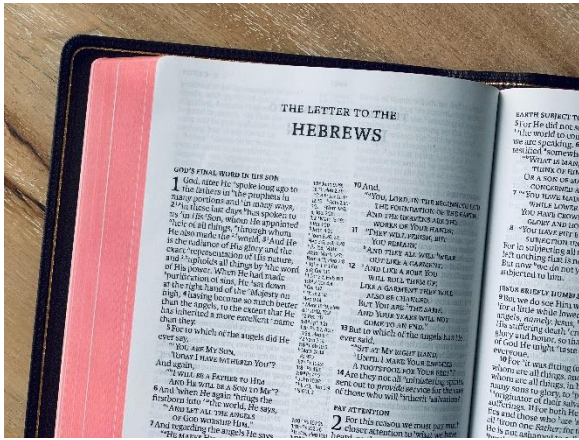


Food for Thought— Highlights in the book of Hebrews

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Although the book of Hebrews was clearly written with Jewish believers in mind, its rich teaching has informed and deepened believers—both Jews and Gentiles—through the centuries. Its beauty and its high Christology puts it into a category with John’s writings. That is, it gives us a beautiful portrait of Christ—of who He is, His nature, and His work. I love this book, so I thought I’d make this Food for Thought a collection of just a few highlights from Hebrews (and it is a very short and incomplete list, for there is far more in Hebrews than I could write about in just a few pages).

Chapter 1

God, who at various times and diverse manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.... (verses 1-2)

In these beautifully written opening verses, we notice that the very first word in this book is "God." God is at the beginning of Hebrews, just as He is at the beginning of all things.

In that sentence we are told what God has been doing. He has been speaking to us. This is important, for it shows that He desires to communicate with us (which in turn means He cares about us). This is something our hearts long to know.

The fact that He has been speaking to us in a variety of ways ("diverse manners") is also worth noting because we often think that God will always do things the same way, but He doesn't always. We can't put Him in a box.

And this passage tells us that God's most complete message to us is Jesus. His ultimate word is given by means of the incarnation, by the Godhead bursting into our world in human form. This person--Jesus--is God's message. Just as John says "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," Hebrews says God's consummate way of speaking to us was through Jesus—His words, His deeds, and His life.

Let's look at verse 9 (which quotes Psalm 45, a messianic psalm): ***Thou has loved righteousness and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, has, anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.***

What sort of person was Jesus? Verse 9 reminds us that the Lord really cares about right and wrong (this is another thing we long to know). It also says that His existence (and His presence in our lives) is also earmarked with joy. It is interesting that if we find ourselves becoming numb to right and wrong or if we find ourselves drifting away from joy--either of those things--it can be a sign that we are drifting away from Him. And even if we are drifting just a little, we need to change course and head back toward Him.

Note the beauty of verses 11-12 (quoting Psalm 102). ***They [the Heavens and the earth] shall perish, but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old like a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed, but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.*** The impermanence of the things of this world is contrasted with God's everlasting nature. And it is done so through a touching image: the earth will grow old and will be folded up like a garment, and carefully put away (as we might gently fold and put away our winter clothes when spring comes).

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, verses 9-10, we see the reminder that the Lord was completely willing to be made "low" for us and to suffer. There is also the beautiful attestation that He would "taste death for every man" and that through that, He would be "bringing many sons to glory." We also see in this passage one of the beautiful names for Jesus given in Hebrews, "the Captain of their [and our] Salvation." And we are told in no uncertain terms that He is "not ashamed to call them [and us] brethren," an important reminder that He is our brother, that He sees us

as family, something Jesus stressed in his earthly ministry by so often referring to God as "the Father" and "our Father."

In verses 14-15, the theme of the Lord's rescue mission continues. He became flesh so that through death He could defeat the one "who had the power of the death" (the devil) and rescue the people who **"through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."** Here we see the compassion of God both in the Lord's unwavering decision to free mankind and in the poignant description of the plight of mankind. Not only do people die, we see here, but Satan successfully robs as many people as he can (he comes to rob, steal, and destroy) of happiness in this life through their consuming fear of death (and attendant hopelessness). But because of Jesus, we no longer need to fear death, and death is no longer the end of the story.

