

T. Austin-Sparks:

We are now going to concentrate upon one aspect of the great transition: the superiority of the heavenly Israel to the earthly.

The writer of this Letter, whoever he was, was giving himself wholly to the immense superiority of what had come in with this dispensation. It was as though he said to himself. 'The time has come for someone to let these people know how superior is that which has come in with this dispensation. This final movement of God in the history of this world is greater than anything before.' So that is what he set himself to show to the people of his day. But God meant it for more than that: He meant it for His people for all time.

No one knows who wrote this Letter. Many names have been mentioned. Some have been very certain about who it was, and then someone else has come along and upset that certainty. Some have been sure that Paul wrote it, while others have very nearly proved that he did not. Some have thought that Apollos wrote it, and others have said that it was Barnabas. Apollos, it was said, was a man "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 8:24), and it certainly did require such a man to write this document! Barnabas was a Levite, and he knew all about the Levitical system of the Old Testament, so he would be a good one to write the book. As for Paul, well, of course, he was the perfect master both of Judaism and of Christianity, and it needed a man like that to write this book. If Stephen had not been martyred I would have chosen him, because I think that in his last great discourse you have all the substance of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Well, we cannot say. Perhaps the Lord has never thought it to be very important to settle a human name upon it, but rather to make everything of "God... hath spoken."

We are touching very old and well-worn ground when we remind you of the place that the word 'better' has in this Letter. It occurs more often here than in all the rest of the New Testament put together.

(Here is a study for the beginners in Bible Study. Get out your box of coloured pencils, choose a colour that you think is suitable to 'better', and underline that word through this Letter.)

This word occurs thirteen times in the Letter and always in a very instructive connection. I will just mention the references:

Chapter 1:4 - "Better than the angels". (That is a high place at which to begin!)

Chapter 6:9 - "We are persuaded better things of you".

Chapter 7:19 - "A better hope".

Chapter 7:22 - "A better covenant".

Chapter 8:6 - "A better covenant" and "better promises".

Chapter 9:23 - "Better sacrifices".

Chapter 10:34 - "A better possession".

Chapter 11:16 - "A better country".

Chapter 11:35 - "A better resurrection".

Chapter 11:40 - "Some better thing".

Then, alongside of that, you can put:

Chapter 12:24 - "The blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel".

In chapter 1:4 and 8:6 there are the words "more excellent", and in chapter 1:4, chapter 3:3 and chapter 10:25 there is the phrase "by so much... more".

So that word is a key to the Letter. Everything here is better than it has ever been before. And we can come back with that to our own key words: "Holy brethren, companions of a heavenly calling" - called to something so much better than has ever been in the history of this world.

Let us remind ourselves of why this Letter was written.

In the first place, it was written to save these Christians from spiritual declension or spiritual arrest. For various reasons they were being tempted to draw back. You will remember that those words occur in a warning: "If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:38 - A.V.). It is a terrible thing to get into a place where the Lord has no pleasure in you, to lose the pleasure of the Lord! And it was to prevent these Christians from getting into such a position that this Letter was written.

Some of these Christians were inclined just to stand still and not go on any further, so that their spiritual life would be arrested and they would no longer go on and grow. They would become "stand-still" Christians - 'As it was, so it is now'. Nothing of the future was governing them. So this Letter was written to save them from going back or from standing still.

However, we have already pointed out that there was another reason: It was to carry these Christians through a time of great trouble which was coming. Evidently this Letter was written very shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem. Perhaps the writer already saw the signs of that, but, whether he did or not, the Holy Spirit saw what was coming. He knew that a time of great testing was coming to these Christians, when all that in which they had trusted on this earth was going to be shaken, so He led this writer to write this Letter. It was intended to be a strength to them and salvation in a time of trouble. And the method of so ministering help to them was to show again the greatness of the Lord Jesus, the greatness of the heavenly calling, and how great a thing it is to be companions of Christ and of the heavenly calling. So the writer sets out to bring into view the Lord Jesus in His superiority to all who had gone before. But in doing so, he does another thing, and this is a very interesting matter. He says: 'Down through the past ages there have been men who have had great difficulties, many discouragements and trials,' and he mentions Abraham.

Now Abraham had indeed a difficult life. There was the difficulty of the postponed promise - God's promises did not seem to be in the way of fulfilment. He was taking such a long time to fulfil His word. We all know something about that difficulty! We are in a hurry and God is not - He seems to have all time at His disposal. Our trouble is: 'Oh, if only the Lord would hurry up!', and I suppose our prayers are so often marked by one word: 'Lord, hasten it!'

If any man knew about having to be patient, it was Abraham! There was this difficulty of God taking so much time to fulfil His promises, and Abraham sometimes broke down under that. On one occasion he left the land of promise and went to Egypt - and there he found himself in still greater trouble. He had to tell a lie to get out of it.

