

God's Final Word

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[0 : 00] It's what it says in chapter 2 verse 1 and can't really put it better than that.! I want to this evening do three things. I want to first of all give you an introduction to the book,! Tell you a little bit about it, what we know about it and what we don't know about it.

And then we will look at that prologue, The Glorious Son, which really introduces all the ideas that are expounded later in the book in more detail. And then when we look at the first warning, there are lots of warnings and encouragement in Hebrews and we'll look at the first one.

So what about this book? Who wrote it? Might be the first question. Well there's really only one thing we can say with absolute certainty and that's that it wasn't written by Timothy.

We can see that because it refers to Timothy our brother at one point in the text. Who did write it? Almost certainly not Paul. The authorised version is somewhat confusing because it says the epistle of Paul to Hebrews. But almost certainly was not written by Paul for all sorts of reasons. For one thing it's in the wrong place in the canon. The church fathers obviously didn't think it was written by Paul or they would have put it with his other long letters after Romans and Corinthians. Hebrews is the first of the non-Paul letters rather than the last of the Paul letters.

It doesn't have the greetings that Paul always starts with. It doesn't have the many personal references that Paul usually has. People who are experts on Greek style, which I'm certainly not, but people who are say the style is different from Paul's. It's actually in many ways an almost more structured and sort of literary style than Paul has. And I say there are no initial greetings and few personal references. So who did write it? Well of course since we don't know there's been all sorts of speculations. One suggestion is that it was written by Barnabas. I've always rather liked that idea.

[2 : 17] Not on the basis of any evidence at all, but just because I feel that Barnabas perhaps ought to have written something. But we don't know. Other people have suggested on stylistic grounds that it might have been written by Luke. But again we can't really be certain of that. Scholars of a more liberal turn of mind suggest it was actually written by Clement of Rome about the end of the first century. Come back to that in a bit. But we really don't know who wrote it. We do know it doesn't appear to have been written by somebody who actually knew Jesus personally. I'm sure you knew him perfectly. I mean personally. Why do I say that? Well in chapter 2 verse 3, he tells us that he got the message from those who had known the Lord and had delivered it authoritatively. So it seems that it wasn't written by one of the apostles themselves, but on the other hand it does seem to have been written with apostolic authority. Those who knew the Lord while he was on earth and confirmed the message. So we don't know exactly who wrote it, but it does seem to have apostolic authority and from early times it's been regarded as scripture because of the great doctrine that it has in it.

Who was it written to? It was written to Christians, probably from a Jewish background, and I might say a bit more about this again in a minute. The title is to, in the Greek, is the epistle to the Hebrews, and the book is full of references to the law and to prophets and to Jewish history. So it's likely it was written to Jews, but Jews who were Christian converts to Christianity, but as Tom was saying this morning, who were in danger of slipping back into their old ways.

Where was it written? Where was it written? Well, in chapter 13, verse 24, it says the brothers in Italy greet you. So the suggestion is that it was probably written in Italy, well almost certainly written in Italy, probably written in Rome, but again, many of the apostles landed up in Rome, so we really don't know exactly who wrote it, but it was probably written from Rome.

When was it written? Well, we do know it was written before the end of the first century, and we know that because Clement of Rome, who wrote it around the end of the first century, quotes from it.

So we do know it was written in the first century AD, but there is a considerable debate about when it was written.

[5 : 27] Many scholars think that, well for various reasons, that it was probably quite late, and there are various arguments on that. The theological arguments are quite sort of sophisticated, it's a well thought through theology.

There is no mention of the temple, which some people regard as significant, and some people don't, but it does seem strange in a thing written to Jews, that there was no mention of the temple. And the temple was destroyed, of course, in AD 70, so some people have suggested that it must have been written after that, but other people think that's not such a strong argument.

There are references to suffering, and some people say that might be the persecution under Nero in AD 65, which is another evidence that it might have been written fairly late on, but we really can't be sure.

But many people sort of think maybe it was written around 75 to 85 AD, which would make it one of the last New Testament books to be written.

