

“Crowned With Glory”

The Third in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 2:9; Psalm 8:1-9

Although we do not know which church received the letter we now know as the Epistle to the Hebrews, we do know that a number of people in that church had renounced their profession of faith in Jesus Christ and returned to Judaism (the religion in which they had been raised).

Apostasy among professing Christians was a real issue facing this church, and the subject raises a number of important questions which the author of Hebrews must address. Can a Christian lose their salvation? What is the status of those who make a profession of faith, are baptized, but then fall away? Having established in the opening chapter that Jesus Christ is the creator and sustainer of all things, the author now exhorts his readers to consider the greatness of that salvation which Jesus has earned for us through his death and resurrection, before Jesus ascended on high, and took his place at God’s right hand. It is a serious thing to neglect so great a salvation!

As we continue our series on the Book of Hebrews, so far we have discussed the problems surrounding the authorship, destination, and date of the writing of this epistle, and we have covered the author’s principle argument in opening chapter for the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses, to Israel’s priesthood, and to the angels. Since it is likely that most of the members of the church receiving this letter were Hellenistic Jews (Greek in culture, Hebrew in theology) who had recently become Christians, as such, they fully accepted the LXX as the word of God. So, in order to respond to the questions raised by those who had made professions of faith in Jesus Christ and were baptized, but then renounced both, the author cites seven passages from the Old Testament (predominantly from the Psalms) which prove that Jesus is the son of God, and possesses a glory equal to that of the Father.

An undue interest in angels (and even the worship of angels) was a problem in Hellenistic Judaism, and there are hints throughout the New Testament that this was an issue in some of the first Christian churches (Galatians 1, Hebrews 13, Colossians 2). While acknowledging that angels are God’s messengers, and that they have played a significant role in redemptive history, the author of Hebrews turns to the Old Testament to prove that angels are Christ’s servants, and therefore inferior to the eternal Son of God. From the pages of the Old Testament, the author demonstrates that Jesus is the creator of all things. And having created all things, Jesus holds them together, directing them to fulfill their appointed ends. Jesus is worshiped by the angels, Jesus gives these invisible creatures orders and directives, and Jesus alone sits as God’s right hand. The author has already made a very impressive case for the deity of Jesus Christ.

As we move into Hebrews chapter two, the author issues his first admonition to this congregation in verses 1-4. Although angels played a role in Old Testament revelation, given the superiority of Jesus Christ, it is vital that Christians not neglect due consideration of all that Jesus has done for them to save them from the guilt and power of sin. Then, in verses 5-9, the author reminds believers of Jesus’ humiliation and exaltation, and how both were necessary for Jesus to secure our salvation.

As we turn to our text this morning, we begin with verses 1-4 of chapter two and the author’s exhortation to the congregation not to neglect the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ. Having set forth a series of seven Old Testament verses demonstrating Jesus’ superiority over angels, the author now hones in on his main theological point – the contrast between Old Testament revelation, specifically the giving of the law to Israel at Mount Sinai and the role played by angels in that event, and the superiority of the New Covenant in which God has spoken finally and definitively in the

person of his son. If the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, and is no longer in effect, then what reason remains for renouncing Christ and returning to an inferior covenant? There is no reason. This is not only a powerful argument for the deity of Jesus, in arguing in this way the author of Hebrews teaches us how we as Christians should read and understand the Old Testament.

In verse 1, the author switches from spelling out his argument about the superiority of Jesus, to an exhortation to those giving up their faith: *“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.”* In this exhortation, we begin to see the issue which concerns the author, and which has motivated him to write this letter. There are people in this church who have heard the gospel, apparently accepted it, but were now “drifting away” from what they heard (in terms of neglecting the content of Christian preaching). But they were also drifting away from their fellow church members (and ceasing to attend Christian worship—Hebrews 10:25). Unlike Paul’s two letters to the Corinthian churches, we do not get the sense here that people in this church were behaving like pagans, or that they were claiming to be Christians, yet engaging in all sorts of immorality.

Rather, those who are described as “drifting away” have likely come under persecution because of their profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and a number of them are removing themselves from the church, and the community of believers. The nature of the author’s arguments indicate that they were returning to Judaism. And in doing so, they are abandoning the truth that has been proclaimed to them—namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. The author urges them to pay close attention to what they have heard, because if they give it up, they will face the consequences. In other words, this is both a warning of what will happen when professing Christians walk away from Christ, as well as an exhortation for them to persevere in the faith. But the author grounds this warning and exhortation in an extended and powerful argument for the superiority of Jesus Christ.

