

LESSON ONE  
*Don't Miss  
God's Message  
in His Son*

**FOCAL TEXT**

Hebrews 1:1–6, 14; 2:1–4

**BACKGROUND**

Hebrews 1:1–2:9

**MAIN IDEA**

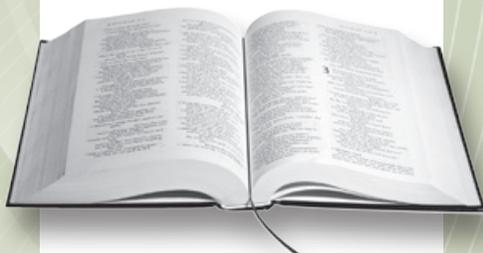
Since Jesus is God's supreme revelation to us, far above prophets and angels, we must beware of failing to give him the allegiance he deserves.

**QUESTION TO EXPLORE**

What place does Jesus really have in your life?

**TEACHING AIM**

To lead adults to evaluate the place Jesus really has in their lives



**HEBREWS**

**A Call for Rigorous  
Faithfulness**

## BIBLE COMMENTS

### Understanding the Context

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In many ways, Hebrews is the most dangerous book in the New Testament. It calls for a radical faith in Jesus and allows no competing loyalties. The Book of Hebrews forces Christians to examine closely the ways in which they are focused on Jesus, and when some of those ways are shallow or inadequate, dramatic changes are mandatory. Jesus is superior to all religious ideas and demands our undiluted faith.

So much about Hebrews that would help us understand the book is absent. We do not know the author's name and can say with certainty only that he or she was extraordinarily well-versed in the Old Testament. Additionally the author probably had ties to Alexandria, for the philosophy of earthly objects having a perfect heavenly counterpart reflects the teachings of Philo (for example, Hebrews 8:5, 10).

Date is uncertain, although before 70 A.D. seems likely, for the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. would have perfectly supported the author's point of the temporal nature of all things apart from Christ. As for recipients, again we have only hints. It seems likely to have been written to Italy (Heb. 13:24), although that is debatable. Persecution was also likely (12:3–11). We can't be too sure about the Gentile or Jewish nature of the congregation, although the latter seems more likely due to the extensive quotations from the Old Testament.

One thing we can say with certainty is that the Christian recipients were hedging their faith, and that brings us back to the danger of this book. Some of the imagery is harsh, but then we must remember that Jesus' words were harshest when dealing with fence-sitting faith. ("Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple," Luke 14:26. "If you love me you will keep my commandments," John 14:15.)<sup>1</sup> Taking up a cross and following Jesus is no easy matter. Hebrews reminds us of the demand of the cross and that Jesus is no concierge aiming to make our journeys as easy and comfortable as possible.

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## Interpreting the Scriptures

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### God's Ultimate Revelation (1:1–3)

**1:1.** The prophets spoke for God. This high calling put them in the unique position to reveal God's character and guide the people. Depending on the criteria, the Old Testament has seventeen named prophets, along with references to countless others. Prophets and prophecy continued into the New Testament era.

God's revelation to the ancestors was not by spoken word alone. "Many and various ways" refers also to the mighty acts God performed sometimes through the prophets. The key is, God revealed himself in a variety of ways. He was not silent or even reluctant. But as varied and important as these initial revelations were, they pale in light of God's ultimate revelation.

**1:2.** The phrase "in these last days" does not denote a literal countdown, but more of an epoch. The initial phase of revelation had given way to the ultimate revelation of Jesus Christ. This affirmation is the foundational theme of Hebrews. Nothing will ever supersede Christ, and nothing needs ever to be added to Christ.

The author cited seven proofs of Christ's supremacy. First, as "the heir of all things" Jesus has no rival. This phrase echoes Psalm 2:8, and is the first of scores of Old Testament allusions and quotations in Hebrews. The author was extraordinarily well-acquainted with Scripture.

Second, Jesus was the agent of creation, through whom God created "the worlds" (literally *the ages*, meaning all space and time). This fascinating and mysterious insight into the Trinity is reflected also in John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16.