[6 : 35] But again, we can't really be sure about that. Why was it written? That's perhaps the most important question. Well, I've already quoted that verse, chapter 2, verse 1, we must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

It was written to people that were in danger of losing their focus, perhaps of becoming disillusioned. They were being oppressed. They were maybe even being persecuted.

And what did they have to show for it? How were they reacting? It appears in the text that they were reacting in one of two contrasting ways, both of which have roots in Jewish thinking.

Some were seeking sort of esoteric ideas about angels, possibly proto-Gnostic ideas, if you know anything about the Gnostic heresy, but it doesn't matter too much. They were seeking some ideas about angels.

Some New Testament scholars have suggested that these Jews might have been converts of the Qumran sect. The Qumran sect were the people from whose mountain hideout, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

[7 : 53] And they apparently believe that there will be two, in fact, two messiahs, but that both those messiahs will be subject to the archangel Michael. Now, because of these references to being subject to angels, it has been suggested that it was written to people who either were members of or influenced by the Qumran sect.

But again, we can't be sure about that. But certainly these ideas about angels were a branch of Jewish thought and, of course, go on into the Middle Ages with the Kabbalah and the Jewish mystics.

That was something that was always found in Jewish thought, this seeking after the esoteric. So that was one form of escape, as it were. Perhaps they felt they needed a mediator between God and themselves, just as sometimes Christians have viewed dead saints in the same way.

Yes, says the writer, you do need a mediator, but the mediator's not an angel. And others were just perhaps slipping back into Jewish principles and practices, putting their emphasis on Moses and the law.

But to do that was to substitute Moses for Christ. And again, we find that in development of Jewish society after, up into the Middle Ages, a very whole way of life that revolves around observing the law.

[9 : 28] Now, you might say, okay, well, we're not Qumran Jews. Is this relevant to us at all then? And apparently even Spurgeon, it's quoted as saying that, at first, he couldn't quite see the relevance of this to Christian believers.

But if we look at what, take a slightly broader view of this and look at the sort of modes of thinking that are being used here, we can see that in fact, it's very relevant because it's exactly the same temptations that we face today.

If we become disillusioned with the practical spiritual life, we are likely to react in one of two ways, aren't we? Either we're likely to seek some sort of esoteric, mysterious experience, we look for the spectacular or the weird as some evidence of mystery, or we might slip back into the comfortable rituals of everyday life, whether they're secular or religious rituals, just reading our Bible, coming to church, or just the ordinary habits of everyday life, doing the washing up and so on.

Now, actually, of course, we do all need experience. And in fact, we do all need ritual. It's natural to seek excitement, isn't it?

It's a natural human desire to seek excitement. And also, of course, none of us can actually live without the orderly habits of everyday life, those things which give us a sense of place and belonging.

[11:13] So when we read of the, we see these videos of people being hit by either some sort of enemy attack or by some natural disaster.

It's the disruption of everyday life, which is almost the thing that affects us most, isn't it? They seem to have, you know, the ritual of how we go about their lives is being uprooted.

So if you lose either this need for excitement, this sense of excitement, or indeed, if you lose the rituals and structures of everyday life, we're going to land up somewhere between depression and horror.

But the problem arises when we allow these things to become a substitute for faith. That's the difficulty.

And by numerous examples, the writer, as we go through the book, the writer is going to point out to us that this is a recipe for disaster. Why is it? Well, because when we have trouble or difficulty or persecution, or even when we just get bored, we'll crack under the pressure because those things will be taken away from us.

[12:29] So even though this particular form of slippage that the Jews were, these Jews were showing, might not be relevant to us, the message is totally relevant because we are, just like those Jews, very ready to drift away.

Not to be sort of destroyed by persecution or suddenly turn aside, but as it says it here, to drift. To just, not as it says in that, in Revelation to the Ephesians, to have lost the first love. To, not really have stopped coming, although that happens after a while, but, just to, you know, let things slip. We're all liable to do that. And, this book is written to warn us against doing that. So what are the themes of the book?

Well, we already meet them in this first section. First of all, the first theme is the primacy of Christ, that we must focus on Christ and nothing else and nobody else.

