

## **Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 3, Hebrews 2:5-18: Hope and Help in the Son**

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In the preceding presentation, we examined the first major argumentative block of Hebrews, namely chapter 1, verse 1, through chapter 2, verse 4, which we found to be bound together into a unit on the basis of an underlying syllogism. The author had significantly ornamented this syllogism with eulogistic affirmations concerning the Son, Jesus, and with smaller steps in the overall argumentation. The remainder of the second chapter of Hebrews continues to develop the strong Christological themes that were introduced in the first chapter.

It does so, however, not just with a view to lending weight to the seriousness of heeding the words spoken by the Son, but also with the goal of providing pastoral comfort and hope to the audience, which has lost honor and status in this world as a result of their response to the Son up to this point. The centerpiece of this segment is the author's Christological reading of Psalm 8, verses 4 to 6, in which he establishes that Jesus' path through suffering to glory is the way in which the many sons and daughters should expect to travel if they wish to arrive at their divinely appointed destiny. The author goes on for the remainder of the chapter and then reflects upon the appropriateness of Jesus's arrival at glory only after suffering.

Because the plight of human beings is to be subjected to the fear of death and need liberation to face trial and testing, God, in his foresight, fitted the Son ahead of time to be their pioneer, taking him through suffering to glory ahead of them. In this way, the hearers can be assured that their current unpleasant experiences are not actually a sign of being distant from God but rather of being right where God knew they would be as they followed in the footsteps of the Son on the path to glory. In Hebrews 2, verses 5 to 9, the author introduces the text from Psalm 8 that he will explicate with the words, For it was not to angels that he subjected the coming world about which we have been speaking.

With the word for, the author introduces what follows as a rationale for chapter 2, verses 1 through 4, continuing to support the call to give the Son's word due attention in one's life. We have already noted that the coming world here is the divine realm, which, though it exists now for God and the spiritual beings that populate it, is not yet accessible to human beings, and therefore, from our perspective, it is a coming realm. It is a realm that will appear when the physical heavens and earth are shaken and removed.

The author's point here is that by subjecting this coming world to the authority of the Son, God has given the Son authority over who would enter that world, and therefore, one's ongoing response to the Son is determinative for one's place in the

coming realm. Will we encounter the Son as enemies to be subjected under his feet, as the quotation from Psalm 110 promises? Or will we encounter the Son as the many sons and daughters who have embraced and been embraced by the Son to be welcomed into this kingdom? The author now goes on to quote the psalm text itself. Someone somewhere has borne witness, saying, What is a human being that you are mindful of him, or the Son of man, that you have a care for him? You have made him a little while or a little bit lower than the angels.

You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have subjected all things under his feet. In its original context, Psalm 8 would be read simply as a celebration of the place of human beings in God's creation.

The lines, what is a human being that you are mindful of him, what are the children of human beings that you should have cared for them, would traditionally have been understood as general references to all mortals. It may be significant that the author of Hebrews has skipped over one line from these verses in the original psalm. You have set him over the works of your hands, a clear reference to the place of humanity in general, in creation, hearkening back to Genesis 1 and 2 and humanity's mandate to tend the world that God had created.

The author of Hebrews is no doubt aware of this traditional reading of Psalm 8, but he introduces instead a Christological reading of this text. The phrase, Son of man, is a title frequently associated with Jesus and the gospel traditions, and this becomes the author's point of entry into applying the text to the Son, Jesus. Modern translations that are committed to gender-neutral language where human beings are concerned often obscure this by rendering the phrase Son of man more generally as mortals and by moving from him to them in the verses that follow.

That makes perfect sense for translating the psalm in line with its traditional application to human beings in general, but it completely obscures what the author of Hebrews is seizing upon in the psalm text to make his interpretation work, namely the precise language of Son of man that is also Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In this way, it introduces the distance between the psalm text and the author's interpretation of that text that does not exist in Greek. The Septuagint version of the psalm has a particular twist that makes it easier to apply to Jesus.

