

**“OUR HOPE: JESUS SETS US FREE”**

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Heb. 3:1-6

*Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. <sup>2</sup>He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all his house. <sup>3</sup>For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. <sup>4</sup>For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. <sup>5</sup>Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; <sup>6</sup>but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.*

The writer of Hebrews was a literary genius. He possessed a remarkable way with words. This becomes obvious when we tackle chapter three. In the short span of a single sentence, he tells his readers who they are and who Jesus is: “*Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.*”(3:1).

The phrase “*holy brethren*” does not refer to their daily performance. In terms of actions and attitudes those first-century saved-sinners, like ourselves, were far from being holy in the traditional sense. Rather, it describes a relationship. A very special kind of relationship existing between themselves and the Heavenly Father.

The word translated “*holy*” literally means “*set apart to God in a unique way.*” The fact they shared in “*a heavenly calling*” indicates this set-apartness was not something they maneuvered or managed on their own. It was something God had conferred upon them. The Lord Himself had made them members of His family. They had received a call to God -- from God. Their invitation to heaven was from heaven.

### Good News for Saved-sinners

When we remember this invitation is both timeless and universal, including all people in all ages and areas who come to God through Christ, we have to realize there is something very positive and personal in this for Christians today. We, too, share a heavenly calling. We, too, have been set apart by God to God in a unique way. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to walk upon the earth with a special kind of dignity and humility. The intimate relationship existing between ourselves and the Lord is something He has initiated. “*You did not choose Me,*” said Jesus. “*I chose you*” (John 15:16). God has made a great investment in us. To take that fact lightly is to misunderstand the full measure of His mercy, love and grace.

Having told these Christians (and us) who they (and we) are, the author adds still another dimension to their awareness of who Jesus is. He is “*apostle and high priest*” (3:1). There is such a tremendous amount of truth in those few words, we shall only touch the surface. They tell us Jesus was, at one and the same time, God’s way to man (apostle) and man’s way to God (high priest).

“*Apostle*” literally means “*one who is sent*.” A representative. An Emissary. An Ambassador invested with the right and the authority to speak for the one who has sent him. When the writer of Hebrews refers to Jesus as apostle, he is saying there is nothing we need to know about God and the will of God beyond what Jesus has said. There is no more evidence of God’s love and forgiving grace than Jesus has revealed. The Good News God wants the world to hear is heard loud and clear in the person of Christ. He is the perfect emissary. The perfect ambassador. The apostle! God’s way to man.

Jesus is also “*high priest*.” That is to say, He is man’s way to God. The Latin word for “*priest*” is “*pontifex*.” It means “bridge builder.” A priest is one who builds a bridge between God and man. As William Barclay notes, to do that successfully, a priest must know two things: he must know man; he must also know God. “He must be able to speak to God for men, and to speak to men for God.”<sup>1</sup>

Here we begin to see the deeper significance of everything said in Hebrews chapter one and two. Barclay continues, “Jesus is the perfect high priest because He is perfectly God and perfectly man. He can represent God to man. At the same time, He can represent man to God.” God finds Himself in this Person and is with man. Man finds himself in this Person and is with God. Jesus is the only person through whom God comes to man (*apostle*) and man makes his way to God (*high priest*). That’s awesome!

What has all this to do with Christ’s superiority over Moses (3:3)? Before getting into that, notice how the writer of the book of Hebrews is not only a skilled debater, he is a sensitive one. Before dropping his bomb, he takes time to build a bomb shelter! He was not unaware of the high place Moses held in the thoughts and affections of the Hebrew people. So, before presenting his argument for Christ’s superiority to Moses, he takes time to point out Christ’s similarity to Moses. Jesus “*was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as, that is, (like) Moses also was (faithful) in all His house*” (3:12).

In my various educational experiences, I’ve been privileged to sit under two or three really great teachers. These were people who were not only aware of their intellectual superiority, their ability to nail me to the wall with logic and knowledge, they were also sensitive to my interior integrity, my right to be what I was and believe as I did. They did not overwhelm me with their obvious superior knowledge. Instead, these great teachers met me where I was, respected my convictions, and helped me to expand my understanding. Whether or not I ultimately agreed with them, the end product was a better reason for “*the hope that is in me*” (1 Peter 3:15).

