

Salvation in Hebrews

I have culled this article from a passage in my *False Brothers: Paul and Today*,¹ gently edited for this present purpose. In that book, because I was dealing with two main passages – 2 Corinthians 11:26 and Galatians 2:4 – and the Judaisers’ demand on Gentile believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 15:2), it was necessary to show that ‘salvation’ embraces far more than justification. To add some weight to my argument, I took an overview of Hebrews. It is that overview which I now publish as a free-standing article.

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Even though the letter to the Hebrews was not written by Paul, it has an important contribution to make to the way Paul responded to the false brothers – the *pseudadelphoi*. Strictly speaking the writer of Hebrews is not dealing with the *pseudadelphoi* – at least, I can see no evidence of it. As I explained in my *False Brothers*, the *pseudadelphoi* arose as a reaction to the conversion of Gentiles; Hebrews is concerned with the apostasy of Jewish believers, *their* defection from Christ. In order to prevent this, the writer sets out the superiority of the new covenant over the old. He takes the elements of the old – land, sabbath, tabernacle, priesthood, sacrifice, altar, and argues that Christ is the fulfilment, the reality of them all. He takes the old-covenant characters (or pre-old-covenant characters) – prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek, Aaron – and shows Christ to be superior to them all. ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11).

But though they may, as it were, circumnavigate in opposite directions (one set tackling Gentile believers; the other, Jewish), both sets of protagonists – and their errors – end up at the same point; namely, the adulteration of the new covenant by the old;

¹ My *False Brothers: Paul and Today*, pp80-93.

which inevitably means the ruin of the new covenant. And, as Paul so bluntly told the Galatians, this spells disaster – the replacement of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one and only true gospel, with a false gospel, and the lowering of Christ. Consequently, Hebrews, which has more than any other canonical book to say concerning the new covenant and its supersession of the old, has a great deal to tell us about what the writer called ‘such a great salvation’ (Heb. 2:3) accomplished by Christ who is ‘the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him’ (Heb. 5:9). Although the definite article has to be supplied, it *has* to be supplied. The writer was plainly referring to Christ as the one, the only one, who saves: he is ‘*the* source of eternal salvation’. All is in keeping, of course, with Christ’s own assertion (John 14:6), later preached by Peter (Acts 4:12). Christ, ‘securing an eternal redemption’ for his people by his propitiating sacrifice – ‘by means of his own blood’ (Heb. 9:12) – ‘having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him’ (Heb. 9:28), and thus bring in their everlasting bliss.² In saying this, the writer indicated that one of the main ways in which he would accomplish his purpose of holding these Jewish believers to the new covenant was to set out a full exposition of salvation.

Even the briefest of skims through the book makes it evident that for the writer of Hebrews the ‘great salvation’ embraces far, far more than justification; at the very least, it also embraces progressive sanctification and glorification. And do not miss my ‘at the very least’. When he was speaking of ‘salvation’, the writer spread his net to the fullest extent to include salvation’s announcement in the preaching of Christ (Heb. 1:1-4) – later completed by apostolic revelation (Heb. 2:3) – its accomplishment by the sacrificial death of Christ (Heb. 1:3; 2:9-10,14-17; 9:12-28; 10:12-14; 13:12) to deliver his people from slavery (Heb. 2:16), his maintenance of them in this state of salvation by his endless, constant, peerless, effective intercession on their behalf (Heb. 6:17-20; 7:23-28; 8:1-2; 9:24), the sanctification of believers (Heb. 2:11; 6:1-12; 9:14; 10:10,14;

² See my *Undervalued Themes: Resurrection and Kingdom*.

13:12), their perseverance (Heb. 1:14; 2:1-4,18; 3:6; 4:1-16), and Christ's glorious return (Heb. 9:28), all of which – and more – is incorporated in the 'new order' (Heb. 9:10) – that is, the better, superior, new covenant which has superseded the inferior old covenant (Heb. 7:18-28; 8:6-13; 10:1-18). Let me stress the obvious: these things are not disjointed, isolated packets standing on a supermarket shelf calmly awaiting selection by the finicky customer; they obviously overlap and interplay with each other. They are interlocking. You cannot have one without all the rest. Indeed, in a very real sense, that is the fundamental point I am making. 'Salvation' encompasses all aspects of redemption, every part of it, all linked in an indissoluble bond, beginning with God's electing decree and leading inevitably to the saint's glorification in Christ's kingdom at the resurrection (Rom. 8:28 – 11:36). And all is combined into the new covenant which – unlike the old covenant which was temporary³ – is the fixed, permanent, unchanging and unchangeable covenant in Christ.

