

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 6 August 7, 2016 Lower Than the Angels: Tasting Death

Hebrews 2:5-9

The World to Come v. 5

The author makes it plain that he has not left the topic of angels yet, as he builds on the warning passage of 2:1-4, which we have just looked at, and in which angels also play a prominent role.

Now, a further point is made as a sort of transitory move into chapter 2 where Christ is exalted even more and again depicted as superior to the angels, as Creator, as victor over Satan, among other things. But note the subject here in v. 5, stated negatively; “*it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come...*”. By adding to this, the phrase, “*of which we are speaking*”, the author strongly connects this verse to what preceded it in 1:1-14 & 2:1-4.; which has not only been a discussion of the state of the world at the moment, but also of the world to come. Cf. Heb. 1:5,6,8,11,13.

The “*world to come*”, one that “*cannot be shaken*” – cf. Heb. 12:27-28 – is one in which all these claims of Christ’s superiority will be manifested for all to see. But at that time, it will not be angels on the throne – it will be humans – cf. I Cor. 6:3. God has not given angels authority over the world to come, and now, the author will cite Psalm 8 to prove his point.

Psalm 8 – What is Man?

Heb. 2: 6-8

It is interesting to note that, throughout chapter 1, each citation of an OT passage was preceded by some phrase signifying that the passage was from God’s lips. Note 1:5,6,7,8,13. But here in v. 6, “It has been testified somewhere...”, then the citation from Psalm 8 in Heb. 2:6-8. In chapter 1, each citation had either God, the Spirit or the Son as the subject. Something else notably different here is that the author comments on the citation in order to make a clear application to Christ.ⁱ

The first words of v. 6 are the author’s introduction of his quote from Psalm 8, and we must not take this formulaic phrase to be saying that the author does not know where he is getting this from. The entire letter – and the OT is quoted a lot in this letter - reveals a person who is both sophisticated (it is written in excellent Greek) and knows the OT intimately. So here is the reason for this literary structure. What the author is doing is having us understand the testimony of the OT as God’s spoken and written word, and therefore he too remains unnamed or anonymous.ⁱⁱ

Psalm 8

Psalm 8 consists of 9 verses, 3 of which are cited in Heb. 2:6-8 (4,5,6). It begins (1) and ends (9) with an identical stanza; and celebrates God's greatness and glory in creation; in v. 2, His ability to conquer His enemies is illustrated by using the weakest means (babies and infants). Yet, per v. 6, as great as His creation is, God has chosen to ordain man to play a special role in the created world, as well as the one to follow it (Heb. 2:5). Psalm 8:4 poses David's incredulous question. This verse is not referring to Jesus, who often referred to Himself as "Son of man", but here and in Heb. 2, it means 'born as a human'. Ezekiel was called this a number of times in his book by God, with probably no prophetic or typological meaning intended. One potential OT usage of this phrase which does refer to Christ almost certainly is in Dan. 7:13. Here, however, in Psalm 8, the title is about humanity in general and David inquires of God why He would go to such lengths of patience and grace to condescend to care about mere creatures.

Heb. 2:7-8 – these verses answer the question posed in v. 6. What is man? "*You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet. [this ends the quote from Ps. 8] Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present we do not see everything in subjection to him.*" The reference to angels here reflects what we have been seeing since Hebrews 1:4, and humans are crowned with glory and honor, because we are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27), and God gave man dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:27-28; Genesis 9).

Tom Schreiner comments;

"Yes, human beings were destined to rule the entire world for God. Everything was supposed to be under the rule and dominion of human beings but sin intervened to frustrate this rule. The subsequent argument will clarify that death (which is due to sin) thwarts human dominion over the world. The glory designed for human beings has not become a reality in human history. Instead, human history is littered with the wreckage of suffering and death – a world gone mad."ⁱⁱⁱ

Remember that, when David wrote Psalm 8, the Fall was certainly in his purview, and he was very aware of what the reality of the world was, although he seems to give no hint of that in this psalm, although Ps. 8:5 certainly could be a veiled reference to that rather than just a statement of the order of things.

The author of Hebrews' comments in v. 8b reflect that true dominion was given by God, and nothing was outside of man's control – at least in Eden before the Fall. But the Fall changed things, as v. 8c says, "*at present, we do not yet see anything in subjection to him [man].*" The word "yet" tells us that the author fully expects that this will change (Cf. Heb. 2:5).

Heb. 2:8 is actually a citation of both Psalm 8:8 and Psalm 110:1. It is also found cited in I Cor. 15:25-27, and Eph. 1:20-22. The historical reality of how this verse is used here by Paul is that it will be fulfilled in the risen Christ and this is how Jews in NT times would have seen it.

