

April 26, 2015

King, Captain, Brother

Hebrews 2:1 – 18

Week by week we're looking at the book of Hebrews that was written to 1st century urban Christians who were experiencing a lot of trouble and fear and discouragement in their lives. In fact they're so discouraged they're on the point of giving this thing up altogether. And the writer responds to their fear and discouragement by infusing them with hope. And the main way he does that is to show them who Jesus is. The question they seem to be asking is: 'If God really loves us, why is life so hard?' And the writer answers this by pointing out that life is a journey through the wilderness and the only way we'll make it through is to keep our eyes on Jesus. And here in chapter two he says, 'In this wilderness, you need to have a revelation of Jesus as King, as Captain, and as Brother. You need to know Him as **the King who came to us**; as **the Captain who fights for us**; and as **the Brother who loves us**.

In the first chapter the writer paints this high and exalted picture of who Jesus is. He's better than the angels. He's the heir of all things; He created all things; He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature; He upholds the universe by the word of His power; and He is the reigning King on the throne. And then He says, *Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.* This second chapter of Hebrews begins with a warning, the first of 5 in this letter, reminding these Christians that unless we have this exalted view of Jesus, we will drift. Life is not a walk in the park; it is a journey through a howling wilderness, and unless we're following Jesus, unless we are paying closer attention to what we have heard, we'll drift off course.

But in chapter two, the writer shows us that Jesus is not just the great King enthroned in the heavens, content to let us find our way through this wilderness on our own. He's heard our cries and He's come down to us. From mid-April to mid-July, in 1994, in a period of 100 days, over 800,000 people were slaughtered in Rwanda and no one with the power to do so, lifted a hand to stop it. Western governments were leary of being involved in what they perceived were internal politics. Most of the killing instructions for the participants were transmitted over radio, and the head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda, UNAMIR, General Dallaire, early on sent a request to the UN asking them to jam the extremists hate radio transmissions. The UN turned to the US who was the only nation with the capability. The US in turn rejected the proposal as too expensive, and said that any act to silence radio broadcasts might violate Rwanda's sovereign right to control radio broadcasts within its border.

As the killings went on, some were pressuring outside governments and the UN to label this a genocide. But a U.S. Defence Department discussion paper warned the politicians, *"Be careful... a genocide finding could commit us to actually 'do something.'"* President Clinton, in a speech about American policy on humanitarian action, said: *"Whether we get involved [in Rwanda]... in the end must depend on the cumulative weight of the American interests at stake."* French President Francois Mitterrand said, *"In such countries, genocide is not too important."* The UN passed resolutions condemning the killings; the US and other countries issued strongly worded warnings; but no one stepped in to stop it. As UNAMIR departed from the country, Rwandans laid in the streets trying to block the UNAMIR trucks from leaving, while others threw their children into the trucks screaming, *"They are going to kill us if you leave! Don't abandon us!"* They cried out for help and no one answered.

But the writer of Hebrews tells us that the great King has heard our cries; He's answered. He gets involved – He comes down. He's not some Olympian god on a far-off throne who doesn't want to get his hands dirty. **He didn't just risk His life to save us, He gave His life to save us.** He didn't circulate position papers and pass resolutions or issue strongly worded warnings, He got involved. He came down. Look at how the writer puts it. Verse 9 says that He was made a little lower than the angels. He came down as one of us. Verse 11 says that He came into our family as a brother; and verse 14 says He took on flesh and blood. Verse 17 says that He became like us in every way. And verse 18 says that just like we are tempted – He was tempted. He came down. This is a King who suffers in our suffering, who weeps with our weeping, who knows our troubles. He's with us. **What you need when you're in trouble is not a directive from heaven, but the presence of heaven.** You need someone beside you, in the trenches, in the tough times, sharing your burden. The King comes down. But that's not all.