No wonder, then, that the writer of Hebrews would not allow his readers even to think of going back to the superseded, old covenant. Similarly, Hebrews enforces Paul's vehemence against the *pseudadelphoi* for their efforts to contaminate the new covenant by the old. Both writers, blessed with a clearness of vision, saw the writing on the wall. And it was just one word which stared them in the face: 'DISASTER!'

We must never skip the warning passages by which the writer of Hebrews applies the new covenant. Application was key to him, and so it must be for us.⁴ So serious and searching are these warnings in Hebrews, it is not unknown for commentators to gloss them so as to avoid their clear – but painful – implication. What a cheap, grievous way to treat the writer's effort to maintain the glory of Christ in the new covenant! These warnings, of course, have an obvious application for unbelievers, but – and we

³ See my *Three Verses Misunderstood: Galatians 3:23-25 Expounded*.

⁴ As William Perkins, the arch-Puritan preacher, said to all preachers: 'What's the use of it?' Setting out doctrine, good; applying that doctrine, better. Better? No! Best of all, essential.

must never allow ourselves to forget it – the writer issued them in the first instance to believers, and for believers. And one way of looking at their thrust is this: Christ has established the new covenant, rendering the old obsolete. He has brought in his own, new law. So, in terms of the wineskins, don't go back to the obsolete, worn out, tired, old leather. The consequences of getting this wrong are not to be played with. So said the writer to the Hebrews.

The writer had hardly got out of the starting blocks before he sounded his first warning note:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? (Heb. 2:1-3).

This is patent: if the old-covenant warnings were so serious, how much more so must be the warnings of the new?

Even with the passage of 2000 years, we can still feel the passion pounding in his heart; it leaps off the page across those two millennia: the writer was not in the Senior Common Room of the local theological seminary, holding a sedate, refined debate, discussing, in a detached way, some nice, abstruse, esoteric theoretical issue over a cup of coffee. Oh no! He was engaged in a spiritual battle, a life-and-death battle, a battle he had to win. He was fighting for the souls of men.

As he had begun, so he continued:

We are [God's] house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as [the Jews did] in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said: "They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways". As I swore in my wrath: "They shall not enter my rest"'. Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today',

that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (Heb. 3:6-14).

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it (Heb. 4:1).

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience [as the Jews displayed in the wilderness]. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession (Heb. 4:11-14).

This ‘rest’ must not be confined to justification, done and dusted. Nor to the intermediate state.⁵ Nor to eternal glory. The use of ‘strive’ in ‘strive to enter that rest’ and ‘to him to whom we must give account’ proves that we have moved on from justification to include progressive sanctification and perseverance, *even to the day of judgment*.

The writer pressed on with his argument, the bit now firmly between his teeth:

It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt (Heb. 6:4-6).

And then we get this, clearly speaking of progressive sanctification, the living out of the justification wrought for the elect by God, and, once again, with an eye to the judgment day:

⁵ See my *Undervalued Themes: Resurrection and Kingdom*.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said: ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’. And again: ‘The Lord will judge his people’. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:19-31).

The writer was in full flow:

You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For: ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him’. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Heb. 10:34-39).

Wise teacher that he was, the writer then (in Hebrews 11) reminded his readers (ex Jews, remember) of the heroic saga they all knew so well, the long history of countless men and women of faith who had lived and died in the days before the coming of the Messiah and the new covenant. Nobody could miss what he was

saying. Yes, these men and women were men and women of faith, but for each and every one of them, their faith was shown in a lifetime of works and obedience. There was no exception. In a new-covenant sense, their justification by faith, in every case, was demonstrated by a life of works done in faith; in short, their justification inevitably led to their progressive sanctification and perseverance. If the writer – who said this:

...You have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:11-14)...

...had lived until the twentieth century, he would never have allowed cheap talk about ‘once saved, always saved’, or: ‘I’m only a carnal Christian’.⁶ For him, progressive sanctification and perseverance was as vital as justification. No works? No justification!

He resolutely pressed home the obvious application:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [the testimony of the believers listed in Hebrews 11], let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising

⁶ An excuse offered by those who try to justify their talk of Christ being their Saviour but not their Lord. In other words, they turn Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians on its head to make it a compliment, an explanation, a justification! ‘I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says: “I follow Paul,” and another: “I follow Apollos”, are you not being merely human?’ (1 Cor. 3:1-4). ‘Flesh’ and ‘spirit’, once again.

the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:1-2).

