

HEBREWS: ALL ABOUT FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

Hebrews is one of the three New Testament commentaries on a single Old Testament verse:

the just shall live by his faith {Hab 2:4b KJV}

This is the verse that struck a fire in the heart of Martin Luther, and began the Protestant Reformation 450 years ago. This verse opened the eyes of Augustine, and helped him to become a mighty man of faith, and it is still striking fire in many hearts today. It is expanded and amplified in Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews. Each of these Epistles emphasizes a different aspect of that statement.

The book of Romans talks about the just -- the justified -- those who have been accepted as righteous in Jesus Christ. The just shall live by faith. The book of Ephesians emphasized the words "shall live," and it tells us about life as a justified person -- the walk in the Spirit, the life in Jesus, the life of Christ in us -- the just shall live by faith. And finally, the book of Hebrews takes up the last two words, "by faith," and it shows us how to lay hold of the life by which we are justified.

But I hope you know that faith is derived, not from anything in itself, but from its object. This is a source of great confusion among many Christians. People are always saying to me, "If I only had enough faith, I could do so and so, and such and such," as though faith were a commodity sold by the pound; as though all you have to do is buy another pound of faith and add it to the store you have now, and you could do great things for God.

But the quantity of faith is of very little significance. Jesus said so: "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed" {Matt 17:20b RSV}, you could move mountains. It is not quantity that is important in faith. It is quality; it is what your faith is fastened to. What is the object of your faith? The strength of faith is directly related to the strength of what you believe in. What are you believing in? Who are you believing in? What kind of a person is he?

When Hebrews talks about faith, therefore, it must help us to see the object of faith, because our faith will be strong if we believe and understand that the object of our faith is strong. That is why this is the most Christ-centered book in the New Testament. It focuses on Jesus Christ: therefore, it is one of the greatest books for hours of discouragement, defeat, or depression, because it emphasizes the character and the qualities of Jesus Christ. If we see him as he is, we cannot help but be strong in faith.

There is an old story of a man who had just become a Christian. He was experiencing some of the difficulties that new Christians often have of uncertainty in his faith; he was wondering if he really was a Christian, and was feeling frustrated with his own lack of growth. He felt he had come to the place where he just could not stand any longer; he could not live as a Christian any more. He came into a church service where a pastor was speaking on the verses in Ephesians that tell of Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father, and that we are dead, and our life is hid with Christ in God. He talked about Christ as the head of the body, and said that we are the body, and that Christ as the head is seated at the right hand of the Father.

As the truth of this gripped this man's heart, and he realized that although he was struggling to swim against the current down here below, his head was seated in victory and triumph already at the right hand of God, he jumped out of his seat, and shouted, "Hallelujah! Who ever heard of anyone drowning with his head high above water!"

That is what Hebrews does to us: it helps us to focus on the One who is already in the place of victory. We are fighting a battle already won, and that is what encourages us. When we walk in the flesh, we are fighting a battle already lost; there is no chance, no hope of victory; but when we walk in the Spirit, the battle is already

won.

In the first ten chapters of Hebrews, there is a very simple structure. Jesus Christ is being compared to a number of other leaders and systems and religious values that the people to whom this letter was first written had once felt were important. It is a little like an athletic contest or an elimination match where certain contestants are vying for the championship. One after the other challenges the hero, and one after another is conquered, and the hero emerges triumphant, superior to everyone else. Throughout this letter, Christ is compared with the basic thing that men trust in days of peril and trial. And every one of them is found insufficient -- except him!

The first one is the prophets of the Old Testament. The letter opens on that theme:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; {Heb 1:1 RSV}

-- these impressive writers of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Habakkuk -- all these names that meant so much to the Hebrew mind and heart. These men were well ahead of all the philosophies and philosophers the world has ever known, contemporaries with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and yet their views of reality far outstripped these men. These were great men, the fathers, the prophets -- and God spoke to them, and through them in the past.

but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. {Heb 1:2a RSV}

Almost with a wave of a hand, the writer dismisses the prophets as having no equality with Jesus Christ. After all, they were just spokesmen, instruments, but he is the God enthroned as king of the universe, forming the boundaries of history and upholding everything by the word of his power. How can a prophet compare with someone like that? He is much better than they; therefore, the writer argues, anybody who trusted in prophets ought to be interested in listening to Jesus Christ.