Look at the way the writer lays out the argument. Essentially he takes us through what God intended; how it went off the rails; and what God is doing to put it all right. Start at verse 5. From verse five through eight the writer quotes Psalm 8; and Psalm 8 looks back to God's original creation. *What is man, that You are mindful of him, or the son of man, that You care for him? 7 You made him for a little while lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, 8 putting everything in subjection under his feet. Now in putting everything in subjection to him, He left nothing outside his control.* In other words, the author is taking us back to God's original intent in creation. "What did you make us to be? What did you make man to be? What do you mean that You left nothing outside our control? What does that look like?"

What it means is that when God created the world He gave us the responsibility to care for it, to cultivate it, to oversee it as stewards. He gave us dominion. It became our responsibility to see that peace and harmony were kept; it was our responsibility to see that justice was done and prosperity flourished; it became our responsibility to see that resources were shared. Jesus hinted at this in Luke 12 where He is teaching and someone in the crowd calls out to Him, *'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me'*. Apparently there was a family squabble about the inheritance. But Jesus gives him this curious answer: *'Man, who appointed me judge over you?'* And what Jesus was saying was 'That's not my job – that's your job. That's why I crowned you with glory and honor. That's why I gave you the responsibility. To see justice done, to work for peace in the world, to see that resources are shared equitably, to see that others enjoy prosperity – that's your job. That's why I crowned you with glory and honor and put everything under your control.' In other words, that's what God intended.

But we know in Genesis, it all went off the rails. The end of verse eight says, *At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.* God put everything in subjection to man, but we don't see it happening today. Whoever wrote this letter is taking a page from Captain Obvious. We don't see universal peace in the world; we don't see universal justice in the world; we don't see prosperity happening across the board; we don't see resources being shared out equitably or being stewarded well. Because when we look back to Genesis three, we see that when man decided that he would be his own master and lord, he lost the power to exercise dominion over these responsibilities. War, poverty, injustice, environmental pollution, hoarding resources, disease – all these are evidence of a creation that has broken down, socially, politically, economically, morally and spiritually. Nothing works like it was supposed to work. The world is not under our feet. It is not subject to us. Rather we are in bondage to it.

And the biggest bondage of all is death. The writer takes pains to make the point in verse 15 that the biggest bondage we are under is the fear of death. He talks about *all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.* That's us. If you were here three Sundays ago we talked about how this universal fear of death drives us and motivates a lot of our behavior. Because mankind as a whole rejected God, death becomes the end of everything. And we run from that idea. Ernest Becker in his book, *The Denial of Death*, says that we, especially in the western world, embrace a culture of death denial. Although we know that is the end of all men, we invent ways to not think about it. We do it by creating or becoming part of something we feel will last forever; something eternal; something that will *never* die. In other words, we build pyramids, we create a legacy, we throw ourselves into stuff to make our lives mean something.

Why isn't there justice and prosperity and peace in the world? Why do we run after money and power and fame? Why do we need to build monuments to our accomplishments? Why are we stepping on each other? Why are we trampling on each other? Why are we exploiting each other? It is because we're desperately trying to convince ourselves we count, we matter, things we do make a difference. But they don't, they can't. Not if death is the end. We are in bondage to the fear of death, and we don't know it. That's the worst bondage of all. We don't even realize how enslaved we are, how distorted our thinking is.

We see what God intended. We've seen where it went off the rails. So what is God doing to put things right? Psalm eight tells us that we've been crowned with glory and honor and God put everything under our feet leaving nothing outside our control, and yet we don't see that. But, the writer says, *'We do see Jesus'. But 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, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.* The writer introduces Psalm 8 and he reads it through Jesus. *He* was made a little lower than the angels. *He* was crowned with glory and honor. How? Through His suffering and death. Not in spite of His suffering and death, but because of it. Through His suffering and death He redeemed the world to restore God's original intention. We don't see this being true of us, but it is true of Jesus – and through Jesus it *will* be true of us.

