

THE EPISTLES TO THE HEBREWS

HEBREWS 1:1-4:13, THE SUPERIORITY OF THE PERSON OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

- A. Outline of Hebrews (to be finalized at completion of Hebrews study)
1. The superiority of the person of Christ (1:1-4:13)
 - a. Christ has the superior message (1:1-2a)
 - b. Christ is the superior person (1:2b-3)
 - c. Christ is superior to angels (1:4-2:18)
 - 1) Evidence from the Old Testament (1:4-14)
 - 2) First warning passage (2:1-4)
- B. Review of Hebrews 1:4-14
1. Zane Hodges, *That the readers were under external pressure there is little reason to doubt... Here the writer reminded them that the final victory over all enemies belongs to God's King and that the angels presently serve those who are destined to share in that victory, that is, to "inherit salvation."*
 2. R. Kent Hughes, *Our superior Christ has assigned his angels to minister to you. And if he wills, he can deliver you anytime and anywhere he wishes. Christ is superior to everything. He is adequate in your hour of need. You must believe it, and trust him with all you are and have.*
- C. Comments on Hebrews 2:1-4
1. Zane Hodges, *The writer now paused in his exposition to address the readers with the first in a series of five urgent warnings. (The others are in chaps. 3-4; 5:11-6:20; 10:19-39; 12.) This one is the briefest and most restrained of all of them, but is nonetheless solemn.*
 2. Donald Hagner, *These four verses provide a parenthetical exhortation, the first of a series of such exhortations following the author's well-designed style and method. He will not discuss theology in the abstract, but constantly calls his readers to its practical significance and to the appropriate response. He writes indeed as an accomplished theologian but also as a preacher with distinct pastoral concerns.*

HEBREWS 1:4-2:18, JESUS CHRIST IS SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

HEBREWS 1:4-14, FIRST WARNING PASSAGE

- A. The writer warns against drifting away from the Gospel (1)
1. Readers of the epistle are to take seriously what has been said concerning the superiority of Christ (1a), **Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard,**
 - a. *Therefore,*
 - 1) The writer encourages the readers to remember what was just said concerning Jesus.
 - a) The Son is the superior Spokesman (2a), *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*
 - b) The Son is the Heir of all creation (2b), *whom he appointed the heir of all things,*
 - c) The Son is the Creator of the world (2c), *through whom also he created the world.*
 - d) The Son is the full revelation of God (3a), *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,*
 - e) The Son is the Sustainer of the universe (3b), *and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*
 - f) The Son is the Redeemer from sin (3c), *After making purification for sins,*
 - g) The Son reigns as King of Kings (3d), *he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,*
 - 2) Comments
 - a) Donald Hagner, *Our author's argument is that a proper assessment of the Son (this is the force of therefore) will result in the recognition of the truth and the supreme importance of the Christian message (what we have heard) and will also encourage faithfulness to that message.*
 - b) Zane Hodges, *The truth he had just enunciated has important implications. The therefore shows that this admonition arose directly from the preceding material.*
 - c) Thomas Constable, *...since Jesus Christ is greater than the angels we should take the revelation that has come through Him seriously.*

- b. *we must pay much closer attention*
 - 1) It means *to be in a continuous state of readiness to learn and respond accordingly.*
 - 2) Acts 8:6, *And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.*
 - 3) 2 Peter 1:9, *And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,*
 - 4) The warning is directed to Christians, not only to the readers but to the writer, as well. Note, the first word of the warning is *we*.
 - 5) William L. Lane, *...from the fact that Christ is greater than the angels it follows logically that the revelation delivered through the Son must be regarded with the utmost seriousness...If God, in the final period of history, has spoken to us his ultimate word in the Son (1:2a), then we must pay the closest attention to what has been heard (2:1).*

- c. *to what we have heard*
 - 1) This refers to not only what was written in Hebrews 1 but also what they had been taught.
 - 2) The kernel of truth is the Gospel which must not only be heard and understood but received and retained.
 - 3) Ray Stedman, *The remedy urged is pay more careful attention to the things heard (from the Son). This would suggest the frequent reading or hearing of the four Gospels, which contain the actual words of Jesus, and a repeated and careful reading of the further exposition in the Epistles.*

