

## 1

## GOD'S FINAL WORD

*Hebrews 1:1–2*

*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Heb. 1:1–2)*

**A** scene from Jesus' life and ministry wonderfully depicts what the Book of Hebrews is all about. Matthew 17 tells us that Jesus took his three closest disciples up onto the mount, where they saw him transfigured in glory, speaking with Moses and Elijah. Peter proposed building a tabernacle for the veneration of these three spiritual giants. But just then the Shekinah glory cloud enveloped them in brightness and the voice of God said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matt. 17:5). When the disciples rose from their terror, they did not see either Moses or Elijah, but they saw Jesus alone. A. W. Pink comments: "The glory associated with Moses and Elijah was so eclipsed by the infinitely greater glory connected with Christ, that they faded from view."<sup>1</sup>

1. A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 29.

### *God's Final Word*

This is what the Book of Hebrews is about—the supremacy of Christ, along with the sufficiency of his work and the necessity of faith in him for salvation.

### BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

We should begin studying a book with a consideration of its background. Who wrote the Book of Hebrews? To whom was it written and when? What prompted the writing of the letter, what is its literary genre, and on what basis is it included in the biblical canon?

When we consider the authorship of Hebrews, we must first observe that the answer is not stated in the letter itself. There is no opening greeting, nor do the closing remarks identify the writer. There is, however, no shortage of candidates for the honor of authorship.

Throughout church history there has been a strong impulse to name the apostle Paul as the author of Hebrews. There seem to be two main reasons for this, the first of which is that much of the letter's content sounds Pauline. Hebrews 13:23 refers to Timothy, one of Paul's protégés, and chapter 10's theme of joy amidst suffering strongly reminds us of Paul. Therefore, it is argued, the author of Hebrews must at least have been a member of the Pauline circle. The second reason to support Paul has to do with the canonicity of the book. The inclusion of Hebrews in the Bible was not without controversy, and arguments for Paul's authorship naturally strengthened its case dramatically.

Nonetheless, there are many indications that Paul almost certainly did not write Hebrews. First, in all of Paul's other letters he identifies himself, blatantly asserting his apostolic authority. The writer of Hebrews does not identify himself, although some speculate that because of Jewish hostility Paul may have wanted to remain anonymous. More telling is the nature of the Greek in Hebrews, which is of a high literary style in striking contrast to Paul's more common Greek. The structure of Hebrews, with its interspersed exhortations, contrasts with Paul's tendency to save practical applications for the letter's end. Most conclusive is the statement of Hebrews 2:3, which says the author's message "was attested to us by those who heard." In other words, the writer received his message from those who heard it firsthand from Jesus. This is the very thing

## HEBREWS 1:1–2

Paul always denies in his letters, insisting that he received his revelation directly from the Lord and not from the other apostles (see Gal. 1:12).

With Paul ruled out, other candidates are drawn from his circle and include Luke, Silas, and Priscilla. Most persuasive are the arguments in favor of Barnabas and Apollos. Hebrews 13:22 describes the letter as a “word of exhortation,” and Barnabas’s name means “son of exhortation.” Not only was Barnabas a close associate of Paul, but as a Levite he would likely have had the kind of interest in the Jewish priesthood that shows up in Hebrews. An even more intriguing suggestion was made by Martin Luther in favor of Paul’s sometime associate Apollos. Acts 18:24 identifies him as “an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures,” which qualifies him to write such an extraordinary epistle. Furthermore, Apollos hailed from Alexandria, and Hebrews shows an interest in theological themes known to have been popular there.

So who wrote Hebrews? In the end, we must agree with the ancient scholar Origen, who concluded, “Who wrote the epistle is known to God alone.”<sup>2</sup> All we can say with confidence is that it came from an apostolic figure who was likely a colleague of the apostle Paul. It did not please the Holy Spirit to have us know the human author’s identity, so we must content ourselves with knowing that the letter is the Word of God.

Also important is the identity of the recipients. The title “To the Hebrews” is not in the text, although it is found in all the earliest manuscripts. This, along with the letter’s content, argues persuasively that these were Jewish Christians who were under pressure to renounce the faith and return to Judaism.

As to their location, the two main options are Palestine and Rome. Those who argue for a Palestinian audience point out that Christians are known to have suffered at the hands of their fellow Jews, and also point to the detailed references to the Jewish temple ritual. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some have tried to show similarities to the writings of the Essene community in the Judean desert. Opposing this theory is the fact that all of the Old Testament citations in Hebrews are from the Septuagint, the Greek version common in that time, which was not used in Palestine as much as elsewhere. Also opposing a Palestinian background is the statement that the recipients of the letter had only heard of Jesus secondhand (see Heb. 2:3).

2. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1965), 6.25.

### *God's Final Word*

Furthermore, Hebrews 12:4 states that earlier persecutions did not involve the shedding of blood, whereas those in Palestine certainly did from the very beginning.

Scholarly consensus has recently shifted in the direction of Rome. Clement of Rome, writing around A.D. 95, shows close familiarity with Hebrews, and the books of Acts and Romans speak of a large Jewish church in Rome from early on. The Jewish Christians there were persecuted in A.D. 49 under the emperor Claudius, and then again in the 60s under Nero. What we know of the former of these persecutions seems to fit the description of 10:32–34 and 12:4 (in that Claudius's persecution involved loss of property and imprisonment, but not bloodshed), and the anticipation of violence fits the latter, with Nero's notorious violence against Christians. Finally, there is the statement of Hebrews 13:24, "Those who come from Italy send you greetings." It could be that a pastor now in Rome was writing to Jewish believers in Palestine. But the more natural reason for Italian Christians to send their greetings is that the readers were themselves from Italy.

If Rome was the location of the audience, then the letter would have been written shortly before A.D. 64, when Nero's persecution broke out. Under almost all theories, Hebrews was written prior to A.D. 70, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans. Not only does Hebrews speak of the temple rituals as a present reality, but it is hard to imagine its writer passing up such an opportunity as the fall of Jerusalem to prove the passing away of the old covenant religion.

The purpose of Hebrews is made clear by its content. The writer warns Christians not to fall back from faith in Christ in the midst of trials and exhorts them instead to press on to full maturity. The letter should not be thought of as a theological treatise, but as a sermon written by a pastor to a congregation from which he is separated. The writer describes it as "my word of exhortation" (13:22). His method is to point out the supremacy of Christ over everything to which the readers might be tempted to turn; he is superior to angels, to Moses and the prophets, to Aaron and the Levitical priests, to the blood sacrifices of the old covenant, and to the tabernacle and temple themselves. Since Jesus is the true messenger, the true prophet, the true priest, and the true sacrifice, to renounce him is to lose salvation altogether. Therefore, the readers must hold fast to Jesus Christ.

## HEBREWS 1:1–2

The author's plea is summed up in Hebrews 10:23: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

The final matter of background to consider is the place of Hebrews in the New Testament canon. The early church's basic test of canonicity was proof of apostolicity. This did not mean that a book had to be written by an apostle, as is shown by the ready inclusion of Mark, Luke, Acts, and other books. It was sufficient for the author to be an associate of an apostle, so long as the teaching was apostolic in character. We should not think, however, that it was the church that created the canon, since really it was exactly the opposite. The canon—that is, the apostolic teaching of the New Testament writings—created the church. Hywel Jones aptly summarizes, "The canon was drawn up . . . by way of response to the effect which sacred literature had on those who heard it. The church's formal acknowledgement of a piece of literature was an 'Amen' to the Holy Spirit's testimony in it, and not a bestowing of its own *imprimatur*."<sup>3</sup>

Any introduction to Hebrews ought to conclude with an appreciation of its outstanding excellence. Here the last word is best given to John Calvin, who wrote in the dedication of his commentary: "Since the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews contains a full discussion of the eternal divinity of Christ, His supreme government, and only priesthood (which are the main points of heavenly wisdom), and as these things are so explained in it, that the whole power and work of Christ are set forth in the most graphic way, it rightly deserves to have the place and honor of an invaluable treasure in the Church."<sup>4</sup>

## GOD HAS SPOKEN

As soon as we begin the Book of Hebrews, we encounter what is perhaps the single most important statement that could be made in our time: "God spoke" (Heb. 1:1). This is one of the most vital things people today need to know. Ours is a relativistic age; as many as 70 percent of Americans insist that there are no absolutes, whether in matters of truth or morality. Secular society having removed God, there no longer is a heavenly voice to speak

3. Hywel R. Jones, *Let's Study Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), xiii.

4. John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12:ix.

### *God's Final Word*

with clarity and authority. The price we have paid is the loss of truth, and with truth, hope. Even when it comes to those things we think we know, we now consider them mere constructs of thought amidst the constant flux of uncertain knowledge and belief. Really, we are told, we don't know anything for sure, nor can we.

All this is especially the case when it comes to our knowledge of God himself. Can we know our Creator, if there is one? Is there a Savior to help us? Unless God has spoken, we cannot even be sure he is there; unless God is there, there is no ultimate hope for us as individuals, and no answer for the ultimate problem of death. Job asks, "Can you find out the deep things of God?" (11:7) and answers No. By definition, God is beyond the realm of our senses, from which all our self-gained knowledge has to come. Therefore, if God is there and wants us to know him—if he has an answer, a plan, or a salvation—he is going to have to speak to us. And he must speak in a way we can understand. Therefore, there is nothing more important, nothing more essential, than what Hebrews says in its very first verse: "God has spoken."

This is the uniform testimony of the Bible about itself, that it is God's very Word. The Bible's books were written by human authors, who spoke and wrote in human language. But the Bible insists that through them God himself spoke and speaks to us still. Peter explained, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). This is what we refer to as the Bible's *inspiration*. God has communicated to us through the Holy Spirit's leading of its human authors. The point is not that these books contain the inspired insights of men; the point is exactly the opposite. Indeed, we might better speak of the Bible not as being *inspired* but as being *expired*. It is God's Word as from his very mouth, given through the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of human servants. This is what Paul emphasizes in 2 Timothy 3:16, where he says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God."

