

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 1

Watch Out For The Sidewash!

(Hebrews 1:1-2:4)

VERSE (to ponder and/or memorize)

"How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?" (Heb 2:3)

WHAT?

1. The Argument of the Passage in a Nutshell

The argument in this passage is actually quite straightforward. The Writer wants us to see how magnificent our Saviour is and how great our salvation is. In view of this, he warns us to treat him and the salvation he has procured for us with befitting respect.

Let's appreciate the logic of his argument by breaking it down into premises:

Premise 1. The Son is God's final, completely accurate Word. The Writer starts with a grand statement portraying the Son as God's ultimate Word, who shares his very nature and is co-creator and co-sustainer of the universe (1:1-4).

Premise 2. He is superior to the angels. His position at the right hand of the Father indicates that he is superior to the angels (who were very highly regarded at the time). The title "Son" is already a designation of his higher honour. While on the subject of the angels, he strings together seven Old Testament passages that reinforce his point (1:5-14; Psa 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; Deut 32:43; Psa 104:4 [LXX]; 45:6, 7; 102:25-27; 110:1).

Premise 3. The angels were instrumental in the giving of the law. This is declared in Scripture and was common cause at the time (Deut 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53; Gal 3:19).

Premise 4. *The law (mediated by angels) was binding and violations received just punishment.*

Premise 5. *The salvation mediated by the Son (who is greater than the angels) is vastly superior to living under the law.*

Conclusion: *Therefore, we cannot expect to escape if we neglect such a great salvation?* In view of this, we ought to give the most careful attention to what we have heard so that we don't drift away from it.

In short: *If* as God's ultimate word, the Son is superior to the angels,
and

If the angels were instrumental in giving the law,
and

If those under the law were punished for disregarding it,
then

How can we possibly escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

2. What a Grand Opening!

The opening statement of the letter is, according to William Barclay, "the most sonorous piece of Greek in the whole New Testament."¹ It was the practice of the great Greek orators to weave words like the ones used here into the first paragraph of a speech. The alliteration and assonance (in the original) would arrest the attention of the readers. The opening words are, "*Polumerōs kai polutropōs palai . . .*" If we retain the order of the Greek text, the first line reads, "In many parts and in various ways in times past, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets . . ." The Writer felt that since he was going to speak of God's supreme revelation to humankind, he must clothe his thought in the noblest language possible.

The KJV, while changing the word order, manages to retain something of the grandeur of this opening sentence: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake unto our fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" Our NIV is more prosaic, but does accurately convey the meaning of the verse: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . ."

¹William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 1.

As rich and as varied as it was, God's revelation through the prophets was fragmentary. Each prophet tended to highlight an important aspect of God's nature. The portrayal was valid, but it was necessarily partial and incomplete. But the time of fulfilment has arrived and God has spoken to us in his Son. The picture is complete, and we are able to see exactly what God is like (John 1:18; 14:8-9; Col 1:15). To reinforce this thought the Writer piles up seven clauses that leave the identity of the Son beyond doubt.

3. How Can We Possibly Doubt His Deity?

Look at the powerful imagery in these assertions:

"In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son . . .
whom he has appointed heir of *all things*,
though whom also he *made the universe*."
The Son is the *radiance of God's glory*,
the *exact representation* of his being,
sustaining all things by his powerful word."

John Bunyan was right when he said: "If Jesus Christ be not God, then heaven will be filled with idolaters."

4. The Son's Redemptive Work - A Précis

The author will have much to say about what Jesus accomplished for us. Here he states simply, "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." This highlights his atoning sacrifice and the exaltation of Jesus after his ascension but, in a sense, everything is contained in this statement. To make purification for sins, he had to become human in the first place: "He had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way." He needed to identify with us fully, being "tempted in every way just as we are--yet without sin." Having learned obedience from what he suffered, once made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who obey him." It was as a genuine human being that he died, so "making atonement for the sins of the people" and "destroying him who holds (held) the power of death--that is, the devil." In so doing, "he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." For this reason, "Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised new inheritance." One day "he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." All this is presaged in that compact statement

in verse 3: "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

5. The Worshipping Angels

The description in the first three verses leads the Writer to a highly significant assertion. The fact the Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven demonstrates that he is superior not only to the prophets but also to the angels. Here the Writer strings together seven passages to substantiate his point that the Son is "as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs". It is important to remember that angels were highly respected at the time of writing (see Note 1).

The upshot of the Writer's use of these passages is that Jesus, not the angels, is referred to as God's Son. The angels are ministering spirits (1:14). Indeed the angels of God worship him. He is even referred to as God and as LORD (Yahweh; Psa 102). And to no angel did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Psa. 110:1).

6. How Might *We* Neglect So Great a Salvation?

It follows, in view of what the Writer has said so far, that God's ultimate Word through his unique Son deserves the most serious attention we can give it. We must therefore heed it carefully and make sure we don't drift away from it. The image employed here is highly appropriate. It refers not to a deliberate act of rejection, but to a more subtle attitude of carelessness or neglect. The word translated "drift away" was sometimes used in a nautical sense to describe a ship that lost its mooring and drifted past the harbour. William Barclay suggests that the first verse could be vividly translated: "Therefore we must more eagerly anchor our lives to the things we have been taught, lest the ship of life drift past the harbour and be wrecked."²

If angels were instrumental in the giving of the law, the message conveyed by the Son deserves even closer attention. And if every violation and disobedience of the law received just punishment, just imagine how serious it is to disregard God's final Word through his Son. Not only was the salvation announced by the Lord, but it was also confirmed by those who heard him and authenticated by God himself through signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.

²Barclay, *Hebrews*, 13.

