

JESUS: FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS

Hebrews 2:5-9

If you cast your minds back a couple of weeks to our study of Hebrews 1:5-14 you will recall how the Preacher contrasts Jesus and the angels in a series of quotations from the Old Testament. He tells us that angels are functionaries but Jesus is a son; angels are fleeting, but the Son is eternal; angels are servants but the Son sits in glory at the right hand of God. As we move into 2:5ff the Preacher brings another contrast to our attention – at the end of time all things will be subject to Jesus the Son, not to angels.

This may seem simply one more item in the list that began in 1:5 and was interrupted by the ethical interlude in 2:1-4, but there is a major difference here. Up till now the Preacher has been speaking about how the Son is superior to the angels in every way. Now there is a movement away from the heights that the Son knew in glory towards something altogether different. We move from exaltation to the Cross. No longer is the theme “Jesus high over all” – now he has become “lower than the angels” (2:7). This is a marked change of direction.

The Preacher uses Psalm 8 as his text for this part of his sermon. What he wants his congregation to understand is that Jesus, the full and exact likeness of God himself, is made “lower than the angels”, that is, made the full and exact likeness of mankind, a full participant in the human condition. This is a hard truth to take in, even today. Like them, we have a hard job accepting Jesus the man, doing and being all the things a man does and is, except without sin (4:15). For them, and us, the question is, if the opening words of this sermon are true, that Jesus is the heir of all things, the reflection of God’s glory, superior to the angels and Lord of all time, why did he walk the tragic road of human history to defeat and death? If Jesus truly sustains all things by his powerful word, why do we see him weakly submitting to a cross of shame? Psalm 8 is the preacher’s answer to these questions – introduced in typical sermon fashion, “someone said somewhere...”

We need to look briefly at Psalm 8 before proceeding. In its Old Testament setting this Psalm is about humanity in general. The Psalmist marvels at the majesty of God and the wonder of all he has made. Yet this same God is concerned about mere humans, lifting them up from earthbound decay, crowning them with glory and honour only a little lower than the angels, and setting them over all creation. However, the Preacher uses these words very differently; not as a statement about people in general but about one person in particular. To make this shift clear and explicit the Preacher slightly alters the text, something most if not all, preachers do on occasions. If you look at 2:7f and PS 8:6 you will see that the words, “you made him ruler over the works of your hands” are missing from this person. In its original context this is about ordinary

people being stewards over all creation, but this is a confusing idea in Hebrews so it is simply left out.

More importantly the Preacher reverses the thrust of the Psalm. Originally the Psalm expresses amazement that the humans are lifted to such glorious heights, only a little lower than the angels themselves. But here the Preacher looks into the depths Jesus was willing to sound, stooping lower than the angels to join us where we are.

One other thing to mention about Psalm 8 is a translation issue. As always, the Preacher uses the Greek LXX rather than the Hebrew text. In Greek, Psalm 8:5 (Hebrews 2:7) can be translated either of 2 ways: “you made him a little lower than the angels, (as NIV), which is a statement about rank, or “you made him for a little while lower than the angels” (as RSV) which refers to time. This second translation fits better with 2:9 which is also about time. The point being that the Preacher is not trying to say that Jesus was just a tiny bit lower than the angels in the order of creation, as though he came down to the edge of human life or dipped a toe into our life. Rather, he wants to claim that for a brief moment in time the eternal and exalted Son purposefully dived into the depths of human suffering and weakness.

Can you see how Psalm 8 rounds off the Preacher’s comments so far? In 1:5-14 he uses verses taken from a number of places making a series of points. Psalm 8 covers the whole story so far – that the Glorious Son became the Suffering Son and then becomes the Triumphant Son, so the quotation concludes with “(God) put everything under his feet.”

This last point allows the Preacher to return once again to a central theme of the sermon, the distance between what we can see with our eyes and what we can only be known by faith. The Preacher interprets the Psalm as saying everything is under Jesus’ control, just like our songs and hymns that proclaim, “Christ triumphant, ever reigning”. The preacher concludes, “In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. (2:8a)

But you and I know things are not like that. Tomorrow morning we will get up and put the news on and all our songs about God’s glory and power will seem naïve and irrelevant. From the hole in the ozone layer and climate chaos to the war on terror and the torn fabric of society we do not see everything subject to him. The Preacher has also noticed this (2:8b), he too admits we do not see everything subject to him. Indeed to be honest, far from being under the control of the victorious Son, the world looks dangerously out of control.

If we don’t see everything subject to Jesus, what do we see? What we do see is this... we see Jesus. The Preacher puts Jesus firmly in the centre of view. (By the way, this is one of only 8 occasions when the Preacher uses the name Jesus.) He is inviting us to think about what we can see and what we have heard about Jesus. Everyone saw Jesus arrested and tried and pushed around like a common criminal. You could see he was “lower than the angels”. But you have to hear the Good News to know that this same Jesus is “now crowned with glory and honour”. Anyone can see Jesus suffered death, that was a public event. But only those who have heard God’s word could know that this death was in order to save humanity, that, “by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (2:9) We are reminded here of Jesus’ own words to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. (Luke 24:25)

Yes, Jesus did suffer. The whole world saw that. Yes, Jesus did exhibit the weakness of human flesh. Yes, Jesus did die, sharing the fate of all humanity. But that is only what any eye can see, listen to the words, to the message of salvation: Jesus was only, "for a little while lower than the angels." His descent into human history was for a definite purpose. We know beyond mere sight that Jesus' suffering was a necessary part of the grace that draws us closer to that place we cannot yet see, to the place of triumph where even now the Son is crowned with glory and honour.

Amen

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