

“OUR HOPE: JESUS GOD’S LAST WORD”

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Hebrews 2:1-4

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, ³how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

Hebrews, like the hidden treasure of Monte Cristo, is a storehouse of abundance. Like the Count, we will never run short of resources if we follow his practice of returning to the treasure chest for further handfuls of riches which can be converted into the stuff required for creative and abundant living.

In the Count’s case, he went after material riches. In the Christian’s case, hopefully, the quest is for the spiritual riches which are ours in Christ. I don’t mean to imply material things are not important. They are. I simply mean spiritual resources are more important.

If you question this, work with me for a week as I try to help people facing personal, family, marriage, vocational, health or moral problems. Stand with me at the bedside of the millionaire who is dying. Or at the graveside of anyone, rich or poor. Perhaps then you will understand why I say, from my perspective, spiritual riches get the nod over material riches every time.

A broken-hearted young husband who had lost his wife who was only in her mid-thirties, stopped by to say, “Pastor, I never knew how much her faith meant until she was gone. Now, her faith is my hope!” Material riches are useful. Of greater significance are spiritual riches. It is my profound conviction that the most desperate need of our time is for a clear, unwavering, authentic

word of hope. Why, then, have I turned to Hebrews, unquestionably one of the most difficult, obscure, overlooked, underused books in the Bible? The answer is simple. No other book ties the Old and New Testaments so closely together. No other portion of scripture so clearly shows that God has been, and is, acting through history to win back His creation lost through sin.

When we grasp the awesome fact that God has His holy hand on human affairs and will not be defeated, we have hope. Not groundless, vulnerable, wishful thinking. Hope! Real hope rooted in both the living and written Word of God. Therefore, it will be worth all the effort required to put on our thinking caps and really wrestle with what the book of Hebrews has to say.

Apart from getting to know the person of Jesus Christ intimately, the one thing which has given me the greatest sense of hope is the Biblical record of God acting in history from the beginning to this very moment. Continued deeper perception of God’s grand theme of redemption recorded in the Bible and the discovery of Jesus’ part in that scheme have been a source of delight which sets my soul singing. Because of all I have seen God doing in the past, I have hope for what He is doing in the present and will be doing in the future.

One of the things that comes through loud and clear when we probe into Hebrews is that Jesus is not an isolated phenomenon. There is a link between the Old and New Testaments. Between the old and the new covenants. Between the old and new demonstrations of redemption. Standing behind all of them is the same God. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New.

And this God has never left Himself without a witness, as the opening verses of the book of Hebrews make clear. *“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers [by] the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son”* (1:1,2a).

Why has God gone to such pains to break through to man? To speak to man? For this simple reason: God and God alone can answer the question man is asking! Who is God? Only God can

say. What is God like? Only God can tell. How do you know Him and come into fellowship with Him? Only God can answer.

This is precisely what God has done. From the very first word of the very first verse of the Old Testament through the very last word of the very last verse of the New, God has been busy striving, in every conceivable fashion, to make His Word and will known to man.

Genesis 1 and 2 describe what God meant this creation to be. As He made it, it was a system in which everything was in perfect relationship to everything else. There was harmony between God and man. Between man and himself. Between man and his brother. Between man and his environment. To use contemporary language, there was theological, psychological, sociological and ecological harmony. That’s what God intended His creation to be.

Genesis 3 through 11 describes how man’s self-will, pride, lust, greed and folly destroyed the harmony which existed between God and himself. As a result, harmony no longer prevails at any level of creation. Havoc reigns. Beginning with Genesis 12 and continuing on through the book of Revelation, the Bible reveals what God has done, is doing and will do to restore the creation cursed through sin.

What we have in the tiny book of Hebrews is a capsule version of the Bible’s long story of God’s re-creative process. Here we have in mini-form everything God has said to make Himself and His will known to the world.

