

## **JESUS – SO MUCH BETTER!**

### **Hebrews (selected verses)**

More than ever we live in an age of pluralism. In old county boy idiom, pluralism simply means there's more than one way to skin a cat. And if there ever was an area of our culture where pluralism reigns it is in the area of faith. Point of evidence #1 is an interview with singer and songwriter Sheryl Crow in the New York Post. Sheryl said, "I believe in God. I believe in Jesus and Buddha and Mohammed and all those that were enlightened. I wouldn't say necessarily that I'm a strict Christian. I'm not sure I believe in heaven." That's a good example of pluralism. Believe whatever you want to believe for all roads lead to Rome.

Dr. Tim Keller, who is a Presbyterian pastor in New York City, gave another illustration. He tells about a debate that he had with a Muslim scholar before a university audience. Dr. Keller said that that he and his counterpart did agree on one thing, and that was the Christian faith and Islam were diametrically opposed. Both could in no way be correct. So, Dr. Keller said that he had quite a surprise when after the debate they opened up a time for questions from the audience. The first question came from a young man who said, "It seems obvious that both of you men are saying the same thing. Both you men really believe the same thing." Dr. Keller said that both he and the Islamic scholar responded by reiterating again, there's nothing the same at all about our faiths. Jesus can't be the Son of God as Christianity teaches and just another human teacher at the same time, as Islam teaches. No way. But the student kept insisting that the two men believed the same thing.

So Dr Keller asked, what's going on with this student? Why can't he accept the obvious facts of the chasm between Christianity and Islam? And Dr. Keller said it's because he was an unconscious victim of a religious ideology that pervades the western world. And that ideology is pluralism.

Let me share just one more example that should alarm everyone who values their Christian heritage and the Christian heritage of America. For the first time in history earlier this month, the Dalai Lama prayed the opening prayer at a session of the U.S. Senate. And here is what he prayed, if you call it a prayer: “With our thoughts we make our world. Our mind is central and precedes our deeds. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like a shadow that never leaves.” Beloved, pluralism has reached the pinnacle in America, in the chamber of the highest governing body in the land, and a god of any stripe will do.

Well, the first century had a problem with pluralism, too. Certainly there were many Roman and Greek gods that the Gentiles worshipped. But the Jews had another type of struggle. But their struggle was primarily confined to just two options, Judaism or the new faith that had come bursting on the scene which many people called The Way. Followers of The Way were those Jews and Gentiles who had embraced Jesus of Nazareth as the long awaited Jews Messiah that had been prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures for hundreds of years.

And some of the Jewish followers of The Way were struggling. Some were genuinely saved, yet in their hearts the traditions of their old faith were still precious. And they wistfully thought about the good old days of sacrifices, feasts, and other rituals that made them feel so secure. Others were still on the fringes of the Christian faith. They were involved in the Christian community and they knew the claims of Christ on their lives, but they had not yet made a total commitment to Jesus. They were at the door of salvation but had not yet stepped inside wondering, should I go on in or turn back? It is to both of these groups of Jews that God sent a message not long after Jesus ascended back into Heaven. We call it the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews is truly a fascinating book. It reveals Jesus and His superiority over the OT law perhaps more clearly than any other NT

book, and it also magnifies the necessity and the power of faith. And Hebrews also gives the reader some strong warnings that you read nowhere else. It is a book shrouded in mystery because we do not know who wrote it – we can only speculate. Many say it was probably Paul. Some say it was more likely Apollos. One old scholar suggested Barnabas and another Aquila. But nobody really knows who wrote Hebrews. But when you read through Hebrews you can see four great themes that the author addresses, and they are just as relevant for both Jew and Gentile in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they were in the first. So today we are going to take a broad overview of these wonderful themes, and next week we will plunge in and begin to look at each one. So, please take your Bibles and turn to Hebrews 1: 1-4.

The first great theme of Hebrews stands head and shoulders above all the rest and addresses the struggle of so many of the Jewish converts to Christianity. And that theme is **the supremacy of Jesus**. Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God and the only way to God, and replaced the sacrificial system as the only way to God. And we see this theme plainly stated in vs. 1-4. vs. 1 tells that God has spoken to men ages in past at various times and in various ways. And He certainly has. He spoke to all men through Creation, and He still speaks to men through Creation. He spoke to men through the Flood, He spoke to Moses through the burning bush and He spoke audibly to the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai, along with thunder and lightning and trumpet blasts and smoke. He spoke to Balaam through a donkey, he spoke to audibly to young Samuel, and He spoke audibly to Elijah through a still, small voice. God spoke to Joshua with His own mighty presence as the Commander of the Lord's army. God spoke to Job out of a whirlwind, He spoke to Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel in visions, and He spoke to Nebuchadnezzar through dreams. God spoke to Naaman through a servant girl and He spoke to Belshazzar through

the handwriting on the wall. God spoke to Jonah through a great fish.