In the Hebrews, it is unambiguous that God set human beings a little bit lower than the angels. Human beings are just a bit inferior to angels on the ladder of creation. When that same Hebrew word that gives us the spatial measure of a little bit is translated into Greek, it becomes ambiguous.

It could be spatial or temporal, a little bit lower, or for a little while lower. The preacher of Hebrews exploits the second possibility of creating an incarnational

reading of the psalm and then focusing on sequential events in Jesus' course. The Son's incarnation involved temporarily accepting a lower status beneath the angels.

But following upon that time, the Son was glorified. You crowned him with glory and honor. This glorification followed upon the Son's death and ascension and return to the divine realm and session at God's right hand.

The last step in this story, you have subjected all things under his feet, is yet to be fulfilled, as the author of Hebrews himself confesses in chapter 2, verse 9. We do not yet see all things subjected to him. There's a connection here between this psalm text and Psalm 110 verse 1, which was recited earlier in the sermon: sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. In this psalm, you have subjected all things under his feet.

So again, this becomes a point of connection for the author to read the text Christologically. The author goes on in verse 9 to apply the language of this psalm specifically to Jesus. We do not yet see everything subjected to him, but we do see the one who for a little while was subjected beneath the angels, Jesus, who, on account of the suffering of death, was crowned with glory and honor so that he might, by the grace of God, taste death on behalf of everyone.

In this reading, the author has brought the psalm text fully into the life of Jesus and the audience's experience of Jesus' story so far. But he introduces now into this interpretation an extra piece, namely that this son of man died on behalf of everyone and that this was somehow an act that was undertaken to benefit others and was a manifestation itself of God's own favor. It was an act of self-giving that laid an obligation upon the audience, the recipients.

Now, in all of this, the author has not yet come to what would have been the psalm's main point. How is it that humanity arrives at glory and honor? This will be the topic of the following segment as we pursue further the author's development of this psalm in Hebrews 2, verse 10. After the author's presentation of this Christ-centered reading of Psalm 8, the author begins to explain why a suffering Messiah was part of God's plan.

We read, For it was fitting for him, on whose account were all things, and through whom are all things, in leading many sons and daughters to glory, to perfect the leader of their salvation through sufferings. In the opening words here, for it was fitting, we see the author explicitly offering this verse as a rationale for the preceding material, the fact that Jesus had to endure first the humiliation of becoming human and then the further humiliation of death upon the cross prior to his glorification and exaltation. What was fitting? It was fitting here, the author says, to perfect Christ, the author or leader of the path to deliverance through sufferings.

What perfecting means in Hebrews has been the topic of many dissertations. Here, let me simply suggest that perfect language throughout Hebrews has to do largely with bringing something to the end point of a developmental process for which it was destined. This could be applied in many different contexts.

The child is perfected as he or she becomes an adult. The human being comes to full fruition when maturity is reached. An initiate in the mystery religions of the ancient world, an initiate is perfected when the rite of initiation is finished.

In the language of Exodus 29, in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, priests were perfected when their rite of ordination was completed. In this instance, then, Jesus would be perfected not because some perceived deficiency in himself was finally remedied but rather because he was brought to that end point toward which God was driving him or leading him. This probably ought to be read as Christ's return in glory to the heavenly realm, Christ's crossing back over into the abiding realm of God's presence, installed there as the great high priest and mediator between God and all of humanity.

Why was it fitting to bring Christ to that exalted position of universal high priesthood through sufferings? Probably because, in the author's mind, suffering would be the path through which the many sons and daughters would arrive at glory. Thus, in God's foresight, God brought the pioneer of the many sons and daughters, the trailblazer of their deliverance, through to that end point of the journey through sufferings as well. The many sons and daughters have benefits before them yet to be enjoyed, and in particular, the author here focuses on entering into that glory into which Jesus has already entered in the heavenly realm, in the permanent realm of God's dwelling.