In verses 17-18, the high Christology continues. We see here, as we do over and over in this book, the compassion and self-sacrificial nature of Jesus. He chose to be made "like His brethren" in every way, including being tempted and tested, in order to be able to reach and aid us. ***Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour [reach and aid] them that are tempted.***

Chapter 4

This theme of the high priest continues in Chapter 4, verses 14-15, where Jesus is called "a great high priest that is passed into the Heavens." The importance of his humanity is also emphasized again, for He is described as "not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but [one who] was in all points tempted like we are...." We see here a priest who understands us as only someone who has walked in human shoes can. Yet He is also strong and has blazed a trail before us; He is the high priest who has punched an outbound hole in the sky for us, for He has "passed into the Heavens" ahead of us. And it is because He has gone before us and is waiting for us there that we can come "boldly before the throne of grace" to "obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Just before that, in verses 12-13, the portrait includes something else we must never forget—the power of the Word of God. ***For the word of God is living and powerful even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight; but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.***

In verse 12, does "the word of God" mean the scriptures (and the Holy Spirit speaking through them?), or does it mean Jesus Himself (for He is, as John says, "The Word")? I'd say both, but the main thing is that, either way, nothing in our minds or hearts can hide from Him. We may be able to hide our faults and needs from ourselves, but not from Him. We are told that the Word is "quick [alive] and powerful" and incredibly sharp--able to see and pierce the boundaries between "soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the Heart." And, we are told, "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." Yikes. *That* is power. He sees everything, including seeing right through our excuses and our pride (things to which we are usually quite blind) yet also can no doubt see the circumstances and injuries that have made their impact upon us too (and no doubt bears those mercifully in mind and knows how much weight to give them). This should leave us awestruck (yet strangely comforted too perhaps--because we don't have to explain anything to Him; He sees it all and knows what to do about it all).

Chapter 7

Note chapter 7, verses 24-25: ***But this man, because He continueth ever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing He ever lives to make intercession for them [for us].*** Jesus exists outside time and thus His work as our mediator and intercessor is outside of time too, continuous. This echoes Revelation's description of the Lord as the Lamb that was "slain before the foundation of the world." And who is not glad to be told that Jesus can save us "to the uttermost"!?

Chapter 8

As we move into Chapter 8...we see the New Covenant and its contrast with the Old Covenant beautifully described in verses 10-11 (which are in turn quoting Jeremiah 31): *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brothers, saying 'Know the Lord'; for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest, For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.*

Part of this prophecy about the New Covenant has been fulfilled, for the Holy Spirit has indeed come to live within the Hearts of believers. And this has brought about a monumental shift. In the Old Testament, as my father has often pointed out, the Holy Spirit would "fall upon" a person, but in the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit resides "inside" a person. This sea change is evident in the transformation from Peter-before-Pentecost to Peter-after-Pentecost. It is important for us to remember that God can truly change us in ways we would've never thought possible.

And the picture this prophecy paints becomes yet more beautiful, for at some point, we are told, a day will come when there will be no more need to lead people to the Lord. For all will know Him. When exactly will this be? And how? I don't know. And trying to come up with a theory about it would almost certainly end in error and bear bad fruit. But what is certain is that this is a promise of great hope.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 explains that the Old Testament sacrificial system and priesthood were just a picture or shadow of the real thing to come. In the Old Testament, when the high priest made the annual sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the nation, as my father often mentioned, the thing which happened to the sins was described as "being covered." The sins were covered up, like spreading a blanket over them. In Christ, in the New Covenant, however, the sins are not just covered, they are taken away. I love verse 4, which makes it clear that **"it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."** The blood of bulls and goats was a picture, reminding us that sin is costly and that something must be done about it. But the blood of animals couldn't really change anything. Even if I myself were to die for my sins, my death might be justice, but it couldn't really undo the sin. This verse's plain declaration that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin is like a signpost. To actually "take away" sin would require something on a cosmic level, something neither I nor a bull could ever do. But Jesus could.

