

Retribution or Salvation

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[0 : 00] The passage that I'm aiming for, but won't get to for a minute or two or three, is Hebrews chapter 2, and that's found in your pew Bible on page 203 of the New Testament section, Hebrews chapter 2.

We have read in the lessons this morning, 1 Kings chapter 13, the story of Joash coming to visit Elisha, on his deathbed, and the story from Luke chapter 12 of the two brothers who had the dispute about the inheritance, which led to Jesus telling them the story of the rich fool as he has come to be known.

Well, now, that's where I have to start. When I was a young lad, I used to go and work on the farm in southern Ontario to help, because it was wartime and all the men were off at war, and so they needed people like me to help on the farm.

One of the jobs I occasionally was given was to go up into the hay mill and throw down some hay for the cattle. Now, many of you may never have experienced this.

You're all far too young. But it was a terrible thing to have to do, because you would stick in your fork, and it just wouldn't move anything.

[1 : 42] You could pick up a blade here and there, but trying to move enough down for the cattle to eat was just too much. And that's the predicament I mean. I've got one Kings to deal with this morning in Colossians chapter 3, and we've got Luke chapter 12, and I want to stick to Hebrews chapter 2.

So I sort of felt like I stuck in my fork and I couldn't move it without emptying the whole mall in one forkful, which is impossible.

So you may think that's what I'm doing this morning, to try and empty the whole thing out. But I think I can put it together in a way that at least you can carry some of it home with you.

First, Joash going to see Elisha on his deathbed, and the old man taking hold of Joash's hands as he draws the bow and fires it out the window.

And Elisha says, and that will symbolize a victory over Syria for you. Now he said to Joash, take up the arrows. And he took the bundle of them in his hands.

[2 : 52] He said, strike the ground with it. Strike one. Strike two. Strike three. And he was finished. And Elisha was angry with it.

He said, you should have done it again and again and again. Because that symbolizes how many times he will defeat Syria. And this is the, this is the, you failed because you won't, you haven't carried it through.

Misunderstanding between Joash and the man of God. He should have carried through this difficult perhaps of religion for most of us.

He said, in the things of God, our obedience is not very thorough, not very consistent. It doesn't carry very far. And so we can look at that.

Then there's the two brothers who come to Jesus and say, bid my brother share the inheritance with me. And Jesus says, that's not my job.

[3 : 58] Good thing that he says that. And something for all of us to think about that he says that. Because most of our problems are in that area. And we'd like somebody to come along and solve them for us.

And when Jesus fails to do so, we become a little bit indignant with him. And say, well, what are you here for? That's a good question. And Jesus goes on to explain what he's here for by telling them the parable of the rich fool.

The man who had such a super abundance of blessing on him that he had to tear down his barns and build greater. And he thought that was the response he should make.

But he, too, didn't understand the issue. And so he built himself a mansion.

And, of course, adequate as that may have been for certain things, it wasn't what he needed in the worst possible way. And the Lord said to him, this night your soul will be required.

[5 : 08] Not an inventory of what you have in the bar. But an inventory of who you are as a person. It's a good place to be brought to.

And so Jesus was, in effect, telling the brothers. They would deal with their own personal inventory. They would probably get along better with one another and be able to come to some understanding quite easily.

Well, God is not an easy person to get along with. And Hebrews chapter 2 tells us this. If you look at it, you will see that it begins, Therefore, verse 1, Therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

Do you know what I think is really sort of fundamental in all this? The plea of the writer of the Hebrews is, Pay close attention lest you drift away from it.

And he says that the position we're in is that we're caught between two messages from God. And he describes what those two messages are.

[6 : 39] In verse 2, he says, The message declared by angels. And if you were to look quickly at Exodus chapter 20, you would find out what he's talking about there.

How the angels declared their message through Moses on the mountain. And it was a very dramatic event which would rival fireworks at Exodus, or something infinitely worse.

On chapter 19 in verse 16, On the morning of the third day, there was thunders and lightnings, a thick cloud upon the mountain, very loud trumpet blasts, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they put their stand at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire.

The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in the thunder.

[7 : 59] And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai to the top of Harbaugh. He called Moses to the top of the mountain. Well, that's what he's referring to when he says, the message delivered by angels.

