

Hebrews 3:1-6
“Christ’s Superiority to Moses”

Introduction:

This passage functions as a transition, shifting the focus from the identity of Christ, our Divine human high priest, to the people of God and their need to display unwavering faith in order to enter the “*rest*” that God has set before them (meant to picture the ultimate state of salvation). Additionally, in this paragraph the author used a number of linguistic and conceptual parallels to what was written in the previous two chapters. These parallels were then used to support the author’s exhortation that his readers needed to fix their attention on Jesus. The parallels between this passage and the previous two chapters are best recognized when they are set side by side:

This paragraph (3:1-6)	Chapters 1-2
Brethren (vs.1)	Brethren (2:11-12)
“ <i>holy</i> ” brethren (v.1)	Whom God makes holy (2:11-12)
Partakers (vs.1)	Companions (same Greek word) (1:9)
Jesus as “ <i>apostle</i> ” (vs.1)	Jesus as “ <i>captain of salvation</i> ” (2:10)
Jesus as “ <i>high priest</i> ” (vs.1)	Jesus as “ <i>high priest</i> ” (2:17)
Jesus as “ <i>faithful</i> ” (vs.2, 6)	Jesus as “ <i>faithful</i> ” (2:17)
Use of personal name “ <i>Jesus</i> ” (vs.1)	Use of personal name “ <i>Jesus</i> ” (2:9)
Jesus, worthy of glory and honor (vs.3)	Jesus crowned w/ glory and honor (2:9)
Things spoken by God (vs.5)	Things spoken by God in the Son (1:2)
The superiority of the Son (vs.6)	The superiority of the Son (1:3-14)

In the previous chapters the author showed that Jesus was superior to angels. In this passage the author made the point that Jesus was also superior to Moses. Comparing Jesus to Moses immediately after comparing Him to angels was the logical thing to do because both the angels and Moses were involved in bringing God’s foundational revelation of the Law at Sinai, the angels functioning as God’s mediators in that revelation, while Moses served as God’s central spokesman who taught the people God’s Law. In Jewish tradition, Moses was also thought to be exalted above all others, including angels. Therefore, given the author’s overall intention in this letter, it was imperative that he demonstrate Christ’s superiority to Moses.

I. Christ, Faithful as Moses: (vs.1-2)

The author starts off this portion of the letter with the following words, “*Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling*”. The writer began by reminding his readers about the significant identity that was theirs because they were in Christ. The conjunction “*therefore*” reminds the reader that the following exhortation that the author will give in this verse was based on the theological truths that were presented in the previous two chapters. In particular, the latter portion of chapter two had been about the redemptive work of Christ. Thus,

especially in light of Christ's redemptive work, the recipients of this letter were to recognize that they were holy, they were brothers and sisters in God's family, and they were partakers of a heavenly calling.

The author reminds his readers that they had been made "*holy*", in that they had been cleansed of their sin through Jesus' propitiatory sacrifice (2:17); and thus, their lives had been consecrated to the service of God. They were "*brothers*", not only with one another but with the originator of their salvation (2:11-12), who was not ashamed to be associated with them as members of His family. Finally, they were also "*partakers of the heavenly calling*". The Greek word translated as "*partakers*" denotes either an ordinary companion or a legal associate. The word indicates some sort of alliance or mutual participation. In this context the idea is that believers are involved in an intimate relationship with one another in which they share a common spiritual identity. Part of that identity is that they all had received a "*heavenly*" calling. The adjective "*heavenly*" was used a number of times by the author in this letter (6:4; 8:5; 9:23; 11:16; 12:22). In each case, what is "*heavenly*" is contrasted with what is earthly. The idea being that what is heavenly is ultimately superior in that it represents what is real in comparison to the shadow found on earth that is only temporary. The heavenly calling refers to how all believers have been summoned from heaven to join God in eternal fellowship through Jesus Christ. That this calling has its origin in heaven indicates that the initiative in the relationship came from God. In addressing his readers this way, the author of the letter reminded them of the dignity with which God had invested them, and thus in light of this dignity it would be insulting to God for them to treat their privileged position lightly.

