

“A Little While Lower”

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1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.³He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. ...

2 Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. ²For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, ³how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, ⁴while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

⁵Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels.⁶But someone has testified somewhere, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? ⁷You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, ⁸subjecting all things under their feet.” Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.
(Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:1-9)

When I was in seminary and the girls were very young, we loaded up the car and headed down I-64 to Williamsburg for a day at “Water Country USA.” Most of the attractions were slick, fast, and modern, but one of them was old school – like something that would have been popular on Coney Island in the early 1900’s. It was a diving show that was staged a few times each day. The audience gathered around a small pool, which sat at the bottom of a huge diving tower with multiple platforms. The first and lowest level was the biggest of the platforms. It had two diving boards comparable to the high dives you’d find at a neighborhood pool. Above that, suspended about 30-40 feet above the pool, was a smaller platform just big enough for two or three people to stand on at any one time. And then, at the very top of the tower, was a platform barely big enough for one person. In the grand finale of the performance, a single diver would climb the frighteningly narrow ladder up 75 feet to the tip top and do a spectacular, flipping swan dive into the little pool below. The death defying feat easily stole the show every time.

The first words of the book of Hebrews set a stage not dissimilar to this aquatics show that I still remember today. There are levels in the kingdom of God. The lowest and biggest platform is occupied by human beings, but that does not imply that we are unimportant in the pageant God has created. Hebrews clearly quotes Psalm 8, which marvels at the fact that God has elevated us mortals to such prominence and importance in the cosmos. Who are we that God would even pay attention to us, the psalmist asks? And yet we have been crowned with glory and honor and given dominion over the world.



Within the hierarchy of creation, God has “put all things under [our] feet.” We have special status and featured roles in the show.

However, we are not as high as the angels. We are lower than them, which is something that the entirety of the Bible makes very clear. One morning about ten years ago, when I was doing some research for a sermon in the church library of First Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, NC, I came across a little book on angels. The text of that book was not very helpful, but there was something in there that was. When I opened the book, a small, fragile piece of parchment dropped out of its pages. The typewriter font suggested that, whoever had left this little message in a bottle must have done so many years before. The title at the top read simply, “An Authentic Record of Angel Activities,” and the rest of the page was filled with a list of things that angels do. For each angelic activity, at least one biblical example was given. In support of this idea that we humans are lower than the angels, I give you an authentic list of angel activity in the Bible and in the kingdom of God:

*Angels announce... Angels warn... Angels praise God... Angels fly...
Angels ascend and descend... Angels guard... Angels liberate...
Angels comfort... Angels heal... Angels proclaim and speak the truth...
Angels find the lost... Angels minister to Christ... Angels minister to people...
Angels give directions... Angels save from death...
Angels fight our battles... Angels stir up the waters...
Angels worship at God's throne.*

No wonder their platform is smaller than ours. It is too lofty for mere mortals – it is so high we cannot attain it.

But at the very highest level, on the platform that not even the angels can reach, is the lofty place taken by Jesus. He, Hebrews proclaims, is "*much superior to angels,*" and his name "*is more excellent than theirs.*" For a little while, Jesus came down from the heights. He even went so far as to take the same dive as we do, the mortal dive down into suffering, pain, humiliation, and death that marks the human condition. That swan dive from the heights of divinity down into the pool of mortality was and is the grand finale of the pageant of creation, but the show did not end there. Though that fall made Christ taste death with all of humanity, he was then drawn up out of that pit and re-elevated, fully restored and glorified by God and angels as the "*heir of all things,*" the vessel through which the world was created, "*the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being,*" the one who sustains "*all things by his powerful word.*" Christ alone still stands on the highest platform, a place where no one else can stand.

Hebrews focuses on these three levels so that there is no question about where we all stand. But there is another dimension at play in these opening words of Hebrews that we should not miss. Jesus easily stands at the pinnacle of creation in terms of the height, breadth, and length of his glory, but there is also a hint of what some have called the fourth dimension, and that is *time*. Jesus was made lower than the angels, but just "*for a little while.*" We, too, are lower than the angels, but just "*for a little while.*" The idea is that, where we stand on the ladder depends a lot on what time it is.

This reminds me of the story of another ladder, which also happens to be one of the most memorable angel stories in the Bible. Jacob the trickster has fooled his brother Esau, conning him out of his birthright. He has deceived his father Isaac, stealing a blessing that was not his to receive. Jacob is on the run from Esau, who has vowed to kill his deceitful brother on sight. Lonely and afraid, with only a rock for a pillow, Jacob falls into an uneasy

sleep and has a powerful dream. He sees a glorious ladder leading up to heaven, with angels of God ascending and descending it. Then the voice of the Lord assured him to hold on – that God would form his descendants into a mighty nation, and that God would be with him always. Jacob must have felt like he was like the angels he saw in the vision, with all the ups and downs his life was taking. Ever ascending and descending... falling down and being lifted back up.

