

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART IV

JESUS AS BRINGING US SALVATION BEYOND THE MEANS OF ANGELS

I. The letter then continues onto the theme that all things are subjected to Christ even more than they ever were to the angels.

A. He begins by saying that "the world to come," either the age of the Messiah or the kingdom of heaven, is not subject to angels but someone greater.

1. The angels have control over the world as it is now. They kept humans out of the garden of Eden and control human events. See, e.g., Gen. 3:24; Ex. 32:2; Num. 20:16; Duet. 32:8; Is. 36:36-37; Dan. 10:13-14, 21. But, the letter argues, the age to come is subject to one greater.

- Thus, for example, none of the angels are given the prophesy of Isaiah, but rather a man, Isaiah is given the message, to testify to a greater man to come, one who would suffer but then bring salvation. See Isaiah 6:1, 53-54.

2. The letter then quotes the Septuagint for of Psalm 8 to say that God made man lower than the angels "for a little while," implying that there will come a time when a man will be greater than the angels.

- The Hebrew could be translated either than God made man a little lower than the gods or the angels (elohim) or lower than them for a little while. Here again, the ancient Psalm used the term for "gods" in a context that can be applied to angels.

- In any case, the Psalm reflects mankind as having complete authority over all the works of God. Psalm 8:7.

- Without Christ, this passage would seem to be an instance of hyperbole. But the letter indicates that what was an idealization before becomes fact in Jesus. Humanity lost control of the universe by original sin. Through Christ we also gain it back.

- The phrase "someone has testified somewhere" does not indicate ignorance (the rest of the letter makes it clear that the author knows Hebrew Scriptures well) but rather than the passage has been ignored; people have not

understood the full implications.

B. The letter goes on to argue that plainly all things are not subject to mankind now.

1. But Jesus, now crowned with glory, is bringing all things into subjection to Himself, and will finalize this project at the end of all things. Eph. 1:18-23; Phil. 2:9-11. And one greater than the angels must do so, for angels certainly can bring death to earth, see, e.g., Num. 22:22-35, but only the Almighty God can restore life.

2. Above all else, death puts an end to all human power and makes all human efforts temporal, as the Book of Ecclesiastes especially emphasizes. See, e.g., Eccl. 3:16-22, 4:2-6, 9:4-10, 12:1-8. In Christ alone is this final opponent conquered. See 1 Cor. 15:25-28.

3. Thus, it is Jesus who fulfills the 8th Psalm in full, bringing all things into order again. In His human nature alone, He would be lower than the angels, but even that human nature is now brought to glory with God. There is an implication that human nature, joined to Christ is in a way higher than that of the angels.

II. The letter then describes how it was fitting that such a glorious figure should also be one who suffers, for it is in suffering that human nature attains perfection.

A. On the one hand, the letter is explaining why such a glorious figure should suffer. For people are inclined to think that the great figures are above suffering. See, e.g., Matt. 16:21-23. Jesus completely turns this expectation upside down by taking on the greatest suffering and thus presents the world with the scandal of the Cross. See 1 Cor. 1:18; 1 Peter 2:7-8.

- Jesus shows that perfect love of God through the Cross, and it is that love that brings human nature to perfection. See John 3:6, 1 John 4:10.

- In order to be the leader or pioneer for humanity in salvation, Jesus joined with us to lead us all the better. This idea stands in complete contrast to the idea of perfection coming from being aloof from human affairs, in pure contemplation or Stoic detachment. He thus brings to perfection the prophecies of a suffering servant and the wisdom literature's embodiment of the just man proved through suffering. See, e.g., Is. 52:13-53:12; Zech. 12:9-10; Job 1:1-2:10; Wis. 3:1-

12.

B. Coming from the other direction, the example of Christ gives us confidence that human struggles and suffering, far from keeping one from perfection, are a source of perfection, for they draw us closer to Christ. See, e.g., Col. 1:24; 1 Peter 4:13.

- It is in Jesus that we enter into the full meaning of the mystery of human suffering. That mystery is not explained away, but taken up into a higher mystery, that of Jesus suffering for us. See Romans 5:1-11; Pope John Paul II, The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (1984) 13-14.

C. The letter brings this theme to a high point by saying that Christ fulfills the 22nd Psalm, as embodied in verse 23, where it switches from lamentation to praise.

1. The 22nd Psalm, which Jesus cited on the Cross with the words, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" begins as a lament, but then switches into a Psalm of praise, ending with a proclamation of confidence in God that all nations and even the dead will praise God.

2. The letter is citing this psalm as an expression of how Christ took on the depth of human suffering, but through that suffering gave the greatest praise to God, and now brings all nations to God.

D. The letter also quotes from Isaiah's prophesy about full confidence in the almighty God, and not in alliances with pagan nations. This prophesy would lead to the great prophesy of the child, Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father Forever, and Prince of Peace who is to come. See Isaiah 8:11-9:6. It calls upon the faithful to place that full confidence in Christ, who suffered for us out of love, rather than in earthly powers.

III. This chapter then concludes by saying that Jesus sympathizes with us all the more, and can help us all the more because He shared in our sufferings, as no angel did.

A. The letter points out that Jesus did not take on the higher angelic nature because they had no need of salvation from sin and death. And so it was only fitting that He take on the lower human nature, the one He was to save. See Romans 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 15:21.

B. The letter argues from the fittingness of one among the human race offering the sacrifice that would redeem us. It goes on to argue that we can more easily place our confidence in Christ because He shared our nature. See, e.g., Romans 8:28-39