

Sermon 1: Hebrews 1:1-2a: 'This is My Beloved Son...Listen to Him'

OUTLINE

God's word to the Hebrews
God's word to the fathers
God's word through His Son

INTRODUCTION

Every book of the Bible is a joy to preach, but there are some key books that are daunting and energizing and challenging and rewarding. The book of Genesis because it is the book of beginnings which lays such an important foundation for everything else. The book of Romans because it is a systematic treatise of Paul's gospel. The book of John because it has the deepest Christology. The book of Revelation because it is so disputed by various schools. I would add the book of Hebrews to this group. This is one of those books that you dare not tackle as a young preacher but one that you spend time studying and preparing to preach. It is a book that is written to those saturated in OT theology, to Jewish believers. Someone has pointed out that there are 37 OT quotes; 40 allusions; 19 summaries; and 13 references from the OT. There are many concepts that are alien and strange to our modern minds.

The book of Hebrews has been compared to the Mount of Transfiguration. This is a letter written to a group of believers who were feeling the pressures of persecution and who were playing with the idea of retreating back into Judaism and its OT practices and beliefs to relieve the problem. This exhortation is written to put on display the supremacy of Christ's person and the sufficiency of His work on our behalf to show we can have no better Saviour and no better salvation than the one we have in Christ. This is a letter written to show you what you have and that calls you to persevere in light of that. This is like the Mount of Transfiguration because even though the glory of the law and the prophets is great, Moses and Elijah, the divine glory of the Son is greater. Moses and Elijah are superseded by the superior glory of Christ.

If you are feeling harassed; daunted; tired; weak, then the epistle to the Hebrews is for you. Most people know the book of Hebrews because it has some of the strongest warning passages about falling away in the NT. But those warning passages are only a byproduct of the central concern of the book. The warning passages are so strong because we have so great a salvation. To those who have been given much, much will be required. If judgement is in light of what we know and what privileges we have received there can be no greater judgement than for those who forsake the Saviour we have in the God-Man Jesus Christ who is an ever-living Highpriest for His people. For those who forsake the great salvation promised from eternity past; revealed through the whole of the OT and comes to pass through Jesus laying down His life, to completely pay for all of our sins and win our eternal rest. The book of Hebrews is all about showing you what you have in Christ, and to hold fast to Christ. If you are feeling the pressure of the promises of sin, know that you have greater satisfaction and promises in Him, as well as His aid in your struggle. If you are feeling confused wondering whether other religions and other worldviews have more to offer, know that in Christ you have God made man to save us in a way no other religion can. If you are daunted by the hatred and the animosity that the world has for Christ and are feeling like you want to throw in the towel because the price is too high, know that the price is higher if you leave, and more importantly, if you persevere

you will inherit the greatest of all possible gifts, life with God. If you are concerned that the difficulties of your life seem to be saying to you that God does not love you, or that evil is winning, know that the path of suffering that even the Son of God had to walk, is the path appointed for you by a loving Father; that He disciplines all those He loves. There is so much that we have in Christ and that is what the book of Hebrews is all about. If we were to give Hebrews a title, I like one of the titles I read, Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims; or we could call it, Sufficient Saviour for suffering servants. I like what these titles capture, that there is more power and provision in Christ than there is need in you. This I think captures the heart of this book. And it is where the book of Hebrews begins, it begins looking at the glories of Christ. In this introductory sermon we will introduce ourselves to the letter to the Hebrews, and look at the first 2 verses. Our three points are, God's word to the Hebrews; God's word to the fathers; God's word through His Son.

