



Sunday School Lesson for June 6, 2004.
Released on: June 4, 2004.

Study Hebrews 1:1-9; 2:1-4. Jesus: The Reason to Be Faithful
Questions and answers below.

TIME: about A.D. 67
PLACE: unknown

Hebrews 1:1-9

1 God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,
2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;
3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;
4 Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.
5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?
6 And again, when he bringeth in the first-begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.
7 And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.
8 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.
9 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

Hebrews 2:1-4

1 Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.
2 For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward;
3 How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;
4 God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?

Lesson Background

Jesus Christ is the central figure in the world's history. Even many people who do not follow Him will acknowledge this fact. The key question is why He deserves His lofty standing.

There are those who try to explain Jesus' greatness by saying He was simply the greatest teacher who ever was. He knew how to explain deep truths in vivid and easily understandable ways. Others attribute His preeminence to the unparalleled example of selfless love that He set. By His words and deeds He taught us how to love one another. Still others emphasize how the social and cultural climate of the ancient world facilitated the growth of Christianity.

The opening chapters of Hebrews give us a portrait of Jesus that explains why He is worthy of our faith. He is history's central figure because He is God's Son, the Revealer of God's glory, and the Ruler of God's kingdom. As believers we do not simply admire Christ as a great man; we worship Him and entrust Him with our very lives and future. He is our Lord.

Christ's Greatness (Hebrews 1:1-9)

1. To whom was the book of Hebrews especially addressed (Hebrews 1:1)?

Our God is not some remote, obscure deity who observes our activities from afar with little or no involvement. How reassuring, and at the same time sobering, to realize that He is not just "out there," but is also here with us.

God shows His gracious nature by the mere fact that He desires to communicate with us. Despite the fact that we so often fail to live for God and love Him as we should, He has persistently sought communion with His people. We are told that in Old Testament days He sent messages to His people "sundry" (many) times and by various means.

The reference to "the fathers" is to the people of Israel. The book of Hebrews was especially directed to Jewish believers. God had sent many prophets to Israel with messages of both warning and encouragement. These prophets had sometimes received visions (Ezek. 1). At other times they had been told to present striking object lessons (4:1-8). The list of God's means of communication could go on and on (Exodus 19:19–20:21; 1 Kings 19:12), and they all point to God's earnest desire to get through to fallen man.

Now, however, an exciting time had come. All of the past communications between God and man had been leading up to the climactic and decisive revelation of His Son. As the Scripture passage will soon make abundantly clear, this Son is God in human form.

2. What does it mean that Christ is the "heir of all things" (v. 2)?

One of the primary themes of the book of Hebrews is how the new covenant, brought to pass by Christ Himself, fulfills all the great covenant promises of the Old Testament (2:5-9; 8:6-13; 12:24). As the beloved Son of His Father, Jesus has been appointed to receive the inheritance of the great messianic kingdom foretold in 2 Samuel 7:16 (Isaiah 9:6,7). Here in Hebrews 1:2 we learn that the new covenant reality not only fulfills but surpasses the old covenant promises. Christ is the Ruler of "all things," that is, of the entire created order.

The writer of Hebrews was concerned that his readers might gradually drift away from Christ and back into an empty dependence on the Mosaic law and ritualism. He was determined to show them the glory of Christ. He reminded them that Christ was the divine instrument of the Creation itself (John 1:3; Col. 1:16).

3. Suppose a fellow believer came to you and said, "Say, a friend gave me this book. He says it's 'another testament of Jesus Christ.' Maybe we need to see what it says and add that to our teachings at church." How would you respond to your friend's suggestion? How does today's text help you in your answer?

Many groups and individuals claim to have further words from God. In light of our text, we should be very skeptical of such claims. We have the words of Jesus from the Gospels. We also have Jesus' prediction that He will speak more of His Word through the apostles (see John 16:12-15). The New Testament, written during the time of the apostles, and written by apostles or close associates of the apostles, can rightfully claim to be the fulfillment of that promise. But books written centuries after the death of the last apostle cannot.

And what do these additional "revelations" have to say? If they contradict the inspired Word of God, they cannot be true. Invariably, every supposed revelation will contradict the Scriptures, exposing itself as false.

