

Studies In Hebrews No. 7
Hebrews 3:1-19
June 9, 2002

Review

In the section of the sermon just completed, chapter 2, vv. 5-18, the author demonstrated that Christ was superior to the angels insofar as he had, on our behalf, consented to partake of our humanity, to come to earth and share our lives in every way, to become our brother, and, then, as a man, to suffer and die in our place to secure our peace with God.

Once again, exposition is followed by application. Notice the “therefore” with which chapter 3 begins.

- v.1 He has spoken of Christ as our “brother” and of us as his “brethren” in the previous section and also of Christ being the means of God’s bringing us to “glory.” So he is picking up the threads of the previous argument as he proceeds. As “apostle” Christ represents God to men; as “high priest” he represents man to God. Here is the great application of the letter: stand fast in loyalty to Jesus Christ.
- v.2 Of course, by now we are not surprised that he should introduce a comparison between Jesus and Moses, as he has already compared Jesus to the prophets and to the angels. For the Jews Moses was *the* great man, *the* great prophet, the great leader and law-giver.
- v.3 Just as Jesus is greater than the angels, so he is greater than Moses.
- v.4 The author means either that Jesus is the builder of the house *as the executor of the Father’s will*, as he is described to be in 1:2, or, perhaps less likely, we have here another instance in which Jesus is being called “God,” as in 1:8.
- v.6 It is here that very often interpretations of Hebrews begin to go seriously astray. It is often alleged that these verses amount to a contrast between the inferior Mosaic order and administration and the superior administration introduced by Christ and his apostles. The Christian era or order is superior to the Mosaic one. But, that is not what the author says. You can see that clearly enough yourself. There is but one house of God; Moses served in that house; but Christ built it. We are likewise a part of that house, *if, that is, we continue in faith to the end*. Moses was never anything more than a servant in the house that Christ was building and over which Christ ruled as the Son of God. Furthermore, Moses himself pointed away from himself to the Christ who was to come. That is a point often made in the New Testament. Jesus said that Moses spoke of him and Paul said that Moses’ message was the same as his own: salvation through faith in Christ. Believers today belong to the same house to which Moses belonged and in which he served. The continuity of the church in all ages of the history of salvation *is a fundamental assumption of this author!* He refers repeatedly to the people of God, but never once does he distinguish eras or epochs or generations. There is but one people of God, that people in all ages that are saved by persevering faith in Christ.

Now we have introduced in this brief and more subtle way a point the author will make more explicit later, viz. that Christ himself was at work in building the church in the ancient epoch. Here in Hebrews we will learn that Moses himself stood with the Israelites in Egypt precisely *for the sake of Christ*. The author tells us that it was for *Christ* that Moses did that, a very interesting and important way of speaking. He makes the summary point in 13:8 that Jesus Christ “is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” It will become clear when we reach chapter 12 that this author teaches that it was Christ, God the Son, who gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. In this, of course, he agrees with the general teaching of the Bible. It was Christ who led the people of God out of Egypt and through the wilderness. It was Christ who talked to Moses in the Tent of Meeting and, later, the Tabernacle, and it was Christ’s glory that shone on his face when he came out. It was the glory of Jesus Christ that Isaiah saw when given his vision of God high and lifted up in the temple in the year King Uzziah died. As I have told you before, the general impression of the New Testament is that the person of the Godhead with whom God’s people had to do in the ancient epoch was God the Son. The person whose revelation awaited the developments of the incarnation was God the Father. The Israelites did not know him by his incarnate name, Jesus, of course; but the one with whom they had to do was the Son of God. All of that is assumed here in 3:2-6.

But, take note. All of this has for its purpose to set out the argument as to why they must continue to persevere in faith in Jesus Christ. This is the point that the author now develops.

- v.6 Now begins a long section, a hortatory section, or section of application mixed with exposition, that stretches to 4:13, in which the danger of apostasy and the necessity of an enduring faith are illustrated from Israel’s history.
- v.7 Psalm 95, now to be cited, was a psalm of David – as this author will acknowledge in 4:7 – but it is introduced as from the Holy Spirit. Here is our doctrine of Holy Scripture: what David says, or Isaiah, or John, or Paul, *God the Holy Spirit himself says!*
- v.12 Now, by way of anticipation, let me simply take note of two points: 1) this author uses psalm 95 to address his own audience; this word of God is still today to be believed and obeyed; these folk can make precisely the same error that Israel made in the wilderness and, if they do, they will suffer precisely the same fate; 2) in chapter 4 he will indicate that “the rest of God” referred to in the psalm and here in the citation in v. 11 is not the land of Canaan but, much more, heaven itself. Once again we have the futuristic perspective of Hebrews. Failure to enter God’s rest means nothing less than failure to obtain eternal life, of which entrance into the Promised Land was only a figure.
- v.13 The “today” of the Psalm is still with us! We are still in that “today.”
- v.14 The thesis of the entire sermon, once again.

