

Benefiting from the Mistakes of Others

The Book of Hebrews

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Well, we're beginning tonight a new series. I don't know how long this series will last. It's a series in Hebrews. We were last here in excess of 10 years ago, an evening series, I can recall it. It says something, doesn't it, it seems like yesterday that I was doing it but it wasn't, it was over 10 years ago. I looked further than that into my diaries to find out when precisely but time to be here again, time to be in this most rich and most marvelous book.

When I talk with people over the years and, well, maybe it's never a good thing to say what's your favorite book of the Bible, but some would say that this is their favorite book, putting it like that and, well, you can understand people saying why, and we're going to be hard pressed to keep ourselves confined in terms of length of sermon because of the riches of the material here. I give you fair warning, chapter 1, we'll not be leaving it in any time soon, and this evening's sermon is really something of an introduction and it's entitled this, "Benefiting from the Mistakes of Others." Benefiting from the mistakes of others, and it has something of, as I say, an introductory overview to it, a brief kind of take in as much as we can because there's not an awful lot we know, in truth, but as to the context and [unintelligible] the author of this book. But we have a first heading, it is this, a book emerging out of spiritual failure. A book emerging out of spiritual failure. Well, you could probably say the Bible is a book emerging out of spiritual failure at its broader sense, that the failure there, our first parents and all that that entailed and everything that God then had to put into motion to redeem us from our sin.

Well, if we confine our attention to the New Testament, well, Hebrews in common with many books, in a sense, would not be here were not for the mistakes and spiritual failures of the early church, and the early new covenant church, that is, because we believe, don't we, that the church has always been, predates the day of Pentecost. It was the elect of God, that gathered church, that remnant within the ethnic Israel of that day and other proselytes who had joined themselves to it. But if we think of the early church, the new covenant church, well, how many of the letters that we have and which form the basis for so many sermons that stimulate and inform preachers and provide for us a wealth of matter to consider and upon which we make decisions and refines our judgments, how many of those New Testament books would not be here were it not for the failures, sometimes abject failures, of the churches that were the recipients of these letters at first.

Hebrews, we'll come into more detail in a moment, was the people to whom this letter was sent were defecting, leaving the faith, or were in danger of soon leaving the faith, and this book is therefore written to win them back. Had they not have heard in the first place, the book would not have been written and we would not have it here before us. But this is the providence of God, isn't it, that there the mistakes of others become issues and matters for us to learn from but provides us also with a wealth of doctrine that arose out of their mistakes and doctrine now which we don't look on it there as simply being belonging in that original context, as if we can only use this material when we come across people in a similar situation. No, the doctrine lives on independent now of its context and richly informs and we think about our Lord Jesus Christ, how we worship, how we pray. And we read the Old Testament, so much of Hebrews helps us to read the Old Testament.

So think and here, well, just quickly 1 & 2 Corinthians, were it not for spiritual failure, we'd have to say that's what it was in Corinth, there was much going on there that makes us go pale and aghast that the apostle was having to deal with that kind of issue. Well, he was and he did deal with it and we have the benefits of what he wrote and that is now in the corpus of the New Testament.

Galatians, I'm going to quote some of that in a moment but Galatians, written not to churches that were flourishing. We can think of Philipians more in that context. But Galatians and the foolish Galatians, always having to write to a people, as we'll see in a moment, who were falling away, falling away from grace, and so we have Galatians. What difference that has made. Well, where would the Reformation be if men of God had not read Galatians with their eyes now opened by the Holy Spirit and the rest, we say, is history.

Colossians indeed, there was a heresy and error doing the rounds that formed the background and informed much of what the Apostle Paul had to say there. We think to Jude and 2 Peter, if not for the existence of false teachers and false people coming into the church, those would never have needed to have been written either, but because those people were there then and are still alive today and with us, so we have the benefit of those letters.

The spiritual failure of others has meant riches for the church of Jesus Christ. When the Lord's people err in behavior and thinking, and more likely in both because both inform each other, and their mistakes furnish us with much much Scripture. And it was indeed a measure of failure in the believers amongst them that the writer to the Hebrews, as we will call him, addresses a situation of failure that was happening beginning to emerge temptations that these people, good people because the writer writes encouraging [unintelligible] lacing it with some very strong and stern warnings but where there is a little beginning of failure.

The external difficulty was the threat of persecution, the threat of persecution. We might therefore date the letter somewhere around maybe AD 64-66, that period then.

