

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 4

Hebrews 2:1-4

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Review

Now, remember where we are. Hebrews is a sermon, really a sermon more than a letter, and a sermon with a single theme: the absolute necessity of persevering faith. It is warning against apostasy – a real threat to this Jewish Christian community – and an encouragement to stand fast through thick and thin in order to obtain the great promises of the gospel in the world to come. The sermon began with a demonstration of the superiority of Jesus Christ to both the OT prophets and to the angels, because these Jewish Christians were being tempted to lessen the place of Jesus Christ in their viewpoint under pressure from the Jewish community from which they had come and back to which they were being tempted to return. The Jews, of course, had constructed a religion that did not require a Redeemer and had no place for Jesus Christ as the Savior of his people from guilt and sin.

Now, in vv. 2:1-4 we have the first of a great many statements of the author's fundamental theme and purpose. This is the "application" of the sermon, if you will, and this preacher will return to it again and again. You have the same urgent application again in 3:6, 12-14, and then again in 4:1 and often thereafter. Notice the "therefore" at the opening of v. 1, which the NIV, as it often does, has buried in the middle of the sentence. You see, he has fashioned an argument from Scripture in chapter 1. Now he applies that argument to his readers' situation. He will do the same again and again throughout the sermon: exposition, then application.

- v.1 For "drift away" Tyndale, in his early English translation, had "glide." That is one way to read the verb, as an image of sliding past, through carelessness, the place where we ought to come to land. Another possible way of reading the verb would be to think of losing something that slips from your grasp without your realizing it, like a ring from your finger.
- v.4 The connection between the argument of chapter 1 and this exhortation now begins to appear. These Jewish Christian readers, steeped in the ancient Scriptures as they were, had no doubts whatsoever about the authority of those Scriptures, or the seriousness of the sanctions that were imposed in the law of Moses on those who did not believe and obey. That revelation, was mediated through angels. That fact is mentioned twice in the NT – in Gal. 3:19 and Acts 7:53 (by Stephen in his defense before the Sanhedrin) – but is stated in the OT only obliquely in Deut. 33:2, where, in a passage in which Moses is recollecting what happened at Sinai, we read:

The Lord came from Sinai
and dawned over them from Seir;
He shone forth from Mount Paran.
He came with myriads of holy ones
from the south, from his mountain slopes.

That last line is difficult to translate in the Hebrew and in the LXX it was translated, “At his right hand were angels with him.” In any case, the point is clear. If they had no doubt about the authority of the law of Moses or of the severity of its punishments for those who did not submit to it, mediated by angels as that law was, how much more a revelation that has come directly from God the Son and was, even more gloriously than the revelation given in the OT, attested by remarkable demonstrations of God’s power, both in the ministry of the Lord himself and in that of the apostles. Presumably these folk had been witnesses to some of those signs, wonders, miracles and spiritual gifts.

The gospel had been preached before, of course; it didn’t make its appearance for the very first time when Jesus Christ came preaching that the kingdom of God had come. This author will make that point decisively later. But, it was *first* proclaimed by the Lord and *then* by those who were eyewitnesses of his ministry, those who had brought the gospel to these people. In that sense the Lord was “first.” But, it also may be that the author intends to say that the full account of the gospel and its actual accomplishment in history came in the life and work of the Lord Jesus. And, just as the law came through Moses, so the gospel came through Jesus Christ in the more ultimate sense. The one was proclaimed by a man, but the other by God the Son. It is quite possible that those who were beguiling this community of Jewish Christians were using the argument that their message had come through angels but that the message these Christians believed had come through mere men. The author decisively corrects *that* mis-statement by reminding his readers that the gospel came through the Son of God, a person far superior to the angels. The evangelists had only spread the message that God the Son had brought.

Now we know why the attention in chapter 1 to the Son’s superiority to the angels (which, as we said last week, may have been particularly relevant because this community of Jewish Christians had come from a background of the Essene/Qumran type of Judaism in which angels were elevated to especially exalted positions). If you are going to argue as the Jews are arguing, then the fact that the law was mediated by angels *lessened* its authority in comparison to the gospel that was mediated through Jesus Christ himself. For he is far greater than they! He’s taking his opponents ground in order to refute their position. [Hughes, 77]

In a little book entitled *Quaint Sayings of Welsh Preachers*, published in 1910, we have this.

