

CHAPTER 4

The Epistle to the Hebrews

The First Exhortation and Warning (Hebrews 2:1-4)

by G. H. Lang

The word “salvation” may mean, I have been saved, or I am being saved, or I am about to be saved.

I. It is of first importance to discern to which of these three aspects of salvation any given passage refers. It is the first, e.g. in Eph. 2:5, 8, “for by grace ye are having been saved,” which union of the present indicative of the verb substantive with the perfect participle passive means that the believer has already and as a fact reached a state of salvation which is abiding: “you have already been saved and are in that status.” It is the second in, e.g. 1 Cor. 1:18: “For the word of the cross to those indeed perishing foolishness is; but to those being saved, even us, power of God it is.” It is the third aspect in our present passage, the recognition of which has important bearing upon the interpretation of the whole Epistle.

That this is the aspect of salvation is clear from the statement that angels are rendering service to those “being about to inherit salvation” (1:14). The present participle shows that the prospect of this salvation is already theirs; but the salvation itself is theirs in expectation only, not in possession; that is, it is a boon awaited in the future.

This is emphasized by the fact that the salvation is to be *inherited*; for it is only of something future that one can be an *heir*; as soon as the property is received one ceases to be heir and becomes owner.

2. Moreover, as we have seen above in the case of the Son of God, an heir must be child of the owner: “if children, then heirs” (Rom 8:17). Thus at the very outset of the Epistle it is shown clearly that the Writer is addressing children of God. This gives character to all his instruction, encouragement, and warnings. He is not addressing the unregenerate, even though professed believers: he writes to the children of God, to actual heirs, and this must be kept steadfastly in mind however severe and solemn some things he says may be. The child of God deals deceitfully with the word of his Father, and with his own soul, when he refuses medicine because it is bitter. He may but show thereby how desperately he needs the sharp and purging draught.

The aspect of the Epistle is therefore exactly that of Peter’s first epistle (1:3-7). He too wrote to those who had been “begotten again,” and were therefore children of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They had been made children with a view to the future, “unto a living hope” based on the “resurrection of Jesus Christ out of the dead.” This living hope was an *heirship*, it

was “unto an *inheritance*”; one of unique quality, differing from all lesser possessions in being, unlike them, incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading. This inheritance is held in reserve in heaven, where it is safe from all influences that could possibly corrupt, defile, and waste. In the meantime the children are under the guardianship of their all-powerful Father, with a view to entering upon “a salvation ready to be revealed in the final season” of the dealings of God with His affairs.

In this magnificent prospect the heirs of God exult, even in the midst of manifold present griefs. But, adds the apostle, this guardian care of God is experienced “through faith”; the child must trust the Father, stay at home, and submit dutifully to all parental discipline; for only so can the Father care for His child, train it for its high future, and confer at last the purposed inheritance.

3. In view of the high realm where this property is situated, in heaven, and in view of its noble qualities, and of the glowing contrast with the dismal prospects of men before they become children and heirs of God, this salvation may well be called *great*. Indeed it is the greatest thing that God can ever design or grant; for its essence is the sharing the relationship of son to the eternal Father (cf. 2:10; 2 Cor. 6:17, 18; Rev. 21:7); and it includes external conformity of body to the glorified Son of God (Rom. 8: 29; 1 John 3:1-3), co-heirship with Him of the entire universe (Rom. 8:14-17; 1 Cor. 3:21-23), co-authority with Him as its Sovereign and Blessor (Lk. 22:28-30; Rev. 2:26-28; 3:21), and co-residence with Him in the heavenly habitation (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:16-18; Rev. 7:15; 14:1; 15:2-4), rather than dwelling with others of the saved on this earth, whether the present earth in the Millennium or the new earth in eternity (Isa. 65:17-25; 66:22-24; Rev. 21:1).