This matter was a very real test to Abraham. I think there are signs that his wife was not always in sympathy with him. When they were both old and the Lord said that they would have a son, Sarah, who was in her tent, heard and "laughed within herself" (Genesis 18:12). The Lord was angry, and Abraham had to rebuke Sarah. Well, we must have full sympathy with Sarah. She was being hard put to it by the way the Lord was taking her husband and she was not always able to see as he saw, or feel as he felt. Perhaps, for that reason, Abraham had a certain measure of spiritual loneliness in his life.

Then what about that young man Lot? He was just a lot of trouble! He certainly did not share Abraham's vision! His vision was all on this earth, his ambitions all for the present, and you know well his story and what a thorn he was in the side of Abraham.

We could add other things to the painful story. Abraham's was not an easy life. But, do you know, the New Testament says that Abraham rejoiced! Why did he do so? Why did he rejoice in tribulation? Jesus Himself tells us the answer to that: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). In some way Abraham had seen the Lord Jesus, had seen the day of the Lord Jesus, and that had got him through all his troubles.

You know, there is more in this Letter to the Hebrews about what Abraham saw. He had seen in the spirit a heavenly country, and was looking for it. He had seen "the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Abraham had seen the day of Jesus Christ. You will remember that this writer said: 'Ye are come unto... the heavenly Jerusalem' (Hebrews 12:22). Abraham had seen that, and, having seen the Lord Jesus, he was able to go on and rejoice in a long life of trial.

What about Moses? Did he have any troubles? Well, we can make a long story about the troubles of Moses! He had to carry a very heavy burden, and there was a time when he nearly lost heart. He said to the Lord: "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me" (Numbers 11:14). Moses often had to go back to the Lord like that and say: 'You have asked me to do something which is more than I can do.' He had very many trials through forty long, weary years. But we have this word here: "He endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27). Who was the "him" that Moses was seeing? Notice what this Letter to the Hebrews says! When Moses was in Pharaoh's palace and saw his own brethren being persecuted, he decided that he was going to take sides with them, and this Letter says: "Choosing rather to be evil entreated with the people of God" - and now comes a wonderful thing - "accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:25, 26). The reproach of Christ! What did Moses know about Christ? Somehow he had

seen Him and seen that these Hebrew people were called in relation to Him, so "He endured, as seeing him who is invisible".

This is a point at which our minds have to get adjusted. Perhaps we have the idea that when Jesus came into this world, that was the beginning of Him, but the Word of God makes it perfectly clear that Jesus Christ was present in the days of Abraham and Moses. Indeed, the Word says that He was present in the creation of the world: "All things were made by him" (John 1:3). He was there all the time. He was the One who appeared again and again and they did not recognize Him. He appeared to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua, to Gideon... yes, this same Christ was there, active all the time. He did not just begin when He was born in Bethlehem. It was then that He came into this world in human form.

Do you think that is exaggerating? Well, let us come to our Letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus Christ... the same yesterday, and today, yea and for ever" (13:8). I have left out one little word - "Jesus Christ IS the same...": He IS yesterday, He IS today and He IS tomorrow. There is no yesterday, today or tomorrow with Jesus. Yesterday was the day of the old dispensation. When this writer wrote this Letter it was 'today' in which he lived, the new dispensation that had just begun. 'Today' is the period between Christ going back to heaven and His coming again. We have seen already how one phrase is quoted three times in this Letter, and it is brought over from yesterday to today: "Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Hebrews 3:7, 8). That is a message for this dispensation. 'Tomorrow' is forever, and it is going to be the same Jesus Christ.

So the writer of this Letter is saying: 'Jesus Christ was back there in yesterday. He was in the past dispensation. And it is the same Jesus Christ that we know today. And He will be the same Jesus Christ forever.'

Do you notice how many quotations from the Old Testament there are in the first chapter of this Letter? We cannot stay to look at them, but the Old Testament is used here a very great deal, and the quotations are concerning Christ, so that, in the first place, it is quite clear that He was in the Old Testament. He was being spoken about then and was present in the minds of Old Testament writers. There are quotations from David. Jesus Christ was very much in the mind of David. The words "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee" were first written by him (Psalm 2:7), and there is much more like that.

There are very many quotations from the Old Testament at the beginning of this Letter, which simply shows that Jesus Christ was present then. And that Jesus Christ is brought over from yesterday to today. This writer is just saying: 'That Jesus Christ of the prophets and the men of old is this One of whom I am writing today.' The first chapter of the Letter just takes up all that about Christ and brings it here into the present - and it is the same Jesus Christ.

We have hardly begun to see the superiority of this today over yesterday. We have only sought to do one thing, and that is what this writer set out to do: to show that to get through trouble and testing you need to have a large conception of the Lord Jesus. To get through to the end in victory will depend upon what kind of Christ our Christ is to us.

