

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (7-1-1979 Strandtown Baptist Church)

Hebrews 1:1 – 2:4

Introduction

Introductory word about the epistle to the Hebrews. The question of when it was written, to whom and by whom it was written has posed problems from the earliest years of the church, and hence it was a long time before it was included into the New Testament canon. Some have referred to this dilemma as “the riddle of the New Testament”. Its place was not secure until the fourth century.

In Reformation times, Luther had problems with whether it was right in the canon – he felt it denied the possibility of second repentance. When was it written? – probably before A.D.70. To whom? – probably a group of Christians in Italy. By whom – the epistle does not say. The title it is given in the A.V. (“The epistle of Paul the apostle to the Hebrews”) was purely the traditional opinion of the A.V. translators. All sorts of guesses – Luke, Barnabas, Aquilla and Priscilla, Apollos, Silas. In the third century, Origen said in answer to the question, “God alone knows”. And we are no further forward today. It is most unlikely to be Paul’s letter because of the style, vocabulary, attitude and concept of law, view of faith, Christ as the Great High Priest. Also the writer said he received knowledge of the Gospel from those who heard the Lord, whereas Paul stressed he received his Gospel from no man.

Yet it is rightly in the New Testament canon, because it is from the apostolic circle, c.f. Mark and Luke. Written to persuade Jewish Christians not to return to Judaism, because the Christian Gospel was the final revelation of God. It highlights the superiority of the Gospel over all other religions.

Value of the Epistle – (a) Person of Christ – humanity and deity, Christ as the High Priest; (b) Importance of Scripture, especially Old Testament, as Word of God; (c) Christian life – stress on progress and growth, dangers of back-sliding.

Status of Christ

N.B. The point of the epistle is God’s final and perfect revelation in Christ. The Old Testament was important but transitory, only preparation for Christ, not complete in itself. In the days of prophets, revelation came in many ways. Prophets had spoken, fitting their message to the age in which they lived and stressing the aspect of the message which applied to the current hearers. Their prophecies were true and important, but fragmentary, e.g. Amos spoke about justice, Hosea spoke about the love of God, Isaiah spoke of His holiness. Each saw a part of the revelation of God, but not all of it. Also each used different methods – **at sundry time and in divers manners** (Hebrews 1:1) – some used speech, some used dramatic actions.

But in Christ we have the whole truth, the full revelation of God, not just a part of it. He has not used human methods to transmit the truth, but revealed God by being Himself. God who had previously spoken in prophets in partial manner **hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son** (Hebrews 1:2). The prophets were mortal and sinful men, they lacked the authority and dignity of the Son. In Jesus Christ, God had

entered humanity, eternity had invaded time and things could never be the same again.

At once the writer speaks of Christ's glories – seven wonderful things about His status:

- (1) The heir – **whom he hath appointed heir of all things**. Points forward to the end and the crown of history. The destined empire is His, He will inherit everything.
- (2) The Creator – He was God's instrument and agent in creating the world, i.e. the universe.
- (3) The Revealer – **being the brightness of his glory** (Hebrews 1:3), the shining radiance of God's glory. He radiates God's glory.
- (4) Very image of His essence - **The express image of His person**. Just as a seal makes a perfect impression on wax, so Christ was the perfect expression of God's being. When we look at Jesus, we see exactly what God is like.
- (5) The sustainer – **upholding all things by the word of His power**. He did not just create the world and let it carry on on its own, but He continues to control and sustain and carry out His own purposes. God of providence.
- (6) Redeemer – made purification of our sins. Revealer and redeemer, He cleansed away sin, paid the price of sin.
- (7) Ruler – **sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high**. His work was done. Sovereign of the universe, world-wide dominion, supreme dignity.

So in Christ we receive the complete, permanent and final revelation of God. How sad that those who argue against God's existence and character are content to rely on human guesswork. They rarely look at the place of His supreme revelation, the evidence for Christ, and the meaning of Christ. Here is the key which unlocks the mystery of God.

