

Hebrews

Part 4 - Experiencing salvation in the here and now

Part 3 ended with the doors being flung open to God's kingdom so it becomes real to us, and that, according to Hebrews is vital, not only for us personally, but also to make us into teachers so we can help make the kingdom of God real to others.

So what's our starting point for helping others discover the kingdom as real? It's in what the Father spoke to us in his Son - in who the Son is, what his Son did on our behalf, and because his Son "loved righteousness and hated wickedness." It's because of those three things, all mentioned in the opening chapter in Hebrews, that made entrance into God's Kingdom possible for all us humans too, so we too can experience the glory and splendour of the Father's love like he does. This was Jesus' prayer for us in John 17 and here we are today on the receiving end of that prayer. And what effect that has on us and on those who know us is now ours to enjoy.

Hebrews, therefore, is just the book we need to lift us above the distractions and troubles of this world and into what God created us for in the first place. He created us to be rulers in his kingdom to set up his will on earth as it is in heaven, so that one day the ethics, justice, love, mercy and wisdom of his world fill every part of our world and creation. Jesus was the first human to totally tune into that purpose, and because of it he is now at the right hand of the Father as the supreme ruler of his kingdom on earth. It means he can now fulfill his greatest wish for the rest of us, that we join him in God's kingdom, sharing in both the rulership of it and in the Father's amazing love.

Hebrews, therefore, cuts through all the guff and gets us back to **the simplicity that is in Christ**, that through him and him alone we receive all the training and help we need to fulfill what God created us for. And this is the point that the author of Hebrews hammers home in Chapter One, that God sent his Son to reveal all that we need to know. We don't need messages and revelations from angels or prophets to find out what God's will and purpose is. All we need is a clear understanding and insight into God's will as revealed in the words and actions of Jesus. He is God's final word. Even the Holy Spirit "speaks only what he hears," **John 16:13**, all of which Jesus says in **verse 14**, is meant to "bring glory to me (Jesus) by taking from what's mine and making it known to you." And that's exactly what the author of Hebrews sets out to do, to help us grasp **what God has given us in his Son**.

And he isn't about to put his hammer down yet either, because he has two more scriptures from the Old Testament to fix the minds of the Christians in his care on God's Son as the only one God now speaks through.

The first of those scriptures in **Hebrews 1:10** is a quote from **Psalm 102:25-27**, which has God saying of his Son, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands." I wonder if those Christians in Hebrews caught that - that the Father is actually calling his Son "Lord."

Imagine that, calling your son "Lord." But I sort of grasp that, because when I look at the "works of my own children's hands," it amazes me what they're capable of. They are so much more clever than I was at their age. So I have no trouble looking up to them. I could happily call them "Lord" to express my deep respect for them. But that's exactly what God is speaking to us about his Son. The Father would love us to see his Son through his eyes, so **we come to have the same respect for his Son that he has.**

And how do we see his Son that way? In Psalm 102 it's through what his Son created. The Father just bursts out with the term "Lord" for his Son when he sees what his Son came up with in the "laying of the foundations" of the universe. The Father marvels at how his Son did it. He can hardly believe how brilliant his Son is.

Imagine having a human father like that, who makes it obvious all the time that he couldn't be prouder having a child like you. And everything he says to you and does for you is proof of it, because it's said and done with so much respect it's almost embarrassing. But that's the kind of respect Jesus has received from his Father for all eternity. It tells us just how much his Father loves him and looks up to him. And the Father wants us to see that. So did the author of Hebrews, because it was this specific quote in Psalm 102:12 that he chose in showing us what the Father is speaking to us through his Son - so that we see his Son in that light too.

And he chose a verse that his congregation would have easily recognized too, because as Jews they sang the Psalms in their synagogues every Sabbath. He was simply confirming from their own scriptures what they already knew, therefore - but - it wasn't having the desired effect in their lives of trusting in God's Son through thick and thin. Something had happened that had taken their focus off the amazing capability of God's Son in the creation of the universe, which had left them floundering around looking to other sources - like angels - for help and guidance.

That's why the author of Hebrews keeps comparing the angels to God's Son, to prove the Son's superiority. Not only did God's Son lay the foundations of the universe, which no angel could do, he could also "roll up the universe" like rolling up a piece of clothing, or change the universe into something else as easily as putting on a change of clothes (verse 12). Even if the universe runs down (verse 11), the Son of God "remains the same," **verse 12**, "and the years of his life will never end."

