

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?

Teaching Aim

To help the class consider the place Jesus has in their lives in relation to the teachings about Jesus in this passage

H E B R E W S



**Call to Wholehearted
Commitment**

Lesson One

Pay Closer Attention to God's Message

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

From the Book of Hebrews we read only the author's response to the situation and the questions his readers faced. Consequently, determining exactly the situation of the readers is very difficult, and the effort to do so has occasioned many suggestions.

Somehow a group of Jewish Christians, perhaps only a portion of the church addressed in the letter, was about to leave aside the gospel that they had first heard and accepted and return to former practices in Judaism. The big question is, *Why?* Why would they leave aside the gospel? When we have answered that question we will understand what Hebrews is about overall. Was it that they were simply apathetic about fulfilling their Christian calling to mission and Hebrews was to awaken them to the greatness of Christ? Was it that they received pressure from a local synagogue in their community to return to their Jewish practices and Hebrews was to guard them against that temptation? Or was it that they had wearied of standing against persecution and wanted to return to their more comfortable, former life in Judaism, and Hebrews was intended to show them what was at stake?

Barnabas Lindars, a New Testament scholar, has described the situation of the readers by suggesting that the author of Hebrews was writing to a group who were looking for forgiveness of sins that occurred after their conversion.¹ In their initial acceptance of Christ they understood the forgiveness of past sins, but now what about sins occurring after conversion? Whereas Judaism had ritual practices by which forgiveness could be sought, no recurring ritual practices existed for the Christian way. Consequently, these Jewish Christians were, according to Lindars, planning to reintroduce Jewish practices in order to deal with unresolved sin in their lives. To do so was to turn from the surpassing and superior work of Christ for them. The author of Hebrews wished to keep them from that, and so he presented the superiority of Christ over any other choice.

As the author presented the nature and work of Christ, he showed Christ to be superior to previous revelation—to angels, to Abraham, to Moses, to the priesthood of Aaron and the Levites, and to the temple itself. So the readers of the Book of Hebrews needed to pay closer attention to God's great work in Christ. If they understood what Christ had accomplished on their behalf, then they would understand that only Christ was great enough to meet their needs.

Today's lesson background begins with Christ as the superior revelation (1:1–3). These verses contain a very lofty doctrine of Christ. Indeed, in this statement by the author of Hebrews, we find a summary, probably in a form often taught in the early churches, of the nature and work of Christ.

In the next section of background Scripture (1:4—2:13), the author presented Jesus as superior to the angels. Angels were considered messengers who conveyed God's message to his servants. In this lengthy section of Scripture, the author pointed out ways in which Jesus is superior to angels. In general, the text affirms that Jesus is God's revelation of himself, and in Jesus we find the ultimate will, purpose, and work of God. Consequently, Jesus is far greater than angels.

In the last section of background Scripture for today's lesson (2:14–18), the author stressed one of the remarkable ways Jesus is superior. He is God's expression of himself in identity with humanity. He became a human being. God entered into our situation, taking fully upon himself our human condition—although he did not sin—to be our deliverer!

Interpreting the Scriptures

A Great Revelation (1:1–4)

1:1. The author emphasized the fact that God speaks. To say that “God spoke” was to bring to the devout Hebrew mind a wealth of memories of God speaking in history. For example, God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence (see Genesis 1). Too, what are the Ten Commandments except words from God for God’s people? Then there were the memories of all the prophets’ words, which were words of deliverance, warning, and guidance. The fact that God spoke in “many and various ways” means that God made himself known through many avenues. Actions in history; prophets; visions; parables; stories; songs; and worship experiences—these were among the many ways God spoke his word of revelation to his people.

1:2–3. The ultimate and completing act of God’s revelation, however, was and is in Jesus Christ. “In these last days” refers to a kind of time and not simply to chronological time. The “last days” includes the time between Jesus’ birth and Jesus’ coming again. We have no idea how long these “last days” will be, but this is the era of time, however long it is, dominated by God’s supreme revelation in Christ.

Many among the Jews looked forward to the time when God would break into history in a special way and begin a whole new existence in relationship to him. These would be the “last days”—the golden era of existence, the day of the Lord, the day God established his special rule in a final age of time. Many of these same people expected this kingdom to be the establishment of Israel as the special kingdom of the world. However, the king and the kingdom have come in Jesus Christ and his rule. This kingdom is not to be understood in political, national, and geographical terms, but in terms of the rule of Christ in the lives of people among all cultures and nationalities and over all things. If Christ is our Lord and Savior, we are in his kingdom.