4. How does Christ reveal the glory of God (v. 3)?

The passage continues to set forth the greatness of Christ by declaring how He reveals the character and power of God. First of all, the Son is like the Father in "the brightness of his glory." John 1:14 affirms this same idea: "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father."

Second, the Son shares with the Father the power to uphold "all things." That is, Christ is involved in the power that sustains all created things. Third, He has "by himself purged our sins." Through His death on the cross He has paid the price required by God's holiness and justice (Romans 3:21-26). Finally, He "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high," indicating His eternal reign with the Father. (See also Hebrews 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Revelation 3:21.) There is no glory or power greater than Jesus.

5. What does it mean that Christ "obtained" (v. 4) a greater name than the angels?

After this impressive description of Christ's greatness, we may wonder why the author of Hebrews thought it necessary to stress His superiority to angels. Considering our own culture's fascination with angelic beings, however, perhaps it is not that surprising. Jewish tradition assigned a prominent place to angels, particularly in the revelation of the Mosaic law (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). There were also currents in ancient thought among the Gentiles that tended toward their exaltation (Col. 2:18).

The words "being made" at the start of Hebrews 1:4 do not mean that Christ at some point in time became greater than the angels. But by carrying out the divine plan of redemption that the Father and Son had formed from "the foundation of the world" (John 17:24; Rev.13:8), or eternity past, He made manifest His supreme power and position. Christ, as well as the new covenant that He instituted, far surpasses the angelically mediated old covenant.

Christ's acts had shown His superiority, and so did the name by which He was recognized by the Father. The idea behind obtaining a more excellent name than the angels is that through His redemptive work the sonship of Christ that existed from eternity was made gloriously manifest.

6. In what sense was the Lord Jesus Christ "begotten" (v. 5) by the Father?

The writer of Hebrews emphasized that only Christ was ever called the Son, and demonstrates the superiority of the Son over the angels by using a series of quotations from the Old Testament. The writer knows that the Christian readers of Jewish background accept these Scriptures as God's authoritative Word.

The first quotation is from Psalm 2:7 (also found in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 5:5). This psalm is widely recognized both in Judaism and in Christianity as being messianic. "Thou art my Son" was not spoken to the angels, but only to the Christ.

The second quotation is from 2 Samuel 7:14, which is identical to 1 Chronicles 17:13. This prediction originally applied to future-King Solomon, but the writer of Hebrews now applies it to Jesus as well. Solomon was in the line of David, as is Jesus (Matthew 1:1, 6).

7. What does the term "firstbegotten" mean in verse 6?

The writer of Hebrews continued to build His case. The words "and again" (Heb.1:6) emphasize how strong the argument is. Because of His messianic stature and His glory as God the Son, the angels were to worship Christ, as indeed they did at the time of His birth (Luke 2:9-14).

Christ is called the "firstbegotten" in Hebrews 1:6. This does not mean that He was created at some point. It refers to His receiving the rights of the firstborn. He is the rightful Heir, and He is also the Leader of all those who will enter His kingdom through faith in Him (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 12:23).

The biblical writer in no way wished to criticize or belittle the angels of God (in verse 7 of lesson text). Referring to Psalm 104:4, he noted the work of the angels, who are ministering spirits (Hebrews 1:14). The Son is to be worshiped (verse 6), but the angels are to serve.

8. How does verses 8 and 9 declare the deity of Christ?

Christ, by contrast, occupies the eternal throne of God (Heb. 1:8). This verse is one of the great proof texts for the deity of Christ. The reference in Psalms that is quoted here (45:6) clearly is addressed to God Himself, and that text is now shown to apply to Christ.

The passage in Hebrews goes on to describe the character of Christ's kingly rule. He does not rule arbitrarily or with any evil intent. Continuing to quote from Psalm 45, the writer of Hebrews made clear that Christ's rule is in accord with God's righteousness.

To truly rule righteously, one must have a deep love of righteousness and hate wickedness. Because Christ perfectly embodies God's righteous character, He receives the outpouring of the Father's pleasure (Ps. 23:5; Matt. 3:17). Being "anointed" with "oil" is a majestic picture of the Son's position "above" His "fellows" (Ps. 45:7).

