

So Great a Salvation
A Review of Hebrews
August 11, 2024

Maybe you've paid a little more attention to track and field than normal in the past week or so. My favorite Olympian this year has been Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone. During an interview early last week, I heard her say that her husband used to play in the NFL. Wondering what team he played for, I found myself on her Wikipedia page. I soon read that they attend Grace Community Church and that her husband Andre is not only a former football player, he's also a student at the Master's Seminary.

They love running *and* the Reformation? Now I'm locked in. These are my people. A few days later she wins gold—and *not* by a nose—but by breaking the world record in the 400-meter hurdles. By the way, 400 meters is almost exactly a quarter of a mile. She runs that quarter of a mile in 50 seconds. Owen and I went outside yesterday, turned on the running app, and ran as hard as we could in 50 seconds to see how far *we* went. I hope people weren't watching out their windows. Sydney doesn't look like she's absolutely flying because of who's around her, but it's a blistering pace. Further, she runs that sub four-minute mile while jumping ten times over hurdles that are each two and half feet tall.

By the way, forty women qualified for the 400-meter hurdles. In order to qualify, *all* of them had to run it in under 55 seconds.

Why am I talking about a race? Is it because of the Olympics? Is it because I like running? Neither. It's because of our third point. The task before me today is to compress roughly 50 sermons into one, to whittle stacks of typed pages down to six-ish. I considered a number of ways to do it. A few weeks ago, while mowing the grass and listening to Hebrews, an outline made its way into my head. With the mower running, I pulled out my phone and jotted it down. I read that outline this week; it was mediocre. For another idea, in the past I've taken one central passage from it to attempt to bring all the pieces together. But, with Hebrews, I couldn't find one, singular passage that would do *all* I aimed to do.

So, instead of a broad outline—or a single passage—I've picked three pivotal “therefores” in Hebrews to put the book together, connecting pegs to hang our thoughts on. Two of these “therefores” you likely expect. The first one might be less obvious.

1. So Great a Salvation: Pay close attention to it. (Heb. 2:1–3)

The first “therefore,” comes right on the heels of the triumphant language in Hebrews 1. You recall how the book starts: **Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son** (Heb. 1:1–2).

Hebrews doesn't bury the lede. God speaks to us in and through His Son. Maybe you recall that in this introduction there are seven statements about the Son and what He's done: 1. He is the heir of all things (v. 2); 2. He is the radiance of God's glory (v. 3); 3. He is the exact representation of God's nature (v. 3); 4. He is the sustainer of all things (v. 3); 5. He made purification of sins (v. 3); 6. He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (v. 3); 7. He inherited a more excellent name than the angels (v. 4).

Those are seven statements *about* the Son. Then, *after* making those seven statements, the author quotes seven Old Testament Scriptures: 1. Psalm 2:7 (v. 5); 2. 2 Samuel 7:14 (v. 5); 3. Deuteronomy 32:43 (v. 6); 4. Psalm 104:4 (v. 7); 5. Psalm 45:6-7 (v. 8); 6. Psalm 102:25-27 (v. 10–11) and the culminating passage, Psalm 110:1 (v. 13).

He makes seven statements about the Son; and then he cites seven Scriptures. Considering how the book *began*, the citing of these passages makes perfect sense. God *had* spoken many times and in many ways. These passages remind us that there's *continuity* with these Old Testament Scriptures. This revelation from God is not *entirely* new.

However, it is, in the most important sense, *new*. In *these* days, He's spoken to us in His Son (1:2). You can almost put yourself on the Mount of Transfiguration—alongside Peter, James, and John. Before the disciples are two men that embody all that the Old Testament teaches—Moses and Elijah. And, in *that* context, on *that* mount, with those heroes of the faith in front of you, the Lord God says concerning His Son, **Listen to Him** (Mt. 17:5).

