

Prayers

Thoughts on prayer

It is amazing to think that when we pray, God gives us personal time. He wants us to share our thoughts and feelings with Him, and asks us to listen to His Word.

As you come to your Lord in prayer today, speak to Him knowing He is indeed listening to your every word, and praise Him. Then, if you want to hear what He is saying, giving some time to listening!

A prayer for today

O Lord, my Creator and Redeemer, You know the state of my heart, my complex feelings, the joys I can hardly express and the deeper troubles of my soul. You are the only light for my darkness, so I submit, I confess my sins and especially my inner sins and I resign my wandering will to You and Your purposes! So touch me now I pray; reach out and draw me into Your arms; cover my aching heart with Your grace and surprise me with the joy of Your presence! AMEN

Meditation

Wonderful!

Have you known what it is like to be filled with love -
And in a moment, realise this love is none other than God?
Then, know that this love is what breaks open life's boundaries
And opens up to us infinite possibilities?

Have you known what it is like to receive joy -
And in a moment, feel a wondrous bliss within your heart
Which sends emotion leaping upward in glee and celebration
Of the great eternal 'Yes' of God?

Have you known what it is like to relax in God's peace -
And in a moment, know It passes understanding, yes,
The warmth of all God is envelops you and tinged with joy
You know your destiny is secure.

Wonderful!

May this, God's renewal break out now within your life ... !

Bible Passage

Hebrews 1:1-4

¹ At various times past and in different ways, God has spoken to our ancestors through the prophets. ² In these last days, though, He has spoken to us through the Son who completes the revelation, the one through whom He made everything ³ and who radiates His bright glory. He is the same as God Himself, and He sustains everything by His powerful Word. After He dealt with the cleansing of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become greatly superior to angels, and been given a name by God much greater than theirs.

Review

The beginning of Hebrews is extraordinary. It starts with a powerful description of the work of God throughout history, and eventually, *'through the Son'* (1:2) in the days of the New Testament. Jesus is not mentioned by His personal name, but He is the clearly subject of the paragraph and at the centre of the writer's understanding of world history. The whole letter is designed to explain how Jesus fulfils Jewish history and destiny, and is therefore God's means of salvation for the whole world (1:3,4). It is a 'letter to the Hebrews', written in the hope that the Jews might accept what God had done for them through their Messiah.

Who wrote Hebrews?

The letter begins with a vast and comprehensive statement about God's eternal plan (1:1), and is nothing like the opening of any of Paul's letters. From the earliest of times Hebrews has been listed in Scripture as one not written by this great apostle. We may know this because the letters of Paul were listed as group, starting with Romans and ending with Philemon, in order of length (with the letters to individual people coming last). Hebrews comes after these letters and it is followed by letters accredited to other apostles; James, Peter, John and Jude.

Hebrews therefore stands in the middle of the New Testament letters as a statement of faith, and with no indication of its author! Over the years, speculation over who might have written Hebrews has been intense, could it be Paul, Apollos, Mark, Barnabas, or one of the other early apostles? Such ideas are based on literary analysis and assumptions about the letter's construction, content and sentiment. But there is no clear answer, and barring major discoveries about the New Testament text, little good comes from dwelling on this, and we do not need to know the author to benefit from the intense spiritual value of Hebrews.

The scope of History

Hebrews begins impressively by reducing God's historic plan of salvation to a couple of sentences (1:1,2). It claims boldly that up to the time of Jesus, God had revealed Himself and His purposes through *'prophets'*, but since the coming of His Son (identified by the name Jesus in 2:9,11), we need do no more than look at Him. The prophets were great people but their work was partial, where the work of the Son for the Father is complete.

All this is not clear in some Bible versions, which translate verse 2 more like this; *'in these last days, He has spoke to us through His Son, whom He has appoint heir of all things ...'* What then does it mean to speak of the Son of God as His heir? Has God died and so passed on his belongings? Of course not, and we should not interpret this so literally. The language of being *'an heir'* or *'receiving an inheritance'* was then used to speak of something being finished and completed, and when we know this, the passage becomes clear. Before the Son, prophets revealed parts of God's Word, but if we want to see it all we must look to the Son, to His person

and His work, and the rest of Hebrews explains this at length. For this reason I give this translation of verse 2; ‘... *through His Son who completes the revelation*’.

The Son and the Father

Hebrews then says more about the Son and the Father, answering these questions; are they two separate beings, or essentially one person? If so, how is it possible and what does it mean? The text explains it in this way; ‘*the Son is ... the one who made everything and radiates His bright glory. He is the same as God Himself ...*’ (1:2,3). So the Father and the Son are integrally connected; they are both God, they are responsible for Creation and their ‘likeness’ is the same. There is no doubt about this!

