

## **“Running the race”**

**Hebrews 1:1-3, 11:1-12:2**

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### **Introduction**

Most Christians are unfamiliar with Hebrews. This is a tragedy. The unknown author has greater skill in the use of the Greek language than any other New Testament writer. People who know more about this than I do say Hebrews is the finest example of rhetoric available from the first century. It contains the most elaborate reading of the Hebrew Bible anywhere in the New Testament. And as a theologian, scholars say the writer of Hebrews is equal to both Paul and John. So why is Hebrews so unfamiliar to us?

One reason might be because it occurs late in the New Testament, a positioning read as a value judgment as to its worth. Another second reason is its name. Geographical titles like Galatians, Corinthians, and Philippians distance us because we are not from Galatia, Corinth, or Philippi. But these titles do not distance us as much as ethnic titles. Few of us consider ourselves Hebrews. And thirdly and finally, the unknown author assumes familiarity with the Hebrew Bible. A familiarity which would make briefly stated allusions powerful. But most contemporary Christian congregations admit, “We are not that familiar with the Old Testament.” This is a shame. The Old Testament was Jesus’ Bible because the New Testament had not been written yet in his day.

So what is the contribution of Hebrews to Christian theology? Two things.

First, no New Testament writer presents a more human Jesus than does the author of Hebrews. Hebrews reminds us that even though God dwelled within Jesus, Jesus was also one of us, tempted like us, submitted to God in tearful and prayerful obedience, and subjected himself to a shameful humiliating death. Those who trust in God are not expected to walk in the sandals of one who has not walked in theirs. Scholars say a weakness of the Apostle’s Creed is that it talks about Jesus’ birth and death, but does not say much about Jesus’ life. Hebrews says that dash-line between the birth date and date of Jesus’ death, that dash-line that tells of Jesus’ humanity, that dash-line is also important. Our Brief Statement of Faith, from which we will read later today, fills in that dash-line.

Second, Hebrews promotes a priesthood of believers. Historically, religious PRIESTS carry messages FROM the people TO God. Priests are different from

PROPHETS, in that prophets carry messages FROM God TO us. Technically, Presbyterian pastors are prophets, but not priests. Because Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our high priest, Lutherans and we Presbyterians believe in the priesthood of all believers. Lutherans and we Presbyterians do not need human priests because for us Jesus himself is our priest.

### **Scripture reading**

#### **Movement 1: A church is tired**

Authors of the New Testament letters write to churches with different purposes in mind. Paul writes angry letters to the churches at Corinth and in Galatia. You can tell that as he wrote to them he had a lot of things on his mind. On the other hand, the letters of 1st Thessalonians and Philipppians consist almost entirely of prayers and praise.

Then there is Hebrews, the letter an unknown disciple writes to the Greek-speaking Jews in Rome, from which our scripture text for this morning comes. It is a thick letter. Probably took three stamps to mail it. And on the front of that letter we feel sure the pastor writes: Special Delivery. There is a sense of urgency about this letter. The moment you open the letter up you know why. Hold on, it says. Don't shrink back. Don't despair. Don't give up. Stir each other up. Encourage each other. Don't stop going to worship. Don't get discouraged. All the way through that is the tone. The writer, a disciple, is trying his best to build up a church.

What is wrong with the house churches in Rome, those Greek-speaking Christian Jews? When you read the letter you discover that it was once a church that was full of love and joy and fellowship. It took delight in serving each other and serving the Lord. But that is no longer the case. Between that time when Paul wrote his letter to the joyous Roman house churches in the year 58, and the writing of this letter, something has happened. What has gone wrong?

Scholars think that the root problem in the house churches of Rome is that they have simply grown tired. When we are tired we are different people. The way we talk to our children and the way we talk to our spouse can all be affected by weariness. This is why the unknown writer encourages his followers not to grow weary. Fatigue is discipleship's greatest enemy. We engage our children and spouse with heated words when we are tired.

The road for the Greek speaking Jewish Christians of Rome was turning out to be longer than they thought. There was a time when they ended every one of their worship services with that marvelous word – Maranatha – Come Lord Jesus. But at the writing of this particular letter, the church was somewhere between 30 and 65 years old. I suppose that if this church had been located in rural Tennessee you would gauge its age by looking out the back window at the

number of tombstones in the church cemetery. Where is the promise of Jesus' coming? Many did not begin their Christian pilgrimage by thinking that it would be this long. So here is a church that has simply grown tired.

The author of Hebrews is mounting a valiant effort to heal this church. He sends a letter to the Greek-speaking Christian Jews of Rome, trying his very best to restore their church to its former joy. He is trying to bring back the delight that they once had in serving the Lord.

So this unknown author takes them prophetically down the Hall of Fame.

### **Movement 2: A Cloud of Witnesses**

I read a story of a judge who stared at a criminal defendant. "Because of the gravity of this case," the judge said, "I am going to give you three lawyers." "Never mind the three lawyers," replied the defendant. "Just give me one good witness." Our theological heroes and heroines are not the ones who lead logical discussions telling us in whom to place our trust. Our theological heroes and heroines instead are the witnesses. Hebrews reminds us about those heroes and heroines who witness to the truth.

So the author of Hebrews takes the house churches of Rome down what we might call the Old Testament memory lane. The Old Testament Hall of Fame. There they are, he says, among others, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Rachael.

But look at their rap sheets. Abraham gives his wife Sarah to an Egyptian to increase his wealth. Moses murders an Egyptian. Samson falls for Delilah. David falls for Bathsheba. We can go on and on and on. Yet all of these people are heroes and heroines because of their witness to trust in God. No, the church is not a citadel for the religiously or ethically pure. Instead, it is a hospital for the broken. A hospital for sinners.