We have taken a long, hard look at the person of Jesus Christ. In a startling series of staggering statements which could not be made of prophets nor any man, nor of angels, the writer of Hebrews nails down the inescapable fact of Christ’s deity, dignity, majesty, eternity, equity, immutability, sovereignty and ultimate glory.

He, in the brief four-verse exhortation which opens chapter 2, focuses on three things. A great

salvation, the benefits of which are in peril because of a great danger which, if not guarded against, will result in believers suffering a great loss.

A Great Salvation

Look first at this great salvation. It is great for three reasons. One, it came through “*the Lord*” (2:3). Ours is a God-revealed salvation. It came directly through the lips and life of Jesus. Every other revelation of God’s intention to do something about the problem of sin came secondhand. Through ancient seers. Or angels. This was direct communication. God Himself speaking through the person of His Son. This was not a piecemeal, partial revelation like that of the prophets. It was, and is, a living, energizing, authentic word spoken by One who was Himself the fulfillment of all the prophecies the prophets had uttered. Truly, our hope is in Jesus, God’s last word!

In Luke 24 we are told that following His resurrection Jesus met a couple of His disciples on the road to Emmaus. There He showed them in the scriptures everything said of Him. Now remember, at that point in time there was no New Testament. By “*scriptures*” (Luke 24:45), He was referring to the Old Testament. Jesus took the Old Testament and showed them everything said about Himself there. Beginning with Genesis on through Malachi.

When Jesus came to earth and spoke God’s last, best word to the world, He opened up and filled full of meaning all the Old Testament symbolisms regarding the Messiah. For the first time these types and symbols made sense. The bits and pieces began to fit together. Ours is a great salvation because it is a direct and authentic word from the Lord Himself

Then also, this is a great salvation because it was confirmed by eyewitnesses. “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard*” (2:3).

We can put our faith in this great salvation, the writer of Hebrews says, because it is supported by

a two-part guarantee. First, the word of eyewitnesses who received the message firsthand and transmitted it to us uncorrupted. Second, the willingness of those same eyewitnesses to die for the very message they were proclaiming. This is a great salvation because it was confirmed by people who themselves were transformed from doubters to martyrs based on what they saw and heard. If they were willing to die for this salvation, we can have confidence to live by it!

Furthermore, this is a great salvation because of what it accomplished. When the Good News was introduced to the world, it produced signs. Wonders. Fantastic miracles. Angels appeared to announce the coming of this Savior. A heavenly host sang at His birth. Throughout His lifetime He performed miraculous deeds. Following His resurrection and ascension into heaven, that same miracle-working power was conferred upon His disciples.

The man at the temple gate arose and walked at the command of Peter and John. Peter, himself, was released from prison while Christians prayed. So similar were the lives of those first-century disciples to the miracle-working life of the Lord Jesus they were given His name. They were called Christians, that is, “little Christs.”

The reason for this remarkable power on their part was that this great salvation included the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon believers as God deemed best. The gifts of the Spirit were distributed “according to His (God’s) own will” (2:4). This is significant. It harmonizes perfectly with 1 Corinthians 12:11 where we are told the Spirit of God divides all spiritual gifts “*to each one individually just as He wills.*” If we are wise we will let God decide what gift or gifts He thinks we need. Our concern should be that our lives show forth the fruit of the Spirit which is love. Every day we ought to take our spiritual pulse to determine the love quotient in our life and witness.

Love for others was a primary characteristic of first-century Christians. It was the changed lives of those people that provided the best of all arguments for this great salvation. It wasn’t what

they said, or even what they did. It was what they *were* that made the difference. Intuitively those early believers knew they had to be real, as well as right!

Recently I came across something from the Christian Herald magazine by Kenneth Wilson:

“Christianity for my money has more to do with being real, in the sense of being non-phoney, than in being right in the sense of having all the answers.”

Yea and amen!

This is a great salvation! It is great because it came from God. It is great because it was confirmed by eyewitnesses who themselves were transformed from doubters to martyrs by what they had seen and heard. It is great because of what it achieves: change in the lives of people. Liberating them from the littleness of a Satan-dominated life to the greatness of a Spirit-led life.

