

The Holiest of All

Introduction

When we enter upon the study of our Epistle, there are some questions on which it is desirable to have some light. It is well to know what can be told as to its author, the Church to which it was addressed, the object the author had in view, and the plan he adopts to attain that object. The reader then knows something of what he is to expect, and has a point of view suggested from which to overlook the whole.

1. The Author of the Epistle

From the very earliest times there have been some among the Church Fathers who maintained that the Epistle was not written by Paul, while those who held the opposite view have admitted that they had no decisive evidence to offer to prove that authorship. All admit that the literary style is not that found in Paul's writings. And some say that the substance of the teaching differs too, and that the great truth which he had been set apart to announce, that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and of the same body, is entirely wanting. The Epistle speaks

as if salvation was for the Jew only: it is absolutely silent as to the existence of a heathen or Christian world outside the Church it addresses.

On the other hand, it may be said that the Epistle contains so much of what had been specially revealed to Paul more than to others- concerning the fulfilment of the law in Christ and its passing away, concerning the glory of Christ seated on the throne of heaven and the alone power of faith, that it is almost impossible not to recognise his spirit in its teaching. What adds special weight to this view is that, while from the style it is certain that it cannot be the work of any other of our Bible writers, it appears strange that the history of the Church does not even mention the name of a man who had been favoured with such special revelations from God as the Epistle bears witness to.

The difficulty has led from the earliest times to the supposition that Paul either wrote the letter to the Hebrews in their tongue, and that we only have it in the Greek translation, or that he gave the substance of its contents to someone who gave expression to them in his own peculiar style. The names have been suggested of Bamabas, of Luke (to whose style in the Acts there is considerable resemblance), of Aquila, of Apollos the Alexandrian (eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures), and Clement of Rome. There is such an entire absence of material for forming a decision that we are compelled to rest in the certainty that the name of the author cannot be known. All the more we praise God that we know for certain that the Holy Spirit spake in him who wrote, and that it is He who has given us in the Epistle one of the deepest and fullest revelations which the Bible contains of the counsel of redemption, and the glory of the Son who makes us partakers of it.

2. To Whom the Epistle Was Written

The Jews had the name of Hebrews from Abraham, who, in Gen. xiv. 13, is spoken of as “the Hebrew.” It was counted a title of honour, as we see in Paul’s, “an Hebrew of the Hebrews.” Some have thought that, because no special place or church is mentioned, it was meant for all Christians among the Jews. But expressions as, “Pray that I may be restored to you the sooner,” “With Timothy, if he come shortly, I will see you,” compel us to think of some special community. The most probable view is that it was addressed, in the first place, to the Christians in Jerusalem. From Acts md. 20, we know that there were many thousands of them, who, while believing in Christ, yet clung to the temple and its worship. Nowhere were they in greater danger of yielding to the temptation of conformity to the spirit of the world around them, and losing the boldness and the brightness of their Christian life; and nowhere would there be better opportunity of securing for the letter the widest possible circulation through all the scattered Christian churches among the Jews.

3. The Object of the Epistle

What was it that led the writer to take his pen? The Epistle itself gives us the answer. The religious state of those to whom it was addressed was far from right or satisfactory. Some had grown “slothful,” were “not giving earnest heed,” were ‘neglecting the, great salvation.’ They were no longer “holding fast their profession’ or “their confidence.” The Christian life was feeble and ready to die. Others had “gone back,” were in danger of “coming short of the promises,” and, yielding to

“wilful sin,” “drawing back to perdition.” Still others were in danger of “refusing Him who speaks from heaven,” of giving up their faith in Jesus. Expressions such as we have quoted, and others, indicate clearly that there had been much backsliding, and that the Church was in a state that needed most solemn and pointed warning.

Great stress has been laid upon the difficulties that arose in they were placed. They had hoped that their countrymen would speedily accept the Messiah: they had been signally disappointed. They still clung to the old worship; but felt more and more that, suspected and despised as they were, they could no longer be at home there. The prophecies appeared to fail them, both in regard to the power with which Christ should reign, and the blessing He would bestow. To meet these difficulties, it is said, the Epistle seeks to open up the true glory of the religion of Christ, and to show that all that they lost in the old worship was a hundredfold restored in the “something better” God had now provided. It seeks to solve the problem that troubled them in the light of the gospel.

There is doubtless a measure of truth in this view. And yet, the more I study the Epistle, the more confident I feel that this was not the chief trouble; the main difficulty lay in the want of religious earnestness. Their case was very much what has been the story of almost every Church, and what marks the state of the greater part of Christendom at the present day.

It was to meet this spirit of backsliding, to warn against the disease and its danger, and to make known the infallible cure, that our author takes up his pen. He saw that the one cause of all the feebleness and faithlessness was this: the want of the knowledge and the faith of what Christ and His salvation

truly are. He sets himself to show them how wonderfully, how divinely, all the prophecies and types of the Old Testament have their fulfilment in the salvation the Son of God has wrought for us. He unceasingly places their weakness and Christ's person side by side: he is sure that, if they but know Christ, all will be well.

4. The Plan of the Epistle

In what way does the writer propose to attain his object? In the opening verses we find the substance of his whole argument. God, who spoke to the fathers in the prophets, hath now spoken to us in the Son. There have been two revelations of God to man. The first was through men; the second through the Son. As much more glorious as God's Son is than His servants, has the new revelation more of life and of glory than the old. He not only writes to prove the superiority of the new above the old, but specially to show what that intrinsic excellence is which gives it that superiority. In the knowledge of this its excellence, both faith and experience will find their strength. The contents of the Epistle, taking its doctrinal and practical aspect together, may be summarised—the knowledge of the Son of God, the power of the Christian life.