The one unique feature of the Son though is the fact that He makes God visible; Hebrews says He ‘*radiates*’ the glory of God (1:3). Some translations of the Bible read ‘*He is the reflection of God’s glory*’, but this does not do justice to the text. Reflected light bounces off a surface, however the idea here is not that God’s glory can be seen like a picture reflected in a mirror. The text speaks of God’s glory coming from within the Son, precisely because He is one with the Father and can therefore ‘*radiate*’ the glory. In so doing the Son ‘sustains’ God’s work and Word (1:3); this is a powerful revelation of Christ, of His nature and ministry.

The Son and His work

Halfway through verse 3 a new sentence starts, and it is a basic explanation of the work done by the Son. The whole sentence extracted from the passage reads like this:

After He dealt with the cleansing of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become greatly superior to angels, and been given a name by God much greater than theirs.

So the radiance of the Son revealing the glory of God lies in this; He has ‘*dealt with the cleansing of sins*’ (1:3). We may ask how this was done, but the rest of Hebrews is designed to explain precisely this. Of course, the need for the cleansing of sin lies at the heart of the Gospel, though we are more familiar with the way Paul explains it: ‘*you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once live ... (but now you are) made alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved*’ (Ephesians 2:1-5). However, where Paul was writing to a predominantly Gentile congregation, Hebrews is written to Jews. It explains how Jesus deals with sin by a detailed explanation of how Jesus fulfils Jewish Law, as we will soon find out.

More important than angels!

But something else is here. From the start, Hebrews is careful to explain that ‘the name’ given to the Son by God is ‘*far greater*’ (1:4) than that of angels. What is so important about this?

It may not be the case today, but in the first century, popular religion focussed greatly on the spiritual work of angels, who were thought to be as spiritual beings who affected people’s lives on behalf of the gods. Hebrews, however, is concerned to ensure that the early church does not have anything to do with such ideas. Angels are indeed part of God’s heavenly order, but the Son is far greater. When the Son has completed His work and gone to the Father (at the Ascension - Acts 1, Romans 10, Ephesians 4), the Gospel does not rely on the mediation of angels! No, the Son Himself remains the only source of grace for the forgiveness of sins; this is how grace works, it is available only from the Son.

After this introduction Hebrews offers a detailed analysis of the work of the Son, explaining how His actions fulfil the Law, and we can be in no doubt. This very different letter written to Jewish

Christians preaches the same Gospel taught by other apostles, including Paul, after the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's revelation through the Son is all about how the Son deals with sin, making it possible for people to have access to the Father.

Application

Discipleship issues

A message that must be declared

What must it have been like to live in days after Jesus died and rose from the dead, and feel empowered by the Spirit with the message of God's truth for the whole world, revealed by Jesus and guaranteed by means of the Holy Spirit? The answer is that for many people, especially Jews, it must have felt something like the sentiments behind these verses. The words radiate awe and wonder, as well as zeal and enthusiasm, and the message is everything. No human niceties are relevant, and no cultural explanations are required; God's work is new and vibrant! He has completed His Gospel message in the work of His Son!

So for those who are alive and full of faith, the only thing required is to persist in delivering the message that in Christ, God's Son, sin is no longer a barrier between people and God (1:3). No philosophy, no angels, no argument, no demons or threats can stand in the way of what the Son has achieved for the Father, and as the whole New Testament explains and certainly the rest of Hebrews, all may now benefit from God's grace! There can be little argument that at heart, the task of the church remains the same today.

The arguments that won over first century Jews (Hebrews)!

As we start reading Hebrews we must be absolutely clear that this is a letter written to Jews. We who are Gentiles are listening in to a private argument amongst Jews, and much of the letter is so steeped in Judaism it is easy for Gentiles to get lost. Yet instead of turning aside from a potentially difficult piece of Scripture, we should be all the more interested. Here, we have a chance to eavesdrop on how first century Jews debated the life and work of Jesus, and the letter also gives us a glimpse of how these people understood Old Testament Scriptures! Neither can we ignore that fact that these arguments frequently persuaded Jews to accept Jesus as their Messiah, which means they are of great significance to Christians today.

Here is some real 'meat' of New Testament teaching about Jesus, and a golden opportunity to study both the Judaism from which Jesus came and also how the New and the Old Testament work together to define God's work of salvation from sin through His Son Jesus.

Questions for groups

- 1. Discuss / consider what this passage means when it speaks of the Son 'radiating' God's 'bright glory'?*
- 2. Spend a little time writing this passage down in your own words, perhaps in a way that will better explain itself to the general reader today ...*
- 3. Do you know any Jewish people or Jewish Christians? If so, do your best to discuss this passage with your friends. If no such friends are available, search on the internet to find out anything you can about Messianic Jews, and the way they justify their faith and leaving Judaism.*

Final Prayer

All wisdom and power are Yours, Almighty and everlasting God. You have worked through generations of Your people, through Jews, through Christians, and through all who have given themselves to You. May all of us who follow in their footsteps be ready to lay everything aside to bear witness to the Gospel; to Your praise and glory! AMEN