

# Who Are the Companions?

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the importance of giving Jesus Christ the place of God's eternal Son and the transition from the natural to the spiritual Israel.*

**Scripture:** Zechariah 9:9, Luke 14:14, Acts 26:19, Acts 28:28, Romans 9:3, Philippians 3:8, Hebrews 12:25-28

**Topics:** "Heavenly Calling", "Companionship with Christ"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the Letter to the Hebrews, emphasizing the conflict between Jewish traditions and the new spiritual calling in Christ. He highlights the Apostle Paul's deep desire for his fellow Hebrews to accept Jesus as the Messiah, contrasting their rejection with the heavenly calling offered to believers. Sparks warns Hebrew Christians against returning to their old ways, urging them to embrace their identity as companions of Christ, who are called to a heavenly and spiritual existence. He illustrates the transition from the earthly Israel to a new spiritual Israel, underscoring the importance of recognizing Jesus' rightful place as God's Son. Ultimately, he encourages believers to grasp the magnitude of their calling and the greatness of Christ.

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## Transcript

We come now to a more general look at the Letter in which our particular occupation is found, which particular matter we believe to be the concern of the Letter: the Letter to the Hebrews.

In the oldest manuscripts the title is just simply 'To the Hebrews', but we understand that to mean Hebrew Christians, or Christians who naturally were Hebrews.

We must understand the setting of the Letter in New Testament times. We know of the great battle which raged then between Jews and Christians. The Apostle Paul, who was himself a great Hebrew, had a very large heart for his own people. Do you remember what he said? "I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). He was prepared to let everything go if only his people would accept the Lord Jesus, so great was his desire and his hope for them. But he fought a losing battle for Israel, and in the last chapter of the Book of the Acts you see Paul's surrender of that hope: "Be it known therefore unto you, that this salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles: they will also hear" (Acts 28:28). In effect he said: 'Seeing that Israel will not hear, we will give them up. I give up my great hope for them and I turn to those who will hear - I turn to the Gentiles.'

Then you come to this Letter to the Hebrews, and at the end of it you have the result of Israel's refusal. The writer makes this appeal to these Hebrew Christians: "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not, when they refused him that warned them on the earth, much more shall not we escape, who turn away from him that warneth from heaven:... And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, that those things which are not shaken may remain. Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Hebrews 12:25,27,28).

These words contain the final judgment upon the Hebrews who rejected Christ. That 'shaking' referred, in the first instance, to the destruction which was coming upon Israel in the year A.D. 70, and when that happened Israel was left without a country, without a city, without a temple and without a government. Everything was shaken until it fell completely - the result of refusing to hear "him that warneth from heaven".

It is in that setting that we have this Letter to the Hebrews. On the one side it is a final appeal to the Hebrew Christians not to go back from Jesus Christ. On the other side the Letter is a great warning as to what will happen if they do. So you have to put this Letter right into that setting: it is set in a great crisis of spiritual life, and, of course, it contains an abiding message for all time.

Let us look for a minute at the three features which made up that great conflict and which led to that final division.

The first feature was Christ Himself, as the Messiah, and Jesus as the Christ. Of course, the Jews believed in a Christ, for 'Christ' is only the Greek word for the Hebrew 'Messiah'. But the trouble was that they would not have Jesus as the Messiah, and so, as was prophesied, Jesus became the stone upon which they fell and were broken to pieces. It was a matter of the place they gave to Jesus.

You can see into what a high place this letter puts Jesus, and we are going to see that again presently. Jesus was God's anointed Son, the Christ, the Rock upon which they were broken. That was the first great factor in the conflict and in the ultimate division.

We must always remember that the test of everyone and everything is the place which is given to Jesus Christ. If anyone ever comes to you wanting you to accept some system of teaching, having wonderful arguments and using a lot of the Bible, what are you going to do about it? You may not be able to meet their arguments, and you may not even be able to answer Scripture with Scripture, but there is one thing that will always go to the heart of the matter: 'What place do you give to the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you give Him the place of God's eternal Son?' Everything stands or falls on that. You can try it, and you will find that most of the false teachers will begin to wriggle on that: 'Oh, we believe in Jesus as a great man, as the greatest teacher that ever lived', and so on. 'but if you want us to believe that Jesus is God, well, we just cannot go that far.' It is the place given to the Lord Jesus that is the test of everyone and everything.

That is the first factor in this great conflict in the Letter to the Hebrews, and you will see why the writer uses the whole of the first part to magnify the Lord Jesus.