The writer then sought to turn his readers attention to their Savior; writing "*consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus*" (vs.1b). The Greek word translated as "*consider*" means to discover something through direct observation, with the implication of also thinking about it; and thus, to give proper and decisive thought about something, and come to a clear and definite understanding about it so as to perceive it clearly. This consideration means that one correctly sees the significance of a given thing. Therefore, the author was exhorting his readers to keep their attention continually fixed on Jesus. A major reason behind the spiritual weakness, backsliding, ineffectiveness, confusion, and gullibility of Christians is the lack of a real consideration of and focus upon all that Christ is and all that He has accomplished for those who believe.

The first title associated with the Savior that we are to consider is that He was an "*apostle*". An apostle is an officially designated representative that is sent out to speak on behalf of the one who sent him. Therefore, as the twelve disciples were apostles of Christ and spoke on His behalf, Christ was an apostle of God and spoke on the Father's behalf to mankind (Jn.17:18).

The second title the author wanted his readers to focus upon was related to Christ's role as God's High Priest. From an Old Testament perspective, which these Jewish Christians certainly had, the High Priest was the ultimate representative of the people of God who made atonement for their sins once a year in order to

maintain their fellowship with God. Therefore, through this title, Christ was set before the readers as God's exalted High Priest who fulfills this role in the heavens for the people of God, the One who actually secures the believer's acceptance with God.

The third thought is that these two titles relate to the believer's "*confession*". The Greek word translated as "*confession*" literally refers to saying the same thing as someone else, and thus can convey agreement, acknowledgement or acceptance of something as being true or real; it can also mean to recognize that something is valid. The idea here is that Christ, as apostle and high priest, is the very substance of what the Christian believes and affirms. If Christ did not serve God in these two roles, there would be no salvation for sinful men and women.

The author of the letter then went on to note that Christ "*was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house*" (vs.2). This verse should be understood to connect with verse one, in that it should be read "*Consider Jesus...being faithful to the One who appointed Him*". Taken in this way, the readers are urged to fix their gaze on the person of Christ who is even now faithful to God. In writing that Christ "*was faithful*" it is helpful to understand that this is a translation of a present tense participle and thus it intimates that the work God appointed the Son to do, did not terminate when His earthly task was complete, but continues in heaven after His ascension right up to the present. Also, the Greek participle translated as "*appointed*" can literally be translated as "*made*". This is important because heretics early in Church history used the word to argue that Christ was created in time and thus was not God. However, this word can also refer to an action that one undertakes or a state that one brings about; and thus here (as the English translation indicates) the participle applies to the installation of Christ to the offices of apostle and high priest. In support of this translation is the fact that this Greek word is used precisely in this sense elsewhere in the NT (Mark 3:14; Acts 2:36), and also in the Septuagint translation of the OT (I Sam.12:6).

In the latter half of the verse the author compares Jesus' faithfulness to that of Moses (*as Moses also was faithful*). This is best understood as a parenthetical observation that emphasizes just how faithful Jesus was, by comparing Him to the one who was the epitome of faithfulness (from a Jewish perspective). The words "*was faithful in all His house*" are a quotation of Numbers 12:7. This was a quote of what God said to Aaron and Miriam when they suggested that there was nothing unique about Moses, implying that God spoken equally through them. The response indicated that Moses was God's foundational channel of revelation to His people, thus attesting to the fact that Moses indeed served in a unique role, and did so faithfully. In this verse we are told that the sphere of Moses' faithfulness was "*His house*". The English translation capitalizes the pronoun to indicate that the house was God's (something that was not done in ancient Hebrew but is a reasonable choice and clearly reflects the intent of what God was saying here). The question is what is this "*house*"? Based upon the context of Numbers 12 (which relates a conversation that God has with Aaron and Miriam at the Tabernacle) one must conclude that the "*house*" that God was referring to here, was the Tabernacle.