The divine authorship of Holy Scripture needs to be emphasized today, especially since contemporary scholarship tends to focus on the human authors. It is right, of course, to realize the human contours God used to give different shape to different Bible books. Moses had his own experience and calling and personality and gifts, and God used them to craft a particular message in the books that Moses wrote. The same is true of Paul and

## HEBREWS 1:1–2

John and all the other biblical writers. But while the Bible itself affirms this, its own emphasis is on divine authorship. Hebrews 1:1 says that God spoke “at many times and in many ways,” and that God employed “the prophets” to do this. But in all of this it was still God who spoke. It is not Moses who spoke in Genesis, nor David who spoke in the Psalms, nor Paul who spoke in Romans. God spoke in the Bible, and we must regard all Scripture as his holy Word.

The Book of Hebrews gives the Bible’s own slant on the process of revelation. Whenever the writer cites Scripture, it is never the human author whom he credits but the divine Author. In Hebrews 2:12 he cites Psalm 22:22 and ascribes it to Jesus Christ speaking in the Old Testament. Hebrews 3:7–11 cites Psalm 95, but prefaces it not by saying “as David said,” but “as the Holy Spirit says.” So it goes all through Hebrews. The point is not to deny the significance of the Bible’s human authors, but to show that our emphasis, following the Bible’s own emphasis, must always be on God speaking in his Word.

This has several important implications. First, if God speaks in the Bible, then the Bible carries divine *authority*. Today, many want to set aside the Bible’s teachings when they collide with current cultural standards. But just as God commands our obedience, so he also demands that we humbly obey his Word. There is nothing so important for Christians to recover today as the awe and respect that Scripture deserves as God’s own revelation to us.

Second, if God wrote the Bible, then it is enduringly *relevant*. After all, if God does not change—and by nature he cannot—then his Word does not change either. It is true that some things said in the Bible were intended only for its original recipients. God told Moses, not us, to “Go down to Egypt.” But the teaching given all through the Bible—on God’s character, on sin and on his moral standards, on the good news of salvation and how it comes to us—abides forever for the simple reason that God abides forever. The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 13 that Christian standards of conduct remain the same because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).

God not only spoke in the Bible to those who first received it, but he speaks as well to those who read it today. This is emphasized in Hebrews. In Hebrews 3:7, for instance, the writer cites Psalm 95, written a thou-

### *God's Final Word*

sand years before, and writes, “as the Holy Spirit *says*.” He uses the present tense. It is not merely what the Holy Spirit *said* back when David wrote it, but what the Holy Spirit says now as God speaks to those who read it. This is why the Bible is fully relevant to all our needs today.

Third, since God has spoken in the Bible, even though he did so with great diversity—“at many times and in many ways”—we also hold to the *unity* of the Bible. The Bible consists of sixty-six books written over at least thirteen hundred years by over forty different people. And yet it is one book with one unified message. James Boice explains:

These people were not alike. Some were kings. Others were statesmen, priests, prophets, a tax collector, a physician, a tentmaker, fishermen. . . . Yet together they produced a volume that is a marvelous unity in its doctrine, historical viewpoints, ethics and expectations. It is, in short, a single story of divine redemption begun in Israel, centered in Jesus Christ and culminating at the end of history. . . . Behind the efforts of the more than forty human authors is the one perfect, sovereign and guiding mind of God.<sup>5</sup>

This provides us with an important interpretive principle, namely, that Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture itself. Since the Bible is one message spoken by God, we should understand the teaching in one passage in light of the way that teaching is given elsewhere in Scripture. To be sure, the Bible's message is progressively revealed, so that the gospel appears in bud in the Old Testament and in bloom only in the New Testament. Many doctrines are therefore progressively revealed. Nonetheless, the clear teaching God gives in one place constrains our interpretation of the same subject elsewhere in the Bible. This is most relevant to our study of Hebrews, where the author not only finds numerous Old Testament passages to be relevant to his readers, but under the Holy Spirit's control also gives us an authoritative guide as to how we should understand them (as well as the whole Old Testament).

5. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 58–59.



### THE FINAL REVELATION IN GOD’S SON

These opening verses tell us not merely that God has spoken, but that his final and definitive revelation is in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. The writer makes this point through three contrasts in Hebrews 1:1–2. First, there is the *when* of revelation: “long ago,” in contrast to “in these last days.” Second, there is the *to whom* of revelation, “to our fathers,” versus “to us.” Third, there is the *how* of revelation, namely, “at many times and in many ways . . . by the prophets,” versus “by his Son.”

The author’s point, which is the burden of the entire Book of Hebrews, is to show the superiority of Christianity to the old covenant religion. He wastes no time getting to this point, arguing the supremacy of Christ over the prophets. This supremacy does not in any way malign the Old Testament faith. Unlike pagan religions, it was a legitimate revelation and a true faith. In the Old Testament “God spoke,” and it was God-given religion. Nonetheless, Christ is superior and with his coming there is now no excuse for reverting back to Judaism.

The author describes former revelation as coming “at many times and in many ways.” His point is not merely the diversity of revelation in the Old Testament, but its fragmentary, incomplete, and gradual character. Take any one book of the Old Testament—perhaps Genesis, with its rich scenes of creation, fall, and redemption; or Esther, with her courageous faith in an unseen God; or Psalms, with its heart-lifting poetry—and you will read true divine revelation, even necessary revelation. But each book is fragmentary and incomplete. The Old Testament is unfulfilled. It expectantly longs for the answer that comes in Jesus Christ. By contrast, God’s revelation in Christ is not partial or incomplete. This is why the Christian era is described as “these last days.” The point is not that Jesus is about to come back any minute, as many take this to mean (though other New Testament passages tell us to have this perspective), but that this is the age of fulfillment when God’s revelation has been made complete. This is what makes the *when* of Christian revelation so much better. Calvin comments, “It was not a part of the Word that Christ brought, but the last closing Word.”<sup>6</sup>

6. Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 12:6.

### *God's Final Word*

Another reason for the superiority of the Christian faith is the contrast in the channel of its revelation, that is, the *how*. In the Old Testament, God spoke by the prophets, but in the New he speaks by his own Son. One could hardly find a greater group of spiritual giants than the prophets of the Old Testament. Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah—these were outstanding bearers of divine truth. Yet how they pale compared to the very Son of God come to earth. As Jesus put it, “He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all” (John 3:31).

The revelation in Christ, then, given not merely to our forefathers but preserved for us in Scripture, is superior to that given formerly through the prophets. Martin Luther concludes: “If the word of the prophets is accepted, how much more ought we to seize the gospel of Christ, since it is not a prophet speaking to us but the Lord of the prophets, not a servant but a son, not an angel but God.”<sup>7</sup>

### JESUS THE TRUTH

Whenever we think of Jesus as the ultimate, final truth, we may remember the confrontation at his trial before Pontius Pilate. The Roman governor had demanded to know if Jesus really thought himself a king. Jesus replied that his kingdom was not of this world. When Pilate responded doubtfully, Jesus related his kingship to the revelation of God's truth in the world. He said, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). Christ reigns through God's Word, because in Christ God has fully and ultimately revealed himself.

What a confrontation that was! Pilate represented the philosophy and wisdom of the world, with its relativism and cruel utilitarianism. Pilate was not able to accept that there could be truth at all. Looking into the very face of God's Son, through whom God has revealed the ultimate truth, Pilate replied, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). This not only shows that what we call postmodernity, with its denial of truth, is really nothing new, but it also

7. Martin Luther, cited in Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 37.

## HEBREWS 1:1-2

dramatizes the tragedy of our unbelieving world. Jesus put it this way: “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). There before Pilate stood the very Truth of God, and there was Pilate denying even the possibility of truth.

Pilate thought he was judging Jesus, but with the Truth before him it was the governor who really was on trial. The same is true today. When you read or hear God’s message through his Son Jesus Christ, you stand before the Truth. If you reject him, God’s final Word, you consign yourself to darkness—the darkness of spiritual blindness now and the eternal darkness that comes in God’s final judgment.

But if you look to Jesus Christ, and if in him you see and believe the very Truth of God, then God’s redemptive work of the ages will be fulfilled in you. “At many times and in many ways,” God began preparing the world through the prophets for the coming of his Son. Why? So that in these last days—these days of God’s redemptive fulfillment in Jesus Christ—we might enter into the fullness of salvation. This is what Jesus said to the disciples as they struggled to know the truth on the night of his arrest. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” he told them (John 14:6). And so he is for us. When we receive Jesus as the Truth, then he becomes the Way for us to enter into Life everlasting. This is why Jesus is God’s final Word, and why even if all else in this world is lost we must hold fast to him in faith.

## 2

## PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

*Hebrews 1:2–4*

*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*

(Heb. 1:3)

**I**t is hard for us to understand how remarkable it was for the first generation of Christians to put their faith in Jesus Christ. This is especially true of the Jews who had not personally known Jesus but converted to Christianity. We can imagine the kind of arguments that unbelieving Jews would have employed to dissuade their new faith. They would have pointed out that Jesus was just a man, the son of a poor carpenter from a backwater village in Galilee. They might have echoed Nathaniel's comment, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). It was a time of unrest and of heady passions, they may have pointed out, and this man Jesus was just one of many zealous leaders of his day. Worst of all, his failure as a Messiah was proved by his humiliating execution as the worst sort of criminal. The fact that he was crucified—the most despicable of all deaths—proved that he was rejected by God. Jesus may have been a decent enough man, though he obviously got carried away by his short-lived

## HEBREWS 1:2–4

fame. The real problem was his fanatical disciples, who made outlandish claims about his resurrection and started a heretical religion that actually worshiped the poor man.

