

Hebrews 1: Jesus, Prophets & Angels

Let us take a look at the book of Hebrews, chapter 1. If you were the author of Hebrews, how would you begin? If you were writing to a group of friends who were persecuted and thinking about leaving the faith, what would you say first, especially if they were even questioning the power of God and the supremacy of Christ? The genius of the book of Hebrews is that it does not begin by addressing the problem, but it bypasses the problem and addresses the solution. The genius is that the author does not say, “You should not bend; you should not quiver; you should not be frightened.” Instead he says, “If you would just look at Jesus the temptation to abandon Him would wither away. If you understood who He was and all that He did, you would be able to bear up under persecution like never before.” The author does not start with a problem; he starts with a solution.

I want to read Hebrews 1:1-4 with you:

In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, [literally it is ‘by Son, by his Son,’] whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory, the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven, so he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

I have read that in an odd way without pauses, because in the original Greek, Hebrews 1:1-4 is all one sentence; it is all one first great blast on the trumpet of the supremacy of Christ. It is almost like the author takes a deep breath, launches in, and starts to say what he has to say. The first thing that he has to say is that Jesus is the final and supreme revelation of God. Notice carefully the parallel between verses 1 and 2 of the way in which this is described: “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways [The original language actually stresses “in various ways”—in many ways, in many times] but now God spoke to us in these last days by the Son.” Now what does that comparison imply?

“In the past, through the prophets, many times and in various ways.” What are some of the ways God used to speak to the people in the past? He used a law. He used the law first; for example, the burning bush. The burning bush is a theophany. Do you know what theophany is? It is God appearing in some form or other; not just a vision. He also spoke by dreams; by angels; by prophets. When we say law, we may think of Moses. Actually the law of Moses is sort of dictation from God. The Lord occasionally says to His prophets, “Go, write this down.” Sometimes the prophets seem to be working with a lot of freedom and other times, God is dictating certain words, as the words of the law were dictated to Moses. God spoke in some other ways like proverbs, psalms, poems, riddles, historical events—God uses all kinds of means. How long did that go on in the Old Testament? Maybe 4000 years from the birth of Abraham to today. He spoke to Adam face to face, and walked with Enoch.

Now what does it imply if you have to use many different means of communicating for a long period of time? Among other things, it implies that it was not a final message. If you have to keep talking and talking and keep on adding and adding, it implies that maybe people were not listening very well or that the whole truth was not out. The author of Hebrews says that the Old Testament had an excellent revelation, but not a complete revelation. “Now God has spoken to us in these last days by the Son.” This implies that this is the last, the final, the full speech. There is nothing more to be added; it is now complete. He has now spoken to us by the Son—and who is the Son? For your reflection assignment, I

asked you to look at Hebrews 1 and 2 and notice what you could see about Jesus as He is described by the book. What are some of the descriptions of Christ in this passage of the Bible?

Jesus is the exact representation of God's being. He created all things. He is the heir of all things. He is higher than the angels. He is the sustainer of all things. He bears all things by His powerful Word and He upholds the creation. He is the exact representation, and the radiance of God's glory. I want to put these two together, and answer a basic question that many people ask. The question is, "What is God like?" If you are talking to a very naïve beginner who asks, "What is God like?" The answer is, He is like Jesus. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what God is like, read the Gospel. This does not mean God is always meek and mild and sweet. He was also able to call people 'whitewashed tombs,' 'sons of the devil,' and various other things and to give the sternest judgment and call it righteousness. But He is also tender, compassionate and willing to associate with all. He is the presence of God on earth. He is the Son of God; He is also the Son of man. He is divine; He is human.

Do you know what the three big offices are in the Old Testament? Prophet, priest and king. Are these the three big offices in these first three verses of Hebrews? Is Jesus a prophet? He spoke, and the Bible calls Him the final Word of God. In another passage He is called 'the prophet,' 'the great prophet,' and so forth, and we know this because He spoke. Is He a priest? He provided purification for sins, so He is a priest. Is He king? He is heir of all things. He is creator of all things. He sits at the right hand of God. We are not done with what is in these first few verses. There is more to be said, but the author is filled with an urgency to present the person of Christ. That is his goal at the beginning of the book. It is almost as though he says, "The thing that I need you to get most clear is who Jesus is in Himself," and yet he is also showing us something else.