4. It is much to be observed that *the Lord Jesus first announced this great salvation*: “which a beginning received to be spoken through the Lord.” This excludes from the meaning here that present aspect of salvation which consists in the forgiveness of sins, justification, and the new birth unto eternal life; for though the Lord Jesus did indeed speak of these initial, indispensable, and immeasurable benefits, He was by no means the first to announce these. Not to go back earlier, Moses in the law, fourteen centuries before Christ, had conveyed to Israel the divine assurance of forgiveness, e.g. Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 16, 18. A thousand years before Christ David rejoiced in that free forgiveness (Ps. 32). Christ confirmed this earlier message of mercy, declaring that the repentant confessing sinner, who sought mercy on the ground of the propitiatory sacrifice, “went down to his house justified” (Lk. 18:14); but He was not the first so to teach.

The Lord forgave sins, as those of the man let down through the roof (Luke 5), and of the woman who wept at His feet (Luke 7). He declared that it

was His own blood that would procure this remission (Matt. 26:28). He commanded that remission of sins should be preached in His name (Luke 24:47). He strongly emphasized the duty that the forgiven must forgive (Matt. 6:12-15; 18:21-35); and He warned solemnly against one fatal sin which for ever precludes forgiveness (Mark 3:28-30). But if any one will go through in the concordance the words *forgiveness* and *remission* he may be surprised to learn that these are almost all the occasions and connections when Christ is reported as having touched on the subject.

It was thus as to the new birth and life. Every saint of earlier ages must have received that life, or saint he never could have been; for the carnal Adam nature of man's first birth "is not able to please God" (Rom. 8:6-8), yet ch. 2 of our Epistle will recount how very many before Christ walked well-pleasing to God by faith. This teaching also Christ confirmed, and showed the place of His own person and death as the basis of the new life (John 3); but so far was the Lord from being the first so to teach that He rather censured Nicodemus for not knowing these things, seeing that Old Testament scriptures taught the doctrine, as e.g. in Ezek. 37:1-14, and Jer. 31:31-34.

Let the student extend his survey into the Acts and the Epistles and he can find how those who confirmed the teaching of Christ, and saw it confirmed by the supernatural workings of God and the Spirit, maintained the same features as before noted. They taught forgiveness and regeneration plainly and emphatically, as Christ had done, and on the same ground of His atoning blood, but the records of this are similarly few. It was the foundation of their message, its opening topic, but by no means its sole or even its most distinguishing feature. In this particular much modern evangelizing has been rather a contrast to than a continuation of the preaching of Christ and His apostles.

But let the earnest searcher turn now to the word *kingdom* and trace it through the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and the Revelation, and he will be struck with the frequency and intensity with which the Lord and the apostles enlarged upon *this* theme. And not simply as to that earthly government by Messiah of which the prophets had sung in such glowing strains, but with the introduction of fresh elements which Christ was the first to announce and which constituted the distinctive topics of His ministry.

The Old Testament prophets had foretold that God would re-establish His sovereign rights on this earth. John the Immerser had enforced this and had directed men to Christ, and to His sacrifice as the Lamb of God, saying that repentance for sin and faith in Christ would give preparation for the judgment that the King would execute. But when the Lord Jesus took up John's ministry He introduced elements additional to what had been taught before.

i. He taught those who became His disciples that they were to regard God as their *Father* (Matt. 5:16, 43-48; 6:1, 4, 6-18, 26, 32; John 14 to 17). Thus He raised those who truly received and who followed Him to a share in His own relationship of Son to Father. This culminated in His first message to them after His resurrection, "I ascend unto My Father and your Father, and My God and your God" (John 20:17).

In former times it had been God in His majesty and power Whom the godly knew; the mention of Him as Father was most infrequent and exceptional. In the whole Old Testament there seem to be only nine or ten places where this relationship is mentioned, and the third, fifth and sixth of these are prophetic of Israel's experiences in days to come (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 22:10; Ps. 89:26; 103:13; Isa. 63:16 twice; 64:8; Jer. 3:4, 19; Mal. 1:6; 2:10).