The author seems to be suggesting that the way in which the general sense of Psalm 8, Psalm 8 as a statement about the glory that will belong to humanity, the way the general sense of Psalm 8 comes to pass is through the agency of Jesus, the Son, the pioneer in whom that liturgical prophecy is now fulfilled. *Doxa*, glory, is a keyword both in the Psalm text and in the recitation of the Psalm text in Hebrews 2, verses 7 through 9. This is a word that matches the pastoral need of the author's hearers insofar as honor, *doxa*, or *timeh*, is precisely something they have lost in this world as a result of coming to join the Christian movement in the first place. Thus, the author assures them that their destiny is not to continue to live in disgrace or shame as they currently experience life under the shadow of their unsupportive neighbors, but their destiny is to share in the very glory that the exalted Son himself enjoys.

Having connected the glory of the Son with the glory that would come to the many sons and daughters who would follow in the path that Jesus pioneered, the author now dwells upon the solidarity of the Son with the many sons and daughters, and he does this with some ingenious applications of Old Testament texts. As we read on in

Hebrews 2, verses 11 through 13, For the one who sanctifies, and those who are in the process of being sanctified, are all from one. For which cause he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, I will announce your name to my brothers.

In the midst of the assembly, I will praise you. And again, I will be confident in him. And again, look, here I am, and the children whom God has given me.

In this series of scriptural quotations, then, the author has placed on the lips of the Son words of a psalm, Psalm 22, and words from Isaiah to provide, as it were, scriptural evidence of Jesus' ongoing solidarity with the many sons and daughters. When he says that the one who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all from one, probably meaning all from one source, the author resonates with Stoic discourse on the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of human beings. For example, Seneca, the Roman philosopher active in the first half of the first century A.D., writes, We all spring from the same source, have the same origin.

Heaven is the one parent of us all. Also, Paul, in his speech before the Areopagus in Acts chapter 17, quotes a Stoic philosopher by the name of Aratus. We are all his offspring.

We are all God's offspring. But here in Hebrews, the emphasis is not primarily on the solidarity of all people. Rather, it is on the solidarity of the exalted Son with the many less exalted sons and daughters who are yet to enjoy the esteem that is inherent in this bond.

And how can the hearers know that they enjoy this connection with the exalted Son? The author provides evidence for this cause he is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. This claim that the author makes is supported by the recitation of three authoritative texts presented as the mode in which the Son owns his sisters and brothers. The first of these, I will announce your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation I will praise you, is taken from Psalm 22, the end of a psalm famously given a messianic reading in the early church.

This is the psalm that starts out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? From the early creation of the passion narratives, where Jesus recites this opening verse of the psalm from the cross, the early church is exposed to a messianic, Christ-centered reading of this psalm. This is a striking hermeneutical move on the part of the author here in the following steps as he places Old Testament texts on the lips of Jesus as an appropriate framework for interpreting those texts. When he moves then to the following quotations, he takes what was originally a single, consecutive text in Isaiah 8, verses 17 and 18, and splits it into two different quotations.

In this way, he's able to give each half a somewhat different sense than it had in Isaiah. For example, in Isaiah, the statement, I will be confident in him, was an

expression of the prophet's confidence in God. Here, however, we are being led by the author to hear this as the son's expression of confidence in each of those whom he calls brother or sister since this is the heading under which all three texts are being recited in Hebrews 2:11 to 13.

The next segment of the Isaiah quotation, look, here I am and the children which God has given me, was originally a declaration by the prophet concerning his own children, which in context now included Mahar-Shalal-Hashbas, whom the prophet named as signs and portents to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The author of Hebrews now takes it as an oracle spoken by the son himself, providing further proof of the son's open willingness to identify with and confess solidarity with the many sons and daughters. The preacher is speaking here about the honor that his hearers possess, even though their neighbors do not currently recognize it, seeking to make them feel disgraced instead.

The son, whose exaltation was the subject in large measure of Hebrews 1:1 through 2:9, has sufficiently high regard for the believers that he considers it no disgrace to him to be associated with them in the closest of ways. How much less, by implication, should the hearers think it a source of shame for them to be associated with Jesus? If he is willing to put such confidence in them, how can they betray such trust? One of the benefits that the author of Hebrews stresses that Jesus has won for his followers is freedom from the fear of death.