As the author states in verse 2, angels do play a role in redemptive history (including the giving of the law), and the law is indeed an important element of biblical revelation. *“For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, . . . every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution?”* The Old Testament—if inferior to the superior revelation God has given through Jesus Christ—was nevertheless the word of God. In making this point, the author is calling attention to what are likely the two main pillars undergirding Hellenistic Judaism. The first pillar is the role that angels played in the giving of the law. This is not stated explicitly anywhere in the Old Testament, but it is hinted at in Deuteronomy 33:2: *“The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.”* The reference to the thousands of holy ones is a reference to angels, and in fact, the LXX translates this as “at his right hand were angels with him.”¹

Even if angels were present when the law was given, they were not mediators of that law, Moses was. Paul speaks to this in Galatians 3:19, when he asks *“why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.”* Paul raises this point in the context of an argument proving that the promises of the Sinaitic covenant were inferior to those promises which God made to Abraham. To focus so intently upon what angels did or did not do when the law was given was to miss the point.

But missing the main point is what makes speculation about such things as the ministry of angels so

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 67.

unprofitable. Speculation about issues which Scripture doesn't specifically address (like what angels did when the law was given) is often a convenient excuse to miss the obvious—that the covenant of grace, first promised to Adam, then revealed more fully to Abraham, and then fulfilled in Jesus Christ, has better promises than the works-based covenant revealed at Mount Sinai, which only brought condemnation to the people of God. In other words, missing the obvious allows one to elevate the law above the gospel.

As we have seen, people in this church were likely fascinated with angels, but not much interested in hearing that Jesus Christ was superior to them. Many of their number, apparently, felt that stories about Moses and speculation about the giving of the law were practical and relevant, while the gospel was not. Just as in our own day, people would rather be told what to do, rather than being told that they have to think about what they must believe—especially when it comes a difficult topic like the identity of Jesus Christ, and the gory details of what Jesus endured on the cross to save us from our sins. The law is easy. It is written on our hearts. This is why “just tell me what to do,” is what people want to hear. But the gospel is difficult. It requires God's people to both listen and hear. It tells us that Jesus saved us because we can't save ourselves. In fact, the gospel forces us to change how we think and feel about everything. And that is why people would rather go back to the inferior (the law). It is just plain easier.

As the author points out, the law is grounded in the same blessing-curse principle underlying the covenant of works which God made with Adam during Adam's time of probation in Eden. Understanding the blessing/curse principle is essential in understanding the Bible. Here is how the blessing/curse principle works. If you obey God's commandments (perfectly, in thought, in word, and in deed), you will receive the promised blessing. If you disobey the commandment of God (even in the slightest way), you will come under the covenant curses. Those who perfectly obey are blessed. Those who disobey in any sense come under judgment. It is very simple.

There is a reason why Adam was expelled from Eden. In direct rebellion against God's command, Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and came under the curse, which is death. Had Adam not eaten from the tree, he would have been confirmed in righteousness and then entered into eternal life. The same blessing/curse principle is in effect with Israel based on the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. Because Israel did not believe God and trust his promises, the entire nation was forced to wander in the wilderness of the Sinai desert for forty years. Everyone who knew the Old Testament, knew the story of Israel's disobedience and difficult days in the wilderness. They also knew that once Israel entered the promised land of Canaan, within one generation God's people became just like the pagans around them. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes, and eventually Israel was removed from the land of Canaan under the hand of God's judgment, just as Adam was cast from Eden. The author of Hebrews reminds us that for every transgression there is punishment and retribution. But retribution and punishment is what the law threatens to those who break it. It is either blessing or curse.

In raising this point, the author is asking his readers/hearers “have those in this church not heard the gospel promises?” That Jesus died for all of our transgressions, bearing in his own body that punishment we rightfully deserved from God? Had they not been listening when they were told that Jesus not only died for our sins, but that he perfectly obeyed all of God's commandments, and that his law-keeping is credited to us through the means of faith? Had they not heard the good news—the glorious declaration that now there is peace with God because of the cross? Had they not been listening?

