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THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

In the New Testament canon the Book of Hebrews is THE FIRST of the epistles of Paul. There is a reason for this! Paul's other epistles are all written either to specific congregations or to specific individuals. Hebrews is different in this regard, also for a reason.

THE GENERAL BACKGROUND

Let's try to picture the N.T. Church by the late 50'ies A.D.:

- 5000 Jews had been baptized around 31 A.D.
- perhaps another 500 - 1000 non-Jews had come into the Church thereafter
- most had by the 50's A.D. been in the Church for over 20 years
- all were well versed in the basic doctrines
- hardly any left the Church due to false doctrines
- they were all deeply involved in doing "the work"
- they had a real zeal and fervency

BUT unfortunately they also faced some problems:

- they expected Christ to return in THEIR lifetime
- some had even begun to set dates for Christ's return
- THEN the ministry began to see and to teach that Christ would not return when they had all expected Him to return
- but the majority of the members didn't grasp this shift in emphasis, even as today it is hard to get people to see that our dates have also been wrong
- so their expected "date" came and it went ... but Christ did not return.

AND THEN problems appeared within the Church:

- some doubted Christ would return at all; they lost faith
- others said: my Lord delays His coming ...
- and many people just LOST their zeal and interest and left the Church.

That is basically the story of the EPHESIAN ERA of God's Church. In the 90'ies A.D. Jesus Christ said to

this era: "You HAVE LEFT your first love (Revelation 2:4).

Now exactly WHO was their first love?

Answer: JESUS CHRIST!

They were the only era that was started by Jesus Christ in person. He had walked and talked with members of that era. It was His personal example that was instrumental in bringing so many of them into the Church. And when it became clear that He wasn't coming back in their lifetime, some lost faith and felt let down by Jesus Christ. It was their conviction in His imminent return that had motivated them to make tremendous sacrifices ... and now they felt let down.

It wasn't that they disagreed with any doctrines. They just lost their zeal and commitment! Viewed as a whole entity, that era was overwhelmingly Jewish. Very likely over 80% of all Church members prior to 90 A.D. were ethnic Jews.

NOW TO THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

In the early 60's A.D. Paul could see this problem of leaving their first love developing amongst especially the Jewish members of the Church. And so Paul wrote an epistle, not to any specific congregation, but to a whole Church era! That is why this epistle comes first in Paul's 14 letters ... it was really written to that whole era of God's Church!

The message of the whole Book of Hebrews can be summed up as follows:

REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST WHO WAS YOUR FIRST LOVE!

While 1 Corinthians may be the most corrective book in the N.T. as far as volume of correction is concerned, the Book of Hebrews is without doubt the most corrective book in the N.T. as far as INTENSITY of correction is concerned! It is this epistle, rather than any other book in the Bible, that discusses and warns about the unpardonable sin ... and it does so several times. The correction in this letter is EXTREMELY STRONG!

The severity of the correction mentioned by Jesus Christ to this era ("I will remove your candlestick out of his place") is only equalled or exceeded by the correction mentioned to the Laodicean era ("I will spue you out of My mouth").

Because his message is so corrective, Paul takes the approach of spreading out the correction between various explanatory chapters (or sections). This is intended to take some of the sting out of his extremely corrective message.

Since they were losing faith in Jesus Christ, Paul explains firstly Christ's supreme position in God's plan, and secondly Christ's PRESENT position and function. It is Christ's present position and function (as our High Priest) which is THE REASON why He was not returning when they expected Him to return!

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Hebrews 1:1-3 = this establishes Christ's supreme position and authority

Hebrews 2:1-3 = THEREFORE DON'T NEGLECT ...

Hebrews 3:1, 6-19 = DON'T HARDEN YOUR HEARTS ...

Hebrews 4:1-13 = ...BECAUSE GOD IS A DISCERNER OF THE THOUGHTS ...

(Hebrews 3:12,19 introduces FAITH as essential; therefore chapter 11)

(Hebrews 3:14 = "the beginning of our confidence" = this is the FIRST LOVE!)

(Hebrews 4:12 = a discerner of = Paul states this because outward physical obedience, which they still had, is not enough)

Hebrews 5:8-12 = YOU ARE DULL OF HEARING (i.e. you don't WANT to listen)

Hebrews 6:4-8 = IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO RENEW AGAIN ...

Hebrews 10:22-23 = DON'T SIN WILFULLY ...

Hebrews 10:36-37 = YOU NEED PATIENCE (therefore what follows is the FAITH chapter, to explain this need for patience)

Hebrews 12:1 = A LACK OF FAITH IS THE SIN "WHICH SO EASILY BESETS US"

Hebrews 12:4-12 = I KNOW THIS CORRECTION I'M GIVING YOU ISN'T PLEASANT ... BUT LOOK BEYOND IT TO WHAT IT WILL ACHIEVE!