The next challengers are the angels. In the Greek world in which the New Testament church found itself, angels were regarded as very important beings. Most of the Greek gods and goddesses -- Venus, Zeus, Mercury and others -- were angels in the eyes of the Greeks. They knew they were not supreme God, but they were regarded as a kind of God, junior-grade, sub-deities, and they treated them as such.

But here the writer takes up the question of which is greater, the angels or the Son. He points out immediately that the Son, the Lord Jesus, is superior to any angel:

**For to which angel did God ever say,
"Thou art my Son ..."? {Heb 1:5a RSV}**

No, he never said that to any angel. The Son is superior to the angels, and furthermore, the angels worshipped him; therefore, they themselves admit that he is superior, and they obey him -- this is the argument -- so how could you ever compare an angel to the Son of God?

He goes on to point out in chapters two and three, moreover, that Jesus was the true man; he was the second Adam. He came to fulfill the destiny of human beings -- the lost destiny which Adam threw away. This right of mankind to be rulers and kings in the universe is reflected in the eighth Psalm:

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou are mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honor.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; {Ps. 8:3-6a RSV}**

That is God's design for man, but in our fallen state, we find it very difficult to fulfill. But Jesus is there, and

the writer says that although we do not yet see man fulfilling his destiny, we see Jesus sitting at the right hand of God -- the true man; man as God intended man to be. He is certainly higher than the angels, because God made man ultimately to be higher than the angels. He said of man, "Let us make him in our image." He did not say that about any angel, but of man.

In the midst of this argument about the angels, the writer of Hebrews gives a warning. There are five warnings through the book of Hebrews, and this is the first one: Do not neglect to listen to this One. If Jesus is higher than the prophets, and higher than the angels, then we ought to listen to him. If prophets have affected the stream of history as much as they have, and the angels are the invisible agents of God working through all of history, then surely we ought to listen to the Son. Do not neglect to listen!

Now the next challengers who move into the picture are Moses and Joshua out of the Old Testament, these great men of God whom God greatly used. The Hebrew people almost idolized them as the supreme examples of men mightily used of God -- especially Moses. In chapter three Jesus is compared to Moses, and in chapter four, to Joshua.

And what is his argument? Well, it is very simple. Moses was a servant in the house of God; but Jesus is the Son to whom the house belongs, and for whom it is built, so he obviously has superiority.

When I was a boy in Montana I was invited to visit a well known, wealthy ranch, by one of the hired men. As we came up to an imposing ranch house, he did not take me into the house: instead, he took me to the bunkhouse out in back. I asked him what it was like in the ranch house, and he said, "Well, I can't take you in there; that belongs to the family."

I saw a beautiful palomino horse in the pasture, and I told him how I would love to ride on that horse. And he said, "I'm sorry, you can't; that belongs to the family." All day long, I was frustrated, because everything I wanted to do, he could not let me do, because he was only a hired man.

But later on, I got to know the son of that family, a boy of my own age, and do you know what we did? We rode that palomino horse all over the place, and we went into the house, and we even went into the kitchen and helped ourselves to food in the refrigerator -- anything we wanted -- and we made ourselves perfectly at home. A son has greater liberty than a servant. Moses was just a servant, but Jesus was the master. Moses led the people of God out of Egypt towards the land of Canaan, which was the symbol of the rest of God -- the rest which God wants people to learn to live on inside their hearts.

As we will see later on in this letter -- and there is a hint of it here in the beginning -- the house of God which this writer talks about is man. Moses was but a servant in the symbol of the house of God. Jesus is the Son in the very house itself. Moses led toward a symbol of the rest of God, but Jesus leads into the actual place of rest.

That rest is defined for us here in chapter four. It says,

whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. {Heb 4:10 RSV}

That is, if you stop depending upon yourself and your self-effort, you have learned to enter into rest, because you start depending upon another -- God's work in you. That is the lost secret of humanity. That is the secret that Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden, and which Jesus Christ came to restore to us. When we learn to operate on that, we learn to be perfectly peaceful, calm, undisturbed by circumstances, trusting, powerful, effective, accomplishing things for Christ's sake. And that is rest.

Now Joshua could not lead into that rest, says the writer. He tried to, but he could not take the people into real rest. Oh, he took them into the symbol of rest, the land, but he did not take them into real rest. But Jesus can! Therefore, he says,

Let us strive to enter that rest, {Heb 4:11a RSV}

lest like those people in the wilderness, we fall away and lose out on what God has for us.

