

Chapter 5 (Exploring Hebrews) Jesus Is the Answer to Life's Tensions
Read Hebrews 2:5-9

This is not the easiest passage in Hebrews to understand. In fact, it is one of the most difficult.

The confusion comes about because most of us expect verses 5-8 (quoting Psalm 8) to be talking about Jesus. Nearly all translations encourage that misconception when they render verse 6 as "the son of man" rather than "son of man" as found in the Greek text. Christians generally see the son of man as an allusion to Jesus, whereas the text actually refers to people in general. Psalm 8 is not primarily a Messianic passage. Rather, it is a reflection of Genesis 1, in which God created Adam and Eve in His image and gave them dominion over His creation (cf. Ps. 8:5-8 with Gen. 1:26-28).

Thus Hebrews in quoting Psalm 8 does not specifically have Jesus in mind but human beings, including each of the first readers of the letter and, by extension, those of us who read it in the twenty-first century. And what we need to ask, is the author of Hebrews telling us about ourselves?

1. That human beings are significant. We are important enough for God to remember us and to watch over us (verse 6).

2. That humanity had a dignified beginning. That we were made a little lower than the angels (verse 7). But wait a minute, you may be thinking. I know my Old Testament. Psalm 8 itself doesn't say lower than the angels, but "a little less than God," referring back to Genesis 1:26,27, which states that God created Adam and Eve in His image and likeness. Why then does Hebrews use angels? There are two reasons. First, the author nearly always cites from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the original Hebrews, and that translation for some reason has "angels" rather than "God" in Psalm 8:5. Second, Hebrews 1 demonstrated that Jesus was greater than the angels, and the use of angels here fits in with the flow of his discussion. His point of emphasis, however, is absolutely clear. Humans have high status by creation.

3. That human beings have been crowned with glory and honor (verse 7).

4. That God has placed all things in subordination to humanity (verse 8). Here we have a reflection on Genesis 1:28, in which God gave the human race "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"(RSV).

The original readers of Hebrews must have felt quite a bit of tension about this time. What does the biblical writer mean by all these statements? Look at us, they must have thought, our lives aren't "crowned with glory and honor" and certainly not much has been subjected to us, let alone all things. To the contrary, we are excluded, persecuted, and made to feel insignificant by the larger culture around us--both Jewish and Roman. We are nothing!

In fact it is that feeling of nothingness that drives us to desire to abandon Christianity and return to Judaism with its bigness and ritual and security. What good are promises if they have no substance? It is nice to say that we have been crowned with honor, but, we know better. Since we joined the church we have less honor and security than before. Christianity sounds nice, but it doesn't seem to be everything that it promised. Have we been duped and tricked by the evangelists who brought us into the church?

Hebrews responds to such thoughts in verse 8: "But now we do not yet see all things subordinate to him." Thus the author has brought his readers to a point of tension. In verse 8 he claims that God "in subordinating all things to him....left nothing not subordinated to him." Yet the next section of the verse goes on to point out that we do not yet witness that subordination.

The minds and lives of those first Christians struggled with a fierce tension. They had God's promises of glory, but they also saw something less than glorious in their daily existence. Not much has changed. Most of us still feel that way. Some days we find ourselves tempted to doubt the value or even the genuineness of our Christian experience. Why the conflict between God's promises and our daily lives?

That is where verse 9 comes in. Up through verse 8 Hebrews has not defined how it used the "him" of Psalm 8. As noted earlier, Psalm 8 refers to humanity in general--"a son of man." But now our author takes that ambiguity in verse 9 and interprets it in terms of "the son of man."

Verse 9 turns the eyes of all toward Jesus. Previously, verses 5 through 8 had set forth the ideal of what humanity should be and the frustrating reality of its present condition. But verse 9 indicates God's means of transforming that disappointing reality into the ideal--Jesus. "We do see that Jesus, the One who was made for a little while lower than the angels, has been crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, in order that by God's grace He might taste death for everyone." The flow of Hebrews 2:5-9

God intended Christians for dominion, glory, and honor (verse 5-8a).

But the actual state of Christians is failure rather than glory, frustration, instead of victory (verse 8b).

The good news is that Christ made it possible for Christians to move beyond failure and frustration to that dominion, glory, and honor for which God created them (verse 9).

Yes, God originally created human beings in His image and gave them dominion over all creation (Heb. 2:6-8a; Gen. 1:26-28), but we don't see much glory at present (Heb. 2:8b). That's where the good news (the gospel) comes in. Jesus became one of us. He also, we read in verse 9, became "for a little while lower than the angels." Or, as Matthew puts it, the virgin bore a Son, and they called His name Jesus (Matt. 1:21, 23).

But--and here we come to the author's main point in Hebrews 2:5-9--even though Jesus was a part of humanity, He had a different experience from the rest of the race. In absolute reality Jesus already stands "crowned with glory and honor." He received that glory at His resurrection from the dead and by His ascension to the right hand of God (cf. Heb. 1:3).

Jesus may have gone, like other humans, through the frustration of life, but by perseverance He became victorious. The key to that victory, Hebrews 2:9 tells us, was His "suffering of death." Christ's death on the cross won that victory. In actuality the cry "it is finished" (John 19:30 RSV), was a shout of triumph. His death on the cross made His resurrection and crowning at the Resurrection possible.

But that once-for-all death (Heb. 10:10) was not only for Christ's coronation of glory and honor, but for the crowning and honoring of each person who accepts His sacrifice and perseveres through the frustration of life just as He did. He tasted "death for everyone" (2:9). God's grace to all humanity who accept His provisions for their future crowning and honor is grounded in the substitutionary death.

Hebrews 2:5-9 may not be the easiest passage to grasp at first glance, but once understood it is powerful because it provides us with the gospel in microcosm. William Barclay helps us see that point when he observes that the passage has three basic ideas: "(i) God created man, only a little less than Himself, to have the mastery over all things. (ii) Man through his sin entered into frustration and defeat instead of mastery and dominion. (iii) Into this state of frustration and defeat came Jesus Christ, in order that by His life and death and glory, He might make man what man was meant to be: (Barclay, p. 17).

And what did this mean for the lives of the first readers? Especially what does it represent for my life?

It means that we shouldn't let outward circumstances overcome us or discourage us. While it is true that our lives aren't as "glorious" as we would like to see them, that the church has problems, and that we find ourselves tempted to give up, it is just as true that Jesus has already won the victory for us and has already been "crowned with glory and honor" (Heb. 2:9). And His glorification is a foretaste of those who accept His sacrifice and "great salvation" (2:3) by faith.

But never forget that His life wasn't easy. In fact, He eventually met a cruel death on a cross. Yet Jesus persevered in spite of outward circumstances, becoming the "pioneer" (2:10) of those who would follow Him. The recipients of Hebrews also needed to persevere even though they also were having trouble that placed their prosperity and at times even their lives in jeopardy (10:32-34; 12:7-10; 13:3, 13). They felt tempted to give up on Christ and go back to their old life, but the message of Hebrews declares that the only way to victory is to have faith in those things that cannot be seen (11:1). Like Abraham of old, they have the promises but not the reality. By faith Abraham "looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:10, RSV).

We today have the same promises, the same frustrations, and the same challenges. Our only safety is in keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, who tasted death for each of us and who through that death, as we will see in the next section of Hebrews, became the pioneer of our salvation (2:10).