

# Hebrews

Series 1

## Lesson 3

### “Hebrews Chapter 2”

**Objective:** To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.

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**Materials:** The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

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#### Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God’s people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God’s word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

This chapter is an incredibly important chapter as it begins by making a comparison between the Old Testament, a message with a long and rich history, in writing, with the New Testament that often was not written and only passed on orally at this point. The author of Hebrews challenges his reader to pay special attention to the word that they have heard. There are many aspects of this that should challenge our view of the Old and New Testament canon as well as our understanding of how God communicated with those early members of the church and how he communicates with us today. In the ancient world, it was often the case that the most precious and important things were not those that were written down. They were the things that were passed on orally. Written documents could be stolen, destroyed, lost, and decayed over time. Some things were so precious that they were passed down orally with great care and diligence through special messengers or through families from father to son.

As we have already seen in the first chapter, the communication that is through the Son is superior to that delivered previously. Here in chapter one this line of reasoning will be examined more fully and the position that what has been

heard, will be advocated as the superior message (λόγος) over that which was delivered through the mediation of angels. At issue is not the form of the current writings, but the transmission agency. One came through the Son of God, the other through angelic beings. The focus here in chapter 2 is on the issue of salvation. Notice the focus on that which is heard, over that which has been delivered before the coming of the Son, in verse 1. The salvation that is spoken through the sending of His Son and spoken through His apostles is that which is to be paid attention to with extreme diligence. Jesus is the incarnation, the working out of the actual Word of God (the *Logos*). Even the Old Testament, that which was given through the agency of angels is to be seen anew, with fresh eyes, due to the revelation which came through the Son. The focus here is to pay attention, to listen.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the reasoning given in this chapter, the issue of penalty is brought to bear. The penalty (μισθαποδοσίαν) for failing to “pay attention” to what is heard will be far greater for those who drift away from that delivered by the Son (The Gospel Message) over that which was delivered by “angels” (the Old

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 135-136.

Testament). There are many stylistic similarities in Hebrews 2:1-4 and the first chapter of this writing. The writer begins with the oratorical imperative in verse 1 (“we must”) followed by a periodic sentence in verses 2-4 that comes in the form of a rhetorical question (an involved conditional sentence). There is also a lot of alliteration in the first two verses. In verse 1 this comes involving the “p” sound. Of course this is not replicated in English. In verse two, this alliteration involves the “l” and the “p” sound too. There are also other forms of alliteration used in all of these first four verses.<sup>2</sup> This usage of alliteration may have helped with remembering the material, but more than this it is a high style which would have challenged the reader to be engaged and to pay close and careful attention. It is what we might term fancy.

There is much to challenge us here. One of those challenges is that nowhere in the Old Testament is it recorded that the Law was mediated by angels. The nearest thing that we find to saying such a thing is the description of the Sinai theophany at the beginning of the Blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33:2):

**He said:**

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 57.


**The LORD came from Sinai,  
and dawned from Seir upon us;  
he shone forth from Mount Paran.  
With him were myriads of holy ones;  
at his right, a host of his own. NRSV.**

In the Septuagint the final clause of this verse is rendered: **at his right, angels with him.** NETS. In the Septuagint then there is a closer association of “angels” with the giving of the Law than there is in the Hebrew text (Masoretic Text).<sup>3</sup> In verse 1, and then on into verses 2 and 3 there is a grave warning given. Failure to “pay attention” to the Law could result in death. The idea conveyed here is that the transgression, or disobedience of this message sent through the Son would be expected to receive an even greater penalty as it is a greater message, delivered by a greater messenger. This message is to be received as the very word spoken from the mind of God through the agency of His blessed Son.

The argument made here is made from the lesser to the greater. The Old Testament Law is the lesser, being mediated as it was through angels. The messenger is important relative to the message. The more important message comes through the more


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<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), p. 67.



important messenger, in this instance the Son. God gave additional indications of the importance of this message, as if that might be necessary, by the “signs and wonders, and various demonstrations of power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The author here builds up the importance of their understanding of the superiority of this message. This is in order to aid in the understanding that there is no real comparison between what was offered as regards salvation in the Law as compared to the message of the Son. The readers are made aware of the extreme seriousness of this message with the words spoken at the beginning of verse 3, “how can escape after we neglect so great a salvation.” The expected answer is that no one will.