II. Christ, Worthy of More Glory than Moses: (vs.3-6)

As the author continued, he wrote that *“For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house”* (vs.3). At this point the author begins to make a contrast between Christ and Moses, in order to demonstrate Christ’s superiority to him. Christ is said to be worthy of more honor than Moses in the same way that one who builds a house has more honor than the house that is built. Once again, it becomes a question of what the writer has in mind when he employs the word *“house”*? In answering that, it is best to observe what the writer wrote about that house in the following verse:

“For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God”

Some interpreters have suggested that in light of the reference to God making all things, we should understand that *“the house”* in this case is the entire created universe. However, there is really nothing of substance to support that view. In light of the heavy infusion of OT quotes and allusions throughout the Book of Hebrews it is much more likely that the author here was making an allusion to Zechariah 6:12 where the one called *“the Branch”* is said to have built Yahweh’s Temple. The Branch in that context referred to Zerubbabel and Joshua who together represented the kingly and priestly roles that belong ultimately to the Messiah. This means then that when the author of Hebrews used the term *“house”* again in verses three and four, he was referring to the dwelling place of God, just as he had in verse two. However, with this allusion is the added thought that the place of God’s dwelling had evolved through the progress of revelation. At this point it was no longer a physical tent, the dwelling place of God under the New Covenant, is within the people of God (keeping in mind that the word translated as *“house”* could refer to either the people who lived in a home, or to the structure itself). The reference to the maker of all things being God, is a return to an earlier important truth that the author had focused upon. For though the author has been making the point that the Son became human and thus is a brother to the people of God; this does not alter the reality that Christ is also more than a human being. Chapter one clarified that the Son is God. The context is about a comparison between Christ and Moses, therefore, the builder who is God (vs.4), is Christ, not the Father. This is consistent with how the author has already emphasized that Christ is Divine in chapter one (vs.8), and the author had identified Christ as the one through whom God created everything (1:10-12), and as the one God used to accomplish the salvation of His people (2:10, 17), making it clear that Christ was the builder of the house. The Greek word translated as *“built”* means to furnish, prepare, make ready; or construct (with the included ideas of adorning and equipping something with everything necessary). The form of the contrast in itself, is basically a proverbial truism. It expresses the obvious truth, that a builder is deserving of more honor than what he builds.

In verse five, the author wrote *“Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward.”* Moses’ fidelity consisted in erecting the tabernacle according to God’s instructions and

acting as God's spokesperson to instruct the people of Israel about proper worship and conduct before the true God. The Greek word translated as "*servant*" refers to personal service that is freely rendered. It denotes both the willingness of the service that is rendered as well as the relationship between the one serving and the one being served; it emphasizes an honorable and dignified office. Therefore, there is emphasis upon Moses' special relationship with God and distinct ministry from others; he was a servant in a very exalted sense. Therefore, the author was being careful not to criticize Moses, but was simply pointing out the exalted uniqueness of Christ even in comparison to one of Israel's greatest saints.

Next, the author focused on one specific aspect of Moses' role as God's servant. That role related to being "*a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward*". Many interpreters believe that this refers to the typological meaning of the articles of the Tabernacle, and the sacrificial system that anticipated the coming of Christ. Others have suggested that Moses was functioning as God's prophet, and therefore what is meant is that he was a prototype of Jesus, the great prophet that was to come (Deut.18:15-18). Although there is merit to these ideas, neither flows clearly from this context in Hebrews, or from the passages that the author specifically alludes to or quotes. The best idea is that, in anticipation of the extended quote about to be made (in verses seven through eleven), the writer was referring to how Moses faithfully told the Israelites what would befall them in light of their disobedience to God.

The author made two additional distinctions between Moses and Christ that can be seen more clearly if one reads the first half of verse six immediately after the first half of verse five:

*"And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant,...
but Christ as a Son over His own house"*

Moses was faithful as a "*servant*" who was among (using the preposition "*in*") the people of God; Christ was faithful as the "*Son*" (one adopted to a place of inheritance and authority), who was "*over*" the people of God. The author was seeking to maintain a delicate balance; demonstrating Christ's superiority and yet in no way denigrating Moses. The way he did this was by emphasizing in these verses that Moses was as faithful as any servant could possibly be. Therefore, making it clear that the superiority of Christ did not imply that Moses had somehow failed in his service to God. Then, as the author went on, he added that Christ was superior to Moses in the same way a Son and heir was superior to a servant. Moses was a part of God's family; Christ was the One who had authority over the entire family.

