

The Message of Hebrews

by G. Campbell Morgan

The letter to the Hebrews teaches that faith is the principle by which we experience the perfection of the revelation through the Son, and that apostasy is the peril of death through disobedience.

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-3, Hebrews 3:12-13, Hebrews 4:1, Hebrews 6:1, Hebrews 10:22-24, Hebrews 11:1, Hebrews 12:1-2, Hebrews 12:15, Hebrews 13:15

Topics: "Apostasy", "Faith"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the profound teachings of Hebrews, focusing on the perfection of God's revelation through the Son, the principle of life by faith, and the peril of apostasy. He explains that the revelation through Christ supersedes all previous forms, meets every human need, and ensures ultimate victory. Morgan defines faith as a volitional surrender that acts despite appearances, contrasting it with apostasy, which leads to disobedience and spiritual death. He warns the church of the dangers of drifting away from God's promises and encourages believers to hold fast to their faith and service. Ultimately, the message calls for a deep understanding of God's sovereignty and the necessity of faith in the believer's life.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching

i. The Perfection of the Revelation through the Son.

a. Superseding all others.

Angelic. Human. Ritualistic.

b. Meeting all Needs.

Prophetic. Priestly. Kingly.

c. Ensuring all Victories.

Individual. Social. Universal.

ii. The Principle of Life by Faith.

a. Faith denuded.

Volitional Surrender (In spite of Appearances)

b. Faith active.

Doing. Suffering. Wailing.

c. Faith triumphant.

In the Deed. Over the Suffering. Ultimately with God.

iii. The Peril of Death through Apostasy.

a. Apostasy defined.

Disobedience (Because of Appearances).

b. Apostasy active.

Doing. Suffering. Waiting.

c. Apostasy hopeless.

In the Deed. Under the Suffering. Ultimately without God.

II. The Abiding Appeal

i. Warnings.

a. As to Speech of Son. ii. 1a "Lest"

1. Haply we drift. ii. 1.

2. Haply . . . falling . . . God. iii. 12.

3. Hardened. iii. 13.

4. Haply. . . rest . . . short iv. 1

b. As to Goal of God.

1. "Falleth short of Grace." xii. 15. Life.

2. "Root of Bitterness." xii. 15. Love.

3. "Profane Person." xii. 16. Light.

ii. Encouragements.

"Let us."

a. As to Son.

1. Prophet.

"Fear." iv. 1.

"Give diligence." iv. 11.

2. Priest.

"Hold fast." iv. 14.

"Draw near." iv. 16.

3. King.

"Press on." vi. 1.

b. As to Saintship.

"Draw near." x. 22. "Holdfast." 23.

"Consider one another." 24.

c. As to Service.

Towards the Goal.

"Lay aside." "Run." xii. 1.

"Have Grace." xii. 28.

Suffering.

"Go forth." xii. 13.

"Offer praise." xii. 15.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Church

i. The Message assumes the Biblical Conception of God.

a. Universal Sovereignty.

b. Knowable and revealing.

To deny this Conception is to destroy these Conclusions.

ii. The Message depends upon the Christology of the Writer (See i. 3. 3).

To deny this Christology is to destroy these Appeals.

II. To the Individual

i. The Power of Faith.

ii. The Peril of Apostasy.

For inclusive value, suggestive teaching, beauty of statement, perfection of system, perhaps there is no writing of the New Testament more wonderful than this letter to the Hebrews.

Its central teaching is threefold; first, the perfection of the revelation through the Son; secondly, the principle of life by faith; thirdly, the peril of death through apostasy.

As to the first, the perfection of the revelation through the Son, there are three values of the revelation set forth; that it supersedes all others; that it meets all needs; and that it ensures all victories.

This letter does not reveal Christ to us in His personal glory as some others do; but it does show that through the Son, God has given us His most perfect revelation of Himself. God is the first word of the letter; it is the theme of the letter. It is God revealed; God at work; and God triumphing. As we take our way through this letter, we are following the pathway of God through human history to consummation. It begins where the first verse of Genesis begins; and ere it closes, we find ourselves upon the mount, amid all the hosts of glory, as we find them in the Apocalypse.

It teaches us first of all that the revelation through the Son supersedes all others; angelic, human, and ritualistic. It supersedes the angelic; for the Son is superior to angels. It supersedes the human, as represented by Moses and Joshua; for the Son is greater than the servant. It supersedes the ritualistic method, the method of the priest and the altar, the method of the temple and sacrifice, and all the things through which God did by picture and symbol speak to men of Himself; because when the Son came, there was fulfillment of all of which these were but the shadows. When the Son came to speak from God, angels were no longer required, human teachers and interpreters were set on one side, all ritualism was rendered unnecessary.

The revelation through the Son was sufficient to meet all human need. The first need of man is a prophet who shall utter the word of God as the standard for his life. He needs also a priest, whose mediation shall reconcile him to God. He needs finally a king who shall govern according to the will of God.