[13:40] And particularly, the primacy of Christ when it comes to salvation, although in this first section it's much broader than that. And the other main theme is the importance of faith.

And faith particularly as it relates to perseverance because he's trying to warn us against drifting away. He says the antidote to this drift is faith.

And, therefore, he's warning us about, well, he talks a lot about the importance of faith. And the emphasis faith, on faith in Hebrews is somewhat, actually somewhat different to what we find either in the other letters.

Paul's emphasis on faith is as the way we obtain the benefits of Christ, isn't it? He says it's because we have faith that we are justified before God.

If we read the epistle to James, his emphasis on faith is a spur to action. Our faith, if it doesn't cause us to act, is no faith at all.

[14:49] But the writer to the Hebrews puts faith at the center of Christian life and Christian experience. It's the way, faith is the very way in which we live the life of Christ.

And so, well-known verse, Hebrews 11, verse 1, says, now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Very well-known verse.

I'm sure most of you have heard it before. We sometimes say it's a definition of faith, but I must be honest, I think I probably even said that myself on occasions, but I've always had a niggling thought that as a definition of faith, then maybe it's a bit thin.

I mean, there are certainly things it doesn't say. Faith in what? And how does faith justify us? But as a description of the experience of faith, I would suggest to you that it's absolutely spot on.

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. We're keen to say nowadays, aren't we, that faith is not believing things without evidence.

[16:04] It's not believing six impossible things before breakfast. And of course, that's true. The Hebrews, the writer to the Hebrews is very keen that our faith is based on evidence.

That's why he talks so much about testimony and those who knew the Lord and bring it to us. It's based on evidence, but we mustn't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Faith does, of course, involve trusting things that are outside our immediate experience and understanding that the world is more than just what we see.

Now, I'd just like to point out to you there's nothing irrational about doing that. We do it every day and here's a few examples. Well, one example is quantum physics, for instance.

Everybody should read a bit of quantum physics. I'm not going to suggest tell you any tonight, but it's really worth reading, actually, the quantum physics. It's because it's weird. It's quite contrary to our normal experience of the world and yet, it's entirely relevant to the way the world works.

[17:11] Our CD players and the laser pointers are impossible in the understanding of 19th century physics. A laser is a quantum phenomenon.

Or, it's another example. Bacteria and viruses are two small things to see, aren't they? But, at first, in fact, people found it difficult to believe in them, such small creatures.

And yet, we all know they exist and we all do constant battle with them, don't we? Well, perhaps, if science isn't your thing, here's a slightly different sort of example.

people. I've mentioned those who are dying or famine or disease or natural disaster. But, can we really enter into their experience, the people in that situation?

Can we do it, as one might say, immersively, if you wanted to use a kind of technical word, can we really share their experience? And I think the answer is that, in fact, we can't.

[18:16] At best, we have a limited imagination of what these things are really like. Only by going through them, only by experiencing them for yourself, can you really understand what these experiences are like.

And yet, we don't deny that these are real experiences, we don't deny that people suffer, and we know, indeed, that we ought to be doing something about it. So, in many ways, we act on knowledge, which is not our immediate experience.

And that is what the writer to the Hebrews is saying that faith is. It's being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Faith, to the writer to the Hebrews, is the triumph of knowledge over perception.

It's the triumph of theology over speculation. And it's the triumph of reality over ritual. So, what is the structure of the book?

It's a bit hard to divide it up, actually. The first five or six chapters are usually regarded as one section. And then, but where you draw the line is not entirely clear.

[19:37] And then, another section, it's three sections, many commentators put it in. But it's very hard to draw the line because of the sort of lower level structure of the book, which I've tried to illustrate there by a diagram.

And what you get is longer passages which are passages of theology or teaching or history. And then, at the end of them, you usually get some sort of warning or encouragement, sometimes both. And, in many cases, these shorter warning passages both refer back to what's just happened, what's just gone, and, but also, lead into the next topic.

And this makes the book hang together rather well, in fact. I say it's a, it's a very well structured book. The argument hangs together very well. It does present a problem to expository preachers, though, because it's difficult to find a natural breaking point because you always have to break the argument somewhere.

