

Jesus Is God's Word

This fall we're using the Revised Common Lectionary¹ as the basis of our worship. The lectionary suggests four Bible passages for use each Sunday of the year. Some churches read all four passages each week. I usually chose to focus on one or two of the four. For example, in September I preached on James and Proverbs but not on Psalms or Mark. In October the choices continue with Psalms and Mark and also include readings from Job and Hebrews.

The same readings are repeated every three years, so I decided to look back to see which scriptures I had preached on before. I was surprised to discover that I didn't preach on any of the lectionary scriptures in 2018, 2015, or 2012. We used other themes for worship during those times. It was way back in 2009 that I preached two sermons on Job and two on Hebrews. In fact, that's the only time in my twelve years here that I've preached on either of those two books. In the next three Sundays, I'm going to remedy that, at least in regard to Hebrews.

This morning we're going to read the first two chapters of Hebrews together. But first, let's consider some basic questions about the book.²

Who wrote it? No one knows. Some attribute it to Paul but that seems highly unlikely given the style of writing which doesn't match Paul's other writings. Possible authors include Apollos, Barnabas, Luke, and Clement of Rome, but the arguments aren't strong for any of those candidates. We can't name any author with a large degree of certainty. It's apparent, though, that the author had a first-hand relationship with the apostles who had a first-hand relationship with Jesus.

When was it written? We don't know that for sure either. It was in the first century, likely after the gospels and many of Paul's letters were written. There's no direct mention of Temple destruction in 70, so perhaps it was before that.

Where was it written? Possibly Rome, certainly in the midst of some kind of harassment.

What is it? Although it's often referred to as a letter, it reads more like a sermon.

Who is the audience? Probably they were Jewish Christians. The author knows them very well and assumes they have a thorough knowledge of Israel's history – the call of Abraham, the formation of the nation of Israel, the exodus led by Moses, the giving of the law and covenants at Mt Sinai, and the wandering through the wilderness before arriving in the promised land.

Clues from the book indicate that they were facing persecution and even imprisonment because of their association with Jesus. Some were distancing themselves from Jesus; others were abandoning the faith altogether.

The pastoral problem the preacher addresses is familiar to most Christians in any time throughout history. His congregation is exhausted. They're tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus.

What is the author's purpose? The writer appears to have two goals. First, to elevate Jesus as superior to anyone or anything else, showing that Jesus is worthy of all their trust and devotion. Second, to challenge the readers to remain faithful to Jesus despite persecution.

To achieve these goals, the author of Hebrews compares and contrasts Jesus with key people and events from Israel's history; he issues warnings about falling away from the faith; and he encourages his audience to follow the examples of the great models of faith throughout Israel's history.

¹ <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/downloads/Year%20B%202020-2021.pdf>

² This sermon draws from from Pulpit Fiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper22b>; The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/hebrews/>; and Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 1-45

Let's begin our reading with the introduction, Hebrews 1:1-4.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but 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. He 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, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.³

God used to speak through prophets. Now though, something has changed. The nature of our relationship with God is forever shifted because we no longer have messengers. We have the message. This doesn't undermine the messages received before. The word spoken in Jesus doesn't void the previous promises of God. It clarifies and fulfills them. Jesus is the Son and the Son is more important than a mere messenger. He is the message

The author goes back to the creation of the world in order to restore the fire in those who have become tired. He states that Jesus was present at the very beginning. In fact, Jesus is a reflection of God's glory, a perfect imprint of God's nature, capable of sustaining all things. He wants his audience to know everything about Jesus.

One of the songs my mother chose to be sung at her funeral was "More about Jesus." I think the author of Hebrews would be pleased with her choice. Let's sing it together now.

Verse 1:

*More about Jesus would I know
More of His grace to others show
More of His saving fullness see
More of His love who died for me*

Verse 2:

*More about Jesus let me learn
More of His Holy will discern
Spirit of God, my teacher be
Showing the things of Christ to me*

Verse 3:

*More about Jesus in His Word
Holding communion with my Lord
Hearing His voice in ev'ry line
Making each faithful saying mine*

Verse 4:

*More about Jesus on His throne
Riches in glory all His own
More of His Kingdom's sure increase
More of His coming, Prince of peace*

Chorus:

*More, more about Jesus
More, more about Jesus
More of His saving fullness see
More of His love who died for me⁴*

In the remainder of chapter 1, the preacher compares Jesus with angels and, by implication, with the Torah – the Jewish scriptures – since the words of God were delivered to Moses at Mt. Sinai by angels. Jesus and his message of good news are superior to all previous messengers of God's word, including angels.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

*"You are my Son;
today I have begotten you"?*

Or again,

*"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"?*

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him."