The second feature is what the writer here speaks of as 'the heavenly calling', and you have to put all the emphasis upon that word 'heavenly'. You see, the Hebrews wanted an earthly calling: and all who are like them, even if they are called Christians, just want an earthly calling; a Christianity that belongs to this earth and to this world. We are going to enlarge upon this later, but there is a tremendous significance in this little phrase 'the heavenly calling'.

Then there was this third feature. These Hebrews were prepared to be Christians, but it must be a Christianity after their own mind. It must be a Christianity that allows the Old Testament system to continue. It must allow Moses to continue. It must allow all the law of Moses to continue. It must allow the temple to continue. It must allow all the Old Testament priests to continue. It must allow all the sacrifices to continue - 'We are prepared to be Christians if you will let us bring over our Old Testament into Christianity, but if you say all that is finished and a heavenly system has taken its place, then we cannot have that.' They wanted the Jewish system brought into Christianity, that is, a Christianity of ritual and form. Do you see the force of this word 'Companions of a heavenly calling'? 'Companions of Christ'?

These companions of Christ are those who are constituted anew on a heavenly and spiritual basis. They are the ones who are responding to a heavenly calling.

Now we have come to the point of the transition from the natural and earthly Israel to the new spiritual and heavenly Israel. This transition ought to have been in a divine sequence, the one quietly giving way to the other. The old ought to have made full place for the new. The old Israel ought to have died, been buried and raised again in Christ and become the heavenly Israel - the companions of Jesus Christ - but they refused to have it like that. And because they refused to have it like that they were set aside. God is just moving on with His purpose concerning His Son, and, although many were called, few were chosen. There were a few of Israel who were chosen as companions, but the many who were called refused, and so they were set aside, and God moved in this transition toward His new heavenly Israel.

Note: they positively refused to move on to heavenly ground. They refused to move on to the ground of the heavenly Man. Hence, as a result, they went the way of Adam - and here is a very interesting and instructive thing.

Adam was made by God, chosen by God and called by God into relation to His purpose concerning His Son, but when Adam was made he was not perfect. He was innocent, but he was not perfect. You know the difference between being innocent and being perfect! A little baby child is innocent, but will you say that it is perfect? No, it is not perfect. It has to grow up, and it will only grow up and become perfect as it goes through all sorts of difficulties and troubles. We call them 'growing pains' and that is the way of becoming perfect from an innocent child to a full-grown man. Adam was innocent, like a little child. He was very beautiful, with no sin in him, but he was not perfect. He had to come to spiritual perfection. He had still to be made like God's Son. That is what he was created for. God allowed him to be tested, and, oh, what a wonderful thing would have happened if Adam had gone through his testing triumphantly! From the innocence of a little child he would have become a spiritually full-grown man like the Lord Jesus humanly, and we, the children of Adam, would have been very different people. But he failed in his test and did not go the way to which God had called him. What did God do? He put Adam aside. He put a curse upon him and said, in effect: 'That kind of being can never satisfy Me. He has refused to go the way of My Son.'

That is exactly what happened to Israel after the flesh. God made Israel, chose Israel and called Israel - all with His Son in view. And Israel refused to go God's way. Israel was tested as to Jesus Christ - the four Gospels are just full of Israel being tested concerning Jesus Christ, and they all close with Israel saying 'No!' to God's way. So God did with Israel as He did with Adam - He put them aside. He put a curse upon them and for these many centuries that curse has rested upon Israel.

In this Letter, you see, you have that possibility presented. God is saying to the Hebrew Christians 'Do not refuse Him that speaketh from heaven.' But here is the other side of the story. Israel positively refused

God's heavenly calling... and just at that point God's eternal plan is revealed, that is, a heavenly people with a spiritual nature occupying a place in God's creation. That is what God eternally intended. He intended that before He called Israel, and He called Israel to be a people like that - a heavenly people with a spiritual nature.

The point is that just here, when Israel refuses, God presents His eternal plan, which is a heavenly people of a spiritual nature.

The whole of the New Testament is the body of truth which relates to this eternal will of God. Let us just look at that very hurriedly. We will take the four Gospels. (No! We are not going to study the four Gospels! We are just going to look at them.)

If you take up Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and get some idea of what they contain, and then stand back from them, you are able to see two lines of movement right through them. These two movements run alongside of each other.

On the one side there is the Jewish idea of the Messiah and the Jewish idea of the kingdom of God. The whole Jewish system is there.

Alongside of that, and over against it, there is something that is different. There is God's idea, and heaven's idea, of the Messiah. That is very different from the Jewish idea, and it is always in conflict with the Jewish idea. Then there is God's idea, and heaven's idea, of the kingdom of God, and it is very different from the Jewish idea.

