

“A More Excellent Son”

Hebrews 1:1-4

April 14, 2024

Well, let's go.

What's the expression - put your money where your mouth is.

Or don't ask other people to do something you aren't willing to try

44 He told them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

46 He also said to them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead the third day,

47 and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

49 And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high.” -- Luke 24:44-49 (CSB)

So we saw last week that the whole of the Bible was pointing to this coming Messiah who would suffer, die and be raised on the third day. This idea is more important than we might think.

Sports provide an illustration of this reality.

What is the point of a game, like basketball?

If we think about it, there are all sorts of value:

- You learn to work well with others
- You get into great shape and have energy for other things in life
- You use your abilities to contribute and make other people better
 - You learn to listen to a leader and do what they tell you

But, are these the point? Well, no, at least not if you are the coach of one of these teams. Your job doesn't hinge on whether you players are in good shape, whether they like each other, whether you have one superstar, or even whether the players enjoy playing for you. At the end of the day, your job comes down to one thing - does your team win games. That's the point. Everything else is a secondary benefit.

In a similar way, what's the point of Christianity. What's it all about? Ask someone and they might be tempted to list off a host of benefits:

- You find a family in the local church and have community with some of your dearest friends

- You are empowered to overcome crippling sin and are learning to walk in holiness
- You start to understand your Bible and grow to love spending time reading it and praying
- You have hope to face the really difficult circumstances that come in life.

All wonderful things, indeed. But are they the point? Well, no. The center of Christianity, the goal, the focus, is Jesus Christ. Christians are not, first and foremost, merely people who read their Bibles, or go to church, or walk in holiness, or who suffer well. First, they are people who believe certain things about Jesus. Take Jesus out, and the whole thing falls apart.

That's why the New Testament writers spend the majority of their time talking about Jesus - He is their point of orientation. Everything they tell us to think or do or be is built off of an understanding of who Jesus is and what He's come to do. Don't believe me, read the first post-Pentacost sermon recorded in Acts 2. There Peter does nothing but talk about Jesus.

We noted that this is how Hebrews opens:

Long ago God spoke to the ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways.
2 In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son.

God has spoken through His Son. The words that were once on tablets and in the prophets mouth have now been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The opening refrain has a poetical note that's lost on us in our English Bibles. You only get the repetition of "different" - but the original language has five words that begin with the prefix "poly", meaning some form of many.

→ Many moons ago, to many ancestors, by many prophets, at many times, in many ways.

A parent might have a sense of this - I have told you so many times, in so many ways, in so many tones of voice, starting all the way back when you were little, that you need to put your toys and clothes where they belong.

God says, I've been speaking throughout history. I've been showing myself to you. Notice, that Hebrews starts like the book of John starts, not with a baby in Bethlehem but all the way back in the Garden. God has not left the people in darkness, light has come. Carl F.H. Henry - God forfeits his personal privacy

But not - v. 2 - in these last days, I've spoken by my son.

There's a distinctive shift here - I've been doing all of this, I've not been silent, but now, in these days (last days here meaning recent), I've spoken by sending my Son. History divides at Jesus Christ. Therefore, the author says, you are in a better place.

Which brings us to some introductory questions that you should attend to when you start a new book of the Bible? Who is the "you" who are in a better place because of the revelation of the Son? Well, certainly that extends to us, today, who are on this side of Christ's first coming. But we were not the original recipients of this book. So who were?

Who is Hebrews written to?

Answer - We don't know, at least not exactly. In fact, of the New Testament books, the book of Hebrews probably has the most questions surrounding it. Simply put, almost all of the orienting facts about the book are unclear, including who's it to. In other letters we have a clear introduction that tells us - to the church at Rome, to the church in Corinth, and so on. Not here. The inscription "to the Hebrews" was added later, based on some pieces people put together from the content of the book.

- The main theme of the book is to a call to persevere in the faith, to not fall away, so it's likely that the audience was facing persecution and was tempted to lose heart
- The book warns them against falling back into lesser practices of Judaism rather than clinging to Christ, so it's likely that the people had a background in Judaism
- This is a bit in the weeds - but The way the author warns against this is by quoting the OT extensively, but the author uses the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint, so it's likely that the audience was Greek speaking Jewish Christians, likely living in one of the major cities of that day, perhaps Rome or modern day Cairo, then known as Alexandria.

Who's writing?

Answer - We don't know.

