

Hebrews 3:1; 10:9; 13:22

The Value of The Epistle to the Hebrews

Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus – 3:1

At first glance one may be tempted to wonder how this epistle found its way into the New Testament. After all there is no apostolic salutation such as what we find in all the other epistles. Indeed the author of this epistle doesn't identify himself at all and one of the marks of canonicity is that a gospel or an epistle have the mark of apostolic origin.

On top of this consideration is also the fact that the epistle is addressed to Hebrews – or Jewish believers. The issues that are dealt with pertain to matters that would have been of particular interest to the Jews – especially the Jews of that time period. The temple was still standing, the Levitical Priesthood was still functioning and there were many among the Jewish believers that were zealous for the law, in particular, the ceremonial law. How do you convey to such zealots that the Levitical order of worship was now obsolete? You had better be able to demonstrate with clarity and fullness that the types and shadows of the old order were now fulfilled in Christ.

What interest, then, would such an epistle have to us? We're not Hebrews – the temple no longer is standing and hasn't been in existence for thousands of years. We have never been zealous for a sacrificing Priesthood or for any other aspect of the Old Testament economy so how does this epistle pertain to us?

The truth is, of course, that the doctrinal and practical aspects of this epistle are of great value to the child of God and follower of Christ. Writing on the authority of this epistle, William Gouge notes the following evidences that make clear the divine authority of this epistle:

The matter of it, which is beyond the reach of human invention. The manner of unfolding those mysteries, which is with such majesty and gravity as argues a divine spirit. The congruity of it with other canonical scriptures. The direct refutation of pernicious heresies, which, since the writing of this epistle, have been forged, so as it must needs be inspired by a foreknowing Spirit. It's as if the Holy Spirit anticipated the rise of the church of Rome and set forth in advance the doctrines that would refute Romanism – most notably the doctrine of the sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ which cuts at the root of the doctrine of the Catholic mass.

The occasion which gave rise to the writing of this epistle makes it very practical in our day. These Jewish believers were under great pressure. Their confession of Christ had cost them much. We're told in Acts 8:1 that *at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria.*

It's interesting that in James' epistle which was addressed also to the Jews he refers to them as *the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.* And Peter, also writing to Jews

refers to them as the *strangers* or *sojourners scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia*.

You see the emphasis on the Jewish believers being scattered? Just about every time they're referred to they're referred to as being scattered. They came to learn what we still should mark as true in our day which is that this world is no friend to grace or to Christ. It never has been nor should we expect it to be. And we need to be warned and exhorted to persevere in a world that is hostile to grace and hostile to Christ. William Gouge notes two things that occasioned this epistle – *the immortal and insatiable malice of the unbelieving Jews against all that professed the name of Christ and their inbred superstition about the Mosaical rites*.

There is still found in our day what Gouge calls an inbred superstition about the law of God – what it is and how it applies. Listen to what John Brown says in the beginning of his commentary – a commentary I should add that was first published in 1862. See if there's anything in this remark that reminds you of Christianity in our day. He writes:

The observation, though commonplace, is true and important, that principles, in themselves not only innocent but laudable, may, from their being excessive in degree or ill-timed in their display, be, to a great extent, mischievous in their consequences.

Couldn't such a statement correspond to what Gouge, the Puritan of the late 1600's called *inbred superstition* regarding the law? It seems that inbred superstition has to be fought against constantly. Arguably it was this inbred superstition that was leading the Galatians away from Christ and away from the gospel. And so we find in this epistle to the Hebrews a wholesome antidote to the pressures of the world and the mistaken use of the law of God – both ceremonial and moral. These aspects of this epistle certainly make it a useful and needed epistle in our day.

Now let me at the outset of our study of this epistle say a word about the authorship of Hebrews. You'll notice in the Authorized Version of the Bible that the title is called the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews. These titles are not a part of the inspired text but they do reveal an historical tradition. The ancient church regarded Paul as the author. There are, to be sure, arguments against Paul being the author. Luther and Calvin did not regard Paul as the author. And the argument was set forth by them and has been set forth by others that the style of the original Greek does not resemble Paul's style in his epistles.

I am not knowledgeable enough in my study of Greek to debate on the basis of the style of the Greek. I do find it interesting, however, that John Brown, who was an eminent Greek scholar points out that often times the purpose and argument of an epistle often times determine the style that's used. On a purely stylistic basis who would think that the author of John's gospel could also be the author of the book of Revelation? There are great differences of style between those two books and each book serves an altogether different purpose.

One of the strongest arguments in my mind to suggest that Paul is the author of this epistle is a statement made by Peter near the end of his 2nd epistle. We know, of course,

that Peter was the apostle to the Jews and that his 1st epistle was addressed to the Jews and his 2nd epistle is generally believed to be addressed to the same people as his first epistle. And in 2Peter 3:15 Peter writes that we're to *account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you*. Here, then, is a very specific reference to Paul writing to the Jews. If Hebrews is not that epistle, we might ask, where is that epistle?

