

“OUR HOPE: JESUS IS FOR REAL”

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Heb 1:1-14

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ²in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power, when He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; ⁴having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

⁵For to which of the angels did He ever say, “Thou art My Son, today I have begotten thee”? And again, “I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me”? And when He again brings the first-born into the world, He says, “And let all the angels of God worship Him.”

⁷And of the angels He says, “Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.”

⁸But of the Son He says, “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom. ⁹Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy companions.”

¹⁰And, “Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Thy hands; ¹¹they will perish, but Thou remainest; and they all will become old as a garment, ¹²and as a mantle Thou wilt roll them up; as a garment they will also be changed. But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end.”

¹³But to which of the angels has He ever said, “Sit at My right hand, until I make thine enemies a footstool for thy feet”? ¹⁴Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

The prize jewel in the treasure chest of Hebrews is Jesus. With characteristic directness, our writer wastes no time in introducing us to Christ, the subject of his book. Rarely has so much been said in so short a span as in the first three verses of Hebrews. In fewer than one hundred words, the writer of Hebrews declares the unrivaled superiority of Jesus over every other form or

word of revelation God has given to men. And God has given many such words. From the start He took the initiative to make Himself known to His creation (Genesis 3:9). In diverse ways and on numerous occasions throughout the ages, God has given man as much knowledge of Himself as could be understood at the time.

“In many portions and in many ways” (1:1) is an interesting phrase. It indicates that in the past God has spoken in bits and pieces. A portion here. A section there. But never was everything revealed to everyone. Meeting man at whatever level of understanding He found him, God gave a piece of the puzzle to this person. Another to that. Yet, over a great span of time, these various fragments fitted together in an ever-expanding revelation by God of Himself.

One of my favorite preachers is Clarence Cranford. For many years he pastored the great Calvary Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. A decade or so ago I heard “Cranny” preach a sermon in which he gave us something of the broad sweep of scripture as it unveils the glory and grandeur of God.

He took us back to the time when men thought there were many gods, believing them to be whimsical. Religion consisted pretty much of appeasing these capricious deities. Then “Cranny” led us into the Old Testament and showed us how, out of their wandering and suffering, a nation arose to say there are not many gods, but one. And, He is not whimsical, He is dependable. *“Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”* asked Abraham (Genesis 18:25). It was more an affirmation of faith than a question.

But, dependable in what way? The prophet Amos said, I know we can depend on His justice. His justice is as stern as the laws of the desert in which I keep my sheep. God is like a plumb line. Anything not true to that plumb line will eventually topple over.

The prophet Hosea said, Yes, that’s true, but God is more than just. Even after my wife Gomer proved untrue to me, not once but several times, I loved her. When she was about to be sold as a

slave, I bought her back. God is greater than I. If I could love Gomer in spite of her infidelity, God can and does love Israel, though Israel has often been unfaithful to Him.

The prophet Jonah said, Yes, that's true. But God loves more than Israel. He told me to go to Nineveh to preach, but I didn't want to go. The Ninevites were our enemies. So I went to Joppa, and bought a ticket to Tarshish, heading as far in the other direction as possible. But I discovered you can't run away from God. He turned me around, sent me back to Nineveh, and there I preached. A great spiritual awakening took place. One day, as I examined a gourd destroyed by worms, God's truth flashed in on me. I realized if I could be concerned about a gourd vine, God could be concerned about something infinitely more precious, the soul of the pagan Ninevites.

Then the prophet Jeremiah drew a picture of God. He saw God as a potter, patently remaking a marred vessel. The prophet Isaiah went a step further, and painted a more accurate portrait. God, he said, is like a suffering servant who took upon Himself the sins of the world.

Still, the Hebrew people as a whole could not understand. A god of vengeance? That they could grasp. A god of seven thunders? Such a deity appealed to them. But a God willing to be afflicted with their transgressions and bruised for their iniquities? Such a God was beyond their comprehension

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Then, one day, that picture of a suffering servant took flesh, and God who “*in many and various ways*” had spoken to the fathers by the prophets, spoke at long last through His Son. No longer did men need to ask, “What is God like?” They saw Him revealed in a life. On a cross!

It's important to remember none of these great and good men of the Old Testament had the whole picture. They grasped it in bits and pieces. A wonderful revelation here. A glorious truth there. Insight came to them in various modes. Dreams. Visions. Audible voices.

