



The Superior One

Hebrews 1:1-3

About a month or two ago, I was studying up on some introductory materials on the book of Hebrews. In the first commentary I picked up, in the first sentence, I read this: “Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles. Its form is unusual, its setting in life is uncertain, and its argument is unfamiliar. It invites engagement in the task of defining the undefined. Undefined are the identity of the writer, his conceptual background, the character and location of the community addressed, the circumstances and date of composition, the setting in life, the nature of the crisis to which the document is a response, the literary genre, and the purpose and plan of the work. Although these undefined issues continue to be addressed and debated vigorously, no real consensus has been reached.”¹ That’s not necessarily encouraging.

And, you actually may be wondering the same thing. If there are that many questions over this book, why did you choose to preach through Hebrews? My answer is that even though this book can be daunting and confusing at times, it’s also very plain. There are certain messages in this book that ring loud and clear that I believe we as a church need to hear. First is that we need to be more grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures and how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Christianity has its roots in Judaism. But many of us don’t know how the sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood applies to Jesus; so, oftentimes we’re lost in reading the Old Testament. Hebrews is a wondrous discourse to teach us how Jesus is the fulfillment. Second, I believe we need to learn more on the importance of church community. The author of Hebrews picks up at various points the need believers have for one another. With utmost zeal, he presses the point that we must be in fellowship with a local body. Third, the writer of Hebrews presses the point that endurance is necessary for the Christian life. Personally, I’m concerned that in our day-in-age and in our culture, many people in churches believe a fluffy Christianity. They think following God should be easy. There shouldn’t be any dying to ourselves, and we can still have control over our schedules, our lives, as long as we’re relatively moral. But is Christianity easy? What does it mean for Jesus to say that we must take up our cross and follow him? That doesn’t sound “fluffy.” That sound painful. And, it is. Yet, following Christ is far more worth it than following anything or anyone else! Finally, the fourth reason came to me as I read Hebrews. And that is we learn more about the Kingdom of God. Jesus told us we are to be a people who seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness. How do we do that in this world in the here and now? **The writer of Hebrews expands our vision of Jesus and his kingdom so that we are impelled to endure with a body of believers!**

¹ Lane, William. *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 1-8*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991, p. xlvii.

So, in the midst of the little doubts and fears I've had, I also have great anticipation as we begin this series through the book of Hebrews. I think of myself climbing a mountain in order to see the beauty of the sunrise on the horizon. The climbing is difficult, maybe even arduous, but the view is breathtaking. This is the book of Hebrews to me. And so I invite you to journey with me up this mountain.

Now, as with any book of the Bible, we ought to want to figure out basic details. But as I quoted a little bit ago, there are a lot of details we're simply unsure of. Who's the author? We don't know for sure since no author is named. Some say Paul, and various other people have been postulated. I have a guess myself, but I think since the person is unnamed, that it must not be important for us to know. That said, this person obviously knows Timothy, Paul's son in the faith. And, the author refers to himself in Hebrews 11:32 with a masculine participle. So, I think we can be fairly certain, this is a man. So, you'll hear me referring to the author in the masculine as well.

The next question we should have about this book is its genre. While there's debate on this, too, this is clearly a letter, but it doesn't have the normal form of a letter. In Hebrews 13, the writer calls this a "word of exhortation." This idea is brought up elsewhere in Acts 13:15, where Paul is called by synagogue leaders to exhort them after the public reading of the Law and the Prophets. Paul then went on to give a sermon. This idea of "word of exhortation" probably refers more to a sermon. One commentator writes that "Hebrews is the first complete primitive Christian sermon. . . (O. Michel as quote. in Lane, p. lxxi). But there's a little more to this idea of sermon. This genre is meant to persuade. It's not simply factual information to be understood. It's information to be understood, believed and embraced. This is the goal of preaching. We aren't to be people to hear the Word and not do. We are to believe and live. The writer of Hebrews will emphasize this throughout.

But what's the point of this written sermon and who is it written to? Even this is a cause for debate. But we can be fairly certain that the author is writing to Jews. The sheer emphasis and assumptions this author makes regarding the knowledge of the audience, the quotations from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament and even his reference in Hebrews 1:1 of "our fathers," while it could be inclusive of Gentiles, this all seems to indicate that the author is writing primarily to people who were Hebrews – Jews by birth who follow Jesus.

