

Dear Group Leaders and Hosts,

Welcome to week one of our Fall session of preaching and discipleship via our adult small group ministry. This year I will be preaching from Hebrews, trusting that its theme of the supremacy of Christ will broaden and deepen our appreciation and love for Jesus. Like all the epistles, our understanding of its audience and purpose is induced from the details given. Based on what the author has written, it is generally agreed that the book of Hebrews is written to a Christian community of Jewish origin (hence "Hebrews") who are facing persecution for their faith in Christ. The temptation they face is to abandon their Christian faith and revert back to Judaism, which was a protected religion in the Roman Empire. The author of Hebrews seeks to convince his readers to stay true to Jesus, even in the face of persecution, by passionately displaying the superiority of Christ over the Law of Moses.

I began on Sunday by showing a clip from the Christ Institutes (Christnow.com) in which the presenter, David Bryant, mentions that we don't know how much our heart longs for a richer relationship with Christ until we know more of Christ. Christ is central to our lives but his supremacy speaks to us about our lives being centered in his life, living for his life and purposes. We are not using the Christ Institutes directly but I highly recommend them as supplementary material. You can watch the ChristNow videos at your own pace and leisure.

This supremacy of Christ is the essence of the book of Hebrews, calling the readers to abandon self-interest (avoid persecution) and to hang on to Christ at any cost. And so the epistle begins with a bang and a sense of urgency. There is no time for formalities, the author does not introduce himself as is typical, but launches into an opening paragraph that extols Christ over the Hebrew prophets.

In verse 1 we are told that "in the past God had spoken to our ancestors (the Israelites) through the prophets (enforcers of Mosaic covenant) at many times and in various ways (during Israel's history) but in these last days he has spoken by his Son". That Jesus is God's ultimate word is then confirmed by seven amazing descriptive statements: (1) God has appointed Christ heir of all things, (2) through Christ God made the universe (ages), (3) the Son is the radiance of God's glory, (4) the Son is the exact representation of God's being, (5) Christ sustains all things by his powerful word, (6) Christ provides purification for sins, and (7) Christ sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (God).

These seven descriptions are a remarkable testimony of Christ and in them we see a big picture of who Christ is and how God speaks through him. I briefly explained each of the seven statements and then asked what God spoke through these descriptions of Christ. For example, #1 speaks of Jesus as heir of all things. This most likely reflects Psalm 2:8, "Ask me, and I will make the nations our inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." What does God speak through Jesus by this? To me it speaks of God's sovereignty over the nations, of his care and inclusion of the nations, of his justice in all the nations, etc. that are or will be accomplished through Christ.

My goal in considering the seven descriptions was to help us consider Christ in new and broader ways. We readily hear God speak forgiveness to us through Christ (#6) but do we also hear of Christ's role in bringing justice now to all the nations? How often do we pray for the name of God to be hallowed and for his kingdom to come and will to be done over the nations?

So I would recommend reviewing and discussion the seven statements, considering both what is meant and what God speaks through Christ by them. How is your understanding of Christ deepened or widened? How might this impact your prayers, actions, thoughts, conversations?

I will conclude by recommending the same format we used last year. This Encounter-Engage-Extend approach helps us stay focused on Christ ministering through us as we follow Him. All the discussion above about the passage fits into the "engage" section. I always begin with the encounter questions before moving on to engaging the text/sermon. If your group has more than three people you would do well to begin with groups of three discussing the "encounter" section so that everyone has a chance to talk and share would God is doing in and through their lives. If your group is more than 3 you will not have enough time.

blessings,
P Dan

Encounter Questions: Connecting with each other and directing our attention toward God's presence with us:

1. What are you thankful for this week? Has God "shown up"?
2. Were there any lessons from last week that you applied or shared with someone else?
3. How did you serve/bless someone this past week?

Engage Questions: Stay focused on the passage at hand.

1. What does the passage say? Repeat it in your own words.
2. What does the passage mean? What does it teach us about God (Father, Son, or Spirit), ourselves/humanity, or God's Kingdom?
3. What is your best response to what God is speaking?

Extend Questions: Consider the lives of those around you. How might you extend God's Kingdom to them? What do they need? How is God leading or prompting you?

1. For whom outside the group are you praying for?
2. With whom might you share what you are learning?
3. How might you/we serve/bless someone this week?