Look at verse ten: *For it was fitting that He, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the Founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.* First of all, what does the writer mean when he says God makes the founder of our salvation perfect through suffering? Are we to think that Jesus was not perfect? That He sinned in some respect so as to make Himself imperfect? The Bible does not allow us to even think about going there as it repeatedly claims that Jesus was without sin – perfect. In fact this book more than any other makes that point several times. But if you look at Hebrews 5:8-9 you'll see what the writer was getting at. Speaking of Jesus he says, *Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.*

Here, being made perfect means learning obedience through suffering. But don't think that this means that Jesus was disobedient and then became obedient. It means rather that Jesus moved from untested obedience through suffering into the realm of tested and proven obedience. You haven't really proven your obedience until it is tested. And the writer says here in chapter two that the way of suffering was fitting, it was proper, it was the right way for God to make the founder of salvation perfect. Why was that? In what way was that the right way to do it? It was fitting in that ***because Jesus is leading many sons to glory, He must succeed where we have failed.*** We have all suffered and failed to be perfected by it. Instead we murmur and complain and get angry at God, and we fail. Psalm 8 is not true of us. Without a champion, it will never be true of us. We need someone who will rescue us and lead us to glory. And so if Jesus is that one, it is fitting that He would be subjected to the same kind of suffering that comes our way and succeed where we have failed. And that's what He did.

You see, the writer here uses a curious term 'the founder of our salvation. Jesus is the '***archegos***', the founder, the author, the **captain**, of our salvation. It means He's the leader. William Lane in his commentary on this book argues that the word is really closer to our idea of champion. Jesus Christ is our champion – He's our captain. What is a champion? **A champion is someone who does representative combat for you.** I don't know if any of you have seen the movie Troy made back in 2004, but there is a scene in that movie that captures the essence of what a champion is. In the movie the forces of the Greek allies encounter the enemy armies of Thessaly and both sides are drawn up in battle array. Instead of fighting, the armies send out their respective champions – Achilles from the Greeks and a giant on steroids from the Thessalonians named Boagrius. Whoever wins this single combat determines victory or defeat for their respective armies. That's a champion.

A champion fights so you don't have to. A champion puts himself between you and the enemy and he faces death for you. And here the writer says that Jesus is our champion, our captain. He put Himself between our greatest foe, death and defeated it on our behalf. Verse 9 says that He suffered death and verse 14 says that through that suffering and death He destroyed the one who had the power of death, that is the devil. Jesus our Captain, faced off with death, entered the tomb and blew it wide open. As C.S. Lewis put it, ***A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside.***

You have to see Jesus as your Captain, your champion, the One who faced the enemy you dare not face on your own. It is only when you embrace this Captain; it is only when you embrace the fact that He rose from the grave on your behalf that you are suddenly freed from the lifelong bondage to the fear of death. In fact you don't even realize the degree to which you are enslaved to the fear of death until you embrace the resurrection of Jesus Christ and it begins to release you from fear. He went into death and blew a hole right through it so that He could *deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

We need to know Jesus as the King who comes to us; as the Captain who fights for us; and also as the Brother who loves us. The writer tells us in verses 11 – 13: *For He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why He is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, "I will tell of your name to My brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." And again, "I will put my trust in Him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has given me."* Here is one of the great truths of the Bible. It is also one of the most head-shaking truths. Look at the language – it's family language. The One who make us holy and we who are being made holy, the writer says, are all from one source, one Father. We're family. He's taken hostile, rebel sinners and made them His brothers and sisters. ***And He's not ashamed of us.*** I don't know about you, but if the situation were reversed, I don't think I could make that kind of claim. I mean, just looking at myself I cannot fathom how Jesus could not be ashamed of me. Kind of like the relative you never talk about?

You see, you have to understand something here about family as it was understood in Jesus' day. In our culture, when we want to recommend ourselves or promote ourselves, we come up with a resume. We list our accomplishments, we list our achievements, we itemize what makes me so individually special. We don't list our family, we don't put our brothers and sisters, or uncles and aunts on the list, unless perhaps there's a former president in the tree, but even that isn't such a big deal because we are so individualistic in our approach. Someone wants to know about us, we hand them a resume, a CV, curriculum vita. This is what I've accomplished. This is what I've achieved. This is who I am. But that's not how it was back then. In fact that's not how it is for a majority of cultures in the world.

