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Our Firm Foundation: A Biblical Theological Study of Hebrews 2:5-18

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INTRODUCTION

Whether due to its many references to Jewish tradition or its expansive use of the Old Testament, or perhaps something else altogether, Hebrews is often viewed by Christians with uncertainty and intimidation, and sometimes even ignored in favor of epistles which are more cheerful or easier for modern Christians to understand. To pass over Hebrews, however, is to miss its important appeal to perseverance in faith, an appeal grounded in the supremacy of Christ. While this appeal necessarily contains warnings about being careful not to fall away from faith, it is also rich in description of the relationship between Christ and man, and the assurance that may be found in it—both of which are highly present in Hebrews 2:5-18.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Simplistically, the book of Hebrews may be broken into two parts which weave together throughout the book: (1) a study of the character (and, with this, the works of) Christ and (2) an appeal given the church to respond to this revealed Christ—separated by Lane as sections of exposition and exhortation, respectively.¹ The opening two chapters of the book largely lie in the realm of exposition, providing necessary context for the exhortation to faithfulness in Hebrews 3:1-4:13. This exposition sets up the character of Christ in two separate ways: the first, mostly

¹ William L. Lane. *Hebrews 1-8*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), xcix.

seen in Hebrews 1:1-2:4, sets up Christ as distinct from the angels, while the second outlines his relationship with mankind.

The descriptions of the two sections build on one another to establish an image of the person of Christ; as such, there are a few points in Hebrews 1:1-2:4 which are critical to establishing an understanding of Hebrews 2:5-18. First, Christ is established as the means of the revelation of God’s character (Heb. 1:2). He is able to provide this revelation as a result of his nature: the Son is shown to be both “the exact imprint of [God’s] nature” (Heb. 1:3 ESV²) and distinct from the Father, given that He is able to “[sit] down at the right hand of the Majesty on high [God]” (Heb. 1:3). Second, it is established that Christ has provided a means for the purification of sins (Heb. 1:3). Third—and most strongly emphasized in this section—Christ is described as being superior to the angels (Heb. 1:4, 6). Having established these, the author of Hebrews moves into the second movement of his exposition: a study of Christ’s relationship with man.

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS 2:5-18

Though the relationship between Christ and man (also referred to as “sons” and “offspring of Abraham”) is perhaps the foremost concept present in Hebrews 2:5-18, it is by no means the only one, and to treat it as such risks missing the subtleties found in the interplay of the various repeated ideas; therefore, the following sections will examine the nature of this relationship alongside three other key, repeated ideas: suffering, glory, and atonement.

2:5

In many ways, Hebrews 2:5 acts as a transition between the two sections. The content of the verse, which directly mentions two parties—angels and God—and the “for” at the beginning

² Unless otherwise noted, all quoted Scripture is taken from the ESV.

both recall the information of the previous section, indicating its relevance will continue in the coming section. A third, unnamed party, however, sets the scene for the verses to come: the author's statement that "it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come" (Heb. 2:5), indicates that God subjected the world to come to some party, and raises the question "to whom?"

2:6-8

This question is answered in part in verses 6-8, largely through the quotation of Psalm 8:4-6. A psalm of David, Psalm 8 is a psalm of praise, the first and last verses identical appeals to the majesty of the Lord's name. The verses quoted in Hebrews 2:6-8 come from the middle of the psalm, and are informed by this praise of the Lord, as David reflects in awe that, in spite of man's relative smallness in relation to creation (Ps.8:3-4), God has granted him glory and honor along with dominion over creation (Ps. 8:5-8). The language of Psalm 8 in turn recalls the creation of man in Genesis 1:26-29, an account which, through repetition, emphasizes both the dominion of man over creation (Gen. 1:26, 28) and the fact that man is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27).

In the context of Hebrews 2:5, these verses emphasize the distinction between man and angels. The use of this specific passage does more than that, however: it draws attention to the unique relationship between God and man, based both in the wonder of God's care for man and his creation of man in his own image. Hebrews 2:8b emphasizes this point, stating specifically that "in putting *everything* in subjection to him, he left *nothing* outside of his control" (emphasis added); however, it also notes that this is not the current state of the world.