They could do this because they were intellectually and emotionally mature. The reason most of us are so dogmatic and belligerent about our beliefs, so unwilling to talk about differing and sometimes disturbing ideas, is because we lack intellectual and emotional maturity. We do not have the knowledge we ought to have. We know it. This makes us feel insecure. We cover our insecurity with a bombast of dogmatism. Like the preacher who had his sermon notes marked in

red, “Argument weak at this point. Pound the pulpit and yell.”

The writer of Hebrews had no such hang-up. He had done his homework. He could confidently meet his readers where they were. He acknowledged the greatness of Moses before attempting to show Jesus to be greater still. This could be done with integrity. Moses was a great man. He had poured out his very life in service to Israel. He had made every sacrifice for his nation. On one occasion, for the sake of his people, Moses was willing to be blotted out of the Book of God forever (Exodus 32:32).

Like all public figures, however, he had his critics. In the twelfth chapter of Numbers we’re told of the jealousy of Miriam and Aaron. Jehovah came to these two jealous critics. He told them He would speak to the children of Israel through prophets, but it would only be through dreams and visions. However, when He spoke to Moses, it would be, as the Old Testament puts it, “*mouth to mouth*” (Numbers 12:8). Moses alone would behold the form of God. The reason for this special treatment is that Moses alone was “*faithful in [entrusted with] all My household*” (Numbers 12:7).

The word “*household*” means Israel, the household of God. We speak of the house of David. Or the house of Rothschild. Or the house of Hanover. By these phrases we mean the family of David. The family of Rothschild. The family of Hanover. As far as the Old Testament era was concerned, Israel was the family, or “house,” of God. She was His unique and special possession. In that “house,” Moses was a faithful apostle and high priest.

Our author has not forgotten about Aaron. He will get around to him later. First, as F. F. Bruce suggests, the author wants us to see Moses as one of the few Old Testament characters who blended these two roles of apostle and high priest.

That Moses was apostle, speaking to the people for God, goes without saying. It is equally true, however, that Moses was priest. As such, he spoke to God for the people. As Bruce points out,

“After the idolatrous festival in honor of the golden calf in which Aaron himself was implicated, it was Moses whose prevailing plea procured pardon for his guilty people.”<sup>2</sup> Later still, when the spies brought back an evil report which aroused rebellion in the camp of Israel and caused the people to be inclined to return to Egypt, it was the prayer of Moses that led God to extend pardon.

Moses was his people’s most effective intercessor with God. This point is often overlooked, partly because Moses did so many things, and partly because the priestly function of the Old Testament is generally associated with Aaron. But before the appointment of Aaron, Moses fulfilled those duties. It was Moses who appointed Aaron, thus conferring upon his brother many of the functions which had previously been his.

While the writer of Hebrews will later talk about Aaron and show how Jesus put meat on Aaron’s bones, at this point he compares Jesus to Moses, giving them both the title of high priest. Thus, he traces the origin of the Old Testament priesthood back to its true fountainhead: Moses.

Showing the greatness and the faithfulness of Moses in these two functions, he now moves on to nail down his point about Jesus’ superiority to Moses. He does so in a most interesting way.

*“For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are . . .”* (3:3-6).

As we have already seen, the word “house” refers to the family of God. In the New Testament, the “house” is the church, made up, as it is, of saved Jews and saved Gentiles. Using this metaphor, the writer of Hebrews shows that, great as Moses was, he was inferior to Jesus for two reasons. First of all, Moses was a member of the house. He was one whom God included in His family. Jesus was the maker of the house. The founder of the family. The progenitor from whom

all family members derive their very existence.

In Hebrews 1:2, our author revealed Jesus to be the architect of creation. In Hebrews 3:4 he declares the builder of all things is God. His point? You cannot distinguish between Father and Son in the creative enterprise! As progenitor from whom all members derive their very existence, Jesus is obviously superior to them. As the builder of a building is greater than the building he builds, however beautiful it may be, Jesus, the builder, is greater than Moses, who is a part of the building!