- v.18 What is so significant about this historical reference is that for the Jews, and especially the Jews at Qumran, the wilderness generation of Israel was regarded as the pattern or paradigm for their life. They sought to organize themselves in a way so that their religious community imitated the wilderness generation's manner of life. But, here, this author is telling them that generation was an example of *unbelief* not faith; of *apostasy* not loyalty to God. Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10 and warns his readers not to imitate their disobedience and be overtaken by a like punishment. And Jude speaks similarly: "Jesus, having saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that did not believe." In this, as you know, they are only following the OT prophets who often point to the wilderness generation as an example of apostasy. Remember, in Hebrews, we are not talking about unbelief *in general*, but of *apostasy*, the turning away on the part of someone who once believed, or said he believed, and was taken to believe.
- v.19 As indicated in v. 12, Israel's *disobedience* is the indication that she had an unbelieving and sinful heart. Throughout Hebrews we will find this tight connection between faith and obedience, disobedience and unbelief. In 5:9 we even have "obey" where we would expect to find "believe."

Now, there are wonderful and important things here that belong to the main argument that continues into and is concluded in chapter 4. I will leave those things until next time. As we are only half-way through the argument the preacher is making, I want to pick up a detail along the way. It comes in v. 13 where the author warns us not to allow our hearts to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

That is what happened to Israel in the wilderness it seems: their hearts were hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. And that is such a real danger for us and such a constant danger, we are being told, that we need to *encourage one another daily*. Nothing has changed, in other words. It is still possible for those who are numbered outwardly among the people of God to forfeit the eternal country and it requires nothing more than spiritual neglect to harden a heart to the point that it will turn away from God. And what makes that terrible outcome so common, what sends so many unconsciously and uncomprehendingly down that gloomy road is precisely the deceitfulness of sin. Sin fools them, deceives them, misleads them, beguiles them, tricks them, dupes them. Sin misrepresents itself and by so doing lays a trap into which many men and women fall blindly unawares.

You see this and hear this all the time, if only you will take notice. Remember Richard Dawkins' famous statement that it was the theory of evolution that made it possible for him to be "an intellectually fulfilled atheist." Well, what is that but a man who has been hoodwinked by sin's deceitfulness? Sin not only deceives a man into believing a cock and bull story about the origins of human life, it renders a man so captive to the deceit that he can congratulate himself on his bondage! So with Somerset Maugham who said that he thought perfection, heaven, was apt to be dull! Hollywood thinks so too. It covers sin and unbelief and wickedness with glitter and finds godliness punishingly boring. Who could possibly make a movie about that? But sin has deceived these benighted people. Heaven will be stimulating, pure, unadulterated fun and pleasure and fulfillment and hell will be unrelenting dullness and monotony.

Why is it, after all, that defenders of abortion or of the homosexual way of life are so earnest and sincere, so ardent in the defense of their principles, so sure that they are right and that the Bible is wrong! Sin has deceived them. It is not merely that they have a wrong opinion, they are *deceived* by sin, they are in the grip of a falsehood that has been so powerfully and persuasively and winsomely presented to them that not only do they believe the lie, but have become zealous defenders of it.

This author is reminding us of how deceitful sin can be. After all, think of those Israelites whose history we are reminded of in Psalm 95. They had witnessed the ten plagues in Egypt; they had left Egypt in triumph having plundered their former masters; they had escaped from the pursuing Egyptians through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and had watched their enemies be buried in that same Sea when the waters closed over them. They had the pillar of fire and the cloud as constant reminders of God's powerful presence with them. And yet, still early on in the wilderness journey, Israel rebelled against God. The particular incident cited in Psalm 95 is that recorded in Exodus 17. There, if you remember, the Israelites threatened Moses with revolt at Rephidim, where they had camped, because there was no water for the people to drink. They said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?" The Lord provided water for the people by means of Moses striking a rock with the same staff by which he had struck the Nile river and turned the water to blood (Ex. 7:20). Then, the Lord told Moses to name that place "Massah," which means "testing" and "Meribah," which means "quarreling," the two words you find in Psalm 95 and here in v. 8, though in the form of the LXX translation.