Then, for a period of three hundred years or so, God stopped speaking through the prophets. It was almost as if He had abandoned His people. Suddenly, at just the right moment (Galatians

4:4,5), God spoke again! This time in a life. The life of His Son. Through that Son, God gave more than a piecemeal revelation of Himself. In Jesus the world saw more than various shades and hues of light. They saw pure light. The Light of the world Himself!

The Bible is God’s unfolding self-revelation. It proceeds step by step. There is a steady progression up to the person of Christ. Beyond Him, progression stops. Jesus is God’s last word to the world. Without being blasphemous, we can look at Him and say, “That’s all there is, folks; there isn’t any more.”

God who, in various ways and at different times, in bits and pieces, spoke through the prophets, has in these last days, these gospel days, these good news days, spoken through His Son. In that Son, God has given the dearest, truest, finest, purest, clearest word about Himself. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

Introducing Jesus Christ

His Superiority. Obviously, this raises questions. Who is this Son? How does He stand in relationship to the Father? What are His credentials? What makes Him superior to the prophets?

The writer of Hebrews answers by making six staggering statements about Jesus. He is “*heir of all things*” (1:2). Ponder that. Had the scripture said He was heir of God’s things, we would have read the obvious. To learn He is heir of all things is incredible. The glory, riches and greatness of God? Yes. Also, the weakness, heartbreak and brokenness of man! This Son, who will one day rule by right of inheritance, will not be indifferent to our anguish. He knows what it’s like to be human. He’s been one! He is heir of *all* things. Therefore, we have hope. He who will reign has borne our pain.

He is also the architect of the ages “*through whom also He [God] made the world*” (1:2). This son is not merely the historical Jesus. He is pre-existent. Pre-incarnate. The one who said, “*Before Abraham was born, I AM*” (John 8:58). Jesus is the clue to all that is. The explanation

of creation. The interpreter of history. The one who alone gives meaning and sense to it all.

More than that, Jesus “*is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.*”(1:3). No one has ever seen God's full glory. Even what we have in Jesus is a scaled-down version. Something we humans can perceive. Like a two-way mirror, Christ, at one and the same time, reveals and conceals. God looks at Jesus and sees His glory concealed there. Man looks at Jesus and sees God's glory revealed there. As the ancient hymn declares,

“The Sun of God in glory beams
Too bright for us to scan,
But we can face the light that streams
From the mild Son of man.”

Jesus scales down God's glory so we can perceive it.

At the same time, Jesus faithfully reproduces the Father's nature, bearing “the exact representation of His nature” (1:3). Do you ever wonder what God is like? Then look at Jesus. Whatever God is like, He is nothing less than Jesus. The Son is a perfect die cut of the Father. What God is in heaven, Jesus was on earth.

He is heir of all things. The architect of the universe. The reflection of God's glory. The perfect reproduction of the Father's nature. He also, at this very moment, “*upholds all things by the word of His power*” (1:3). Jesus is the glue which sticks life together. That which keeps it from flying apart. This, too, is a source of hope. The one who acted to create, is acting to operate. He who made creation knows best how to make it work. That's what He is currently doing: holding things together “*by the word of His power.*”

However fantastic that is, it is nothing compared to the next statement our author makes. This truly is good news to saved-sinners. He “*purged our sins*” (1:3 KJV). Or, as the newer translation puts it, “*(He) made purification of sins, [and] He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*”

Two things about that are precious to me. First, Jesus makes us clean. What is there about our sin which so appalls us? Is it not the sense of contamination with which it leaves us? The most ugly aspect of our sin is that it makes us feel unclean. Unworthy. Unable to gain access to God. The good news is this, “*The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*” (I John 1:7).

“*There is therefore now no condemnation [that is, no contamination] for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

The blessed assurance this is so is the second thing which exhilarates me. When Jesus made purification for our sin, “*He sat down*” (1:3). It’s as if He said, all that needs to be done for the salvation of sinners *has* been done. “*It is finished!*” (John 19:30).

Now, please note that not one of these staggering things said of Jesus could be said of the prophets. Or of any man. The prophets were the friends of God. Jesus was the Son of God. They grasped a part of God's plan. Jesus was God’s plan. They pointed the way to truth and life. Jesus said, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6). Therefore, He is superior to the prophets with their piecemeal, partial revelation. The revelation of Jesus is real. Complete. Final.