Salvation is the greatest of God’s accomplishments. Greater far than the creation, is the re-creation God is achieving of that which was destroyed by sin. “*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?*” A salvation that gives us a great Savior. Lifts us out of a great misery. Imparts to us a great holiness. Fills us with a great happiness. Is evidenced by a great love. And inspires us with a great hope. “*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation?*” The answer is we shan’t, for we can’t. There is no escape!

A Great Danger

Those first-century recipients of this great salvation were in grave danger because of their failure to appropriate and enjoy the numerous blessings available to them in Christ. This is what the author is getting at when he says, “*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it*” (2:1).

As I pointed out earlier, we do not know as an absolute certainty who wrote the book of Hebrews. I am inclined to believe it was written by a pastor, because what he says in this second

chapter is clearly spoken from a pastor’s heart. The writer of Hebrews is not satisfied with doctrine for doctrine’s sake. He is not content to settle for right believing. He insists there must be a practical application of that believing to daily living. Christians must be real as well as right! This is the burden of every pastor’s heart.

In some versions the second chapter begins with the word “*therefore*.” Someone has said, “Whenever you find a ‘therefore’ in scripture, you must ask yourself what’s the therefore there for?” In this instance, it is an invitation to consider and act upon the logic of everything said in chapter 1.

This man with a pastor’s heart is saying to his flock: Look, friends, if I have made my case for the deity of Jesus, if He is in fact the message and not just the messenger, let me point out there is a moral to it all. There is a “so what?” element to my sermon. We must be on guard against drift instead of decisive Christian living.

Notice, please, the writer classifies himself with those to whom he is writing, “Therefore we.” He is pointing a finger at them, as every pastor is called upon to do, however painful at times, but he also has three fingers and a thumb pointing at himself. “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*” The great danger faces all believers. Layman and preacher alike.

Fritz Kreisler, the great violinist, was being interviewed. One of the questions was, “What would happen if you stopped practicing? How long would it be before others noticed the neglect?” He answered, “If I stopped practicing for a day, I would know the difference. If I stopped for a week, the musical critics would know the difference. If I stopped for a month, the whole musical world would know the difference.”

“*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*” Again I say, we shan’t. We can’t. There is no escape. The law of cause and effect is inexorable. Universal. We cannot neglect this

great salvation without paying a dreadful price. “*Therefore*,” the scripture says, “*we ought to give the more earnest heed;*” (KJV) that is, we ought to listen, really listen, with a very special kind of intensity to everything we have been told, and are being told, about this great salvation.

Our need is not for some new thing, though that seems to be the driving demand today. Our need is to really listen to, heed and act upon, “the old-time religion.” The great danger we face is that through indifference we will allow the blessings, privileges and joys of a great salvation to slip through our fingers.

Now, it rarely happens in a moment. There is hardly ever a specific time or particular moment when we deliberately and belligerently say “no” to the lordship of Christ in our life. It almost never happens that way. Instead, quietly, slowly at first, without our even perceiving it, surely without the world knowing or even caring, we begin to drift. Somewhere along the line it occurs to us how far we are slipping away from God, Christ and the church. But, oddly, it doesn’t bother us. It doesn’t seem to matter. We just don’t care.

A Great Loss

When we reach this point, we are on the verge of experiencing the third thing about which this scripture speaks: A great loss.

Our salvation is a wonderful gift from God. It is a glorious inheritance. But, it carries with it inescapable obligations and responsibilities. We are to grow in our understanding of what it is and how it works, so we can make it work for us and enjoy the fruits of it.

Someone has illustrated it this way. You are given a farm. Fertile, beautiful, productive land. It doesn’t cost a cent. You are given title and deed to it. It’s yours. At that point you can work it and make it productive. Or you can neglect it. If you do the latter, you do not forfeit title to the farm. It still belongs to you. But you will be deprived of the blessings and rewards the farm

might have brought had you properly worked it. Your neglect will make the farm a drag. A millstone. A liability even, because of its lack of productivity. The taxes, upkeep, and overhead will eat you up because there is no income to help defray them.