When the Son came He came as Prophet, Priest, and King, meeting all these needs; and this is clearly set forth in the argument of the writer. God speaks through the Son; and angels, and Moses, and Joshua are silent. So the prophetic need is met. Then He establishes a new covenant; and His priesthood is higher than that of Aaron, higher than the Levitical order, being of the order of Melchizedek. Thus the priestly need is met. Finally, He, as King, establishes the Kingdom of God in this world. So the kingly need is met.

Once again, the revelation through the Son ensures all victories. The individual is perfected through the Son. The old economy is abolished because it made nothing perfect. Social victory is realized through the Son; "Ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." Finally, universal victory is made certain, for the ultimate glory is that triumph of God wherein He Who suffered shall find His perfect satisfaction.

All that, so far as we are concerned, may be said to be objective. Faith is revealed as the principle by which these things become subjective, part of our own experience. If there is one book of the Bible which

more carefully than any other defines faith, it is this letter. It contains one passage in which faith is defined in so many words, but that is not the only definition of faith which it affords. Faith, according to the whole teaching of the writer, is volitional surrender, and obedience in spite of appearances. Faith is not merely intellectual conviction. Faith is the action of the will which follows intellectual conviction and harmonizes with intellectual conviction. That is the only faith that saves. Faith as a creed, apprehended by the intellect, never saves. If we carefully follow the argument of the writer, when he is dealing with the subject of the people who could not enter in because of unbelief, we discover that unbelief is described as disobedience. The men who triumphed by faith were men who did things because they believed, when all appearances made it seem as though their doing was the doing of unutterable folly. Think of the unutterable folly of any man turning his back on Ur of the Chaldees and going, no one knew whither, not even himself, because he believed God, and looked for a city. That is faith; volitional surrender and obedience in spite of appearances. That is how the letter to the Hebrews in its wider teaching defines faith.

Faith is not only defined, it is revealed at work. Faith is not merely a sentiment, an attitude of mind; it is energy that drives and accomplishes. These men did something. Faith also suffers, and the story of suffering is graphically told. And finally, faith waits, the most difficult thing that faith ever has to do; "These all died in faith, not having received the promises. . . . God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." And they are waiting still! The life of faith does not end when we die. The life of faith runs on into the paradise of God. There is no uncertainty in the waiting, no unhappiness, no misery; but they are waiting because the victory is not yet won, the work is not done, and God's Kingdom has not yet come. For us the most heavenly activity, and the most difficult activity of faith, is to wait. So long as I can work, even though I may suffer, it is not so difficult; but when I can no longer work, or suffer, and simply have to wait, that is the most trying activity of faith.

Finally, this letter gives us a picture of faith triumphant. It is triumphant in the deed. Go through the eleventh chapter again, and see how constantly those men did things, and how in the doing there was triumph. The things that they did are the things that have made the world what it is to-day, in so far as it harmonizes with the will of God. Faith suffers, but in the suffering it is triumphant. It makes sorrow the occasion for song. Finally faith is triumphant in its waiting, for it is in itself the assurance of things hoped for, the certainty of the ultimate accomplishment of the will of God.

The final note of the teaching of this letter reveals the peril of death through apostasy. Apostasy is defined here. It is the exact opposite of faith, and consists of disobedience because of appearances. Let the history interpret the teaching. The men of old said, The land is full of Anakim, and walled cities; these were appearances ; because of them they disobeyed; that is apostasy; and so they failed to enter into rest.

Therein is revealed the whole truth about apostasy. Men are not apostate because the doctrine they hold is wrong. They are apostate when they hold the true doctrine, and refuse to obey it. Disobedience is the unbelief that hardens the spirit, and ends in death. Apostasy is active also, it will do things. Apostasy will suffer; and will wait. Let no man imagine that by apostasy he will escape from effort, or suffering, or waiting. The strain of effort, the actuality of suffering, the tragedy of waiting all continue; but mark the difference. As faith is always triumphant in deed, and over suffering, and ultimately with God; apostasy is always hopeless in the deed, in the suffering, and ultimately without God. The end of apostasy is restlessness, just as surely as the end of faith is perfect rest.

In the light of this central teaching, let us hear the abiding appeal of the letter. The first note of that appeal is one of warning, and the application is introduced in every case by the use of the word "Lest." There are

two groups of such warnings. The first deals with perils threatening us in view of the finality of the speech of the Son; and the second with perils confronting us in view of the ultimate victory of God.

The first group is found in the section of the letter specially dealing with the speech of the Son. God has spoken to us by the Son; we ought therefore to give most earnest heed to the things we have heard.

Take the four warnings:

"Lest haply we drift."

"Lest haply there shall be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God."

"Lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

"Lest haply, a promise being left of entering into his rest, any one of you should seem to come short of it."