Some confusion could lie here as a result of seeing Psalm 8:8 describing a present reality, while Psalm 110:1 sees it as a future event. This is how the author of Hebrews, quoting Psalm 8:4-6 reconciles this – all things are placed under Jesus' feet. It [the Kingdom] is already inaugurated, but its consummation is yet future.^{iv} This concept is usually referred to as “already, but not yet”.

“The author assures them [the first hearers] that Christ really is in control but that the full subjugation of all things lies in the future. Thus, he dispels their confusion regarding the passage and at the same time leads them into his discussion of the incarnation. This is the beauty and genius of the author's use of Ps. 8:4-6.”^v

The Second Adam Heb. 2:9

Hence the “But we see him...”, the subject has changed here from man – as in humanity – to Jesus, who was also “made lower than the angels” for a “little while”, and He was crowned with glory and honor.

You see, the problem is that man has plunged himself into bondage to sin (Rom. 5:12-18; Gen. 3) notwithstanding Romans 8:19-20, and cannot extricate himself out of his condition of separation from and the condemnation of God. So, a radical solution far beyond the reaches of man's intellect, ability and desire was called for, and was put into motion by God. God sent His Son as our Saviour, even as far back as Gen. 3:15 and according to I Peter 1:20, FB4TFOTW^{vi} – cf. Rom. 5:6-8 – and He is more than just our Saviour from sin. He is the Heir, the One called Lord, the one Ps. 110:1 refers to – the One who has conquered death and who will reign eternally as our God and King eternal.

Verse 9 lays out first, His humiliation, as “He was made lower than the angels” (Phil. 2:5-8) though He was eternally the Son of God before He was ever born in Bethlehem (cf. Micah 5:2; JN 17:5,24; JN 1:1). Dying a sinner's death as our substitute, then rising from the dead – note Col. 2:8-15 – He is now crowned with glory and honour – cf. Heb. 12:2; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:9-10.

Rev. 5:9-10 shows us a sort of parallel to Heb. 2:9b. He is crowned with glory and honour “*because of the suffering of death*”. His exaltation came about as a result of His vindication by God who raised Him from the dead (cf. Acts 17:30-31), showing that His sacrifice was sufficient and accepted by God the Father and by whom His ascension took Him upward to reign over humanity and all things at God's right hand (Heb. 1:3), as well as to make intercession there for His people (Heb. 7:25).

But, why, if Jesus reigns now, is Lord now; why is then world in such a mess? Not many bow the knee to Him, not everyone confesses Him as Lord, and there is chaos, disobedience, evil and rampant hatred. Yet, there is still more to come.

Richard Phillips comments;

“Christ the answer has come and achieved salvation. But the problem of this world still remains most evident. Here, then, is the final answer and it is coming soon – Christ is coming again with glory to consummate His reign, to triumph over all His enemies – sin and death and the Devil and this present evil world - all of which will be placed under His feet and destroyed, making way for the new creation in holiness and light. Already this coming triumph is working in the lives of people as they turn away from sin, in the life of the church as it receives more and more new believers, and even in the secular culture as salt and light to extend Christ’s reign.”^{vii}

“This is the already and not yet of the Christian life. Everything is already ours in Christ, although not yet realised in our experience.”^{viii}

So the One whom God intended all along to reign over the world and whose people would reign with Him is Jesus Christ, the One and only. He is the human made lower than the angels for a short time, but is now exalted and reigning. Cf. Heb. 4:14-15; 6:17-20.

Verse 9 finishes off as a verse that Arminians love to claim as their own. V. 9c says, “*so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*” Schreiner says of this verse,

“As a human being He was not superior to angels during his life on earth but placed beneath them, for he, like all human beings, was subject to death. Jesus’ death, however, was for the sake of others, for he did not deserve to die since he was the sinless one (4:15; 7:26-27). His death, therefore, represented the grace of God. In other words, the rest of humanity deserved to die because of its sin, but God poured out His grace by rescuing human beings from sin and death through the death of Jesus. The word ‘taste’ here means ‘experienced’, signifying that Jesus tasted death in all its fullness with all its horrors.”^{ix} Schreiner cites O’Brien in a footnote on this verse,

“The final clause, “so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” expresses purpose, not the purpose of the crowning by itself, but rather the purpose of the whole sequence of preceding events, the humiliation, passion, and glory combined.”^x

The author states that “...*he might taste death for everyone.*” Now, Arminians and ‘4 point’ Calvinists want to stick closely to the word “everyone” here because it tends to support their contention that Jesus died for all, but that only those who accept Him as Saviour will be saved, and that, since God cannot interfere with man’s ‘autonomous’ free will so as to entice anyone to come to Christ against their will or else the saved are like robots, therefore we must have ‘autonomous free will’ – IOW – we decide to get saved. This position is called “universal atonement” and it rejects ‘limited atonement’ or ‘particular redemption’.