That is how deceitful sin can be. It can blind you to the obvious, it can make you forget completely what you have just seen and learned. The pillar of fire, the cloud, the parted waters, the Passover, the other plagues – sin can blind a heart to all of that and make it as if it hadn't even happened! In that case it did it through physical desire. They were thirsty and, under the influence of sin, their thirst made them forget everything else. We tend to think them indescribably foolish, that we would never be so foolish, but, then, we've never been thirsty in the desert. General Charles Gordon, the famous English military hero of the 19th century, who spent a great deal of time in the desert – this is the Gordon who was martyred during the defense of Khartoum – once said that he thought Israel's sin of grumbling for water was a small sin, at least he thought it would be viewed as such by anyone who knew the desert. Well, it was not a small sin by any means, but a remark like that helps us to realize that sin always has its persuasive reasons, its convincing proofs. I've seen this again recently. How powerfully a person can be deceived, how terribly that sin can mar and harm; but, all the while, it seemed so attractive, so reasonable.

We wouldn't have the problem with sin that we do if it were not for its power to beguile and dazzle us with its promise of pleasure and reward and satisfaction. But its promises are always deceitful. It never tells us what the true results must be of giving in to it; of the bitter fruit of its pleasures either in this world or the world to come. If temptation came to you and asked: would you like a few moments pleasure or satisfaction in exchange for months or years of misery, we would not be impressed. But it shows us all the charm and hides the stinger away and we never see it until it is too late. And, so this preacher is telling us, if we give in to sin's deceit long

enough or often enough it will so beguile us, so capture our thinking, so harden our hearts to the truth that we won't be able to get back to a sound mind. This is particularly so if we allow ourselves to be isolated from others, to do, as it were, all our thinking for ourselves. We are far more likely to be impressed by nonsense when we are alone than when we have Christian friends beside us telling us that it is nonsense and nothing more. That was Eve's problem, was it not? Sin entered the world through lying and deception. Paul makes a point of saying, in 1 Timothy 2, that Eve fell because she was deceived. Eve was deceived by the Devil. He held up the fruit to her view. The fruit was pleasing to look at and, while she was looking at the enticing fruit, he told her that God's command was burdensome, unfair, and God's warning flatly untrue. And the longer she looked at the fruit, the more preposterous God's command seemed to her. And Adam was sitting there right beside her the entire time and did nothing to encourage her in faithfulness to God. And so she sinned and he sinned and misery spread over the world like a dark cloud.

The Devil knows how to beguile us: with ease or pleasure or drink or drugs or sex or money or power or the hope of revenge or reputation or a thousand other things. And he knows how to dangle those things before our eyes and so dazzle us that we cannot see God or heaven or hell or Christ or the cross or the wages of sin and, before we know it, we have fallen and now must taste the bitter of our sin. Luther says, "It is rightly called the deceitfulness of sin, because it deceives under the appearance of good." It holds out to us something desirable, something we want, and so gains our assent to what is evil.

And, sin will deceive us according to our own vulnerabilities. To some of us it will say "this sin is not sin at all." To others it will say, "this sin is really pleasurable." To others, "you need this sin." To others, "it may be sin, but it's a minor sin." To others, "everyone is doing it." To others, "even great Christians have committed this sin." To others, "if you sin, you can always go to Christ and have forgiveness."

These folk were being deceived or were in danger of being so. And we can imagine what the deceits were: false teaching that promised to restore their broken fellowship with the Jewish community, that following God did not have to be as difficult as these people were finding it – we know they had already suffered persecution; he says so in 10:32-34. What is more, they were being offered a more visible faith, one that didn't require so much believing in what could not be seen, heard, or touched. These were powerful attractions and drew hearts powerfully after them.

But, this preacher warns us, you can never be sure that succumbing to sin's deceit will not create a permanent hardness of heart and will make you forever impervious to repentance. Don't toy with anything so deadly.

Here is a lesson for us all to learn. Here is a truth to keep in the front of our minds as we observe the world, as we face our temptations, as we examine our own faith and obedience. I love the way Simone Weil put it:

"Nothing is so beautiful, nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as the good; no desert is so dreary, monotonous and boring as evil. But with fantasy it's the other way round. Fictional good is boring and flat, while

fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive and full of charm.” [Cited in Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media*, 46]

You see, it works both ways. Sin’s deceit is both that sin itself is rewarding and satisfying and that righteousness is dull and not worth the grinding effort it requires. Of course, the truth of the matter is the exact reverse. You have this often in the work of C.S. Lewis who referred to the radiant quality in righteousness as “joy,” a joy not to be compared to the sinful pleasures of the world.

