

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 2

“The Argument”

April 21, 2002

Review

Last Lord’s Day evening, in our introduction to Hebrews, we said that Hebrews was really a sermon more than it was a letter, that, like any good sermon, it consists of the exposition and application of Scripture, that its theme is the absolute necessity of a persevering faith, that it was preached white-hot to a community of Jewish Christians who were wavering in their faith and, apparently, a community of Christians that, however well they had begun their pilgrimage, had already watched some of their number give up and return to their former Judaism, deserting the Christ and the gospel they had claimed to believe. The sermon is preached and sent to them to persuade them not to do the same.

The Argument

To that end the author or the preacher makes an argument. A good sermon always is an argument in some fashion, it attempts to persuade with reasons. And that is what Hebrews is: an attempt to persuade a community of Christians to hold fast to the faith of Jesus Christ. And to that end reasons are given.

Now, this evening, I want to consider with you the general drift of that argument, the reasons given for the necessity of a persevering faith. I want to do that, in particular, because I think it is here that people often go astray in their reading of Hebrews and preachers in their preaching of the book. The thesis of Hebrews is the supremacy of Jesus Christ as God’s one and only provision for the salvation of mankind. This is, of course, precisely what Judaism denied. First century Judaism had constructed a view of salvation that did not require a Redeemer who would die for the sins of the world. Its view of salvation was the efficacy of repentance and the merit of obedience. God would forgive the sins of those who obeyed him to whatever was the required measure. Jewish rabbis differed in defining the standard – some held to stricter, some to looser definitions of what constituted saving righteousness – but they agreed that you got to heaven by being good, by doing what God required. This system did not need Jesus Christ, it did not require his death on the cross, or his resurrection from the dead, and it certainly did not require faith in Jesus for one’s acceptance with God.

Hebrews is going to argue, on the contrary, that Jesus *is* God’s definitive provision for the salvation of mankind and that Jewish substitutes for him would never avail to make a sinner right with God. That much is clear and not in dispute. It is how Hebrews argues the case for Christ and Christ alone that is the problem.

You know, of course, that Hebrews makes a great deal of Israel and the Old Testament. No wonder. These people were Jews and were very familiar with the first 39 books of the Bible. What is more, clearly they were being tempted to read those books in the way that the Jews read them and, we know from the Gospels and the entire NT, that the Jews read those books in a very different way and got a very different message out of them than did Jesus and his apostles. Paul,

for example, is always arguing that the Judaizers – that is, the Jewish Christians who wanted to find some middle ground between first century Judaism and Christianity – were guilty of misreading the Bible, that the Bible’s true message from the very beginning was nothing else but the gospel Jesus brought and the apostles preached.

Now that seems very much to be the same ground that is taken in Hebrews. There is one gospel and it has been the same from the beginning and the problem with Judaism is simply that it does not believe that gospel, it does not have true faith.

Take, for example, 4:1-2.

“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.”

Now, the “they who heard the gospel” are Israel in the wilderness, the people mentioned in the citation of Psalm 95 in the previous chapter and of whom the author has been speaking in the immediately preceding verses. “Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?”

Now, we gather from this statement in the opening verses of chapter 4 several things.

1. The gospel that was preached to these second generation Christians was the same message Moses preached to Israel in the wilderness. He says it was. In fact, notice the striking reversal. We would expect verse 2 to read, “they also had the gospel preached to them just as we did.” But this author says, “*we had* the gospel preached to us just as *they* did,” as if no one would doubt that Moses preached the gospel to Israel, but someone might doubt that these people had heard the gospel. That is how straightforwardly this author identifies the message of salvation in Moses’ day with that of his own day. The message is the same! It is a message about entering the rest of God – heaven – through faith in Jesus Christ. And that has been the message from the beginning.
2. What is more, the condition of obtaining that heavenly rest is also the same. It was faith in Moses’ day and it is faith today. The only difference between the situation in the wilderness and that in the community to which Hebrews was written is that in Moses’ day almost no one believed and in that day, in that community, many had believed. But the believing is the same, the faith is the same. That point is going to be made several times at length in the letter and most famously in chapter 11. There we are given a number of exemplars of faith – from Abel to Abraham, from Moses to Rahab to Samuel – and then urged to imitate them. What got them to heaven is what will get us to heaven: a true and persevering faith in Jesus Christ. As chapter 12 opens the author concludes his great argument there by saying that, surrounded as we are by that great cloud of witnesses, and with them cheering us on, we must run the same race they ran and run it in the same way.