Again, the book doesn't give an author like others do. The earliest Christians presumed Paul to be the author, but this isn't the majority view today. Simply put - the book doesn't contain many of the tell-tale marks of Paul's writing. For example, if you compare say the letters of Ephesians and Colossians you'd walk away and say, the same dude had to write those. And he probably wrote those at the same time. Well, if you take this book and lay it beside the other letters that we know to be Paul's it just doesn't look or sound like Paul. So starting as early as 200AD, other theories were put forward, most of the attributing the book to one of Paul's traveling companions like Apollos or Barnabus, who

would have known Timothy well (who is mentioned in chapter 13) and would have had a background in Judaism. Some have seen similarities in Luke's writing that cause them to think the writer of the Gospel is also the writer of Hebrews.

Answer - God didn't want us to know. The search for an author for Hebrews can be a huge rabbit hole that like many areas of Bible curiosity can move us away from the main point. I think Origen is right when he writes in the year 200, "But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows." The fact that we do not know the author doesn't change the main point of the book nor should it undermine our confidence in God's word. In fact, it might heighten it since it reminds us that it is God who is primarily speaking anyway.

What is Hebrews?

We tend to use two terms to speak of something like Hebrews - 1. These are "books" of the Bible or 2. These are letters. The book of Hebrews or the Letter to the Hebrews.

Well, Hebrews doesn't seem to fit those descriptions. At least, not in the way that you'd typically think of those terms. Books doesn't seem to be a great way to speak of sections of the New Testament, unless perhaps we are speaking of the whole of the New Testament as a book. These aren't self-contained, isolated, disconnected stories, but rather a multi-volume work that has added color given as you move from one to the next. And, Hebrews, in particular, isn't a letter. The only letter-like feature we have is a conclusion that refers to this as a "brief message of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22). While not catchy like a book or letter, this is probably the best way to think about Hebrews. It was likely an address of sorts, maybe even a sermon. And, much like a sermon that you would hear today, that address was transcribed, affixed with a conclusion, and then sent out in written form to encourage others who were not present at the first address.

[Mention that we are going to do that in this series by posting sermon notes](#)

And this understanding, in my estimation, does help to account for some of the unknowns. For example, I think it's entirely possible that what we have here is an example of Paul's preaching in contrast to the other letters that he wrote, with someone like Barnabus transcribing the notes as He preached. Or the same could be said for several of the other apostles who could have also preached this address. So here's what I'm going to do as we move through the book. I'll refrain from speculating about an author so I won't say "Paul said..." or "Luke wrote". And I'll most often use "author" because we are not hearing this sermon preached. We are reading it.

This does present a challenge for us. Any teaching, sermon, address is meant to be heard as a unit. It takes about 45 minutes to say the book aloud, hopefully that time is a wee bit short of this morning's sermon. But we are doing 31 sermons on Hebrews.

Imagine that you took my 38 minute sermon this morning and chopped it up into 31 units, you'd have a unit of about every 1 minute I talked. Then someone tried to talk for 38 minutes about that 1 minute section of my sermon. It's tough and it's a bit unnatural because so much of what you say in minute 18 builds on what you said in minute 3, or the conclusion in minutes 36-38 hinges on a point you made back in minute 5. So you'll have to hang with it as we go. Commit to being here week to week. Listen to the sermon when you are away. Go back and consider more about ideas that don't make sense. And recognize that the "so what" might not be clear in any one sermon alone.

Now, for all that's unclear about the author, and the audience, and the style of Hebrews, one thing is abundantly clear – the book is about Jesus. The author is consumed with Jesus Christ. We might be fuzzy on some of the details, but there's no question about the main idea of the book. The author wants us to see Jesus. Even in the introduction, the author is captivated by Jesus.

God has appointed him heir of all things
and made the universe through him.
3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory
and the exact expression of his nature,
sustaining all things by his powerful word.

After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

If you've ever taken a class on public speaking, you've likely heard the mantra - "Tell em what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them that you told them." It seems like this is what's happening here. We're given a number of descriptions of Jesus that the author will return to throughout the book. As with an introduction, these concepts are not fleshed out in full detail here, but are merely given as placeholders for later explanation. You can rest assured that we will return to these themes repeatedly through this series. What does he say about Jesus?

Jesus Is...

1. Heir of all Things

In light of verse 3, this is a clear derivative of Jesus' sonship. Since He is the firstborn son of the Father, He is the heir of all that the Father possesses, though not on the basis of the death of the Father, but upon the death of the Son.