But by Christ this was lifted into relief and given emphasis. He insisted that His followers must walk worthily of this high calling; it must be a regulating factor in their heart and ways. And this note is struck early in our Epistle: God is "bringing many *sons* unto glory" (2:10).

ii. From the eleventh chapter (vv. 2-10, 13-16) we learn that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been told of a heavenly city, that they embraced the prospect, became heirs of the promise of it, and regulated their life on earth accordingly. In this activity of faith Abraham became the ancestor of spiritual descendants of the time since the coming of Christ. This cannot be learned from the histories, and there is no mention that their descendants after the flesh expected that heavenly portion. Resurrection was but occasionally mentioned, as in Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37; Dan. 12:2, 3, 12, 13 and then rather with a view to a portion in the kingdom of God on this earth.

This also Christ confirmed, as in Luke 13:28, 29; etc. But to His faithful followers He opened up the earlier prospect and enlarged its details, and He was the first to do this. He told them that, if they were persecuted for His sake, their reward would be great in *heaven* (Matt. 5:12): that they should set their hearts *there*, not here, and accumulate treasure *there* (Matt. 6:19-21 19:21; comp. Col. 3:1, 2). He promised them that if they thus lived for *that* world He would confess their names there, as belonging to that world (Matt. 10:24-33). This line of teaching and promise, up till that time peculiar to His own ministry, culminated in the new and mighty assurance that He was going back to that realm above to prepare an abode there for them, and that He would duly return thence to take them thither, to be in His company there (John 14:1-3).

As regards any express teaching of this aspect of salvation, it had its beginning from the lips of the Lord. The rest of the New Testament shows how fully and earnestly it was confirmed and enlarged by them that heard Him. See 1

Thess. 4; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Pet. 1 before quoted; 1 John 3:1-3. The stress of the apostolic teaching fell upon the dominant note of Christ, that not this earth, even when renewed in Messiah's day, but the heavenly side of God's great empire is the proper sphere, prospect, and hope of the followers of Christ, their reward for suffering for Him now.

It is this supernal prospect that gives point to the passage before us. It is not here that salvation is *great*: salvation in its lesser range than this is indeed great (*megas*); but the adjective used here is rare in the New Testament, and very emphatic. *Tilichoutos* means "so great." Its only other places are: Jas. 3:4; the ship that is so great as compared with its small rudder: 2 Cor. 1:10; "so great a death" as threatened Paul in Asia, something more terrible than men ordinarily face; and Rev. 16:18; where the full force of the word is seen by its describing "so great an earthquake, so violent (*megas*), such as was not seen since there were men upon the earth."

Thus the point in our passage is that the future salvation in view is something as wholly unexampled as was that earthquake. It is not that "common salvation" in which all the saved must share, or they would not be saved in any sense, but it is that highest height and splendour of glory to which the God of all grace is in this age calling us in Christ, even "unto His eternal glory" (1 Pet. 5:10); yea, "into *His own* kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 2:12); so that such shall obtain nothing less than "the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:14), and be part of that company which, under the figure of a city, is seen by John as coming down out of heaven "having the glory of God" (Rev. 21:11).

It did not demand unusual wonders and signs to assure repentant men of the pardon of a gracious God. David, the tax-gatherer, the woman that was a sinner, and millions more, of old and of to-day, have obtained the bliss of justification by believing the bare word of God. But the proposal that men should be elevated bodily from earth, man's natural home, to the heavens above, should share the glory of God Himself, and the sovereignty of the universe with the Son of God, *this* was so startling, so unimaginable, that God confined it as His message by exceptional signs, wonders, various powerful workings, and especially by distributions of His own Spirit, without Whose in-working aid it were scarcely possible to grasp the proposal or think it credible.

5. The Exhortation. The Messenger of God to us is immeasurably nobler than those He sent to earlier generations: "because of this it behooves *us* more abundantly to direct our attention to the things heard" through Him. It was always incumbent on men to heed a message from God, whoever might bring it; much more it is incumbent on us to Whom His own Son has been sent (Matt. 21:33-44), and sent with an immeasurably higher message.