2. The warning is to not drift away from what was written (1b), ***lest we drift away from it.***

- a. *drift away*
 - 1) The word means *to slip or drift away.*
 - 2) Louw-Nida, *It is also possible to render He 2:1 as, so that we will not gradually give up believing what we have believed in the past.*
 - 3) A paraphrase of verse 1 by William Barclay, *Therefore, we must the more eagerly anchor our lives to the things that we have been taught in case the ship of life should drift past the harbour and be wrecked.*
 - 4) *It refers to the truth concerning Christ.*

- b. Comments
 - 1) William L. Lane, *The language implies that the community had grown lax in their commitment to Christ and were neglecting the Christian message...The writer warns his readers that they are in danger of losing sight of the reality of Christian salvation.*
 - 2) Thomas Constable, *This is a warning against apostatizing, departing from truth once held. All the warnings in the Bible against following false teachers are similar to this one in their intent. If we do not diligently remain in the truth—and to do so we must know it and remember it—we will depart from it.*
 - 3) R. Kent Hughes, *That church's experience 2, 000 years ago intersects our lives in this way: drifting is the besetting sin of our day. And as the metaphor suggests, it is not so much intentional as from unconcern. Christians neglect their anchor—Christ—and begin to quietly drift away. There is no friction, no dramatic sense of departure. But when the winds of trouble come, the things of Christ are left far behind, even out of sight.*
 - 4) C. S. Lewis, *...if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?*
 - 5) Robertson McQuilkin, *I fear the Dark Spectre may come too soon—or do I mean, too late? That I should end before I finish or finish, but not well. That I should stain your honor, shame your name, grieve your loving heart. Few, they tell me, finish well...Lord, let me get home before dark.*

B. The message declared by angels was important (2-3a)

1. It was a reliable message (2a), ***For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable,***

- a. There is a comparison between the message declared by angels and that of Jesus Christ.
 - 1) *Since* ties the Mosaic Covenant to the Gospel.
 - 2) If the Jews trusted and obeyed a message delivered by angels, how much more should they trust and obey the message delivered by God's Son.
 - 3) William L. Lane, *The following three verses develop a comparison designed to reinforce the necessity of adhering to the Christian tradition. If disregard for the Mosaic law was appropriately punished, unconcern for the gospel must inevitably be catastrophic.*
 - 4) R. Kent Hughes, *... if something is true in a light or lesser thing, it is true in a heavy or greater thing.*

- b. *the message declared by angels*
 - 1) *message*
 - a) The Greek word used for *message* is *logos*.
 - b) There is continuity in the speaking of divinity, whether it be through angels or by means of the Son, the *logos*.
 - c) Of course, *logos* is the key identifier of the Son in John 1:1, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*
 - 2) *The message refers to the Mosaic Covenant.*
 - a) Acts 7:53, *you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.*”
 - b) Galatians 3:19, *Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.*
 - c) Raymond Brown, *The part played by the angels in the communication of the law was often discussed by Jewish teachers in the pre-Christian era. It appears in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) at Deuteronomy 33:2 where the text says that when the Lord came from Sinai ‘at his right hand were angels with him’...*
 - d) William L. Lane, *Sometime prior to the first century, the conviction spread that angels had played a mediatorial role in the transmission of the law...Near the end of the first century Josephus wrote, “And for ourselves, we have learned from God the most excellent of our teachings, and the most holy part of our law by angels or ambassadors.*
 - c. *proved to be reliable*
 - 1) It means *dependable, certain, firm*.
 - 2) This certainty may be seen in the following clause concerning judgment for disobedience.
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *For the Jews, these terms were not open to debate. For them the will of God was unalterable. It required obedience.*
2. Disobedience to the Law brought judgment (2b), ***and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,***
- a. *transgression*
 - 1) It means *an overstepping, a violation of the law*.
 - 2) It may be understood as an act of commission, knowingly disobeying.
 - 3) William Barclay, *There is a line drawn both by knowledge and by conscience, and to step across it is sin.*
 - b. *disobedience*
 - 1) It means *to refuse to listen*.
 - 2) It is an unwillingness to hear and obey.
 - 3) William Barclay, *It is the deliberate shutting of the ears to the commands and warnings and invitations of God.*
 - 4) William L. Lane, *Both...involve a deliberate rejection of the divine will.*
 - c. *just retribution*
 - 1) It means *punishment, a just penalty*.
 - 2) Old Testament retribution note in Hebrews.
 - a) Hebrews 3:17, *And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?*
 - b) Hebrews 10:28, *Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.*
 - 3) Comments
 - a) Thomas Constable, *Under the Old Covenant the connection between sin and punishment was clear and direct.*
 - b) Zane Hodges, *...there were severe penalties for infractions of its demands, the readers could not suppose there would be no penalties for infractions against the New Covenant.*
 - c) P. E. Hughes, *If the breakers of the law did not go unpunished, certainly despisers of the gospel cannot expect to do so.*