The Superiority of Christ

The superiority of Christ in relation to the angels. **Being made so much better than the angels** (Hebrews 1:4). This sounds strange to our ears, but this was written to Jews to whom angels were so important. The angels were intermediaries between God and man, God spoke through angels, God was surrounded by angels, they formed His armies, God always discussed His plans with the angels, they intervened in history, controlled the stars, years and months, the sea, rain and snow, thunder and hail, they were the wardens of hell, wrote down every word which men said, the punishment of God was done through angels, they brought death to all at the right time, every nation and individual had a guardian angel. There were millions of angels.

The writer here stresses that the Son was superior in every way. The Son was to be worshipped, as heir, king and ruler. In verses 5-13 there are quotations about the Son from Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah. He is shown to be the Son in three of the quotations, enthroned over His enemies, builder of the Temple, Lord of all nations. **The firstbegotten** (Hebrews 1:6) – priority and superiority. Then He is heir of all things, and is actually called "God" (Hebrews 1:8). He is the creator of the world,

heaven and earth. While things change in the world, he is always the same (Hebrews 1:12). God has put Him at His right hand till His enemies become His footstool (Hebrews 1:13). None of these things apply to the angels, they are not the Son of God. Indeed they have to worship the Son. They are only servants. They are ministering or serving spirits who are servants of the heirs of salvation, i.e. the believers. Therefore they are inferior to us, as well as inferior to the Son. We do not need them as intermediaries between God and man. We go to God through Christ alone. The Son is characterised by His dominion. The angels are characterised by their service.

Here on the first page we have a full length portrait of Christ, at the very opening of the epistle. We bow in worship, our hearts are immediately warmed to Him. Here is the eternal Son, incarnate, crucified, exalted, enthroned. God has completely and finally spoken in Christ. F.F. Bruce writes, "As God has no greater messenger than His Son, He has no further message beyond the Gospel".

Significance of this statement

Because the Gospel is final and complete, it is of paramount importance that we must attend to it. Hence chapter two opens with this exhortation and warning. A converted negro, studying the epistle to the Hebrews, was asked if he did not find it a rather difficult epistle, replied "Yes, I press on until I meet a 'therefore' and then I get a blessing". It is to be hoped that as he grew older, he would begin to get His blessings before he met the 'therefores'.

Here is the first 'therefore'. **Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip** (Hebrews 2:1). In view of Christ's glory and superiority, we ought to pay more earnest attention to the Gospel. If the Old Testament revelation, which came through angels who were inferior to Christ is true and every disobedience of it is severely punished, how can we expect to escape if we neglect a much greater salvation which comes from the Lord and which was confirmed by signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is necessary to give more earnest heed. προσεχειν can be a nautical term, i.e. moor a ship. παραρυωμεν means to slip, e.g. slip a ring off a finger. The picture is of a ship carelessly allowed to drift past a haven or harbour because the sailors forgot to allow for wind and tide. Therefore the meaning is that we must more eagerly anchor our lives to the things we have been taught, lest the ship of life drift past the harbour and be wrecked. Note that this is not a warning against outright and deliberate rejection of Christ, but of drifting away from God till we are ruined. Ever-present danger of bit by bit imperceptibly drifting, and suddenly waking up to disaster. Compare those invited guests in Jesus parable in Matthew 22:5 who made light of the king's invitation to the marriage of his son. They treated salvation as not worthy of their notice.

So great salvation (Hebrews 2:3). "Great", because it was accomplished through the Son of God, His death on Calvary, and "great" because of its effects on peoples' lives, and the eternal issues bound up with it. Full and free gift with eternal consequences. How shall we escape if we neglect it?

Conclusion

The glorious status of Christ, God's last word to men, is the opening word of this epistle. How perilous to neglect it. God has done all he can to reveal the truth to us. Over to us to give it our full attention.

Lets make sure we do not let things slip, lest we drift unconsciously from our anchorage of faith. The current of the years, time changes us all, many have slid away from their earlier better self. Many still keep up appearances, but the years have carried them downstream, and they are closer to their old selves, before they came to Christ.

Another danger is familiarity with truth. We can start to regard familiar as commonplace. Continual pressure of daily cares and duties – even of Christian work – can draw us away, and leave us no time for communion with Christ. Tides of opinion and ways of thinking can influence us away from the Gospel. Hence we need to heed this warning – to occupy ourselves with the truth and the Bible, give it daily and prayerful perusal. Being moored to the truth by using it and causing it to influence our daily life. Acting on the truth leads to a deepening of our grasp of it.