

## Hebrews 1:4-9 Christ is Better: A Father's Affirmation

The inability to sustain one's attention isn't simply confined to the toddlers among us. We're in the age of ads, smart devices, and TikTok. Billboards change before they can be adequately understood. Pressures to make instantaneous decisions about buying anything abound. As a result of the quick information that we now swim in, cultures have swiftly changed in my lifetime. The first time that this kind of change settled on me was in 2012. While in Southern Kenya, Randy McLendon and I approached a Maasai village and happened upon a band of goat herders. Nothing strange about that, we thought, but perhaps the reason we saw more herders than goats is probably due to the fact that all of them were fixated on cell phones, something we certainly didn't expect at all. Perhaps the local predators were benefitting from this new world reality!

But beyond the unexpected Maasai techies, other, more expected realities have settled in. Do we think that the skill of sustained concentration has experienced an uptick in recent years? The ability to read social cues well? The ability to have sustained, logical, and deep conversations? I'm not sure we realize all the effects of staring at screens, often glued to our hands, for hours each day. That single device, which can tell me this afternoon's weather, the square root of 4,489, what happened in Libya a half-hour ago, and whether or not I took my medicine this morning—all within a three-minute span, certainly raises questions, "How is this galaxy of information affecting us now in unperceived ways?" "What physical, mental, or spiritual problems await us decades from now, problems which also remain hidden from us?"

While the initial recipients of this sermon-letter called Hebrews were spared from such accessibilities with its attending effects, they had their share of pressure points and distractions from what should have been central. No, they didn't have hologram billboards or Apple watches, but they did have the same basic stressors—raising a family, making a living, wrestling with identity, facing unexpected physical challenges, etc. And more than this, just like us, they found that enduring faithfully as one who confessed Jesus as Lord was the difficult path that Jesus told them (and us) it would be. He promised internal consternation in following Him—if *anyone would come after Me* he/she must bear a lifelong *cross*.<sup>1</sup> And he promised external pressures in following Him—if *they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household*.<sup>2</sup>

And the author of Hebrews understood the struggles of life in Christ, and wrote with this in mind under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As Matt mentioned last week, a very specific pressure for the audience of Hebrew was that of going back into the experience and safety of the Jewish community. Some of you know that this is not only true for the Jews then, but the demands of the gospel on us have required us to leave many of our own religious and social safe havens. And the strength of the emotional and social pulls to regain standing and respect back into those communities are hard to understate.

But if Hebrews is a long argument in answer to "Why follow Jesus?" then there's no time wasted by the Holy Spirit in the opening statement—the Maker, Owner, Sustainer of all things, the very radiance of the Ancient of Days Himself, after He made purification for our filth, He, Jesus the Christ, sat down to reign at God's right hand. The opening doctrinal deposition is clear—none can compare with Him. Through Him, fully and finally, God has spoken. "Therefore," chapter two will

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:24

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:25

begin, “*we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*” In other words, sustain your attention on the One of whom the prophets bore reverent witness; fix your faith-gaze on the One whom heavenly beings admire with unceasing veneration. How is Jesus Christ preeminent, distinguished from the hosts of heaven? And, in noting the infinite chasm between Him and them, is He not worthy to stay the course mapped out for His children before the foundation of the world?<sup>3</sup> The text will answer these questions by way of comparison, and that in two respects.

## I. A superior name—Son

*After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, verse 4, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. [5] For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”?*

Here is the first yard of fabric as the author of Hebrews quilts together how Jesus and the angels compare. And the argument that he makes is not comprised of brand-new material. He begins to unfold the *more excellent name* by quoting Psalm 2:7. It’s the first in a string of Old Testament quotes, which should come as no surprise. Verses 1-3 have already established in breathtaking fashion that Jesus bears the fullness of the divine nature. The author then appeals to the message of the prophets, drawing on the historical framework of the Jewish peoples. So then, what makes the most sense if indeed the new Jewish converts to Christ are tempted to go back to their old way of life inside of the Mosaic Law? The Spirit moves upon this author to enable a word-portrait of Christ’s superiority, and to do so utilizing colors already familiar to Jewish eyes! He makes His plea by showing that Christ is precisely who they learned Him to be from the first time His gospel rang out in their ears. He seeks to prove that the ancient, holy, and inspired texts, which served as the Jew’s educational food and drink from birth, are actually about Jesus. Psalm 2:7 is about Jesus being called *Son* by Yahweh Himself.