Chapter 1 verses 1-3 have a comparison in them. Jesus is compared to priests. The clearest, most prominent thing that you cannot miss, is the way Jesus is compared to all prior revelations. He is compared to the prophets. He speaks more clearly, more finally than the prophets do, so there is a lot on Jesus in Himself; but there is also a comparison. The comparison is evident in the first part of the sentence. Remember that verses 1 to 4 are all one sentence.

Read this again, the way it actually goes, very literally. I want you to notice how this sentence could easily end at the end of verse 3:

God in many ways [in many diverse ways], long ago, having spoken to the fathers by the prophets, in these last days spoke to us by the Son whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom he made the world, who being the radiance of his glory, the exact representation of his being and bearing [or sustaining] all things by his powerful Word and having made purification for sins sat down by the right hand of the Majesty on high [See how easy it would be to end right there? But it keeps on going.] having made purification for sins, he sat down, being so much greater than the angels inasmuch as He inherited a name more excellent than theirs.

There is the period in the original. Then the author says, "For to whom of the angels did he ever say, "You are my Son. Today I have begotten You." and so forth. When I see something like this, I want to ask the question, "Why?" Why did he not stop where it would have been so strategic and so rich to stop? Why not stop when he said "sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high?" That would have been so beautiful. But instead, he goes off into angels in the same sentence, and that bothers me. I wonder why he did that, and so I have to look for an answer. It piques my curiosity. I think he is starting to work on this theme, that whatever you use to compare to Jesus, Jesus is always greater. Throughout the book

of Hebrews there is one comparison after another. The first comparison is to the prophets, chapter 1:1-3, but you could miss it if you stop at the end of verse 3. To make it more clear, more in your face, he makes comparisons. This first great sentence both opens and closes with comparisons. It opens with a comparison to prophets, and closes with a comparison to angels.

Now I would like to look through this comparison to angels, not reading the whole thing, but racing through it to see what it is all about. The comparison has four parts to it. The first part, in verses 4 and 5, is that Jesus is appointed as a royal heir, the heir of all things, the Son of God. Jesus is the royal heir of all things, and as such, He has received a more excellent name than the angels. His name is 'Son.' Their name is 'angel.' The word 'angel' means 'messenger,' so Jesus is a Son, they are messengers. The second comparison, in verse 6, is that Jesus has greater dignity than angels. Jesus receives worship, but they give it: "Let all God's angels worship him." Jesus receives worship, they render worship. He has a greater status. He reigns forever. He never changes. The third comparison is in verses 7-9: "They are his servants, flames of fire." The angels serve God in that function. Then finally in verses 10-13, Jesus is exalted at the right hand of God. He is the Creator and enthroned ruler of all, while the angels are "ministering spirits" serving not only Jesus, but serving "those who inherit salvation," verse 14. So the author is interested in showing Jesus' supremacy. He is repeating the grandeur of Jesus. He says over and over, in both segments 1 to 4, and 5 to 13 that Jesus is the royal Son, that He is the Mediator of creation, that He has eternal glory, that He is exalted at God's right hand. As he repeats all these excellencies of Jesus, he says that the angels do not quite have that. They are important, but they are created. They are ministers, they are great servants, but they are just servants. Jesus is the greatest of them all.