He brings this to expression in chapter 2, verses 14 and 15. Since then, the children shared flesh and blood; he himself shared fully in the same things, in order that, through death, he might destroy the one having power over death, that is, the devil, and release those who all their lives were held liable to slavery by the fear of death. In this passage, as the author continues to stress the solidarity of the son with the many sons and daughters, all of whom have now shared in the frailty of flesh and blood, the author has brought in a philosophical topic of how a sage or a hero can liberate his or her followers from the fear of death and its crippling effects on human commitment to virtue and courage in the face of hardships.

Epictetus, the early Stoic philosopher who actually would have been a later contemporary with the author of Hebrews, writes that Death, for example, is nothing frightening, or else it would have frightened Socrates. Socrates was remembered in his fearless confrontation with death in his acceptance of the cup of hemlock that had been appointed to him by the Athenian assembly. This Socrates was a hero in the eyes of these philosophers, teaching that death and every shade of death that might come our way was something that the sage of temperate mind could endure and, therefore, not something that would unnecessarily subvert their commitment to do the right thing.

Seneca spells this out even more fully in one of his moral epistles. Socrates, in prison, declined to flee when certain persons gave him the opportunity in order that he might free humankind from the fear of two most grievous things: death and imprisonment. The author of Hebrews has looked to Jesus as one who has accomplished the same thing, even at a greater scale, for Jesus' followers.

He joins this philosophical topic of the sage fearlessly confronting death with a more Jewish and Christian apocalyptic worldview of the cosmic battle between God's forces here in the person of the Son and Satan, the cosmic enemy of God and humankind. Jesus' death is both an act of liberation of the captives and a victory over their spiritual captor. Freedom from the fear of death means freedom from any external coercion.

This should challenge the hearers to regard their challenges and their situations as things that they are morally capable of meeting. They do not need to be subverted in their loyalty to Jesus by these paler shadows of death that they have encountered, like shame, reproach, and loss of property. This declaration of Jesus' liberation of them is yet another cause for loyalty and gratitude, and it should also forestall defection and encourage reinvestment on the part of these addressees in their service to Jesus and their promotion of the honor of Jesus.

The author goes on in the concluding verses of chapter 2 to speak of Jesus' qualifications for helping the many sons and daughters. He writes, For it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the seed of Abraham, whence he was obliged in every respect to be made like his brothers and sisters in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in regard to the things of God, for the sake of making expiation for the sins of the people. For in what he suffered, himself being tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

In this passage, we find the author using an extended recontextualization of some lines from Isaiah chapter 41, where the prophet says, Seed of Abraham, whom I loved, of whom I took hold, I am your God who helped you. Laying hold of mortals and effecting their deliverance obliged the Son to be made like those whom he sought to rescue and help. This returns to the earlier topic of why it was fitting for the Son to enter glory only through suffering.

It was by this means that God could make Jesus the most effective and sensitive helper and broker of God's favor that Jesus could be. This passage introduces the term *archireus*, or high priest, which becomes a major category under which the preacher will examine the work, both past and present, of Jesus on behalf of the many sons and daughters. Priests in the ancient world were bridge builders between the divine and the human.

Indeed, the Latin word for priest, pontifex, is literally bridge builder. The frequent use of the word mediator in Hebrews to describe Jesus' role is another reflection of this awareness of the importance of a priest as one who connects humans in this realm with the divine in an otherwise inaccessible realm. This is a form of brokerage.

In the ancient world, one of the valuable gifts that a patron could give to someone else was access to one of that patron's other friends or higher-stationed patrons. In such a case, the patron wasn't giving an actual gift of assistance, and he was making a connection between the person who came to him for help and the greater resource, the greater patron who could provide that help. This is the kind of relationship that undergirds ancient thinking about priests as brokers, mediators, and bridge builders.