The writer of Hebrews also tells of the One who leads the pack. A hero and witness above reproach. There is only One who fits this description. One who interprets most correctly the history of God's presence in the world. The one who is promised. The one who is our goal.

### **Movement 3: Jesus is the One**

Stella and I just got back from a mission trip to Guatemala. That is why I like missionary stories. There is the story of a missionary to the New Hebrides. This missionary soon discovers that while the indigenous have words for house, tree, stone, and the like, they have no words for love, joy, and peace. Worst of all, they have no word for believe. One day as he sits in his hut filled with frustration, an older indigenous man enters and slumps down in a chair. Exhausted from a long

journey, the native says, "I'm leaning my whole weight on this chair." "What did you say?" asks the missionary. The man repeats, "I'm leaning my whole weight on this chair." Immediately, the missionary cries, "That's it!" And from that day forward for that primitive tribe, "Believe in Jesus" becomes, "Lean your whole weight on Jesus." Faith is more than belief. James says, "Even the demons believe and shudder." Faith is leaning your whole weight on Jesus. No one else can bear the weight of our trust. As the Psalmist simply prescribed, "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes" (Psalm 118:8-9 NIV).

The writer of Hebrews says, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that is set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."

So why is this disciple, the writer of Hebrews, trying so hard to heal this Roman church of Greek-speaking Christian Jews? Does anyone care?

#### **Movement 4: The church cares**

The author of Hebrews really cares. And care sometimes intrudes. It has the wrong timing, says the wrong thing, makes mistakes. But one thing that care never does is to completely give up. This author cared for his church.

Sometimes people think that the church on the other hand doesn't care. Fred Craddock, the Professor of Preaching and New Testament, at the Candler School of Theology, recalls dealing with this sentiment in his own church. He says, "I am walking out one Sunday to go to the parking lot and pass the choir room. I pass this woman who is in the process of hanging up her choir robe. I say: 'I really enjoyed the anthem this morning.' Well, she says, 'I hope so because that is it for me.' 'What do you mean,'" Craddock asks. 'I am hanging it up,' she says. She is hanging up her robe as she says that. 'I'm hanging it up.' 'What's the matter with you,' I ask. 'Well,' she answers, 'this is my last Sunday.' I think she is retiring from the choir. She has been in it about 30 years.

'No,' she says, 'I'm not retiring from choir. I'm quitting anything to do with church.' She says: 'I finally accepted the question that has haunted me for years. I looked out at all of the people, the ushers, the pastor. And it just finally sinks into me – who cares. Who cares whether or not I am in the choir. Who cares whether or not I am even here. Who cares?'"

Craddock says, "I left the church that afternoon and tried to dismiss the conversation. Oh, go home and get something to eat and you will feel better. But what she said to me kept haunting me. Who cares?"

"So I picked up the phone and called her and asked her if I could come over and talk. Well, if you wanna', she says. Well, I wanna', he says. I go over to her house and told her: 'You're wrong.' She says: 'I am not wrong.' I give her a little church history. I said: 'What you say of our church this morning is called one of the seven deadly sins. It is translated in the King James Version as sloth, but that doesn't quite capture its real meaning. The Greek means simply - not caring.'"

Let us step aside from this story for a moment. My friends, it is possible for a person to drive by the old homeless man holding up a sign that says I am hungry and say: "Well, he's not my father." It is possible to see a Guatemalan or Swaziland child with rotten teeth and say: "Well, he's not my kid." It is possible to look at a widow at the retirement center and say: "Well, she's not my mother." The greatest insult that we can say to the world is: "I don't care."

Back to Craddock's story. Craddock says: "Lady, do you realize what you have done. You have charged me, and everyone in that church, with one of the seven deadly sins." She says, "So?"

Craddock tells her it is not the first time he heard that criticism. He heard her same argument from others. He tells her he thinks he heard it most forcefully from a particular man some years ago. His wife came to church with the children, but he never came. When he would go over to the house and visit the family this old man would come out and act like a Philistine. Always his arguments were the same. "Church doesn't care anything about me. Another name, another pledge. Need some more money over at that church preacher? Is that why you are here?" He tells her he heard him say it a hundred times.

There was a day when the man Craddock visited finally stopped saying "No one really cares." He was in Veteran's hospital. He had cancer and he was down to 70 pounds. "Too late," they said. "Shouldn't have been smoking," they said. Craddock told her that in every window in that room there were flowers. By his bed a stack of cards 20 inches thick. Even that thing that they swing around the bed to put food on had flowers on it. He tells her that every flower – are you listening now – every one of them came from groups or individuals in that church. The old man couldn't speak so he wrote something on a Kleenex box. And you know what he wrote? He wrote, "Tell the people that I was wrong."

Craddock got up to leave this lady's house and said: "So you see, you are wrong. There are people who care. I have never been in a church yet, big or small, when there was a situation of need, a house in distress, or pain or bereavement, but that there were footprints of Christians that were left behind. They came with pies, a gift, a kind word... something, but always they came. I said people everywhere care." You know what she said? She said, "Oh yeah? Name some." The woman wanted names. So then Fred Craddock ends his message to his congregation with the following question, "May I give her your names?"

## Conclusion

Four o'clock at a restaurant, rural churches with grave stones out the back window, heated discussions when we are tired, and the question, "Does anyone really care?" Today's lesson gives us answers. One answer is the great cloud of witnesses in the Old Testament Hall of Fame. They care.

Yes, I know you also care. But get some rest. Because the race to being Jesus' true disciple has only just begun.

And when you become tired, keep your eyes and lean with your whole weight on Jesus. Remember, Jesus says, "Come to me all who are weary, and I will refresh you."

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ....