

Focal Text

Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:1–11,
14–18

Background

Hebrews 1:1—2:18

Main Idea

We must pay closer attention to God's supreme revelation to us in his Son, who deserves our full loyalty.

Question to Explore

What place does Jesus have—and deserve—in your life?

Study Aim

To consider the place Jesus has in my life in relation to the teachings about Jesus in this passage

Study and Action Emphases

- Share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people
- Equip people for ministry in the church and in the world

LESSON ONE

Pay Closer Attention to God's Message

Quick Read

Jesus Christ is the definitive disclosure of God's nature and God's way for all people. Sustained focus on Jesus keeps us from distraction of our attention and dilution of our commitment to God.



HEBREWS: Call to Wholehearted Commitment

A typical performance of a musical play begins with the overture. You settle into your seat, review the program notes, and wait for the house lights to dim. When they do, the conductor appears, and the orchestra begins to play music that contains short phrases from tunes that will carry the themes of the evening's performance.

Something similar occurs as you read the opening verses of Hebrews. These words introduce the primary themes that you encounter repeatedly throughout this challenging book. The overriding theme is the joyful declaration that the defining moment of God's relationship with humanity is in the life and work of Jesus. We will not need to search anywhere else for the redemptive truth about God; yet we will spend a lifetime exploring the unfathomable riches of the revelation that has come to us in Jesus.

A Challenging Book

The themes of Hebrews are not "easy listening" or merely theological mood music played in the background of our lives. Rather, some of the sounds seem strange and some of the ideas difficult to understand. One has to work hard to appreciate the subtleties of the language and grasp the power of the argument. Reading Hebrews may at times seem to be like experiencing music from a different culture with its unfamiliar harmonization and distinctive rhythms. One must pay close attention to understand this expression of God's disclosure of grace and truth.

Although we refer to Hebrews as a letter, its basic form is more like an extended expository sermon or series of sermons. The heart of the message is the conviction that God's final or definitive revelation has come to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ, God's Son. The writer took extended texts from the Old Testament and interpreted them in light of what Christians experienced in Jesus. The first readers regarded the Old Testament as authoritative. They needed to understand how the revelation that came in Jesus Christ was superior to the revelation that shaped the faith of Israel and the religious practices of Judaism.

A difficulty in our understanding Hebrews lies in its assumption that the reader has a good knowledge of the Old Testament. There are frequent references to people and events in Hebrew history without explanation. The language of sacrifice from the Old Testament pervades the text. As contemporary Westerners we have trouble understanding this ancient religious system and its relevance to us. The arguments based on

Hebrews 1:1–4

¹Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 2:1–11, 14–18

¹Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. ²For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, ³how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, ⁴while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

⁵Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. ⁶But someone has testified somewhere,

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?

⁷ You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,

⁸ subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,

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HEBREWS: Call to Wholehearted Commitment

¹⁴Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

the system of sacrifice are often not so powerful to us as they were for the first readers.

In addition, we soon recognize that we are in a world of ancient history, unfamiliar customs, and complex theological ideas. There is much talk of angels. We meet the figure of Melchizedek, the mysterious priest to whom Abraham offered sacrifices. We encounter theological ideas that may challenge our own understanding of the Christian faith and make us uncomfortable. Ideas such as the threat of apostasy, or drifting away from our commitment, the impossibility of finding another way of salvation after rejecting Christ, and the need to persevere in one's faith are examples of these difficulties.

Many people obviously neglect this portion of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, Hebrews speaks with abiding relevance to our spiritual needs today. It addresses people who at best are on a plateau in their spir-

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itual lives, resisting the challenge to climb to new heights of understanding and action. Hebrews can speak with power to people who have become halfhearted in their commitment to Christ and discouraged in their efforts to follow his way. In understanding Hebrews we can find help to overcome our resistance to make a full commitment to Jesus. We can gain encouragement to over-

come our lagging enthusiasm for things of the spirit. We can discover the incentive to draw near to Christ in times we are tempted to shrink back because Christ's way is difficult to discern or hard to follow.

The first readers of Hebrews appear to have been second-generation Christians who may have been having second thoughts about their religious convictions and commitments. The fervor of initial spiritual

experience had subsided, and they were beginning to face issues they had not anticipated.

William James (1842–1909) was a pioneering American psychologist who wrote the classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He once said that in second-generation spiritual experience what had been for the earlier generation an “acute fever” had become for them a “dull habit.” The experience had been passed on to them, but something seems to have been lost in the transmission.

The Revelation in God's Son (1:1–4)

The opening verses of Hebrews read like an exalted hymn of praise to Jesus Christ as God's Son and our Savior and Lord. In many ways the language calls to mind the opening words of the Gospel of John and Paul's great description of Christ in Philippians 2:5–11. These passages provide us with some of the most profound biblical affirmations we have to develop our Christology—our understanding of the person and work of Christ.

Although the highest revelation of God has come in Jesus the Christ, biblical faith has always borne witness to God's self-disclosure. God's nature is to communicate with human beings, who are made in God's image. The Bible frequently refers to this characteristic in terms of God's speaking. The communication of God's nature and will comes not only in human words but also in historical acts. Human beings, guided by God, reflect on God's actions in history and bear witness to their meaning in human language.

God has spoken “in many and various ways” (1:1). The revelation has come at different times and through diverse means. Prior to the coming of Jesus, God's revelation had been partial and incomplete. This does not mean that there was a divine reluctance to let the people know the true nature of God. Their knowledge of God's will and way was sufficient for their needs at the time and yet limited by their capacity to understand. Often the revelation came in the form of a promise that awaited fulfillment.

People who heard God's “speaking” had a stewardship responsibility for the revelation they received. God spoke to prophets, people who were called to speak forth God's word to the people. The writer also

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HEBREWS: Call to Wholehearted Commitment

speaks of the role of angels, messengers and servants of God to the people of God.

The word of God always comes with the intent that we share it. Revelation is not the exclusive possession of those who are God's spiritual favorites. Rather, God speaks to some that they may speak God's message to others. What God says *to* us God wants to say *through* us.

The revelation of God brought by Jesus was different from all that came before Jesus, both in its nature and extent. In contrast to the revelation of

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the past, God has now "spoken to us by a Son" (1:2). To be a son is to share the nature of the father. The one who has brought God's word *is* God's word. John's Gospel declares the same identification of the messenger and the message: "And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"(John 1:14).

A child once asked her parents, "Where is God?" The parents responded: "God is everywhere." Their answer did not satisfy their daughter, and after a moment she said: "But I don't want God to be *everywhere*; I want God to be *somewhere!*" The great declaration of the Christian gospel is that God *was* somewhere. In the words of Paul: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself"(2 Corinthians 5:19). Christians believe that the life and work of Jesus provide the world with the best expression of God's nature and purpose. The most certain affirmation we can make about God is that God is like Jesus.

Hebrews 1:2-4 declares some specific characteristics of Christ's unique relationship with God. These go far beyond the earthly life and ministry

How Can We "See Jesus?"

- Reflect on the names and titles given to Jesus in the Bible and in Christian history.
 - Remember people and events that helped make Christ personal to you.
 - Read biographies or articles of people whose lives reflect the mind of Christ.
 - Meditate for an extended time on a single incident in Jesus' life as recorded in the gospels.
 - Use the hymnal to discover great hymn texts to guide your meditation and express your praise.
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of Jesus, extending from eternity before creation to eternity beyond human history. These characteristics provide evidence for the claim that Christ is superior to any other revelation of the nature of God. As God's Son, Christ was the divine agent in creation, and God has appointed him "heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2). Paul disclosed that the mystery of God's intention for all creation had been to "set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9–10).

The themes introduced in the first four verses of Hebrews bear witness to the unique identity of Jesus Christ with the Father. They affirm Christ's crucial work as creator, sustainer, and redeemer. They attest Christ's superiority over any other way to understand the nature and will of God.

Jesus is forever the center of biblical faith. Because of Jesus, believers need no other intermediary in their relation with God. Believers also need to give serious attention to what the revelation in Christ demands of us in terms of the content of our faith and the consistency of our lives.

The Hebrew tradition gave important place to the role of angels. Hebrews 1:5–14 affirms the superiority of Jesus as God's Son over the angelic hosts. Some of the original recipients of this writing may have been in danger of worshipping angels. Through a series of Old Testament passages, the writer demonstrated that the Son is superior to angels. Angels are not to be worshipped; they, like we, are to worship the Son. Angels are the servants of the Lord; Christ is the heir of all things. Angels are sent forth to serve; the Son is seated at the right hand of the Father.

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The Danger in Our Neglect (2:1–4)

One of the most serious casualties in our hurried and hectic culture is time for reflection and the practice of contemplation. Bombarded from many directions by far more data than we can understand or assimilate, we suffer from information overload. Even the most important things in our lives can be lost in the torrent of trivia we experience. In this environment we need to cultivate the spiritual discipline that focuses our minds on the things that endure, the truth that lies at the heart of our

HEBREWS: Call to Wholehearted Commitment

faith. The revelation that has come in Jesus Christ enables us to discover life's true priority and the relative value of everything else.

"We must pay greater attention to what we have heard"(Heb. 2:1). Christians believe the most dependable fact in the entire universe is that the life and work of Jesus Christ reveal the true nature of God. Yet, we often neglect to keep this truth clearly in our minds or explore the depths of its meaning for our daily lives. Hebrews reminds us that failure to be attentive to God's revelation in Christ and to act on its truth brings serious consequences.