We might ask, "Why is there this interest in angels?" One reason why there is an interest in angels is because angels were viewed as God's greatest servants. Lane, in *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment*, mentions that it was believed that angels were with God on Mt. Sinai, with the myriad of His holy ones. Deuteronomy says, "And angels were with Him at His right hand." That is the Septuagint of Deuteronomy 33, and so they thought angels were the intermediaries. In ancient Greek culture there was an interest in demigods. The idea was that there were gods, and then there were demigods. There were supreme gods, and then there were lower gods. From these gods, you had other gods, and emanations came. There was an interest in a chain of being and it was believed that there was God, and there was mankind, and there were quite a few ranks of angels. There was a lot of speculation about that in some philosophy of the time. It was also believed in the intertestamental period, between the writing of Malachi and the writing of the Gospels, by many Jewish people that if you were really good as a man or a woman that when you died you got to become an angel. That idea did not come from a Hollywood movie, it has been around for a long time. It was borrowed from beliefs in that day. So Jesus is shown to be superior to angels, to those great beings in which people had a lot of interest in at that time.

But that is not the only thing that is going on in Hebrews 1:5-14, as he describes the greatness of Christ. There is also the theme that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament. We have a third thing happening here. He is greater than the prophets. He is greater than the angels. He is also the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes. The author of Hebrews, whoever he was, knew the Old Testament well. If you have a marginal reference Bible you see that these quotations come from different places. For example, chapter 1:5, "You are my Son, today I have become your Father." Do you know where that comes from? Psalm 2. "And then I will be his Father and he will be my Son." That comes from II Samuel 7. Then it says, "Let all God's angels worship him." That comes from Deuteronomy 32. And then we have a quotation from Psalm 104 and from Psalm 45, so the author is combing through the Old Testament, gathering verses here and there, and saying "Jesus is the one who fulfills all these things." Some of them were not originally addressed to the Messiah or the promised one to come.

I am going to give you one solid example of this. The longest is in verses 8 and 9. It says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever.” It comes from Psalm 45. Look at Psalm 45 to get a feel for what Hebrews is doing. The author does this a number of times, and we are looking at one instance of what Hebrews does. Psalm 45 begins this way: “My heart is stirred by a noble theme. As I recite my verses for the king, my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.” He is writing for the king, and it appears that the occasion for which he wrote was a royal wedding. If you look down in verses 10 and 11 and 14, you can see this. “Listen, O daughter, consider and give ear: Forget your people and your father’s house, the king is enthralled by your beauty. Honor him for he is your lord.” That is the kind of thing you might say to someone who is about to marry in general, but especially about to marry the king. And then verse 13, “All glorious is the princess within her chamber. Her gown is interwoven with gold.” Then in verse 16, “Your sons will take the place of your fathers. You will make them princes throughout the land. I will perpetuate your memory throughout all generations.” This is a wish for progeny, for a fruitful marriage. So it really appears to be a wedding psalm. It is a royal psalm. It is a class of psalms for the king of Israel, and it is a royal psalm written for him on the occasion of his wedding day.

It started as a wedding psalm, but that is not all. Psalm 45 starts, “My heart is stirred by a noble theme, as I recite my verses for the king; my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer. You are the most excellent of men. Your lips have been anointed with grace since God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword upon your side, O mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty. In your majesty ride forth victoriously [it is very fitting for a king to go forward in battle successfully] in behalf of truth, [not just in war but also fighting for the truth] humility and righteousness, let your right hand display awesome deeds. Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king’s enemies. [Again it is military, but also spiritual] Let the nations fall beneath your feet.” But then in verse 6 it gets strange. “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.” Now what did he just call the king? He just called the king ‘God.’ Now you can put a little gloss on that and say, “Well, the king was a representative of God on earth.” But that is not what he said. He did not say, “Your throne represents God,” he said, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever.” Now notice what happens in verse 7. “You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions.” Now he is saying that the king is God, but that God is also His God. I want to tell you that there is no king in the Old Testament that that describes. The author of Hebrews has recognized this, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps with his fellow Christians in the apostolic community who are reading the Old Testament together the way Jesus taught them to do. You remember when Jesus was instructing His disciples at the end He said, “Listen. All that the prophets and the Psalms have written speaks of Me.” Jesus had to do what they all said, so He told them to go look for references to Himself in the Old Testament, and the author of Hebrews has found one.