If this is the kind of argument the Jewish Christians were subjected to, it likely was a potent one. Especially since believing on Christ came at such a high cost—exclusion from Jewish society and perhaps even violent persecution in the days to come—many might have reconsidered their religious options.

The Epistle to the Hebrews was written because of this kind of pressure. Then, as now, faith in Jesus came at a price. You could not be a Christian without carrying a cross and suffering at the hands of the world. Therefore, it had to be worth it to believe on Jesus Christ. This is what the writer of Hebrews wanted to impress upon his readers. In the book's opening lines, he directs us to the supremacy of our Lord. He knows that if we perceive Jesus in the marvel of his person and his work—as God's Son and as our Savior—then instead of doubting or trembling in fear we will respond with words like those from the great hymn: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day."

Verses 2–3 contain seven statements of Christ's supremacy. This number seems deliberate, because verses 5–14 go on to list seven Old Testament citations that are ascribed to Christ. Seven was the number for perfection or completion, and that is the writer's point here: the perfect supremacy of Christ. Furthermore, the seven statements of verses 2 and 3 may be organized along the lines of the three great Old Testament offices that are perfected and completed in Christ: prophet, priest, and king. This is a helpful and biblical way of thinking about our Lord. He is prophet in that he perfectly reveals God to us. He is priest in offering himself for our sins, cleansing us, and interceding for us with God. He is our king, reigning now in heaven and ruling over us as our Sovereign Lord.

## CHRIST AS THE TRUE KING

It is with the last of these, Christ as king, that the writer of Hebrews begins his sevenfold exclamation of the supremacy of Christ. Verse 2 says, "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all

*Prophet, Priest, and King*

things, through whom also he created the world.” In these first two of the seven statements, we see Jesus as Lord both in his person and in his work.

First, he is “appointed the heir of all things.” This is something that follows from Christ’s being God’s only Son. In Israel, it was the firstborn son who had the right of inheritance. This means that “as the heir, all things already belong to the Son in principle, just as they will actually and finally be his at the end.”<sup>1</sup> This was God the Father’s appointment, his purpose in creation: that his Son should be blessed and glorified in receiving all things. This is also the ultimate purpose of our redemption: “His inheritance is the innumerable company of the redeemed and the universe renewed by virtue of his triumphant work of reconciliation.”<sup>2</sup>

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say, “through whom also he created the world.” Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is Lord and King because of his divine role in creation. Not only was the world made for him, but it was made by him. There can hardly be a stronger claim for lordship than this. If you are the one who made something, and for whom it was made, then you are its rightful lord. So it is in the case of Jesus Christ. Paul says the same thing in Colossians 1:16: “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” Hebrews 1:3 adds that even now “he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

Those Jewish Christians who first received this letter were being tempted to renounce Christianity. But Jesus fulfills and gathers to himself all that the office of king ever meant in Israel. He is the true king, the Lord of all, and the faithful of Israel are those who worship and serve him.

We need to embrace the same truth. Jesus is king over the church and over the Christian people, no less than when the Israelites of David’s day looked to his authority and obeyed his commands. But how seldom people think of Jesus this way. When he walked upon this earth in his humanity, Jesus did not look like a king. He did not ride a great stallion; his coming was not heralded by trumpets; he did not hold court in a palace of gold. This is why people scoffed at his kingship. Pontius Pilate said, “Are you the King of the Jews?” It was not so much a question as a taunt. Jesus replied, “My

1. Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 41.

2. Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 37.

## HEBREWS 1:2–4

kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:33, 36). Does this mean that while you have to respect earthly rulers, you can afford to ignore Jesus’ kingdom since it is merely spiritual? James M. Boice answers,

Nothing is farther from the truth, for when we say that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, what we are really saying is that Christ’s kingdom is of heaven and therefore has an even greater claim over us than do the earthly kingdoms we know so well. . . . Over these is Christ, and we flout His kingship not merely at the peril of our fortune and lives but at the peril of our eternal souls.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus was appointed heir of all things, which were made through him and are even now sustained by him. But this is seen only by God’s Word, and only with the eyes of faith. Jesus is enthroned, not upon an earthly throne, but “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). We can see this only by faith. Believing on Christ as our king, we must obey him by faith, and we must be comforted amidst our trials in the knowledge that one day soon he will come to manifest his kingdom over all creation, destroying his enemies with the rod of his might (Ps. 2:9), and inviting his faithful servants to enter into the joy of his kingdom (Matt. 25:21). As the writer of Hebrews points out in 2:8–9, quoting from Psalm 8, “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.” This is the cause of our unbelief and fear. But by faith we know that he is even now “crowned with glory and honor,” and someday soon every eye will see him, every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10–11).

## CHRIST AS THE FINAL PROPHET

This passage exalts Christ not only as Lord of all, but also as the One who perfectly reveals God in all his glory. He is the true king, but also the final prophet: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3).

Hot and brilliant as the sun is in the heavens, we would never see it or feel its warmth without the radiating beams that come to the earth. So it is with

3. James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 1278.

*Prophet, Priest, and King*

God and his Son, who is the radiance of his glory. Without the Son we remain in the dark regarding the glory of God. But with the Son we have an ideal, indeed, a perfect revelation of God. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:6 that we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” We do not see God in Christ through drawings that purport to represent his features, much less through an actor who tries to represent the way Jesus must have been. We see God in Christ through the Bible’s teaching of his person and work, of his holy zeal and compassionate love, of his heavenly words and mighty, saving works.

As the Son, Jesus is a better revelation than that which came through the prophets. It is one thing to know a chosen servant. You can learn a lot about a master by what you see in those who work for him. But as Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains, “A servant may be able to say everything that is right about his lord and master, he may know him well and intimately, but he can never represent him in the way that the son can. The son is a manifestation of the father by being what he is. Thus our Lord himself, while here on earth, represented and manifested the name of God in a way that is incomparable and greater than all others, because he is the Son of God.”<sup>4</sup> John 1:18 tells us, in a striking assertion of Jesus’ deity: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

Jesus is the perfect prophet—the one who fully reveals God’s glory—because he is not only similar to God the Father, but also is “the exact imprint of his nature.” The Greek word here is *charaktēr*, which gives us the word “character.” It refers to the stamp or imprint made by a die or seal. The best example is a coin with the imprint of a ruler’s face; in the same way, Jesus bears God’s image or imprint. Paul says, “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). The point is the trustworthiness with which Jesus reveals God to us. There is an exact correspondence between what we see in him and what is true of God. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus explained (John 14:9).

Furthermore, Jesus “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3). Jesus wields divine power because as God’s Son he is fully

4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Safe in the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 60–61.



## HEBREWS 1:2-4

God. As the true and great and final prophet, he is able not merely to reveal God's will but also to establish God's will upon the earth.

This description of Jesus as the great and final prophet helps us to gain a proper understanding of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New. The reason the Hebrew Christians should not revert from Christ back to Judaism is not that the Old Testament was wrong. Through the long line of prophets, God left his people with his revelation for their salvation. But the chief message of that revelation was of a Savior yet to come, the true prophet who would not only point to salvation but would also accomplish it. Isaiah spoke of a child who would be born, a son who would be given, and said that he would be called "Wonderful Counselor" (Isa. 9:6). He added, "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD" (Isa. 11:2-3). The way to be a true follower of Isaiah and the other prophets was and is to believe their message, to receive in faith the One for whom they prayed, who is the head of their order and the fulfillment of their age-old longing.

**CHRIST AS THE PERFECT PRIEST**

We need to give homage to Jesus, God's Son, as the King who is Lord of all. And we need to listen to him as the true and final prophet who perfectly reveals God's glory. But there is a third office Jesus perfects and completes, that of the priest. Apart from his ministry in this office we may bow to God, and we may listen to God, but we can never be accepted by God and draw near to his presence. Therefore, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the true and perfect priest, who makes atonement for our sins. He writes, "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3).

The theme of Christ's priestly office will occupy much of the Book of Hebrews, and it is a message we must understand if we want to be saved. Jesus fulfills the priestly office because he offers the one true sacrifice to take away our sin. This is what the angel said about him to Joseph even before his birth: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Yes, Jesus rules within us by his spirit, and he

*Prophet, Priest, and King*

speaks to us as prophet through the gospel. But these are possible only because as Lamb of God he laid down his life for our sins, making purification for us upon the cross. Then, as the true and final priest, he went into heaven to present his own blood to God to secure our full, perfect, and final forgiveness.

This sevenfold exclamation of praise to God's Son is completed with the statement that "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). There were no seats in the temple at Jerusalem. The priests offered sacrifices for the purification of the people day and night without ceasing because the problem of sin had not yet been solved. They never sat down. But when God's Son, the true priest whom the old covenant priests merely represented, shed his blood for us, his atoning sacrifice was the one to which all the others had merely pointed. He sat down, because there was no more sacrifice to be made, God's Son having offered his infinitely holy and precious blood once for all. That being the case, if the readers of Hebrews wanted the benefits of the Old Testament sacrifices, then they must not turn away from Christ but hold fast to his death for their salvation.

God's Son "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). Since this is a throne, naturally we think of his kingly office. But it is also as our priest that Jesus takes up his heavenly royal seat. The King who rules on the throne of heaven is the very priest who sacrificed himself for our salvation and whose presence there bears everlasting testimony to our forgiveness. As Charles Wesley says in his great hymn "Arise, My Soul, Arise":

Five bleeding wounds he bears,  
 received on Calvary;  
 they pour effectual prayers,  
 they strongly plead for me.  
 "Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,  
 "forgive him, O forgive," they cry,  
 "nor let that ransomed sinner die!"<sup>5</sup>

5. Charles Wesley, "Arise, My Soul, Arise," 1742.

### CROWN HIM WITH MANY CROWNS

Verse 4 completes what in the Greek text is a single sentence that runs from the beginning of verse 1. It says, “Having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” This seems like an odd ending, but there are two explanations. The first is that Jewish spirituality in that day had an excessively high view of angels. The Jews connected angels with the great events of the Old Testament, believing that God gave Moses the law through angelic mediation and that it was an angel voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Ex. 3:2).