But, as I say, we can think of it, I think it's useful to think of it in this, structured in this way, of longer passages of teaching or history broken up by shorter warnings and encouragements.

[21:01] And, what I want to do for the rest of this evening is look at the first teaching passage, which is where the writer really introduces his themes and then look briefly at the warning that follows it.

But, I have, you've got a picture of the structure there. I've actually printed out this slide. There may not be enough to go around. There should be about 20, but perhaps if you can share one if necessary.

I'll just have it in front of you. It might be useful. Thank you. First 14 verses.

Not nearly enough, are we? Sorry about that. My computer decided to print them out one at a time. I asked it to print 20 copies and it printed out one at a time and took the whole afternoon doing it.

I don't know why it did that, but... Yeah, never mind. So, let's look first of all at these first 14 verses.

[22:18] We looked at the first four in detail this morning, but these first 14 verses really introduce the themes that are going to be expanded in the rest of the letter.

There are a couple more there if people want them. And what is the writer's main point? Well, we had it this morning, but we can repeat it.

It's when it comes to salvation and knowing God, you only need to know Jesus. He is God's final word. Not the final word in the sense that God has ceased to speak any more than when it says in Genesis that on the seventh day God rested, it meant he stopped working.

Jesus himself pointed that, that would be absurd. It's not that God has ceased to speak, but the final revelation of the character of God is to be found in the sun.

and that's the point that is going to run all the way through the letter and is introduced here in a very, very compacted and there's just so much in a very few verses.

[23 : 38] Even if we just look at those first two verses in this, well, sorry, not the first two, two and three. In these last days he has spoken to us by his son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe.

The sun is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

So he starts with ontology, if you like long words. He starts with the being of the sun. The preexistent sun is the radiance of God, the creator and heir of all things.

But he's also the priest and sacrificed for sin. The writer actually has a lot to say about the priesthood later, so we won't look so much about that today. But this is one thing he lists here.

Here he focuses on the glory of the sun. Angels are God's servants, he tells us. They're God's messengers. Some of the Old Testament quotations there, it's not actually clear whether it means angels or messengers.

[24 : 59] And therefore in translation it's not quite clear. Clearly there is some reference to angels here when he talks about he makes his angels winds of fire and so on. And some of the other passages are possibly messenger rather than angel.

In a sense it doesn't matter he's saying whether the messenger is an angel or a prophet. they were those who were delivering the message of God certainly and yet their message was partial.

The final revelation is found in Jesus Christ. And just look what he the son is the firstborn the heir and the one who will rule forever and just listed it there those things that we just pack into those two verses that he tells us about the son.

first of all that it is the last message. Secondly that Jesus is the appointed heir. He's the creator and sustainer of the universe.

He's the radiance of God's glory. In other words we can't see God's glory on earth but if we see Jesus then he shows us God's glory the brightness of God and as I said he's the true priest and the true sacrifice that much is just packed into those three or four verses and you almost could do what Tom did this morning and just preach the first four verses and say that's all the message of Hebrews but actually of course there's much more to it than that.

[26 : 33] It's expanded and developed in all sorts of ways over the whole book. So the son is who is he the last message the appointed heir the creator the radiance of God's glory the true priest and sacrifice but then it tells us that the son came in verse six says God brings his firstborn into the world the son became a man so whereas the son was preexistent and yet he became a man mystery of course he came into the world and he became the anointed king and this quotation which of course is in verses eight and nine is a quotation from psalm 45 and it's a particularly interesting psalm actually

I think we have I've certainly looked at it relatively recently I'm not sure whether Phil has preached on it or something but it's quite a well known psalm psalm well worth reading and it's actually a wedding song it's a song that seems to have been written to be sung at the king's wedding perhaps at the wedding of David or Solomon we're not quite sure which but at the wedding of the king the throne here is described as that of God himself and yet it's the king whom is set above his companions and it's clear even if you read psalm 45 that it quoted here that the meaning is more than just the king David or king Solomon because the throne is described as the very throne of God himself and yet it is the king who is set above the companions and so to make this clear the writer to Hebrews tells us that the son is not the father in verse 5 but he is the one