**1:3.** Third, as the reflection of God's glory Jesus radiates his light into "the worlds" and our lives. This is not to suggest that Jesus is only a reflection of God. The author's fourth statement about Jesus as "the exact imprint of God's very being" emphasizes the identity of God and Jesus. The word for "exact imprint" is used only here in the New Testament and is much stronger in meaning than the word for image. Fifth, "very being" refers to the precise substance of God. If you have seen Jesus, you have seen God. If you know Jesus, you know God.

Not only did Jesus bring into existence all of creation, he also “sustains” it “by his powerful word.” Creation is dependent on the powerful, creative word of Christ. This sixth statement was particularly important for the author, as he would later argue for the inadequacy of the temple. Jesus was fully qualified and sufficient to make purification for sins. Seventh and finally, having “sat down,” Jesus clearly demonstrated the completion of his mission as the Son, and his position “at the right hand” of God emphasizes his power and authority.

The verdict is quite clear. Jesus is not second-rate or subservient. He was and is God. The rest of the Book of Hebrews addresses the consequences of this identification.

### Jesus Is Superior to Angels (1:4–6, 14)

**1:4.** The author here introduced Jesus’ superiority to angels, and the reason for this comparison becomes clear in 2:2. Suffice it to say here that the author was simply considering every possible rival to Jesus’ superiority. The reference to the superiority of Jesus’ “name” is interesting. The word *angel* means *messenger*. *Jesus* means *God saves*. The angels can *tell* of God’s mighty works. Jesus *accomplishes* God’s mighty works of salvation.

**1:5.** More than in any New Testament letter, the author used the Old Testament to make the case for Jesus. The first quotation is from Psalm 2:7, and its original reference was to David or one of his heirs. The second is from 2 Samuel 7:14. Over the centuries, the references to David and his special relationship to God became directly applied to the Davidic Messiah. The author used this interpretive method repeatedly, seeing an Old Testament allusion as being fully realized in Jesus. The point the author was making is that only Jesus is God’s “Son.”

**1:6.** The “firstborn” refers to Jesus’ existing prior to anything else and thus all of creation as belonging to him. To further prove Jesus’ superiority to angels, the author quoted Psalm 97:7. One worships only what is clearly superior. Angels worshiped Jesus, not the other way around. So the author has clearly established and dismissed two possible rivals to Jesus’ superiority: prophets and angels. As wondrous and effective

messengers of God as they are, they serve and worship Jesus as God. God is not in their lineage. He is their Lord.

The intervening verses (Heb. 1:7–13) are a collection of quotations serving to drive home Jesus' superiority to angels. Psalm 104:4 (Heb. 1:7) highlights the work of angels as agents of God in the universe. Hebrews 1:8 contains a quotation from Psalm 45:6 and is another direct identification of Jesus and God. The angels are servants to the One on the throne.

Further quotations in Hebrews 1:9–12 are from Psalm 45:7 (Heb. 1:9) and Psalm 102:25–27 (Heb. 1:10–12). The reference to Jesus' unchanging nature and standing in the creation is an important theme for the author. God has no other plan. The plan progressed to its fruition in Jesus. The final quotation is from Psalm 110 (Heb. 1:13). It adds one important truth: one day God will defeat all enemies of righteousness. We still live in the *already but not yet* epoch of God's providence. He has brought salvation, the death knell of evil has sounded, the victory is assured, but it is not yet complete.

**1:14.** The author made two points in this verse, and we will look at them in reverse order. The angels' service to God is ultimately a service for our sake, or "those who are to inherit salvation." This points ahead to the final defeat of evil referenced in 1:13. At this very moment the angels contend with the powers of evil with the world as the battleground.

The author's goal throughout this section has been to establish the superiority of Jesus. We must be careful not to diminish the role of angels. They are powerful "spirits in the divine service." They behold God but have never been asked to sit with him in the position of unique power. I might add, and neither would they want to.

### Heed Jesus' Words (2:1–4)

**2:1.** We arrive now at the main point of the lesson. The essential question the author wants us to consider is this: *if Christ is superior in every way, how should we respond?* The author directly drove home the point that we must "pay greater attention to what we have heard" (specifically Heb. 1:2). As mentioned in "Understanding the Context," the author of Hebrews was dealing with a church that had compromised its focus on

Christ. This was a dangerous situation and explains the harsh language and imagery of the book. Competing messages (from other religions, or purportedly through angels, etc.) do not call for divided loyalties, even if that would mean protection from persecution. Diverse challenges to Christ call for greater attention to Christ.