The writer of Hebrews does not quarrel with these facts but rather with their interpretation. He acknowledges that angels are ministering spirits God sends for our help (Heb. 1:14). But that God employed angels does not mean that we should exalt them, as many Jews seem to have been doing. The angels, like the prophets, were servants of the old covenant. But Jesus Christ is the Son who fulfills the old covenant. He is the Christ, the Messiah, which means “Anointed One.” He fulfills the three anointed offices of the Old Testament: prophet, priest, and king. Therefore, the only way to fulfill all that the Old Testament taught, the only way to realize all that the Israelite fathers had looked to with hope, was to trust in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Upon the throne of heaven, he is exalted above even the angels, and his name—that is, his title or position—is more excellent than theirs.

There is another possible reason why the writer brings in angels, one that resonates with our own spiritual environment. People are fascinated by angels. Book about angels are bestsellers, and many people adorn themselves with angelic jewelry. The reason is that people know they need a mediator with God. They need someone to open a doorway to heaven and to the blessing and power of God. They need supernatural help for their otherwise insurmountable problems. People in the first-century church, just as in our own time, found in angels an appealing and non-demanding form of spiritual hope and comfort (see Col. 2:18). The fact that we don’t know much about angels makes them attractive for our veneration; we can fill in the details as we want them to be.

What this passage reveals about Jesus Christ is a cause for much greater comfort and hope than we could ever gain through the mystical worship of

*Prophet, Priest, and King*

angels. When the Bible presents God's Son as the true prophet and priest and king, God is showing us that Jesus Christ is and does all that our souls could ever need. Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the long-expected Anointed One, who enters into the God-given offices of the Old Testament so that he might save us to the uttermost. Charles Hodge expresses this well, explaining how Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills all our needs so that we might enter with him into the blessings of eternal life:

We as fallen men, ignorant, guilty, polluted, and helpless, need a Saviour who is a prophet to instruct us; a priest to atone and to make intercession for us; and a king to rule over and protect us. And the salvation which we receive at his hands includes all that a prophet, priest, and king in the highest sense of those terms can do. We are enlightened in the knowledge of the truth; we are reconciled unto God by the sacrificial death of his Son; and we are delivered from the power of Satan and introduced into the kingdom of God; all of which supposes that our Redeemer is to us at once prophet, priest, and king.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus is the perfect and all-sufficient answer from God for our everlasting blessing. The significance of this for the original readers is obvious: If you have a Savior like this, you never let him go. If you have to lose your job, your family, your possessions—even your life—then so be it. Jesus said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:24–25). What great profit it is, then, to gain Christ, and eternal life with him, even if all the world needs to be lost.

What this passage tells us about Christ reminds us not merely *that* we must hold to him in faith, but also *how* to draw near to him in faith. This comes through our understanding of his three offices as prophet and priest and king.

Jesus is our King. We need to be ruled and governed, protected and led. Let us therefore bow before him and crown him Lord of all, flying his banner at the gates of our hearts and forsaking all other kingdoms and rulers. Jesus is our Prophet. We need truth; he is the Truth and he speaks the

6. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 2:461.

HEBREWS 1:2-4

truth. Let us therefore come to his Word seeking light and forsaking all the false prophets who would lead us astray. Jesus is our Priest. So we should readily come to him for cleansing, for forgiveness, for interceding prayers, and for a full and loving reconciliation with God the Father. Let us therefore confess our great need for his blood and for his ongoing priestly intercession in heaven. Let us lay hold of the cross, forsaking all claim to any merit of our own. In all these ways, through his three offices, let us commit ourselves to Jesus Christ alone, who is able to save us to the uttermost, to the glory of God the Father.

## 3

## SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

*Hebrews 1:4–9*

*For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? (Heb. 1:5)*

**A**ngels are “in.” If you go to your local bookstore you will find legions of books, jewelry, and trinkets celebrating these winged spirits. When it comes to the media, it is certainly true that angels are “in.” Probably most well known is the popular 1990s television show *Touched by an Angel*, in which viewers encountered all too human angels serving as heavenly psychologists, proclaiming a soothing message of love from an all-embracing, nonjudgmental God. This is a far cry from the biblical presentation of angels, who are anything but advocates of a morally loose, tolerant deity. Angels appeal to our age because they seem to offer us access to heavenly blessings without having to deal directly with heaven’s God himself.

Ours is not the only time when false or inappropriate attitudes toward angels were held. Among many Jews in the first century there was an unhealthy emphasis on angels, in part because of the excellent things

## HEBREWS 1:4–9

said of them in Scripture. While angels are not to be thought of frivolously, neither are they to hold an improper place in our devotion.

Probably the main reason why the author of Hebrews needed to emphasize Christ's superiority to the angels has to do with angels' association with the old covenant given at Mount Sinai. In Hebrews 2:2 we see an example of this teaching, where it is said that the Old Testament law was "declared by angels." Acts 7:53 tells us that the law was "delivered by angels," so that their mediation of the law at Sinai does have biblical support.

In saying that Christ is superior to the angels, the author is again emphasizing the superiority of the new covenant over the old, and therefore the folly of turning back from the gospel. He makes this point here by means of seven Old Testament quotations. This is the pattern we will see all through Hebrews, and the writer sets an example for us in the authority he grants to Scripture. In this chapter we will look at the first five of these citations, from Hebrews 1:4 to 1:9, which together prove the superiority of God's Son to the angels.

**SUPERIOR BECAUSE OF A BETTER NAME**

The argument of these verses is straightforward: by means of these Old Testament prophecies and teachings, the writer of Hebrews demonstrates the claim of verse 4, that Jesus became "as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." Christ's supremacy rests upon his inheritance of the name "Son of God." The author's greater burden is to show the superiority of the new covenant to the old, the gospel to the law, that covenant which is mediated by Christ to the covenant mediated by angels. His purpose is to persuade his readers not to fall back from Christianity to the old and now obsolete religion.

The basic reason for Christ's exaltation over the angels is stated in verse 4, that he inherited the superior name, that is, the name of God's Son. This is reinforced in the next two citations, from Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7. Psalm 2 is an explicitly "messianic" psalm, referring in verse 2 to "the Anointed One." The early Christians made a strong connection between its statement that "the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed" (v. 2), and the trial

*Superior to Angels*

and condemnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Most important is the verse quoted in our passage, “The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’” (v. 7).

This raises the question as to when Jesus inherited the name “Son of God,” as Hebrews 1:4 says, or when he was begotten as God’s Son (Heb. 1:5, citing Ps. 2:7). After all, was he not the only begotten Son of God from before all worlds? Isn’t that the point of John 3:16, that “God so loved the world, that he gave his [one and] only Son”? In what way, then, did Christ *inherit* the name “Son of God”?

There are several times in Jesus’ life and ministry when a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming him to be God’s Son. For instance, when the angel Gabriel announced the birth of a son to the virgin Mary, he said, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). Some commentators therefore conclude that it was in his incarnation that Jesus was appointed or declared Son of God. Similarly, when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, we are told that the voice of God himself was audibly heard, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Therefore some mark this, the inauguration of Christ’s public ministry, as his proclamation as Son. Again, when Jesus was transfigured in glory before the three disciples, God’s voice was heard, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 17:5).

About one thing we must be clear: Jesus is eternally Son of God. He did not become Son of God at or subsequent to his incarnation. J. I. Packer explains that the relationship of the “God-man to the Father while He was on earth was not a new relationship occasioned by the incarnation, but the continuation in time of the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father in heaven. As in heaven, so on earth.”<sup>2</sup> Thus Paul says in Romans 1:3–4 that according to Jesus’ human nature he is called son of David, but according to his divine nature he is the Son of God. Likewise, John 1:14 tells us that in the incarnation “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” and as a result we saw the “glory as of the only Son from the Father.”

1. For an outline of the significance of Psalm 2 to the early church, see Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 47.

2. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 54–55.



## HEBREWS 1:4–9

So, if Jesus is eternally Son of God, what do we make of the statement in Psalm 2:7 that “today I have begotten you”? Fortunately, the New Testament helps us elsewhere, as is often the case. One of the principles of interpretation that the writer of Hebrews strictly follows is that Scripture interprets Scripture. We call this principle *the analogy of faith*. In the case of Psalm 2:7 we are helped by the apostle Paul, who cited it in his sermon at Pisidian Antioch: “We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’ ” (Acts 13:32–33).

This refers to Christ’s resurrection, and the idea of begetting here is that of declaring or manifesting to the full. Paul amplifies this in Romans 1:4, writing that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Here, then, is why those first-century Christians must hold fast to their faith in Christ, as must we: when God raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, having been crucified for our sins, God the Father brought him into his inheritance, manifesting before all the world his status as divine Son.

This idea of inheritance is key to the point of these verses. When we think of someone inheriting riches or a name, it has nothing to do with the merit or achievement of that person. Quite often, heirs are unworthy people who lack the very qualities that allowed their forebearer to amass his fortune. To be an heir simply means that you were born in an advantageous position and will not have to work for a living like the rest of us.

