jesus made perfect through suffering – v10

It is strange to read of Jesus being made perfect. How can a sinless man have any need to be made perfect? The word translated *perfect* occurs several times in the letter²⁹ and elsewhere in the NT to denote someone who completely fulfils their purpose³⁰ or who is fully mature. It has more to do with function than outward appearance. It does not mean spotless or even flawless, but rather accomplishment of the intended purpose. So we could say that a beaten up car clattering down the road is more perfect than a shiny car that never leaves the garage. Cars are designed for travelling, not as ornaments. It is in this sense that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. It was His *purpose* to bring salvation and that required suffering and death. Death and suffering were the fitting means by which Christ achieved God's purpose for Him. Later the writer talks about Christ being perfected by learning obedience (Heb 5:8-9) which we will consider when we get there.

Christ, the pioneer of our salvation – v10

Another phrase repeatedly applied to Christ is the word translated *pioneer*. Other versions have captain or author. The word certainly includes leadership in its meaning and *pioneer* captures that sense better for me.³¹ Jesus did not just write the instructions for salvation; he lived it out in full. He was the forerunner who blazed the trail for us so that we can follow. That is the point the author is making here and elsewhere when he writes about Jesus' humanity. It was His struggle with temptation as He followed the path of righteousness that makes Him a merciful and sympathetic high priest.³² When we face the same temptation for the thousandth time, we can turn to Christ and say, "You know what it is like to live in this weak, hormone flooded body. Give me strength to stand and the assurance of your sympathetic assistance and unfailing love."

Christ, our brother – v11-13

"Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers." Whenever I read this sentence, I am dumbfounded. I seem to live in almost constant shame of my unworthiness before Christ and yet He is not ashamed of me!³³ These verses prompt me to imagine Jesus amongst us when we gather to worship. I see Him singing God's praises with us, calling out to the angels and the whole heavenly host, "Here am I, and the children God has given me" with a huge grin of pride and pleasure on His face. When, in my imagination, I look at His face, shining with joy at praising His father, boasting of His inheritance in the saints,³⁴ my heart is melted and I too lift my voice in praise to God for our great salvation. Then I hear Him say, "I will put my trust in him" and I eagerly follow His example, saying, "Lord, there is none like you. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Ps 73:25-26)

²⁹ See Heb 5:9; 6:1; 7:19,28; 9:9; 10:1,14; 11:40; 12:23

³⁰ See W. E. Vine *Expository dictionary of bible words*.

³¹ Champion is another way of translating it, but not in the modern sense of the winner of a race, but the ancient notion of a champion who fought the enemy champion in order to determine the outcome of a war, like David and Goliath.

³² Heb 4:15

³³ But see Mark 8:38 "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

³⁴ Eph 1:18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

Destroying the devil – v14

“... that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

Through Jesus’ complete trust and obedience to God, even to death, and through His sinless self-sacrifice on the cross as the Lamb of God, He has taken back from the devil every claim of authority over sinful man. Where Adam and Eve gave up their God-given rule over the earth³⁵ to the devil through their disobedience, Christ by His obedience has wrested it back. He has plundered the devil and robbed him of any authority or power in the lives of those who, by faith, become children of God. Jesus spoke of this:

“But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.” (Luke 11:20-22)

Paul proclaimed this victory over the devil:

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Col 2:15)

This powerlessness of the devil is what is meant by the word translated *destroy* in Heb 2:14 (the NASB has *render powerless*). Christians are no longer subject to the *unrestrained* opposition of Satan. Where there is opposition it is permitted and regulated by God for His loving purposes.³⁶ Therefore we should not be afraid of the devil; to continue in fear of the defeated foe is to play into his hands. Rather we should be confident in God’s loving and constant care:

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Pet 5:7)

Your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. (Isa 58:8)

One day I was going round the neighbourhood knocking on doors to introduce myself as the minister of a local church and offering to pray for any needs. At one property a man opened his side gate and set his ferocious dog on me, which promptly bit me in a very disagreeable place. But, thank God, Christ has chained that ferocious dog, the devil, so that so long as we keep away from him, he can bark all he likes, but he cannot bite.

Freed from the fear of death – v15

It is common these days for non-Christians to believe that there is nothing following death, just a rotting body. You might think that such people would have no fear of death, yet there is plenty of evidence to show that fear of death is common among unbelievers. But what is much more surprising is the prevalence of the fear of death amongst professing Christians. In the medical profession, it is assumed that life should be prolonged at almost any cost and Christians often allow themselves to be carried along in this view without questioning it. Paul says:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body³⁷. (Phil 1:21-24)

³⁵ Gen 1:28

³⁶ E.g. 2Cor 12:7-9 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

³⁷ See also 2Cor 5 for another extended discourse on the desire to be with the Lord.