The Book of Hebrews does not focus on doctrinal error; “rather, the focus is upon apathy, indifference, neglect and inattention.” The focus is not upon doing what is wrong as much as it is upon doing nothing at all. This is a condition that has plagued the church from the very inception of the church all the way through to today. Apathy is perhaps more dangerous than almost all other sins, in part because it is so easy, you simply have



to do nothing.<sup>4</sup> Apathy destroys the church as people sit and do nothing, maybe as they see others doing nothing and do likewise. It is contagious as well as easy, when we see others doing nothing it is so easy to do nothing as well, to simply drift. The author of Hebrews is trying to awaken the sleepers and make them aware of the danger that lies ahead as they ignore the message brought through the Son. The danger is real, and the consequences of failing to heed the Gospel are more serious than the penalty that was received by disobeying the Law. Doing nothing is not an option. The Word of God calls for action. When God speaks even nothing obeys and becomes something as in the creation account when God calls light out of darkness.

As we move to verses 5-18 the exposition turns to a comparison of the Son with angels, demonstrating that the very same Jesus who was superior to the angels was made for a season lower than the angels. Even though in verse 5 it is made clear that God had made the world subject to Jesus, because of His regard for human beings, God made His Son lower than the angels for a time. The language used to make this point comes from Psalm 8:4-6 and

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<sup>4</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 63.

cited is here at 6b-8a and then interpreted in 8b-9. The point in this psalm is that it is not to the angels that the coming world is going to be made subject. The psalm provides no place for the future subjection of the world to angels. It is possible that readers could infer that angels are in some fashion involved in the governance of the present world, although that would not be the case in the coming world. Jewish traditions support that idea (cf. Deuteronomy 32:8<sup>5</sup> and Daniel 10:13, 20<sup>6</sup>). However, Hebrews does not develop any such notion. The “coming world,” in the context of Hebrews is the eschatological realm of salvation. It is referred to as “the age to come” (6:5), “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28), and “the city that is to come” (13:14).<sup>7</sup>

This “coming world” is a reality that will become the future and will reflect the sovereignty of God through His Son. The reality of this future though is not something to be just hoped for

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<sup>5</sup> **When the Most High divided the nations, as He divided the sons of Adam, He placed borders of the nations according to the number of the angels of God,** This translation is from the Septuagint translation and varies in terminology for the “angels.” In many modern translations they have “**according to the gods.**” This is not actually in the Masoretic Text, they correct the text. The actual text has “**sons of Israel.**”

<sup>6</sup> <sup>13</sup> **But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia, ....** <sup>20</sup> Then he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? Now I must return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I am through with him, the prince of Greece will come. NRSV.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 66-67.




and anticipated as something in the future, the community of Christ has already begun to experience its reality. The testimony that God has already given, referred to in 1:4 (“signs and wonders and various miracles and ... gifts of the Holy Spirit”) provides evidence of this reality even now (cf. also 6:5<sup>8</sup>).<sup>9</sup> This reality means that the people living under it will begin living even now as they would in the “coming world.” They will live under the rule of God and under the ways of that future kingdom even now. In this way they provide an additional witness to the truth of that reality. Those who choose to do this live like the great heroes of the faith lived and in this then, it can be said the “world is not worthy of them.” Their home is the realm of God, and they will not be crushed, destroyed, cowed, or persuaded to live in any other way than the way of the kingdom of God. That future kingdom has already broken into the present reality.

In Hebrews 2:6-9 we are shown three things: (1) the ideal of humankind is kinship with God and mastery of the universe, (2) the actual state of humankind at present is frustration instead of mastery; failure and not glory. In the present, mankind has

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<sup>8</sup> **and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come**, NRSV.

<sup>9</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 67.




become a slave rather than king. (3) the promise is that the actual has already changed into the ideal through Christ who can transform humankind into what they were meant to be. The suffering and glory of Jesus accomplish this. Psalm 8:4-6 is quoted in order to show what God had originally intended for human beings to have, governance over the created order. This was their original destiny. Psalm 8 speaks of the glory that God originally gave to mankind. This was a gift endowed by God. Jesus accomplished this destiny for humankind. We need to insure that we understand that the author's interest in the psalm was not merely to demonstrate the original destiny of mankind, but to move from that intent to its actual fulfillment in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

As this is fulfilled then, all things are subjected to the one man, Jesus, who accomplished this. He accomplished this through tasting death for everyone, opening up new possibilities: possibilities that make the original intent of God a reality. It is in Christ that the full import of the grace of God comes into view. Jesus allows hope that the original destiny of God for humanity is still possible. We can now, through His death, undertake to

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<sup>10</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 67.



become what God has called us to become. We can become His true image-bearers expressing the reality of His nature and His grace to all of creation. This is a high and noble calling that challenges us not simply to act in new ways, but to become something different from what we were before: to become like Jesus, to see the world like Jesus sees it, to seek the redemption of the world like Jesus did. This challenges us to become unselfish, humble, self-sacrificing replicas of Christ. We are called to be people who pour out their blood and their soul like Jesus, who suffer and wrestle to bring salvation to others like Jesus.