Second, the superiority of Jesus is linked to the fact Moses was servant, while Jesus is Son. “*Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant . . . but Christ was faithful over God’s house as a Son*” (3:5,6). Moses served in the household (3:5); Christ serves over the household as the Son whom the Father hath made “*heir of all things*” (1:2). Moses was faithful as servant; Jesus is faithful as Son. Thus, the second reason for His superiority.

About now you may be asking, “So what? What does all this business about Christ’s superiority to Moses have to do with good news for saved-sinners? Well, what was obvious to those Jewish Christians is less clear to us. We have to do some real “skull work” to get the point they grasped immediately.

As we’ve seen, Moses held an utterly unique place in the thoughts and affections of the Hebrew people. It was he with whom God spoke face to face. It was he through whom God gave Israel the law. Therefore, to the Jew, the law and Moses were identical. They were one and the same. When our writer says Jesus is greater than Moses, those first-century folk immediately knew he was saying Jesus is greater than the law!

What’s the point of that? Just this: the temptation confronting those early Hebrew Christians was to return to the legalism of the law. To believe in Jesus, but to be on the safe side, to practice a religion of Jesus plus certain practices and provisions of the law. They who had begun in faith

were now tempted to continue in the flesh. Having been saved by grace, they were now hoping to be kept by works.

Does that ring a bell with you? Have you ever had the impulse to pick up a few “brownie points” by a bit of human effort on God’s behalf? Have you ever harbored the thought that in this way you might atone for some of your failings as a sinner-saint? This is absolute folly, the writer of Hebrews says. Don’t put yourself under the law again. Jesus is greater than the law. He is greater than Moses. His grace is greater than your sin. To turn from Jesus to legalism is to leave the best for second-best.

Furthermore, it accomplishes absolutely nothing. Everything needed by sinners (both saved and unsaved!) was provided when Jesus tasted death for every man. Don’t turn back the clock, our author pleads. Turn to Jesus. Jesus sets you free. Don’t put yourself back in bondage again. Instead, grow, Christian, grow. Grow up in grace. Claim the freedom which is yours in Christ. Use it. Revel in it. Go forward with it. Take the risk of it. For, only through a full and responsible exercise of your freedom in Christ, will you enjoy abundant life here on earth and have the hope of a Christian’s reward in heaven.

I paraphrase the last half of verse 6: “*We, that is, the church, are His house, if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope*” (3:6). On the surface this seems to suggest someone who has been saved can be lost again unless he perseveres to the bitter end. The perseverance of the saints is taught in this text, but not for the purpose of salvation! The reason for a Christian’s persevering is that he might have a sense of assurance. Confidence. Joy. Hope. Hebrews 3:6 does not say, “*if we hold fast our salvation*,” but “*if we hold fast our confidence*.” It was not a question of losing their salvation, but of losing their assurance. And, as a by-product, their joy in time, and their hope of reward in eternity.

### **Perseverance as Christians**

That’s a peril you and I also need to be on guard against. If, by a deliberate act of the will, we

receive the Lord Jesus as our Savior, our eternal salvation is secure. We need not be concerned about that anymore. But, it's one thing to be received into heaven with joyful commendation; it's another to get into heaven by the skin of your teeth. So, following conversion, we persevere as Christians, not to stay saved, but because we are saved. We engage in works of righteousness, not to round out a salvation Jesus didn't quite finish on the cross, but to earn spiritual rewards so we'll have an appropriate means of saying thank you to Jesus when we meet Him face to face.

Perhaps you are wondering, “How can I be sure I am laying up treasures in heaven? How can I be sure I'm earning a reasonable spiritual reward so I need not fear the grim prospect of meeting Jesus with empty hands?”