The name exceeding the station of angels, making their otherworldly excellencies look rather small in comparison, is that Jesus is not simply *a* son of God, but here we see that it’s the pointed designation, the singling out of *the Son*.<sup>4</sup> We know that the Jewish understanding was that the angels were sometimes designated as sons of God. “*Where were you when the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy?*” asked God of Job.<sup>5</sup> A few weeks from now, in Matthew’s Gospel, you’ll consider Jesus’ words, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*” But here, the name unveiling the position also reveals a dissimilarity to every angel and every other human.

We have a few elementary-age teachers in the room. Words teachers often use to casually talk about the students under their care are “my kids.” My wife is a teacher. If her own children were to walk in her classroom and she told her students, “these are *my kids*,” we would doubt that any of them would meet their teacher with jealousy or serious argumentation. They would instinctively know the difference, though the same word was used. Much more, Jesus is God’s *Son* by virtue of His relationship to the Father and His position on the throne of heaven.<sup>6</sup> Angels and humans may know

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:4, Revelation 13:8

<sup>4</sup> Tom Schreiner, *EBTC: Hebrews*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Job 38:7

<sup>6</sup> We can note the importance of this title of Jesus being God the Father’s *Son* in the occasions of its usage in the gospels. Two out of the three times that the Father spoke audibly in public He called Jesus His *Son*—one at the baptism and the other at the transfiguration. The other occasion in John 12, strangely related, is where God spoke aloud of glorifying Jesus and some people who heard it mistook His voice for that of an angel.

the compassion expressed towards them in being referred to as God's sons, but this **Son** "shines brighter, shines purer, than all the angels heaven can boast."<sup>7</sup>

There were obvious theological issues regarding angels in the first century. Why else would we have this lengthy comparison. These angel-issues are partly reflected by Paul to those at Colossae. Colossians 2:18–19, "*Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head...*" The false teachers seeking to influence Colossian believers had integrated the exaltation of angels with elements of the Christian faith most likely in a way where they were figuring centrally in the plan of salvation.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, they were encouraging a betrayal of the Christ-centric emphasis that all the NT writers explicitly articulated and called for.

But would the Jews dispersed throughout the Roman world during the circulation of this sermon-letter be involved in or be tempted to angel worship? Not explicitly so. Recall the wilderness encounter in Matthew 4 between the most exemplary Jew ever and a dark angel of the highest order. We read there, "...*the devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."*"<sup>9</sup> If Christ was tempted, then it's beyond plausible that some in the Jewish community would be given to an inappropriate reverence for these celestial beings. Before being martyred in Acts 7, Stephen recalls such misplaced reverence by the Jews in a Canaanite wilderness. On the heels of being graciously rescued from the hand of Pharaoh, they molded a golden calf to worship, and with it Stephen said that "*God gave them over to worship the host of heaven*"<sup>9</sup>

The reality is that leaps from respect to reverence to worship aren't all that hard for any of us. We're dazzled by anything and everything that sparkles. And idolatry is not so much erecting images and joining in pagan beliefs and rituals. We can be full-fledged idolators simply by shifting what is unworthy of worship to the top shelf (even good things) while designating what is central to a place of mere convenience or usefulness. The comparison of angels to Jesus was a warning away from idolatry and towards the worship these Jewish believers were called to, and the worship we were made for. Yet, to verse 5, the God of their fathers has zero hesitations in affirming Jesus as His unique, one and only, uncreated, **Son**. Jesus is better. Pay close attention. Let the aged words of our very own Psalter be your guide. Hear the promise King David heard afresh with his own ears, "***I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.***" Let this sustain your trust: He is not merely a son; He is *the* Son. No angel ever held that distinction, or ever will.

## II. The superior rule as Son

***[6] And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."*** This term ***firstborn*** relates specifically to the inheritance rights of the oldest son, unrelated to the physical dimension of being birthed. Deuteronomy 21 expresses that the oldest actually should receive twice as much as any son born after him. The position was one of tremendous honor. When we backtrack to verse two of this chapter, we see Him who is the *heir of all things*. And this heir was

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<sup>7</sup> "Fairest Lord Jesus," a hymn written or translated over from the German by Joseph Seiss.