“Many years ago, a Welsh minister, beginning his sermon, leaned over the pulpit, and said with a solemn air, ‘Friends, I have a question to ask. I cannot answer it, you cannot answer it, if an angel from heaven were present he could not answer it.’ Death-like silence reigned. Every eye was fixed on the preacher. He proceeded. ‘The question is this: how shall we escape if we neglect so great A salvation?’” [Hywel Thomas, 56-57]

We are no longer listening to a theological argument about the comparative glory of angels and the Son of God. Now the author has brought those facts home to *us*, to each one of us. “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”

Now, the fact is, hardly anyone hears that question put nowadays, still less does the average American, even the average American church-goer, even the average American evangelical church-goer hear that question put with real seriousness and solemnity. With all the religious sentiment that has been in the air since 9/11, still you hear in public nothing, nothing at all about the wrath of God, the real peril in which the unbelieving soul lives in this world, or the terrible seriousness of the entire question of salvation.

Listen to this from William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. Think of “drift away” in v. 1 and listen to this.

“Look! Look at that man yonder; look at him going down the river. There he is going down in a boat with Niagara beyond. He has got out into the stream; the rapids have got hold of the boat, and down he goes. He need not pull at the oars; he has nothing to do but to be still; to go on with his sleep; to go on with his novel. He is going – going – going. My God! He is gone over, and he never pulled at an oar. That is the way people are damned; they go on; they are preoccupied; they are taken up; they have no time; they don’t think; they neglect salvation, and they are lost.” [Cited in Gammie, *Preachers I Have Heard*, 55]

This preacher, writing remember what the Holy Spirit wanted him to write, thought he should warn his readers of the reality of approaching doom and remind them that many will suffer punishment and loss because they did not believe in Jesus Christ and follow him. And he will remind them of this over and again in this sermon. He will tell them how easy it is to lose heaven and how terrible it is to suffer the punishments of God. Later, in chapter 10, we will read one of the most terrible warnings in all of the New Testament:

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ... How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” [10:26-31]

Now, people in our day are not used to hearing sermons like this. Their ancestors heard such sermons regularly, but they do not. Nor do they sing about the judgment of the Lord in their worship on the Lord’s Day. There is abroad in American Christianity, even of the evangelical type, a sentimentalism that lays all stress on happy thoughts and good feelings and systematically avoids the darker teachings of biblical revelation and the stronger meat of biblical Christianity. But, the result is that this generation of Christians is losing touch with real Christianity altogether. Take away the threat of punishment, take away the wrath of God, and soon it will not longer be clear what we need a Savior for and Christ will appear a different person, a different figure than the God/Man, the Redeemer the Scripture reveals him to be.

According to a recent survey conducted by the Barna Research Group, only 3 out of 10 adults in the United States still believe that hell is literally “a place of physical torment where people may be sent.” Now, that 3 out of 10 is more significant than you may realize, because more than 3 out of 10 claim to be evangelical Christians. But, what is perhaps more revealing of the present situation is that, according to that same survey, four out of ten of those who claim to be born-again Christians accept the proposition that if a person is “generally good” he or she will escape the punishment of hell and enjoy the rewards of heaven.” [Cited in *Modern Reformation* 11/3 (May-June 2002), 2] So, you see, take away the prospect of real punishment and loss and before long you take away Jesus Christ and salvation itself. This is what John Henry Newman meant when he wrote,

“[Hell] is the turning point between Christianity and pantheism, it is the critical doctrine – you can’t get rid of it – it is the very characteristic of Christianity. We must, therefore, look matters in the face. Is it more probably that eternal punishment should be true, or that there should be no God? For if there be a God there is eternal punishment (a posteriori).” [*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, cited in V. Grounds, “The Final State of the Wicked,” *JETS* 24/3 (1981) 215]

And, in a similar way, so accurately describing what is happening today in the church, another wrote,

“The kind-hearted humanitarians decided to improve on Christianity. The thought of hell offended their sensibilities. They closed it, and to their surprise the gate of heaven closed also with a melancholy bang.” [*Ibid*]

Lewis was referring to the same reality in a different way when he wrote, in one of his *Letters to Malcolm* (76), “I have met no people who fully disbelieved in hell and also had a living and life-giving belief in heaven.”