Then if you look and see what the message is, it's very clear, and it's in verse 2 of Hebrews 2.

It's the message that every transgression or disobedience receives a just retribution. Every transgression or disobedience receives a just retribution.

That may sound heavy to you, but if you suddenly become the president of one of the great emerging republics of our world, that's the first law you give out, too.

Every transgression or disobedience will receive just retribution right on the spot. You'll be shocked. You'll be done away with it.

[9 : 14] And so people recognize deep in themselves that this is the way it must be. This is the only way the world works. If you live quietly on your farm in the country and milk your cow and feed your chickens, maybe you can escape the terrible reality of it, but in the modern, complex, urban cities in which we live and in the world of the media in which we live, it's apparent that every transgression and disobedience receives just retribution.

It's a tough, tough world. And the other message, which is on the other side, you see, that one was declared by angels.

The other one is referred to as, in verse 3, as something declared at first by the Lord. And it's described not in terms of just retribution, but in terms of a great salvation.

And, well, it's hard, I think.

It's a great salvation which has been prepared for us through Jesus Christ. The difficulty for us is that I think we're a very casual, laid-back people if we find God a little heavy, a little too heavy for us.

[10 : 56] We're not a big congregation this morning, is she, is she? And that's not really very surprising because who wants to hear this stuff? You know, a just retribution for every transgression and disobedience?

Well, that's too much. And the great salvation? It's on the other side, but it's too much. I would prefer to believe, as one man put it to me, that I'm not really bad enough to deserve hell and I'm not

good enough to deserve heaven, so just leave me alone.

And, you know, let me live my little life without having to face the issues of that kind. We have that problem that God takes me too seriously.

And I'm just not that kind of a person. I don't ask a lot of him, and I don't want him to ask a lot of me. And can't we work out some modus vivendi whereby we can get by without that happening?

You leave me alone and I'll leave you alone. You can get a lot of evidence that this isn't a new thought. I was reading in the book of Job the other day, the end of chapter 7.

[12:23] Job puts it very well, how God treats people. If you ever were to look at it, you'd find a lot of evidence to support the God-let-me-alone philosophy.

Job writes, Therefore I will not restrain my mouth. I will speak in the anguish of my spirit. I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

Am I the sea or a sea monster that thou settest a guard over me? When I say my bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint.

Then you scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions so that I would choose strangling and death. Rather than my bones, I loathe my life.

I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are of breath. What is man that thou dost make so much of him and that thou dost set thy mind upon him?

[13:33] Thus visit him every morning and test him in every moment. How long wilt thou not look away from me nor let me alone until I swallow my sickle?

If I sin, what do I do to thee, thou watcher of men? Why hast thou made me thy mark? Why have I become a burden to thee?

Why dost thou not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth and thou wilt see me and I shall not be.

Well, Joe puts it very well, I think. And it's that thing that I think Christianity is a burden to people in the 20th century.

A very real burden. I think it's a burden because it wants to tell you that you are infinitely worse than you think you are. And your condition is very much more perilous than you think it is.

[14:40] And on the other hand, you are capable of infinitely more than you could ever dream of. God's purpose for you is infinitely greater than you could ever imagine.

If God would only leave us alone in between there to grow our potatoes and milk the cow and feed the chickens and mind our own business, that would be enough for me.

I don't want to get caught in it. And yet, the trouble is you can't. You can't live with that kind of a difference.

I rode in the other night. I was in Toronto and I got on the GO train in Oakville and I went up onto the second story of one of those two-decker coaches and it was packed with happy people eating bananas and telling jokes and riding along merrily at \$3 for the one-way trip.

And they all got off at Exhibition Park and went to the ball game to see the Baltimore Orioles to see the Toronto Blue Jays 7-2 as it turned out.

[15:57] But they didn't know that at the time. And they were happily riding along in the train.

And they were just a very congenial crowd and I wished I had a ticket to the ball game and I could hide myself there. But there I was in my clerical collar feeling very stuffy and looking very stuffy and being avoided by the happy people.

And there, you see, it's a lot easier if you can build your world around the good guys who were the Blue Jays and the bad guys who were the Baltimore Orioles and we'll have a little contest and see how it works out.

Then we'll go home and sleep. We won't dream bad dreams or anything. It'll work out. But Hebrew 2 says we're up against something far different.