But that was not the way it was seen in Scripture, nor in the ancient world in which the original readers of this letter lived. In Roman society, when a son came of age, and if he was approved as a man by his father, he would be ceremonially received and bestowed with his name. So it was in Christ’s resurrection: by raising him from the dead, God gave final approval to him who had perfectly fulfilled the law and obediently endured the cross, bestowing on him the name “Son of God” with the Father’s divine and supernatural signature. Furthermore, in the ancient world sons inevitably entered into their father’s occupation and business. Today, very few of us follow in our father’s footsteps. But back then this is what it meant to be a son. To be

*Superior to Angels*

accepted and approved as son meant all these things—approval, inheritance, and fitness to take up the business of the father. James Montgomery Boice writes,

The resurrection of Jesus Christ establishes the doctrine of our Lord's deity. When he lived upon earth Jesus claimed to be equal with God and that God would raise him from the dead three days after his execution by the Jewish and Roman authorities. . . . The resurrection is God's seal on Christ's claim to divinity. Jesus was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4).<sup>3</sup>

By means of the resurrection, God the Father declared that Jesus Christ, and he alone, is the worthy heir and the true Son of God.

The second citation, from 2 Samuel 7:14, serves to augment the point made by the first: "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son." This was originally spoken by the prophet Nathan, as God's response to King David's godly desire to build a temple for the Lord. In this famous passage God promised David that he would always have an heir, and that his son would build God's house. As with many Old Testament prophecies, this had a near and an ultimate fulfillment. On the one hand it applied to Solomon, who built the temple and whom God treated with fatherly affection. But there were things said of this son that could not be true of any merely human descendant of David, especially the statement that "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13). This connects the prophecy forward to David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, of whom God says, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son." John Owen explains that this expresses "the paternal care of God over Christ in his kingdom, and the dearness of Christ himself unto him."<sup>4</sup>

The point, then, is, "To which of the angels did God ever say things like this?" The answer is that God said such things to none of the angels, and since he specially dignified Jesus Christ with the name of his own Son, Christ must be recognized as superior. That being the case, to whom should we

3. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 342–43.

4. John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 3:145.

## HEBREWS 1:4–9

turn for salvation? Whom shall we worship as our Lord and whom shall we follow, except the one proclaimed worthy to be heir and Son of God? Jesus taught, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6), for his salvation is that of the only begotten Son.

## SUPERIOR BECAUSE HE IS WORSHIPED

Hebrews 1:6 gives the second argument for Christ’s superiority, namely, that the angels are commanded to worship him. To prove this, the writer cites either Psalm 97:7 or Deuteronomy 32:43, both of which include the statement he has in mind: “And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’” In the Hebrew text, the angels are referred to as *elohim*, or gods, a not uncommon Old Testament way of speaking of the angels as heavenly beings. The Greek translation, the Septuagint, translates it as “angels,” and it is from there that our author cites; since he writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, our text tells us the correct interpretation of Psalm 97:7 and Deuteronomy 32:43.

First, we have the writer’s own introductory statement: “When he brings the firstborn into the world,” to which he adds God’s command that the angels should worship him. This probably refers to the coming of Jesus in his first advent, beginning with the virgin birth. Perhaps the most spectacular part of that first Christmas was the choir of angels singing praise. Angels also rejoiced at the open tomb, and again at Jesus’ ascension into heaven. The Book of Revelation reveals that the angels forever worship the Son who is lion and lamb as he sits upon his throne (see Rev. 5:5–6).

Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews speaks of Christ as God’s “firstborn,” and it is for this that he is worshiped. The point here seems to be Jesus’ special status over all the created realm. It does not mean that Jesus is first among creatures, but rather that he is exalted above the creatures. The idea is again that of inheritance and unique dignity. F. F. Bruce explains, “He is called firstborn because he exists before all creation and because all creation is his heritage.”<sup>5</sup>

5. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 56.

*Superior to Angels*

Great as the angels are, they are still creatures. So when the firstborn enters the world, it is no surprise to see them as chief among his worshipers. This was God's command and their delight. It shows that Jesus is the One we ought to worship, the One we want to trust and follow. Far from worshiping the angels, we should follow their example and worship God's Son.

**SUPERIOR BECAUSE OF HIS DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY**

Third, the writer of Hebrews points out that Christ is superior because of his divine sovereignty. This is the point of the brief citation in verse 7, as well as of the longer one in verses 8 and 9.

Verse 7 cites Psalm 104:4, saying, "Of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.'" This is a description of the angels as servants, even glorious ones. We should not despise angels; it is to God's glory that these are the kinds of servants and ministers he creates and deploys. Bruce writes, "Angels are portrayed as executing the divine commands with the swiftness of wind and the strength of fire."<sup>6</sup> We would not want to toy with angels. Though their glory is lesser than the Son's, it is a very significant glory. Everywhere they appear in the Bible they strike fear into men's hearts. In the Book of Revelation, even the apostle John was tempted to worship the angel who appeared to him. "You must not do that!" the angel rebuked him. "Worship God" (Rev. 19:10).

Nevertheless, as great and mighty and glorious as angels are, they minister while Christ sits enthroned. They have servanthood, and he has sovereignty. Therefore, the statement of their glory as servants is set against another Old Testament citation in verses 8 and 9, from Psalm 45:6–7, which exults in Christ's sovereign glory: "But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness 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.'"

Christ's enthronement was central to the Old Testament expectation. This theme starts in passages like Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7, which our author

6. *Ibid.*, 58.

## HEBREWS 1:4–9

has already brought into play. But it continues all through the Old Testament. Isaiah rested the hope of his generation on God's promise of a Savior: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:6–8). This is what the angel told Mary would be accomplished through her virgin-born Son: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32–33).

All this was anticipated in the remarkable lines of Psalm 45. This is a wedding psalm, depicting a royal bride as she prepares to enter into marriage with the king: "All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many-colored robes she is led to the king" (Ps. 45:13–14). The psalm begins with words that express the throbbing in her heart: the bride celebrates his handsome looks, his royal splendor and majesty, his mighty strength, and the dignity of his cause (Ps. 45:1–5). But then verse 6 explodes the bounds of propriety. The psalm suddenly exclaims of the king, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." This verse is an intense example of what is true of the Old Testament as a whole, that it demands fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ. However a Jewish scribe might explain away this statement, no king of Judah could live up to this acclamation. Only Jesus Christ, the son of David and the Son of God, can fulfill this boast of an eternal reign that is perfect in righteousness. The writer of Hebrews is teaching us how to read the Old Testament (and particularly the Psalms), namely, to read it through a Christ-colored lens—promising and anticipating, portraying and celebrating the coming of Jesus Christ. The handling of the Psalms by the author of Hebrews shows us what Jesus himself taught the forlorn disciples on the Emmaus road: "That everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

Just as the opening verses of Hebrews (Heb. 1:1–3) introduced the anointed offices of Jesus—prophet, priest, and king—Psalm 45 goes on to

*Superior to Angels*

speak of this royal groom's anointing: "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (v. 7). There could hardly be a clearer reference to the Messiah—the Anointed One. He is identified as God: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Ps. 45:6). But it is "God, your God," who anoints him. Not only does this provide an important Old Testament foreshadowing of the doctrine of the Trinity, but it stunningly asserts that the true king of glory, the true Messiah in whom righteousness will come to reign, is one with God himself.

Note, too, the basis for this exaltation—the Messiah's perfect righteousness. The psalm says, "The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness" (Heb. 1:8–9; Ps. 45:6–7). This is why Jesus is exalted; this is why he is anointed as Messiah and Savior, because in his righteousness he is worthy to reign as God's Son and is able to save sinners.

All this being true, to whom else will we turn for the righteousness we so desperately lack, but need if we are to stand in God's judgment? Who else will reign over this earth to establish righteousness? To what power, to what authority, will we run seeking safety and refuge, except the One whom God has enthroned forever, who bears the title, "You, O God," whose scepter is that of righteousness, and who, at the end of days, will establish righteousness upon the earth?

**"I HAVE BECOME YOUR FATHER"**

The five Old Testament citations in Hebrews 1:5–9 amply prove the writer's point that Jesus is superior to the angels, and therefore worthy of our adoration. He is superior because his name is greater, Son of God; he is superior because he is worshiped by the angels themselves; and he is superior because of his royal sovereignty and divine anointing.

It is one thing, however, to acknowledge Christ's greatness and worthiness to be praised, and another to come to him personally seeking your own salvation. The writer has proved the former, but the latter is his goal, that is, that we should hold fast to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

In all of these Old Testament citations, God the Father acts and ordains with regard to Jesus Christ. He appoints and declares Jesus as Son and heir;

## HEBREWS 1:4–9

he commands angels to worship him; he enthrones him on the eternal throne of righteousness. Why? Because the Father loves the Son and wants to exalt and bless him, just as the Son loves the Father and wants him to be praised.

But there was another reason for all these things, a reason that is amazing and thrilling. God appointed and exalted and enthroned his Son so that we might be reconciled to him and enter into salvation through the Son as a mediator. This is why the eternal Son became man, and as man was declared Son of God in power—it was for our sakes, because of his love for us. God’s Son became like us, so that we might become like him through his resurrection.

If you have believed on Jesus Christ as God’s Son and come to him to be your Savior, then these verses speak not merely to him but also to you. You, in the quiet of your heart, hear God’s tender voice say these precious, dear words of verse 5 to you: “You are my son, today I have become your Father.” Forevermore, you may call God Father, with all the security and care and privileges of a beloved child, in Christ. You read in verse 6 that Jesus is called the “firstborn.” Then realize what Paul wrote in Colossians 1:18, that he is not merely the firstborn *over* creation, but that in his resurrection he is the firstborn *of* a new creation to which we belong by faith. Paul writes in Romans 8:29 that we were “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Jesus is the prototype of a new race in his resurrection, the firstborn to whom we are brothers and sisters.

Finally, verse 9 speaks of God anointing his enthroned Son “with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” We are among the companions of whom God speaks. By his righteousness Christ gains a kingdom, and we are members of that kingdom; we will reign with him, as his blessed companions, forever and ever. His joy and his righteousness are the blessings he gives to his royal subjects. This is what the prophet Isaiah foretold, speaking of the anointed Jesus Christ and the work he would come to do:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . . to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead

*Superior to Angels*

of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. (Isa. 61:1–3)

Beauty for ashes, gladness for mourning, praise instead of despair, a righteous people displaying the glory of the Lord—all this is the bounty of our righteous king, God's firstborn Son and our elder-born brother, his blessings to all who trust in him.