Likely Psalm 2 is a backdrop to this idea:

7 I will declare the Lord's decree.
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
8 Ask of me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance

and the ends of the earth your possession. -- Psalms 2:7-8 (CSB)

While Jesus is the heir of all things, most important He is the heir of the Father's people. Or as Jesus says in John 6 - all of those whom the Father gives me - referring to God's elect, those saved through Jesus' work. But, the author says, He's the heir of all things, not just all people. All that the Father possesses. The entire creation is His rightful possession.

2. Creator of the Universe

There is some overlap to one of Paul's letters here, with this idea framing the introduction to the book of Colossians:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
16 For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through him and for him. -- Colossians 1:15-16 (CSB)

It's probably right and helpful here to distinguish the eternal existence of the second person of the Trinity and Jesus' the human name the second person of the Trinity was given. So when the Bible speaks of "he" here, it's referring to the Son who has always existed with God and is the means by which God the Father created all things. John uses the idea of logos, or the Word, to make the same point:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. -- John 1:1-3 (CSB)

So, the Son, who came to this earth as Jesus, possesses all things and created all things and...

3. The Radiance of God's Glory

Here the picture is one of the brightness of God's purity, like Moses who would see and interact with God and His face would shine at the divine encounter. Or the extraordinary brightness over the mercy seat when God was present in the Temple. It was a physical symbol of the presence and power of God. He was the embodiment of the glory of God. Perhaps it's best to think of the term "outshining", not in terms of superiority - like the son outshines the Father, but that the Son is the shining out of the Father. Meaning the Son isn't merely a reflection of the Father, but he's the manifestation of the Father.

4. The Exact Representation of God's Nature

And a closely parallel concept, he was the exact representation of His nature. We can't say this about any human son and their father. They might have similarities - common personality or appearance or mannerisms, but no one is an exact representation, except the God-man, Jesus Christ. Want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus.

This is incredibly helpful to us. Imagine if what we were given were merely the concept of God. We were told that He was kind, or gracious, or loving, or pure. If all we had were theories about who God is, it would be difficult for humans to grasp that concept because we would only have other people to look at and no one around us is perfectly kind or gracious, or loving or pure. But we have Jesus.

- We can observe His kindness as he graciously offers a woman living water at a well.
- We can see His grace when He heals a demon possessed man and leaves Him sitting in His right mind
- We can see His love, when he calls Zaccheus out of the tree and goes to His house for a meal
- We can see His purity when He opposes Satan in the wilderness

5. Sustainer of all Things

This idea is nicely parallel to the concept of Jesus as the creator. He did not merely make all things and then take his hand off and let them run on their own. Rather, he sustains all things with the very same word that he used to create all things. This—all things—here is personal and cosmic - He sustains your life and He sustains the universe.

Here I think Spurgeon gets at a wonderful note of application:
"Only think of it; those innumerable worlds of light that make unbounded space to look as though it were sprinkled over the golden dust, would all die out, like so many expiring sparks, and cease to be, if the Christ who died on Calvary did not will that they should continue to exist. Surely, if Christ upholds all things He can uphold me. If the word of His power upholds earth and heaven, surely, that same word can uphold you, poor trembling heart, if you will trust him."

6. Mediator Between Sinners and God

Lastly, Jesus has made purification for sins and has set down at the throne of the Father. It's probably this concept that is going to be the most often used throughout the book. He's going to come back to this again and again, so I won't overpreach the concept now, but notice simply that he says that it is Jesus who is the one you made it

possible for sins to be forgiven and then sat down at the right hand of the Father - showing both completion - He can sit down because the work is finished and privilege - He can sit down at the right hand of the Father because He is the divine Son.

So...

4 So he became superior to the angels, just as the name he inherited is more excellent than theirs.

-- Hebrews 1:1-4 (CSB)

1. Jesus is Better

And here we are catapulted into the main idea of the book and the title of our series. Because of these realities, Jesus is superior. It's probably not an accident - This word is going to show up 13 times in a book that's been broken into 13 chapters. The object will change - sometimes He's better than Moses, sometimes than the high priest, sometimes than the Old Covenant, here better than angels. From this foundation, then, Hebrews is going to challenge us to do, and feel, and believe all sorts of things, all on the basis of the same truth - because Jesus is better.

Which is a good foundation for us for some initial reflection:

- Does your life show that you think Jesus is better?
- Are you looking for hope and purpose in Jesus or in something else?
- Do these truths about Jesus bring you joy?