<sup>8</sup> F.F. Bruce, NICNT: Colossians, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 7:41-43

not only appointed to rule by mere right, but what we noted last week is that He qualified to be this ruling heir in the work He completed on earth—the work of grace in redeeming sinners.

Now, we might think on the surface that the Father bringing His Son into the world is in reference to Jesus being born—His incarnation. But this word *world* helps us to draw another conclusion. It's not the normal term when referencing this present world.<sup>10</sup> When we pair the very same word with Hebrews 2:5, the only other usage in Hebrews, it signifies the idea of “another world,” or heaven itself. Though a host of angels certainly did worship Jesus as a baby snuggled in a stall in Bethlehem, considering verse 1-3 and the usage from chapter 2, here we're led in a different direction. And it's this: because of Jesus' position in the Trinity, and because of the finished work of redemption that only He could achieve, when Christ ascended and sat down on heaven's throne, the Father called and continues to call for the angels to worship Him. It's the perfectly suitable response by them to His person and His achievements, These same angels, who long to look<sup>11</sup> into this reign of grace,<sup>12</sup> they have the present privilege and responsibility to exclaim His worthiness. And the Christ who sat post-ascension will continue to be seated as Lord over all. The present privilege and responsibility of worship is ours too.

But, there's more in this string of pearls. The author keeps citing what God spoke to their fathers. In verse 7, it's Psalm 104:4's turn to clarify the disparity between Jesus and the angels. *Of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.”* These dazzling ideas for angels being actual winds and flames have tickled the theological imaginations many through the centuries. But one pass through Psalm 104 and you'll see that it's filled with metaphors and similes. Though the essence of gospel doctrine was made clear by the Holy Spirit, not every word of scripture is conveyed literally. In addition, angels are spirit beings, not crafted from the things of earth. However, they were nonetheless partly crafted for this world. Like the winds blow to an effect, and like fires burn to courier warmth, light, and destruction, angels are invisible couriers who carry out the will of God in the world.<sup>13</sup> Like Christ, they are messengers and servants. But unlike Christ, they answer to Someone higher than them. They do biddings. He bids.

Christ is better. Among men and angels, He is the fairest of all. *Let all God's angels worship him* was the Father's clear affirmation of His Son. Part of seeing clearly in this world as a believer is our trust that Christ is seated over every realm in existence.<sup>14</sup> When the teeth of faith are sunk into that truth, then it's just the nourishment that will keep these saints from drifting and returning to the dead works of the past. Like the angels, they were being called back to behold Christ, and we are being called upon to behold and worship Him.

#### A. *It is lasting rule*

The first part of verse 8, *But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...”* I was asked this past week about what I thought of the mayoral race in Memphis, and who might be a candidate worth backing in November. I appreciated the question because underneath it I sensed a desire from this person to play their part in voting for the best candidate out there. Someone who is clear, principled, informed, compassionate, calculated, diplomatic, dignified, etc. It's certainly

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Witherington, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James, & Jude*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> I Peter 1:12

<sup>12</sup> Romans 5:20–21, “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, [21] so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

<sup>13</sup> Schreiner, 70.

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 1:20, “...that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places...”

something we should pray for, as Clay reminded us a few weeks back in his sermon on 1 Timothy 2. And the LORD might grant such a cry to Him at some point. But a prayer the LORD will not grant in this life is for any peoples to appoint a public servant whose life and vitality refuses to fade into the background of obscurity. The rulers of earth have never had that luxury. All of them—dispensable.

But this ruler, affirmed by the Father through the ancient songwriter of Psalm 45, is not susceptible to the decaying atrophies of the human race. But more to the text, His status and station as eternal Son exceeds that of the angelic race. You might recall the account in Revelation when John was given a personal tour through his own visions by an angel. At the conclusion of that vision, John had a lapse in judgment. We read his confession in the last chapter of Revelation, beginning in verse 8, “*I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, [9] but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”*” It would be another 30 years after Hebrews was written before the book of Revelation would be penned on the island of Patmos, and subsequently circulated. But whoever authored Hebrews is certainly making the same point in a different way: The enthroned, eternal Son is the worthy Lamb of God, not the created, ministering spirits commissioned to serve Him and His blood-bought people. His rule was, is, and ever will be a superior, never-to-fade and never-to-fail rule. It is lasting. And that is good news in this weary world!