Now Hebrews tells us the scope of this Son, who is the ultimate act of revelation. He is the “heir of all things” (1:2). He is the one toward whom all things are moving. All things will find their consummation in the Son’s character, nature, and purpose. He also “created the worlds” (1:2). Just as the Son is God’s expression of himself in salvation, so the Son is God’s expression of himself in creation. We know who God is as Savior by knowing Jesus Christ; likewise, we know who God is as Creator by knowing

Jesus Christ. Just as things find their consummation in the Son as to their character, nature, and purpose, they also find their beginning in the Son as to their character, nature, and purpose.

Mother Teresa was a person of powerful influence. She established an order of nuns known as the Missionaries of Charity, a ministry to the sick in Calcutta, especially to destitute children. This ministry spread to many parts of the world. Her tireless and selfless service characterized the work of the entire missionary society that she established. The missionary society shaped itself along the lines of her character, nature, and purpose. On a much bigger scale, think of God shaping the universe in the character, nature, purpose, and power of Jesus Christ.

In addition, the Son “sustains all things by his powerful word” (1:3). All things exist by his character, nature, purpose, and power. Things can only hold together by him and make sense by him. Therefore the Son is the beginning, in-between, and goal of all creation. To try to make life and creation fit by any other way than by Christ is to deny what is real, as much as denying what is real by claiming a giraffe and a tree are the same thing because they are both tall. The tree does not fit the reality of a giraffe, and the giraffe does not fit the reality of a tree. Life lived apart from the kingdom (rule) of Christ does not fit what is real.

“When he had made purification for sins” (1:3) means that Christ did all that was necessary to make us clean, or whole, much as one would be delivered from disease or would put aside old and dirty clothes for clean, new garments. He “sat down” (1:3) indicates the completed work of Christ. His work for making us whole is done. The priests who served in the temple could never “sit down,” because they had to repeat the sacrifices over and over again. But Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for those who accept him. Nothing else is needed to cleanse us from sins.

1:4. A belief among the Jews was that angels had mediated the law from God to Moses. Jesus, however, mediated salvation, cleansing, and wholeness. No angel could or can save. No angel can cleanse us from sin. Christ can and does, and Christ is by his saving work far superior to the angels.

A Great Salvation (2:1–11)

2:1–4. The author called the readers to renew their attention to what they had “heard” (2:1), or had been taught. They had been taught the gospel, the glad tidings of salvation in Jesus Christ. If the readers focused again on the Jewish law and ritual practice as a means for seeking forgiveness of sin,

they would miss, or “drift away” (2:1) from the work of Christ’s cleansing in their lives.

The author of Hebrews then reminded the readers that law judged every person’s “transgression or disobedience” (2:2). So there was no escaping the condemnation of the law upon sin. We know, of course, that the law or its ritual does not have power to forgive. A “just penalty” follows the judging. Since penalty is always the end result of the law’s judgment, the law offers no escape. But now, through Christ, God offers salvation, including forgiveness and cleansing from all transgression and disobedience. To “neglect so great a salvation” means there is no escape. Of course, to accept “so great a salvation” means escape from the penalty of sin.

This salvation in Christ has been made known, as clearly as the law had been made known. It has been made known “through the Lord,” by those “who heard him,” by God’s “signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2:3–4). Thus the author declared that the great salvation in Christ had been made plain for the readers to hear and accept.

2:5–11. This section of text infers a great deal of theological thought that can only be summarized at this point. Again, the superiority of Jesus to angels is the main purpose of the argument here. While human beings are less than angels, the world was made subject to human beings. The author supported this argument from Psalm 8. However, death is not subject to human dominion; instead, humans are subject to death (Heb. 2:8–9). Jesus, however, who was fully human, fully God, and fully identified with humanity, entered into human suffering and death so that he might “taste death for everyone” (2:9). In doing so, he became the “pioneer” to lead many to “glory” (2:10). Jesus delivers those who follow him from the dominion of death to glory, meaning fullness of relationship with God.

Remember that the readers’ evident concern was forgiveness of sin after their salvation experience. How does one receive forgiveness apart from some ritual by which to make offering to God to cover the sin? The author stressed at this point that Jesus “sanctifies” (2:11). To sanctify means to *make holy*. God in Christ, by his own initiative and consequent sufferings and self-giving, has made all who trust him, holy. Thus, Jesus calls us “brothers and sisters.” We are not rejected sinners.

A Great Identity (2:14–18)

2:14–15. The author comes again to that matter that kept human beings in bondage—death. Jesus entered into human death so that death might

stop with him. The resurrection, although not stated here, is implied. Jesus' resurrection broke the power of death and destroyed the "devil" (2:14). The devil's rule (kingdom) of death is destroyed by the rule (kingdom) of Christ, who himself is the gift of life (John 3:16).