Now, what are the circumstances? Again, while we can't say for sure, we do get certain ideas. We understand that these individuals had been persecuted in the past, joyfully accepting the plundering of their property as Hebrews 10:32-34 state. These Christians also are experiencing strange teaching coming in. And, to add to all of this, persecution seems to be coming again. The author emphasizes that they haven't contended to the point of bloodshed and even the "faith chapter" highlights their need to endure. This seems to indicate that they're entering into more persecution. While I state this tentatively, it actually seems as though the author is writing to Christians from Rome. Historically speaking, there was a banishment of certain Christians from Rome under Claudius. Riots took place because of the disputes over the Christ. And as a result, Christians lost property, were insulted and experienced public abuse. This fits Hebrews 10. But this also fits the idea of more persecution. Under Emperor Nero, he blamed the burning of Rome on the Christians – which heightened Christian persecution. To add to all of this, at the end of Hebrews, we read "those that come from Italy send you greetings." In Acts 18, when Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, we're told they were from Italy, and that specifically refers to Rome. We're told they were expelled under Claudius' decree. But this idea of being "from Italy," refers to people who are from Italy, but aren't currently residing there. In addition, it seems to be a general term to speak specifically to Rome itself.

So, what we have are people in the hotbed of opposition and difficulty. They have trials within the church with false teaching. They are seeing other people giving up the faith and no longer gathering with the believers. They also are seeing heightened persecution. It's in the midst of this that both the apostles Peter and Paul will die. These Hebrew Christians are tired because they've already gone through this difficulty, and they've begun to wonder if Jesus really is worth following. Maybe they should follow their friends who have defected.

In the midst of these circumstances, a sermon is delivered to them on paper. A sermon?! Is this really the best way to encourage the fainthearted? You know, I tend to think that when we go through trials, we will say, "I don't need anyone preaching at me!" And then, what we want is someone to tell us how great we are or how we're going to make it. The writer of Hebrews doesn't do that. I can imagine my response if I was a Hebrew in Rome. I open this letter, in the midst of feeling like I'm going to give up. There's no introduction, and right off the bat – instead of focusing on us and our problem – he focuses on Jesus. If you haven't turned in your Bibles to Hebrews 1 yet, please do so. Let's read the first three verses together:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.³ 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. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,²

Before I comment further, let's pray.

This past week, as I was talking with a close friend of mine, they were telling me about a scenario they heard of where a counselor was talking with a counselee who was going through a very difficult position and wasn't forgiving the person who hurt them. The counselor asked the individual when they were going to forgive that other person, to which the person essentially said, "When my feelings say I can."

We put a lot of stock in our feelings, don't we? We think life is out of line when I feelings think it is. We think all is well when our feelings say so. But are our feelings a perfect, infallible, gauge of reality? Absolutely not. Yet, when discouraged, we want people to *first* address our feelings.

Listen, I'm not against being compassionate. I actually think the author is being very compassionate here. He doesn't focus on the people themselves. Instead, he tells them that they need to get their gaze off of themselves and look to Jesus. This is true encouragement! When we gaze at Jesus, we begin to see all things in their proper context and we are calmed, comforted, assured, strengthened. So, the author of Hebrews writes to people in the midst of pain and he gives them exactly what they need. He tells them that Jesus is worth the pain, the sacrifice, the troubles. He starts off by telling them that **Jesus is worth our everything because Jesus is superior.**

The reason others have defected is because they failed to grasp the gloriousness of Christ. And the reason persecution is worth it is because Jesus is greater. Now, I know that might sound like a jolting

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 1:1–3.

statement. But we all sacrifice for things we love. And we love the things we love because they have great value to us. The problem is that our value sets are off. We prize pain-free lives. We value having property and land. We value relationships that are not severed. And so, when those things enter our days, we wonder, “Is Jesus really worth it?” because we value those things above Jesus. But in those moments, when we think that way, the writer of Hebrews reminds us of Jesus’ eternal glory!

In this first three verses, we see how superior Jesus is. And because he’s superior, he’s truly worthy to be followed. So, I’m going to break up this passage into three categories of superiority. We see here that Jesus is the Superior Prophet, the Superior King and the Superior Priest. There are other truths that are highlighted here, but these three are the three categories of biblical thought throughout the Old Testament to point to the Messiah. So, let’s start with the Superior Prophet.

1. Jesus is the superior Prophet (vv. 1-2a).

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. . . .”³ Maybe the Hebrews should just go back to the old ways. They should embrace the temple sacrificial system again and just do what they’ve done all their lives.