Persecution was just beginning to make itself felt. Nero was coming into office as emperor and unleashing gradually and then more viciously his persecution against the church of Jesus Christ, and because and here we cannot be exact in this but because in the context of what the writer is writing, had the temple in Jerusalem been destroyed, well, that would have seemed to have been a very natural point of reference, something to reference. He's, after all, making a case strongly that the things belonging to the old covenant, worship, the sacrifices, the high priesthood, that which was associated with the temple had passed away, it was obsolete and aging and ready to pass away. But if the temple had gone, that would have only made his case that much stronger, but he doesn't refer to that and we might therefore imagine, because it has not happened, that happened in AD 70, we can anchor that in known time, so we would reckon sometime prior to that and before were in the kind of height of the persecution so we find ourselves perhaps somewhere around AD 64.

So there is a reference in chapter 12, verse 3, for instance, there of kinds of things beginning to make themselves felt, perhaps which had not yet reached these believers but the writer says, "For consider Him," and that is the Lord Jesus, "who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." That's where he talks about those whose property had been seized from them, so there is something happening. There is persecution. It's upcoming, it's already beginning to make itself felt, the terror of Roman emperors and their deity worship that went with that, and all that that did by putting pressure upon people to conform to it or not conform to it at the cost of their lives. That was the growing threat and the phenomenon beginning to be felt.

And yet also within it there appears to be a bit of a push effect from the result of the persecution but some draw as well towards, well, old covenant ways, old sacrifices, the old priesthood. Looking at old priesthood here we are anticipating all the reasoning of the writer, the old priesthood of Aaron and thinking there was still benefit to be found from sheltering under that and going back to such things as circumcision, maybe, and to the feasts and the various observances of days, and seeing value in beast slaying and their shed blood, and the writer is anxious that they should not do this, that this would be a total denial of everything in the effect that they had put their faith in, the one they had put their faith in had abolished this, logically speaking, abolished the moral law but all the ceremonial law he most certainly had and that it should not be revived. It's not meant to be revived and so he makes that case very strongly.

And it would seem that this idea, it's a bit remote to us, isn't it, in this day and this age, but certainly it was a very live issue in the early church and there were many people out there saying that Christ was not enough, you needed to obey the law. And by that they didn't mean just the moral law, we would all agree with them on that, the 10 Commandments, we'd all agree with them on that, but they were saying all the particulars of the ceremonial law, all of the issues to do with washings perhaps, and ceremonial things and preparations, circumcision, and the worship of the old covenant.

We find, for instance, in Acts 15:1-4 the following. We read there, "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.'" Well, by the law of Moses they're not saying that they must keep the 10 Commandments otherwise everybody would have been in agreement with them, but they're saying more than that. They were saying, "You must be circumcised in order to be saved," which was a very big statement and one that Paul and Barnabas entered into what Luke there with beautiful understatement says was no small dissension and dispute with them because there were key issues at stake and that is why the writer to the Hebrews is at times very exercised and very strong in what he has to say.

Elsewhere, well, we mentioned Paul's letter to the Galatians, just turning up, had already anticipated this passage in what I'd said a moment ago but Galatians 3:1-4, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain?" Well, we cannot read that, can we, in a sort of detached and dispassionate sense because we feel in it Paul's passion. When just as we read there there was no small dissension and dispute, well, this is a little piece of that no small dissension and dispute because there were vital things at stake. So here is Paul, he's not flattering them, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? And what is that Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? Does He mean nothing to you now? Are you now looking to be justified by the works of the law?" And that is his remonstrance that runs through the whole of Galatians. It has, as it were, it's high tide marks where Paul is very strong in what he says and we could have picked out a few more examples there where he's extremely strong in what he says because this is a key issue. Much is at stake. And as we can see, this whole idea, remote to us may be, but this whole idea of circumcision and doing all the law of Moses, following all the special festivals and feast days and new moons and such things, this was not simply optional but absolutely required if you are going to be saved.

So this was a big thing and, well, it's already there, isn't it, in that passage in Galatians what Paul sees as being under threat and what elsewhere in Acts is under threat and why they have the big Council in Jerusalem to iron out this issue which, in a sense, that should have been the end of all argument but, sadly, we know it wasn't because that's probably why this issue is still the live issue here, they had not heard or received what the Council of Jerusalem had said. And the results are sad and the first one and the biggest one is it

devalues Christ. It removes from us, him, and if he's taken away from us, then we've got nothing left. We have nothing left. We have religion but that does not save, and we have indeed for the salvation of our souls nothing left because it's taking away from Christ, anything that is added to him, in effect, takes away from him and saying he is not sufficient, you also need to be circumcised. Yes, he's necessary but not sufficient, you also need to be circumcised, taking that as a particular issue that in Acts 15 was exercising then. And the writer to the Hebrews, he protests against that and he establishes, doesn't he, chapter 1, does this admirably but is actually setting the pattern for the whole book, established who the Lord Jesus Christ is, his importance, his rank, his significance, his work, and really the aim is to leave everybody with nowhere else to hide but they are compelled to come back to him, compelled to see that only he is the Savior that they need.

