

The Concern of the Author of the Letter to Hebrews

“How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?” (Hebrews 2:3a)

The Letter to the Hebrews has a “high Christology.” It presents, beginning to end, an exalted view of Jesus. That’s why, and it’s mostly the only reason, Hebrews is such a beloved Letter in the canon. The exact reason that the Letter was written is not only not known but is irrelevant to us today: There are very few Jewish believers in today’s church and, since 70 AD, going back to the Mosaic system is not even possible. So today’s readers, teachers and preachers have scant interest in the author’s arguments. And that’s a tragic error, due to grossly misunderstanding the Letter’s context and the author’s passionate burden. We very much, we *desperately*, need to grasp the message of Hebrews. It is in fact exceedingly relevant to us today.

The Letter magnificently begins by exalting Jesus. What is missed, though, is that He is exalted as *King*. And the word “kingdom” appears in this chapter (1:8c). And let’s observe that this Letter closes with the same word, kingdom (12:28). The Letter opens with a verse about God speaking, and it closes with the same (12:25). Also, the word “escape” appears both at the beginning (2:3) and at the end (12:25). This is *inclusio*, or “bookends.” They not only mark this Letter as a coherent unit, they indicate what this Letter is all about.

So what is this Letter all about? The Kingdom! The author states in Chapter 2 that he’s referring to the future era, the promised Kingdom (verse 5). The “hope” of 3:6b and 11:1 is the Kingdom. The “rest” in Chapter 4 is the Kingdom. The faith that all those O.T. figures mentioned in Chapter 11 had was in the promised Kingdom. Not some abstract, uncoercive rule from heaven but the restoration of Israel and a literal rule from Jerusalem over all the nations on earth that Jesus will have when He returns from heaven in glory.

More specifically, this Letter is a concern about missing out on the Kingdom by ignoring God’s Word. The author’s argument, and his repeated warnings, have to do with being indifferent to God’s voice and refusing to press on to maturity, because failure to heed God and to grow means forfeiting participation in the coming Kingdom. This concern is just as serious today as it was then.

The early Church understood what salvation is. We don’t. After 1700 years of Roman Catholic and Protestant amillennialism (or post-millennialism), most Christians today suppose that salvation is going to heaven for an eternity instead of being cast into hell. That’s not salvation in the Bible. It’s not salvation in the early Church nor is it salvation in the Letter to the Hebrews. Jesus came preaching that the prophesied Kingdom of God is imminent, and people needed to repent to be in it (Matthew 4:17, for example). His teachings were to prepare people who wanted to be in the Kingdom to know how to be kingdom citizens. His death was, among other reasons, necessary to make it possible for those who wanted to be in the Kingdom to be in it. His resurrection and ascension were necessary, among other reasons, so He could return one future day to establish the promised Kingdom, an eternal kingdom. The preaching in the Book of Acts invites people, Jews and Gentiles, to be in the Kingdom. Paul’s letters instruct believers how to prepare to be in the coming Kingdom.

The Letter to the Hebrews warns certain early Jewish Christians that they were at risk of forfeiting being in the Kingdom because of their deliberate refusal to prepare for it. Why? They evidently wanted the security of their traditional Mosaic religion to avoid the risks and consequences associated with following Christ and sanctification. Today's believers in Christ (here in the West, anyway) assume that, having sins forgiven, nothing further is necessary and their ultimate destiny is secure. That's what the Letter to Hebrews not only asserts is wrong but warns against. The exhortation to persevere and the repeated warnings of failure to do so are so that those who profess to believe in Jesus don't miss out on the greatest aspect of our salvation, participation in the Kingdom.

There is a race marked out for us, and we're expected to run it with perseverance (12:1c), with our eyes fixed on Jesus (12:2). We're expected to endure hardship (12:7), however painful, and so not miss out on the grace of God (12:15)—which could actually happen if we're indifferent to God's voice in Scripture.

“See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks” (12:25). The author writes this because it's a very real possibility, a possibility he doesn't want to happen. He's writing to Christians, then and now. The way to escape God's discipline or judgment is to hear Him and obey Him, regardless what suffering or loss may result.