Oh, the writer of Hebrews admits that there’s a long chain of tradition. He says “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. . . .” This past year, I read through the whole Bible, and did you know that I didn’t get into the New Testament until October? Two-thirds of the Bible is what we call the Old Testament. That’s big! And the oldest book was probably written somewhere around 1400 BC, while the last book of the Old Testament was written around 400 BC. Think of this. That’s 1,000 years. Whereas the New Testament was written within a 50-year timespan. Why this divergence between the two? To show Jesus’ superiority.

The author says that in the Old Testament time period (i.e. - long ago) “God spoke to our fathers.” Each word is pregnant with meaning. First, God spoke. We know from the Scriptures that the heavens declare the glory of God, but to God, that wasn’t enough. He wanted to speak to us humans. This is a fascinatingly glorious truth. We, who had sinned against God, are the recipients of mercy. God wants us to know him and to know his truth. So, he purposefully speaks throughout the ages to the fathers in the past. The “fathers” here are referencing the Jewish people throughout time’s past.

But how did God speak? He spoke through prophets in many times and many ways. God certainly spoke in many ways and at many times. This past week, I spoke to my children about the different genres of the Bible. There’s Law, wisdom, poetry, history. To quote one man by the name of Kent Hughes, “God utilized great devices to instruct his prophets. God spoke to Moses at Sinai in thunder and lightning and with the voice of a trumpet. He whispered to Elijah at Horeb in “a still small voice (1 Kings 19:12 KJV). Ezekiel was informed by visions and Daniel through dreams. God speared to Abram in human form and to Jacob as an angel. God declared himself by Law, by warning, by exhortation, by type, by parable. And when God’s seers prophesied, they utilized nearly every method to communicate their message. Amos gave direct oracles from God. Malachi used questions and answers. Ezekiel performed bizarre symbolic acts. Haggai preached sermons. And Zechariah employed mysterious signs. The significance of this immensely creative and variegated communication is that it dramatically demonstrated God’s loving desire to communicate with his people” (Hughes, p. 19). Next time you read the Old Testament, instead of thinking it’s so big, think to yourself, “Look at the extent God goes to communicate to us!”

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 1:1–2.

The author affirms that all of this is glorious and grand. However, he also states to the people that the Old Testament is communicates in a fragmentary way. In the Greek, the two words for “many” are actually different Greek words. That’s why one translation says that God spoke in a “fragmentary and varied fashion” (see NEB). All the communication is true and yet all the communication in the Old Testament is fragmentary and needs to be unified.

Yes, the prophets are great. Yes, we ought to be grateful for the prophets! I know I am. I’ve named by three boys after prophets! But the prophets themselves knew that they were writing of Someone greater. They were writing of a greater revelation: Jesus, the Son! All the prophecies of the prophets are met in Christ. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses prophecies that “¹⁵ “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—. . .”⁴ Jesus is that greater prophet. And the reason he is that greater prophet is because he is not merely a prophet. He is the Son! In Hebrews, the phrase Son of God, is equivalent to being deity. We’ll talk about that more in a few minutes, but at this point, you’ll have to take my word for it. So, why is Jesus greater than all the prophets? Because the prophets weren’t God! Jesus is the Son of God in the flesh. Is it worth it to go back to the old ways and no longer experience suffering? Absolutely not.

But at this point, I want to emphasize the point of the writer when he says that God “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. . .”⁵ No longer fragmentary and varied ways. That’s not to say there aren’t genres of writing, but instead, now the communication is absolutely clear because Jesus is explicit in the communication. Jesus himself is the revelation of God. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he said that if they saw him, they saw the Father. Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and man. And in Christ is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption! Therefore, the New Testament Scriptures affirm continuously that our lives are hidden with Christ in God and that we are to determine to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. In other words, meaning, hope and life comes when we see and savor Jesus as our *everything*. Jesus is God’s Word to us.