So how may *we* disregard so great a salvation? If we fail to appreciate the lengths to which God has gone to provide this salvation, and have a less than adequate view of Jesus (his person, incarnation, life, suffering, present position and future destiny), we place ourselves in harm's way. Pressure mounts and, by compromise, we may drift away without even realizing it.

7. Watch Out for the Sidewash!

My late father loved swimming and he was determined that his children would be comfortable in the water. Every Friday evening he would take us down to a large swimming pool opposite Durban's North Beach. At an early age we learnt to swim. Soon we graduated from the still water of the swimming pool to the less tranquil water of adjacent beach (it can be really rough!).

My father always encouraged us to respect the sea. "Watch out for the backwash!" he would say. "It can take you right out of your depth before you know it. Never underestimate the strength of the crosscurrent. Be particularly careful of the sidewash. The backwash you can feel, as the water seems to rush out to sea, but the sidewash will take you off course. Before you know it you will be swimming outside the beacons placed there by the lifeguards to demarcate the area where it is safe to swim. Since you are not being dragged out to sea, you will not feel the need to resist the tide. Then, all of a sudden, you will experience how treacherous the sea can be. You'll be caught in a current so strong that you will not be able to resist it. Watch out for the sidewash!"

We experienced something of the ferocity of the sea but, as time went on, we became more confident and a little blasé. My Dad, who was a strong swimmer, always kept a watchful eye on us. "Back this way," he would shout as we drifted outside the beacons. But he knew that one day we would be there without him. Then we might be foolhardy enough to disregard his advice.

One Sunday morning his opportunity came. We were at the beach and an upcountry visitor got into difficulty beyond the breakers. Ordinarily he would have taken us away from such a disturbing scene. But he wanted us to see this one. The lifeguards were exhausted when they eventually brought the man to shore. He had almost drowned. I shall never forget the groans that came from that man. They turned him on his stomach and one of the lifeguards linked his hands under the man's diaphragm and bounced him around to expel the water from his lungs. We stood there wide-eyed as he coughed and spluttered, grunted and groaned. That's all it took. All the advice and all the warnings

came into sharp focus in that one incident. My Dad was wise enough not to say a word. He didn't need to. We had seen the sidewash go quietly about its insidious work. From that day on we never did swim outside the beacons!

NOTES

Angels

During the inter-testamental period, there was a fascination with angels and some elaborate theories were developed. There were believed to be millions and millions of angels who were organised into an elaborate hierarchy. Some rabbis could even say, "Every blade of grass has its angel." One sees, within the early church, the same tendency to become preoccupied with angels to the point of worshipping them (Col. 2:18-19; cf. Rev. 19:9-11). The ancients were in awe of angels.

The picture presented in Scripture is, however, sane and consistent. Both the Hebrew and Greek words translated angel mean "messenger". Angels are powerful and know their place in the scheme of things (2 Pet. 10-11; Jude 8-9). The closest we come to a definition is the statement at the end of this chapter, which describes angels as "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (1:14). When we are given a glimpse into the presence of God, we see him surrounded by angels (1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1-4; Rev.5:11). Angels appeared to people like Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Zechariah (Gen. 22:11; Ex. 33:2; I Kings 19:5; Zech. 1:11). They played an important role in the events surrounding the birth and the ministry of Jesus (Mt. 1:20, 24; 2:13; Mk. 1:13; Lk. 11:1, 13, 35, 38; 2:9, 13; 22:43). In the Acts we see angels opening prison doors and giving specific instructions to people at important points (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:7, 22). It is interesting to note that when they appeared, angels seemed human (Mt. 28:2-3; Acts 1:10-11).

So, when the Writer presents the Son as vastly superior to the angels, he was making a telling point. Who *could* be greater than the angels?

The Writer's Citation of Old Testament Passages

It would possibly be helpful to mention the way in which the Old Testament is quoted in the New. Some people are a little puzzled to find that a verse that referred, in the first place, to David or to Solomon is applied to Jesus. Long before the New Testament authors cited passages like these, it was accepted that in their fullest sense, they referred to the Messiah who would rule on the throne of David. Psalm 2 may well have been used as a coronation liturgy by the dynasty of David. But, by the middle of the first century BC, the words of the psalm were being quoted in the *Psalms of Solomon* with reference to the Davidic Messiah (Ps

2:7-9; cf. Isa. 9:6-7; Lk. 1:32). When we remember that God has a single plan of salvation, and that this plan centres in his Son, it is not difficult to see why the New Testament writers could see the ultimate fulfilment of these promises in David's greater Son (cf. Matt 22:41-46).

SO WHAT?

1. Just how high a view does the Writer have of Jesus?

The greatest of the prophets	The first and highest created being, of an angelic order	The eternal Son of God, as divine as God the Father	An exceptional man, raised to the level of universal pre-eminence
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What statements in 1:1-4 lead you to your conclusion?

2. After affirming the Son's unique position and role (1:1-3), the Writer sums up his entire high-priestly ministry in a single sentence. Can you locate the sentence?
3. According to chapter 1, what are angels?
4. What factors (stated in the Old Testament verses cited here) incline the Writer to place the Son above the angels (1:3-14)?
5. In a nutshell, explain the logic of the Writer in 2:1-4.
6. By the way, how do you know the Writer was not one of the twelve apostles?
7. Why does the Writer use the term, "*so great* a salvation"?
8. In terms of the (nautical) image the Writer employs ("drifting away"), what subtle danger do we, as believers, face?

NOW WHAT?

1. Do you think *your* picture of Jesus is adequate?

2. What factors in your life could cause you to drift away from the Lord (remember the almost imperceptible sidewash), neglecting the great salvation, which he procured at such huge cost?
3. Could this happen to any Christian, or only to some? Could it happen to you?
4. What precautionary steps ought we to take to make sure that we don't drift away from what we have heard?