In the last clause of verse six we read, "*whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end*". This last clause contains an affirmation and an implied warning. The affirmation is that believers are those who make up the household of God. The author stated this because it was important to stress repeatedly, that what these Hebrew Christians were contemplating leaving behind was something precious. The implied warning is introduced with the conjunction "*if*". Many interpreters argue that this word does

not indicate that what follows is a conditional statement. However, to say that is to ignore Greek grammar. It is clear from the wording chosen by the author that he composed a third-class conditional sentence. This type of grammatical construction expresses the idea that a particular outcome (in this case that we are a part of God's household) is contingent on a condition (in this case "*if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope*"), and finally, that it is uncertain whether or not this condition will be met. At the heart of the condition is the Greek verb translated as "*hold fast*". In this context, this Greek verb means to hold tight to something, and thus to seek to retain it and not lose one's grip on it or let it slip away. The first thing that the faithful are to hold fast is "*confidence*". The word is used several times in this letter, and it refers to having an assurance that one has been accepted by God because of the work of Christ. The confidence is not rooted in one's own personal righteousness, but in the integrity of God's promise and the certainty that Christ's atonement is sufficient in God's eyes to pay for our sins. The second thing that the faithful are to cling to is best translated as "*the hope in which we boast*". The "*hope*" is the expectation of our acceptance before God. The Greek term translated here as "*hope*" expresses an idea that is much stronger than the normal use of its English counterpart. In English, the word "*hope*" can mean little more than a simple wish that something might happen that has no basis in fact or assurance. The Greek term refers to a strong assurance that a given thing is certain to come to pass. These two things (confidence and hope) are two different ways of referring to our anticipation that we have genuinely been saved by trusting in the redemptive work of Christ on our behalf. Therefore, this clause expresses that one is only a part of the family of God (i.e., saved) if one continues to have an assured confidence in the Gospel as the means by which one will be saved. Therefore, the verse is teaching that only those who persevere in their faith will be saved. What we find is that throughout this book there are repeated warnings that state precisely this same thing.

But it is important to understand that it would be somewhat misleading to speak of this focused devotion as a condition for receiving the status that is given to believers. It is certainly not a condition in the sense of quid pro quo. The condition spoken of in this verse is rather the manner in which the status is initially received. Because the status spoke of here amounts to nothing less than a complete transformation of the individual's identity, becoming God's holy dwelling. This can be received only when one takes full ownership of it: when they embrace the truth of what Christ has done for them, so that it completely shapes their self-understanding. Therefore, this final clause does not mean that believers are only saved if they hold onto their faith firm to the end. Because if that were so then it would mean that one's salvation was ultimately attained by good works in addition to faith. Instead, the point the author was making here is that continuance in faith is the evidence that a person has exercised genuine faith. Lack of continuance in faith in itself does not immediately prove that a person is not saved; it simply indicates that there is no evidence to indicate that faith exists. But that should give a person reason to fear, and to make sure that one is saved.

The reality is that the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints has as its corollary the salutary teaching that the saints are the people who persevere to the end. Meaning that perseverance is not so much the condition that qualifies people to be a part of God's household, but the evidence that they have already attained this status.

Conclusion:

The teaching here is made more confusing by some presuppositions that modern Christians have about the nature of faith. Many assume faith is something you either have or you don't. However, the reality is that faith exists as a continuum of varying degrees, with complete belief on one end and complete disbelief on the other. Between those extremes are many differing degrees of faith. The Scriptures present saving faith as that degree of belief where one genuinely trusts in the Gospel enough to actually act on that trust. It is more than simply being somewhat intellectually persuaded about the facts of the Gospel. That is why traditionally conservative protestants have held to the conviction that saving faith involves three things; knowledge, approval, and personal trust (a genuine commitment of oneself to the Gospel message, not simply dropping all resistance to it). It is also likely that most come to genuine faith and conversion over time. Growing in their acceptance of Christian truth until it truly takes hold of their heart. This is an important idea because of the improper over emphasis in modern Evangelicalism on outward decisions where the focus is on setting a precise moment of salvation.

But a fair question for modern believers is in what way should it matter to us that Christ is greater than Moses? The answer is that Christ's superiority to Moses was an important truth that the original recipients of the letter needed to grasp, because they were inclined to once again put their faith in a Christless Judaism to save them, and Moses was an important part of that belief system. For those of us in the modern world, this specific point does not address the temptations that most people face. But the inspired principle is still important for us today. The principle is that Christ is greater than anything else we might cling to for salvation. In the end, eternal life will only be found in Him, and in no one else (Acts 4:12). Therefore, it reminds us also where our focus must be, on Jesus and on Him alone.