We're up against a message which says, in which we acknowledge because if we were running the world we'd run it this way only worse.

[17:19] A message which says every transgression and every disobedience will receive just retribution. And another message which says there is a great salvation which has been won for us through Jesus Christ and we must claim that.

We're like Joash. You know, we just beat once, twice, thrice and let's get it over with. And Elisha was angry and said, no, there is a victory to be won here.

There is an enemy to be utterly and completely defeated. A compromise isn't good enough. And, uh, that's what I'm saying.

We're caught between these two messages. I was reading a Canadian, a write-up on a Canadian author and he had this to say about people in Toronto.

That's just to protect us from the lash that's going to come. Ah, he said, he quoted somebody and saying, we lead half lives, half-hearted.

[18 : 38] He said, in his opinion, he's trying to explore what it's all about. He says, there's something out there that is a hell of a lot bigger than I am.

He's frightened by it. He uses hell in a special sense, not in a general sense there. Ah, there is something out there a hell of a lot bigger than I am. He says, most Canadians are haunted by the knowledge of things they know exist inside themselves, but that they can't quite get at.

They feel the pride. They have robbed themselves of their inner life. It's the generation, he says, of the black hole.

You see, I like going to ball games, but the danger is that time.

That's the only issue for us. And the issue which Hebrews 2 tries to bring us up against is an issue that we don't want to face. And, uh, it's the issue that we would rather live in a sense as the generation of the black hole, this terrible inner emptiness that face the situation.

[20 : 06] Well, there it is. And, uh, that's why he says that these are the things that we must do. we must pay close, we must pay close attention.

I, uh, see, it's, uh, if a surgeon is going to operate on you, you don't want him to be full of goodwill, do you?

And you don't want him to be friendly. You want him to know exactly how to use those instruments.

And if we are to live our lives, we can't live on a sort of frost of friendly emotion.

we have to know what the issues are and live in the light of those issues. And Hebrews says the issues are just retribution on the one hand and great salvation on the other.

And those both apply to us. And to know one and not the other is bad news. So we have to pay close attention the second thing it says that we have to do is that we have to do that because we don't want to drift.

[21 : 36] And that's the trouble with Christians. Not that we're not a nice, nice people, but we drift away from the essential issues.

And when people come along and ask us what the issue is, we've lost touch. We don't know what it is. that we're so pressed in by our world and conformed in our thinking and confused in our minds that we've sort of lost touch and find it hard to describe what that issue is.

We've lost touch because we've drifted. And it goes on to say that we're not to be neglectful.

Because how shall we escape if we neglect it? If all we know is the just retribution for every transgression and every disobedience.

And I'd like to preach a sermon on how we know that because I'm sure we all do know that every last one of us. Know that in our hearts. Live in fear of it every day.

[22 : 50] Spend a lot of time hiding from it. We know just that. And we don't know the great salvation which has in these verses we're told been declared to us by our Lord.

We're in a bad space. We have lost that awareness by neglect. You know if we reduce our Christianity to something that is just of no value then we've neglected something that is terribly important.

How shall we escape if we move into indifference and neglect and lack the ability to pay attention to what the issues really are?

we can't escape into indifference. We can't escape into meaninglessness. So that our function as a church is somehow to keep people in vital living touch with this great salvation salvation which has been declared to us by the Lord Jesus Christ, attested to by the apostles, confirmed by God through signs and wonders and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

You've got to stay in touch with us. I could wish that every one of us belong to a group that met each week for no other purpose than to check the drift in their own lives, to overcome the meaninglessness of their own lives because they have drifted from the message to face the issues, to open their hearts to the word of God and to open the word of God to their hearts and to check that they listen attentively to the message.

[25 : 07] that they understand just retribution on the one hand and great salvation through Jesus Christ on the other. That we live in these groups in such contact with one another that we never get out of touch with that because if we get out of touch with that, then everything else falls apart.

That's what Hebrews 2 tells us. Pay close attention to the message that you have heard or if the message delivered by angels means that for every transgression and disobedience there is just retribution.

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation which was declared to us by the Lord, attested to us by the New Testament confirmed among us by the works, wonders and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

We've got to stay in touch with that. We've got to each of us make it our business to do that. Amen. Amen. Amen.