All the Old Testament Scriptures quoted in Hebrews 1 find their fulfillment in Him. Further, all the Old Testament Scriptures *not* quoted in Hebrews 1 find their fulfillment in Him. So, Hebrews 2 begins: **For this reason** (or in the ESV, **therefore**) **we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.** God has spoken in His Son. We've heard it. Chapter 2 *warns* us that we must pay much closer attention to it.

In the book of Hebrews, a book full of exhortations—or warnings—*this* is the first one. I spent some time on the phone this week with someone beginning the book of Hebrews soon. I told him that to understand the book rightly one key matter is to sort out the function of these warnings.

So, if we're reviewing, let me quickly remind us how these warnings function in the letter. To begin, not unlike telling a child, "Don't touch that iron," or a teenager, "Your lack of respect for authority will one day catch up with you," it's good to remember that warnings don't *merely* carry negative connotations. Warnings can be loving. They can be for our good.

We heard verse 1. Now hear the warning continue in verse 2 of chapter 2: **For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?** The answer to that question is this: "You won't." The author warns.

Now, if you're listening carefully, you noticed that the author uses "we" pronouns in verses 1 and 3 of this passage. Why is that important to point out? Because he includes *himself* in the warning. What's the significance of that? It means that believers reading this sermon-letter aren't excluded from paying much closer attention to what we have heard.

Is it possible that some hearing these words hadn't truly believed? Did they need to hear this warning? Absolutely. But, also—and this is key—can God use warnings like this one as a means in the life of a believer to spur him or her on to perseverance? Absolutely.¹ Some of it comes down to whether or not we think warnings are loving, as well as whether or not we think warnings can be heeded.

God is a God of both *means* and *ends*. Though His purposes are sure—unalterable—He uses means. How might these relate to one another? Neither this passage, nor the other warnings in Hebrews, shift what we believe about God's keeping—His preservation of His people. Instead, we believe these warnings *always* accomplish their aim—they're *always* effective—in the lives of those God purchased.² It's not either/or; it's both/and. God keeps; and one of the ways God keeps—one of the *means* by which He does so—is by warning His people.

So, here in chapter 2—at the outset of this letter—the Word of God warns those reading to pay much closer attention to what they have heard, so that they do not drift away from it. How would they escape if they neglect so great a salvation?

That's the first "therefore." Now we'll look at a second one in chapter 10, a "therefore," that details just how great this salvation is.

¹ See Tom Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*, 200ff.

² Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 489.

2. So Great a Salvation: What is it? (Heb. 10:19–25)

Chapters three and four are *mostly* warning. Using Psalm 95, the author exhorts those reading *not* to be like the wilderness generation, a people kept from entering the promised land because of unbelief (Heb. 3:19). That's *most* of chapters three and four. But at the end of chapter four are these verses: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need** (Heb. 4:14–16).

That passage is a hinge passage. While in some sense it *concludes* what the author's said thus far,³ it also *introduces* the next section. This is important to point out because the next section—beginning here and going all the way to chapter 10—is *the* central theological argument in the book of Hebrews.⁴ It concerns who Christ is—in particular His priesthood—and what He's done to give us access to God Himself.

It begins by reminding us that the priesthood was a vocation. For this particular vocation there were particular qualifications, character-istics that made someone fit to serve. We considered those qualifications last December, using the phrase in Hebrews 5:7, **in the days of His flesh**. That phrase actually tells us the *first* thing that made Jesus qualified. He was made like us (2:14).

But that's not *all* that qualified Him. What did He do in the days of His flesh? His days were marked by continual dependence upon the Father (5:7). Even in the midst of suffering, He was flawlessly obedient (5:8). Because of that, Him having been made perfect—in other words, qualified—He became the source of salvation (5:9).

Chapter 5 then connects this to Christ being **designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek** (5:10). I've mentioned before that we can be fairly certain the book of Hebrews is a sermon because in chapter 11 he writes that he's running out of time (11:32). But we *also* get the hint that it's a sermon because in chapter 5 he mentions a fascinating topic—Melchizedek—but then immediately goes into a chapter long parenthesis. It is yet another warning.