## 4

## THE REIGNING LORD

*Hebrews 1:10–14*

*You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up. (Heb. 1:10–12)*

**N**o chapter in the entire New Testament sets forth the divinity of Jesus Christ so thoroughly and fervently as this first chapter of the Book of Hebrews. Other chapters are notable for their portrayal of Christ's deity, such as John 1 and Colossians 1. But for the sheer weight of testimony to the divine nature of Christ, there is nothing in all of Scripture like the barrage of Old Testament verses applied to him in Hebrews 1.

## THE DEITY OF CHRIST

From the very beginning, Hebrews 1 brings Christ into the closest relationship with God and his work. He is called "heir of all things, through whom also he created the world . . . the radiance of the glory of God and the

*The Reigning Lord*

exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (vv. 2–3). In verse 6 we see the angels worshiping him, and by the testimony of the angels themselves, only God is to be worshiped (Rev. 19:10). But if there is any doubt left that the Son is God, this is dispelled utterly in verse 8, which says to him, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” This is a great trinitarian passage, for the Son is addressed as “God,” and yet it also says that his God has exalted him: “Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

With such a testimony, it is impossible to see how the authority of Scripture can be maintained while the deity of Christ is denied. Verse 10, which begins our present passage, is the climax of this whole presentation. Here the Holy Spirit, speaking through the writer of Hebrews, informs us of these words which are spoken by the Father to the Son: “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.”

It is traditional, when speaking of the attributes of God, to distinguish between his communicable and incommunicable attributes. Some of his attributes God can and does communicate to us, such as goodness, mercy, and holiness, to name a few. But other attributes are part and parcel of God’s deity, and cannot be communicated to mortal creatures. In these verses, it is divine incommunicable attributes that are ascribed to the Son—attributes like eternity, omnipotence, and immutability. Indeed, we are deliberately reminded of Genesis 1:1—“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Here that work of creation is ascribed to the Lord Jesus Christ, with all the implications of divinity that accompany it.

We also observe here a striking contrast between the creation and the Son of God. Heaven and earth, we are told, will perish. The great works of God in creation will come to an end—the majesty of the mountains, the roaring of the waterfall, the beauty of the valley—all these will run their course and ultimately perish. Indeed, like an old set of clothes, they are even now wearing out. Stars are using up their hydrogen; matter is converted to energy and there is loss. Ours is a dying universe with its end in sight.

If this is true of God’s creation, how much more of man’s work! The tallest skyscraper will fall; the dams will burst; the greatest achievements will be

## HEBREWS 1:10–14

forgotten. All this will happen not merely in the long-running course of time, with its decay, but suddenly, by God's Son when he comes to end history and judge the world. He will "roll it up like a robe," exchanging it at his desire for a new garment. The apostle Peter writes of this: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Peter 3:10).

As Paul writes, "The present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31). But of God's Son we read the opposite: "They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. . . . But you are the same, and your years will have no end" (Heb. 1:11–12).

It is hard to imagine a more emphatic portrayal of Christ's divinity, a mighty Lord and God who is worthy of our faith.

**PSALM 102: LAMENT AND REJOICING**

Whenever we see an Old Testament citation, it is good to look back at the passage in its original context, because the New Testament writer often has that in mind as well. This is especially true of Hebrews 1:10–12, which is a lengthy citation from Psalm 102, which has this subtitle: "A Prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord."

In the first half of that psalm, the writer laments the decaying nature of life, the weakness and ultimately the failure of all created things, and especially of human nature. He writes, "For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is struck down like grass and has withered. . . . Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh. . . . I lie awake; I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. All the day my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink" (Ps. 102:3–9). In particular, the writer sees his mortality as a result of man's alienation from God on account of sin: ". . . because of your indignation and anger; for you have taken me up and thrown me down. My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass" (Ps. 102:10–11). Man's mutability, weakness, and mortality on account of sin make up the content of this lament.

These are cries that will find themselves on the lips of everyone who lives on this earth for any length of time. Our days do pass away like smoke, and

*The Reigning Lord*

our bones do give way. Every one of us must reckon with the fact that death awaits us; even as we live we “wither away like grass,” here today and gone tomorrow. The psalmist seems to be motivated by the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians; in the bitterness of defeat he eats ashes and mingles his drink with tears. And while we live, we too will know the taunts and the oppression of enemies we are too weak to oppose.

But in the second half of the psalm, the lamenting man lifts up his eyes to see God and there he finds a great hope: “But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever. . . . You will arise and have pity on Zion. . . . For the LORD builds up Zion; he appears in his glory” (Ps. 102:12–16). Though all is lost in this life, though hardship and even death await, though the worst calamity brings destruction, the man who trusts the Lord sees him in his eternal reign of power, his unchanging and unchangeable character, and there he finds hope. For as God said in Isaiah 51:6, “The heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.” Despite all we may lose in this life, through faith in God we receive a salvation that is eternal and secure.

That is how Psalm 102 goes, and with the words of our passage in Hebrews 1 it approaches its end, remembering that God created all things and endures long beyond their end: “They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. . . . But you are the same, and your years will have no end.”

One purpose in Hebrews 1 is to show Christ’s superiority to the angels, and therefore the superiority of the new covenant to the old. That contrast is inescapable in light of these verses. If these things are true of the Son, then he is worthy of all our trust. We would be foolish in the extreme not to turn for our salvation to such a mighty Savior.

**FATHER TO SON**

In Psalm 102, these words are addressed to Yahweh, the personal, covenant name of the Lord in the Old Testament. What is striking about their repetition in Hebrews 1 is that here they are spoken by God to Jesus, the Son. It is God who addresses him as “Lord,” which is equivalent to the Old Testament “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.”

## HEBREWS 1:10–14

Indeed, in the light of the New Testament we must see both halves of Psalm 102 as applying to our Lord Jesus Christ. *He* is the afflicted man pouring out his lament before his Father. It is *his* voice, as he faces and then takes up the cross, that we hear crying out, “For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is struck down like grass and has withered. . . . All the day my enemies taunt me” (Ps. 102:3–4, 8). Jesus, in his humanity, knew what it was to have his days cut short, to die too young, afflicted and despised by men, and abandoned by even his friends. Crucified in shame, he died a cursed death, with all the bitterness and darkness a man can experience.

The second half of the psalm constitutes heaven’s response to the anguished cry of the Savior. Yes, as man he was cursed and rejected and died on the cross, but as resurrected and exalted Son, God says to him: “But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever” (Ps. 102:12). Yes, the world may have crucified you, but I have enthroned you! “They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end” (Ps. 102:26–27). Arthur Pink comments:

*This* was God’s answer to the plaint of Christ’s being “cut off” in the midst of His days. . . . As man, in resurrection, He received “life for evermore.” Do we really grasp this? For [almost two thousand] years since the Cross, men have been born, have lived, and then died. Statesmen, emperors, and kings have appeared on the scene and then passed away. But there is one glorious Man who spans the centuries, who in His own humanity bridges those [two millennia]. He has not died, nor even grown old: He is “the same yesterday, and today, and forever!” [Heb. 13:8].<sup>1</sup>

## SEATED AT GOD’S RIGHT HAND

Psalm 102 is a wonderful portrait of what the resurrection and ascension of Christ are all about. We can see why the writer of Hebrews turned his thoughts to that great psalm. But in verse 13 we find yet another great psalm, the last of the Old Testament citations used to uphold the supremacy of Christ in Hebrews 1. Verse 13 shows us the opening words of Psalm 110:

1. A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 73–74.

### *The Reigning Lord*

“And to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’”

If the words of Psalm 102 are God’s verbal reply to the cross, in this quotation from Psalm 110 we see God’s action that accompanied those words. This enthronement is in keeping with what was said in Hebrews 1:3: “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

Psalm 110 is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament, because of what it tells us about where Christ went when he departed this earth in glory, and what he is doing now. The imagery of him seated comes from the oriental court, where the king sat upon his throne while his vassals and servants stood before him to show their deference and his supremacy. This is the picture the Bible gives us of God’s throne room in passages like Revelation 7, where the angels and elders and living creatures stand before the enthroned sovereign God, worshipping him and ready to do his will. To be told, “Sit at my right hand,” signifies a singular honor and dignity. It shows rank and power and authority in the kingdom.

The fact that Jesus is seated on the throne of God does not mean that he is inactive. Rather, he is attentively concerned with the affairs of his flock. Being seated, he wields authority over and for the sake of the church. Just perusing through the Book of Acts you will see how active the ascended and seated Christ was on behalf of the early church. He sent forth his Spirit to empower his human messengers and to bring many others to faith, as he did on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. When Stephen, the first martyr, was facing the bloodthirsty mob, he cried out, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). Jesus stood to receive his own into the heavenly courts.

When the zealous persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, was heading to Damascus to harass the believers there, the risen Jesus appeared to him in all his glory, saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4). Indeed, he commands angels and sends them for the service of his people, as was the case when Peter was rescued from Herod’s prison by an angel (12:6–10). This is what the writer of Hebrews tells us about angels in verse 14: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” The angels are servants who are sent; the risen Christ is the Lord who sends.

## HEBREWS 1:10–14

What a comfort it is to know that our Lord is so busy on our behalf from his heavenly seat of divine authority. We may never know when he has sent angels to minister to us in time of need, to thwart spiritual antagonists, and to strengthen us in times of weakness. Like the chariots of fire that surrounded the prophet Elisha, how many times do we receive unseen help from those ministering spirits that Christ sends to us?

