

REFLECTED GLORY

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Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Back in the mid 90's, I had just been called to pastor a church. At the time there was this fad among certain churches and a couple of the leaders of the church wanted me buy in to it. This fad was called the Seeker movement. Churches in the Seeker movement were known as "seeker-sensitive"—in other words, they focused on those lost souls in the world, those people seeking meaning, and hopefully seeking Christ. A seeker church would make it their mission to reach out and bring these people in.

There is nothing wrong with this. It is commendable. Every church should seek out the lost. It is what Jesus commands us to do. But this seeker movement (which I gently resisted) does not seek out the lost through preaching or discipleship. It does so primarily through marketing. The first step of a seeker church is to survey their intended audience and ask them what they would like in a church if they were to attend one. Then, a church is created or re-shaped based on the responses that people have given. What you end up with is a church is entertaining, uplifting, that meets my needs, that doesn't fill me with guilt, that doesn't demand much of my time. People also want a church that is filled with people just like them. To accomplish this last want, the church develops targeted audiences. The church doesn't say, "We're going to preach the gospel to whoever shows up." Instead they focus on a specific demographic that they target. That is their perceived audience, their intended congregation.

The problem with a church that offers exactly what its people want is that it does not challenge the people. If there is no sacrifice, there is no discipleship. If all our needs are met, if there is no challenge then there is no growth. This isn't the gospel. The gospel is not meant to be easy. The gospel is something that we are supposed to struggle with.

Did these seeker churches work? Yes. Today, our religious landscape is covered with large, successful churches. You may have attended one of them. The question many people are asking is this: what sort of Christians are they producing? Are they equipped for the long haul? Are they strong enough to navigate adversity? Are these people's spirits being adequately fed on a diet of Jesus-lite?

Personally, I hope they are. It would be a sin if those thousands upon thousands of believers were to become disillusioned and lost. The chances are that they would not turn to the church again.

A similar question faced the leadership of the church that is the audience for the book in the New Testament that we know as The Letter to the Hebrews. For the next seven weeks, the focus of my preaching will be from this particular book.

Let's begin with a brief introduction to Hebrews. First of all, it is not a letter. It is more likely an essay or probably a sermon. It is not a letter because it lacks the attributes that we associate with a letter, such as who is writing it and who it is being written to. Honestly, we don't know much about this book. Tradition tells us that it was written by the Apostle Paul who wrote so many books in our New Testament. However, it is easy to recognize the great difference in style between Paul's writings and Hebrews. It is highly unlikely that it is Paul's work. We simply do not have a name for its author. As the early Christian theologian and scholar Origen of Alexandria said about the authorship of Hebrews, "Only God knows."

We also don't know the church that is being addressed although the best guess is that the congregation was located in Rome. The reason for the name Hebrews is that the members of this congregation appear to be Jewish converts to Christianity. They would have been the Hebrew congregation.

The purpose of this book, the reason it was written, was to address a certain malaise within the congregation. Many of the members had grown disaffected with Christ and were drifting away from the church. From the clues scattered through the book, it appears that the group had been a rather successful new mission startup. In the early days, they had received the gospel message with excitement. It was clear that the work of the Holy Spirit was with them (2:3-4). Over time, there were some obstacles and setbacks, until finally, apathy set in and some drifted away. The congregation began in the glorious, excited promise of Christ, but when life in the Christian community seemed to fall short of their expectations, then the church suffered and withered. We'll look at that more closely in the coming weeks.

It is this situation that the writer of Hebrews addresses—the situation that Christ had fallen short of the people's expectations. The author of Hebrews makes it clear that it is not Jesus who has fallen short; it is the people's understanding of Jesus that has fallen short. Jesus had been undersold to the people. The people had not been offered the full measure of their Christ. The Jesus they had been given was ultimately trifling and un-nourishing. Their interest in him quickly waned.

The writer of Hebrews sets out to counter this by presenting the full measure of Jesus Christ. The writer begins with a powerful prelude—the first four verses of chapter 1—in which he places Jesus firmly within the cosmic scope of creation. Listen to the majestic and poetic language we find here. It describes, as one writer puts it, "the radiance of the divine presence."¹ Hebrews begins with these words:

¹ Craig R. Koester in workingpreacher.com, 2018.

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways
by the prophets,
but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,
whom he appointed heir of all things,
through whom he also created the worlds.
He is the reflection of God's glory
and the exact imprint of God's very being,
and he sustains all things by his powerful word.
When he had made purification for sins,
he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,
having become as much superior to angels
as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*

The book of Hebrews is a powerful reminder that Jesus is not just a talented preacher wandering the outskirts of Judean society; he is not simply a popular rabbi dispensing wisdom and theology to the crowds who are anxious to hear something new and different. He is part of God's great plan for our salvation. He is God's son and heir. He possesses God's power to forgive us of our sins. He is greater than the angels themselves. He is the *reflection of God's glory*; he is *the exact imprint of God's very being*.

Then, after establishing the majesty of Jesus, Hebrews reminds the people that in God's creation they are special too. Citing Psalm 8, Hebrews asks, *What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet.*

God created people for glory and honor, making them little lower than the angels and entrusting them with responsibility for the world. But the people do not "see" things that way. God may intend people to have glory and honor, but you certainly wouldn't know that by looking at the dispiriting situation of the Christian community of Hebrews. The situation there seemed anything but glorious.

But then, Hebrews brings us back to the gospel message. We've read the opening prelude about the lordship of Christ but we know that at the center of this message we will find Christ's suffering and dishonor. There is no glory here. There is no triumph here.

But there is. Christ's suffering was something he took upon himself for those who suffer. Christ's suffering was paving a way to show that God's will for all was life, not suffering.

Hebrews calls Christ a *pioneer*. A pioneer is one who charts a course through a difficult landscape in order that others may follow. Think of the first pioneers crossing this country. The pioneer endures hardship for the sake of something far greater.

Being follower of Jesus Christ is not about our comfort and entertainment; it is not about getting what we want. It is difficult and challenging. It means going to places that we have not been before. However, as a follower of Christ we know that we are not alone. That God is with us, watching us, and that God has a purpose for us.

As we will find in our journey through Hebrews, God's purposes are clear and firm. God has created all people for glory, not dishonor, for life, not suffering. In Christ, as part of the church, we "see" how God continues to be at work bringing God's purposes to fulfillment.

Amen.