

Times of Disillusionment Hebrews 1-2

We are going to begin a new sermon series this morning on the book of Hebrews. I wanted to do a series that focuses our attention on Jesus as we begin this new year and Hebrews does exactly that. It's a book I've thought about preaching through for a long time and this just seemed like the right time to do it. We are going to try to cover the whole book in about 12 weeks, following the outline from John MacArthur's Study Guide on Hebrews. If you'd like to go more in depth, I highly encourage you to get a copy of it. You could use it for your own study or in a small group. You can order it online for about \$10, or I can order a copy for you. If you are a small group leader and want to use it in your group, the church will buy a copy for you.

Hebrews is a letter, but it's written a lot like a sermon. So it has a lot of details and deep theology along with practical application. Today we are going to tackle the first two chapters, which have a lot of information, but it all ties together into one main point. The people it was written to were going through what I would call a time of disillusionment in the faith. They had been Christians for quite some time, but because of things that had happened they were beginning to have some serious doubts about the gospel and they were questioning if what they had been taught about Jesus was true.

I think we too can go through times like that when we struggle with doubt and begin to question the things that we've been taught. It can happen when we focus all our attention on things in this world for a long period of time and forget about Christ. We get distracted and grow distant from him and open the door to doubts and questions. It can happen when we go through a long period of physical or emotional suffering or a traumatic experience like abuse or the death of a loved one. Suffering can knock our anchor loose and we can begin to question what we believe. It can happen when we learn or experience something that seems to contradict our beliefs and we can begin to wonder if anything we believe is actually true.

The whole book of Hebrews has to do with this and in the chapters we look at today the author is going to warn his readers how to guard against it. We can do things to prevent disillusionment from destroying our faith and today we are going to see how to do that.

First I need to fill in some of the historical background to this book so that we can understand what their disillusionment was about. These were Jews that this letter was written to and as we go through it you will see that it has a very distinctive Jewish flavor – that’s probably how it got the name of “Hebrews.” These were also Christians to one degree or another. Some of them were certainly born again and deeply devoted to Christ, but others were not and that too will become apparent as we work our way through the book. It was their Christian faith that brought them together and they had formed their own Jewish Christian community.

An important part of their history has to do with persecution. My guess is that these were people who used to live in or near Jerusalem but had been driven from their homes during one of the waves of persecution by the Jewish religious leaders and forced to relocate. Hebrews 10:32-34 says, “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property.” That was in their past, but they were still facing the danger of persecution and I think that was a major factor that played into their disillusionment.

Another factor probably had to do with what they believed about the Messiah before they became Christians. They were expecting the Messiah to be much different than Jesus was. They were expecting a political and military hero who would unite the Jewish leaders and people together to overthrow the Romans and set up an earthly kingdom that would have no end. That’s not at all what happened. Jesus didn’t elevate himself as a leader like they thought he would, instead he served the sick and poor. And he didn’t work together with the Jewish leaders, he confronted them about their hypocrisy. He didn’t set up an earthly kingdom and overthrow the Romans; he suffered and died on a Roman cross. And even when he rose again, he still didn’t do what they expected, in fact, he went to heaven and left his disciples in charge.

I think it may have been the combination of these unexpected things and the ongoing persecution they faced that began to create doubts and questions in their minds about whether or not the things they had been taught about Jesus by the apostles were actually true. They were suffering at the hands of the Jewish

leaders and possibly the Romans because they believed certain things about Jesus, but were those things really true? Was Jesus really God? Or was he just a prophet like Moses? That would sit a lot better with their persecutors and they began to believe it. They also began to believe that Jesus was inferior to angels. A couple of questions really seemed to bother them: If Jesus was God, why did he appear to be so human? And why would he suffer and die like he did? That didn't seem like something God would do. Disillusionment, doubt, and questioning were having their way and they were beginning to drift away from the faith; they were tempted to revert back to Judaism.

And that's where this letter comes in. The author is unknown, but it is obvious that he knew them well and had spent a lot of time with them and had been a significant spiritual leader among them. He wasn't with them anymore but had heard about the struggles they were having so he wrote this letter. And in the first two chapters he begins to address their doubts and questions and false beliefs right away. In his opening statement he makes it clear exactly who Jesus was.

Read Hebrews 1:1-4.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,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 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

So in this powerful opening statement the author sets up a direct contrast between Jesus and the prophets that he mentions in verse 1, and Jesus and the angels that he mentions in verse 4. Jesus isn't a prophet or an angel. He is in a class that is altogether separate and supreme. He is the very Son of God. And being the Son of God, he is what no prophet or angel ever could be – he is the heir of all things, the creator of all things, the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. He is the one who upholds the universe by the word of his power, and the only one who is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. His is the highest position of honor and authority in the seen and unseen world and no prophet or angel even comes close. There is no comparison.

So this is a powerful declaration of the divinity and supremacy of Christ. He then goes on to address the faulty idea that Jesus was somehow equal to or lesser than the angels by presenting a series of four sets of quotes taken from their own Scriptures. Three of these are in chapter 1 and one is in chapter 2. The first begins at Hebrews 1:5.

Read Hebrews 1:5-6.

⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"?

⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

He quotes 3 passages here to begin to point out the differences between Jesus and the angels. First, God never called any of the angels his "Son" like he called Jesus, nor did he ever command any angels to worship another angel. Christ alone was honored in this way. He goes on with the second set of quotes beginning in verse 7...

Read Hebrews 1:7-12.