2:16–18. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ were all for the aid of those who trusted him. It was not for angels that he did this, but for the "seed of Abraham" (2:16, KJV). The "seed of Abraham" are those who are followers of Christ. The Jewish readers of this book could especially identify with that kind of terminology. Christ became the "high priest" (2:17) so that all people could meet God in Christ and God could meet all people in Christ.

As high priest, Jesus mediates God to people and people to God. In doing so, Jesus made a "sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17). Thus Jesus acted to aid us in every way, even sharing the temptation with which we are tempted, but not sinning, in order to help us when we are tempted.

Focusing on the Meaning

We make choices by exercising our wills. We choose who or what is to receive the focus of our attention. Could it be that Jesus is simply among the range of things and people to whom we give our attention, receiving some of our focus but not much? This lesson should help us to remember that Jesus is the greatest event in all of history. This very fact calls us to make him the priority of our lives and pay close attention to him.

Remember that Christ is God's greatest act of revelation. Nothing else compares with God's making himself known to us in this way. We look at Christ, and we see God. Indeed, Christ is the very expression of God. Because of Christ, we know what God thinks about us, how God cares about us, and what God expects us to be and become. God's purpose for all of history, especially us, is to follow and be fulfilled according to the nature, character, purpose, and power of Christ.

Remember, too, that Christ is God's great act of salvation. By his identification with us, Christ delivers us from the power of sin and death. He cleanses us and makes us whole. We are made holy by Christ, not on the basis of what we do but on the basis of Christ's defeat of sin and death for us. Do we not need to focus, or refocus, our attention on

this great salvation? No angel, or anyone else, can overcome sin and death for us. Only Christ can do that.

This lesson encourages us to pay closer attention to God's supreme revelation in Christ. The main question, asked at the beginning of this lesson, urges us to consider what place Christ has in our lives. What loyalty do we have to him? Perhaps the best answers come by considering our relationships and what part Christ plays in them. In this way we can be specific in answering the question of Christ's place. For example, what place does Christ have in our relationship to the following: our family, our friends, our enemies, our work, our leisure, our money, our things, and Christ's local church? Honest evaluation of ourselves at this point is the right step in order to align ourselves with the great revelation we have in Christ.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Refer to the lesson introduction in the *Study Guide* about the overture played at the beginning of a musical production. Suggest that the overture is to music what an overview is to literature. It introduces themes that will appear throughout the production. Note that these themes become clearer as the production or piece of literature proceeds.

Overview the study of Hebrews by using information from the *Study Guide* (see “A Challenging Book” in Lesson One; see also “Introducing Hebrews”) and this *Teaching Guide* (see “Understanding the Context”). Accompany the overview with the fill-in-the-blank exercise, “Hebrews, a Challenging Book,” which can be presented on a handout, chart, or chalkboard. (The information in parentheses is provided for your use as teacher. Do not print it on the handout or chart.)

Hebrews, a Challenging Book

- Authorship? _____(Unknown)
- To whom written? _____ (Uncertain, but likely second-generation Christians)
- When written? _____ (Probably between AD 60–90)
- Basic format: letter, sermon, or theological exposition? _____(Probably a letter)
- Basic assumption of the writer? _____(Readers would have a good knowledge of the Old Testament.)
- Some mysteries of the book? _____ (References to ancient history, unfamiliar customs and people, talk of angels, the threat of apostasy)
- Message of the book? _____ (Christians must remain strong in their faith and committed to their world mission.)

2. Make the transition into Bible study by asking, *Is the main message of Hebrews still relevant for believers today? Why?*

Guide Bible Study

3. To help learners grasp the beauty and depth of Hebrews 1:1–4, enlist in advance two readers to read aloud portions of the lyrics of Christian music that presents God’s majesty and God’s work in creation. (Suggestions: “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” “O Worship the King,” “Thou Art Worthy,” “We Will Glorify.” Choose one or more with which your class is familiar.) Invite members to listen for characteristics of Christ as the readers read the words aloud. Call for responses.
4. Invite the class to discover from Hebrews 1:1–4 some characteristics of Christ’s relationship to the Father. Write responses on the board. (The list should include these characteristics: “heir of all things,” active in creation with the Father, “reflection of God’s glory,” “exact imprint of God’s very being,” Sustainer, Redeemer, superior to angels.)

Refer to John 1:1–5 and invite someone to read those verses aloud. Inquire: *In light of these passages from Hebrews and John, what should be the attitude and resolve of every believer?*

Summarize Hebrews 1:1–4 by sharing information in the next-

to-last paragraph in the *Study Guide* under the heading “The Revelation in God’s Son.”