What he has found is a psalm that is about a king. But the more carefully you read, you realize it really cannot be about a king. There is no king that this describes. This is really about Jesus, because Jesus is the one who is the true king, whose throne is the throne of God. “Your throne, O God, will last forever” describes Jesus, and even verse 7 describes Him. “God, your God.” Jesus is God and He has a God. God the Father is, shall we say, the God of Jesus. This is described by a commentator on the psalms as one of those times when the language of the psalm almost ‘bursts the banks’ of propriety. See the river break out of its banks. You just want to tell it all, but language fails. He is talking about a king, but all of a sudden he is carried away by God to realize that there is a king greater than any king, and that king is Jesus.

A simple illustration of this is when you watch a child. You remember when your kids were around two or three years old, or even 1-1/2 depending on when these things happen, and you tell them how much

you love them. “I love you so much,” and you give them a hug and you give them a squeeze and then they say, “and I love you too, Mommy and Daddy, I love you this much” and they hold out their hands wider. Sometimes you can play with your kids and say “How much do you love me? Do you love me this much? Do I love you this much? No, we love each other this much,” and they hold their arms out like that. Sometimes they look at their arms and they realize their wingspan is about 28 inches, and that is not enough. Have you ever seen them bend over backwards? What they are trying to do is say, “I cannot go far enough,” that is what is happening. The psalmist is saying that the language does not go far enough, the language explodes. The language is of God’s king, when there is no king over God. He wants to praise God’s king, but he realizes that what he really has to do is praise God. He is carried away, as I Peter says, and Hebrews recognizes these moments of being carried away; there are actually a fair number of them in the Old Testament that are actually pointing to Christ. So Hebrews is setting us up in these three ways. Jesus is greater than the prophets, He is greater than the angels, and He is greater than the word of the Old Testament. The word of the Old Testament, when it blew up in ecstasy, when it exploded with joy, then it was talking about Jesus. There was no king that ever fulfilled this, it had to be Jesus.

We are looking at how Hebrews starts off. We are looking at the genius of Hebrews, and although it is written to counteract Christians vacillating under persecution, the author starts off with this first blast of Christology. Christology in itself is describing some of the traits of Christ, and also His superiority to prophets, to angels, and to the revelation of the Old Testament. Before we move to the application in the book, let me simply make one observation. This is a question some of you may have if you are working with non-Christians or with heretics or people in cults. Hebrews 1:5 is one that is apt to be misused. It says, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” Some cults want to make use of that verse. You do not need to handle cults by learning about the cults. All cults go wrong in three areas. Number one, they always go wrong in Christology. Every major cult that you will encounter will have a defective doctrine of Christ. They will almost always deny that Jesus is fully God. There are a few other errors, but that is by far the most common error that Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses and so forth would make. They are always going to be wrong on soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Every religion in the world except Christianity is ultimately a religion in which you are saved by works. Your works may be your good deeds—more good deeds than bad deeds. Maybe you are saved by enlightenment, by gaining knowledge, by going to a guru, but you have to do something. Christianity is the only religion in which the only contribution you make to your salvation is the sin that made it necessary. There is nothing you can do in Christianity, which is so radically contrary to human nature because we all want to do something. Every cult will also go wrong in the area of authority. They will always have another authority beyond the Bible. By ‘cult’ I mean a Christian cult now. They will always have something else, the book of Mormon or the sayings of Joseph Smith are the most common, but there will be some other oracles, some spokesman from the later days. Now what happens is that that later oracle, because it is last, tends to trump the earlier revelation, so that later revelation gets more and more light. So here is one verse that some would seize upon: “Today I have become your Father.” It seems to imply that maybe Jesus was not always the Son of God. “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.”

There are two options for the way we need to take this. One is to say that it is referring to the day within eternity when the Father was begotten by the Son. That is one option that decent Christians and theologians say, but I do not think that is actually correct. I think it is better to say that there was a day when the deity of Christ became manifest or public to the world, and that was the day. Even to say a ‘day’ is not exactly right, but that was the day of His resurrection together with His exaltation, His ascension. There are a couple of places in the New Testament that show what this ‘today’ means.