Here is Malcolm Muggeridge reflecting on his life in his autobiography, *The Chronicles of Wasted Time* [407-408].

“The saddest thing to me, in looking back on my life, has been to recall, not so much the wickedness I have been involved in, the cruel and selfish and egotistic things I have done, the hurt I have inflicted on those I loved – although all that’s painful enough. What hurts most is the preference I have so often shown for what is inferior, tenth-rate, when the first-rate was there for the having. Like a man who goes shopping, and comes back with cardboard shoes when he might have had leather, with dried fruit when he might have had fresh, with processed cheese when he might have had cheddar, with paper flowers when the primroses were out. ... Alas, so much of my life has been spent pursuing this fictional good, and forgetful of the other, the real good, that is ever inspiring, ever renewed...”

We know how this is. We know it at even the common level of life. We look back upon the hours, the days, the weeks we have spent in front of a television set watching programs that were so insubstantial and unimportant and unimproving that we cannot even remember their names. And we wonder, I wonder, what powers I would have if I had spent that same amount of time in useful pursuits. What pleasures would be mine, what fruitfulness would my life have now had I only used that time as I should have used it. But, now, of course, it is too late. The deceit worked only too well. I bought it hook, line, and sinker. Only now do I see at what cost, at what loss.

And we know it at far higher levels of life as well. What damage done to a marriage that can never be repaired, to children when they were young because of what we, as parents, let ourselves be deceived into doing or not doing. What harm done to other human beings because we followed the pleasing scent of sin and forgot the law and the will of our heavenly Father and our Redeemer.

How many there are who never become Christians because of the deceitfulness of sin. C.S. Lewis was asked once: “Which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness?” He answered:

“While it lasts, the religion of worshipping oneself is the best. I have an elderly acquaintance of about eighty, who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and self-admiration from the earliest years, and is, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know. From the moral point of view it is very difficult! I am not approaching the question from

that angle. As you perhaps know, I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew that a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity." [*God in the Dock*, 58]

And, in the same way, just as there have been multitudes who never began to be Christians, so there are multitudes who gave up their Christianity under the influence of the deceitfulness of sin. They were convinced that they could be Christians without being faithful to the way of life taught in the Bible; or they didn't have to believe the particular doctrines of the Bible to be Christians; or that they didn't have to be Christians at all; or, even, that Christianity and the Bible beneath it were bogus and mythical. Some have lived reasonably happy lives thereafter and will not know what a capital error they made until they step beyond this world. We know that many Christians have very difficult lives. And sin deceives us with those facts. But, there will always be a moment of truth, a day of reckoning, when it will become obvious that sin was lying all the while and only the way of faith in Christ made lasting good on its promises.

In the days of the Inquisition in Spain there was a diabolical instrument known as the *strappado*. It worked in this way. The victim was hoisted far above the ground by a system of ropes and pulleys and then, suddenly, allowed to drop all the way to the earth. The body was, by this means, broken and battered in the most cruel and painful way. The word made its way into the language of English spiritual writing in respect to just this deceitfulness of sin. Here is Thomas Goodwin,

"...[a man's] lusts, both of body and mind, do strappado a sinner's expectations."

"That is to say: his sinful imaginations hoist up his expectations of pleasure to a great height; and then, suddenly, he is let fall. For, when the sinner comes to enjoy his high expectations, they always prove themselves to be such flat and empty things, that his soul, being completely cheated, says to itself – And this is all!" [In Whyte, *With Mercy and with Judgment*, 35-36] Like the rich farmer in the Lord's parable who is counting his money and planning to build more barns in which to store his wealth, and then finds himself dead and before the judgment of God! Sin told him nothing about that! Sin didn't prepare him for that! Sin never said how temporary his pleasure in things would be! Sin never suggested that misplaced affections could have eternal consequences!

On guard, says our preacher. Sin is always seeking to deceive; the Devil has been a liar from the beginning. The world in largest part has believed his lies and swallowed his deceits. That is why they are impervious to the truth, even the truth that anyone can see. Don't let that happen to you. Be aware; be alert; stand ready when sin appears. Stare through it until you can see its *real* outcome, its *real* issue. And help others to do the same! Let us help one another to keep our wits about us and refuse to stop thinking when sin appears. The world is chock full of people who have been deceived by sin's deceitfulness. We can see so clearly how pathetic and tragic that deception has proved. Let us be constantly on guard lest the same thing happen to us.