One of the strongest arguments against Pauline authorship of this epistle is found in Heb 2:3 *How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him*. This verse seems to suggest that the author of the epistle, whoever he was, was in the next generation of Christians – the word being confirmed to them by those who first heard the Lord.

I don't find this argument as compelling as the reference in 2Peter because Paul tells us in his epistle to Galatians that he went to Jerusalem after 14 years and shared with the apostles there the gospel which he had received from Christ and he shares how that gospel was confirmed to him and he and Barnabbas were given the right hand of fellowship by them. There are other arguments as well to suggest that Paul is the author of this epistle, most notably the reference to Timothy that is made near the end of this epistle.

It's worth noting also that there are plain indications within this epistle that make it very clear that the recipients of this epistle knew who it was that was writing to them. So in Heb 13:18 we have this request: *Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly*.

So when you hear me refer to Paul as the author of this epistle along the way keep in mind that there are good reasons for holding that Paul is indeed the author. But what I'd like to do now is to come back to the subject of the value of this epistle. As we begin the study of this book I think it's appropriate for me to simply exhort you that:

We Must Appreciate The Value of This Book

And in the moments that remain I want to demonstrate to you a few ways in which the value of this book is seen. Consider first of all that the value of Hebrews is seen:

I. By How It Points Us to Christ

And if ever there was an epistle that pointed to Christ it would be this epistle to the Hebrews. From the very beginning Paul rivets the attention of his readers to Christ. He doesn't bother with an opening salutation but instead directs his readers immediately to Christ as God's last and final word to His people. *God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son*.

The subject is Christ, the Son of God and immediately we're taken up with His deity as well as His prophetic office. In the very next verse we're face to face His essential glory –

His power over the world, His priestly ministry and His office as our King. That's really packing a lot into a single verse isn't it? But look at v. 3 – *Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

Also implied in this verse is His humanity, for it's the work of the God-man to purge sins. And so we see in this same verse His work – the work of atonement – purging our sins. And in the chapters that follow the theme will be the immeasurable superiority of Christ over all that has gone before. One by one the various objects in which the Jews boasted are taken up, and in the presence of the superlative glory of the Son of God they pale into utter insignificance. We are shown First, His superiority over the prophets (1:1-3). Second, His superiority over angels (1:4-2:18). Third, His superiority over Moses (3:1-19). Fourth, His superiority over Joshua (4:1-13). Fifth, His superiority over Aaron (5:1-7:18). Sixth, His superiority over the whole ritual of Judaism, including the Levitical priesthood which is developed by showing the surpassing excellency of the new covenant over the old. Seventh, His superiority over each and all of the Old Testament saints.

It's good to keep in mind at all times the setting or the occasion of this epistle. Remember the pressure that the believing Jews were suffering. A very practical point of counseling or ministry arises from these chapters when you consider their content and when you consider the people being addressed. What do believers in Christ need when the pressures of life seem overwhelming? What do you say to them? How do you minister to them? How can you possibly comfort and encourage them to not lose hope. We can certainly conclude by the method being utilized in this epistle that the greatest need of Christians under pressure is to behold Christ in His magnificent glory.

What do these opening chapters amount to but Paul giving substance to the exhortation of John the Baptist – *Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.* Behold Him in His Deity, Behold Him in His humanity, Behold Him in all His mediatorial offices in His estate of exaltation. Behold the success of His atoning death, Behold Him risen and exalted and ruling over all!

Here is where the sorely afflicted child of God finds grace and patience and faith to endure. Here, in the act of beholding the risen and conquering Son, do we renew our faith and strengthen our hope and gain the confidence not merely to survive but to prevail triumphantly just as our Savior prevailed triumphantly.

Paul's design, then, is to rivet the spiritual eyes of the afflicted people of God upon Christ and to make sure that they don't take their eyes off Christ. And if the Holy Spirit will impress upon your hearts the truth and reality of what these opening chapters tell us of Christ, then you'll find yourself bowing before Him and you'll find your heart being stirred and you'll be enabled to say to yourself that all will be well – how can it not be when my Savior is seated at the right hand of God?

You begin, I hope, to see the tremendous value to this epistle to the Hebrews and you begin to see why God has seen fit to inspire and preserve this epistle. There is a sense in which the veil is drawn back in this epistle and with the Holy Spirit's help that glass through which we see darkly is made lighter and our spiritual vision of the glory of Christ becomes clearer. May our vision indeed be filled with Christ as we make our way through this epistle.

Consider with me next that the value of this epistle is seen

II. By How it Brings Us Into a New Dispensation

Some have suggested that the key verse to Hebrews is found in Heb 10:9 *Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.*

It's important to understand this verse within the general context of the entire word of God. Early dispensationalists went so far as to say that there are two different gospels in the Bible. There's the gospel of salvation through obedience to the law and there's the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The original Schofield notes flat out said as much – although later editions of the Schofield Reference Bible saw fit to strike the statement of C.I. Schofield.