The Believer's Responsibility (Hebrews 2:1-4)

9. Why is it so important to "heed the things which we have heard" (Hebrews 2:1)?

The word therefore is crucial in this epistle. It is often used to mark a conclusion that logically follows arguments or statements that have preceded it. Thus when we see the word, we ought to be alert to the practical applications that follow.

In this verse the writer exhorts his readers to give heed to the things that they have heard. These things include the gospel message that they had received and responded to while they were still Jews living under the law. Also included are sermons and lessons they have heard that have helped them grow toward maturity in the faith.

While many of the Jewish Christians had suffered persecution because of their faith, this does not seem to be the problem addressed here. The author apparently is not concerned that the readers will openly and dramatically renounce Christianity and return to Judaism. The real danger is that the readers will carelessly, little by little, slip away.

That danger remains as real today as it was in the first century. Rarely does a Christian publicly renounce his or her faith. He or she is much more likely to drift away slowly. We see it when a person who once attended worship services every Sunday begins to attend only once or twice a month (Hebrews 10:25). Eventually that person shows up only for special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter, or sometimes not at all.

Several factors may contribute to this slipping away—family, business, and recreation interests are possibilities. A growing unwillingness to make the effort to live up to the high standards of Christianity is also a danger. When we see this pattern developing in a person, the church and its leadership need to make efforts to restore that person.

10. What are some examples of those who have "drifted away" from the faith? What can help people avoid "faith drift"?

An often-mentioned Biblical example of this faith drift is Demas (2 Timothy 4:10). Perhaps class members can think also of friends or family members, once active in the faith, who just seemed to "slide away" by neglect (advise caution in using real names). Remind the class that sometimes all that is needed to revive a person's waning faith are a few kind words or a kind deed.

Without careful attention to the teaching of Scripture, it is very easy to lose the Christian faith by abandoning it a little at a time over a long period. The fact that the change is not dramatic makes this all the easier. Daily Bible reading is a must. Understanding and applying Scripture will help us remain anchored within the faith.

11. What was the "word spoken by angels" (vs. 2,3)?

"The word spoken by angels" most likely refers to the law given at Mount Sinai. In Galatians 3:19 Paul speaks of the law being "ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator." The Mosaic law was sure and dependable (the word "stedfast" often referred to a legal guarantee), and God's threatened punishment for Israel's violations of it were equally certain (Num.15:22,23,30,31).

If a revelation mediated by angels would be strictly enforced, there certainly was no hope of evading the consequences if a person let "slip" the truth of salvation brought by the Son of God Himself (Heb. 2:3) and purchased by Him at such great cost (vs. 10-18).

Notice that this stern warning is not directed at those who arrogantly and blatantly reject the Son. Instead, this warning is directed at those who could become guilty of "neglect" of the offer of salvation that they already have accepted. This is the "let them slip" that the writer has just mentioned in verse 1.

12. Why did God send signs and wonders in the apostolic age (v. 4)?

The Lord was the first to proclaim the gospel (Mark 1:14,15), and His message was vouched for and passed on to others through reliable eyewitnesses (Luke 1:2).

The message that the apostles of Christ had received was so important that God validated it in spectacular fashion (Heb. 2:4). Beginning at Pentecost (Acts 2:22, 43), He sent various miraculous signs and wonders to make it clear that the truth was being proclaimed and that it came from Him. He also sent great spiritual gifts and empowerment through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7-11). None of this was the work of man. The sovereign God had acted.

CONCLUSION

Realizing the importance of teaching the exclusive truth of the Christian faith is crucial. Ideally this ought to begin in our homes, the most important educational institution in the world. Unfortunately, many parents, even Christian parents, do not feel that they are capable of doing a good job of passing on their faith to their children. Even though most of us are not professional educators, we need to understand that there are many important things each of us can do—praying at mealtimes, having a Bible study with our children, and emphasizing Christian values in our conversations are examples.

Let us all make a firm commitment that we will not allow Christianity to slip away because of our neglect.

PRAYER

Almighty God, we thank You for allowing us to share in all the joys and blessings that come to us through our Christian faith. Give us the wisdom and determination to pass this faith on to our children and to all others who have not known these joys and blessings. Through Jesus Christ we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God has spoken, and we must listen.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our next lesson we will consider how Jesus is our Saviour who came to wash our sins away. Study Hebrews 2:5-18.

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