Yet, after warning them, he writes that he's convinced of **better things concerning them, things that accompany salvation** (6:9). In fact, he writes that **this hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast** (6:19). How might our hope be described as steadfast? How might it be an anchor of the soul? He writes that this hope is a hope **which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek** (6:20).

Keep in mind that chapter 5 began the argument concerning the priesthood, emphasizing qualifications to serve as priest. But when the author picks *back* up that argument in chapter 7, he does so by opening the readers' minds to consider a priesthood unlike the priesthood they were familiar with.

To follow this preacher's lead, this might be a good place to say something vital to grasping Hebrews, in particular its use of the word "better." Pastors sometimes, present company included, have made it sound as if "better" in the book of Hebrews is akin to *this* steak being better than that other steak, because it's aged better, seasoned better, or cooked better. It's better in *degree*.

³ Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 138.

⁴ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken In His Son*, 46.

As you know, the central argument of Hebrews is that Christ is in fact better—better than Moses, better than the priests, that He serves in a better tabernacle, offers a better sacrifice, and on we could go. However, the argument—and the examples the author gives, will not allow Him to be better merely in degree. No, He’s better in kind, or in essence.

We see this clearly in chapter 7. Jesus isn’t described as *merely* the best of the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priesthood gives us categories, yes, but the priest Hebrews details is not just superior. He’s of an entirely different order.

And that’s what mysterious Melchizedek shows us. We read about him in Genesis 14. He was king of Salem, a king of righteousness and of peace (Heb. 7:1–2). But he was not *only* king; he was also priest. And once the author of Hebrews introduces *that*, he also introduces the mystery. Because verse 3 of chapter 7 says this priest–king is **without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.**

Do I have time to re–teach all of Hebrews 7 today? Though it’d be fun, no. Don Carson’s helpful lecture on Melchizedek reminds us that nearly everyone else in Genesis seems to have a genealogy.⁵ Melchizedek, however, does *not*. In fact, if you read Genesis 14, it’s *as if* he comes out of nowhere. So, to use Carson’s language, instead of him *literally* not having a father or a mother, it’s that *literarily* Genesis presents him that way.⁶ Further, not only does Genesis *not* list Melchizedek’s father, we’re never told of *anyone* succeeding him in that order of priesthood. In that particular line, no one followed him.

At least not in the Old Testament.

So, in *that* sense, *literarily*, it’s *as if* he’s always existed and *as if* his priesthood continues to exist. Which is precisely the point of Hebrews 7. Though the logic is dense, unfamiliar, we might even say “odd,” those verses lead step by step to a point the author’s making. In fulfillment of Psalm 110—a priest–king after the order of Melchizedek has indeed come. He has neither beginning of days nor end of life. Therefore He, chapter 7 verse 25, **is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, (why? how?) since He always lives to make intercession for them** (Heb. 7:25).

Though the Levitical priesthood was the *only* kind of priesthood these Jewish Christians had categories for—a priesthood where *every single priest* eventually died, Jesus—**because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently** (7:24). He’s a better priest, not only in degree, but in kind.

And chapter 8 tells us that He serves as priest in a better tabernacle. As we said then, there’s a particular story the Bible intends to tell us. And then there is a *way* the Bible tells us *that* story.

If we’re convinced that the point of human history—and Biblical revelation—is for God to reveal Himself to His people through His Son, and if we are *also* convinced that the God aiming to do so is all–powerful—sovereign over every second—then we should have *little* trouble believing He can reveal Himself even in the details within the Old Testament. Why say all that? Because once we’re convinced of *both* those truths, the Bible can open up for us. That is, when we consider Old Testament priests, laws, Melchizedeks, covenants, and tabernacles, we can ask, “Are they patterns? Patterns intended to picture something else, something to come, something better?”

