

I'm very excited about what we're beginning in this class. When I was first asked to join Lis in this responsibility we began to discuss class structure and materials. We quickly realized that we were both fairly disenchanted with the *Life Answers* series. The structure of that series has always bothered me because of its approach to lesson topics—choosing a theme and then cherry-picking Bible passages that fit the predetermined theme. This seems to proceed from the premise that we are to study the Bible for the purpose of seeing how we can “apply it to our lives.” You may have never thought about this before: what is the trouble with that expression?

The trouble is that its thinking is backward. Consider the following passage:

16All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The Greek term translated “inspired” is *theopneustos*, or “God-breathed” (I believe the NIV translates it that way). If the Bible has been given to us by God in such a direct manner as to have been “breathed” by Him, then to seek ways to force-fit it into our predetermined patterns of life is not a sufficient reaction to its teachings. We should not take the Bible and seek to apply it to our lives—we should study the Bible for what it says, and then structure our lives according to its truths.

This is the reason for our change to the *Explore the Bible* series, which we hope will be a positive and profitable one. This series of lessons is designed to present God's Word in a systematic manner week after week, with lesson topics determined not by cultural fads or “felt needs,” but simply by whatever topic is covered next in a given book or series of books. I think you'll find the lessons in your books to be more intellectually demanding than what you have encountered in the past, but hopefully also more spiritually edifying.

For this entire quarter, all the way through November, we're going to be studying the book of Hebrews. Can anyone tell me who the (human) author of Hebrews was? Truthfully, only God knows. If you have a King James Bible it probably identifies the book as having been written by Paul. While this has been the historical position of the Church, there are some notable inconsistencies between the book of Hebrews and the epistles we know to have been authored by Paul. Among these are the lack of an introductory section identifying Paul as the writer, and also the lack of a mention of Paul having written a brief salutation in his own hand at the end of the letter. For this reason, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, and others have been suggested as possible authors. The case for Barnabas having been the author of Hebrews is an especially interesting one to me. As we will discover, this book contains a number of references to the Mosaic Law, the Levitical priesthood, and the old sacrificial system. Because the recipients of this message were converted Jews, this is not surprising. The reason Barnabas is suggested as an author is revealed in part by the following passage:

36Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), 37and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-37)

As a Levite, Barnabas undoubtedly had an in-depth understanding of the Law and the priesthood. This perspective is why some suggest that he wrote Hebrews.

To me, though, the case for Paul having authored Hebrews is still the strongest. The church father Origen, a third-century theologian, is often cited as having rejected Pauline authorship, though a closer examination of his writings reveals that he actually believed the ideas to be Paul's, transmitted to us perhaps in a series of transcribed sermons (a suggestion made by the author of our book on page 8). In other words, while this “epistle” is not a letter dictated by Paul as were his others, the ideas are his, though provided by way of an unknown penman.

Whoever the (human) author was, there is virtually no disagreement among scholars that Hebrews is inspired Scripture, and therefore deserves our study, respect, and attention.

We begin today's study with the first three verses of Hebrews chapter 1:

1God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. 3And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, (Hebrews 1:1-3)

When one reads the Old Testament, it is tempting to suppose that God was always speaking audibly to people in those times, appearing in theophanies, performing elaborate miracles, and otherwise manifesting His Presence with great power and frequency. Verse 1, however, states that God's speaking was not perpetual at that time, but that He revealed Himself "at different times." We must remember that the Old Testament, while definitely a record of God's active work in creating the universe and ministering to His creation, was written over a period of over a thousand years. In the book of Judges we see phrases like "and the land was undisturbed for eighty years." (Judges 3:30) As far as we know, there was no new revelation from God during those years, until the next "disturbance" came about. When preaching from Genesis Bro. Skip likewise mentioned how God appeared to Abraham and told him he would have a son, and then Abraham didn't hear from God again until years later, after the whole debacle with Hagar and Ishmael. In other words, direct revelation from God is, and always has been, a rare form of communication for Him, though He is certainly capable of using that method whenever He sees fit.

God also spoke in different ways during that time. Sometimes He appeared in what is called a *theophany*, or a preincarnate physical manifestation of Christ, as in Genesis 18. At other times, He would speak through prophets, as was His usual method during the time of the kings. At still other times, He would communicate in visions, such as in Isaiah 6.

God's final revelation to us, however, is in His Son, Jesus Christ. Consider the following two passages:

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. 4In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. 5The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:1-5)

17"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

Jesus stated Himself in that second verse that He is the embodied fulfillment of the Old Testament. The reference to Christ as the Word in John 1 further suggests that Christ Himself *is* God's message to us.

The idea that the revelation through Jesus is God's final revelation to mankind is, to a certain extent, at odds with the modern notion that we all can expect to receive regular and detailed instructions from God, outside of His Word and in the time and manner of our choosing. In fact, the recorded instances of God's direct communication in the early church were initiated by *God*, not by men. In the book of Acts, we have 16 recorded instances of such communication, and at no time were they sought by men—God simply chose to communicate, and I believe that this is the only way we can expect this today. But, I digress.

I am certainly NOT suggesting that the Holy Spirit does not at times prompt us to certain actions:

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (Romans 8:14)

However, I *am* suggesting that the Holy Spirit will only lead us to actions that are at the very least in line with, and more likely only those commanded by Scripture.

1Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 3and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. (1 Peter 4:1-3)

If you watch "Christian" television enough you are bound to encounter someone claiming to have received some direct revelation from God. Maybe he has, but if he is claiming something that you know to be contrary to the Bible's teachings, this person has *not* heard from God. For example, the Bible *never* teaches us that we can expect to receive great riches in this life, and condemns the lust for wealth as sinful:

8If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. (1 Timothy 6:8-11)

Perhaps God will choose to bless us in this way—there were certainly some wealthy believers in the early church, but to preach that "if you pledge *x* number of dollars to this network you can expect to receive great material blessings in the coming year" is not only against the teaching of Scripture, but appeals to the lust for worldly possessions that should be characteristic of unregenerate persons, not believers.

In short, if someone claims to have heard from God, or if you believe *you* have heard from Him, study the Scriptures. God will not contradict Himself, and will never lead you to do something contrary to His Word. If the message is not in the Bible, be skeptical. If it is diametrically opposed to the Bible, know for certain that this “spirit” is *not* of God.

Back to the passage in Hebrews, Jesus is identified as **“the heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.”** This reiterates the message of John 1 which we have already read, that Jesus was present at and a participant in the creation of the world, and that He *is* God. Anyone that claims that Jesus is any less than God (a heresy known as Arianism) is going against these and other passages in which the deity of Christ is proclaimed. Perhaps the most direct of these from Jesus’ mouth is as follows:

58Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." (John 8:58)

Those that say Jesus never claimed to be God are not very thoroughly versed in the Scriptures. The Jews to whom He was speaking knew this was a claim to deity. If it were not, why would the Jews have reacted as they did?

59Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple. (John 8:59)

The unbelieving Jews interpreted this as a blasphemous claim to deity because Jesus clearly used one of the revealed names of God in reference to Himself:

13Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" 14God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13-14)

By His claim that “I am,” Jesus, in effect, said “I am God.”

Finally, we read that **“when He had made purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”** Jesus Christ is our great High Priest, having made atonement for our sins once and for all by His own blood:

11But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12)

Having done this, He ascended to Heaven, and reigns there until the day when He will return to set up His Kingdom.

1Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

22I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Revelation 21:22-23)

In just these first three verses, the author of Hebrews has presented what can certainly be called a “high Christology,” naming Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, and a full participant in the nature, role, and power of God. Jesus is identified here, as our book states on page 13, as “God’s final Prophet, superior Priest, and eternal King.”

Now, you’re probably thinking that if we spent that long on three verses, we’ll never get through! The other two passages for today really serve to support and reiterate the message of the first one, however, and won’t take as long. The second passage is as follows:

4having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. 5For to which of the angels did He ever say,

**"YOU ARE MY SON,
TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU"?**
And again,
**"I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM
AND HE SHALL BE A SON TO ME"?**
6And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says,
"AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM."
7And of the angels He says,
**"WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS,
AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE."**
8But of the Son He says,
**"YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER,
AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM. (Hebrews 1:4-8)**

14Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14)

Back in verses 1-2, the author of Hebrews tells us that God spoke in various ways before, but that He has now spoken by His Son. In these verses, he emphasizes the fact that Jesus, as God, is far superior to the angelic host. In fact, the angel which spoke with John in the book of Revelation emphasized this by refusing to accept worship:

10Then I fell at his feet to worship him But he said to me, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Revelation 19:10)

Contrast this with Jesus, who accepted worship from people:

**35Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
36He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. (John 9:35-38)**

So, what is the message of these verses? If the Jews accepted the testimonies of prophets, judges, priests, and even angels as messengers of God, they should much more readily accept the greatly superior message of Christ!

Moving on, the final passage for today continues the same theme:

1For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. 2For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, 3 how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. (Hebrews 2:1-4)

This chapter begins by reiterating that, since Jesus and the revelation by Him are superior to those of angels, etc., we must be that much more attentive to the observation of His commands. Indeed, He is the *only* Way to eternal life with the Father, and we will not escape His wrath if we ignore His message and reject His salvation, a saving message delivered from the incarnate God Himself and confirmed by His early followers by **"both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit."**

The admonition to "not drift away" has been cited by some as proof that it is possible for one to lose his salvation after confessing Christ. This interpretation, however, is in conflict with passages that affirm eternal security:

27" My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29" My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

Jesus states that none of His "sheep" will be lost, and this is a great source of comfort to believers. We do know that genuine, saved believers will sin at times—otherwise we would not be commanded to confess our sins (1 John 1:9—addressed to Christians!). HOWEVER, this does not mean that we can simply pray a prayer and then go on with our sinful lives. Consider these passages:

4For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. 5Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, 6and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, 7and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.

8For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.10Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; 11for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you. (2 Peter 1:4-11)

18Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. 19They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:18-19)

In his letter, Peter lists qualities that will be present and increasing in the genuine believer, and instructs his recipients to, as the King James says, **“give diligence to make your calling and election sure.”** In other words, those that are truly saved will diligently seek to serve Him without falling away. In John’s letter, we see that some that were associated with the church turned away from and against the faith. Of them he says that **“they were not really of us,”** or not genuine believers.

Again, the passage in Hebrews does NOT state that one’s salvation can be lost...if it has truly been gained. Salvation is entirely of grace and not of works, but the genuine believer’s life will be marked by consistent and diligent service to God’s Kingdom, though the isolated and unfortunate sin will, of course, occur. Let us all **“pay even more attention”** to God’s Word so that we are spurred to increased knowledge of His will and to greater service to His Kingdom, thereby confirming our genuine regeneration by the Holy Spirit and possession of eternal life.

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