3. Neglecting the Gospel of grace will bring judgment (3a), *how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*
 - a. The writer again uses a rhetorical question for emphasis.
 - 1) The response is that no escape is possible.
 - 2) Judgment is certain.
 - b. *escape*
 - 1) It means *run away, seek safety in flight*.
 - 2) Romans 2:3, *Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?*
 - 3) Hebrews 12:25, *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 will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.*
 - c. *neglect*
 - 1) It means *to be unconcerned, disregard, ignore, careless*.
 - 2) 1 Timothy 4:14, *Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.*
 - 3) Warren Wiersbe, *More spiritual problems are caused by neglect than perhaps by any other failure on our part. We neglect God's Word, prayer, worship with God's people (see Heb. 10:25), and other opportunities for spiritual growth, and as a result, we start to drift.*
 - d. *such a great salvation*
 - 1) *Salvation means deliverance which true religion bestows.*
 - 2) 1 Peter 1:9, *obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*
 - 3) Hebrews 1:14, *Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*
 - 4) Hebrews 6:9, *Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.*
 - 5) William L. Lane, *...a salvation as great as this,* " simply means that they are faced with greater responsibility and greater peril...*The character of the message of salvation received by the congregation is defined by the fact that God addresses people no longer through the agency of the angels, but through the Lord, who is his unique Son.*
 - e. Questions for consideration
 - 1) Does *we* refer to the saved or unsaved?
 - a) It refers to the saved.
 - b) Zane Hodges, *The "we" which pervades the passage shows that the author included himself among those who needed to pay close attention to these truths.*
 - c) Thomas Constable, *The most natural conclusion is that genuine Christians are in view in this warning, not unsaved professing Christians. The writer gave us no clues in the text that he had in mind unsaved professing Christians. Everything he said can be true of genuine believers.*
 - d) Joseph C. Dillow, *Since the writers themselves never explicitly say that they feel their audience is a mixture and since they everywhere make statements to the effect that they are talking to genuine Christians, we have no warrant for reading into their otherwise clear statements qualifications which they themselves never make.*
 - 2) Does *escape* refer to hell or discipline?
 - a) It refers to discipline.
 - b) Thomas Constable, *The writer did not specify the punishment, but it cannot be loss of salvation since Scripture specifically states that we will not lose our salvation...*
 - c) Joseph C. Dillow, *The neglected salvation is not our final deliverance from hell, that is not the salvation 'about which we are speaking.' Rather, it is the opportunity to enter into the final destiny of man, to reign with Christ over the works of God's hands (Heb. 2:8–9).*
 - 3) Is this a warning to not reject salvation?
 - a) No, it is a warning not to neglect the salvation one has received by faith in Christ alone.
 - b) Thomas Constable, *The warning is against neglecting, not rejecting, salvation.*
 - c) Warren Wiersbe, *He [the writer] is not encouraging sinners to become Christians; rather, he is encouraging Christians to pay attention to the great salvation they have received from the Lord.*