Turn to Romans 1:4 with me. Let me go back a bit and get the context. Paul says, “This is the gospel he promised beforehand regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David and through the spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.” It is declared with power. It is not as though nobody had ever heard it before. They did, but it was proven. It was powerfully declared on the day when Jesus rose from the dead.

Acts 13 has something very similar, in verses 32 and 33. “We tell you the good news: what God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us their children by raising up Jesus.” What was fulfilled was the second psalm, “You are my Son, today I have become your Father.” Again what we have here is Hebrews, and also Paul’s sermon in Acts quoting Psalm 2 about a king becoming the Son of God, which really does not apply to a king. The final application is the Christ that was declared with power to be the Son of God on a particular day, the day of resurrection. That is the real fulfillment of Psalm 2:7.

Now we come to the first application section of Hebrews. The author begins to make a glancing reference to their situation back in chapter 1:13-14. At the end he says, “To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’” Did you hear the reference to their problems? There will be a day when their enemies will be a footstool for them, that they will be subordinated to them. Furthermore in their struggle, verse 14 says, “Are not all angels those ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” An angel is a messenger. Angels stand very, very high in the ranks of God’s creation. There is actually a debate about angels being above men, or men being above angels. I think if we saw Gabriel, we would be inclined to say Gabriel is above us. In the Bible when people meet Gabriel, they do things like fall down, worship, quiver, and think they are going to die. I have met some impressive people in my life, but I have never fallen down in worship and thought I was going to die when I met any of them. So angels are very high, but it says angels are ministering spirits sent to serve us. Powerful beings are on our side. And our adversaries will become a footstool for the feet of Christ, verse 13. But if they submit to Christ, and Christ is our King, then they will submit to us.

That is the first encouragement and exhortation, but then he goes further in chapter 2:1-4. The author says, “We must pay more careful attention therefore, to what we have heard, lest we drift away.” He is saying, “Okay, I have given you this theology now for the first chapter, and now you have to pay attention to what you have heard so you do not drift away.” He is concerned about them drifting away. Now this word ‘drift’ could also be used in antiquity for things slipping. Just as a ring would fall off your finger when you were not paying attention, if it was a little bit too big and it was cold outside and you were playing volleyball and you jumped up and your ring flew off your finger. ‘Drift’ would also be used for a boat losing its anchor. They are out at sea. At one point when I was on a mission trip we were looking for a sunken boat, because a lot of interesting fish are around sunken boats, so we dropped anchor. But in this particular place, the next stop where the current was going was Liberia. So before we stopped and got out of the boat, we tried to make sure we set our anchor, because even if the boat moved slowly, if we could not catch the boat, we would have been in trouble. So we wanted to make sure the anchor was set.

This idea of ‘slipping away’ was used for anchors slipping out of a boat. The images, in fact, are exactly apt for their situation because the problem was not that they were going to turn to full apostasy. In fact, it is extremely rare for a Christian to turn from fidelity to apostasy in a day. What happens is you start to go to church a little less, read the Bible a little less, pray a little less, associate with sinners more. Everybody should have some non-Christian friends, but there are different ways to associate with those non-Christian friends. And so the author is afraid that they will slip away. That is what has been happening to them; they have not deliberately scorned the revelation of God. They have slipped away.

Pay attention so you do not drift away, or slip away. A little drift picks up speed, and the result is disaster. That is what we have here. The author says that drift can kill.

The author also teaches and warns them about this as well. Notice how he reasons with them: Hebrews 2:2, “The message spoken by angels was binding.” This is a reference to the Old Testament Mosaic law, the Mosaic covenant and every violation of disobedience received. It is just punishment. You know all the punishment stipulated in the Mosaic law for violating the law of the covenant of God. If that is the way it was in the old covenant, he says, how will we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation that we have was announced not by angels, but by the Lord. And beyond that, it was attested to us by signs and wonders and miracles. Do you think you can escape if you neglect, if you slip away from that, even if it starts small? It is a great salvation, and there is a hint in this verse that although most of the time it is by accident, sometimes it is purposeful. The author says, “If the message spoken by angels is binding, and every violation...” that word ‘violation’ is usually translated to ‘transgression.’ For those of you who know Greek, the word is *parabasis*, and the idea is that you are stepping across a line. There are different kinds of sin. There are sins of omission and commission, but there is a sin in which you say, “There is the line, I know it is wrong.” You know it is a sin, and you go ahead and step across it anyway. There are some sins that are drifting sins; there are other sins that are transgression. The author is beginning to hint that maybe some of them are also transgressing, not just slipping.