Of the angels he says,

*"He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire."*

But of the Son he says,

³ Hebrews 1:1-4, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁴ Author: E. E. Hewitt (1887); Tune: Sweney; https://hymnary.org/text/more_about_jesus_would_i_know

*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

And,

*“In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like clothing;
like a cloak you will roll them up,
and like clothing they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will never end.”*

But to which of the angels has he ever said,

*“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?*

*Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*⁵

During this discourse on angels, the writer quotes seven verses from the Hebrew scriptures. Since his audience is familiar with these writings, it's likely these quotes brought entire psalms or other writings to their minds. For us, it would be like hearing “The Lord is my shepherd” and going on to recite the entire 23rd psalm. Or hearing the phrase, “love is patient, love is kind” and knowing that it is part of 1 Corinthians 13. In secular culture, many people hear the phrase “Life is like a box of chocolates” and immediately think of the actor Tom Hanks and the movie Forrest Gump. Or they hear “may the force be with you” and think of Star Wars. The quotes in Hebrews 1 and throughout the rest of the book would have the same effect on the initial audience.

The verses about father and son would bring to mind God's promise to his anointed kings, especially his covenant with King David.⁶ The images of angels in worship and acting as messengers would remind them of Moses' song of praise to God and the psalmist's recognition of God as creator and provider.⁷ The remaining references place Jesus on God's earthly throne, with God at the creation of the world, and sitting at God's right hand in heaven.⁸

These descriptions of Jesus as Lord, king, messenger, creator, and God's son are followed by a warning to pay attention. This is found in the first four verses of chapter 2.

*Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how 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, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.*⁹

The warning is clear: If Israel was called to pay attention to the Torah which was delivered by angels, how much more should we pay attention to the message that was announced by Jesus, the son of God? This is God's message. We must pay attention.

The rest of Hebrews, chapter 2 is devoted to God's relationship with human beings and the wonder that Jesus set aside his divinity to share in their life and suffering. Let's read the rest of the chapter.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

⁵ Hebrews 1:5-14, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁶ Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13

⁷ Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 104:4

⁸ Psalm 45:6-7; Psalm 102:25-27; Psalm 110:1

⁹ Hebrews 2:1-4, *New Revised Standard Version*

*“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting 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, but 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.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

*“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”*

And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.
¹⁰

The preacher quotes the Hebrew scriptures four more times in this section. First, to remind the Jewish Christians of their dignity as humans in relationship to God’s divine majesty as evidenced in the majesty of creation.¹¹ Next he references a psalm of lament and states that Jesus will call them brothers and sisters no matter how much their enemies revile, reject, and persecute them.¹² He continues with an invitation for everyone to follow Jesus’ example of true dependence on God in the same way the prophet Isaiah put his trust in God and cared for the people entrusted to him.¹³

The takeaway from this discussion of angels is this: Given Jesus’ status as high above the angels, how remarkable is it that he gave up that high status to become human, to suffer, and to die. Throughout the book, the author focuses on Jesus’ deep humanity as well as his ultimate divinity. In Jesus we see God’s greatest glory and God’s humility as Jesus joined himself to humanity’s tragic fate.

These are words of hope. The world isn’t the way God created it to be. Things are messed up and out of control. Jesus was sent to set things right and that work continues. Jesus is using people – those he calls brothers and sisters – to help put it back together again.

Hebrews speaks of salvation through suffering. This is good news to those who suffer today. Jesus came not only as God’s son but also as our sibling who sits with us in the silence and the pain even unto death. And yet he comes out on the other side bringing his people with him.

We’re not totally lost in this life that often seems to be a wilderness. We are cared for by the one who lived and loved among. Jesus grants us grace, creates peace, and offers healing to hurting people. This is good news!

¹⁰ Hebrews 2:5-18, *New Revised Standard Version*

¹¹ Psalm 8:4-6

¹² Psalm 22:22

¹³ Isaiah 8:17-18