A 5 point Calvinist would argue that Christ died only for the elect (per God’s design), and that every person for whom He died will be saved without a doubt. So, since there is a chasm between these two interpretations, how can we reconcile this verse with that, and see “taste death for everyone” does not mean everyone without exception, but rather, “everyone without distinction?”

The overwhelming evidence of the NT (and the OT) is that Jesus died for everyone without distinction, therefore all kinds of people, people from every tribe tongue and nation in fact – the poor, the rich, the mildly sinful, the wicked, kings and paupers, killers and liars, and so on, but not for every single person ever born – that would be “everyone without exception”. That would be universalism and thus, logically, if that position were true, then there would be no need for His substitutionary death and resurrection.

Here are some verses that support the Calvinist interpretation of this verse; even within the book of Hebrews – 2:10,11,12 (bringing many sons to glory (not all sons); 2:13 citing Isa. 8:18 – ‘the children God has given me’ –who are the offspring of Abraham, not Adam; Heb. 7:-10 (who does He make intercession for?) and note other NT passages – MT. 1:21 (He will save His people from their sins); MT 20:28 (He gave His life as a ransom for many); JN 10:11-15 – His sheep; JN 6:37-40, 44, 64-65; 17; Rom. 8:29-39; 9:22-23; Eph. 2:1-10; I Pet. 2:9-10; II Thess. 2:13-14, and many, many more!

It is not that the atonement of Jesus Christ is insufficient in power to save everyone, if that is what God had intended. But what did God intend? The design of God was to save some – His elect, not just to make salvation possible for all.

Per Philip E. Hughes;

“There is, however, an ambiguity in the Greek phrase rendered “for every one”...In the original the pronoun “every one” is singular in number when the plural might have been expected, and may be either masculine or neuter in gender, so that the question arises whether it means “for every person” or “for everything”. If “for every person” is intended, then the phrase is the equivalent of the plural “for all men” as in 2 Cor. 5:14ff, and in I Tim. 2:6 and “for us all” in Rom. 8:32. This is the most natural way to understand it. The possibility, however, of its being a neuter singular cannot be ruled out, in which case the totality or collectivity of that for which Jesus tasted death is emphasized. This may still be interpreted in a personal manner of men, as in JN 6:37-40 where Jesus says: *“Every one [neuter] that the Father gives Me will come to Me; and him who comes [masculine] to Me I will not cast out...and this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing [neuter] of all that He has given Me, but raise it [neuter] up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one [masculine] who sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life.”* The neuter singular then, would stand for the collectivity of the redeemed who in faith have come to Christ.”^{xi}

The strongest arguments for the Doctrine of Limited Atonement or Particular Redemption, are found in such biblical facts as the Unity of the Trinity (JN 6:37); the exclusivity of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ (JN 17); the names in the Book of Life before the foundation of the world; the sovereignty of God’s will (Isa. 53); the fact that Jesus died for “His sheep” (JN 10); the actuality of Jesus’ purchase (I Peter 1); the reality of Christ’s propitiation (Rom. 3:21-26); the accomplishment of reconciliation (Rom. 5:10-11); the penalty on man’s final belief (Heb. 10:26ff); the singularity of Christ’s love (Eph. 5:25-27); & the diversity of universal language (JN 3:12-17).

By His tasting death – experiencing it to the full – He has been raised and exalted and it is as a result of this that He reigns as King and serves as our High Priest – cf. 2:17-18; 7:25. The death humans deserved as sinners could only be dealt with via a perfect, sinless, spotless substitute – cf. I Pet. 1:15-21; I JN 4:10 – in an act of perfect love and grace.

ⁱ DA Carson & Greg Beale, Commentary on the NT Use of the OT; Baker Academic, 2008, p. 944

ⁱⁱ Schreiner, Hebrews, pp. 87-88

ⁱⁱⁱ Schreiner, IBID, p. 89

^{iv} Carson & Beale, p. 946-947

^v IBID, p. 947

^{vi} From before the foundation of the world – in acrostic form

^{vii} Richard D. Phillips, Hebrews- Reformed Expository Commentary, on Kindle, Loc. 838 of 8471; P & R 2006

^{viii} IBID, Loc 849

^{ix} Schreiner, p. 90

^x IBID, p. 01, FN 93...Peter O'Brien

^{xi} Philip E. Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1977 / Reprint 1987; pp. 92-93