Chapters 11 and 12

The Faith Hall of Fame of Hebrews 11 is instructive. Not only does it give us a pretty long list (even though the passage itself tells us that it is very much only a partial list) of people in whose lives God worked, but it also gives us a list of the sorts of things those people did. And it is important for us to note that the list includes both gifts of miracles and the endurance of suffering. We can err on one end of the spectrum by thinking and teaching that there are no miracles, and we can err on the other end of the spectrum by thinking and teaching that there is no suffering. This passage reminds us that both can glorify God and be an opportunity for light to shine in a dark world. In verses 33-37 we see the people of ***God subduing kingdoms, stopping the mouths of lions, waxing valiant in fight, obtaining promises, receiving their dead raised to life again***, and much more. We see them, however, also at other times being ***mocked, being tortured, wandering destitute, being imprisoned and being slain***. And we are poignantly told that these people were ones ***"of whom the world was not worthy."***

We are also told that all these people in the past are like an audience rooting for us as we run our own long-distance race in this life. Thus, we have a portrait not only of Jesus in this epistle, but also, in this passage, a portrait of His people. And in His followers, we sometimes see glimpses of Him (reminiscent of how the chief rulers in Acts 4:13 noticed the mark of Jesus on His disciples).

Then we are told what to do in our long-distance race. We are reminded that in order to run our race well, we need to lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily besets us. It's important for us to realize that some things *will* weigh us down and hinder us if we don't look for them and get rid of them. The passage also is a reminder that these things *can* be laid aside (with the Lord's direction and strength). We are then given our

final and most important instruction--to keep our eyes on Jesus during our race. And the camera now turns away from us and zooms back in on Jesus.

Wherefore, seeing we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our Faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame....

We are told to keep our eyes on Him, the one who was able to endure the cross because of the joy it gave Him to know what He was accomplishing for us. We are told also, almost parenthetically, that He cared nothing at all about the earthly shame of the cross—the shame in the world's eyes connected with punishment, crime, and death--for He knew that what He was doing was more than worth it. (The older meaning of the word "despise" is not "to hate or detest" but "to see something as having no value"). Jesus saw both earthly acclaim and earthly shame as having no importance. Saving us, on the other hand, was of utmost importance and gave Him joy in the midst of His pain.

Also in this passage we are given an additional name for the Lord—"The Author and Finisher of our Faith."

Chapter 13

One of my father's favorite verses is Chapter 13 verse 8: ***Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.*** This is surely another key reminder. There has never been, and will never be, a time where Jesus is not with us, and He will always be Himself.

Notice also verses 11-13: ***For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.*** These verses remind us of another aspect of who our Lord is. In the sacrificial system, the animal sacrificed on behalf of the entire nation on the annual day of atonement--because it was the representation or embodiment of sin--was not cooked and eaten by the priests or anyone else. After it had been sacrificed, it was carried "outside the camp" (outside the city or community) and burned, along with other refuse among the smoldering trash heaps there. Jesus likewise, because He was the sacrifice as well as the High Priest, suffered outside the camp. It is no accident that He and the thieves were taken just outside Jerusalem for the crucifixion. The "outside the camp" setting corresponded to the disgrace of the nakedness, the criminal status, the torture, and the execution. Hebrews thus gives us also this picture of Jesus—the one who went outside the camp for us, cut off from the respectable community, willing to become refuse for us. And we are reminded that we also are to be ready to go outside the camp and join Him there. Sometimes we will have to forego the respect and admiration of the world in order to do what He values instead of what the world values.

We are also told in verses 15-16 of other sacrifices—the sacrifices *we* can offer and which truly please God—giving praise, being thankful, doing good, and sharing our material goods. These sacrifices are more important than we often think. Being thankful, for example, may not sound significant, but it is. Note that in Romans chapter 1, it is un-thankfulness that starts mankind down some dark roads. Studies have shown, by the way, that the areas of our brain which are in action when we are resentful or bitter are the same areas in action when we are thankful. The two things—thankfulness and resentment—can't effectively happen at the same time. Thankfulness blocks resentment (and vice versa) physiologically. Thankfulness, then, is not a mushy thing. It is an offensive weapon against toxic thoughts and toxic messages. And, thankfulness is something that simply pleases God, something He appreciates (think of how we feel when someone actually notices something we did and says something positive about it).

I will close with verse 20, which gives us more names for the Lord, more dimensions to add to His portrait—He is "**the God of Peace,**" "**that Great Shepherd of the Sheep**" and the one who has brought about an "**everlasting covenant.**"