There is the Jewish idea of the king running along one side through the four Gospels - what kind of a king they want and are determined to have. Alongside of it, and over against it, is God's idea, and heaven's idea, of a king: "Behold, thy king cometh unto thee... lowly, and riding upon an ass" (Zechariah 9:9). That is not the Jewish idea of a king! 'How can a meek man riding on an ass overthrow the mighty Roman Empire? That is not our idea of a king... "We will not that this man reign over us" (Luke 14:14)'.

So, you see, the two lines run through the four Gospels: the Hebrew idea and the heavenly idea. That is the very meaning of the four Gospels. When you get to the end of them you have the Jewish idea rejected fully and finally by God, and, on the other side, God's idea introduced and established forever.

Two thousand years have proved that. The one side of an earthly system has gone and there has been nothing of it for two thousand years. On the other side there is God's idea of His kingdom. That was introduced when Israel was rejected, and God has been going on with that for two thousand years. We have God's King; we are in God's Kingdom; we are under God's government.

That is what the four Gospels say to us. Of course, that is not all, but that is the general conclusion of the four Gospels. Later on we are going to see the details in the Gospels, or, at least, in one of them, which will show how true that was. These four Gospels show the rejection by God of those who rejected His Son, and on the other side they show God bringing in that which was according to His Son and establishing it forever so that the very gates of hell have not been able to prevail against it.

You move from the Gospels to the Book of the Acts, and here you have two features. First of all, you have the feature of transition from the old to the new. With God the transition is complete, but with His people it is made slowly because they are not ready to accept it. It was slower than it ought to have been because James, the head of the church in Jerusalem, still wanted to have something of old Israel, and even Peter

was very reluctant to abandon Israel and go right out to the Gentiles. And dear Barnabas was caught in that snare. Paul says, with grief in his heart, "even Barnabas" (Galatians 2:13). These who were of the old tradition were very slow to give up their tradition, but you see that God is going on - 'James, Peter, or whoever it may be, if you are not coming on I am going on, and if you are not going on I shall leave you behind and find others.' And while they were so slow He brought in Paul - and Paul got things going. The transition was complete with Paul, and he was God's instrument for completing the transition. The Letter to the Galatians is the instrument by which that transition was completed. Judaism in the Christian church received a fatal blow with that Letter.

You pass from the Book of the Acts to the Letters - what are called the 'Epistles' - and what have you here? Just the full body of teaching concerning the heavenly and spiritual nature of the people of God. It is applied to a whole variety of connections. There is one state of things in Corinth and another state of things in Galatia, and yet another in Ephesus, and so on. But applied to all these different conditions is this one thing: it is God's intention to have a heavenly and spiritual people. All the Letters were applied to different situations with that one object in view. Every Letter in the New Testament has something to say about this heavenly nature of the people of God.

We arrive at the Letter to the Hebrews, and this Letter takes a very, very important place in this whole question, as it is a summary of the whole New Testament. In it is gathered up the whole meaning of the New Testament, and into it there flow tributaries, making it the meeting place of all the revelation of God concerning His Son, Jesus Christ.

What is God's purpose concerning His Son? "Wherefore, holy brethren, companions of a heavenly calling... we are become companions of Christ." Who are the companions of Christ? Those who have fully left the whole earthly realm of things and are joined to the heavenly Lord: those who have become God's spiritual Israel: those who have answered to the heavenly calling. Paul cried, when he was on trial: "Wherefore, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). If Paul was a great companion of Jesus Christ, it was because he had completely finished with everything but Jesus Christ. He says: "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8 - A.V.). He was a man who was wholly on the ground of Jesus Christ, and wholly on the ground of God's heavenly purpose. Such are the companions of Jesus Christ.

There are many young Christians here and perhaps you do not know your Bible as well as some older Christians do, and you do not know all the Bible background of what I have been saying. I hope this will make you want to know your Bible better! But perhaps there is a lot that I have said that you do not understand. Now this is one thing that I do want you to understand - you will come to understand all the other as you go on, if you hold fast your beginning firm unto the end. If you really do commit yourself to the Lord Jesus you will come to understand. But that is not what I was going to say: what I was going to say is this:

What I want you to realize is that you have a very much greater Christ than you have ever imagined. The Christ to whom you have given yourselves is a very great Christ. The call of the Lord which you have answered in accepting the Lord Jesus is a much bigger calling than you have any knowledge of. I just want you to go away with this impression: 'My, I have come into something! This is big enough to fill my whole life.'

So don't worry about what you do not understand, but do realize how great a Lord is your Lord, and what a great thing is the heavenly calling.

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