But here, in Holy Scripture, we read of “drifting away,” of “just punishment,” and of a failure to “escape.” Escape what? The punishment of God, banishment from his presence, hell. It is *this reality* that makes Jesus Christ so important to this preacher and should make him so important to us as well. We need to escape something terrible, we need that more than life itself. And there is only one who can deliver us, save us, protect us from that fate we deserve, and that is the Son of God. That fact is what provokes the question: “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”

Nowadays in the church, if belief in divine judgment has not entirely withered, if the minister and people still believe that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, it is widely felt that a message about damnation would be so unpopular and people so unwilling to receive it, that it is better to preach the good news without mentioning the bad news.

The problem with this strategy, and it has always been the problem, is that without bad news there can be no good news. Without judgment and punishment and loss there is nothing to be saved from and, consequently, no need for a Savior. In such a situation it is inevitable and, in fact, has always been the case, that interest in Jesus Christ himself, interest in any form of

supernatural Christianity, withers until there is no interest at all. The entire message of the Bible, the entire revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ is built in Holy Scripture on man's terrible, pressing, urgent need for salvation. But you can persuade no one that he or she is in such urgent need without describing man's burden of sin and guilt and the danger that poses for someone who must face the judgment of a holy and righteous God.

Well, "no" say many preachers today. Can we not proclaim Jesus Christ as our Savior but speak instead of his other benefits, the other blessings that come to us through faith in him? These preachers speak of "felt needs" and make the argument that if people have no thought of a day of doom and a real damnation, even if they are not willing even to consider such a prospect, there are nevertheless real problems in their lives, a real emptiness, a lack of purpose, troubled relationships, controlling sins and addictions, and the like that people feel keenly. We can preach Jesus as their deliverer in these ways and later, after they have become Christians, we can introduce them to the deeper, harder facts of biblical revelation when they will be more disposed to receive them. "Come unto me," Jesus said, "All you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Well, we can preach the same way.

Well, I have no doubt that some people have come to Christ with little thought of hell or damnation. Their lives were in disarray and they cried out to Christ for help and he delivered them in more ways than they knew. I have no doubt that many, many people have become Christians and have come to understand the full effect of their sin and God's wrath only later. People often do not really understand their plight, they do not know what the real problem is. They are dealing with symptoms – broken relationships, controlling sins, spiritual emptiness – and do not yet know anything about God's judgment upon their sins or that in all these ways they are tasting in advance the life of hell.

All of that is certainly true which is why, even in the Bible, you don't have hell in every chapter, you don't have hell in every gospel sermon, you don't have hell in every account of Jesus Christ and his life and work. In fact, to be quite honest, in the Bible as a whole, hell is something like the granite foundation that underlies the other strata of the earth's crust. It underlies and sustains them, but it crops out so as to be clearly seen only here and there. Paul, for example, speaks directly about damnation only a few times in his letters, but when he speaks of it he speaks of it with punishing clarity and emphasis and, at every other point, it is the clear assumption and presupposition of his teaching about man, sin, Christ, and salvation. On the other hand, in the teaching of the Lord Jesus, damnation and hell surface repeatedly and are taught with stark power.

It is certainly also true that in Christian preaching in history and in Christian worship damnation finds only a limited place. In many great gospel sermons by great gospel preachers, Christ is offered to sinners without specific mention of damnation or the judgments of hell. And if there are hymns that deal with this theme – and there are some great hymns, such as Wesley and Cennick's *Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending* or John Newton's *Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!* – there are many more that do not, including hymns that have for their theme the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the end of history. Philip Nicolai's *Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying* is one such hymn. Laurentius Laurenti, the German pietist hymnwriter, has a fine hymn, *Rejoice all Ye Believers*, built on the Lord's parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

The original hymn has some ten verses but the editors of many hymnbooks as well as our hymnal leave out altogether the verses that deal with the banishment of the foolish virgins and include only those that concern the appearance of the Bridegroom to the wise virgins. I have never seen the entire hymn and so don't know if some verses were dropped because they were regarded as of inferior quality. That is often the case. But, even if they were dropped because of their subject, it can be fairly argued that the church can rejoice at the prospect of her Savior's coming without always having to ponder at the same time the doom that will befall those who have not trusted in him. Frequently in the Bible the second coming is presented only in this partial aspect and not its terrible one.

But, all of that being acknowledged, there are I think reasons why the church cannot fail to proclaim the biblical doctrine of divine wrath and damnation.

I. First, it appears too often in the Bible to neglect it without that neglect amounting to a refusal to take Holy Scripture seriously as the living Word of God.