Friends, think of all these manifestations of God. No one can be intellectually honest and say that there is no way that we can know for certain there is a God. For God has clearly revealed Himself time and time again throughout history. But let me tell you something about all of these manifestations of God. Every one of them was incomplete. Not a single one told mankind all that he needed to know about God. They revealed that He was Creator, and that He was Lord over all of His creation. They revealed that He was Judge over all His creation. But they did not reveal that He was a personal God of compassion and love. And there was no way that this could ever be revealed unless God spoke one more time to the human race in a completely new way, a way that was inconceivable to the human mind. And that was through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Look what v. 3 says about Jesus. Now look at v. 4. Beloved, when you look at Jesus you get the full picture of what God is like, for in Jesus you see all the glory of God and every character trait of God. Many people think of angels as being the most God-like creatures ever seen. But not so! The writer tells us that Jesus is so much better than the angels. For Jesus is the express image of God, the perfect replica, having the exact, same nature. And you cannot say this about the angels or any other prophet of any other religion. A few have made the claim, but history has branded every one as a fraud. And this is the primary theme of Hebrews, and we'll explore this in depth next week.

But there is a second theme that naturally follows this primary theme of the supremacy of Jesus. And the second theme is, **the danger of neglecting Jesus**. Look at 2:1-9. In ch. 1:4 we read that Jesus was made so much better than the angels, for He was the express image of God. But in this passage we read that this same Jesus was made a little lower than the angels, crowned

with glory and honor, and given dominion over all things. And then in v. 9 we read that this same Jesus tasted death for everyone, every single soul who has ever lived.

I ask you, friends, what greater act could God the Father and God the Son do to prove their love for you? For the sinless, sovereign Jesus to die and suffer hell in your place? I tell you, there is absolutely nothing more that God Himself could do to show you and me how much He loved us. That's the reason the writer calls salvation in Christ "so great a salvation". Human vocabulary cannot begin to describe the greatness of Jesus' salvation, nor can finite minds conceive of its greatness. And this great salvation is freely offered to every poor, lost sinner in the world. And if you are not saved today, I don't care what you've done. God's great salvation is far greater than all of your sin, I promise. God said in Romans 5:20, "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound". And if you will confess your sins to Jesus, turn from them and beg His forgiveness He will wash you whiter than snow.

But friends, it is no small offense when someone turns their back on such an awesome salvation. To say to God, in effect, "I don't care that You loved me enough to let Your only Son die in my place. I choose to live my life without Jesus' interference, just the way I want to." Friends, that's the way most people live their lives in this world. Here's the way the hymn writer put it: "Lo! The hosts of evil round us, scorn Thy Christ, assail His ways!" That was written in the mid-twentieth century, and times have only gotten worse. The heart cry of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, "Let us eat drink, and be merry, regardless of what the Bible says". And to that God replies, "How can you escape if you neglect so great a salvation? How can you escape the judgment of hell?" And so the second great theme of Hebrews is the danger of neglecting God's great salvation in Jesus.

There is a third great theme that we will explore in Hebrews. Not only **the supremacy of Jesus**, and **the danger of neglecting Jesus**, but also **the danger of not growing in Jesus**. Turn,

please, to 5:12 and 6:3. The writer says in these verses that it is time for these baby Christians to grow up! They should be teachers by now, but they are still sucking on baby bottles. And then he exhorts them in 6:1&2 to go on to maturity in their faith. That it is time to move on from the basic teachings of salvation and baptism, of laying on of hands, and the resurrection and the final judgment. It's time to start addressing things like holy living, loving your neighbor, and spiritual warfare.

Now, beloved, please hear God's Word this morning! Not to grow in your faith is a serious matter to God! Here's how Warren Wiersbe put it: "In the Christian life, if you do not go forward, you go backward; there is no permanent standing still". And Dr. Wiersbe is spot on. That's why Paul writes in Eph. 4:14-15, "that we should no longer be children, tossed about with every wind of doctrine.....but, speaking the truth in love, (we) may **grow up** in all things in Him Who is the head – Christ". That's the reason that Peter wrote, "Grow in grace.....of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

I want you to see the solemn consequences that may happen if you do not grow in your faith. Look down at 6: 7-8. These verses are a picture of the Christian life. V. 7 speaks of the fruitful Christian. A fruitful Christian receives the ministry of the Holy Spirit and bears good fruit and receives blessings from God. But it is different for the unfruitful Christian in v. 8. It is not that the unfruitful Christian's life just doesn't matter; that it counts for nothing. There is no middle ground here. The unfruitful Christian bears thorns and briars and is rejected and near to being cursed.