There is a question I would like to consider. How is it that people drift away? This is a very important question. It is not hard to see how people drifted away back then. Chapter 5 tells us that they drifted away by not practicing what they knew, and they also were not associating with each other as much as they should have. There are many answers to the question, “What can cause Christians today to drift away?” One answer is simply getting caught up in work, getting ahead, consumerism, success and that sort of thing. Worldly entertainment, falling into debt, can cause you to slip away. Pain that you do not know how to interpret can cause you to slip away, getting caught up with your own entertainments, sports or TV or movies or magazines. These do not have to be overtly corrupt to take us away, but we should try to ask, “What do those things have in common?” What they have in common is accommodation to our culture.

The reason it is easy to accommodate to our culture and slip away in that manner is that our culture has experienced profound Christian influences historically. Our culture is not like some countries where there would be idols on the street corner. There are places in the world—in China, Tibet, India, Indonesia and various other places—where you will see idols right there. There are no idols in front of your eyes in America, and because so many people are nice and share so much in common with Christianity, there is a church on every corner. We lose our sense of the distance between Christianity and our culture. There is materialism and consumerism, and it is so easy for that to infect us. We know that God created all things, and He created them for our good and for our enjoyment. “Everything is consecrated, [I am quoting the Bible now] everything is good if it is consecrated by the Word of God and by prayer.” I know God loves to give blessings to His children, and so we say, “Well, God is just giving me things,” and it does not seem dangerous, because we thank God for it. Beyond that, this thinking can really creep into the church.

Over the years, my wife and I generally have attended churches that are anywhere from small to very small. We always have wanted and tried to help churches that really needed it. Some dying group would say to us, “We are dying, if you will come and play the piano, and if you will come and teach or preach, you will make the difference.” We were just gullible enough to believe that. A couple of times it worked for the good, but we spent a lot of time in small, weak churches. A couple of years ago we decided, for the sake of our kids, that we would like to get them in a good, healthy, solid church where they could

experience the breadth of ministries. Not that the church we were in before was bad, but it was just smaller and farther away from home. A lot of big churches tend to be in big cities with other big, healthy churches. In those churches, it is interesting to me to listen to the influences of consumerism, and I am not only pointing the finger at others. I hear this from myself when asked about why I choose a certain church. Well, because it is a full-service church. It has a wonderful choir, a terrific youth ministry, it has specialized ministries for divorced people and recovering alcoholics and widows, it has it all.

One of the reasons why I am in my church, and why I love my church, is because it is big enough to have a fabulous youth ministry, which is what I wanted for my kids. In one sense that is good, but it can become like we are consumers. I even picked my church first for the services it renders to me, and second for self-development. So much a part of our culture is to experience new things. Polls have been done that show how Christians believe the concept of self-development and self-actualization. Christians will say, "It is good to have new and exciting experiences," and in one way that is true. After all, as Christians, we want to grow in wisdom, maturity and knowledge. That sounds like self-development. But self-development can also be deeply egotistical. I can lose the idea that my self-development may be learning how to suffer for the Lord, and that what I want, what I get, or how I develop is a worthwhile question. But it could be a tertiary question, not even a secondary question. So I think that in the blessed, prosperous land we live in, that is the way we can become inured to the gap between biblical Christianity and our culture, and we drift away. We lose our sense of the antithesis, of the radical difference at root between our culture, which is finally, absolutely anthropocentric, as opposed to the Christian faith, which is finally, absolutely theocentric, Christocentric.