6. The Danger is that we may drift away from these things heard. In Isa. 44:4 (LXX) the word used *pararheo* describes running water, water which is flowing by. In Prov. 3:21 (LXX) it is used of not letting good counsel and understanding slip from one's attention. Greek authors used it in this same sense: a thing escapes me, slips from my mind. In our passage the danger in view may be compared to a ship being caught by wind and tide, and through negligence being thus carried past the desired haven. In this case the sailors will pay the penalty of missing the profits, comforts, and pleasures expected in port, and may also be exposed to further perils of the sea.

7. The Warning is given by a comparison. The message of God given through angels at Sinai (Acts 7:53) took effect. Its solemn sanctions against willful transgression and careless disobedience were enforced. The history of Israel through over 3,000 years exhibits this. The Messenger sent to us is far nobler in rank, the message far richer in content: how, then, shall we escape if we neglect Him and it?

The word *neglect* is important. It is found in three other places. At Hebrews 8:9 it is said that the Lord *disregarded* Israel because they turned away from Him. If one party violates a covenant, the other party may treat it as null and void. This God did, deliberately and definitely, as the aorist tense here intimates. This shows that the word *neglect* involves deliberate action, not mere inadvertence. We are warned lest we with intention, even more than by carelessness, disregard this so great salvation offered to us as children of God. It is not here the sinner being indifferent to the first aspect of salvation, nor the unwatchful, prayerless Christian falling before common temptations, though such indifference will assuredly bring its penalties; but it is the believer putting from his mind the final privileges offered. This is seen in ch. 12 in Esau despising his birthright privileges.

1 Tim. 4:14: "Be not *neglectful* of the gift that is in thee." Here the imperfect tense stresses the continuousness of the neglect. If we once turn from the hope of the gospel, the hope of this "great salvation," the attitude may easily become permanent.

Matt. 22:5: "But they *made light* of it," and went off about their personal affairs. Made light of what? Of a royal invitation to a royal wedding! Here the tense of the verb is the same as in our passage, which illuminates the latter. They deliberately disregarded the invitation, made light of the King and His Son, and showed they preferred lesser interests. It was precisely the sin of Esau: choosing a meal instead of a birthright. This is to be noted. Our Writer will further stress the same elements and motives.

8. *The Penalty.* “How shall we escape”—escape what? Obviously that “just recompense of reward” mentioned immediately before, such as followed under the law spoken through angels. The same analogy and warning will be enlarged in ch. 10:26-31. *Misthos*, the root of the word used, means wages for work done: “the labourer is worthy of his *hire*” (Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18; Jas. 5:4), and is used frequently of the reward the godly shall receive in heaven (Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23; 1 Cor. 3:8; Rev. 22:12). The derived word in our passage *misthapodosia* is peculiar to our Writer, being found elsewhere only at 10:35 and 11:26, with the cognate *misthapodotes* at 11:6 only. The force of the compound word is, to give back an equivalent, hence a “*just* recompense”.

Oh, let this be grasped. God is a *Rewarder* of them that seek after Him (11:6). He gives back according to the earnestness and faith of the seeker. It was by paying regard to the day of Christ, and the reward then to become available, that Moses was strengthened to throw up the honours and prospects of the royal house of Egypt (11:26). Men of this world have their portion in this life (Ps. 17:14; Matt. 6:2, 5, 16); the prospects of the disciple of Christ lie where Christ’s prospects lie, in the future; they are known by faith and hope. It is for us to be courageous and bold as was Moses, for this will “receive great recompense of reward” (10:35).

The word recompense is a good translation. It means to make the scales even: to give back in goods the exact value received. The day of Christ will be a period of the administration of justice, and rewards will be strictly equivalent to service and suffering now. So also will be the penalty attached to neglect by the Christian of the high privileges possible of attainment by faith.

Westcott says the word *misthapodosia* “appears to emphasize the idea of an exact requital of good or evil by a sovereign Judge.” Kelly translates it by “just retribution.” “Exact requital,” “just retribution”: Let us face this seriously, for it is a serious prospect for the unheavenly believer. Something of what this retribution may mean will be opened out in later warnings. In this first and brief warning the basic elements of privilege and responsibility are concentrated, to be afterward expanded.

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