In 2:5-9 a critical theme is shown in the development of the Son's superiority over the angels. Christ is the definitive Word of God (crowned with glory and honor) because of his salvific death. This fact stands at the heart of the understanding of Christ. By suffering, Christ stood in the condition of those whom he came to save. Three scriptural quotations (verses 12, and 13) provide confirmation that the children that are led to salvation are brothers and sisters of Christ. Later on, in verses 14-18, what it means for Christ to share in their condition is clarified. Verse 10 serves a critical role in the discussion in that it ties the divine

world to the mundane world by acknowledging that the glorification of humankind is part of the divine plan and then by declaring that human suffering is involved as an essential preparation of the pioneer, Christ, of humankind's salvation. "It was fitting" ("Ἐπρεπεν") that though suffering many children would be brought to God.<sup>11</sup> It is in the passion of Christ that we see the heart of God laid bare; nowhere do we see the nature of God more fully, or more worthily, displayed than when we see Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).<sup>12</sup>

As we move to verse 11, we see the grace of God displayed in the bringing of many sons and daughters to Himself. Jesus sanctified, made holy, these children and for this reason they are God's children. They are united under the fatherhood of God and then in verses 12 and 13 we have three quotations from the Old Testament that are introduced as coming from Jesus Himself. In these three verses Jesus expresses His solidarity with his people. The first quotation is from Psalm 22:22, and no Christian of the first century will have failed to recognize Jesus Christ as the speaker. The first part of this Psalm is: **My God, my God, why**

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<sup>11</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>12</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 79-80.

**have you forsaken me?** NRSV. This was a psalm that was used by the early church as a testimony to the crucifixion. It is then natural that the writer of Hebrews would attribute the rest of the psalm to Jesus. The meaning of this first quotation is that Jesus has become the representative Head of the new humanity.<sup>13</sup>

The relevance of the second quotation is less obvious than that of the first. The second, like the third quotation, come from Isaiah 8:17-18. In the context of Isaiah these verses speak of the prophet's waiting for Yahweh, who at the time is hiding His face from the "house of Jacob." The hope of the prophet is that his own children will be able to be signs and portents in Israel. These verses come just before the section celebrating the accession of the messianic king: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2a). At verse 13a ("I will put my trust in him") is an expression of faith and reliance upon God. This is a characteristic that should be found in all of the children of God. Verse 13b cites only a portion of Isaiah's hope for his own children, and in Hebrews the citation indicates that there are some who have been given to Christ.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 72-73.

The theme of “children” in the third citation prepares us for verse 14, while the theme of brothers and sisters, and trust, prepares us for verse 17. Verses 14 and 15 form what is called a periodic sentence. This sentence affirms the incarnation and gives the purpose for the incarnation. The children and the Son share flesh and blood. There is however a difference in the Greek text in the tenses. The children “share” (the tense indicates a present and abiding condition); the Son “shared” (the tense indicates something that happened in the past and was completed in the past). Jesus shared the weakness and frailty of the human condition, but no longer.<sup>15</sup> This is an important theme in Hebrews and something critical for understanding why Christ had to suffer and die as a true human. Jesus was not some form of demagogue, or pretending to allow Himself to be killed. **He emptied Himself taking the form of a slave ...** (Philippians 2:7). He died in weakness as a true human being.

He did this in order to destroy the tyrant, who held the power of death, the devil and to free those who were held in slavery by their fear of death. Jesus, as the champion of God

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<sup>15</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 73-74.

defeats Satan. We then revert at verse 16 back to the contrast between angels and Christ in a fashion, but here the contrast is between angels and humankind (the descendants of Abraham). Jesus took on the nature (verse 17) of His brothers and sisters in order that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. As high priest He makes “atonement” (ἱλάσκεσθαι) for the sins of the people. Although the role as high priest is alluded to in the prologue (1:3), this is the first time that it is actually stated outright. This (the concept of the High Priesthood of Christ) will be a dominant theme throughout the rest of this writing. In addition, the characteristics of mercy and faithfulness will be developed.<sup>16</sup>

At verse 18, the pastoral concern of Hebrews is highlighted. Jesus went through the experience that other human beings have gone through. Because He has gone through this, He is able to “help” (βοηθῆσαι) those who are being “tested.” Those being “tested” in the context of Hebrews are the readers. Christ is there to help them in their time of testing. He has been through what they are currently experiencing and can help them through it too.

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<sup>16</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 75-76.




