

# THE GREAT APOSTLE

Hebrews 3:1-6

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, October 14, 2012

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Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. (Heb. 3:1).

**T**he Book of Hebrews was written to exhort Christians under fire to continue in the faith in Jesus Christ. Our passage this evening exemplifies that thrust, both beginning and ending with exhortations to endurance. It begins by encouraging them to fix their thoughts on Jesus Christ and concludes by exhorting them to hold on to their courage and hope.

Verse 1 could very well belong to the previous chapter, which concluded by stressing that Jesus, having overcome sin and temptation, is able to help those who are being tempted. “Therefore,” the writer concludes, “consider Jesus.” Since Jesus is the one who conquered death and the devil and sin, the author reasons, “Make him the conscious object of your faith.” He calls his readers “holy brothers” and those “who share in the heavenly calling,” and thus identifies them both as the recipients of Christ’s work and as those who are thus obliged to live for him.

## CHRIST GREATER THAN MOSES

**T**his exhortation receives further support starting with the description of Jesus in verse 1 as “the apostle and high priest of

our confession.” An apostle is one who is sent by God, one who represents God before men, speaks for him, and acts on his behalf; a high priest represents men before God and offers a sacrifice for their sins. Moses was the only Old Testament figure of which both of these were true, and as such he pointed forward to Jesus, who we proclaim as *the* apostle and high priest of our confession.

Chapter 1 established Jesus’ superiority over the angels, and now in chapter three we are told of his supremacy over Moses. The writer says, he “was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house” (v. 2). Jesus is a figure who can be compared with Moses, the greatest prophet of the entire Old Testament and Judaism’s greatest priestly figure. Both Jesus and Moses share the greatest accolade that could be given, namely that they were faithful.

Jesus cannot only be compared favorably with Moses, but is even superior. This is what verse 3 tells us: “Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself.” The point here is obvious, that these Hebrew Christians should not fall back from the New Covenant in Christ to the Old Covenant of Judaism. Jesus is superior to the greatest Old Covenant hero, through whom the Old Covenant was given, and therefore his New Covenant is also superior.

This passage is noteworthy in giving us a New Testament perspective on Moses’ ministry, and thus of the Old Testament as a whole. Moses was a faithful servant in the house. But Christ is the Son and heir who builds the house for God. This means that Moses’ ministry was not in conflict with Christ’s, but Moses was a servant whose labor was part of Christ’s ultimate work. Verse 5 tells us this was especially true of Moses’ work as a prophet; he testified “to the things that were to be spoken later,” that is, in the time of Jesus Christ.

We are reminded of Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees, who accused him of violating the Law of Moses by doing things like healing on the Sabbath. But Moses, the Lawgiver, was Jesus’ servant, and the Law was Jesus’ Law. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the true teacher of the Lord. That is what Jesus was doing in the Sermon on the Mount. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the

Prophets,” he taught. “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt. 5:17). Jesus pointed out that Moses had foretold his ministry and directed people to trust in him. In John chapter 5, he told the Pharisees:

Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. *John 5:45-46*

Moses’ work and message spoke of future things to come. Moses was a servant whose work furthered the house-building project of God’s Son and Heir. Indeed, everything in the Mosaic administration points forward to Jesus Christ. The Year of Jubilee, in which slaves were released and land was returned to its original owners, spoke of the great day of deliverance that was to come in Christ. The tabernacle spoke of God dwelling with man, which is what Christ did. Jesus is called “Immanuel”, which is “God with us.” The apostle John explains, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). The sacrifices of lambs and bulls and goats spoke of his great atoning work on the cross. This is a point the writer of Hebrews will emphasize much in this letter, that the rituals of the Law were “a shadow of the good things to come” (10:1). Paul looks back on the way Moses brought manna from heaven and caused water to flow from a rock. He remembers that Israel “drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). In John 6, Jesus taught, “It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life” (Jn. 6:32-35). Later, when Jesus was transfigured in glory on the mount before the disciples, Moses was there, with Elijah, discussing the exodus of which Moses’ deliverance was but a foretype – Christ’s death on the cross to deliver us from the Egypt of bondage to our sins (Luke 9:30). Moses presented Israel with pictures or types of the Messiah to come, shadows that were cast backward into the Old Testament by the light of Christ and were fulfilled in his long-awaited coming. So what Jesus said is true: Moses testified about him. This being the case, if

Moses could write to the Jewish Christians, he would tell them the very thing emphasized by the writer of Hebrews: that they should hold fast to Christ in faith. In fact, Moses did write such a letter; he wrote the first five books in the Old Testament, and their ultimate purpose was to point to Jesus Christ as the Savior of his people, the apostle and high priest of our confession.

## GOD'S HOUSE

These statements describe Moses as faithful as a servant in God's house, over which Jesus is builder and lord. What are we to understand by "God's house?" Some commentators take this to be the tabernacle or tent of meeting, in which Moses served so faithfully, while others point to Israel as a whole as God's household in which Moses served. Both are true. Verse 6 especially emphasizes the latter, saying, "And we are his house."