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It is the work of Christ to change hearts, to transform us into His image, into Christ-likeness. But it occurs synergistically, that is, thru our lovingly, trustingly obeying His Word, desiring to be like Him and to please Him, as well as thru the internal, empowering work of the Spirit. The problem that I see is, we have no intention even of knowing what we're to obey, let alone actually doing it. We are smugly content with knowing, from pulpit preaching, biblical information (and maybe even theological information) but we have no intention of living any differently because of it. Information changes no one. We substitute Bible knowledge for self-denying maturing in godliness. We want supremely to live safely and comfortably. Our modern, knowledge-based Christianity permits us to pursue the American, self-indulgent lifestyle without any sense of guilt or concern.

We can have one (and only one) of two kinds of blessings. One or the other, not both. There is either God's offer of blessing in the era to come, that is, in the Kingdom (see the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12), or the blessings of living happily in this present era, enjoying all that modernity puts on offer. These are mutually exclusive, choosing one necessarily means forfeiting the other. Seeking the blessings God desires for us is the narrow path of Matthew 7:13-14, and it's a difficult path to take because it entails suffering loss and personal sacrifice (Mark 8:34-35). My great concern is that of the author of Hebrews: We foolishly choose that which is comfortable and seems safer, indifferent to God's voice in the Scriptures, and so lose out on the great salvation that Christ obtained for us. We are really just like that 1st generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt who, out of fear and lack of trust in God, refused to go on to blessing in the Land (Hebrews Chapter 3). God wouldn't allow them to have the blessing. The author of Hebrews is warning us, God won't allow us to have it either.

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That first generation of Israelites, who expressed trust and obedience in the Passover lamb, by God's power were delivered from Egypt. They were to take serious risks in conquering the Land from the Canaanites, but God promised that He would enable it so that they could be forever in His presence in the Land. They refused to do their part, so they had to wander in the wilderness until they died. A second generation took those risks, and they entered the Land. As I see it, most Christians today are just like that first generation; only a few are like that second generation.

"First generation" Christians profess to believe in Jesus, but it's really just information they have. It's cognitive, it's mental agreement with Scripture. They've made a decision for Christ. They attend church, but they pursue life how they want to, according to their own desires and values and interests. "My life is my own to live as I see fit." So they wander in wilderness until dead. To change the metaphor, Christians in name only are like being betrothed, forever. They never enter into the one-flesh union of marriage.

"Second generation" Christians understand who Jesus is and all that He accomplished for us. They grasp and are overwhelmed by the greatness of all that God has done and is doing in the Son. So, expressing love and gratitude with the enabling of the Spirit, they obey Christ's teachings and commands and they serve Him as He revealed He is to be served. They seek to please the living Christ in all they do. They commit their lives to Him, desiring to be like Him in character. And they trust in God for the risks and sacrifices they make for Him. They want their lives to count for Jesus regardless what losses it entails. They enter into the presence of God to partake of His nature and life. These are *in Christ*, they are the Bride of Christ.

The goal of a walk with God, narrow as it is, is to be in His presence, to know Him, to see Him, to enjoy Him. That walk begins in this life, but it is fulfilled *thru death*, i.e., by a resurrection made possible by Christ. It's after death that we meet Jesus and He presents us to the Father. And all the blessings of salvation accrue to us. If that's our great desire, we'll walk the path regardless how difficult it may be or what loss we suffer.

We live what we believe; what we do and what we are betray our true beliefs. If we "believe" in Jesus as Scripture describes true belief, our lives will express it. Our lives also express what we love. If we desire to exalt Jesus, our lives will express it. Our lives also reveal whom we worship. The way we live will reveal if we worship idols or the living and glorious Christ. And our lives reveal who it is we are serving, for we all must serve someone. In America, everyone is granted freedoms to indulge a pagan, self-serving lifestyle. Christ demands that we instead serve Him as if a slave, which we will do if the love and gratitude are there. Our lives also reveal if we've been transformed by the Spirit or not. Only *in Christ* are we able to be changed into His likeness.

Faith is our response to Jesus. If all we want to do is know about Him, attend church, and live as we please, God allows that. But that's not saving faith. The faith that saves is James 2 faith. Abrahamic faith. Rahab's kind of faith. It's how we respond to Jesus that determines if we have saving faith or not. God has revealed in Scripture the response He expects from us. It's not for us to develop a soteriology that presumes to please God. The Letter to Hebrews is there in the canon for us today.