The second warning is: do not harden your heart, and resist God's lead. Do not say to yourself, "I'm all right the way I am. I'm doing OK. What do I need with anything further?" No, do not harden your heart. Do not resist what God is saying. You may be satisfied with the way you are now, but it will not last very long. Sooner or later you will find that what you have got now is not enough: therefore, do not harden your heart, but let God lead you into his rest, or you will be in serious trouble.

Now the next challenger to the superiority of Christ is Aaron, the high priest of Israel, along with the whole system of priesthood. A great deal of this letter has to do with this subject of priesthood, and it is very important, because priests have great value.

What do you think priests are for? In the Old Testament, the priests had two very important functions -- to relieve guilt and to relieve confusion:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relations to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. {Heb 5:1 RSV}

That is relief of guilt; to lift the load and the burden of sin, and,

He can deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward, {Heb 5:2a RSV}

-- those who are confused and miss the path, who do not know where to turn. The modern equivalent of a priest, perhaps, is a psychiatrist; priests did what psychiatrists do today. They tried to relieve the load of guilt and to straighten out people's confused and ignorant approaches to life, and therefore, they were very important.

But now this writer goes on to show that Jesus Christ has a higher priesthood, symbolized by a man named Melchizedek. Melchizedek appears in the Old Testament in a very mysterious way. He steps out of the shadows for a moment and deals with Abraham, and then returns to obscurity and is never heard from again. He is referred to several times in the Old Testament, but he is a figure of mystery until you come to the New Testament, and here in Hebrews, we are helped to see what this strange man signified.

He was a picture of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. His characteristics were those of the priesthood Christ has today. First, he was instantly available. The story, recorded in Genesis 14, tells of Abraham meeting the King of Sodom, after his defeat of the five kings. Although Abraham did not know it, he was in trouble. The King of Sodom was out to make him a very subtle offer that would derail Abraham in his walk of faith. He could not possibly have detected the subtlety of this offer; but Melchizedek suddenly appeared. He was instantly available.

Furthermore, because he was a king without father or without mother -- this is far as the record goes in the Old Testament -- he was a picture of Christ in his eternal relationship -- he was permanently available. His service to Abraham at this time was to strengthen him, picturing the way Jesus Christ actually strengthens us. Melchizedek strengthened Abraham by the offering of bread and wine which in the communion service are the symbols of the body and the blood, the life of the Lord Jesus.

That is why Melchizedek appears in this book, to present the picture of Jesus Christ as instantly available to us. This is why the glory of the priesthood of Christ is so intensely superior to anyone else. Your psychiatrist may go on vacation -- he might even die -- it has been known to happen! But Jesus Christ never dies, and he is never off duty -- he is instantly and permanently available. and he actually strengthens you with the impartation of his own life, symbolized by the body and the blood, the bread and the wine.

In connection with this, there is a third warning -- the danger of delay. This is one of the most serious warnings in the book, found in chapter six. Although we may have tasted the outward experiences of Christianity, and seem to have much that is real in our Christian life, if we have not pressed on into this place

of rest and of trust in Jesus Christ, these external evidences of Christianity are of no value to us. In fact, if that is all we have, a time will come when they will fail us, and then it will be impossible to find the true -- that is a terrible warning; if you trust too long in the untrue, the unreal, the phony, there will come a day of desperation, when you will look for the true, and you will not be able to find it.

The fifth challenger is the tabernacle and the law. Here are more things that people trust in -- buildings and self-effort, which is represented by the law. And the writer now compares Christ to this, and he draws a sharp contrast. He takes the old tabernacle in the wilderness, and he says "that's just a building, that's all," but the real tabernacle is man or woman, a boy, or a girl -- it is you! You are the one God's been aiming at for centuries -- not buildings! He is not interested in buildings. That is why I think it is such a desperate error to refer to a building as the house of God.

I like that story of the little boy who was chewing gum in a church building, and a lady said to the pastor, "Look at that boy chewing gum in church. Do you let children chew gum in the house of God?" And he said, "My dear lady; it's the house of God that's chewing the gum!" And he is exactly right. So the old tabernacle, or the temple in Jerusalem, or a cathedral, or a church, is nothing but a building. The true house of God is you. We are his house. He dwells in us. Christ in you -- the hope of glory.

Now, in connection with the tabernacle was the law, which made its demands upon people: Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not bow down to idols, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and so forth, all the ten commandments. And these are wonderful, but they fail, as Paul says in Romans, because of the weakness of the flesh which is not able to meet the demands of the law. We find ourselves unable to come through with what the law demands. Even when we try our best, all we can achieve is an outward external obedience, but the heart and the attitude within is frequently wrong, and we know it.