Other cultures are more realistic about who you are and how you came to be. Other cultures realize that you are not so much a product of your own individual decisions and choices as you are a product of your family and they look at your family tree. They understand that to a great degree who you are is massively influenced by who your parents are. I remember my uncle, who gave me a little marital advice before I got married, once told me, 'Be sure you like your wife's mother because that's where its going'. In other words, large parts of who we are have to do with our family. That's one of the reasons why, in the ancient world, when you wanted to promote yourself, tell everyone who you were, you didn't hand anyone a resume. You gave them a genealogy.

However, there was the tendency in these ancient genealogies to leave out those family members who were weird, crazy, strange or otherwise socially unacceptable. Kind of like leaving out the bad bits in your resume. You didn't necessarily want others to know that crazy cousin Karl was in your family tree. You just didn't want to include those family members with whom you were ashamed to be associated. I remember when I was younger I found out that I was loosely related to Herman Goering, the Nazi Luftwaffe general. That was one of the bad bits I left out when I told others about my family. I really didn't want anyone to know. So how stunning is it to read in the book of Matthew, where he is revealing who Jesus is to his contemporaries, he's recommending Jesus, and he recounts His genealogy.

Look who he includes. Right at the top of the list we've got a guy whose impatience with God's timing still impacts us today with Jews and Arabs fighting it out. You've got an adulterous, murdering king; and his son whose hundreds of wives and concubines turn his heart away to worship idols; and then *his* son ends up losing half the the kingdom through his incompetance. And the list goes on. But the most amazing part of this genealogy is that it highlights five women. It is astonishing because women at that time did not have a very high status, and if you wanted to impress people you wouldn't include women. And you especially would not include the women Matthew included. You have Tamar, an incest survivor; you have Rahab, a prostitute, there is Ruth, a forbidden foreigner, and Bathsheba, an adulteress; and then there is Mary, Jesus' mother, an unwed single mother. By moral standards and the prejudice of the time, these were people of whom you would be ashamed. You wouldn't put them in your genealogy. You wouldn't put these people forward to recommend you. But Jesus gives them a place of honor in His genealogy.

Do you understand what that means? What it means is that it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter if you feel worthy or not. Your King has come down to you, your Captain has faced death for you, so that through His death, through His sacrifice, by believing in Him and what He has done on your behalf, you can be in His family. He will call you brother. The Bible says that He sings for joy over you, He's not ashamed to call you brother. He's not ashamed to call you sister. Your human genealogy doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what your parents say about you. It doesn't matter what the world says about you. It only matters what the King of the Universe says about you and He says, ***'I'm not ashamed to call you family'***.

As we journey through this wilderness we need to know Jesus as the High King who came down to us. This is a King who suffers in our suffering, who weeps with our weeping, who knows our troubles. He is there with us in our troubles. Heaven came down. He was rejected, He was despised. He took on flesh and blood and was tempted in every way like we are. This is a King who made Himself vulnerable to win us. He didn't just risk His life to save us, He gave His life to save us. We need to know Him as our Captain, our champion who put Himself between us and our enemy and He faced down death for us. Living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died He frees us from the fear of death to which we were held in bondage all our lives. And we need to know Him as our loving Brother. Through His death and resurrection He calls us into His family. He includes us in His genealogy because He's not ashamed to call us family

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

You are the great I AM, Maker of heaven and earth, indescribable, uncontainable, incomparable and unchangeable, and we thank You for every gift we have – life and breath, and this great salvation You have freely offered us. Don't let us drift. Don't let us coast. Don't let us be passive and indifferent. Let us see Jesus, our Brother, our Captain, our King. You are the Brother who loves us, the Captain who fights for us, the King who came down to us. Without You we cannot ever raise our eyes to heaven – but in You we see the face of God. Without You everything in our future is a wasteland and hell – but in You the glory that is heaven beckons. Help us deal with our fears and our discouragements and our present troubles by fixing our eyes on Jesus, by giving our lives to Him, and serving Him. Let the truth of who Jesus is cause our hearts to delight in God through Jesus Christ and spread His joy through the gosepl to all people we pray in the mighty name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.