We also know that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to teach us of him, to enlighten our minds in the knowledge of God, to renew our wills, and to guide us in paths of righteousness. We know that Jesus intercedes for us with the Father, ensuring our acceptance in God's presence, sanctifying our petitions, and pleading our every cause from his seat of honor and favor and authority at God's right hand. Christ is exceedingly busy on our behalf! He who "upholds the universe by the word of his power," as we are told in verse 3, also upholds our faith by his prayers for us. As he said to his disciple Peter before his time of weakness: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31–32).

## EVERY ENEMY DEFEATED

Hebrews says that Christ will sit at God's right hand "until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." In ancient times, a victorious general would place his foot upon the throat of a defeated foe, as Joshua had his commanders do to the captured kings of Canaan (Josh. 10:24). Who, then, are Jesus' enemies? The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:24–26).

The curse of the law, sin, Satan, the worldly powers, death, the grave—these are Christ's enemies. During his earthly ministry he advanced into the ranks of his enemy, casting out demons, purifying leprosy, bringing healing to the sick, exposing hypocrisy, opposing false teaching, humbling the proud, cleansing the temple of moneychangers, and all the while calling sinners to faith and repentance. It is especially in the extension of the gospel that he now overcomes his foes as men and women come to saving faith in him. In

### *The Reigning Lord*

the end, he will have no enemies left standing, as the Book of Revelation tells us: “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14). “He will wipe away every tear from [his people’s] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

Christ our Lord sits enthroned at God’s right hand until his enemies become his footstool. This is the goal of his activity, after which he will present his triumph to God the Father. And then he will reign forever and ever, as proclaimed by the voices in heaven: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

### A SUFFICIENT SAVIOR

Thus concludes the sevenfold exposition of the supremacy and deity of Jesus Christ, going back to verse 4—seven Old Testament passages that prove his superiority to angels. How fitting that this portrait concludes with Jesus seated at God’s right hand, for that is where he is now, reigning as Lord over and on behalf of his bride the church. He is a sufficient Savior, worthy of our trust and praise.

In these verses we see three divine attributes applied to Jesus Christ: eternity, omnipotent power, and immutability. Each of these attributes gives us compelling reasons to trust him as our Savior.

Ours is a Savior who was there from eternity, when the worlds were born. “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (v. 10). Here is a rock on which we can stand assured. And yet he came into this world as one of us; he took up humanity that he might make a place for man in eternal heaven. Even now he opens a door for all who would come to God through him.

Furthermore, our reigning Lord wields omnipotent might, overcoming all the enemies that oppose his reign, enemies that also enslave and afflict us. And yet it was through the greatest weakness that he lifted the heaviest burden, even the weight of our sins. It was because he submitted to the cross in all its agony and shame that God raised him to the position of glory and authority. On the cross Jesus showed his worthiness to reign in might for-



## HEBREWS 1:10–14

ever, and therefore God has crowned him Lord of all. From God's right hand he is able to help us in time of need and save us unto eternal life.

Finally, our Savior is immutable—that is, unchanging and unchangeable: “You are the same, and your years will have no end” (Heb. 1:12). “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8), and therefore we may always turn to him with confidence for salvation. He is never going to change his mind about us or lose his power to save us.

If all this is true, what can a soul need in time or eternity that cannot be found in Christ? Do you need pardon for your sin? See him exalted and know that God has accepted the sacrifice of his blood on your behalf. Do you need reconciliation to God? There he is at God's right hand, interceding for you and offering his own perfect work as the ground of your acceptance. Do you need newness of life—a new heart, a new strength to follow him? From his heavenly throne he sends mighty resources—even angels to your aid. Better yet, he sends his Holy Spirit to work within you with his own power.

Do you have troubles? Difficult decisions to make? Choices that worry you or problems that cause you fear and anxiety? Christ is enthroned in power, a Savior who cares for you with wisdom and love, with power and a grand purpose for your future. The practical value of this truth is immense, for it leads us to trust him and glorify him with our blood-purchased lives. Do you fear death? He is reigning now until even that last enemy shall be conquered. Because he reigns victorious, death will have no hold on you, but only ushers you into the courts of glory.

What is there you might need but that the risen and reigning Lord and Savior is the answer? There is nothing you might face, nothing you might lack, nothing you might need in all your weakness and sin and human frailty, that is not found abundantly in him who loves you and gave himself for you and now reigns forever as Savior and Lord, who remains the same and whose years shall have no end.

## 5

## PAY ATTENTION!

*Hebrews 2:1–4*

*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. (Heb. 2:1)*

**W**e are living in a time when truth does not seem to count for much. The intellectual climate is summed up by the popular bumper sticker, “My karma ran over my dogma.” In other words, “Don’t get hung up on matters of doctrine or truth. Feeling good is what really matters.” That may sound tolerant and attractive, but it is a far cry from the sentiment of the biblical writers, to whom such an attitude is a recipe for disaster.

To the apostles, as to the prophets before them, and as to the Lord Jesus Christ, matters of truth are of the highest priority. What we believe about Jesus is the most important thing, determining both our eternal destiny and our usefulness to God in this world. The apostle John wrote, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18). It is through belief in the truth that God saves us and then works in our hearts to make us holy. F. F. Bruce thus writes: “The truth and teaching of the Gospel must not be held lightly; they are of supreme moment,

## HEBREWS 2:1–4

they are matters of life and death, and must be cherished and obeyed at all costs. The danger of drifting away from them, and so losing them, cannot be treated too gravely.”<sup>1</sup>

## A DANGER: DRIFTING AWAY

It is to this matter that the writer of Hebrews now turns in the first verse of chapter 2, “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” This is the first of five major warnings in Hebrews, all of which deal with the danger of falling away from faith in Christ and therefore from salvation. The Book of Hebrews is a sermon on the theme “Do not fall away.” These Hebrew Christians were being persecuted by the Jewish community around them, and the apostolic writer urgently warns them not to renounce Jesus Christ under pressure.

The author focuses on the danger of “drifting away” from the message they had heard. The Greek word here is a nautical term, *pararreō*, describing a ship at sail that has drifted off course, or a ship in harbor that has slipped its moorings. In other contexts it is used to describe something that slips from our minds, or even a ring that slips off a finger. One of the key ideas here is that this drifting away is something that happens largely unnoticed. While it is happening the changes are imperceptible; only later do its consequences become clear. This is a grave danger, against which we must respond with careful attention.

Some years ago, when my family was vacationing in Hawaii, my brother and I went snorkeling in a bay that was breathtaking in its beauty, with its coral reef and multicolored fish. Before we entered the water, our guide warned us against straying beyond a certain point because of the strong current that would pull us out to sea. He concluded with stories of people who had failed to pay attention and had been pulled out by the current, only to have their bodies wash up on other islands miles away. It was an effective deterrent, to say the least! This is what the writer of Hebrews wanted for his teaching. There is a current to this present evil age, pulling strongly out from the safe harbor of salvation in Christ. We do not have to actively betray Jesus

1. F. F. Bruce: *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 60.

***Pay Attention!***

or renounce our faith. Simply by not paying attention, by becoming preoccupied with the sights and sounds of this world, we can be easily drawn out until we are swept away forever.

Do you realize that? Do you realize that if you do not pay attention to your spiritual condition it will deteriorate on its own? Do you realize, given the corrupt nature of this world and of your heart, that you naturally become dull and then deadened spiritually, steadily believing the lies of this evil age? Without giving heed to the spiritual resources God provides, your heart will revert to greed, pride, avarice, sensuality, and malice—all those characteristics that define our natural state in sin and lead to destruction.

The Book of Hebrews is notable for confronting us with the reality of apostasy. To be sure, the Bible teaches the eternal security of all true believers in Jesus Christ. Jesus taught: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). Yet it is also true that not all who give profession of faith are true believers. Judas Iscariot is one infamous example. He walked with Jesus for three years. Apparently the other disciples never suspected he was a fraud until he had betrayed our Lord. Another excellent example is Paul’s one-time companion Demas. At the end of Colossians and Philemon, Paul adds his name to the list of his close companions. But in 2 Timothy we read these sober words: “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me” (2 Tim. 4:10). Here are the cases of a disciple of Jesus and a fellow-laborer with the apostle Paul. If they could fall away, we can, too.

We are secure through faith in Jesus Christ. But like a good tree, true faith is revealed by its fruit (Matt. 7:17–19). Therefore Peter tells us to “be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10). “Examine yourselves,” Paul adds, “to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Cor. 13:5). We must therefore persevere and use the resources God gives us to bear fruit and thus not to drift away.

**A COMMAND: PAY ATTENTION!**

Mindful of the danger of apostasy, the author of Hebrews gives the accompanying command: “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard” (Heb. 2:1). “What we have heard” is the message of salvation in God’s Son, as the preceding chapter declared.

## HEBREWS 2:1–4

The Greek word for “pay attention,” *prosechō*, is another term with nautical implications; it was used to denote holding to a course or securing an anchor. There is a danger, the writer argues, and there is also a remedy. To avoid drifting off course you hold the wheel of the ship in line; to avoid slipping out with the current you make fast the anchor.

Drifting away happens on its own without much effort on our part, but staying on course is quite the opposite. It requires constant diligence! C. S. Lewis was typically perceptive when he wrote, “We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in your mind. It must be fed. And as a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?”<sup>2</sup> In the matter of our belief, as in all other matters, Christianity requires hard work; the New Testament describes the life of faith as a fight, a race, and a field in which a farmer labors. Paul says in various places: “I press on . . . I follow after . . . I strive . . . I fight.”