Do you believe that? You might mentally assent to this, but let’s test this. There was a Swedish filmmaker named Ingmar Bergman who tells of a time when he was listening to some music and was envisioning a 19th century cathedral. In that cathedral, he encountered a picture of Jesus. As he looked at it, he said to the picture, “Speak to me! I will not leave this cathedral until you speak to me!” Obviously the picture did not speak to him. That year, Bergman produced a film called *The Silence*. It’s about characters who give up on finding God. Now, as we hear this story, we could say, “Obviously God doesn’t speak through pictures. Pick up the Bible!” But how many times have you yearned for God to speak to you through over circumstances? You think, “In times past, I had this circumstance and God comforted me. I want *that* situation back.” Couldn’t the Hebrew Christians think similarly? They once had excitement and strength, but now they’re facing persecution and they want to give up. They want to go backward, even worse, they want to give up and go back to old ways where they had many and various ways of communication. But the writer of Hebrews says, “In these last days” (which refers to the time period between Jesus having come and Jesus coming again) – in these last days, he has spoken through his Son. What is the greatest revelation of God? What is the most glorious speech of God? Not your subjective experience. The most glorious speech of God is in Jesus – and we get to read over and over again in the New Testament this Savior! One pastor wrote this, based off of this statement: **“I challenge those who are God’s children with the thought that Hebrews is a practical book. They may**

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Dt 18:15.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 1:2.

be beleaguered, perhaps even wondering if they can continue on with life. Perhaps they are looking for a manual that will help them handle stress. Hebrews is the ‘manual’ they are looking for, because the essential answer is in the supremacy and finality of Christ” (Hughes, p. 21). So, do you long for other types of speech from God or are you content and amazed with the speech of God in Jesus? Are you like Bergman who refuses to listen to God’s ordained means, not believing God’s speech is best? Oh, please hear this. Christ is better. He is superior! When you are broken and yearning for God to talk to you, pick up the Bible and pray that God shows you more of Christ! He is the superior Prophet, the Son! And God himself has proven that he yearns to speak to his people. Through prophets he revealed it, but more amazingly, Jesus himself came in the flesh to this earth to speak to us. Let’s praise God that the Son of God came, lived and speaks to us. But Jesus is not superior only because he’s a superior prophet. This word “Son” leads us into the next point:

2. Jesus is the Superior King (vv. 2b-3a).

“. . . in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ 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.”⁶

The word “Son” and the phrase “heir of all things” should cause us to think back to Psalm 2. I believe the writer of Hebrews is thinking this way because in verse 5, he quotes from that psalm. In Psalm 2, we read God saying, **“I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”**⁷ First big idea that the author of Hebrews gives is that Jesus will inherit *everything*. In other words, everything is headed his direction. This is brought out in Colossians 1:16, where Paul says that all things are created for him. The word for can be translated “toward.” All things have their destiny headed to Christ as the heir of everything.

The next idea the writer of Hebrews brings out is that the Son of God is the Ruler over all the nations. He is the King of kings. Last month, after a sermon I preached, Ben Jacques was talking to me about the idea of Jesus being the King of kings. He talked about how interesting that idea is because kings don’t have kings. In a monarchy, the king is the highest ruler. In history, kings weren’t held accountable. They could do whatever they wanted. So, to say “King of kings” can sound paradoxical. But this phrase King of kings recognizes something. There is a Ruler over all. While we may want to forget or dismiss God and think we’re in control of our own lives, the King of kings owns all of creation and calls all of his creation to submit to him. This is part of the idea of Psalm 2.

Now, some people might get angry and say, “Well, I worked hard to get what I have.” Or, some rulers could say, “No! This is *my kingdom*.” But the writer of Hebrews reveals how Jesus really can be considered the ruler over all. He shows us Jesus’ cosmic supremacy as Creator of all. In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth. And Hebrews says that the Father created *through* the Son! By the way, this word “world” is somewhat elastic. It can be translated *ages*. One Greek scholar defines this word as “The sum of the ‘periods of time’ including all that is manifested in and through them. . . .” So, this word isn’t simply saying Jesus created this earth. This verse is saying that all things that were made were made through him. The writer of Hebrews is affirming what Paul wrote in Colossians 1:16-17 – **“¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones**

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 1:2–3.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ps 2:7–8.

or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”⁸

Through Jesus, God created all, and through Jesus, all things continue to be held together. Now, ponder this. What are some things that are part of this creation? Well, as far as we know right now, we are told that our galaxy is an average-size galaxy that is 100,000 light years across (i.e. – 600 trillion miles). We also postulate today that there are around some hundred thousand million galaxies in space based on estimates with modern telescopes. The distance between these galaxies? Three million light years! And within each of these galaxies, they estimate one hundred thousand million stars. Then, we’re told that somehow the universe is expanding. We see the milky way rotating with a black hole at its center. Jesus controls all of that at every moment? Then we realize the smallness of God’s creation as well. The neutrons, protons, quarks. The vastness of Christ’s control is over every single thing – including time and space itself.