No, they were not listening. Instead, they were speculating about angels. And when things got tough, many of them were returning to a religion which taught that righteousness is earned through obedience to the law. Therefore, in verse 3, the author warns this congregation in stark and unmistakable terms. “*How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*” The gospel has been preached to these people. It

is a gospel proclaimed by Jesus to his apostles and grounded historically in his life of perfect obedience and in his sacrificial death for our sins. No angel preached such a message to them.² In fact, in Galatians 1, Paul warns us about angels preaching a false gospel!

As the author puts it in the last half of verse 3, “*it was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard.*” If this congregation heard this message when it had been preached, then they have the promises of a gracious God set before their eyes through word and sacrament—and that if they only renounce their own so-called righteousness (which is nothing but filthy rags) and simply receive Christ’s righteousness through faith, then all the promises of God are theirs, including salvation.

Although Christians often throw the word “salvation” around, we rarely define it. What does it mean to “be saved?” It means to be saved by God from God on the day of judgment. It refers to being delivered from final and eternal judgment on the last day. Therefore, those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ, and claim to trust that he will deliver them from God’s wrath, but who then neglect that salvation (by drifting away from it) will not escape that punishment and retribution threatened under the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. In other words, the author is warning those who champion Moses and the law (and who renounce Christ) that they will indeed be judged by the very commandments they claim to have obeyed. They are neglecting the salvation which Jesus has freely given them, and are now demanding that God judge them according to their works. To put it bluntly, “why on earth would anyone desire to do such a thing?” Do you want your chances of entering heaven to depend upon your personal obedience to the law of God? The only people who think this is a good idea are people who have never considered the full extent of their sin, and how much that sin offends a holy God.

Not only have these people heard the gospel, as the author has stated in verse 4, “*God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*” The author of Hebrews admits that he himself was not an eyewitness to the messianic mission of Jesus Christ. But he did hear the gospel from those who were witnesses of Jesus’ messianic ministry (which I take to be a reference to the apostles). Those who receiving this letter also have heard the gospel in the same way as its author has, from the lips of the apostles. But now he takes the opportunity to remind them that the gospel they heard was confirmed by signs and wonders (tied to the apostolic office) and through the gifts of the Holy Spirit which God liberally distributes in the churches for the common good, and for the service of others.

Since this is the case, those who were drifting away from Jesus Christ had themselves witnessed miracles associated with the ministry of the apostles. Members of the church had seen the gifts of the Spirit on display in the church. And they had heard the gospel, of which these miracles and gifts were but the confirmation. And this is why it was imperative that they not drift away from the truth (as found in the preaching of the gospel), thereby neglecting that salvation accomplished for them by Jesus Christ, who is much greater than the angels who, apparently, fascinated them so much.

In verses 5–18, the author again returns to the theme of the superiority of Jesus Christ. Since there is much packed into these verses, we’ll tackle verses 5-9 this morning, and complete the chapter next week, Lord willing. In verse 5, the author once again takes up the role of angels. He writes, “*now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking.*” Angels play a role in the administration of this world, but not the world to come—the new heaven and earth which Jesus creates when he returns. A bit of background here might be helpful.

² Bruce, Hebrews, 68.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a fair bit of evidence that first century Jews were fascinated with angels and had seized upon several Old Testament texts which mentioned angels and then built a whole theology of angels based upon these few verses. This was typical of conservative “Torah believing Jews,” who sided with the Pharisees against the Sadducees, who were theological liberals of the day. The Sadducees did not believe in angels, nor in the bodily resurrection at the end of the age.

One biblical passage used to speculate about angels was Deuteronomy 33:2, which we considered earlier. Another was Deuteronomy 32:8, which reads, “*when the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.*” In the LXX the phrase “sons of God” is taken as a reference to angels. This is assumed to be an indication that angels participate in God’s providential direction and control of the nations, including when they are divided on the day of judgment. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel speaks of angelic princes who rule Greece and Persia (Daniel 10:20-21), and that Michael is the great angelic prince (Daniel 12:1). The author of Hebrews’ point is that Jesus Christ is superior to all angels, even these angelic princes. The angelic princes may have played some role in this age in restraining evil, but they have no role in the age to come—after Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Jesus will rule and reign in the age to come which has already begun when he ascended on high. And it is these mighty angel princes who serve the son of God.