The author dwells here on the son's suffering as somehow a prerequisite to his ability as a benefactor. His own experience, his own wrestling with trial and testing, has equipped him to come to the aid of the many children who experience temptation. He has himself gone farther in the endurance of testing and hardship than any of the addressees would be called to travel.

And so they will never find themselves at a place where Jesus will not be sympathetic to their plight, will not know from personal experience the discomfort that their needs create. The audience, the preacher hopes, cannot escape the sermon without hearing that all that Jesus endured was for me and, therefore, be renewed in their gratitude and loyalty towards such a great benefactor. The author of Hebrews focuses on Jesus as a high priest, and this sets him apart from many of his canonical peers, where Jesus is more often portrayed as a kingly messiah than as a priestly messiah.

However, while the kingly messiah, the son of David is more common, some messianic expectations throughout the Second Temple period developed around a priestly figure. This goes back to some strange developments in the high priesthood during the early second century BC, particularly the rupture of the normal high priestly line under the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV when high priestly wannabes began bidding for and receiving the office of high priest from the Gentile king. Great pockets of Judeans became quite disaffected with the high priestly office as a whole and the hope for a future priest who would officiate rightly, who would do what priests were supposed to do instead of what these high priestly pretenders were doing in Judea began to become prominent.

For example, among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find quite prominent hope not only for a messiah of Israel but also for a messiah of Aaron, a priestly figure. The residence of Qumran nourished the expectation that God would restore the monarchy to David and that he would restore the priesthood to Zadok. One of the authors of one of



these scrolls writes that this future priest will atone for all the sins of his generation and will be sent to all the sons of his people.

His word is like a word of heaven, and his teaching is according to the will of God. His eternal sun will shine, and his fire will spring forth to all the ends of the earth. It will shine over darkness. The darkness will pass away from the earth and deep darkness from the dry land.

These authors looked forward to a priestly leader whose offerings would be acceptable to God and whose teachings would be in line with God's law. One of the most extensive witnesses in the ancient world to this hope for a priestly messiah comes again from the Testament of Levi, particularly the 18th chapter. Toward the end of this testament, we read that when vengeance comes upon them from the Lord, the priesthood will lapse.

And then the Lord will raise up a new priest to whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed. This one will shine forth like the sun on the earth. He shall take away all darkness from under heaven.

From the temple of glory, sanctification will come upon him with a fatherly voice, as from Abraham to Isaac. And the glory of the Most High shall burst forth upon him. And the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him.

There shall be no successor for him from generation to generation forever. In his priesthood, sin shall cease. And lawless people shall rest from their evil deeds.

And righteous people shall find rest in him. And he shall open the gates of paradise. He shall remove the sword that has threatened since Adam.

And he will grant to the saints to eat of the tree of life. The spirit of holiness shall be upon them. And Belial shall be bound by him.

We can find some close connections between expectations of a priestly Messiah and texts like the Testament of Levi with the priestly Christology of Hebrews. We find the expectation that God appoints this priest directly. That this priest will be a reliable mediator of God's word.

That God will regard this priest in some sense as a son. That this priest will have no successor. We might compare what the author of Hebrews will go on to say about Jesus as a high priest forever.

That this priest will cause sin to cease. And that this priest opens up the way to the eternal realm. The Testament of Levi used the language of paradise for this.

The author of Hebrews uses the language of the heavenly rest or the heavenly country or even the heavenly holy of holies. They also share the expectation that the priestly Messiah champions the cause of his dependence on the devil. Called Belial here in the Testament of Levi.

For all these similarities, the differences are just as noteworthy. These models in the texts of the second temple period do not yet suggest a heavenly high priest who will function in the true sanctuary of the divine realm. The intercessory function of the priestly Messiah is also muted in these texts if present at all.

And there is certainly nothing like the idea of the priestly Messiah's self-sacrifice as a purification offering for sins. In these facets, the author of Hebrews shows himself to be quite an innovator in the traditions that he may have inherited from his Jewish heritage. Hebrews chapter 2, verses 5 to 18, contributes to the rhetorical strategy of the author in several important ways.