⁷ Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire." ⁸ But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." ¹⁰ And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; ¹¹ they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, ¹² like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end."

There is a drastic difference between Jesus and angels that is seen in these quotes. Angels are finite and their ministry is temporary. But Jesus is eternal – he created all things and will remain forever and his kingdom and rule is eternal. He continues with another quote from their bibles.

Read Hebrews 1:13-14.

¹³ And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? ¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Angels are God's servants, but Jesus sits at his right hand - the ultimate position of authority in the universe. The next four verses contain what I think is the main point in these first two chapters, so we're going to come back to them in the end, but for now we're going to skip to Hebrews 2:5 where the final set of quotes begins.

Read Hebrews 2:5-8a

⁵ For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. ⁶ It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? ⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, ⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.

He uses this quote from a popular Psalm to point out that Jesus is Lord of the kingdom of heaven and God put everything in subjection to him. God exalted him to a position that angels would never be in. So you can see with quote after quote he refutes the false idea that Christ is equal to or lesser than the angels. He is far greater in every way because he is the Son of God.

He then moves on to address another issue that was feeding into their disillusionment. There were a couple of the troubling questions that seemed to be bothering them: If Jesus was God, why did he appear to be so human and why did he suffer and die? He begins to explain in verses 8-9.

Read Hebrews 2:8b-9

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

So he acknowledges that while Jesus walked this earth, he was made to be lower than the angels in his human form, but that was temporary and for a purpose – he had to be temporarily lowered so that could taste death for us. He was made to be like us in a shocking demonstration of God's grace. He continues to explain in verse 10...

Read Hebrews 2:10-13.

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has given me."

These are complicated verses, so I'll just summarize what I think he's saying... He explains a little bit about why Jesus had to suffer and die. In his humanity, Jesus was like us because we have the same source, which is God – that's why he can call us his brothers. Because he was like us, he was our perfect representative before God. And because of that, God made him perfect as the founder of our salvation by causing him to suffer in our place. By his suffering as our representative he sanctified us and God was able to bring many sons (and daughters) to glory. So that's why he had to suffer and die. I think he states it more clearly in the last few verses.

Read Hebrews 2:14-18.

¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Here's my summary of these verses: Jesus had to be made like us in every way and he had to suffer and die so that he could destroy the work of the devil and deliver us from slavery to sin and death. That's why when he came to earth he wasn't like the angels, but like us; he wasn't helping them – he was helping us. Furthermore, because he was made so much like us, he became a merciful and faithful high priest for us by offering himself as a sacrifice to satisfy God's wrath for our sins. Since he suffered as he did, he is able to help us to the uttermost.

With their Jewish background I think these explanations would have been very clear because they were familiar with the priests and sacrifices and things like sanctification and propitiation. The bottom line is that Jesus had to become just like us in our humanity and he had to suffer and die and even though those things seem to contradict the gospel truth that Jesus is God, once rightly understood, they don't. Jesus was fully human, but he was also fully God, just like the apostles said.

So I think that what he writes to them in these chapters would have helped clarify some of the confusion and questions they had that were leading to their disillusionment, and made it easier for them to agree with what he tells them they needed to do. We find that in the first four verses of chapter 2.

Read Hebrews 2:1-3a.

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

He calls them to pay much closer attention to the gospel of Jesus Christ that they heard from the apostles – that Jesus was indeed the Son of God sent by God to become a man and suffer and die to pay the penalty for our sins. “Pay attention so you don't drift away from it.” By drifting away and no longer believing that Jesus was who the apostles said he was they were neglecting God's merciful way of salvation. And if they did that he reminds them of the covenant they were in with God – the message declared by angels. That covenant proved to be reliable because everyone who disobeyed received just retribution, and since they too were part of that covenant and had disobeyed in various ways, how would they escape punishment if they neglected God's way of salvation? They wouldn't. So he pleads with them to pay attention to it. And finally, he tells them why they could trust that the gospel they heard was reliable.

Read Hebrews 2:3b-4.

It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

God made it very obvious that the gospel was from him. So everything he wrote in these first two chapters clarified and reinforced that what they had been taught about Jesus was true. He truly was the Son of God.

Now our times of disillusionment are going to look very different than it did in this Jewish Christian community, because our backgrounds and experiences are much different than theirs. But the danger of disillusionment is very much the same – it can lead us to drift away from the truth of the gospel to the point where we neglect our great salvation. So the question is: What can we do to prevent disillusionment from destroying our faith? And I think part of the answer is what was written in the first verse of chapter 2 – We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

I don't know what life is like for you, but mine is often like a whirlwind and I'm just trying to hang on for the ride. Life is busy; our schedules are full and it's easy for us to go from one thing to the next and never give any thought to Jesus Christ and the awesome gift of salvation we've been given. And if we don't it will only be a matter of time and we will begin to drift away. Like a boat without an anchor we will start to float away from the foundations of our faith. As busy as life can become, we need to fight to pay closer attention to our faith. We need to carve out time somehow in our busy schedules to connect with God – to read and study the Word, to pray, and to meet together with other believers to encourage one another in the faith.

It's the beginning of a New Year and it's the perfect time to make some adjustments in our lives to put the most important things back in their rightful place. If you can see that you have been neglecting your relationship with God I challenge you to make it a priority once again. Don't just say you need to do that, come up with a plan for how it's going to happen. When is it going to work? Where will it be? What will you do? Coming up with a plan and putting it into motion will keep you from drifting and prevent disillusionment from destroying your faith.