Life, therefore, might be falling apart for us down here, but it's never falling apart for God's Son. He remains above it all, serene, majestic, in total control. And even God the Father marvels at his Son's ability and unwavering confidence, that no matter what happens on this planet his Son continues to sustain both it and us through it all. At no point in our history, no matter how evil our world becomes, does his Son ever given up on us, nor has he got so fed up with us that he scrunched our world up like a wad of paper and threw it away in disgust. He may have felt like scrunching it up in Noah's day because people were so evil - and he threatened to kill off the Israelites and start again with just Moses too - but never has our Creator said, "That's it, I've had enough of those idiots," and given up on us completely.

But, those Hebrew Christians could argue, if the Son truly was as wonderful and wise as the Father thought him to be, why wasn't he intervening in their lives with miracles, healings and protection from their enemies? If God had truly said of his Son, quoting Psalm 110:1 this time in **Hebrews 1:13**, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet," why wasn't he making THEIR enemies a footstool for his feet too?

It's an obvious question for any suffering Christian, but this is where angels come into the picture, **verse 14**, because "**Are not angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?**"

Oh, so angels still play a part, do they? But what does that verse mean exactly? Well, in the context of the previous verse, of God dealing with all the enemies arrayed against his Son, we now find out God's way of dealing with all the enemies arrayed **against us**. It's in the meaning of the word "salvation" here, because to Jews - which the congregation was mostly made up of in Hebrews - salvation meant deliverance from their enemies in the here and now, and looking forward to the time in the age to come when all their enemies in this world would be defeated forever.

But why did they think salvation meant that? Because that's what it meant in the Old Testament, which was the only Scripture they had.

The very first mention of the word “salvation” in the Old Testament was **Exodus 14:13-14**, when “Moses said to the people (pinned down at the Red Sea), ‘Fear not, stand firm, and **see the salvation of the Lord**, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’”

Salvation to a Jew, therefore, was about being saved from enemies in the here and now. It could be human enemies like the Egyptians, or physical and mental suffering and set backs in their personal lives. Either way, salvation pictured deliverance from present troubles, and that was the main meaning of salvation all through the Old Testament.

So, lift that now into the context of those Jewish Christians in Hebrews, because they were up against all sorts of enemies making **their** lives miserable in the here and now as well, including their own countrymen and even members of their own families. It was all very nice, therefore, knowing God was speaking through his Son to lift them into **his** world, but what they needed was help on the ground in **their** world too. It was tough being a Christian when people all around them were opposed to Christianity in both their lifestyles and attitudes. And it was tough getting excited about what God was revealing through his Son when you’d just lost your job and your property to people who hated you for being a Christian. It was disheartening, scary, and so frustrating and lonely-feeling at times it was tempting to chuck in the towel.

Well, the author of Hebrews had good news for them, that angels had been sent to help them, and in the most personal way too, because the angels were now “ministering spirits” to God’s people.

But what does that mean? Well, we know it can’t mean angels appearing in human form speaking messages, warnings and prophecies to us, because Hebrews tells us those days are over. And God is no longer working his plan through the nation of Israel either, where a message from an angel could reach an entire nation all at once. In these last days it’s very different, because God is working his plan through little pockets of Christians scattered all over the place trying to keep their heads above water in a hostile world.

So God has his angels serving in a different way, because the need is different. They’re no longer administrators of God’s will to a nation, because God isn’t working through a nation right now. But God’s people still exist, and God has always had his angels on call to help his people. But what kind of help can an angel give us as Christians if can’t be done by a voice giving instructions or a visible manifestation in human form?

Well, having read up to this point in Hebrews, what is bubbling to the surface as our greatest need as Christians? It's having our ears open to what God is speaking to us through his Son. It sounds simple, but not so simple in practice when there are a million other voices yelling in our ears trying to get our attention as well. I had a car, for instance, that was screaming at me to pay attention to it, because it was leaking water by the gallon into the car soaking the carpet. And how much of my precious time and attention was it demanding from me to find the leak, first of all, and then correct the damage?

The idea, then, that God sends angels to us as ministering spirits is highly appealing, because I'm in endless need of help to get me through the frustrations of this life without losing my mind or my focus. What a relief it is, then, to read in Hebrews that we have God's Son at the helm of this world, with "countless thousands of angels" at his command (Hebrews 12:22), whom he's dispensing in all directions to minister to his people. Notice that? "Countless thousands." There are so many angels it's hard to count them all. But it's at least "ten thousand times ten thousand," according to Revelation 5:11. That's at least one hundred million angels being sent out as ministering spirits to the inheritors of salvation. Good, because with billions of us Christians on this planet, all needing personal and customized help and deliverance in the here and now, we need that many.