The phrase “so that we do not drift away from it” is both interesting and controversial. The image is a bit uncertain but either means (1) we drift past an intended landing point (fullness in Christ) or (2) the goal (again fullness in Christ) slips away from us.

Truly, we do not have to solve here, or elsewhere in the book, the possibility of losing salvation. We can feel and understand the force of the images. At the very least the author wants us to understand that there is salvation in no other. It is Christ or nothing, and so Christ deserves our highest allegiance.

**2:2.** A Hebrew legend claimed that angels physically brought the law to Moses. Although angels are mentioned in connection with Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 33:2), they are never portrayed in Scripture as mediators of the law.

The law was completely valid in its purpose and should not be set over against the grace of Christ (who came to fulfill the law and the prophets, Matthew 5:17). The law served as a diagnostic device, revealing perfectly our imperfection. It could never save. Only faith in God saves. Christ makes that clear.

**2:3.** If the message brought by angels served completely its purpose, then how much more important is the message brought to us by the Son of God? To “neglect so great a salvation” would mean utter ruin, for there is no option.

We notice in this verse also a reference to the physical sharing of the message. It was first brought by the Lord, and was “attested to us by those who heard him.” The author of Hebrews was a second-generation Christian, having never heard Jesus first-hand, but hearing from those who had heard him. We have the same stewardship responsibility for the next generation. We must understand, live, and teach the message of Jesus Christ.

**2:4.** Early on, God granted “signs and wonders and various miracles” to validate the message. While God can and does still perform according to his will any of these mighty works, God appears to prefer the testimony of a changed life. We must tell and show people that we have been with Christ.

Hebrews 2:5–9, the remainder of our background Scripture, is a return to the author’s proofs of Jesus’ superiority to angels. The amount of space the author dedicates to this theme illustrates how great the problem must have been in his day.

### **Focusing on the Meaning**

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During my early years in New Orleans I noticed on the dashboards of some cars a little plastic figurine. I could not tell what it was, and I knew nothing of its significance. One day, I got a chance to talk to a driver who had this little figure on his dashboard. What is it, and why do you have it there? He answered, “It’s just a little Jesus. I carry him around to make me feel good.”

I laughed to myself at what sounded like a superstition. However, over the years I began to realize I often do something similar. No, I don’t have a plastic Jesus on the dashboard, but I do sometimes carry around a Jesus of convenience. I construct my life carefully. I give my time and talents to things that give instant returns. I enjoy doing things that are fun. I make financial sacrifices and plan for the future and not just living for the moment.

Too often, I realize I devote more time and attention to these matters, and I am tossing scraps to Jesus. We all need to regularly assess the place Jesus has in our lives. His demand for my entire life is not an infringement on my freedom or a suppression of my rights. He is God and has the right to have the highest place in my life.

## TEACHING PLANS

### Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

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#### Connect with Life

1. Write these two words at the top of a marker board or poster board: “Vigorous” and “Rigorous.” Lead the group in listing synonyms for these two words. Explain that the Book of Hebrews presents a mixture of God’s grace and God’s demands on his followers. Discuss how the list the class created could be used to describe God’s expectations of his followers.
2. Present the following case study: Imagine you are the teacher of a Sunday morning Bible class. A couple visits your class for the first time. After the class they approach you and inform you that they are not married but they live together. They want to know whether they would be accepted in your class. Lead the class in discussing how they should answer the couple in a way that demonstrates grace but does not condone sin.

#### Guide Bible Study

3. In advance enlist a member to write a job description for angels based on Scriptures. Include their responsibilities toward human beings. After the report write the following names on a marker board: *Moses, King David, Jonah, Ruth, Abraham, Esther*. Lead the class in summarizing the messages God spoke through each person.
4. Give each member an index card and a pen. Instruct the class to pay close attention to the descriptions of Jesus in the following passage. Read Hebrews 1:1–3 in unison with the members using the printed Scripture in the *Study Guide*. Lead participants to write down the descriptions they remember without looking at the Scripture. Share their answers. Then lead participants to read together verses 4–6.

Lead in a discussion by asking them to suggest, especially from Hebrews 1:1–6, why Jesus is superior to the prophets and angels. Refer to and read Hebrew 1:14. Point out that angels are messengers sent by God to minister to people. Contrast this with the fact that Jesus was ministered to by the angels.