In fact, in any number of ways, this author identifies the situation we live in today with the situation in which the saints lived in the epoch before the incarnation, crucifixion, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ. The message is the same and the faith is the same, as we have seen. But the reality of apostasy is also the same, so are the warnings issued to the church about apostasy, so are the threatened penalties for those who apostatize. Over and again this author is going to say to us: do what the faithful did in the ancient epoch and you will get what they got and will get; don't do what the unfaithful in Israel did, or you will get the same terrible punishments that were visited upon them and suffer the same eternal loss. Read through Hebrews and it is quite obvious that this author seems to assume at every turn that the spiritual world that we inhabit is the same as that inhabited by the people who lived in the days of Abraham or Moses. And, that seems to be very clearly what the Apostle Paul teaches in his letters and what Jesus taught before him.

But, there is a problem here. For, or so it seems to many, there is another strain of teaching in Hebrews that seems to make a great distinction between that early day and ours, between the spiritual situation that pertained in Moses' day and that which pertains in our day now that Christ has come. So much is this so that to many writers Hebrews seems to be the New Testament's primary demonstration of the obsolescence of the OT and the superiority of the NT.

Now, what leads them to that view? Well it is the argument in the center of the letter, from chapter 7 to chapter 10 where, it seems to them, the author contrasts the religion of the OT unfavorably with the religion of the NT.

That argument centers around three contrary-to-fact conditional statements, that is "if...then" statements in which the "if" clause is assumed to be false. The first is found in 7:11: "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood...why was there need for another priest to come..." The second is found in 8:7: "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." And the third in 10:1-2: "If the sacrifices, repeated endlessly year after year, could make perfect those who draw near to worship, they would have stopped being offered." Now, the grammatical form of those statements indicates in every case that the "if" clause is untrue. That is perfection couldn't come through the Levitical priesthood; there was something wrong with the first covenant; the sacrifices couldn't make perfect the worshipper.

In each case, so it seems to these commentators and preachers, the author is saying that there was something defective, something inadequate, something that fell short in the religion of Israel in the OT and it was made up when Christ came and introduced the complete, perfect, final form of the Christian faith. The OT religion was the shadows, the NT religion was the sunlight. There was gospel in the OT but it was in a provisional and inadequate form, it did not yet have the full power that it would receive from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Now, I'm going to make my argument as we proceed through the letter. I'm going to take up each of these statements and many others as we go. But, to avoid confusion, I want to tell you where I am going before we begin.

I think it is a capital mistake to view the argument of Hebrews as in any way concerned with the inferiority of the epoch before the appearance of Jesus Christ in this world. This writer says

nothing, not one thing to that effect. I think that there is a great advantage to living when we do, with the cross and resurrection behind us. But this author never says that. He never discusses that question at all. In his view the spiritual worlds are the same. The issues of life are the same. Salvation comes in the same way. The need for persevering faith is today precisely as it was in the days of Moses and David.

But, what are we then to say about these “if...then” sentences? Well, let me say several things.

1. First, in each case this author is saying nothing more than what was said a hundred times in the OT. The Levitical priesthood *was not* God’s definitive provision for the salvation of mankind and no pious and believing Israelite thought it was. As Jesus said of Abraham: “he saw my day from afar and rejoiced.” As Jesus said of Moses, “Moses spoke of me.” The sacrifices could not make the worshipper perfect; of course not! Who thought they could except the nominal, unbelieving element in Israel. The prophets told them that the sacrifices would not avail to take away their sins if they did not have living faith in God. And obviously there was something wrong with the covenant that God made with Israel and which Israel broke. In other words, this writer is saying nothing other than what was clearly known and taught *as the religion and the view of salvation in the ancient epoch*.
2. Second, this writer is not dealing with theoretical questions or debates. He is dealing with a crisis in a church and a community of Jewish Christians. He is attacking a false view of salvation precisely because these people were being tempted to embrace that falsehood as if it were true. That is what he is doing in his argument. He is attacking a very real error. And what was that error. It was precisely the view that is enshrined in the “if” clause of these three statements. These Jewish Christians were being tempted to go back to a Judaism which held precisely that the sacrifices, and the covenant of Israel in the wilderness, and the priesthood *were* God’s definitive provision for the salvation of mankind. That is what first century Jews believed and that is why they did not feel any need for Christ. That wasn’t the teaching of the OT, but it *was* the teaching of Judaism. And this author is attacking it head on. So he is not saying – *he does not say* – that Moses taught that the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices were all anyone needed. The Jews may have thought that, but that isn’t what the OT taught. So he is treating this material *under the view of it entertained by the Jews who did not believe in Jesus*. In other words, he will speak about the sacrifices and the priesthood and the covenant in just the same way the Reformers, for example, spoke about the Mass and the priesthood in their day. He is going to say that these things won’t save you, that they are totally unable to solve your problem with God. He is not going to say anything positive about them because he is trying to break them of the habit of trusting in such things instead of in Christ alone. He is preaching, in other words, just like the prophets preached before him. In fact, there have been those who thought the OT prophets were against the priesthood and against the sacrifices because they heaped such scorn on them – but, of course, they were not against the priesthood and the sacrifices themselves, they were against the misuse of them, they were against putting them in the place of God and trusting them instead of trusting him.