This chapter will set up much of what is to come, but even here we can see the powerful pastoral concern that the writer of Hebrews expresses for his audience. What he has written is meant to bring comfort, to encourage, and to challenge perseverance in his audience. It is no mere scientific treatise, it is through and through a book with a deep and passionate pastoral concern. The concern is to provoke the audience to action, to call them to avoid apathy, and to prevent their return to old and familiar ways. He challenges them to become like Christ and to recognize that this is going to mean more suffering and challenges, but it is the path to become what God called humanity to be from the beginning, His children taking part in ruling this world as true images of God as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.



# Synopsis

As this chapter begins the audience is challenged to recognize the importance of the message that they have heard and not drift away from it. This message is attested as critical because of its source, the Son. This message is more important than the Old Law which brought with it very severe punishment for any who were disobedient to it. None will escape punishment who ignore the message that came through the Son. If the fact that this message came through the Son were not enough it was also given credence by signs and wonders, various miracles and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Hebrews is written using a high style that was intended to challenge the reader to pay more careful attention.

At verse 5, the author begins to point out the greater importance of the message that came through the Son by making a comparison with the angels. He uses texts from the Old Testament to build his case, citing passages from Psalms and Isaiah that had messianic associations. In doing this the author also builds his case for the unique position of mankind in relation to the angels as well. Jesus took a position, for a time that was lower than the angels, but has been elevated to the place of honor above all. In




making Himself for a time lower than the angels and suffering for mankind Jesus tasted death for all and demonstrated the grace of God.

Through His pioneering efforts Jesus brought many children to God and He will proclaim their name before the congregation and act as their advocate, their High Priest. He destroyed Satan and the domination of the fear of death freeing mankind from this slavery to that fear. God came to the rescue of the children of Abraham and not to angels. Jesus is able to help us because He has been through what we are undergoing and overcame. He has been tested as we are now being tested. This passage challenges us to answer the call to action and to throw off apathy and inaction.

# Questions

1. Why do you think people today think that what is written is more important than what is spoken?
2. What are some instances where the spoken word can be extremely important today? Why is it important?
3. What do you think the penalty was for disobeying the Old Testament Law? Was it just, why, or why not?
4. At verse 3, what do you think it means not to “escape,” if we neglect so great a salvation? Why?
5. What are some things that provide you assurance in your salvation? Why?
6. What do you think it means to “hear” the testimony of God regarding Jesus?
7. Why do you think it is important to contrast Christ with angels?
8. What encouragement do you think we are intended to get from the fact that Jesus has been through what we are going through and has overcome?
9. Why was it a demonstration of the grace of God for Jesus to taste death for everyone?
10. Why do you think it was fitting to make the pioneer of salvation perfect through sufferings?
11. What do you think it means to be sanctified? Why do you think it is important?

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12. What do you think it means to be a brother, or a sister of Jesus?
  13. What do you think it means to be a child of God?
  14. What does it mean for Christ to destroy Satan?
  15. Why do you think living in fear of death is described as slavery in verse 15?
  16. What do you think the word “atonement” means? Why? Why is it important?
  17. What comfort do you think we are meant to have because Jesus is our High Priest? Why?
  18. What are some ways that you think Jesus is able to help us because He was tested Himself? Why?
  19. What are some ways that this chapter can help you to live differently as a Christian? Why?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

As we come to this chapter it is important to know that the view is presented that the importance of the messenger is related to the importance, and even the power, of the message. It is also important to know that just hearing something is not as important as doing something about what is heard. It is important to know that the Kingdom of God, though future has already begun. What are some ways that this challenges you?

## **Where is God in these words?**

It is important to understand that so often the perceptions of the nature of God in the past have been wrong. In these words, we see the nature of God, His heart, in that He suffers for His children. He suffers to bring them back to Himself, He does not give up on them and He continues to pursue them. Where do you see God in these words? How as a parent can you relate to God in His suffering for His children?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

The writer of Hebrews is not calling upon his audience to hunker down and wait for Christ to return. He challenges his audience to begin living the future in the here and now. He challenges his audience to understand what Christ has already done for God's children and to live like children of the King. He calls them out of apathy and drifting into inaction. What are some ways that you have a tendency to be apathetic in your Christian walk? What are some ways that encourage you to live your life more like Jesus? Why? How does knowing that Jesus has gone ahead of you provide you with courage to live differently each day?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

So often things around us can begin to seem mundane and ordinary and we can simply give into the struggle of only surviving. This chapter calls us to live lives that are different. This chapter calls us out of apathy and lethargy into a life of action. We are called to fulfill our original destiny and to govern this creation in the way that we were created to do. We are to act as God's children, as heirs of the King. What are some ways that you see God calling you to action in this chapter? What are some things that you had not noticed before about God's calling for you?