So it devalues Christ and, of course, then what goes with that and already we can see it here, replaces him with other things. Obeying the law. Being circumcised and sacrifices. Going back to the Aaronic priesthood and submitting in some measure to that. Or as we had it in chapter 1, again, a bit remote to us, isn't it, but angels, having angels and, in fact, worshipping them and according them just as in the Roman Catholic scheme that Mary becomes this sort of co-Redemptrix with our Lord, that she redeems as well. What false teaching that that is. Well, it's almost as if they're saying the angels, we need the angels to go through them to get to him, that they are part of our salvation. Well, as I say, I'm not aware of many churches terming themselves evangelical loosely speaking who hold to that but it was being here because in that day and in that age, one that was far more taken up with supernaturalism, our age is dead to supernaturalism, but then angels were much more thought about, talked about, and here brought into play as intermediaries.

So Hebrews aims very briefly to teach the glory of Christ, to teach us again and again about the glory of Christ, about his offices, about his power to work to save from sin, about his superiority to everything of the old covenant, every part of it, and including here angels. It shows, too, the insufficiency of all alternatives, making the same case that you need Christ and you must not leave him. He is your only hope. Well, while establishing him otherwise he was also saying how insufficient everything else is, everyone else, every other ministry can't bring us to where he brings us. And so it shows the insufficiency of all alternatives.

Angels, you'll hear it here, won't you, there is what the Father says to the Son, does he say that to angels? No, no, he didn't. He said that to his Son, didn't he? And when he does talk about angels, he actually tells the angels to worship him, worship the Son. And the angels have their place and their office, we'll look at that in future weeks but it's not the same office, not the same supremacy as the Lord Jesus Christ.

And within it stern warnings about drifting away, but this is not just an, "Oh well, never mind," kind of thing, "Well, if you must be circumcised, okay." Paul is not okay, is he, as he writes to the Galatians. He remonstrates with them, "O foolish Galatians!" is a wake-up call. The writer to the Hebrews has some very strong wake-up calls, some of the most troubling passages to believers in the whole of the Bible here in Hebrews. Well, if we just

take a couple of those there, Hebrews 2:2-3, "For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him." And we could turn to Hebrews 5 and just reading verses, a few verses there in verse 11 when he's writing there, "Melchizedek, of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." Well, that is not flattering. That is not saying to them, "Well done." That is saying to them, "Where are you? How much you've listened and never grown, never learned." And he brings his perplexity and his worry to them as a way, again, to wake them up.

So this is what it's aiming to do, teaching us the danger of departing from Christ, showing us the insufficiency of every alternative. This book is remarkable. It anticipates so many things that are going to occur. It's as though, well, we say, don't we, the writer here wouldn't have foreseen Islam. He could not have predicted Islam. The Lord knew of its coming and there were things in this to answer Islam. The Son, about his nature, and that God does have a Son and that he instructs us to worship him. Of course, that's abhorrent to Muslims and who say there is one God [unintelligible], well, the Holy Spirit there they muddle up the Holy Spirit, don't they, and think we believe in Mary to be there because Mohammad had to deal with a pretty apostate church, he didn't see a true church, he saw an apostate church, thought, "Well, that must be it. I think they believe in Mary." And we can understand him concluding that. He runs into an average Roman Catholic Church today probably including that, and so he was off on a complete wild goose chase with that.

So this establishes biblical truth over and against Islam. Well, and the Jehovah's Witnesses as well. They have nowhere to hide, really, not in this book, no help to them whatsoever. Numerous verses there establish from chapter 1 the divinity of Christ and that is not something they hold. Or the Christadelphians, for instance, are no help either. Referred to it a couple of times already, the Roman Catholic Church. No, this book is absolutely destructive to the whole edifice of Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass, of its place in the whole scheme of salvation. This is no help whatsoever. Why, I'm listening to a man who is converted out of Roman Catholicism and it was, guess what, of thus out of Hebrews that was the trigger, that was what the Lord used to speak to him and set him off on that journey away from that and into truth, we might say.