The same thing is true of our great salvation. It is a gift of God. We have title to it. We have deed to a place prepared in the heavens not made with hands. It’s ours. Now we have a choice. We can work it and make it productive. Or we can neglect it. If we follow the second alternative, it becomes a millstone. A burden. A drag.

Christianity is a liability to a person who doesn’t work it and let it work for him. It makes demands and provides the resources to meet those demands. But you have to work at this gift, and let this gift work for you, if there is to be a balancing out of resources to meet the responsibilities that go along with having it

Even more serious, the problem is not limited to time. It stretches into eternity. Your reward or loss at the harvest time in heaven depends entirely upon what you’ve done with this great salvation here on earth. “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad*” (2 Cor. 5:10).

First Corinthians, chapter 3, explains that at “*the judgment seat of Christ*” every Christian’s work will be tested by fire. If, when subjected to the test of fire, his life’s work is burned up, “*he himself will be saved, but only as through fire*” (1 Cor. 3:13-15).

The writer of the book of Hebrews puts himself in the same company as the people to whom he is writing. He was obviously a Christian. So were they. But these people who had received a great salvation were in peril of great danger: the suffering of a great loss. It’s possible for any of us, at any time, to exert our will and turn aside from the Lordship of Christ. When that happens, we

suffer a double loss. We lose the immediate joy which would have been ours had we continued to walk side by side with Him. We also lose the future rewards of faithfulness in heaven.

The Bible makes it clear that, based on the fidelity and service of each Christian when judged by Jesus at the judgment seat of Christ, rewards will be given (Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 19:11-27). Rank will also be assigned. Jesus said His followers will range from least to greatest (Mt. 5:19) and will differ in nearness to Him (Mk. 10:35-40).

How can there be such differences between Christians, all of whom will be perfect in heaven? Consider newly manufactured light bulbs. Each is perfect. But 60 watt bulbs do not burn as brightly as 100 watt bulbs. Nor do 100 watt bulbs give the same light as those of 1000 watts. Each is perfect, yet not all glow with equal intensity.

The same must be said of Christians in heaven. Each will be perfect in Christ, yet each will differ in rank and reward. This knowledge explains our author’s urgency in asking, *“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”* The fact is, we can’t escape. Lost time and opportunity for Spirit-filled fidelity and service are irretrievable. Lost, too, are the blessings on earth and the rewards in heaven which walking in the Spirit would have produced. Since works of the flesh -- including the harvest of our wayward, willful, egocentric periods of life -- lack permanency much like “wood, hay and straw,” they will burn up. Though we survive personally, our loss will be severe.

The works of the flesh simply have no lasting value. And, on earth, we are either walking in the Spirit or working in the flesh. We are never partly Spirit-led and self-dominated at the same time. A mix of 51 to 49, for instance. Or even 99 to 1. No! It’s a clear case of either/or. Either we are 100 percent in the Spirit, or 100 percent under the flesh. We may switch from one to the other often and quickly, but we are never under the control of both simultaneously.

The graphic (see below) illustrates one saved-sinner’s walk with Christ. My objective in using the graphic is to make it painfully clear that what each of us must reckon with is the total loss of everything produced in the flesh. The impermanency of what our text calls “*wood, hay and straw*” is depicted by a dotted line. These include achievements won through what Watchman Nee calls “the latent power of the soul.” They may have temporal value. One can make a pretty good living dealing in “*wood, hay and straw*.” But the writer of Hebrews identifies them as “*dead works*” (Heb. 6:1; 9:14). In terms of making a life, they have no eternal value, in contrast to “*gold, silver and precious stones*,” shown as a solid line. He is speaking metaphorically, of course, but he makes his point.