His Supremacy. The book of Hebrews is not content to merely say Jesus is superior. It goes on to insist He is supreme! Not only greater than the prophets, but also greater than all created things, up to and including angels (1:5). To a contemporary reader, this reference to angels may seem irrelevant. But when we understand who angels are and what they did in the mind of the ancient Jews, a precious truth emerges.

Angels are “*ministering spirits*” (1:14). God’s glorious “errand boys,” so to speak. Newer translations of Hebrews 1:7 describe them as having the characteristics of wind and fire. Swift. Effective. Elusive. We learn angels are the highest of created beings. Man is the crown of God's creation on earth. Angels are the crown of God's creation in heaven. So, when the writer of the book of Hebrews says Jesus is greater than the angels, who are next to God, he is saying Jesus is

God Himself. He is utterly and absolutely without peer. He is supreme!

This assertion is made through a series of proof texts demonstrating how, in a unique and exclusive sense, Jesus is for real. Jesus is Son, the angels are servants. Jesus is message, the angels are messengers. Jesus is sovereign, the angels are subject. Jesus is superior, yes! Even more, He is supreme.

His Deity. *“For to which of the angels did He (God) ever say, ‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee’?”*(1:5). Here is direct reference to the deity of Jesus. If anything can be said of a son, it is that he is of the same species as his father. By saying of Jesus, *“Thou art my Son,”* God is declaring Christ’s origin to be divine.

His Dignity. The book of Hebrews also calls attention to His dignity. At His birth, angels bowed down and worshiped Jesus (1:6). Obviously, this makes Him superior to angels, because the lesser always worships the greater. It is *they* who worshiped and continue to worship *Him*. Not *He* who worships *them*.

His Majesty, Eternity and Equity. Of the Son God said, *“Thy throne, O God”*-- His majesty -- *“is forever and ever”*-- His eternity, *“and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom”* -- His equity (1:8). There is hope. This regal one whose reign is without end shall dispense justice which is just!

His Immutability. Unlike the heavens which grow old and the stars which turn cold, the scripture says of Jesus, *“But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end”* (1:12). He is changeless.

His Sovereignty and Glory. To sum up his argument for the unrivaled supremacy of Jesus, our author refers to the time of His second coming. After the custom of Eastern potentates who put their foot on the neck of a conquered enemy to symbolize victory, the Lord Jesus will one day

enter His ultimate and final glory. He will sit at the right hand of the Father with His enemies as a footstool (1:13).

It's all there in the first chapter of Hebrews. His deity. His dignity. His majesty. His eternity. His equity. His immutability. His sovereignty. His ultimate glory. Jesus is not only superior, He is supreme. Greater than the prophets. Greater also than the angels. Which is to say: Jesus is for real. He is God Himself.

His Sufficiency. Therefore, Jesus is sufficient! This is the primary point the book of Hebrews makes. The writer exalts Jesus' superiority and supremacy to emphasize His sufficiency.

Our author is addressing a group of believers on the verge of becoming dropouts. Of forsaking their liberty in Christ. Of returning to the legalism of pre-Christian days. Instead of clinging to Jesus only, they were tempted to practice a religion of Jesus-plus. Jesus plus a dab of Judaism here. Jesus plus a touch of humanism there.

He says, Don't make that mistake. It not only isn't necessary, it won't do any good. There is no such thing as Jesus-plus, for He is God's last word to the world. Jesus is for real. He is It with a capital "I." He is Son, not servant. Sovereign, not subject.

Jesus initiated and completed a mission even angels could pull off. He made full and final payment for our sin. Proof of this is that He now sits, a symbol of completed work, on the right hand of God, the place of honor. Jesus makes possible a better, sweeter, dearer relationship between God and man than has been possible since the fall. A personal relationship. With nothing between. Not even the angels.

The ancient followers of Judaism were haunted by a feeling of God's far-offness. His transcendency. His other-worldliness. His out-there-ness. Because of this, they found it necessary to establish some connecting link between themselves and God. Their solution? A

highly developed form of angelology.

