

Christ and the Valley of Elah – Hebrews 2

1. On the front of our building is the name: Fourth Avenue Church of Christ and that is how we are known to many of our neighbors. That name was chosen long ago to indicate that we are open to all believers. Only later did it become a brand name and a rather narrow one at that. We have been invited to change our name but we have, so far, chosen to redeem it instead. Because...
2. It is all about Christ. It all about the Jesus stories. And as we walk through Hebrews this summer, we will see that message pounded home again and again and again. Our salvation is all hung upon Jesus. To illustrate this, allow me to go back to a very old story.
3. In First Samuel 17, the Philistines have gathered their men for war. The Israelites responded by gathering their men and camped on a hill opposite of the Philistines with the Valley of Elah between them. Wars were not fought by standing armies in those days and there was no sense wasting lives with indiscriminate butchery, so it was common for a champion or a set of champions to enter the area between armies and offer a proxy fight: whichever side was represented by the victorious champions would win the battle/war (though some violated this and were roundly considered evil).
4. Goliath entered the Valley of Elah and challenged the Israelites to send out a champion to meet him. He mocked them, as none was sent. In fact, the scripture says that the Israelite king, Saul, and all his men were terrified of this giant man. The oldest manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls say he was 6ft 9in but the later manuscripts pump him up to be 9ft 9. Either way, he was big, muscular, and fit enough to carry about a spear whose head weighed 15lbs.
5. Israel needed a champion. When we read this as David being the champion, we miss the point. David would have disagreed with that assessment. He said this: [1st Samuel 17:45-47] God is the champion.
6. In Hebrews 2, we see several takes on why Jesus is our champion and how he became our champion. You see, there is a giant in the valley who is calling us and mocking us: death. We fear dying, we

fear death, and we fear the weakness of age, the passing of our glory, the slide from our peak. Time and death sit there, mocking us. And we are afraid.

7. The first verses of chapter 2 really need chapter 1:14 added to them. They consist of a warning to the Biblically literate Jews: you remember our God and how He treats those who refuse to follow Him or do what He commands. [2:1-3]
8. Four times in the rest of this chapter, we take a look at how and why Jesus is our champion and each of those “takes” end at the cross. He is our champion and he proved it by the cross.
9. [Hebrews 2:5-9] Here is the first take. The writer of Psalm 8 looked at the stars one night and asked what his place was in this vast universe. “What is man that Thou art mindful of him?” Here comes the answer: we are the ones God has placed in charge of the universe. We are to care for it and “dress” the garden well. All of us – male and female – were destined and created to be monarchs of the universe for nothing was left out of what God put under our feet.
10. Some part of us knows this. So we go for world records. We climb. We run. We work. We create all so that we will MEAN something, so that we can defeat something.
11. But we failed. Our authority was a derived authority: someone else gave us our authority, our task. We were made a little lower than the angels so that we could learn our place, our duty but we have allowed ourselves to forget our tasks (love one another, love your enemy, go into all the world...) and, as Hebrews 2:8 sadly says, not everything is yet under God’s feet or ours. So Jesus joins us, being made “lower than angels” for a time. He entered the Valley of Elah for us and slew our fears by facing death and coming back, proving eternal life is real, present, and ours. Jesus is the remover of all fears, the warrior who, as our champion, fought our battle for us and won.
12. Jesus is quite an unexpected champion. The writer of Revelation points this out in graphic, stark images: [Revelation 5:2-6a] It is after this that worship breaks out in heaven.

13. We disagree with Shakespeare's Hamlet when he says "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot. Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." We answer [Colossians 1:27] Our champion lives in us. We can enter the Valley of Elah without fear.
14. [Hebrews 2:10-13] Jesus also came to bring us unity. Remember the sermon where I demonstrated our genius for division? Jesus has a genius for unity. He has brought us here by adoption (one adopted sibling: they had to have you, they chose me).
15. [Hebrews 2:14-15] He came to remove us from our current slavery. The devil used death and time against us. Jesus removed those shackles. Death is not a thing; it is the absence of something – life and, by "life", we include strength, vitality, and fearlessness. "Death" means separation and that is over now. Any separation is temporary, a vapor compared to what life now lives in us.
16. Death is the driver of our sins, for it creates a lack of faith and a panic to gain, do, and have now...as we are not certain of later. Jesus is proof of later.
17. [Hebrews 2:16-18] Jesus can restore us in times of failure because he is merciful and faithful. He "gets" it. He understands. He does not forgive rebelliousness or prideful sin, but he is always ready to forgive when someone admits their brokenness (paralyzed man, thief on the cross, the crucifiers).

We can relax and be confident in our journey for we believe:

[Psalms 91:1-2]