The house Jesus is building and in which Moses served is the people of God. This tells us there is a basic continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. There are differences, since the Old Covenant looks forward to Christ with national Israel and the New Covenant looks back on Christ with the trans-national church. The basis relationship between them is that of fulfillment; Old Covenant Israel is the bud of which the New Covenant church is the flower. For instance, the fulfillment of the tabernacle and temple typology is the church, which is God's house, and is built not by men or by means of purely human labor, but is built by Christ and the power of his gospel.

If this is what we are, God's house, then we should ask, For what does one build a house? We might say that one builds a house for his glory. That is an idea that is certainly in view here, and a majestic estate certainly does show the riches and the skill and artistry of the one who can afford and build it. That is true, but the main reason someone builds a house is to live in it. What a marvelous statement this is, that God has redeemed us that we might be his dwelling place.

This emphasizes that God indwells his people. This is true of Christians individually. One of the most famous books of the Puritan era was titled, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, and that is an excellent description of what salvation is about. If you have come to

God through Christ, then he is living in you, working in you to will and to act according to his good purpose, by means of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said of the Spirit he would send to his followers: “He lives with you and will be in you” (Jn. 14:17).

While we must emphasize that, the description here is mainly corporate. *We are together* God’s house; he dwells *among* us as well as *in* us. In 2 Corinthians 6:16 Paul says, “For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” He used this point to argue that therefore the church is called to be holy, because God is holy. In another well-known verse, Peter said, “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). The church is the holy temple where the holy God dwells in spirit, is worshiped and served.

This gives us vital information about the Church. In building a house you first lay the cornerstone, which establishes the lines and angles for the whole. Then comes the foundation, which will support the structure that is built upon it. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:19-22 that the church is such a house. Christ is the cornerstone and the apostles are the foundation. Their teaching is recorded in the Bible, and it tells us how the church is established and how it grows. Since the apostles are the foundation, a Christian is one who receives and believes the apostolic testimony in the New Testament and builds his life on it, as that foundation rests on Christ himself.

Commenting on this, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor. 3:12-13).

Therefore, the only work that will last is that which is patterned upon the Word of God, which is the blueprint and the manual for the growth and blessing of the church”

People today don’t tend to take the church very seriously. We are rugged individualists and think we can go it alone. But the corporate

community of saints is the household of God. If this does not transform our view of the church then nothing will. On the one hand, we see that the church is not a human institution but a divine building which God erects and in which God himself dwells. To be part of the church is to have historical roots in the people of God and spiritual connectedness to others now, in past ages, and in generations to come. Christians know and study church history the way others research a family genealogy. Loving Christ causes us to love and serve his church and the people who make it up.

The Old Testament reveals a geography of salvation – if you wanted to know God you could not just look anywhere. God is everywhere, yet he specially disclosed himself in a particular place, among his people in Israel, and even more especially at Jerusalem in the temple. If you wanted to find God you had to go there, where God’s house was, the way the Queen of Sheba went to Jerusalem in Solomon’s time. The same is true today. God is everywhere, and his church is not defined by a building or location. But it is still among his people that he dwells, as well as in his Word, and as his Word rules among his people he is specially to be found.

This is one reason why Christians need to be members of the church. Christian growth and discipleship takes place in the church, in God’s household, and not as a solo endeavor. This also says much about evangelism. If you want to bring someone to God you need to bring them to the church, where God speaks through his Word with authority and power. Christian worship takes place most especially in the church, for when his people gather God himself attends with them (see Mt. 18:20). Thus the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 10:25: “Let us not neglect to meet together,” for the gathering of God’s people is God’s own dwelling.

There is therefore no greater privilege than membership in the church. There is no greater calling than the Christian’s calling to offer his gifts and talents, time and money to the work of the church. A Christian who gives all his energy to his job, uses her talents only for personal gain, who spends his money all on himself, neglecting the work of the church which will last forever, is simply a fool. Such a person does not realize that the church is the body, the temple, the bride of the exalted Jesus Christ, who even now reigns on high and

soon will come to rule on earth forever. In the end it is what Christ is doing through the church that will matter most, will most shine in glory, and will have been most worth the offering of our lives. Therefore a Christian who is not involved in a ministry of the church, who does not pray regularly for the church's work, who is taking but never giving to the church, should ask himself if he really understands what this life is about and if he is living for the things of eternity.

## HOLD TO YOUR COURAGE!

**T**he Book of Hebrews is a letter of exhortation, and it includes a great many commands and conditional statements, one of which ends this passage. The author writes in verse 6: "And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope."

Christians sometimes are unnerved by these kinds of statements, often because they have experience with a legalistic theology that denies the believer's security in Christ. But these conditional statements are in the Bible, they are appropriate, and indeed, they are even necessary. The point of this statement is to encourage faith in the face of trouble. The writer is saying, "Since you are the house God is building, this demands that you stand firm in your faith."