- f. A disclaimer
- 1) The intent of this study is not to weaken the warning passages in Hebrews but to reconcile them to Scripture.
 - 2) One must affirm that salvation is a gift and rewards are for faithful service.
 - 3) Note 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*
 - 4) A proper goal is to be faithful to Scripture in this study of Hebrews.
 - 5) The integrity of Scripture demands interpretation of difficult passages through interaction with clear passages.
 - 6) God's Word will never contradict itself.
 - 7) May we learn what God has for us with reverential fear.
- g. Scriptural reference concerning eternal security
- 1) John 10:28-29, *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*
 - 2) Ephesians 1:13-14, *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*
 - 3) 1 Peter 1:3-5, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*
 - 4) John 3:16, *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*
 - 5) Philippians 1:6, *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

C. The triune God confirmed the Gospel (3b-4), ***It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,***

1. It was confirmed by the proclamation of Jesus Christ

a. *It*

- 1) This refers to salvation in 3a.
- 2) Luke 22:29-30, *and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*
- 3) Zane Hodges, *The Lord Jesus Himself, while on earth, spoke much of His future kingdom and the participation of His faithful followers in that reign (cf., e.g., Luke 12:31–32; 22:29–30).*

b. *declared at first*

- 1) It means *to assert, proclaim at the beginning.*
- 2) Matthew 26:13, *Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.*
- 3) Donald Hagner, *The Son...is the one who first announced it (cf. Mark 1:1, 15). It is thus initiated by the authority of the one who stands with God over against all else that exists. There can be no greater authority than this to certify the truth of the church's message.*

c. *by the Lord*

- 1) The message of salvation is the story of Jesus Christ, the very Son of God.
- 2) Hebrews 1:2, *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.*
- 3) R. Kent Hughes, *Jesus proclaimed it! The angels mediated the Law, but Jesus was more than a mediator of the gospel. He was the divine Son, but he was also the incarnate Son, which makes his communication infinitely superior to that of the angels.*
- 4) William Barclay, *It came direct from Jesus himself. It does not consist of guessing and feeling our way towards God; it is the very voice of God himself which comes to us in Jesus Christ.*

2. It was affirmed by those who heard the message directly from the Lord.
 - a. *attested to*
 - 1) It means *to make firm, guarantee, affirm.*
 - 2) The message was affirmed.
 - 3) Walter Bauer, *the saving message was guaranteed to us.*
 - 4) 1 Corinthians 1:6, *even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—*
 - b. *by those who heard*
 - 1) Raymond Brown, *Like ourselves, the author of the letter cannot claim actually to have heard Christ preach, but confesses that it was attested to us by those who heard him. He rejoices in the testimony of eye-witnesses who remember the words and sayings of Christ during his ministry on earth.*
 - 2) R. Kent Hughes, *This primarily refers to the apostles attesting what Jesus said and passing it along from faith to faith through the succeeding generation (cf. Luke 1:2)...The church to which the book of Hebrews was written was in a far better position than we to hear confirmation from those who heard Christ because they were so close historically to the situation. Even if living in Italy as we think, they no doubt had firsthand, eyewitness confirmation.*
 - 3) The writer implies that he did not hear the message of the Gospel directly from the Lord. This would rule out the 12 apostles and Paul from being the writer of Hebrews.