The writer realized that these Christians were finding the 'race' rather long and difficult, and their need was the most testing thing in spiritual life - patience. "Ye have need of patience", says the writer, "that, having done the will of God, ye may receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:36). Later he says: "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). What is the real strength of patience? Oh, it is so easy to say to people: 'Now, be patient. Don't be in a hurry. Things will turn out all right.' But this writer did not just say to these Christians: 'Now be patient!' He said: "Let us run with patience the race..." It will test our patience, will call for a lot of patience, but the thing that will keep our patience strong is this - "Looking off unto Jesus" (Hebrews 12:2). If we look at ourselves we will give up the race, and we shall do so if we look at other people. There are a lot of people who will make us give up the race. If we look around us on the world we shall lose patience. And so we like the true translation of this phrase. Some versions just have "Looking unto Jesus". Well, that is all right, but the real version is: "Looking off unto Jesus". You must take your eyes off yourself. You must positively refuse to look at yourself. You must train yourself in the habit of refusing to look at yourself. Every time you are tempted to do so you have to say: 'No! I shut my eyes to that.' You must not have your eyes on those Christians who are disappointing. You must remember that the very best Christians are only human, after all. It is a very dangerous thing to think of any man or woman as being infallible.

Perhaps Paul was very near to doing that once. You know, he owed a very great deal to Barnabas. It was Barnabas who went off to find Paul and brought him back. I think that when even some of the Apostles saw Saul of Tarsus come in through the door they drew back. They were all suspicious of this man and they drew

back from him. But Barnabas took him by the hand and brought him in, saying: 'Don't be afraid, brothers. He has met our Lord Jesus. He is now a companion of Jesus Christ. He is one with us.' And so they received him.

It was Barnabas who brought Paul to Antioch, a church that was in great need at that time. They needed a very strong minister, and off went Barnabas, saying: 'I know the man.' He brought Saul to Antioch and introduced him to his life ministry.

Paul owed a lot to Barnabas. of whom it was said: "He was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24). Perhaps Paul put Barnabas on a high pedestal! And then came that terrible day when Barnabas fell off that pedestal. You know of the division between the Jewish and Gentile Christians and that the new order of Christ demanded that they should be all one, eating and drinking together. Peter had learnt that lesson at the house of Cornelius, but then that day came when this whole question of Jews and Gentiles eating and drinking at the same table arose. It was a very strong dispute and a very critical day. James and some of the others from Jerusalem went down - and Peter withdrew from the table. He was afraid of James and of those others from Jerusalem! He said: 'I must not let these senior brothers see me eating with Gentiles.' And Paul says: "And the rest of the Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that even Barnabas was carried away with their dissimulation" (Galatians 2:13). 'Just think of it - Barnabas! I never thought Barnabas would do a thing like that! I thought he was far above anything of that sort.' I am sure it was a very great blow to Paul's confidence in men, but if he had continued to keep his eyes on Barnabas no one knows what would have happened. He had to look off from Barnabas to Jesus.

Paul was always having to do that. In many ways and situations he had to take his eyes off and look unto Jesus. There is a real touch of Paul in this Letter to the Hebrews - "Looking off unto Jesus". Whoever actually wrote this Letter, the shadow of Paul is over it. His influence is everywhere. And certainly he was called upon to look off unto Jesus.

Now that is a very vital lesson for us to learn. We have to do that again and again in our Christian life. If we get our eyes upon anything but the Lord Jesus we just go to pieces. Have all respect for God's saints. I am not saying that you have to eye every servant of God with suspicion and be saying all the time: 'Well, of course, he is not perfect, you know.' Give honour to whom honour is due, but never build your faith upon any man, however good he may be.

And as for ourselves - well, I think perhaps we are more tempted to look at ourselves than anything else! This is one of our real Christian exercises. We have continually to remove our eyes from ourselves and everything to do with ourselves. There is nothing more discouraging than this self of ours, and nothing more misleading. Our own judgments are all wrong, and so are our thoughts and ideas. They are not God's thoughts.

We must take our eyes off ourselves, but not look out into space and be vacant. "Look off unto Jesus", and you know how that sentence is finished - "Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith". Did you start this thing? Are you a Christian because you decided to be a Christian? Well, the Lord help you if that is so! No, He started this thing. Are you not glad that you can say: 'It was the Lord who found me. It was the Lord who put His hand on me.'? What He said is very true: "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). He was the author of our faith, and it says that He is the finisher - He will finish it.

When we get to heaven we will be full of wonder that we ever did get there! We will just look at one another and say: 'Well, we are here! It is a wonderful story! How we got here we do not know. We have thought a thousand times that we never would get here. We had given up all hope - but we are here!' And it will be because Jesus is the finisher. Believe that, dear friend! In the day of your despair and difficulty, look off unto Jesus. He has said: "Where I am, there shall also my servant be" (John 12:26). Though it takes a thousand miracles, He will work them to get us there. Do believe it! Take hold of it with both hands and trust Him to see you right through to glory, for that is one of the great things in this Letter: "Bringing many sons unto glory" (Hebrews 2:10). That means you and it means me.