That is a sequence. Lest we drift ; that is the first thing ; it is the picture of a vessel dragging its anchor and drifting. What next? " An evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God." If I drift from the things the Son has said, I fall away from the living God Whom the Son reveals. With what result? I am "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. "With what issue?" A promise being left" I "come short of it." To avoid the first is to be saved from all the rest. To fail in the first is inevitably to pass through all the experience described in the rest. No storm is sweeping the sea ; we are still close to the shore; but drifting just a little way. If by God's grace we recognize the drift, and hasten back, we shall not fall from the living God, we shall not become hardened, we shall not lose our rest.

The second group is found in the twelfth chapter:

"Follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord : looking carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God ; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby the many be defiled ; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one mess of meat sold his own birthright."

These three warnings occur in that part of the letter which has to do peculiarly with the ultimate victory of God. In the eleventh chapter we pass through the hall of the heroes and heroines of faith in the past; the last note is that which declares that the whole of them are not yet made perfect. Then in chapter twelve, we are brought face to face with our own experience in its relation to the ultimate victory of God.

The first warnings had to do with the revelation of the Father through the Son, and the notes were those of personal relationship; Lest we drift, Lest we fall away from the living God, Lest we become hardened, Lest we lose our rest. But now there is something more important than our rest, our heaven. It is God's glory which is in view, the joy that was set before the Christ. We are responsible about that.

"Lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God." Falling short of the grace of God means being unable to run the race, or to cooperate with God in the work that makes His Kingdom come.

"Lest any root of bitterness, springing up . . . the many be defiled" and therefore cannot run the race.

Lest there be a profane person who will turn his back upon the high, supernal glory of God for some mess of earthly pottage, and so fail to cooperate towards the consummation.

These warnings do touch personal salvation, but that is not the ultimate meaning of them. If we fail, we fail to cooperate with God for the bringing in of His Kingdom and His glory. Falling short of grace is falling short of life ; the root of bitterness is falling short of love; the profane person is falling short of light. If we fall short of life, of love, and of light, we cannot run this race and be fellow-workers with God. These three warnings then have ultimately to do, not with the matter of personal salvation, but with the matter of our fitness for cooperation with God in order to the winning of His victory in the world. Thus, warnings greet us at the beginning of the letter, and confront us at its close.

The appeal of this letter is also one full of encouragement, and the notes are introduced by the words: "Let us." They fall into three groups; words intended to encourage us in our relation to the Son through Whom the final speech has been uttered; words to encourage us as to our own saintship; and words to encourage us in our service.

Those referring to the Son touch upon His threefold work as Prophet, Priest, and King.

The first two are:

"Let us fear therefore.

"Let us therefore give diligence."

We are to fear lest the promise being made we do not enter in. We are to be diligent "that no man fall after the same example of disobedience." Both these words of encouragement have to do with the prophetic work of Christ, the teaching of Christ. "The word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit." Let us fear lest we fail of the promise made in the Word, and let us be diligent in order that there be no disobedience to the Word.

The next two are:

"Having then a great high Priest, Who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."

"Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need."

These words have to do with the priestly work of the Son, and need no exposition.

The last word is:

"Wherefore let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ, and press on unto perfection."

That is a picture of the ultimate victory of the King, Who will build the city, and establish the Kingdom; and towards that victory we are to press on.

Then we come to words of encouragement concerning our saintship;

"Let us draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our body washed with pure water:

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope that it waver not; for He is faithful that promised: "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works."

As in the first group of five words we have encouragement as to the Son as Prophet, Priest, and King; here we have words of encouragement as to the experience of saintship in the present life, and they again need no exposition.

Finally, we have words of encouragement in our service;

"Let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us;

"Let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

"Let us have grace."

In order to cooperate in the work which will eventuate in the victory we are to lay aside all that hinders, run with patience, and have grace.

"Let us therefore go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach. . . . Let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually."

In such service we are to have fellowship with Him in suffering; and fellowship in praise.

The teaching of this letter assumes the Biblical conception of God. Its first note is that of His universal sovereignty. The God of the Bible is not a Being within the universe, enslaved by it. He is Sovereign. The God of the Bible moreover is knowable and revealing. He spake in times past; He has spoken in His Son. If we deny these things we shall of course find no teaching in the letter to the Hebrews. There can be no meaning in it, apart from these fundamental conceptions of God.

Again, the teaching depends upon the Christology of the writer. We have it set before us in the early part of the letter. There is a sevenfold description of Christ, leaving no question as to the position He occupied in the mind of the writer. To deny the Christology of the writer is to deny his appeals. If our Christ is not the Christ of this writer; He is not superior to angels, to Moses, to Joshua, to Aaron, to all that magnificent ritualism which the writer knew so well.

If this letter is to be of any value to us in the Christian Church, we must be true to its conceptions of God and its presentation of Christ.

To the individual, the word of application is that of its teaching as to the power of faith, and the peril of apostasy.

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