3. It was confirmed by God the Father through miraculous events (4a), ***while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles***
 - a. *Signs*
 - 1) These are miracles that point to theological truths.
 - 2) Thomas Constable, *“Signs” emphasizes that the miracles signify something.*
 - b. *Wonders*
 - 1) These are miracles that appeal to the imagination.
 - 2) Thomas Constable, *“Wonders” emphasizes the reaction of awe that the miracles produced in those who observed them.*
 - c. *Various miracles*
 - 1) These are deeds of great power with the implication of supernatural force.
 - 2) Thomas Constable, *“Miracles” emphasizes their supernatural origin.*
 - d. *Comments*
 - 1) John Witmer, *Signs, wonders, and miracles authenticated the work of the apostles...*
 - 2) H. D. M. Spence, *The evidential counterpart to them (miracles) in our case is the continued attestation which God gives to the gospel in its living power on the souls of men, and its results in the world before our eyes.*
 - 3) William Barclay, *The moral miracles of Christianity are still plain for all to see.*
 - 4) Thomas Constable, *I think signs and wonders are less common in developed countries today because most of these countries have the complete Word of God. God now typically validates the gospel through His Word (cf. Rom. 8:16; 1 John 5:1–13). Occasionally we hear reports of miracles that validate the gospel, but they are usually in places where the Word of God is not as available.*

4. It was confirmed by gifts distributed by God the Holy Spirit (4b), ***and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.***
 - a. *gifts of the Holy Spirit*
 - 1) It is literally *distributions of the Holy Spirit.*
 - 2) Walter Bauer, *the various gifts proceeding from the Holy Spirit.*
 - 3) *Gifts* is implied in the Greek manuscript.
 - 4) 1 Corinthians 12:4, *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;*
 - 5) Ray Stedman, *...spiritual gifts are given to each believer by the Spirit as the continuing witness of the Spirit to the truth of the gospel.*

- b. *according to His will*
- 1) 1 Corinthians 12:11, *All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*
 - 2) William L. Lane believes this statement applies to God the Father, referring to all the confirmations, not just the distribution of the Holy Spirit, *The writer's final phrase qualifies the entire series, and not simply the last member of the series.*
 - 3) Donald Hagner, *Signs, wonders and various miracles were performed by him through the apostles. But the climactic sign of authenticity is the new outpouring of gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus, like Peter at Pentecost (see Acts 2:14–18) our author regards the Holy Spirit as the ultimate indicator of the fulfillment of God's promises and the dawning of the new era.*
- c. Examples of the distributions of the Holy Spirit may be seen in Acts 2.
- 1) Christians were gifted with the ability to proclaim the message to people in their native languages.
 - 2) Peter, a fisherman, was gifted with the ability to clearly proclaim the message with divine results.
 - 3) Christians were gifted with the motivation to serve one another and find favor with others.
- d. Comments
- 1) Raymond Brown, *He acts in grace; people need the gifts to serve and glorify him.*
 - 2) William L. Lane, *Since the purpose of this evidence is the validation that God has spoken definitively in Christ, unbelief and carelessness can only be regarded as the expression of an utterly incomprehensible hardness of heart.*
 - 3) Ray Stedman, *The authority from which the gospel flows include all three persons of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Son makes the full announcement of it and completes the basis for it through pain and blood; the Father works with him to confirm his word with signs and wonders; and the Spirit continues the confirmation by distribution of spiritual gifts.*
 - 4) Charles Spurgeon, *The miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were the seal that the gospel was no invention of man, but that it was indeed the message of God.*

CONCLUSION

- Warren Wiersbe, *Too many Christians today take the Word of God for granted and neglect it. In my pastoral ministry, I have discovered that neglect of the Word of God and prayer, publicly and privately, is the cause of most "spiritual drifting." I need not multiply examples because every believer knows that this is true. He has either experienced this "drifting" or has seen it in the lives of others. It is easy to drift with the current, but it is difficult to return against the stream. Our salvation is a "great salvation," purchased at a great price. It brings with it great promises and blessings, and it leads to a great inheritance in glory. How can we neglect it?*
- J. Dwight Pentecost, ". . . the doctrines the epistle presents, the warnings it delivers, and the exhortations it gives all were intended to prevent regression and to encourage continuous dynamic development toward spiritual maturity.
- R. Kent Hughes supplies concluding remarks, *Two things are in view here. First, all our attention must be focused on the supremacy of Christ...Second, paying closest attention to what we have heard means living in the revelation of God's Word...we must also remember the words which follow: These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)... These are crucial words and truths from which we must not drift!*