So here we have high doctrine emerging as mistakes and the failures of others. More briefly, the second heading, background. Well, it's unclear. Could end it just there, really. That's the second heading. That's the end of the second heading. We're not absolutely sure on a number of things which we might like to be sure of and which the early church wished it was sure of because it was confusion for a while. Could this book belong in the Canon when we're not absolutely sure who wrote it or whom he wrote it, and such questions as that. Well, people that nailed their colors to the mast and said it was Paul, that nobody could have had such a background in Old Testament types and shadows,

could have drawn out Melchizedek and spoken of these kinds of illustrations. Oh, it must have been Paul. It very well might have been Paul, but there is within that, well, yes, we can say refers to Timothy there in chapter 13, verse 23. So, right, that's some familiarity with somebody that we know Paul knew and yet Paul doesn't mention his name and that might, one would have thought, to have been helpful in a way, that if it had have been Paul, that he would then have been able to refer to the whole body of other letters that he'd written, he'd experienced among the Gentiles, what God did there through his ministry, the kinds of things in Acts 15 that he reported while on his way to Jerusalem and when he had got to Jerusalem. He doesn't begin it as he begins his other letters. Hints, doesn't it, there at this great statement about the Lord Jesus Christ and Paul has great statements to make but he usually brings his letter in in a different kind of way to this. It's not Paul's kind of way.

And there's no biography. How, again, a man who himself had been the Pharisee of the Pharisees, who upheld the place of the high priest and was zealous for all the sacrifices, he could have referred to himself here and he does, of course, numerous times in other letters. Galatians, other places. Philippians, and how he had pushed aside all of those things because it was all about Christ. That was where his righteousness was to be found. But there's no reference in that way, no biographical reference to his past that could have come in and informed and perhaps added weight and authority to what he was saying to these particular people.

There is also, again these things are not conclusive and we must make up our own minds, but just in that verse we read in chapter 2, verse 3, "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him." This sense of having something confirmed to us, the writer includes himself in this sort of group of people who got a secondhand report. No, the apostle meant the Lord Jesus himself. He was out in the desert for three years learning, that he didn't go up to the apostles. He makes that very clear, doesn't he, in Galatians, that this actually substantiates what he's doing, "It wasn't men that taught me this. It's God. God showed me this and emphasized to me justification by faith. I didn't go and talk to Peter. It was years before I went up to talk to Peter."

And so in a sense it would be strange if it were Paul that he talks in those terms, but on these things you must make up your own mind, but clearly the early church, though it could not precisely account for the authorship, it's very satisfied that it was apostolic, that this was within the body of apostolic teaching, that it was amongst that company of the apostles or their immediate delegates, those they'd laid hands on and recognized as prophets. So we are on good ground to receive it as did the early church there in the main as good, proper, inspired doctrine.

We might say that it's obviously being written to people of a Jewish background or who were being encouraged into such a position, and though we cannot again be precise about location, quite likely it is Jerusalem. Quite likely it is to Jerusalem that this letter is written.

We can see some puzzling and intriguing references in chapter 13, verse 24, for instance, about, "Those from Italy greet you." We don't know where these people are. Is it in the church in Rome? Is it written from there to Jerusalem? Or there just happen to be some believers from Italy and some other church? Well, again, we don't know that for certain but it's interesting that the writer who has been detained and we might say therefore imprisoned, that that has been a recent experience, still is an experience, and so in chapter 13 again where we get so much of this sort of biographical little bits of detail he says, "But I especially urge you to do this," and that's to pray for us, "that I may be restored to you the sooner." So that would suggest that he's detained, imprisoned, held under some kind of restriction and that he might be restored to them the sooner. Well, likely that then ill health or something of that kind of nature. And we know also from it that Timothy himself has been in prison. Chapter 13 again, verse 23.

Well, there we are. It's as imprecise as that and maybe to your mind is unsatisfactory as that, but no matter there we have a letter, it's come through to us with plenty to say to us, and I'm going to hold back anything further to say on that. We'd better come to our next heading which is a grand opening statement. What a grand opening statement that chapter 1 is for here we could say it establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In a way, it ends all argument. In a way, it settles the matter right there and right then, that all the rest of the book is a further elaboration of what he has set out, well, basically in the first four verses of this first chapter. That encapsulates and brings to their attention a series of key doctrines about the Lord Jesus Christ that virtually end all arguments. Open and shut case. And he's going to prove his points with meticulous thoroughness, detailed application, painstakingly taking them through various detailed matters to point them again and again to this person who in the first four verses, whose dignity, glory, divinity he has established.

Well, we hold that for another day perhaps, another evening service. God willing, next week that will be, but let's come now to our closing hymn, or at least the closing part of this part of our service, 321, "God hath spoken by His prophets."