Well, says the writer, the Lord Jesus has a solution to this. His solution is to write the law on your heart. To put the Spirit of God within you to keep prompting you to love, and love is the fulfilling of the law. If you yield yourself to love of the Spirit, which is pouring out from within you, you will be automatically and unconsciously fulfilling the law. He writes his law upon our hearts, he never leaves us; he deals fully with our guilt during those times when we do fail -- he has already solved that problem in the cross -- and he provides all the power we need to walk in righteousness if we will take it. Can you beat that? The law never does that. All it does is demand; it never enables; but Jesus comes in and demands and enables. He who is faithful is he who calls us, who also will do it.

Now, here, we have another warning: Do not deceive yourself. Do not say you have got all this and try to put up a good front, because that is presuming upon God. If you do that, the writer says there will be nothing left for you but a certain end of evil:

For if we sin deliberately [that is deceitfully, yet deliberately] after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? {Heb 10:26-29 RSV}

Think of it! God has provided for us at infinite cost a way of being righteous before him, strengthened within, kept strong and pure in the midst of all the adverse circumstances around us, and we set it aside and say, "No thank you, Lord, I'll make it on my own." Could anything be more insulting to God? And so he warns us not to presume on God's grace.

Well, that eliminates buildings, and works, and there are no challengers left. So, in the last section of the letter, he comes to the means of obtaining all that God has, which is faith. In chapter 11 you can learn what faith is, how it acts, how it looks, and how to recognize it. And as you read through that wonderful chapter of the heroes of faith, you find that faith anticipates the future, acts in the present, evaluates the past, dares to move

out, and persists to the end -- that is what faith is. The last two chapters tell us how it is produced in our lives, how God goes about making us strong in the faith.

First, we are made strong by looking unto Jesus; you cannot read about the Lord Jesus, you cannot live with him and think of what God has revealed about him, and believe these great declarations of his power and his availability and his life without finding your faith strengthened. Isn't that true? You can look at all these other men of faith -- Abraham, David, Moses, Barak, Samson, and a whole host of others -- Martin Luther, John Wesley, D. L. Moody -- and all they will do is inspire you, but they cannot enable you. But when you look at Jesus, he will not only inspire you, but he will empower you. That is why we are exhorted to look away from these others unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of faith, who will make us strong in the time of weakness.

Second, our faith is increased by living constantly in trouble -- the disciplines of life. God puts us into problems, because that gives us the opportunity to exercise faith. If you did not have any problems, how could you exercise faith? If you did not have any difficulties how could you ever learn to depend? That is why you can count on trouble. That is encouraging isn't it? You can count on it!

And finally we exercise faith we learn faith by encouraging one another in view of the resources God has given us. Listen to this majestic passage:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreated that no further messages be spoken to them. {Heb 12:18-19 RSV}

That was the law given on Mount Sinai.

For they could not endure the order that was given, "if even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." {Heb 12:20 RSV}

That is terrifying isn't it? You have not come to that.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born [the church of God] who are enrolled in heaven, and to a Judge who is God of all, [pagans, Communists, atheists, everybody] and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, [a new arrangement for living, inside you, not outside of you] and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. {Heb 12:22-24 RSV}

Isn't that wonderful? Doesn't that encourage your faith? And so, in connection with this we have the last warning:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. {Heb 12:25-27 RSV}

I believe we are in those times when everything that can be shaken is going to be shaken. What does this world depend upon? Governments, politics, administration education, legislation? All these things are the fundamentals of history -- the things men reckoned on, rested on, and counted on to keep human life going -- but every one of them is something that can be shaken. We are facing the times when God is going to allow everything to be shaken that can be shaken -- that is everything visible. But what cannot be shaken? Well, he tells us:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming

fire. {Heb 12:28-29 RSV}

The kingdom of God, the rule of God in our hearts; the right of Jesus Christ to be Lord within us can never be shaken. And that is what is being tested today so that all phoniness is being exposed. I have never seen a time when more people who are apparently strong, virile Christians have fallen away, and have renounced the faith in our present day. But the things that cannot be shaken will remain, and that which is based on the phony and the untrue will crumble and fall.

A few verses toward the end sum up this letter and give us the word of encouragement we need in the face of perilous times. It is at once a prayer and a blessing:

Prayer:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. {Heb 13:20-21 RSV}

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