And that ‘cloud of witnesses’, remember, lived in the days of the old covenant, before the Spirit had been poured out!⁷ The implication is clear: a better covenant enables – and demands – a better devotion. Above all:

Consider [Christ] who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives’.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the

⁷ ‘Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said: “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water”. Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified’ (John 7:38-39). The new covenant might well be described as the age of the Spirit (Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:5,8; 2:1-4; 4:31; Gal. 5:16-25, and so on).

blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears (Heb. 12:3-17).⁸

Believers are not under the old covenant and its law. No! They are in Christ, under his law. As the Hebrews writer put it to his readers: You are no longer living in the shadow of Sinai (Heb. 12:18-21):

...But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:22-24).

Consequently:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven... Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:25-29).

All this change, the fulfilling of the old covenant, the bringing in of the new, came only at tremendous cost to Christ, a cost believers must never let slip from their minds:

Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb. 13:12-16).

In particular, Hebrews addresses progressive sanctification. It is clear that the writer could never for a moment have contemplated

⁸ That is, he couldn't change his choice.

that anybody could dream of treating justification and progressive sanctification as separate entities:

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses... We are his house, if [and, I might add, only if – DG] indeed⁹ we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope... Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end... Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it... Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Since then 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 is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 3:1 – 4:16).

His virtually closing remarks put the icing on his cake:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).

⁹ The 'indeed' surely makes the point I added in my parenthesis.

Just before I close this article, let me, at the risk of boring you by repetition, make my purpose as clear as I can. I am anxious to press home the point that ‘salvation’ is far more than justification. In particular, ‘salvation’ includes progressive sanctification, leading to glorification. It is vital to grasp this principle and not let it go – not least when reading the closing chapters of my *False Bothers*. I wrote that book about the way Paul dealt with the *pseudadelphoi* not as an academic study of a historical spat, but as enforcing a biblical principle which we need to understand and apply today. And in that important task of contemporary application, nothing could be more necessary than to make sure we allow no daylight whatsoever between justification and progressive sanctification leading to glorification. That has been what this article has been about.

Let me illustrate what I am saying by an episode (or two episodes in one) drawn from the old covenant. We know that Israel was delivered from Egypt by means of the Passover:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ‘This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household... You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it... It is the LORD’s Passover’ (Ex. 12:1-11).

The spiritual equivalent in the new covenant is obvious: it is the elect sinner’s deliverance from sin, death and slavery by the sacrificial, atoning work of Christ, the imputation of the merits of his blood and righteousness to all who believe:

Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed [for us] (1 Cor. 5:7).

You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

For our [that is, believers'] sake he [that is, the Father] made him [that is, the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Christ was crucified on the Feast of Passover:

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him: 'Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?'... And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives... And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together... Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified (Mark 14:12,26,53; 15:15).

Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour [Pilate] said to the Jews: 'Behold your King!' They cried out: 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him!' Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered: 'We have no king but Caesar'. So he delivered him over to them to be crucified (John 19:14-16).

We know that Israel's deliverance from Egypt was with the intention of settling them in the land God had promised to Abraham. We also know that Israel initially failed in this (Numbers 13 & 14). But, after a generation of judgment in the wilderness, Israel, once again, came to Canaan, and this time they were obedient and successful (Joshua 1 – 5). In accordance with God's command, Israel set up twelve stones drawn from the bed of the Jordan to commemorate the miracle:

The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. And [the] twelve stones, which [at God's command (Josh. 4:1-7)] they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the people of Israel: 'When your children ask their fathers in times to come: 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground'. For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that

the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever' (Josh. 4:19-24).

Scripture draws special attention to the date:

While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho (Josh. 5:10).

The coincidence of dates of the Passover and the crossing of the Jordan, and their memorials, is no accident. I use the term strictly – that is, co-incident:

With a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt... When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you... (Ex. 13:9-11).

Clearly, God was teaching the Israelites – and us today – an important spiritual truth.¹⁰ While it goes without saying that Israel could not leave Egypt and enter Canaan in one physical act on the same day, even so, spiritually speaking, Israel's leaving Egypt and entering Canaan was one. Whatever Canaan is taken to typify – the believer's present rest in Christ, or his eternal bliss – the new-covenant meaning and fulfilment of the old-covenant shadow of the dates and memorials is patent. 'Salvation' is one event, one happening: from election to glorification, 'salvation' is one; it must not be chopped into bits, and treated as free-standing, independent, isolated entities. In particular, we must constantly keep justification and progressive sanctification in one intimate, unbroken union with each other.¹¹ That is my point. Can a sinner be justified but show no evidence of progressive sanctification? Of course not. And surely nobody would suggest that progressive sanctification is possible without justification!

¹⁰ Any who think I make too much of it should read Num. 14:34.

¹¹ For more on this, see my 'Memorials 1' and my 'Memorials 2' on my sermonaudio.com page.