2:9-10

An explanation for this dilemma begins in the opening phrase of verse 9: “But we see Jesus...”

The word “but” provides a transition which links the two verses.³ The verse continues to describe Jesus in wording nearly identical to that of Hebrews 2:7: Jesus was made for a while lower than the angels and then was granted glory and honor. Through this alignment, the author of Hebrews draws a connection between Jesus and the “man” of the psalm: Jesus is fulfilling the role of man. Furthermore, unlike the psalm, verse 9 adds that the glory given Jesus was a result of his suffering of death—a connection which remains important throughout the passage. Moreover, this suffering opens the door for Jesus to “taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9)—to offer atonement.

This idea—that Jesus redeems not only the created purpose of man but mankind themselves as well—is further emphasized in verse 10. As Lane points out, the description of God as the one “for whom and by whom all things exist” (Heb. 2:10) recalls his role as the creator of mankind, and as such, He “is precisely the one who is able to act in such a way that his design for humankind will be achieved”⁴—this being the redemption of purpose. Just after this, God’s purpose is described as “bringing many sons to glory” (Heb 2:10), making it clear that the redemption of mankind is also in view in this passage. Jesus’ given role as “the founder of their [many sons] salvation” (Heb. 2:10) further emphasizes this, and also provides an insight into the nature of the relationship between Jesus and man: he is the origin of both the atonement given them and the glory into which they are brought.

³ Some translations even choose to structure the verses as a continual sentence, i.e. “we do not yet see *all things under his control*, but we see Jesus...” (Heb. 2:8b-9a NET).

⁴ Lane, *Hebrews*, 55.

Both of these are made possible by Jesus' perfection through suffering—which does not, as it may first appear, indicate that Jesus was imperfect or sinful. Rather, the language recalls the description of consecration in the Septuagint, thereby tying Jesus' perfection to his role as a high priest.⁵ F.F. Bruce explores this idea, stating that, in order to be a perfect high priest, Jesus must be able to “sympathize with those on whose behalf he acts, and he cannot sympathize with them unless he can enter into their experiences and share them for himself”⁶—therefore, the point made in the passage: as a perfect high priest, “it was fitting” that Jesus should be made perfect through suffering. Thus, just as in verse 9, Jesus' suffering is seen to be an essential part of the glory and atonement given to man, adding yet another layer of depth to the relationship: Jesus' willingness to suffer in order to provide atonement for mankind.

2:11-13

Another shift of focus occurs in verse 11; however, as with the past transitions, there is a reference to what has come before as well, here seen in the word “for,” which indicates the continuation of an idea. In this case, “for” seems to be addressing the statement in the previous sentence that “it was fitting” that God should make Jesus perfect through suffering (Heb. 2:10)—it indicates that the coming section will answer the question of *why* it is fitting. With that established, the author of Hebrews moves into the next stage of the growing argument: that Jesus and man are all of one source. The language used here differs across translations (e.g. “source” [ESV], “Father” [NASB], “family” [NIV], and “origin” [NET]); however, the statement in the second half of the verse—“that is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb 2:11)—leans toward a more familial interpretation. This new familial aspect to the relationship between

⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 57.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 81.

Jesus and man is expanded in the following verses, the first quoting Psalm 22:22 and the second Isaiah 8:17-18.

Perhaps the most well-known use of Psalm 22 is Jesus crying out with the first line of the Psalm on the cross in Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). Although unstated in the gospels, scholars have noted many other pieces of the psalm which align with Jesus’ experience on and leading up to the cross, including his pierced hands and feet and garments divided by lot (Ps. 22:16b, 18).⁷ Because of this specificity, NT authors understood the psalm as a whole to be directly related to Christ,⁸ including verse 22. In this light, Psalm 22:22 speaks of Jesus’ earthly ministry—his work “in the midst of the congregation”—and his relationship with those he was ministering to—his “brothers.” Within Hebrews 2, this passage provides support not only for the author’s description of Jesus and man as brothers, but also further speaks into Jesus’ role as high priest. Beale and Carson put this succinctly, stating “Christ came to help sinners...that help could be given only if he was “one of us,” for ultimately that help came through his death, and only becoming fully human could he die”.⁹ Christ’s work, then, was not just to die for man, but to be one with man—a brother and a member of the congregation.

