

Prayers

Thoughts on prayer

As you pray today, try to balance your prayers for yourself with prayers for other people you know and also for people around the world who are in distress. There are too many pictures on our TV news reports of people suffering through war and displacement, and they must surely be in our prayers. God loves each and every one.

A prayer for today

Glorious and faithful God, You carry Your people through every manner of trouble and distress, and return repeatedly to rescue us when we are afflicted by the troubles of this world. Save us now, we pray, especially from becoming so absorbed in our personal trials that we do not see the glories of Your future, of Your Kingdom and of Your ultimate Victory! All glory be to You, wonderful and faithful God! AMEN

Meditation

Have you seen a vision?

Like Ezekiel, have you seen a picture or image
Which captures more than can be expressed in words
But explains the deeper, powerful truths of God most High?

Like Daniel, have you seen 'the writing on the wall'
Which plainly delivers the Word of God in Judgement
And makes the future clear to those who need to know?

Like Isaiah, have you seen the future in a person,
A living being, the Messiah, whose name is Jesus ...
Whose deeds make real the love of God for all?

Like Jeremiah, have you seen the future in the present,
And persisted as He did through dire personal suffering
To reveal God's Word of Love writ large on human hearts?

Have you seen a vision?

Do not be mistaken, you may not think yourself a prophet,
But He has chosen You and seeks your obedient will
He says something unique to all, through you ...

Bible Passage

Hebrews 2:1-4

¹ In case we drift away from it, it is crucially important that we pay greater attention to what we have heard. ² For if the message spoken by angels has been proved valid, and every sin or disobedience has its deserved consequence, ³ how can we escape if we care not about the great salvation which we first received through the preaching of the Lord, and has been confirmed to us by those who heard Him? ⁴ For God has added to His testimony by means of signs and wonders, works of power, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, divided out according to His will.

Review

The letter to the Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians in the first century AD, with the main aim of encouraging them not to wander from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In particular, the writer was concerned about Jews who kept their historic faith without question, but failed to grasp that through Christ there had been a fundamental change in God's salvation plan for the world (1:1-4). As we have seen, most of the first chapter contains quotes from Scripture designed to persuade Jewish people that God has now revealed Himself not through angels but through His Son Jesus.

Don't get slack on the Gospel

In chapter 2, Hebrews remains concerned that Jews are focussing too much on trying to understand the work of God as done by angels rather than by Christ. So the chapter begins with these words; *'in case we drift away from it ... pay greater attention to what we have heard'* (2:1). This states the concern in a different way; as time goes some are too quickly forgetting the substance of God's revelation in Christ and speculating about angels instead of setting their faith on the rock of Christ. Hebrews is calling Jewish people back to the same Gospel of Christ as taught by Paul and the other apostles, a Gospel we are able to read today in the New Testament (not available when Hebrews was first written!).

Although this passage was written originally for Jewish Christians, we must surely be aware that all Christians, not just Jews, are capable of getting lost on the pathway of faith. Verse 1 is a good text from which a preacher may appeal to God's people to stand firm in faith! More than that, the rest of this passage is a strong appeal to readers to keep the Gospel revelation of God in sharp focus. The Gospel is no loose philosophical or spiritual matter to be shaped and moulded by people according to their circumstances and world affairs. Hebrews is clear; the Gospel is one work of God through His Son, and it cites evidence to back up the claim.

The strong appeal

At this point, it is worth looking closely at the strong appeal made in the one sentence which makes up verses 2 and 3. This is one long question asking the readers of Hebrews to examine whether they care about the Gospel. It begins by speaking of, *'the message spoken by angels'* which is *'proven valid'*. But what is this revelation? The answer to this is clearer as we read on, especially as it says *'every sin or disobedience has its deserved consequence'* (2:2). Hebrews is of course referring to the Old Covenant of God's people, as summarised in the Jewish Law and way of life.

Judaism was set up as a legalistic way of life whereby sin was, if possible, eliminated; if you kept the Law you avoided sin, because the Law defined every sin. Now Jews knew from infancy and understood that sins separates people from God. Their lives were to be devoted to avoiding sin, and if they failed, the Law even provided ways of appeasing God's wrath (see the book of Leviticus).

However, the Gospel message told Jews that God's only complete answer to the problem of sin was to be found in Jesus, and Hebrews therefore asks Jewish Christians where their allegiance lies. How do they think they can 'escape' the problem of sin (2:3) if they do not 'care about the greats salvation' they have received through God's Son, meaning Jesus. The point is this, and I now put this strong appeal in different words; 'please don't wander back into the legalism of Jewish religion and turn your back on the mercy of God you claim to have accepted in Christ!'

While this could be considered as the main message of this passage, there is yet more. Inside these verses, and verses 2 to 4 in particular, Hebrews backs up the appeal with a classic threefold testimony.

The threefold Testimony: No 1

We should not be surprised that after the sevenfold Scripture quotes of Hebrews 1, the next chapter contains a threefold 'testimony' to the work of God. This is, presented as 'testimony' or 'evidence' of the truth of God's Gospel revelation of salvation (see verse 4 in particular).