They are. And they do. The earthly tabernacle, Hebrews asserts, was a **copy and shadow of the heavenly things** (8:5). Hebrews 8 tells us that this better High Priest—the One according to the order of Melchizedek—serves as a **minister in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man** (Heb. 8:2). He’s entered, through the veil, into the most holy place. And He’s done so that He might intercede for us at the right hand **of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens** (8:1).

⁵ The word Genesis and the word genealogy seem to be related, do they not?

⁶ Don Carson lecture at Union University: <https://www.uu.edu/audio/detail.cfm?ID=396>

With that in mind, we might consider again: What if God orchestrated the very details of human history—tabernacles, temples, and priests—so that you’d know *better* what Christ is doing right now in heaven for you?

Hebrews 8 goes on. Christ has obtained this more excellent ministry, because **He is also the mediator of a better covenant** (8:6). A better priest, better tabernacle, and better covenant. This better covenant, Hebrews 8 goes on to say, is enacted on better promises. That is, rather than on stone, God will write His law on hearts (8:10). Secondly, unlike national Israel, each and every covenant member will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest (8:11). And, for a third promise, a better promise, though under the old covenant there remained an unrelenting need for sacrifice after sacrifice, this covenant is marked by forgiveness that is full, final, and forever. God **will remember their sins no more** (8:12).

It’s a better covenant. Christ is the Mediator of it. To rightly understand this, we must disabuse ourselves of the way we often use the word, “mediator.” There aren’t two equal parties. Nor are there two guilty parties working toward a middle ground. In this covenant, there’s only *one* guilty party. And if the Son is the Mediator of it, He didn’t come to effect a compromise. In fact, knowing we were guilty, He agreed that *we* deserved the infinite outpouring of God’s wrath.

With that in mind, hear the grace of Hebrews 9:11. Hear how He mediated a covenant that promises full and final forgiveness: **But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.** A better priest entered a better tabernacle and offered a better sacrifice—Himself.

Unlike every other priest, He didn’t need to make atonement for His own sins. He had none (7:26). Instead, He bore ours.

And having offered Himself in the place of a people, He—as our High Priest—then did something else. Hear Hebrews 10: **He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God** (10:11–12). He fulfilled Psalm 110.

With that, we *finally* arrive at the next “therefore,” in 10:19: **Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God.** A better priest entered a better tabernacle and by a better sacrifice inaugurated a better covenant which gave us better access.

These Jewish Christians knew that a holy God was far from safe for an unholy people. They knew about Nadab and Abihu. They were well acquainted with the rituals concerning the annual Day of Atonement. Yet, because of what Christ had done, the veil was no longer where they must stop. Instead, the veil was something they went *through*. What is that veil, according to Hebrews 10? Is it the one in Jerusalem, the one at the temple? No, the veil is His flesh. The new and living way to a holy God is through Christ Himself.

It’s not “if” we have confidence to enter, it’s “since” we do. We’re *not* at Mount Sinai. We’re on Zion (Heb. 12:18–24)—with God, and with God’s people—because of the blood of a Son that speaks better.

Because *that’s* true, the author admonishes us to do three things in verses 22–25. Verses 19–21 serve as a description of the benefits Christ’s priesthood provides; verses 22–25 exhort us to take advantage of those privileges.⁷ I won’t belabor these, but I will reassert them. First, verse 22: **Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.** You have access. Draw near with confidence. Verse 23: **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.** We have

⁷ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 464.

truths we confess about the person of the Son and what He's done on our behalf. We confess them together. Hold them fast. Do not waver. Verse 24: **Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together.** This is what you've done. Press on. Considering this great salvation brought about by a gracious God, these are the things we're to do.

Have I exhausted this great salvation in three pages? Does Hebrews 5–10 exhaust it? No. Yet, this is a sweeping, flyover look at the salvation we're to pay much closer attention to, the salvation we're not to neglect. How?