God verse 3 the exact representation of God's being and it says a man that he loved righteousness and hated wickedness and so was set above other men as the eternal king now I could say wake up here let's not let familiarity blind us to the breathtaking nature of what the writer is claiming here

we've kind of heard it before but let's just think again what's actually being claimed here something quite remarkable something far more mysterious than anything you might speculate about angels this is what the readers were in danger of doing they'd lost sight of who Jesus was and were directing their gaze elsewhere who came up with this idea surely not monotheistic

Jews not pagan Greeks whose gods were not very different from themselves surely this idea that there was a pre-existent son who is part who is the representation of God who is the very God and yet became a man that's a quite extraordinary claim and really we have to either believe it or not and yet it is believable because we have the testimony of those who knew him and we have the testimony of the prophets and the angels in the Old Testament who pointed forward to this great event and we have the testimony in our own lives of God with us so let's say let's not be over familiar with that and therefore lose focus that's what

I once heard described as argument fatigue arguments don't often don't get rejected or put aside we just get fed up with them and forget about them let's not lose focus on that remarkable claim that is at the heart of the Christian gospel that God sent his son the first born into the world and again towards the end of that Psalm 45 tells us that he is anointed the king is anointed well the kings were always anointed in those days it means that oil was poured over their head which was a sign of divine favour divine calling but the Psalm tells us that the king is anointed not with oil but with joy surely even this is a reference to the Holy Spirit at work so although it's been said you can't find the Trinity explicitly in the Old Testament yet surely

[31 : 52] Psalm 45 is thoroughly Trinitarian it is through the whole work of the Godhead that the son comes to earth becomes a man and we're told well after all the human Jesus left the world after a few years isn't he but we're told in that Psalm that the reign of the king would outlast heaven and earth verses 10 to 12 and finally just in case we still hang up on angels the writer tells us that far from being objects of worship angels are actually sent to aid God's people we find that in verse 14 we're told that God alone is to be worshipped not angels not saints not anybody else God alone is to be worshipped but he is at the same time as he tells us that he tells us that we worship the son so he tells us we worship God as father son and holy spirit so there's so much packed into there you can't possibly do it justice but we will do it justice in the sense as we work further through the letter when all these ideas are expanded in much more detail but let's look now just to finish at this first warning we find that at the beginning of chapter 2 how does the argument go here well even if you look at the message of the

Old Testament the message of the prophets the message that was given by the prophets and the angels and was given through Moses the law even that was pretty awful wasn't it every wickedness every failure of faith had dire consequences those who should have entered the rest and didn't those who should have crossed the desert and didn't if even the message of the servants requires full attention how much more when the message is delivered and declared by the king himself that's what he's saying isn't it it came the message came with reliable witnesses and full authentication those who had seen and talked to Jesus and witnessed all the events of his death and resurrection he's saying even the message of the old testament you ignore at your peril that was only delivered by messengers now the message has been delivered by the king himself how much more foolish it is to ignore that message and yet so easily we get distracted and drift off into unimportant things so the message of

Hebrews is keep your focus that's the answer to drifting keep your focus and keep your faith in Jesus the glorious son don't put your trust anywhere else to order your everyday life not by what immediately appears but by the knowledge of what God has done and what God will do faith really is to let the everyday experience overtake your knowledge of God that's what happened of course to the Israelites as they were about to enter the promised land they'd seen all the evidence of God's work who had taken them out of Egypt but at the crucial moment when they had to enter the promised land they had a failure of faith didn't they and that most of them died in the desert their immediate experience oh there were giants in the land took over from what they knew about Yahweh their God so Hebrews is about knowledge faith is about knowledge knowing what is true and not letting your immediate experience distract you from that so as I say in the rest of the letter the writer spells out with lots of examples and illustrations the implication of the sun coming into the world so that we're not tempted to ignore such a great salvation let's finish with that warning that he gives us here how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation so next week we'll look at the human Jesus divine Jesus this week next week we'll be looking at the human Jesus in the next

chapter so let's finish our