The fact is, not always mentioning the reality and prospect of divine judgment is not at all the same thing as refusing to mention it when it ought to be mentioned. The problem today is not that divine judgment isn't being mentioned enough. The problem is that divine judgment *is almost never mentioned*. It is mentioned in the Bible, plainly and repeatedly. If we are faithful to the Bible we won't have to mention it at every turn, but we will have to mention it, preach it, explain it, defend it, and press it home to the souls of people *from time to time*, often enough so that it takes its rightful place in Christian minds.

The situation as it appears today looks too much like cowardice on the church's part, too much like an unwillingness to admit that the doctrine is contained in God's Word. That cannot be right and all the more in a day which despises this doctrine in particular. If the church is silent because she fears the scorn of the world, what is that if not cowardice. There may be good reasons not to preach damnation at every turn and there may be good reasons not to preach it to a particular congregation at a particular time. But cowardice is never such a reason and the world's unwillingness to hear what God says is never such a reason. You remember Luther's famous warning.

“If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefields besides, is more flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.”

To be faithful to the Word of God, the church must proclaim its teaching and in that teaching damnation is given an important and fundamental place.

II. Second, reason and history combine to demonstrate that if this doctrine is not preached and firmly believed in the church, soon the doctrines founded upon it will not be believed either.

Here we are given that lesson. Hell is introduced in this argument precisely so that we might understand how important it is that we believe in Jesus Christ and continue to believe in him until the end of our days. Take damnation away and the argument of Hebrews falls. And so it has fallen in our day. Take damnation away and the gospel of Christ falls. Take damnation away and soon all roads lead to God and heaven and soon thereafter any tolerable amount of decency will be enough to get a man or woman to heaven. And so the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, his terrible cross, the resurrection, his ascension, his coming again are all reduced to nothing.

We would like to believe that we could make the case for Christ without recourse to hell and damnation, but we cannot. The fact is there have been Christians in the world for thousands of years now; lots of Christians. And the world has never concluded by observing Christians that the solution to their earthly problems is obviously to be found by believing in Jesus Christ. We would like to believe that the world would look at the church and conclude that Christ was the answer to their troubled marriages, their financial problems, spiritual emptiness, controlling addictions, and so on, but it is not so.

I do not doubt that there is and must be a real difference between the world and the church. I know that Christ makes a great difference in a person's life. But there is not *enough* difference between believers and unbelievers here and now for that difference to serve as the foundation of belief in Christ. You cannot convince the world to follow Christ by pointing them to Christians and their superior living in this world. The author of Hebrews does not attempt to make such a case. He does not say that believing in Christ is so important and so necessary because Christ can and will solve your problems and give you, in this world, a far, far better life. He will give you a better life, and solve many of your problems for you, but it will not necessarily be that obvious to others that he has. No, the real difference is not seen here; it is seen in the world to come. There is the true difference that Christ makes: a difference so great that there can be no mistaking it; the difference between light and darkness, life and death, heaven and hell, God and Satan, good and evil, joy and misery.

It is only when we face the prospect of heaven and hell that we see with absolute clarity who Jesus is, what he did, why he had to do it, why it cost him so terribly, and why it is essential that we trust ourselves to him. Take away the threat of future loss and God's wrath and it will not be clear to the world that Christ Jesus will make a greater difference to your marriage than an effective marriage counselor, or to your financial situation than a good investment counselor. But face the day of judgment, face the prospect of punishment for sin in the world to come, and suddenly, it is Christ and Christ only and everyone and everything else disappear from view.

III. Third, the doctrine of eternal punishment must be preached to keep fresh the church's own sense of her great debt to the love of God and the sacrifice of Christ.

Whatever the world may think about this doctrine of divine judgment, however it may despise it and scorn us for believing it, we know it is true. We who have been given the Holy Spirit know full well the guilt of our sin. We know how much we deserve the punishment of a holy God. We know what an astonishing mercy it is that God should have given us heaven instead. But we

also know full well how easily we forget all of this and live as if our own salvation was something to be taken for granted. No! It cannot be!

Not with the looming chasm of hell beckoning; not with multitudes of people falling into it every day – people no less deserving than we are of God’s grace and salvation.

Your worst problem and mine is that we do not appreciate as we should what an extraordinary gift has been given to us and what a terrible price was paid to give it to us. If only we knew that and realized that and felt that every moment of every day, the infinite love, the willing sacrifice, the opening gates to the city with foundations, what lives we would live, what love and thanksgiving would fill our hearts, what deeds we would perform in the name of our Savior. But we will not, I guarantee you, we will not if we are allowed to forget what it was our Savior saved us from.