The answer comes from Jesus Himself. He is recorded as saying that anyone who meets a human need with something so insignificant as a cup of cold water will not lose his reward (Matthew 10:42). On another occasion, recorded in Matthew 25:35-40, when Jesus was describing the inheritance awaiting the faithful, He said the glory of God's Kingdom will go to those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide shelter to the homeless, clothing to the naked, comfort to the sick, and friendship to the lonely. If you do these gentle acts of kindness to even the least of people, He said, “*you (do) them to Me*” (Matthew 25:40).

There may be some question as to the enduring value of a large deed done in a loud way. There is positively no question about the enduring value of a small deed done in a loving way. It will merit reward. It will result in spiritual treasure which can be turned into a love offering to Jesus. I suppose all of us would love to be in a position to write a thousand dollar check to missions. But in the last analysis, it may be some tiny otherwise overlooked act of thoughtfulness and courtesy which has the greater value.

Writer A. John Nastari relates a heartrending story reported in the press.<sup>3</sup> A Chicago father called a newspaper, told a reporter he was going to commit suicide, and then hung up. The reporter quickly tried to trace the call. By the time the police arrived at the particular telephone booth in

the tavern from which the man had made the call, he was dead with a bullet through his head.

His name was James Lee. In one of Lee’s pockets they found a child’s crayoned drawing, much folded and worn. On this drawing, James Lee had written, *Please leave this in my coat pocket. I want to have it buried with me.* The drawing was signed in a childish print, “Shirley,” his six-year-old daughter who had perished in a fire just five months before.

The grief-stricken father had gone up and down the streets of Chicago literally begging total strangers to attend his daughter’s funeral service. There was no one left in the family. Shirley’s mother had died when the child was only two. But, when the service was held, not a soul showed up. People were too busy. Too involved. Or just didn’t care.

Before he shot himself, James Lee told the newspaper man he was alone, had sold everything he owned, and wanted the proceeds given to the church where Shirley had gone to Sunday School, as a memorial to her. “Maybe in ten or twenty years,” he wrote, “someone will see that little memorial plaque, wonder who Shirley Ellen Lee was, and say, ‘Someone must have loved her very, very much.’”

Of course, there is something in a story like that which pushes our sensitivity button. All of us are moved to compassion. We readily say, “If I had only known, I would have shown that man love and friendship.” But, my friend Nastari points out, “The James Lees are all around us. Open your eyes. Unplug your ears. Look and listen if you dare. They may not pick up a phone and call you. They may not go up and down Main Street with a sandwich board sign saying, LOOK! I NEED HELP! I’M ALONE. WON’T SOMEBODY LOVE ME? But the signs are there just the same.”

When you look into a man’s face, see a need there and respond, you not only show love to that man, you show love to God. For, “*to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me*” (Mt. 25:40). And wonder of wonders, when you give,

you receive. You receive a new sense of confidence. A new sense of joy. A new sense of hope. You have assurance of the rewards of faithfulness. So, persevere. Not to keep your salvation, as if, saved by grace, you are now kept by works. No! Persevere to enjoy the rewards of faithfulness.

### **Right Use of Freedom**

Likewise, our reaping is related to our sowing. “*For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*” (Gal. 6:7). The purpose of sowing is reaping. We are free to choose what we sow, where and how we sow it. But the harvest we reap is governed by the seeds we sow. If you sow criticism, you are not free to reap friendships of an enduring nature. If you sow dishonesty, you are not free to reap trust. On the other hand, sow kindness, reap kindness. Sow gentleness, reap gentleness. Sow compassion, reap compassion. Sow loyalty, reap loyalty. Sow love, reap love. Sow the deeds of righteousness, reap the crown of righteousness!

So go do your gentle, anonymous deeds in Jesus’ name. Not to be saved, but because you are saved. Not to add something to complete Christ’s work on the cross. What Jesus did there was sufficient. He paid it all. He set you free from the necessity of any kind of twentieth century counterpart to the ancient legalism of the law. Instead, because Jesus has been faithful, be faithful yourself. Use your freedom in Christ in such a way as to gain a golden crown. And remember -- Given in the right way, a cup of cold water forms the pure gold from which heaven’s crowns are made!

### **Notes**

1. Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews. p. 25.
2. F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 56.
3. Nastari, Questions Christ Asked! p. 59.