In this section, he continues to focus his hearers on Jesus. Jesus is what the preacher wants the hearers to see, to keep before their mind's eye in every situation. The author also emphasizes here the hope of glory that sits before the audience, supporting, therefore, their continued endurance of a distinct lack of honor in their current circumstances.

The author has also begun to spin out the benefits that have come to the hearers because of Jesus's self-giving and sacrifice. For example, the hearers were liberated from the fear of death and Jesus was acclimated to the kinds of trials that his many brothers and sisters would face so that he could be the more effective mediator on their behalf. The result of this is that continued alignment with Jesus in gratitude and loyalty should be impressing upon the hearers as the only noble path forward.

The author also seeks to impress upon the hearers that they have every reason to remain steadfast in the face of their neighbor's attempts to subvert their commitment. Most particularly, they have the ongoing assistance of the very Son of God, who will equip them to endure and overcome any temptation if they will but rely on him, trusting his ability to help them. This portion of Hebrews also continues to speak of particular challenges and make perennial contributions to our walk of discipleship.

It challenges us to keep faith in the one who kept such faith with us, as we see in Jesus. If we drink in ourselves the author's message that all that Jesus endured was endured for our benefit, for our sake, keeping faith with him through whatever difficulties, trials, or hardships come our way becomes the only noble course of action for us. The author also reminds us that whatever temptation or whatever situation of testing we find ourselves in, Jesus is a present help and can give us what we need to make it through that episode of temptation or testing unscathed.

Too often, when we are tempted, in this sense, I think primarily tempted by our own desires or drives to turn to the right or the left from the path that God would put before us, too often, we do not bring Jesus into that situation of tempting. Too often, when we are tested, and by test, I have in mind those situations where it's not really something inside of us but something outside of us that is weighing on us and trying to pressure us into accommodating ourselves to the path that the world would choose for us, too often in those situations, too, we fail to bring Jesus into that situation. Just as the author of Hebrews is reminding his congregation of Jesus' presence and ability to provide help to those who have become the seed of Abraham spiritually, so the author would speak to us as well and urge us in any situation to learn the habit of running to the throne of grace and at the moment praying to Jesus and inviting him in so that he can lift us up in that situation of testing or temptation, refocus us on the path forward, and remind us by his very presence and by his example of the path that leads to lasting wholeness and honor, which is always going to be the path of obedience to God, whatever that means in terms of self-denial or perseverance in the face of external pressure.

The author also challenges us to experience what it means to be liberated from the fear of death. Fear of death subverts human courage in the face of external coercion or anything that threatens loss or worse. The fear of death is what makes people timid in the face of injustice, whether personally experienced or witnessed.

Fear of death subverts our commitment to investing ourselves in the life that God calls us into, making us think that we need to be living more and more for this life and for the things of this life because this life has an end, after which is a great unknown or perhaps even nothing. Fear of death is what ultimately drives us in dysfunctional ways to try to secure our life, to secure some sense of permanence here because of this lingering sense that our dissolution or being dissolved by nothingness is always out there in front of us. This fear of death can drive us to overachievement, can drive us to try to build up wealth for ourselves, and a treasure for ourselves that becomes a kind of insulation against death by being an insulation against any want or need.

It can drive us to compulsive and controlling behaviors as we try to regiment life and keep chaos at a distance. In all of these ways, the fear of death subverts God's intentions for the human being. In this declaration that Jesus has freed his followers from the fear of death, the author challenges us to discover what our project becomes, what human life becomes if we truly drink in the belief that death is not the be-all and the end-all of our existence and if, in fact, it was not for this material creation that we are ultimately destined.

If we hold on to our transcendence of death, to the promise of resurrection, together with God's call to love righteousness and hate lawlessness, we are greatly

empowered to strive in this life for God's values and God's vision, even in the face of great personal loss and opposition. Such an orientation to the world also throws us a lifeline by which we may be pulled out from the entangling snares of our own defense-against-death pursuits, freeing us to serve not our own fear and insecurities, but a different, greater, God-centered agenda.