Then the writer of Hebrews tells us here that if Jesus withheld his sustaining grace for all of creation, all of creation would vanish in a moment: he upholds the universe by the word of his power. Every moment throughout all time, Jesus is holding all things together and maintaining their distinctive properties. This is power, Ventura! Does any other king have that kind of ownership? Does any other king have that kind of power? Oh, and by the way, this power will not be thwarted. Kings on this earth can be subverted, but not Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews continues to say that Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his nature. This communicates two unified-yet-distinct truths. First, some translations will say that Jesus is the reflection of God’s glory. If you have that in your translation, I recommend you cross that out and write radiance. Reflecting is something that the moon does with the sun’s light. But the moon does not have inherent light. But the sun radiates light from itself, and this is what the authors is saying here. The early church leader, Ambrose, wrote this, **“where there is light there is radiance, and where there is radiance there is also light; and thus we cannot have a light without radiance nor radiance without light, because both the light is in the radiance and the radiance in the light”** (as quot. in P. Edcumbe Hughes, p. 42). God’s glory is radiated from Jesus because Jesus is God!

But Jesus is also distinct from the Father. That’s what we see in the next phrase: the exact imprint of his nature. **“[Exact] imprint’ refers to the image on a coin that perfectly corresponds to the image on the die”** (Hughes, p. 27). Jesus is the exact correspondence to the Father in *nature*. That emphasizes his deity. The Father’s nature is that he is God – not human. In addition, this phrase “exact imprint” also communicates distinction. Jesus, taking on flesh, is also God in the flesh – Immanuel. So, this is the same idea as when Jesus says that if you’ve seen him, you’ve seen the Father.

Merging these two ideas together, we discover that what’s being written here was succinctly taught by the apostle John in John 1:1-3 – **“1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.”⁹** He was with God and he was God. He created all. He is light!

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Col 1:16–17.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Jn 1:1–4.

What kind of king has this authority, power and reign? Is Jesus valuable? Yes, eternally and infinitely valuable! The fledgling Christian church in Rome may fear the persecution under Nero, but Nero isn't even a blip on the screen of Christ's sovereign reign! This type of control and rule should strengthen and encourage all who trust in Christ! But there's one other aspect of Jesus' superiority that we must focus on before we move into communion today:

3. Jesus is the superior Priest (v. 3b).

"After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. . ."¹⁰

For anyone knowing the history of Judaism, we should be thinking of priests making purification. And priests simply did not sit around in the temple. There was always a sacrifice to be made that would keep them moving. The author of Hebrews will state later the ineffectual nature of the Old Testament sacrifices, but for now, the writer is highlighting that Jesus accomplished what no one else and no other observance could accomplish: purification of sins. But Jesus did accomplish it. Ponder this. First, ponder that God would *want* to rescue us and purify us from our sins. How many times has it happened in your life when someone has sinned against you, hurt you – and your response is that you want retribution. You want payment. You want them to feel what they've done. Yet God loves his people and Jesus came to communicate God's message to the world and then Jesus came to state that message through his birth, life, death and resurrection. But he didn't just state the message. He accomplished the message. GOOD NEWS! Jesus took the guilt we deserved so we could have the verdict of just in God's court. And not only that, we are eternally loved by God, too! This phrase that he is sitting at the right hand of God is pregnant with meaning. It does not mean that all he's doing now is sitting. It's a figure of speech. And I want to highlight three truths. First, this communicates that Jesus actually did accomplish the work. Second, he is exalted above all. Third, he's our mediator. At the right hand of God, he intercedes for us. He accomplished the redemption through his life and death!

Christian, Jesus is valuable. Jesus is worthy. In one of the books in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, there's a scene where Lucy saw the lion Aslan (who portrays Christ), and he looked glorious in the moonlight. Lucy ran to him and buried herself in him. As she was lying between him, this is the conversation that ensued

"Welcome, child," he said.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger." (Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, pp. 122-24).

We need to see Jesus as he is! In the midst of pain and prosperity, we need to have a vision of Christ that matches his magnitude and glory! So, Christian, let the book of Hebrews act as a maturing agent. May we find him bigger through this study. And for those who do not trust Jesus, let me urge you. God's summons to you is to submit yourself to Jesus and find rest, joy and life in him! If you turn from your sin and turn to him and trust him to grant forgiveness and reconciliation with God, he will grant that!

Jesus is the superior Prophet, King and Priest. He is the eternal God who came in the flesh to save, to reign, to speak God to us. Glory to his name. He's worthy to be followed!

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 1:3.

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