Years later, as Jacob made his way back to Canaan, another angel found him on the banks of the Jabbock River. Jacob was now a married man, and a very rich man, but he still wondered whether his brother Esau wanted him dead. As he sat alone in the darkness with these feeling of fear and uncertainty, an angel jumped him from behind. The two wrestle until daybreak. Jacob held his own, until the angel finally put his hand on Jacob's hip and threw it out of joint. "Let me go," the angel said, "for the day is breaking."

But Jacob held on with tenacity, even in his pain. "I will not let you go," Jacob replied, "unless you bless me." Jacob received his blessing, entered the Promised Land, and the rest is biblical history.

Up and down. Ascending and descending. There were ascents and descents throughout Jacob's life. It depended on the moment whether Jacob was falling down or being lifted. His life was a journey up and down the ladder of life, ebbing and flowing to the beat of heaven's timing. But whenever Jacob fell, he was only down for a little while.

We cannot miss this important aspect of what the book of Hebrews is trying to say. Yes, there is a message about the heights of authority, the breadth of influence, and the width of glory. Christ is on the top platform of the ladder, we humans are on a lower one, and the angels are ascending and descending somewhere in the middle. But the message that the low times are temporary, that trials and tribulations only last a little while, is a key dimension of the story Hebrews has to tell. I think that aspect of the message is vital to us today, and I'll tell you why.

There is scholarly debate over who wrote the book of Hebrews, when it was written, and to whom it was written. But a few things are fairly apparent. First, the book was meant to speak to Jewish Christians, those with a strong foundation in Judaism who had become followers of Jesus. But perhaps more significantly, those Christians were tired. As my former professor Frances Taylor Gench has written, these people "have grown weary in the Christian way and... are in danger of abandoning their Christian vocation."¹ We know this because of some of the language used in the letter:

- "[W]e must pay greater attention to what we have heard," the preacher writes, "so that we do not **drift away** from it."²
- "Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that **turns away** from the living God."³
- Some of us who have been enlightened by the Christian message, who "have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit," for one reason or another have since "**fallen away**."

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. 3.

² Hebrews 2:1.

³ Hebrews 3:12.

The writer of this letter is reaching out to Christians who have lost their zeal and enthusiasm for the faith. They are drifting away, turning away, falling away, but this writer wants them to hold on... to not let go... to follow the example of Jacob and refuse to give up until they got the final blessing that would lift them up. *“Let us hold fast,”* he writes. *“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”*⁴

This painful reality is just as critical in the church of today as it seems to have been in this late first century community. There are so many people who have grown up in the faith who are drifting away, turning away, falling away. And the pandemic seems to have accelerated a trend that was already painfully obvious. For years, we in the church have posited all kinds of explanations for why engagement in the church continues to lag and wane, and in the next breath voiced hopeful predictions of great reversals. “The young people will come back when they get married,” we tell ourselves. And later, “they’ll come back when they have kids.” Today, some people who study church dynamics are now daring to name the thing that must not be named: the idea that these people who have drifted away are just not going to come back.⁵

That is why Hebrews is such a crucial message for us today. Is this not just the time when we need to be reminded that all of this is in the hands of the one, the only one, who can make it up to the highest reaches of the ladder... the only one who can make that swan dive into death and still be lifted up? Is this not the time for us to hear that, even when we feel knocked down... even as we worry about where everyone is, and who is actually going to come back... that we might be down, but that will just be for a little while.

As I mentioned earlier, most of the attractions at Water Country USA were slick, fast, and modern. Those rides had long lines. People flocked to them. But in the very center of the park there was one attraction that was old school, one that hadn’t changed much over the years, but still found a way to bring the people in. Yes, there were plenty of open seats at the diving show. But today, that is the one that I remember the best, the one with faithful people ascending and descending, that ended with one solitary star who was willing to climb the greatest height, risk life and limb to plummet down to us, and emerge unscathed, much to the delight of the gathered crowd.

In good and bad... in sickness and in health... whether we are ascending or descending, falling down or being lifted up... with the Hebrews of old and the Christians of now... *“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁴ Hebrews 10:23.

⁵ Rob Dyer, “They Aren’t Coming Back,” https://ministryarchitects.com/theyre-not-coming-back/?fbclid=IwAR2CuAj_ETaaM6BOFhVY4w6tUG36lbNTU2lmTa2XGanrP-eNrCderg53sJg