When it comes to the past tense of our salvation—to what is already finished and secure, namely, our justification through faith in Christ—there is no place for our works. We receive forgiveness of our sins not by our work but by Christ’s work. Faith is, first, essentially passive; we do not act but receive, resting upon Christ’s saving action on our behalf. But when it comes to the present tense of our salvation—that which is worked out progressively, namely, our sanctification—this is extremely active. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains it well: “In the matter of our righteousness and justification we can never say too often that we do nothing, we can do nothing, it is entirely the work of Christ. But once we are saved and given this new life, then the progressive work of sanctification does not call for passivity, and we are exhorted to activity.”<sup>3</sup>

J. C. Ryle, in his masterpiece on the Christian life, a book titled simply *Holiness*, added this:

2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 119–20.

3. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Peace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 89.

***Pay Attention!***

I will never shrink from declaring my belief that there are no “spiritual gains without pains.” I should as soon expect a farmer to prosper in business who contented himself with sowing his fields and never looking at them till harvest, as expect a believer to attain much holiness who was not diligent about his Bible-reading, his prayers, and the use of his Sundays.<sup>4</sup>

**SANCTIFIED BY THE TRUTH**

The particular means of security and sanctification the writer of Hebrews wants us to concentrate on is the gospel message, or, to put it more generally, God’s saving revelation culminating in Christ. To use the metaphor of verse 1, God’s Word is the anchor that secures our salvation, and it is the rudder by which we safely steer the ship of our souls.

This is a principle we vitally need today. People are looking for power from God to change their lives and assure them of salvation. Yet many Christians seem intent on using every method except the one highlighted for us all through the Bible, including this very passage: diligent study and understanding of the Word of God. Many people seek to come close to God through some intense emotional experience. Others follow disciplines, rituals, or special formulas that are guaranteed to make them more godly or secure. But look at the emphasis of the writer of Hebrews: “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard,” that is, to the Word of God.

We must remember and organize our thoughts around the Bible’s message every day of our lives. We need to remember humanity’s fall in sin and the corruption that remains within us. We need to recall what the Bible teaches about God’s character—his faithfulness and power, his wisdom and love. We need to be told about his holiness and what an offense our sin is to him. Then we must look to the cross and see God’s mercy so wondrously displayed, remembering that we have been purchased as a new and holy people, never more to dwell in sin. We need daily to ground our identity (1) in God’s adoption of us as his own beloved children, (2) in Christ’s blood that was shed to purchase us from sin, and (3) in our destiny as coheirs with him and as saints called to glory, but also as pilgrims sojourning through an alien

4. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 1979), 21.

## HEBREWS 2:1–4

and dying world. In sum, we need to “pay closer attention” to the message of God’s Word. It is like a firm anchor to hold us fast in salvation, like a compass to guide us safely .

This is a principle emphasized by Jesus himself. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,” he said, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32–33). Praying to his Father on the night of his arrest, Jesus made it one of his chief requests that God’s Word would lead his people to holiness: “Sanctify them in the truth,” he prayed. “Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

The apostle Paul gave this principle similar emphasis. His great exposition of Christian doctrine in the Book of Romans turns to its application in the twelfth chapter. He begins by exhorting Christians to offer their lives to God in gratitude for his mercy. But how are we to live for God? Paul writes of the transforming effect of God’s Word for those who “pay careful attention” to it: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

Donald Grey Barnhouse sums up this message in words that are pointed but true: “It is the Word of God that can establish the Christian and give him strength to overcome the old forces and to live the new. It can never be done in any other way. . . . You cannot find even one Christian on this earth who has developed into strength of wisdom and witness in the Lord who has attained it by any other means than study and meditation in the Word of God.”<sup>5</sup> If we want to hold fast to Christ and advance in the faith, we must become people of the Book—the Bible—giving careful attention to its message all the days of our lives.

## TWO REASONS TO PAY ATTENTION

Hebrews 2:1 is the key verse in this passage, supplying both a warning and a command. Verses 2–4 provide support, making clear why this exhortation should be taken so seriously. In these verses we see both a negative and a positive commendation of the New Testament message in Christ.

5. Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 1:137–38.

*Pay Attention!*

First there is negative support: “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Heb. 2:2–3a). This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. The old covenant had to be taken most seriously, even though—as we saw in Hebrews 1—it was spoken by angels and is subordinate to the new covenant. It was a valid and binding covenant, and “every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution.”

The Old Testament, as the first readers of Hebrews well knew, is rife with examples. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelled against Moses and were swallowed up into the earth (Num. 16:32). Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire (Lev. 10:2). And the whole generation of Israelites who did not trust the Lord were made to wander forty years in the wilderness and then to die. These are examples just from the exodus of those who disobeyed the old covenant and were severely punished.

If all that is true of the old covenant, which is the lesser revelation and lesser salvation, the writer then asks, How shall we escape if we neglect the greater salvation of the new covenant?

These words should dispel the common notion that the new covenant, or the New Testament, is an easier law than the old covenant. “God tried being legalistic in the Old Testament,” the argument goes, “but since that didn’t work, he changed his mind. In the New Testament he decided just to love us.” First of all, this misunderstands the Old Testament, which presents not only a holy God but also a loving God to Israel. More importantly, it denies the point of our passage, which is that the stakes actually go up in the new covenant. There is a greater salvation, and the obligation to receive it in faith is more stringent. If we think the New Testament represents God rejecting judgment and embracing an indiscriminating love for everyone, we can be corrected merely by remembering the woes Jesus pronounced on the Pharisees. Of Capernaum, where many of his miracles were performed, Jesus said: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matt. 11:23–24).



## HEBREWS 2:1-4

If anything, Jesus' presentation of the law of Moses serves to bring its every nuance and spiritual demand into view. In the Sermon on the Mount he taught, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council" (Matt. 5:21-22). One after another, Jesus presents Old Testament laws in terms of their inner, higher, and spiritual demands. So did Jesus lower the demands of the law? According to him, "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17).

On the night of his arrest, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (John 13:34). People sometimes assume this means that God is willing to settle for less in the new covenant than in the old. Back in the Old Testament, they say, people wearied themselves obeying all kinds of rules and regulations. In the easier new covenant, all you have to do is love. That's it. Just love.

But of course, the command to love is vastly more difficult than the outward demands of the Old Testament law. It is easy to wash your hands. But washing your heart of anger, malice, and self-interest is another matter altogether. Therefore, the law's condemnation—always intended to drive sinners to God's grace in the gospel—is more intense in the light of Christ's coming. "This is the judgment," Jesus declared: "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Therefore it is most urgent for us to attend to and receive and hold fast the revelation that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

In the second half of verse 3 and then in verse 4, the revelation in Christ is positively commended. The writer says of this salvation, "It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

The gospel has come to us from the Lord himself. This is not the musing of some airy philosopher, the diatribe of some earthly despot, or the notions of some sentimental guru. Rather, this is a message that has come through God's own Son, who came from heaven to earth to be our Savior. This is what we saw in the opening verses of this letter: "Long ago, at

*Pay Attention!*

many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2).

This message demands our attention because it was declared by the Lord himself. It declares a salvation that he gives as a free gift to all who believe. What a contrast there is between this gospel and every supposed gospel offered by this world! In every religion of man, people have to feed the god they serve. But Christ Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). In every human message of salvation, you carry the burden on your shoulders, and the false gods you serve weigh down upon your back. But in his gospel God says: “I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (Isa. 46:4 NIV).

Furthermore, the writer adds, we know that this message really is of the Lord because it was attested to in the ministry of the apostles by “signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Heb. 2:4b). One of the greatest wonders that attests to the divine origin of the gospel is the very fact of the apostles’ witness. These were men who knew for sure whether or not the gospel was true. Peter and John, for instance, were at the open tomb on the morning of the resurrection (see John 20:4–9). They knew whether or not Jesus really was raised. This means that they would have been aware if their message was false. What did they gain from preaching the gospel? The answer is nothing more than a life of persecution, poverty, and trial, with the likelihood of martyrdom staring them in the face the whole time. Peter was martyred, as were all of the original apostles except John. Acts 5 records them being threatened and then beaten by the Sanhedrin for teaching the Christian gospel. How did they respond? Acts 5:41 tells us, “They left . . . rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name,” and immediately resumed their preaching.

The wonder of the apostles’ faith is a definite proof of the divine origin of the Christian message. Other signs and wonders and miracles and spiritual gifts fill the Book of Acts, and through them God gave his confirmation to the apostolic teaching. It is a message like no other, given by the Lord Jesus Christ, and witnessed to by the Holy Spirit.

Because of what God did in the apostolic age, we do not need signs and wonders today to prove the gospel. The writer of Hebrews speaks of this

## HEBREWS 2:1-4

attestation in the past, not the present, tense: “God *bore* witness” by these signs and wonders. We have already been given all the proof we need to believe the gospel, namely, that it was given by the Lord himself and fully attested in the ministry of the apostles.

**A MODERN MIRACLE**

“We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard,” the writer of Hebrews exhorts, “lest we drift away from it.” These words are as relevant today as when first written. We should fear to be separated from the anchor of God’s Word, or to have any other hand on the wheel of our lives than the Captain of our salvation, who speaks in the Bible. To drift away is ultimately to invite the judgment God will inflict on those who neglect his saving message in Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews says God attested to the gospel in the apostolic age by signs and wonders and miracles. We are not to go seeking after signs and wonders, but there is a miracle that happens today in the lives of those who hold fast to the message of God’s Word. It is the miracle of a changed life—a changed mind and a changed heart, changed attitudes and changed behaviors—changed into the likeness of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. This is the wonder by which God commends his Word to the world today—Christian people enlightened in truth, purified in holiness, settled in peace, and energized in love. This is the life eternal that begins today in the lives of those who believe. As God does this in you, through his Word, he will use the miracle of your life to commend his message in Christ to others.

This is God’s “karma,” which runs over the dogma of this world’s unbelief, so that many may believe and be saved, no longer neglecting so great a salvation, and thus escaping the wrath that is to come on all who disbelieve.