The thing we have to understand about the statements in Hebrews the speak of taking away the first in order to establish the second is that we're dealing with different administrations of the covenant of redemption. And the differences between these administrations are so vast that each administration is spoken of as a covenant. The contrast between these administrations is expressed in a number of verses by the word *better*.

And so we read in 1:4 of Christ being *better* than angels; we read in 7:19 of a *better* hope. In 7:22 of a *better* testament or covenant; in 8:6 of *better* promises; in 9:23 of *better* sacrifices; 10:34 of *better* substance; 11:16 of a *better* country; 11:34 a *better* resurrection.

Pink notes also in this connection the mention of 7 things that are termed *great* – such as *great* salvation (2:3); our *great* high priest (4:14); the *great* tabernacle (9:11); the *great* fight of afflictions (10:32); the *great* recompense (10:35); the *great* cloud of witnesses (12:1); and the *great* shepherd of the sheep (13:20).

Paul also makes mention throughout this epistle, in contrast from what the believing Hebrews were called upon to give up, they were reminded of what they had gained. Notice should be given in this epistle to the use of the phrase *we have*. We have a great high priest (4:14); which hope we have as an anchor of the soul (6:19); We have a better and enduring substance (10:34); and we have an altar (13:10).

So much of the religion of the Old Testament was governed by things that were seen. They saw the temple – they saw the priests – they saw the sacrifices. Now they were being called upon to place a much stronger emphasis on the things that had to be affirmed by faith. I believe a key verse in this epistle can be found in 10:37,38 *For yet a little while,*

and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.

It's interesting to note that this verse is a quote from Hab. 2:3,4 and it also occurs in Rom. 1:17 and in Galatians 3:11. I have heard it suggested that the use of this text in Romans places emphasis on *the just*. It is the justified ones that shall by faith. In Galatians the emphasis is on faith in contrast to works. And in this verse in Hebrews the emphasis is on *now*. Now, the just shall live by faith.

What value, then, does this particular aspect of Hebrews have for us? We're not having to be weaned from Old Testament ritual. We never have acknowledged a central temple for Christianity (in contrast to Romanism) nor have we ever engaged in the practice of sacrificing animals. What is the value, then, of Hebrews for us?

The value is certainly seen in the teaching of the kind of dispensation we live in. We have all, in a sense, become priests to our God and we need not approach God through a priest – other than our great high priest. And we approach Him on the grounds of a completed sacrifice. This is emphasized in Hebrews in such statements as 9:13,14 *For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*

We gain the benefit, then, of knowing our privileges and knowing what we possess and knowing not only the promises but the sure ground upon which the promises of salvation are given. We also come to understand and appreciate the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. This is an area that has plagued and continues to plague many Christians today – so that the value of the Old Testament becomes lost upon many Christians because they are not taught to look at the elements of the Old Testament economy that point us to Christ and demonstrate to us that Christ is the complete and singular plan of the ages. Or other Christians revert to the Old Testament in a way they should not because they fail to understand or appreciate how Christ is the substance that fulfills the shadows of the Old Testament economy.

This epistle to the Hebrews, then, is a very valuable book in our New Testament. Its value is seen in how it points us to Christ – its value is seen by how it brings us into a new dispensation. Would you consider finally that its value is seen:

III. By How It Exhorts Us to Stedfastness

Another key phrase that is found in this epistle is the phrase *let us*.

- Heb 4:1 *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left [us] of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.*
- Heb 4:11 *Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.*

- Heb 4:16 *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*
- Heb 6:1 *Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,*
- Heb 10:23 *Let us hold fast the profession of [our] faith without wavering; (for he [is] faithful that promised;)*
- Heb 10:24 *And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:*
- Heb 12:1 *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset [us], and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,*
- Heb 12:28 *Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:*

This is certainly not an epistle that simply sets important truths before us without calling us to action. In fact I think this epistle demonstrates to us very forcefully the relationship between theology and practice. This epistle, like Paul's epistle to the Romans is very rich in theological truth – rich in the doctrine of Christ – rich in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement – rich in the doctrine of Christ's priestly ministry.

But Paul himself refers to this epistle not as a theological treatise. In Heb 13:22 he writes *And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words.* Do you see how Paul himself calls this letter a word of exhortation? We find, then, in this epistle the call to rise to the challenges that we face.

In the midst of the hostilities of a sinful world that despises and rejects Christ we are called upon to be steadfast and to hold to Christ without wavering. In a world filled with misunderstanding and abuses that spring from legalism or antinomianism we are called upon to come boldly to the throne of grace where we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in every need. And in a world of ever shifting styles and fads even in the realm of worship we are called upon to have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

My hope, then, as we launch into the study of this epistle, is that you will indeed behold Christ in His glory. In a sense beholding Christ in His glory will answer every challenge and equip us for every burden we bear. I hope as well that you'll understand and appreciate the greatness of your spiritual privileges in this day in which we live and that you will, as a result of beholding Christ and as a result of your increased understanding you'll heed the call to lay aside every weight and run the race with patience and go on to perfection.