The fact is, the OT sacrifices functioned in the same way as the Lord’s Supper does today. The OT priesthood functioned in the same way the Christian ministry does today. Salvation is by

faith in Christ as it was then. Apostasy is a very real danger that must be warned against, just as it was in that earlier day.

This author does not say that things have changed. He never says that anything has changed. His entire argument proceeds on the assumption that everything is the same. The gospel is the same, the faith by which Christ and his salvation is obtained is the same, the way of persevering faith is the same, the rewards are the same, the danger of flagging faith is the same, the threatened punishment for apostates is the same. If there are differences between the OT and the NT this author never mentions them. Remember, when Hebrews was written Jewish Christians, even the Apostles, were still offering blood sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem as part of their *Christian* worship.

In fact, it is a very interesting observation that the idea of fulfillment plays almost no role in Hebrews. That is, given the view of Hebrews that many people have, we might expect the OT to be cited over and over again to prove that in the new epoch this or that promise has been fulfilled and what the OT saints were looking forward to we now have. But, in fact, that idea is not found in Hebrews. People assume it is, but it is not. Look for yourself. In fact, in Hebrews the Scripture, what we would call the OT, is always cited not as something that is now fulfilled in Christ, but simply as the living Word of God to be believed and obeyed. I won't take time to demonstrate that to you tonight, but we will notice it all the way through this sermon.

In fact, the temporal or chronological distinction that is important in Hebrews is not the distinction between the OT and the NT, but rather the distinction between this world and the next. There is no other book in the NT that so consistently throws the attention of the reader forward to the world to come.

The OT saints had to believe *in hope*. They didn't see the heavenly country except from afar. But we are in the same boat! We have to believe in hope. We have to continue to believe even though we cannot see the heavenly country with our own eyes. Let me illustrate this at 11:39-40. At the end of his long list of heroes of faith, the author sums up.

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

Over and over again you will hear people say that what this means is that though the OT saints had not received what was promised, we now, in the Christian era, *have* received it. That is, they take this statement to amount to an assertion of the superiority of the NT: we have in our hands what the OT saints just hoped for. Even commentators often interpret the verse that way, though many of them are too sharp-sighted to do that. For this author very clearly does not say here that we have received the promise that they were hoping for. He says we *will* receive it together with them.

We haven't received it either. In fact, the statement he makes just before the beginning of Hebrews 11 puts this point beyond question. In 10:35-36 he says:

“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, *you will receive* what he has promised.”

After saying that he gives us a long list of examples of people who did not throw away their confidence and did persevere and will receive the reward. They haven't received it yet, because we all are going to receive it together. But they showed us what must be done. And now, as he says in the opening verses of chapter 12, we must do what they did so that we too will receive what was promised when the day of days comes. In other words, once again, we are not in a different place than they were; we are in the same place, and so must do the same thing.

In other words, when he says in 11:39 that though the OT saints did persevere they have not yet received what has been promised to them he means that we are in the very same boat and must do precisely as they did – live a life of faith to the very end of our days. So long as Christ tarries, we won't receive the promise in the world either, but we will guarantee that we will be among those who receive it when Christ returns.

What is the promise in Hebrews?

1. Well, it is “the world to come” as he says in 2:5.
2. It is the rest of God, that is heaven, as he says in chapter 4.
3. It is the salvation that Christ will bring when he comes again, as he says in 9:28.
4. It is the “better country” and the “better resurrection” as he says in 11:16 and 11:35.
5. It is the “city with foundations whose architect and builder is God” as he says in 11:10. And then he goes on to say to us in 13:14, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”

Get the general point. The contrast he draws is not between OT religion and NT religion. That is the same and the similarity is the basis, the foundation of his argument. The contrast he draws is between what someone has in this world and what he gets in the world to come. And that contrast is important to him precisely because one must endure in faith in this world if one is to gain the world to come. That was true for Abel, for Noah, for Abraham, for Moses, for David, and it is just as true for us! And to recommend that faith to his hearers or readers, he sets before them Jesus Christ as the one and only provision for our salvation, the one and only object of our faith. He and he alone can take us to the better country – that was always true and it is just as true today. The Jews were wavering in their belief of that all-important fact, and so this preacher is going to prove it to them all over again.

And it is something that needs to be dinned in to us as well, over and over again. I had a telephone conversation this week with a PCA pastor friend of mine from St. Louis. We spoke of a mutual friend who was some years ago a pastor in this presbytery, in one of our Seattle churches. That man, the former pastor, now describes his years as a Christian as one “phase” of his life, a phase that is now finished, a phase he has left behind. Will one of you ever say such a thing? Not if you remain convinced that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners and that it is only by a true and living – which is to say persevering – faith in him that we gain his salvation and entrance into heaven.

There is the argument of Hebrews and we'll start to tackle it paragraph by paragraph next Lord's Day evening.