The warning is not directed to people who were in open rebellion against God's truth. They were, rather, in danger of losing that truth by "drifting away" from it or "neglecting" it. Their primary response had been apathy and indifference. Even the partial revelation that came through angels and prophets carried with it the expectation of obedient response.

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Ultimately, the test of our response to God's revelation is not how much we learn and understand, but rather how much we trust and obey. God's definitive revelation comes not so much to enable us to know more but to become better followers of Jesus. The writer argues that if a disobedient response to the previous partial revelation brought serious consequences, it will be much more serious for us if we disbelieve and disobey the complete revelation that has come in Jesus.

We are to give God's revelation our full attention, because God has clearly attested its truth. As second-generation Christians, the first recipients of the Book of Hebrews learned of Jesus through the witness of others who had seen and heard Jesus directly. The revelation had been affirmed by undeniable evidence of supernatural power in the life of the early church. The signs, wonders, and miracles attested to the truth of the early church's claims about Jesus. In addition individual believers experienced the varied gifts of the Spirit that confirmed their faith, empowered their witness, and built up the body of Christ. This continues to be the way God validates the truth to us.

Redemption Through Our Brother (2:5–11, 14–18)

The effectiveness of Jesus' life and work depends not only on Jesus' oneness with the Father, but also on his identification with us. Jesus was both

divine and human. The Bible does not explain how this could be possible, although this issue has occupied the minds of theologians for centuries. Rather, the New Testament simply and clearly affirms the integrity of both Jesus' deity and humanity together. Each was essential to fulfill God's purpose to reconcile sinful humanity.

What God says to us God wants to say through us.

According to Hebrews, "He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God" (2:17). His assumption of real humanity was a theological necessity. Without becoming fully human, Jesus would not have been able to share our suffering, dispel our fears of death, or bear the penalty for our sins. Jesus willingly accepted this identification with sinful human beings; he was "not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (2:11).

One of the ways the New Testament interprets the life and work of Jesus is as that of a "second Adam" (see Romans 5:14–15; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22,45). In contrast to the first Adam, who disobeyed God, Jesus was fully obedient to the will of the Father. Although Adam became the representative head of fallen humanity, Jesus became the source of a restored relationship human beings may have with God. Although the choices and actions of Adam distorted the divine image, Jesus perfectly reflected the exact image of God (Heb. 1:3).

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Hebrews 2:6–8 cites Psalm 8:4–6 to declare the majesty and glory of God in creation and the exalted place of human beings in creation. The description reflects the purpose of God in creating human beings, and the language conveys their status and responsibility in relation to the rest of creation. In reality, however, human beings have not fulfilled their purpose or been faithful in their stewardship of creation. As a consequence, they have experienced alienation from God, the reality of suffering, and the fear of death.

Hebrews acknowledges that we do not see human beings fulfilling the glorious promise of creation, "but we do see Jesus" (2:9). The divine Son of God became fully human to reverse the ultimate consequences of sin and restore the relationship between God and those made in God's image. This act was costly. It involved the endurance of unjust suffering and the experience of death.

HEBREWS: Call to Wholehearted Commitment

Hebrews interprets the mission of Christ in language that reflects the sacrificial system of Old Testament religion. Jesus is both the high priest who offers the sacrifice to make atonement and the sacrifice itself. He offered himself to restore the oneness of God and God's people. As a result of Jesus' faithfulness to God's purpose in spite of suffering and death, Jesus has made it possible for us to overcome in our times of testing and have hope in our experience of death.

Implications for Us

If we pay close attention to God's message for us in the life and death of Jesus, we realize that this is not just a word to hear and understand. The word calls us to respond with our own costly commitment. Isaac Watts' great hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," expresses what occurs when we fix the image of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice firmly in our minds. When we really see Jesus, we begin to see ourselves as we are and as we need to be. The response we make to the gift of God in Christ is not one of paralyzing guilt but rather of overflowing gratitude.

We can never pay back what Christ has done for us. However, as people who have received grace, we are called to become full of grace toward others.

QUESTIONS

1. What tends to distract you from keeping the reality of Christ as the priority of your life and thought?
2. What are some practical and disciplined ways you have tried to keep your spiritual focus on the meaning of Christ for you?
3. What do you think are the most effective ways the message of Hebrews can be shared in the context of our contemporary culture?
4. Is the idea that Jesus "had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (2:17) reassuring or uncomfortable for you?
5. Do you find it difficult to think of the role of Christ beyond his earthly life and ministry? Why do you think the writer of Hebrews places such importance on Christ's role in relation to creating and sustaining the world?