But notice how they're "ministering spirits." They're not visible, nor are they speaking to us. They're more like bees, tireless workers quietly going about their work behind the scenes, not bringing any attention to themselves, but doing a vital job keeping our minds safely focused on the Son until the time he literally lifts us into his world.

It also tells us we have a ruler at the helm of God's kingdom who knows exactly what we're going through, that we're walking through a minefield in this world that hinders, distracts and discourages us. The Christians in Hebrews were a case in point, because they'd hit all three of those mines and they were staggering around not quite sure what Christianity was about anymore. Some of them had drifted back to what they knew best, the law, while others were still looking to angels for messages and guidance. But how did they get to that point in the first place, and why didn't God send angels to help them before it got that bad?

Well, we know from Jesus' example that suffering is essential in a Christian life so that we turn to God for help. And to our surprise and delight we discover there really is another world out there full of power and love that in time becomes as real to us as the world we have to live in here.

So God had allowed those Christians in Hebrews to suffer, but for the best of reasons, to fling open the windows to his world when they turned to him for help.

But instead of those Christians turning to the power and love of the Son they turned to the law and to angels. And all through our Christian history we see the same thing happening. Whenever we begin to lose sight of the simplicity we have in Christ - that the Father has given us all we need to know in his Son - we create two alternatives. We either make Christianity into a list of rules and rituals that must be obeyed, just like the Christians in Hebrews turned to the law, or we look to other spirit sources and spirit manifestations, just like they looked to angels.

Which is why Chapter Two starts off with, “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.”

But pay more careful attention to what? Well, in context again, it’s realizing what we’ve been given in God’s Son. We’ve been given the greatest, most powerful and most loving helper the Father could possibly give us. That’s the point of Chapter One. So, knowing what Chapter One is saying, how should we react when it feels like Christianity isn’t that meaningful anymore, or it’s not answering our need when the pressures of life are getting us down?

There is one very direct answer to that in **Hebrews 2:2** and the first part of **verse 3**: “If the message spoken by angels (the law given to Moses) was binding and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore the great salvation we’ve been given?”

That’s not meant to be a threat, but it is meant to get us to “pay more careful attention to what we have heard,” because what God is speaking to us through his Son isn’t just words on a page. It’s meant to be as real in **our experience** as obeying the law was to the Israelites in the Old Testament.

When the Israelites took the law seriously, for instance, they were mightily blessed by God, and when they took it casually their lives fell apart. It was simple cause and effect. Well, **it’s still cause and effect in our lives today too**. Pay attention to what God is speaking to us through his Son and we will experience a world we never knew existed. Take it casually and we’re stuck with whatever this world has to offer when troubles and frustrations hit, which is shelf upon shelf of self-help books, and seminars, and so-called “spiritual” experiences that are nothing more than altered states of consciousness. And unfortunately, much of Christianity has gone that route too.

But Christians are supposed to be the people who understand the meaning of the word “salvation,” that what God’s offering us through his Son is ours to experience in the here and now. We’re the one group of people on this planet who, in turning to the Son, have actually experienced what Hebrews is talking about, of being delivered from all sorts of enemies in the here and now ruining our hope and joy, and messing up our relationships with God and people.

We’re the ones, therefore, who actually know what it’s like being lifted out of our frustrating, empty-feeling life into one of peace and joy. When tempted by the culture’s nonsense we can pass it by. When confused our minds are cleared. When stressed we find calm. But that’s what “salvation” means: it’s about making deliverance from our enemies our constant experience, and all because we take what Hebrews Chapter One is saying seriously. But that’s the author of Hebrews point: This only works when we pay close attention to what God is speaking to us through his Son - or as Jesus himself said several times: we use our ears to hear.

And it’s amazing what happens when you do that, because I discovered something in Chapter One that really opened my eyes. It was in that quote from **Psalm 102** in Hebrew 1:10-12. I must’ve read Psalm 102 before, because I’d highlighted a couple of verses in yellow already, but I’d never noticed the title at the top of the Psalm.

The title gives the reason for the Psalm being written: It’s **“A prayer of one whose life is falling to pieces, and who lets God know just how bad it is.”** And it was given that title by the chap who wrote it too.

Psalm 102, therefore, was written by someone who felt the same way those Christians in Hebrews felt, that life as one of God’s people was the pits, because why on earth was God letting such bad things happen to them? Well, the answer to that was in the title of the Psalm. The first part of the title was easy to relate to, because whose life isn’t “falling to pieces” at one time or another? It’s the second part that’s not so easy to relate to....