The Epistle is divided into two parts. In the first, the doctrinal half (i. 1-18), we have the glory of the person and work of Christ set forth. In the second, or practical half (x. 19-xiii. 25), the life is described which the knowledge of Christ and His salvation will enable us to live.

I have had the Epistle printed at the beginning of the book with headings showing the contents of the different parts, with the view of inviting and helping the reader to make himself

master of the writing as a whole. it is of great consequence that the student of God's word should not only seek his edification from individual texts or passages, but that each book should be to him a living and connected organism, all alive with the Spirit that dwells in it. The more we thus take time and trouble to accept the great thoughts of God, the more will our life be brought to that unity and breadth, in which the purpose of God will be perfectly fulfilled.

The first three verses give us the summary of the doctrinal part.

Then follow twelve sections..

1. Christ, as Son of God, is more than the angels (i. 4-14).
2. Jesus, as Son of Man, is more than the angels too. Reasons for His being made lower than the angels (ii. 5-18).
3. Christ Jesus more than Moses (iii. 1-6).
4. Jesus, our High Priest, more than Aaron (iv. 14-v. 10).
5. The New Priesthood after the order of Melchizedek (vii.).
6. The New Sanctuary and the New Covenant (viii.).
7. The power of Christ's blood to inaugurate the New Sanctuary and the New Covenant (ix.).
8. The New Way into the Holiest (x. 1-18).

Here commences the second, the practical, half, with its call to a life corresponding to our privileges.

9. Of entering the Holiest and dwelling there (x. 19-25).
10. Of the Fulness of Faith (xi. 1-40).
11. Of the Patience of Hope (xii. 1-13).
12. Of Love and Good Works (xiii. 1-25).

In this summary of contents I have not taken up the passages containing the solemn warnings by which the Epistle is characterised. They are so inserted that they could in each case be left out, without the argument suffering. In some cases, the connection would in fact be clearer. I have had this indicated in the printing, because I am sure that it is of importance, if we would thoroughly master the lesson given us, that we should fully apprehend the danger which threatened, and in some right measure see how the only deliverance for Christians from all that weakness and hinders them, is the full knowledge of the person and work of Jesus.

The Warnings

1. After the proof of Christ being more than the angels-
Not to neglect so great salvation (ii. 1-4).
2. After the proof of Christ being more than Moses-
Not like Israel in the wilderness to come short of the promised rest (iii. 7-iv. 13).
3. After the mention of Christ being more than Aaron-
Against the danger of sloth, standing still, and falling away (v. 1 1-vi. 2 1).
4. After the call to enter the opened Holiest-
Against sinning willfully, and drawing back to perdition (x. 26-39).
5. After the exhortation to patience-
Against falling short of the grace of God and refusing Him who speaks (xii. 15-29).

The deeper our impression is of the danger that existed, the clearer will be our insight into the truth that the only source of health and strength to the Church is the knowledge of Christ Jesus.

5. The Epistle and the Church of Our Days

There is one more point in which an Introduction can help the reader. It is to suggest the relation in which a book stands to the special needs of our present times.

In the Christian Church of our day the number of members is very large, whose experience corresponds exactly with that which the Epistle pictures and seeks to meet. How many Christians are there yet who, after the profession of faith in Christ, come to a standstill. ‘Taking more abundant heed to what they hear’; ‘giving diligence to enter into the rest of God’; ‘pressing on to perfection’; ‘running with patience the race’—just these are the things which are so little found. So many rest contented with the thought that their sins are pardoned, and that they are in the path of life, but know nothing of a personal attachment to Christ as their Leader, or of a faith that lives in the invisible and walks with God. With many this is the consequence of the hopelessness that came from the failure of their utmost efforts to live as they desired. They struggled in their own strength; they knew not Christ as the secret of strength; they lost heart, and went back. The profession of faith is not cast away; religious habits are kept up; but there is nothing to show that they have entered or are seeking to enter the Holiest to dwell there. The power of the world, the spirit of its literature, the temptations of business and pleasure, all unite to make up a religion in which it is sought to combine a comfortable hope for the future with the least possible amount of sacrifice in the present. The Epistle, with its warnings, is indeed a glass in which the Church of the present day may see itself.

But it is a glass too, thank God, in which we can also see the glory of Jesus on the throne of heaven, in the power that can make our heart and life heavenly too. What the Hebrews needed is what we need. Not in ourselves or our efforts is salvation, but in Christ Jesus. To see Him, to consider Him, to look to Him, *as He lives in heaven*, that will bring the healing. As little as the Hebrews with the Old Testament, its God-given law, its temple service, and its prophecy, could withstand the temptation to “wax weary and grow faint,” can the New Testament, with a sound Church and Church doctrine, and its religious services, give us the true life and power of godliness. It is Jesus Christ we must know better. It is He who lives today in heaven, who can lead us into the heavenly sanctuary, and keep us there, who can give heaven into our heart and life. *The knowledge of Jesus in His heavenly glory and His saving power*, it is this our Churches and our Christians need. It is this the Epistle will bring us, if we yield to that Spirit who speaks in it, to reveal it in us.

It is, therefore, with great confidence that I invite all who long for the rest of God, for a life in the holiest of God’s love, for the fulness of faith and hope and love, to take up the study of the Epistle, with the confident assurance of finding in its revelation of what Christ and His salvation are, the deliverance from sin and sloth, the joy and the strength of a new life.