There is no conflict between the teaching that all true believers are safe in the hands of God and that which emphasizes that Christians must persevere in faith. All true Christians will continue in the faith until they are gathered to God. But it is also true that true Christian faith is proved only by steadfastness under trial. You are saved by faith alone, but the test of your faith comes through your willingness to persevere under difficulty and persecution. Those who do not persevere, like Paul's one-time companion Demas, and those who betray Jesus to this world, like Judas Iscariot, bear testimony that they never truly possessed saving faith and never truly were saved.

Therefore, if you are a Christian, God will call you to show courage before the world, holding fast to your hope in Jesus Christ. But where does courage come from? The answer of the Bible is that it comes from God, from our knowledge of him and his salvation, and from the Holy Spirit he sends to his children as they trust in him.

Let me put this differently: courage comes from seeing. On countless battlefields, the hearts of soldiers have been cheered by the sight of the flag waving still. What they saw reminded them of the home to which they hoped to return as heroes, and the cause for which they came. Seeing the flag waving they knew that victory was at hand. That is what the gospel does for Christians, God's promise that "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). Knowing that God's saving work is sure, that our treasure is safe in heaven, gives us boldness for this fleeting life with its trials and temptations.

## CONSIDER JESUS

**I**t is well documented that the great commanders of history inspired terrific bravery by their simple presence, just by letting their soldiers set their eyes upon them. Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Patton – all had this aura of invincibility that produced undaunted courage in the hearts of those who saw them amidst the fray. That is what the eyes of our faith see when we fix them upon Jesus Christ, who is the Captain of our Salvation. Napoleon, probably military history's greatest conqueror, used to have his generals come into his tent and look into his eyes before they went out to lead the troops in battle; likewise we are to see the face of Christ in our hearts, the brow once crowned with thorns but now with the laurel wreath of heaven. Napoleon, like most of the other great conquerors of this world, was ultimately defeated. Even those who never lost a battle in life, like Alexander the Great, nonetheless were defeated by death. But Christ is victor over every foe. When he went into the grave made even death his captive. Now he lives and reigns forever, placing every enemy under his feet. Let us fix our eyes on him, then, and we will find strength for every battle, hope for every trial.

We remember that the original recipients of Hebrews were facing great persecution for their faith, perhaps even the threat of death. This is something Christians experience today as well. What is the remedy for fear of persecution, but to see Jesus Christ enthroned. Hebrews 2:9 reminded us, "We see him, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and



honor because of the suffering of death” (2:9). That was the sight that filled the eyes of Stephen, the first martyr. The Book of Acts tell us that as they were gathering to stone him,

He, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” *Acts 7:55-56*

With that sight he held onto his courage, and with the hope of salvation he even found grace to ask for his killers’ forgiveness.

Persecution is one source of temptation, but others fall away because they are enticed by the allure of the world and its pleasures. If we know our hearts we will not underestimate this threat of worldliness to our faith. The answer here, too, is found in our passage: “Consider Jesus.” Seeing Jesus in heaven as our forerunner and knowing ourselves co-heirs with him, we anticipate a glorious treasure there, the hope of glory with him forever. He is our boast – not our jobs, not our money, not our pedigree – not anything in this world that can be so easily taken from us. Psalm 16:11 says, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” A love for the things of God and a keen anticipation of heaven is the greatest antidote to worldliness.

Perhaps the most deadly temptation is that which comes from our own feeling of unworthiness, our discouragement because of sin, and the accusations of Satan that plague our weak conscience. We sin and he tells us, “How can you call yourself a Christian? Isn’t it true that you have no part of Christ? Why don’t you give up the façade?” Do you hear that voice, do you feel the sting of that accusation? Then consider Jesus. The Scripture says of him, “The bruised reed he will not break, and the smouldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isa. 42:3).

Let Jesus Christ be your banner, the source of all your confidence. Fix your thoughts on Jesus, contemplate the sufficiency of his work for you, reflect upon the love that bore your sins. And you will find courage. You will boast of the hope that is yours in Christ. And when Satan finds you and levels his accusing finger at you, saying, “You are a great sinner,” you, then, can say, “Yes, I am a great sinner.

But Jesus Christ is a greater Savior. Take your accusations to him, because he has taken all my sins.”

Hold fast. Be brave. Exult in the hope that is ours in Christ. All this we do looking to him, filling our hearts with the knowledge of our all-sufficient Savior. Everything in this passage leads us to consider him. He is the great apostle, sent by God to bring us salvation; he will not fail. He is the great High Priest who reconciles us to God; nothing now shall separate us. He is the master architect and builder, constructing God’s house for his own glory and dwelling. And we are that house. He will not be thwarted, he will not be overcome. The house he builds on the rock of his gospel will not be dashed by any storm. So we draw our courage and our confidence and our hope from him. And there we are safe, to the praise of his name.