The use of familial language is further brought in through the split quotation of Isaiah 8:17 and 8:18 in verse 13. In their immediate context, these verses are spoken by Isaiah in light of the impending Assyrian invasion—verse 17 is a statement Isaiah’s trust in the Lord, while verse 18 declares to Israel that Isaiah and his children are witnesses to them of the Lord’s

⁷ For a further breakdown of these occurrences, see Craig L. Blomberg’s discussion of Matthew 27 and Rikk E. Watts’s discussion of Mark 15 in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Beale & Carson.

⁸ George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 949.

⁹ Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 949.

presence. Although this passage is not overtly messianic, the author of Hebrews interpreted it as such, likely, as Guthrie points out, due to its positioning in the broader text of Isaiah.¹⁰ The quoted verses, Isaiah 8:17-18, come just after the reference to a stumbling block in 8:14-15, which Paul cites in Romans 9 as a reference to Jesus. Furthermore, just after these verses, in Isaiah 9:1-7, is the promise of a coming child who will be the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6 NIV)—a promise fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah.

This placement between two important messianic passages likely explains why the author of Hebrews chose to treat the middle verses as messianic as well, using them in Hebrews 2 as a means to describe “Christ’s posture of trust and his solidarity with his followers”:¹¹ the Son, trusting the Father, gathers his followers to act, as Isaiah and his sons did, as a witness for God to others—in the case of Christ, however, unlike for Isaiah, these “others” are the whole world. Furthermore, the use of these verses strengthens the familial themes already present, as Christ’s followers—men—are described as “children.” Though is some debate over how to interpret the use of this word—as “children of Christ” or “children of God” (the latter, in light of Heb. 2:11, also seen as Christ’s brethren).¹² In either case, the use of Isaiah 8:18 deepens the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and man by strengthening the bond’s familial nature.

2:14-16

Having established the familial relationship through the quotation of passages, the author of Hebrews continues in answering the question the previous section began to address—that of why

¹⁰ Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 951.

¹¹ Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 951.

¹² Bruce, *The Epistle...*, 84; Phillip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1977), 109.

Jesus' suffering was fitting—in light of the information brought in. It is made clear in verse 14 that Jesus' decision to take on humanity was both a willing choice—he “*partook of the same things [flesh and blood]*” (Heb. 2:14, emphasis added)—and something done specifically to be *one with* humanity, seen in the reason for this choice being “since the children share in flesh and blood...” (Heb 2:14 NASB): in other words, Jesus' relationship with man comes from desire, not obligation.

The awe inspired by this choice is strengthened by verses 14b-15, which lay out the goal of Christ's actions in taking on flesh, and are important to see first in their entirety: “...that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:14b-15). This goal may be broken into three parts. First, it is only by taking on humanity that Jesus is able to die, and this is one of his goals: the willing sacrifice of his life. Second, that through his death, Jesus sought to destroy the devil, and through him, to destroy the power of death. Third, through this destruction, he is able to deliver¹³ those in slavery to the fear of death—that is, man.

In these two verses, the author of Hebrews weaves together many of the strands of thought which have been established: Jesus chose to be in an intimate *relationship* with man that, by *suffering* death, he could provide a path of deliverance from man's own *suffering* under the power of death, to a freedom which echoes the *glory* with which he himself has been stated to be crowned. Furthermore, the idea of deliverance recalls and expands Jesus' role as the sanctifier (Heb. 2:11). Sanctification often revolves around the issue of man's sinfulness only, and the separation from God caused by this sinfulness; however, the deliverance detailed in these verses is a deliverance from the fear of death and from the devil, due to his power over death. Freedom

¹³ Alternately translated “free” (NASB, NIV) and “set free” (NET).

from sinfulness is still tied into this deliverance: death, after all, entered the world through sin (Rom. 5:12). These verses provide a broader context for Jesus' role as sanctifier by emphasizing the nuances of the atonement offered through him.