To put it plainly, they had angels coming out their ears. To the first-century mind, there were millions and millions of angels. They were everywhere. Every nation had its angel. As did every child. Every man. Every woman. Every force of nature -- wind, fire, rain had its angel. According to William Barclay, so all-pervading was this doctrine of angels it is safe to say, "every blade of grass had its angel."²

Fearful Christ would, in time, become just another member of this pantheon of angels, the writer of Hebrews declares Jesus is for real. He is not some ethereal being from the nether world. Nor is He merely an historical figure trudging across the pages of the New Testament. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New.

Therefore, Christians need not and must not think in terms of Jesus-plus. He is superior. He is supreme. Best of all, He is sufficient, making possible an immediate and intimate relationship with God with nothing between. Not even angels.

It was important for those Hebrew Christians to know this. To have this reason for the hope which was within them. They were under tremendous pressure to turn back. Their peers, families, religious leaders, life itself, the residual effects of the Adamic nature within them, all were coaxing them to turn back from liberty in Christ to legalism.

If they were to stand tall in the face of this kind of coercion, they had to know for sure on whom they were standing. Was Jesus a fake as many said, or was He for real? Was Jesus sufficient, or did they need a religion of Jesus-plus? The answers came through the Hebrews author for them and us: Jesus is for real! He is sufficient. He has done what not even angels could do. He has cleansed us from sin. Removed all barriers between ourselves and God. Given us instant and intimate access to the Heavenly Father.

There's an important message in that for us today. While we do not make much of angels, we

have our own way of putting things between ourselves and God to make Him more comfortable to be around. We have our own form of angelology. Our own system of intermediaries.

Sometimes it's a person. A particular pastor. Life partner. Child. Or a Christian folk hero, like a favorite evangelist or a popular healer. “If that evangelist comes to town I'm going to go hear him because I can get saved when he preaches. Or, If that healer prays for me, I'll be healed for sure.”

Sometimes it's a place. A beautiful church. The great outdoors. A private prayer closet. That is where we feel we can really get next to God. That is our angel. Our intermediary.

Often it's a thing. A theological formula. A set of religious jargon. A particular ecclesiastical timetable. That makes God comfortable for us. Whittles Him down to size. Makes Him understandable. Logical.

But, God in a box is nothing more than a slightly sophisticated form of angelology. And, it's terribly dangerous. If our formula or jargon or timetable is proved ineffective, everything goes up in smoke. We don't want this to happen, so we cling defensively to our little box. We don't want to think. Struggle. Change. Grow. It's too painful. Too threatening. We concoct our own little system of angelology, be it person, place or thing. In this way we create a God big enough to help us if we're in trouble, but small enough to fit the markers of our puny minds.

But, such a God is not the God that is. He is greater than our theological formulations. Greater than our religious jargon. And, if we are to have a reason for the hope that is within us, we must know Him as He is.

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We can't be like the man who, when asked what he believed, answered, “I believe what my church believes.” “What does your church believe?” was the next question. He replied

blushingly, “I guess my church believes what I believe!” The tragedy of that little story is obvious. Many church members are borderline spiritual illiterates. Their lack of Biblical understanding is appalling. And, while we may laugh at the deacon who thought the Epistles were the wives of the Apostles, the story really isn’t funny.

The opponents of the Christian faith, the followers of the “isms,” know what they believe. They put the average Christian to shame when it comes to articulating convictions. That’s why we need a reason for the hope within us. We need to know all there is to know about this One who is for real and in whom we have believed. If you and I are going to stand true under the mounting pressure of our time, we must be sure about Him upon whom we stand. Mark it well, Jesus is for real. He is all-sufficient.

Therefore...

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (2:1-3).

Escape what? Hell? No, that’s not the issue. Escaping hell and going to heaven are a matter of grace, not works. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9).*

Your salvation is not at stake, fellow sinner-saint. That was taken care of at the cross, if you have been to the cross. From that point on, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). Nothing can pluck you out of the Father's hand (John 10:28).

This is the issue: having been to the cross, taken Jesus as your Savior, been cleansed of sin and given eternal life, what are you going to do about it?

Right believing unsupported by right doing is as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

Conversion is only the first step in the Christian life. From that point on, we all must grow and go forward in grace. If we neglect this great salvation and permit it to go to seed, we cannot escape the consequences of that neglect, either in time or in eternity!

Notes

1. William Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1955), p. 7.
2. Edited by William Barclay and F. F. Bruce, Epistle to the Hebrews -- Bible Guides (London: Lutterworth Press, and New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 65.