It’s the part about “letting God know just how bad it is.” For some reason that’s tough for us to do, perhaps because we want God to think well of us, rather than us always begging and moaning. But the chap who wrote Psalm 102 had no such qualms. He was thoroughly cheesed off at how life and God were treating him, and he let God know it, even charging God outright in **verse 10** for “sweeping me up and throwing me out.”

But we can’t say things like that to God, can we?

Well, he did. And God didn't burn him to a crisp either. Clearly, then, there is a relationship with God we can have in which we can be utterly real, and have no fear being so.

And that was the bit those Christians in Hebrews were missing. They could only see the first part of the title at the top of Psalm 102, that their lives were falling to pieces - but it hadn't dawned on them that they could let God know had bad it was, or that they could speak exactly what they felt to God and God wouldn't mind.

But they'd obviously never been told they could say things to God like: "Don't you go hiding your face from me when I'm in distress. And you'd better turn your ear to me when I call, and answer me quickly too." When have I ever dared talk like that to God? But that is an actual quote from **Psalm 102:2**.

And it was in Hebrews Chapter One that little gem was hiding. Am I ever glad I paid close attention, then, because I've got something I can take to my kids and grandkids. I actually wrote a note to one of my granddaughters after reading that title, because her life has fallen to pieces and no one has been able to help her. All the platitudes the world comes up with, and ways of coping, and costly therapy sessions, have done absolutely nothing to relieve her of her burdens. So she struggles on, trying to cope, trying to put on a brave face, but she cannot contain her frustration.

Good. I'm glad she can't contain her frustration, because containing it doesn't help one bit. It didn't help those Christians in Hebrews either, but had they ever really grasped in all their years in church what the Father had flung open to them in his Son?

What he'd flung open was salvation in the true sense of the word here. It meant deliverance from their enemies, including the devastating enemies of frustration, powerlessness, confusion, discouragement, and worst of all, the growing feeling that maybe Christianity is just another religion without answers to the real needs we've got every day.

The question being asked of them, therefore, was: "Are you going to go on just stewing in your frustration and misery, or are you going to believe what God is saying in his Son?" Or, as **Hebrews 2:3** phrases it, "how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" - meaning, "How are we going to escape the consequences of not using the help we've been given in God's Son? It's not enough just knowing about him, you've got to use him too. So go on, tell him how you feel - and if you don't think you're getting through, say it louder."

And here's a Psalm they knew well to support that. It was written by a man who shared their frustration with life and God, who told God in no uncertain terms in the first eleven verses how rotten his life was. In verse 12, however, his attitude suddenly changes. Why? Because an answer came. Or, as the author of Hebrews would have phrased it: **salvation happened**.

The thunder clouds messing up his mind suddenly blew away, and what was making his life utterly miserable and frustrating simply evaporated as if it had never existed. But that wasn't the only salvation he experienced. It included a window into God's world, where he could see, **Psalm 102:19-20**, "the Lord looking down from his sanctuary on high, and from heaven viewing the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners and release those condemned to death." Now he could see what all that machinery whirring away in God's world was for. It was to bring salvation to God's people in the here and now, freeing them from everything that was the "death" of them in this world.

And according to **Hebrews 2:3** it was this same salvation "which was first announced by the Lord (when he came preaching the Kingdom of God)." This is what he came for, to fling open the windows to God's world and what it existed for. It was to bring salvation to God's people in the here and now, which, **verse 4**, "God also testified to (or backed up with real proof) by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

And those Christians in Hebrews knew that. They'd come into the church because of it. It was the salvation they'd always dreamt of as Jews, and for a while it had been real in their own experience, but life had taken its toll. And what they'd neglected to do at that point was go to God and tell him how bad it was, because he would have heard their groans from heaven and saved them.

And that's what I would dearly love for my granddaughter, that God would open her eyes to his world and she then takes full advantage of it, because salvation from her misery in the here and now will happen for her too. But how is she going to know that world exists unless someone who knows it exists tells her about it? Well I know. And how do I know? Because there were times when I didn't "ignore such a great salvation" God offered me in his Son, and I took full advantage of it, and God answered. And that has now put me in a position to teach others, which is, in fact, what I've been called to do, and not just for now but after Jesus returns too. In other words, I'm using this life for what it's for, to take full advantage of the salvation God spoke through his Son so I have personal proof that it's real. And with proof I can open the windows of God's world to others, and not just in the future as a ruler in God's kingdom, but in the here and now as well.