This description of Christ's choice to suffer for the salvation of man calls to mind the image of the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53. In this passage, Isaiah describes a man who, for the transgressions of others (Isa. 53:5), "was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth" (Isa. 53:7a NIV)—the very pattern outlined in Hebrews 2:14-15. Though the author of Hebrews does not make an outright connection to Isaiah 53, the use of this image enriches the text by directing readers to the broader canon and its images of the awaited Messiah.

These points are concluded in verse 16, which once more emphasizes that it is "the offspring of Abraham" (that is, man)—and not angels—that Jesus helps. This verse reiterates Jesus' relationship with man and his mission to provide him with help, providing a simplistic summary of why it was fitting for Jesus to suffer: for him to be made like man and suffer death was also the way to provide help—deliverance and a means of atonement—and that was his desire.

2:17-18

The final two verses move from this summation into a broader conclusion, the opening word "therefore" recalling the entire passage, seeming to say "in light of all this..." These verses form the culmination of the growing argument begun in Hebrews 2:5. Jesus' relationship with man is defined most clearly here out of the passage: he is their "merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 2:17), a role which ties together his role as sanctifier and savior with the intimate, familial relationship laid out beginning in verse 10. The former is seen in the role of the high priest, to "make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17b), while the latter is seen in the

beginning of verse 17, which declares it necessary that Jesus is “made like his brothers in every respect” in order to fulfill the role of high priest. This necessity is further expanded on in verse 18, which declares that it is “because he himself has suffered when tempted” that Jesus is “able to help those who are being tempted.” In this final statement, Jesus’ compassion shines, his own experience with temptation allowing him to “help those who are now exposed to the ordeal of trial.”¹⁴ It is this way that the passage ends: with yet another affirmation of Christ’s relationship with mankind, a message of encouragement to the letter’s recipients.

Application

The narrative of Hebrews 2:5-18 paints a portrait of Christ marked by suffering and glory, brokenness and atonement, and death and life. All of these, both tragic and beautiful, provide weight and depth to the relationship between Christ Jesus and man—a relationship ultimately defined by Christ’s great love for man; a love lived out perfectly in spite of the suffering required to do so.

The passage leaves no question of man’s need for Christ. It emphasizes again and again our need for atonement and deliverance and the fact that it is Christ who, through his own death, makes propitiation for our sins and offers us freedom from death. What’s more, just as Christ was “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death” (Heb. 2:9), so we are brought to glory by his death (Heb. 2:10).

How, then, do we respond? There is no simple answer to this question, as seen by the fact that answering it is the work of most of Hebrews 3-4. The exhortation in these chapters, however, has two main elements.

¹⁴ Lane, *Hebrews*, 66.

First, we are called to “consider Jesus” (Heb. 3:1), a command which seems obvious, an extension of what has already been done. It is, however, a call to reflection, to a time of meditation on the love and faithfulness of Jesus. Why does this matter? Paul, in Ephesians 3, lays out the importance of understanding the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, and that in this knowledge believers may be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). As we consider the nature of our relationship with Christ, we are able to gain a fuller understanding of it, through which we are drawn into deeper relationship.

Second, the author of Hebrews appeals in the words of Psalm 95, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” (Heb. 3:15). We are called not only to contemplation, but to action: to respond to the call of the Lord, and to keep our hearts open to him. We are not called to enter into a one-sided relationship, but one in which we are to be active participants, listening for and obeying the word of the Lord.

This call may seem daunting, but it does not rely on our own strength. For, as the author of Hebrews says, “we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (Heb. 3:14). And this is the foundation of our confidence: that Christ has come to be in a relationship with us and to make propitiation for our sins, suffering when tempted that he may help us in our time of need (Heb. 2:18).

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