Now, I want you to understand that the writer is not talking about an unfruitful Christian losing their salvation. The text does not say this. It says that the unfruitful Christian is near to being cursed. When Moses went up on the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments, you remember what the children of Israel did down below. They broke out into an idol worshipping orgy. And

God told Moses about it and then said, “Leave Me alone that I might destroy them”. And He would have done it had it not been for Moses’ pleading with Him not to (Ex. 32). But here the children of Israel were near to being cursed.

Paul describes a Christian near being cursed in 1 Cor. 3:15 when he says that his works will be burned up but he will be saved yet so as through fire. He will be backslidden so far that he has absolutely no good works in his life. And when he stands before Jesus in judgment he will see every one of his works go up in smoke. He’ll have nothing to present to Jesus and Jesus will have no rewards for him. But he will escape eternal burning because he has been saved by grace. And Paul actually gives an example of such a Christian in 1 Cor. 5:5. This believer was sleeping with his mother-in-law, without guilt or shame. And Paul tells the Corinthians to deliver the man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh in order that his spirit could be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus, which is the day of judgment. In other words, they turned him over to Satan to kill him. But his spirit still went to Heaven.

Now, beloved, the possibility of dying in such a state should bring no comfort to your heart at all. Certainly there is joy in knowing that nothing can separate you from the love of Christ, that your salvation is secure if you are truly saved. But before you enter the joys of eternal life in Heaven you have a divine appointment that you must keep. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things *done* in *his* body, according to that he hath done, whether *it be* good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). And to die unfruitful, perhaps even prematurely and stand before Jesus with no crowns to lay at His feet will be a sad occasion. And so the writer of Hebrews warns his readers, **beware of not growing in Jesus**”.

There is a final theme that we will discover in our study of Hebrews. In addition to **the danger of not growing in Jesus**, we will also learn of **the necessity of faith in Jesus**. Turn to Hebrews

11:6 (read). Years ago a speaker at a youth camp I attended made a statement that went like this: God is not interested in what you can do for Him, what God is interested in is what He can do for you. Now, when I first heard that I must confess I was taken aback. It was a brand new thought to me. Could it really be true that God was more interested in working for me than me working for Him? But I realized quickly that this young man was exactly right.

You see, beloved, whatever you do for Jesus, no matter how noble your intent, if you do it in the energy of your flesh you will utterly fail. Because Paul writes in Rom. 7:18, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing...” Your flesh has no power to do anything good! The disciples found this out right quick when Jesus commissioned them and sent them out to do Kingdom’s work. In Matthew 10 Jesus tells them to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons. And in Luke’s account he tells us that they went out after their commissioning and healed everywhere. They did what Jesus called them to do. But in Matthew 17 we read that a man came to them with his boy who was demon possessed, and they could not cast it out. So the man went to Jesus and immediately Jesus did the job. And then the discouraged disciples came to Jesus and said, “Why couldn’t we cast out the demon?” They had done it before. So what happened? And you remember what Jesus said. “Because of your unbelief” (Matt. 17:20). They had lost their faith and they had lost the power, and all the power they had now was of their own flesh, which was powerless. And they failed.

Beloved, God wants His children to be holy. Over and over in Leviticus He says to His people, “Be holy for I am holy”. And God wants His people to be loving. The second great commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said that when you love God and love your neighbor you’ve kept all the law. But I tell you, you can live a holy life and love for others can be oozing out of every pore in your body, and you can still be displeasing to God if it

is all in the strength of your flesh, for it will do no eternal good. When Zechariah was seeking to rebuild the temple after the exile God told Him, “Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts”. In other words, “Zechariah, you’ll never get that temple rebuilt in your own strength. It’s an impossible task. But you will by My Spirit”. And the Spirit of the Lord falls upon our endeavors by one thing alone – faith! And the writer of Hebrews exhorts us, “Have faith! Without it God can never work for you and you will never please Him”.

As we close this morning, I wonder, is your life pleasing to God because you are a man of faith, a woman of faith, a teenager of faith, even a child of faith?