Do we believe in eternal life in glory with Christ? Surely if we do, then we would long with Paul, “to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” Shouldn’t our approach to costly or intrusive life-prolonging treatments for disease or accident be different from that of unbelievers? Of course, like Paul, there are other considerations such as the effect of our death on friends and family or on further fruitful ministry. But to see death as something to be feared and delayed for as long as possible begs serious questions about the depth of our faith. Death should be seen as the doorway to the future we have spent our lives thanking God for.

Perhaps we fear death because we feel we are not ready to face judgement; perhaps we are living in compromise and laziness but imagine that in a few years time we will sort our lives out, and then we will be ready to die. This kind of thinking is madness. It ignores Jesus’ direct teaching, warning people against this sort of attitude.³⁸ Should not our natural fear of suffering from disease be tempered by a joyful anticipation of a far better home? When medics resuscitated my elderly mother-in-law after a heart attack, she reproved us, saying, “Don’t you ever let them do that again! I could be in a much better place!”

We should hold on to life lightly, fixing our hopes and longings on our glorious eternal future. Then we will not love this world and the things of the world in a way that hinders our love of God and our readiness to do His will.

A merciful and faithful high priest – v17

Verse 17 is a key verse for the whole letter.

“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”

It unlocks the content of the book, pointing to the humbling of Christ discussed in this chapter and forward to the detailed arguments that follow, presenting Christ as the unique and only truly effective high priest in both His completed role in the sacrifice of Himself and His ongoing role interceding for us and presenting us before the Father.

This letter is the only place in the NT where Christ is described as a priest and the only place where his ongoing priestly role is explored. As such, it is a very important book full of teaching, encouragement and exhortation to help us grow in our faith. Not only are the angels sent to help those who are inheriting salvation, but also the risen Christ intercedes day and night on our behalf.³⁹

He was “made like his brothers” so that He would be merciful and faithful and to atone for our sins. Because of this, we are exhorted to fix our thoughts on Jesus our great High Priest (3:1). How often do we feel miserable, condemning ourselves because we have failed to be the kind of Christians that we aspire to be? Perhaps we see others praying and worshipping and condemn ourselves because we are not as zealous or exuberant. Perhaps we condemn ourselves because we know we are vulnerable to temptation in some area. None of us pray as we know we ought, or study our bibles as we should. Very few Christians have the quality or regularity of personal devotions that they wish they had. All these things and more tend to draw our eyes away from looking at Jesus our faithful High Priest and focus them instead upon ourselves and our shortcomings. It is hardly surprising that once our eyes rest upon our own efforts and failings we quickly become discouraged. This is the danger of immaturity, causing some people to give up and fall away from the faith. But when instead we fix our eyes upon Jesus and His High Priestly ministry we are filled with wonder and

³⁸ For instance the wise and foolish virgins in Matt 25 and the rich fool and foolish manager in Lk 12.

³⁹ Heb 7:25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

encouragement. He is merciful and sympathetic. He is rooting for us. He saved me to bless me, not so I could beat myself with condemnation!

He helps us in our temptations – v18

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

This is such a contrast to the Law. It was this stark contrast that inspired Paul to write Romans 7, bemoaning the cruel Law that demands total obedience but does not lift a finger to help. The writer to the Hebrews emphasises the sympathetic humanity of our great high priest, Jesus Christ. He helps us when we are tempted. My natural inclination is to assume that when I am tempted, Jesus wags his finger and says, “You know you shouldn’t do/think that. Naughty boy! If you carry on I shall turn my back and refuse to speak to you until you say you are sorry.” I think my biggest struggle in relation to sin, is not with the temptation itself, but with this false view of Christ. I constantly have to remind myself that Jesus does not turn His back but that He understands, sympathises and offers to help me in my struggle with temptation. The letter to the Hebrews is my greatest ally in this fight of faith. I hope it will become yours too.

Conclusion

Many of the themes touched on in this chapter are developed further in later chapters. I hope you will pray through the chapter again, considering before God the issues we have raised. My prayer is that you will be greatly encouraged and eager to dig into the next chapter.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 2

- V1 Did you give careful attention to the things you read in Hebrews 1?
Have you continued to live in the good of what you learnt?
What have you learnt in Hebrews 2? What will you do about it?
Do you feel you have drifted away from the passion, faith or vision that you once had?
What do you think are the main causes for you or others?
- V3 Consider the parable of the sower in Matt 13:14-23. This is about how we receive the word spoken to us. Is there something you need to pay attention to?
What is “great” about your salvation?
What is your response to this warning?
- V4 Are you confident that the Holy Spirit dwells in you? In what ways do you recognise the witness of the Spirit that you are a child of God?
- V5-9 Are you confident that Jesus has authority over all creation? ... Over every aspect of your life? Is there anything that troubles you about this claim?
- V11 Are you confident that Jesus is not ashamed of you? ... That He is joyful in His work of grace to make you holy, not in your performance at being holy? How can you grow in this confidence?
- V14-15 What do you think about the issues raised in the paragraph above “Freed from the fear of death”? Look at 2 Cor 5 for Paul’s attitude to death.
- V18 In what ways have you known God’s help in turning from sin or temptation?
Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?