Continuing the theme of Jesus’ superiority, in verses 6-8, the author now cites from Psalm 8 (our Old Testament lesson). “*It has been testified somewhere, ‘What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.’*” Psalm 8 speaks of God’s sovereign and providential care of the human race. Humanity rules and reigns over the earth and all men and women are divine image bearers. The Psalm makes it clear that God loves us, cares for us, and has given us a greater dignity than any of earth’s creatures—with the exception of angels, who, are invisible to us, and have access to all created space, including heaven.

It is important to notice what the author is doing here. Jesus repeatedly spoke of himself as the “son of man.” Although the eternal son of God, Jesus used this title to emphasize the fact that he was the suffering servant who had nowhere to lay his head, and who allowed himself to be crucified by sinful men for the purpose of saving us for our sins. In using the term “son of man,” Jesus was obviously referring to Daniel 7:13, where the title is not a reference to his humanity, but his deity—“*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.*” This passage from Psalm 8 (verse 4) also was behind Jesus’ self-designation “son of man” as a reference to his messianic mission. In Hebrews 2, the author applies that same title to Jesus, who is the special object of the Father’s affection and care.

Why, then would the author speak of Jesus as being like us, and a little lower than the angels, if he possesses such eternal glory? The answer to this question is found in Philippians 2:6-8. Jesus is the eternal son of God who took to himself a true human nature to save from our sins. In Philippians 2, Paul speaks of Jesus, “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” In his incarnation, Jesus joins us as but a little lower than the angels. This too is part of his humiliation. His eternal nature and divine glory are veiled by a tent of flesh.

But in his resurrection and ascension to the father’s right hand, Jesus is exalted and crowned with both glory and honor (just as Paul indicates in Philippians 2). And having ascended into heaven, and taken his

place at the right hand of the Father, all things are now in subjection to him, even angels. Therefore, in the last half of verse 8, the author of Hebrews moves from our Lord's humiliation to his exaltation. "*Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.*" Jesus is Lord over all creation, including angels who obey his every command.

Yet, there is yet another issue which must be addressed—if Christ is ruling over all things, why is there still evil and chaos in the world? Says the author in verses 8-9, "*at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*" The author points his hearers ahead to the consummation of that kingdom which takes place when Jesus Christ returns. Until Christ returns we do not see things as they will be—even though Jesus is even now directing the wrath of sinful men and women to fulfill his ultimate purposes. What we do know is that until Jesus returns at the end of the age, Jesus Christ now reigns with God at his right hand, and even now is crowned with glory and honor despite appearances to the contrary.

Because Jesus willingly humbled himself, made himself lower than the angels in his incarnation, he suffered unto death on the cross securing for us the grace of God. Jesus even tasted death just as we will. He is now at God's right hand, having been given that glory which is rightfully his. No doubt, things in our fallen world are not as they should be—the unmistakable evidence of human sinfulness is all around us. The earth groans beneath our feet. But because Christ has accomplished that which is necessary to defeat sin and its consequences (his death and resurrection), and has ascended to the Father's right hand and is crowned with glory, then he will return just as he promised, and when he does, all things will be in subjection to him. Jesus will destroy sin, and the devil and all his works, and Jesus makes all things new (creating a new heaven and earth). It is not a question of whether all things are in subjection to Jesus now (they are). It is a question of when the earth is visibly and finally in subjection to Christ. Jesus' glory will be manifest to all on the day of his return.

What do we take with us from this passage?

The author has made an impressive case from the Old Testament that Jesus is the son of God, who, having taken his place at the Father's right hand, is now crowned with glory. The author gives us a remarkable picture of Jesus Christ in his exalted glory, and in doing so, reminds us that Jesus is ruling and reigning over all things, even now. Jesus is God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. One day, that same Jesus Christ will return and his heavenly glory will be manifest throughout all creation. After all, Jesus alone has been crowned with glory.

But the author also directs us to Christ's humiliation—how Jesus took to himself a human nature, made himself lower than the angels, secured God's grace for us by suffering unto death, for us, and in our place. Since this is true, how then can anyone profess faith in Christ, and then drift away from that one who did so much to save us from our sins? The only way someone can do this is by neglecting to hear the gospel, failing to participate in the means of grace, thereby intentionally walking away from everything Jesus has purchased for us. The author's exhortation and word of warning should ring in our ears – "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"