Hebrews 12:15-17 = AVOID A ROOT OF BITTERNESS ... AND DON'T BECOME PROFANE!

When all this correction is read back-to-back, it becomes clear just how strong it is. ALL of it refers to "attitude". NONE of it refers to "false doctrines". That is just like Revelation 2:1-6. And Revelation 2:1-6 didn't typify the non-Jewish Corinthians in the Church (who had all kinds of doctrinal problems), or the Romans or the Galatians; Revelation 2 really identifies the JEWS in that era! And Rev. 2:1-6 really summarizes the whole message of the Book of Hebrews.

When you read just the actual message Paul had in mind (this extremely strong warning) and leave out all the explanatory material (the sugar to make the bitter medicine go down), then you can get a feel for what was really on Paul's mind (see Romans 9:3).

Sprinkled throughout this letter we find statements intended to encourage them to persevere, like "remember from whence you are fallen and do the first works". Thus:

-Hebrews 4:14-16 = Christ understands ...

-Hebrews 6:9-10 = God doesn't forget your works of love ...

-Hebrews 10:34-35 = don't throw it all away now ...

-Hebrews 12:25 = please listen ...

-Hebrews 13:8 = Christ is totally dependable ...

-Hebrews 13:22 = so once again: please listen ...!

A BRIEF LOOK AT EACH CHAPTER OF HEBREWS

Chapter 1: Jesus Christ's supreme position in God's plan is the focus: as a Spirit Being He is VASTLY HIGHER than the angels.

Chapter 2: The PURPOSE of Christ's ministry is touched on, which is for God to build a Family (verses 6-10).

Chapter 3: As a Lawgiver Christ's position is also VASTLY HIGHER than Moses, whom the Jews in the Church esteemed very highly.

Chapter 4: In addition, Christ is also our HIGH PRIEST, a new thought Paul introduces.

Chapter 5: As a High Priest Christ's position is also VASTLY HIGHER than Aaron.

Chapter 6: A warning against committing the unpardonable sin.

Chapters 7-10 = This is a thorough discussion of Christ's Highpriesthood. These chapters take some of the pressure off the correction Paul has been giving, and there is no correction in this section. Also, this section explains WHY Christ was not returning when they thought He should return.

Chapter 7: This shows Christ's Highpriesthood is higher than the Levitical one by means of two examples: bestowing blessings (the greater blesses the lesser) and tithing (the greater receives tithes from the lesser). Also the change-over from the one priesthood to the other is discussed.

Chapter 8: THE REASON for the change-over in priesthoods is explained. It is so that God can bring in "the New Covenant" (see especially verse 6).

Chapter 9: The New Covenant involves a totally different set of priesthood duties ... the Melchizedek priesthood does NOT bring animal sacrifices.

Chapter 10: THE RESULTS, or CONSEQUENCES, of the sacrifices brought by both priesthoods are examined and compared, ending with a stern warning and the need for patience.

Chapter 11: This logically leads to a thorough discussion of faith! Each example carries exactly the same lesson ... one the Ephesian era of the Church should have kept in mind. The lesson is: you have not yet received the reward ... (verse 13,39).

Chapter 12: OUR RESPONSE TO CORRECTION shows whether we have learned anything from these O.T. examples of faith.

Chapter 13: A conclusion with various general admonitions.

That's a brief overview of the whole book.

In the 60's A.D. the apostle Paul saw a problem developing among his own countrymen in the Church. They were taking offence at Jesus Christ, while outwardly still maintaining a mechanical obedience. In coming into the Church they had sacrificed everything they had had. When Christ didn't come back in their lifetime, some became turned-off. So Paul wrote this epistle to the whole era with this message: PLEASE DON'T TURN AWAY FROM JESUS CHRIST, YOUR FIRST LOVE!

Then Paul died. But the trend continued ... and 30 years later God inspired John to write to that same

era: you HAVE LEFT your first love. Sadly, Paul's epistle did not reverse the trend.

LESSONS FOR US TODAY

When considering the 7 messages in Revelation 2-3, only the penalty mentioned to Laodicea approaches the severity of the penalty mentioned to Ephesus. Both of those eras have problems with ATTITUDES (for Laodicea it is an attitude of COMPROMISING). A wrong attitude is a far more serious problem than a wrong doctrine! Compared to a wrong attitude, our wrong doctrine in the 1960's of keeping Pentecost on a Monday was only a minor problem.

The penalties for eras with wrong doctrines (Pergamos and Thyatira) are less severe than the penalty for an era with the right doctrines but a wrong attitude (Ephesus and Laodicea).

The Book of Hebrews carries a message which has a very clear application in our time. We too are anticipating the return of Jesus Christ, as did the "Hebrews". We need to guard against the attitude of "My Lord delays His coming".

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