As we have already seen, verse 2 speaks about the Old Covenant revelation of God as summarised in the Law; but the author is unashamed to cite the roll of angels in God's past revelation (2:2). He would like to say less about angels not more but will not lie; they have always been God's faithful messengers! The point here is that the Old Covenant is the first 'testimony' of God's work in the world. The Old Covenant may have been superseded in Christ, but it is still an important and significant part of God's revelation, with much to teach us.

The Threefold Testimony: No 2

The second testimony to the Gospel becomes obvious in verse 3; it is the preaching of the Gospel 'which we first received through the preaching of the Lord, and has been confirmed by those who saw Him' (2:3). It is interesting to read here that Hebrews regards Jesus as the first 'preacher' of the Gospel, and the later preaching of the apostles is the 'confirmation' of this preaching. You will find a similarly close connection between the ministry of Jesus and the preaching of the early church in the letters of Paul, but expressed a little differently (e.g. read Paul's explanation of how he receives the Gospel from Christ, Galatians 1:13-2:14). All this evidence implies that after the life and death of Christ, early Christians, including Jewish Christians, were at pains to keep the preached Gospel as authentic as they could to what was remembered of Christ.

In looking at this it is surely worth touching base with the main point of this passage. How can anyone escape the consequences of sin if they do not value the historic preaching of the Gospel, consistently based on the evidence of the apostles and the preaching of the church? It remains a crucial and challenging point, and one to be preached.

The Threefold Testimony: No 3

Verse 4 is a wonderful and powerful scripture, speaking of the evidence God provides to prove to us that His Gospel is true and valid. I strongly suspect that in using the phrase 'God has added to His testimony', Hebrews means that having shown the world the evidence of His

saving love through the life, death and miraculous resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, God does more! He releases the Holy Spirit amongst us doing '*signs and wonders, works of power, and gifts of the Holy Spirit*' (2:4)!

How amazing! Paul writes extensively in his letters about the work of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts, and he tells us that these are essential features of the work and life of the early church. It would surely be rather strange if we concluded that having in Scripture the evidence of the Old and then the New covenant of God in Christ Jesus, we think we are able to go it alone and do the work of the Church without the Holy Spirit! In truth, all people throughout the last two millennia, have depended on the evident power of God at work amongst them. The supernatural energy and uplifting presence of the Holy Spirit is God's gift to us; the least we can do is to receive and treasure them by using them!

Application

Discipleship issues

A complicated message?

We could be a bit confused by this passage, because there are at least two things going on within it. First, the strong appeal to Christians not to forget the basic Gospel and how it was delivered to them. Secondly, Hebrews presents an intriguing threefold 'testimony' to the Gospel; the Old covenant of the Law, the New covenant of Christ, and the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

I suggest that this is simple enough and worth remembering. Putting all this together, if God's people are not to lose sight of the truth of their heritage, they must focus on the authentic Gospel of Christ, as evidenced in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and as seen in the powerful work of the Holy Spirit amongst God's people today.

The Bible

How is it that God's people today so easily forget His Word the Bible? They forget it by not reading it or giving any personal time to getting to know it. Today, we all know about the pressures of work and family which mean that many an otherwise good Christians has no time to read the Bible. Unfortunately we also accept that for some, their knowledge of the Bible is based on their reactions to the preaching they hear; snippets of God's Word explained with zealous vigour may make a powerful sermon, but they can never replace the wisdom and pleasure of really knowing God's Word for oneself. Who will learn this lesson?

The Holy Spirit

If you visit some churches today you would be hard pushed to say that the Holy Spirit of God has any place. He may be mentioned because standard liturgies of the church speak of Him; He may be invoked, perhaps when we want to tell people that the bread and wine at communion is something special; but mention the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, and the world falls apart for some as stern accusations and allegations of spiritual manipulation fly at speed!

When will we learn that what is said about the Holy Spirit in the Bible is important and relevant; both the powerful evidence of the spiritual gifts (all of them without question) and the carefully worded advice offered by Paul when advising the church about the use of gifts in the context of

public worship (1 Cor. 14). When will we be ready, together with this passage in Hebrews, to accept the miraculous as part of life? For despite our science and culture, there remains a great deal in life that is frankly unexplained except by reference to God's miraculous hand at work. As our eyes are illuminated by the awesome works of God, the Gospel is demonstrated in our midst in power, and the Kingdom of God moves forward with the Gospel held high. Alleluia!

Questions for groups

- 1. What do you believe to be the main message of this passage; how does it affect you and how do you respond to it?*
- 2. Why is the Bible, Old and New Testaments (covenants), basic to the Christian faith? Why is it not possible for us to ignore the Old Testament and what it reveals of God?*
- 3. To what extent do works of the Holy Spirit affect your life and the life of your church? Discuss stories to illustrate this.*

Final Prayer

The majesty and the power of Your glory O Lord is beyond our comprehension. Yet You continually make Yourself available to us in surprising and helpful ways, showing us Your love and compassion. May we always be alert to Your presence and responsive to Your touch O Lord; AMEN.