3. So Great a Salvation: How do I pay close attention to it? (Heb. 12:1–2)

Quickly we'll look at a third, “therefore,” the one that kicks off Hebrews 12. It, of course, comes on the heels of Hebrews 11, the chapter on faith. In that chapter we read about the faith of Abel, of Enoch, of Noah, of Abraham, of Sarah, of Moses, of Joseph, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel and on we might go. As the author *briefly* touches on each person's life, he does so to show us how *they* lived by faith. Example after example demonstrates for us that faith is possible. And each one, at least how each is depicted in Hebrews 11, model for us *how* to do so.

That is, they had **assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen** (11:1). In part that meant their faith was forward looking. For example, Moses endured by seeing Him who is unseen (11:27). He endured by looking to the reward (11:26). He wasn't alone in living that way. Yet, that famous chapter on faith ends with these words, **And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us** (11:40).

Chapter 12 picks up there: **Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us.** It's likely that this imagery pictures spectators in a stadium at an athletic competition.⁸ As they surround, they function as examples. Those reading this letter—then or now—are not the *first* to live by faith. Nor are we the first to try and figure out *how*. Further, in a sense, by their example surrounding us, they encourage us on.⁹

With that picture in mind, what are we to do? Verse 1 goes on: **let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us.** Why do we need to lay aside those encumbrances, that sin? If we're still in a stadium—and in Hebrews 12 we are—this language too carries athletic connotations, pointing to the shedding of excess clothing or any other weight upon us. Why might those Jewish Christians—or we—rid ourselves of everything that might entangle us? Verse 1 answers: **and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.** The book of Hebrews is a call to endure. Those reading it *then*, and those reading it *today*, have need of it (10:36).

But the book of Hebrews is a call to endure in a particular way. The end of verse 1, leading into verse 2, tells us *how*: **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.** Races *then* were not all that different than races today. Then, and now, a runner isn't aimless, looking here and there. During a race, a runner fixes his or her eyes on something ahead.

Verse 2 goes on to tell us two things about the One we're to fix our eyes on. As we endure, in *order* that we might endure, we fix our eyes on Jesus, **the author and perfecter of faith.** In short, He's faith's source—it's author. And He's the One that brings faith to its goal—to the finish line—He's faith's perfecter.¹⁰

⁸ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 357.

⁹ Cockerill, 602–603.

¹⁰ Harris, 359.

How might He do that? What enables *Him* to do *that* for us? He's already done it Himself. And unlike those from Hebrews 11, He's done it perfectly. Hebrews 12 goes on, v. 1b, **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

He *has* sat down. And He's still seated. From the start of the book, Hebrews has labored for us to know *where* Christ is. Why? Because where Christ sat down—at the right hand of the throne of God—is a place we have access to. The throne of God has become a throne of grace. It's a place we approach with confidence. And, further, the book of Hebrews wants us to know where Christ is because where He sits is where we'll go.

Conclusion

How can we be so sure?

Back in Hebrews 2, the author used the term we just saw in Hebrews 12, the word, “author.” But in Hebrews 2, it says this: **For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings** (2:10). He's not only the author of *faith*, He's the author of *salvation*. Some translate the word “founder.”¹¹ The word itself is actually the combination of two smaller words, the word for “first,” and the word for “lead.” That's why many like the translation, “pioneer.”

But it's not *only* the word itself that points to that translation, it's the context. Because what did He do? The pioneer of their salvation—the pioneer of ours—He went *first*. From suffering to glory, from death to life, He *leads* His people out, **bringing many sons to glory** (2:10).

Why will *you* endure? Because the race that qualifies *us* to receive all that Hebrews promises, Christ Himself *already* ran. He ran it. He ran it for you, for us. He ran it so that we might endure. He ran it so that once we've endured, we might be with Him.

This is the salvation we're to pay much closer attention to. We do so by fixing our eyes on this salvation's author. So, whatever pulls at you, hear Hebrews: Christ is better.

¹¹ ESV.