#### *B. It is righteous rule*

*[8] But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. [9] You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

The angels can’t compete with this *scepter of uprightness*. Yes, they were inferior because they were created and they were bound by wisdom, abilities, and more. But Jude tells us that at some point after creation, the angels “*did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, [being] kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.*”<sup>15</sup> Peter echoes Jude. The angels “*sinned and were cast into hell.*”<sup>16</sup> And even those who stayed under God’s favor, impressive as they are, striking fear into the human heart time and again through the scriptures, they are creatures with limitations, unworthy of worship.

But of the Son, the installed King, having won a bride unto Himself by grace, He loves righteousness. He never succumbed to sin like David nor desired to break rank with His Father like the angels that fell. Peter calls Christ a “*lamb without spot or blemish.*”<sup>17</sup> The author of Hebrews expressed that He is “*without sin.*”<sup>18</sup> And Jesus *loved righteousness* so much so, that through faith in the gospel, He gladly wills the transference of His own righteousness to those that are unrighteous. And this is the angle of Jesus Christ which boggles the angel psyche and stirs their curiosity to the point of longing: That this Son so *loved righteousness* and *hated wickedness* that He purposed to share His righteousness with sinners, trading it with those who never deserved such a gift. And God affirmed this trade-off, this *fount’-of-love* act by raising His Son from the dead. John says why this

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<sup>15</sup> Jude 6

<sup>16</sup> 2 Peter 2:4

<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 1:19

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 4:15

Son came into this underserving world, “*You know that [Christ] appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.*”<sup>19</sup> An eternal, righteous rule.

C. It is a glad rule!

[9] *You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.* This very book will speak of a joy residing in Jesus before His crucifixion. Now, that is hard to completely grasp, but I think we can understand it on smaller levels. When we give ourselves for the good of others, does this typically make us miserable or indifferent, or does it fill us with a kind of satisfying happiness? You know the answer to that. Jesus, knowing well the horror of God’s wrath that was to be poured out upon Him, also knew the remainder of the master plans. His resurrection was no surprise. He looked out into the future and saw a resurrected body with a resurrected church. He looked out into the future, with divine eyesight, and saw victory over His enemies. And as He was sustained to finish the work saving us in His death, this *anointed you with the oil of gladness* is a kind of One-to-One heavenly coronation from Father to Son.

One of the scenes played out daily at any airport is that of a reunion. The children running into the arms of their mother after being away. The son embracing his father after time served overseas in the military. When you see these reunions, you’re not unphased, are you? The joy between two strangers can, at least for a moment, increase your own joy. That’s something of what we’re to catch here. The Son did it, and the joy between the Father and the Son overflow and surpass even the joy of Christ’s *companions*. In light of 2:10, that most likely means you and me, and all of His children. And this joy, surpassing any we could ever experience, between Father and Son, what does it do but increase our own! How great a joy it must be within the Triunity of the Godhead at the establishment of God’s grace in this world!

## Conclusion

The argument is building towards the warning of 2:1: Don’t fixate on angelic movements and beings. Don’t be drawn away or swayed back into the condemnation that comes with seeking to keep the law of Moses. But look at Jesus the Christ. Turn your attention in His direction, and notice the details! The Spirit will use your drawing near to bolster your faith and give you confident hope to keep pressing into the life in Christ.

There is an urgency picked up on immediately here in chapter one which conveys the seriousness of hardening one’s heart to God’s Son and His gospel. Those addressed in Hebrews had an attention problem. Might our own attention-switching condition us to look away from what is central? How can it not? Hebrews sets out to show that nothing compares to Jesus the Son. Are you drifting away from Him? Look again at the glory of His position as the King of the universe. Are you dragging day after day, with small joys and a critical spirit? Look again at the radiance of the glory of God, who takes away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Are you seeking what will satisfy outside of the revelation of God’s anointed and gladdened Son? Whatever is out there, or in here, promising you better—it’s a lie. Hear these affirmations by God the Father to God the Son, preserved for your own joy and flourishing in this life, and join in with the hosts of heaven by magnifying the One who is truly magnificent!

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<sup>19</sup> 1 John 3:5