5. Invite learners to scan Hebrews 1:5–14. Ask: *What is the main message of this passage? Why do you think the writer wrote this much about the role of angels? What was the writer’s conclusion?* (See 1:13–14. See also the comments on 1:4 in this *Teaching Guide* and the last paragraph in “The Revelation in God’s Son” in the *Study Guide*.)
6. Invite someone to read aloud Hebrews 2:1–4. Explain the meaning of these verses by using information in the *Study Guide* section “The Danger in Our Neglect” and in the comments on 2:1–4 in this *Teaching Guide*. Remind the class of the lesson title and state the teaching aim. Explain possible meanings of “drift away” (2:1). Ask: *In what ways are we likely to “drift away” (2:1) and neglect our salvation (2:3)?*
7. Invite someone to read aloud Hebrews 2:5–11. Ask, *What do these verses suggest about why Jesus needed to be fully human?* Share insights as needed from “Redemption Through Our Brother” in the *Study Guide* and the comments on 2:5–11 in this *Teaching Guide*. Follow with this illustration:

Near the end of the Civil War, two brothers were caught in a terrible battle. Their squad was undermanned, almost out of ammunition, and in unprotected terrain. The older brother, sensing they were doomed, ordered his younger brother to leave the front line and go for help. After a brief argument, the younger brother escaped, thus surviving to tell the story of his unit’s heroic though fatal stand, and to be reunited with his parents.

State that we are moved by stories of unselfish, heroic action. Lead the class to read Hebrews 2:14–18 to themselves. Then ask: *What did you feel as you read about Jesus’ sacrificial death?* Point out that Jesus is presented both as the priest who makes the sacrifice *and* as the sacrifice itself.

Encourage Application

8. Use the following questions for reflection and response. Read the questions aloud, or present them on a prepared poster or individual sheet.

- Are there areas in my life that require closer attention?
 - What place does Jesus have in my life?
 - How can the message of Hebrews be shared in our contemporary society?
9. Close with prayer, asking for the courage to identify ways we might be drifting away and for the discipline to honor Christ in our daily lives.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Use the following comment and questions to illustrate the human tendency to relax and drift away from principles and priorities. Say: *It is common to hear athletes talk about “focus” or “lack of focus.” What do they mean? What factors might contribute to lack of focus by an athletic team?*
2. Ask: *Does “lack of focus” ever afflict Christians? If so, why? Is there evidence that suggests Christians and churches of today have quit paying attention to God’s instructions and have begun to drift?*
3. State that today’s study introduces us to the Book of Hebrews and to the admonition found in Hebrews 2:1, “. . . we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.”

Guide Bible Study

4. Write the study title, “Hebrews: Call to Wholehearted Commitment,” on the board ahead of class time. Use the material found in “Introducing Hebrews” in the *Study Guide* as the basis for a brief lecture on the difficulties encountered when studying Hebrews. Also mention possible problems among the recipients that might have prompted the writing of Hebrews. Emphasize the main message of the book.
5. Draw attention to the title and Scripture passage for today’s study. Use the subheadings in the *Study Guide* as an outline, which could be a handout for note-taking.

6. *The Revelation in God's Son (Hebrews 1:1–4)*. Invite members to find words and phrases in verses 1–4 that describe the person and work of Christ. Ask members to turn to Philippians 2:5–11 and compare this passage with the Hebrews passage. Ask: *What is the major theme of both passages?* (the greatness of Christ) Refer to Hebrews 1:1–2 and ask, *In what ways has God spoken to God's people? What is the ultimate reason God chooses to reveal himself, or speak to us?* (Refer to the second paragraph in “The Revelation in God's Son” in the *Study Guide*.) Quickly survey 1:5–14 and summarize the “what” and “why” of this section. Close by reemphasizing that angels are “spirits in the divine service” (1:14) but are not equal to Christ and are not to be worshipped.
7. *The Danger in Our Neglect (Hebrews 2:1–8)*. Present a brief lecture on the meaning of 2:1–4, using information in the *Study Guide* and in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*. Give attention to these phrases in 2:1: “therefore,” “pay greater attention,” “so that we do not drift away.” Inquire: *Does this sound a little like a parent talking to a child? Why do you think those who received this letter needed the warning in verses 2–3?*
8. *Redemption Through Our Brother (Hebrews 2:5–11, 14–18)*. Suggest that these verses speak eloquently of Christ's redemptive role. Christ was at once the sacrificial lamb and the great high priest. Read the passage slowly and with feeling. Emphasize especially 2:14–18. Refer to and ask question 4 in the *Study Guide*. Allow time for responses.

Encourage Application

9. To encourage personal application, invite the class to respond to questions 1 and 2 in the *Study Guide*.
10. Read aloud stanzas 1, 2, and 4 of the hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Close with a prayer of thanks for Jesus our Savior.

NOTES

1. Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, in *New Testament Theology*, ed. by J.D.G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8–10.