5. Text the following message to a person in the class: “I want to know why the pastor said those things about me.” Write that message on a note and hand it to a different person, e-mail that message to another person with a smartphone or computer in the class, and then say it to one person and ask that person to relay it to another person in class. Ask: *What are the limits to the forms of communication I used? What is the best way to communicate to another person? What does it say about the nature of the message that God would deliver it through Jesus?* Emphasis that God’s message through Jesus to us was Person to person.
6. Divide the class into three groups.<sup>2</sup> Assign one group to study Hebrews 1:5–7; Psalm 2:7; 97:7; 104:4; 2 Samuel 7:14. The second group is to study Hebrews 1:8–9; Psalm 45:6–7. Assign a third group Hebrews 1:10–13; Psalm 102:25–27; 110:1. Ask the groups to research the Old Testament passages linked to their specific Hebrew passage. Instruct them to describe the context of the Old Testament passages and how they are used in Hebrews to describe Jesus. (A copy of the group instructions is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org).)
7. In advance print some warning signs sometimes found on an automobile dashboard (or elsewhere). Ask the members to identify the signs as you display them. Discuss the possible consequences of disobeying each sign. Take a poll to see how many people usually ignore these warning signs. Discuss the difference it would make if the person who designed the car gave them a personal warning. Read Hebrews 2:1–4. Use the comments on these verses in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” on these verses in this *Teaching Guide* to present information answering the question, *Why should people look to Jesus as the supreme revelation of God?* Give attention to the consequences of neglecting the salvation offered through Jesus.

## Encourage Application

8. Say: *It is one thing to say Jesus' message about God is superior to the message of the angels and also the prophets. However, the question is, Do we listen to and heed the message of Jesus?* Lead the class in listing ways to evaluate whether they have Jesus in the right place in their lives.

## Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

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### Connect with Life

1. Use the information in “Introducing Hebrews: A Call for Rigorous Faithfulness” in the *Study Guide* to offer a brief lecture on the significance of the Book of Hebrews. Direct attention to the book's balance of God's grace and God's demands. Ask, *What is the struggle our church faces with teaching God's grace without watering down his commands and guidelines?*

### Guide Bible Study

2. Ask, *What are some things we learn about God from reading the Old Testament?* Write the answers on a markerboard. Ask, *What are some things we learn about God from the life and teachings of Jesus?* Write these answers on a markerboard.
3. Make two small posters, one with the words “All other prophets” and the second with the name, “Jesus.” Display both posters on a focal wall. Ask, *What do these people have in common? How are they different?* Read Hebrews 1:1–3. Discuss how the descriptions of Jesus in these verses make him superior to the prophets and the angels.
4. Read Hebrews 1:4–6, 14. Ask, *How is Jesus greater than the angels? How do angels' responsibilities differ from Jesus' responsibilities?* Enhance discussion by sharing information from “Bible Comments” on these verses in this *Teaching Guide*. Point out that

Hebrews 1:14 indicates that angels minister “for the sake of” believers but Jesus is to receive ministry.

5. Lead a brief lecture on the readers of Hebrews and their apparent struggle with abandoning the teachings of and about Jesus (see “Understanding the Context” for this lesson in this *Teaching Guide*). Compare their temptation to drift away from the faith with the various messages and ideas in our culture that may cause believers to struggle to remain faithful to Jesus. Enlist someone to read Hebrews 2:1–4.
6. Ask, *Why do many people ignore warning signs?* Share a personal story of a time when you ignored a warning sign and the result was not good. Reflect on ways God punished those who disobeyed him in the Old Testament. Ask, *What are some of the consequences of neglecting God's salvation?*

### Encourage Application

7. Ask: *What are some of the messages we hear from the world on how we are to live our lives?* Write some of these answers on a markerboard. Ask: *What are some of the teachings of Jesus on how his followers are to live their lives?* Write these answers on a markerboard. Compare and contrast the two lists. Close in a time of prayer asking God to help each of you to make and keep Jesus in first place in your lives.

### NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3 and 12–13 are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.
2. Groups should be no larger than six people each. Form additional groups with duplicate assignments if attendance is larger than eighteen.