God's word to the Hebrews

Let's begin by trying to answer some basic questions about the letter to the Hebrews. This is made difficult by the fact that we don't know who wrote it; nor who it was written to; nor when it was written. Many in the early church believed that Paul wrote it. The theory is that he might have written it in Hebrew and Luke or the likes translated it into Greek, accounting for the distinct and masterful Greek of the letter. But I agree with Luther, that Paul who insisted that he was shown this gospel from God directly in Gal. 1:16, would not say as 2:3 says that it was attested to him by witnesses. This has led to other suggestions such as Apollos who was an Alexandrian Jew who was an educated and well-spoken man, which seems to fit with the letter; or Barnabas, the son of encouragement who was a Levite, which seems to fit with the tone of the letter and its emphasis on the priesthood. Technically we do not need to know who wrote it to know that it is the Word of God, Calvin is correct when he said: "Since the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews contains a full discussion of the eternal divinity of Christ, His supreme government, and only priesthood (which are the main points of heavenly wisdom), and as these things are so explained in it, that the whole power and work of Christ are set forth in the most graphic way, it rightly deserves to have the place and honor of an invaluable treasure in the Church."¹

The audience and the date of the writing are likewise hard to ascertain. You will notice that chapter 1 does not begin with the usual greetings identifying the writer and audience. This is likely because it is written as a 'word of exhortation', 13:22. This is the same description given to Paul's sermon in the synagogue in Acts 13:15. It was written to be read as a synagogue sermon. The title 'To The Hebrews' is from the earliest 2nd century Greek manuscripts. The common consensus is that this is the case. The content of the letter which assumes a deep understanding of the OT, the reference to 'our' fathers in 1:1, the temptation to return to Judaism, all point to this being an accurate description. So we can say that this was written to Jewish Christians, but when and where?

I subscribe to the modern consensus that this was written to some Jewish believers in Rome in the early 60s. This cannot be stated categorically but is an

¹ Richard D. Phillips, [Hebrews](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 9.

educated guess. In 13:24 it says, 'those from Italy greet you'. This sounds like 'your countrymen who are also from Italy greet you' placing us in Italy. The book of Hebrews was first quoted by Clement of Rome, making Rome a good option in Italy. And along with 10:32-34 which tells the audience to recall their former sufferings which involved a loss of property and public reproach but not yet martyrdom. This situation seems to fit well with the edict of Claudius in AD49 when he kicked all the Jews including the Jewish Christians out of Rome. And since 12:4 mentions that martyrdom is not yet on the cards, pre 64AD, before Nero began a bloody persecution against the Christians makes sense. A big influence on this date is that fact that the temple was destroyed in 70AD and would have worked well in the argument of the letter but it is not mentioned, and the priests in chap. 9 are described in the present tense possibly supporting their ongoing and not yet ceased ministrations.

So piecing that together we have a good template for understanding the context of what Hebrews is addressing. We have a group of Jewish believers, who are in Roman context. Judaism was a protected religion in Rome, but Christianity was not. With enough noise made by the Jews, Christianity, which would have initially been seen as a sub sect of Judaism was now being seen as something distinct, and something that had a unique message that challenged the supremacy of the Roman Empire. Jesus not Caesar is Lord. The letter notes how the temperature is rising, and the pressure is becoming so much that these Jews are longing for earlier times, looking over at the harbor of Judaism wondering if it might afford more protection and relief. If our guess is correct then this letter is God's provision to help those Roman Jewish believers face the bloody persecution that Nero would soon pour out upon them. Even if our details are not exact, the broad brushstrokes are. The letter to the Hebrews is a synagogue sermon written to show these struggling Christians the supremacy of Christ over anything in the OT never mind anything else. We can see this message in its basic parts.

The letter launches into the supremacy of Christ as the final word of God over the prophets, where Christ is spoken of in some of the most superlative terms as He is painted in all of His glory as Divine and human, 1:1-4; how He is superior to angels, for they are servants but He is the Son, 1:5-14. The book of Hebrews has 6 strong warnings woven throughout, 2:1-4; 3:6-4:2; 5:11-6:8; 10:26-31; 12:15-17; and 12:25-29. Again the warnings are equal to the blessings being rejected. 3:1-4:13 shows Jesus as superior to Moses. 4:14-10:18 is a large section that shows the superiority of Jesus priesthood. 10:19-12:29 shows the superior way Christ has opened for us, and the superior life of faith. Chapter 13 ends with some concluding exhortations, greetings and benedictions. The point is simple, take everything of the OT and compare it with Christ, He is better. He is a superior word, superior to angels who delivered the law, superior to Moses who gave the law, superior to Aaron, has offered a superior sacrifice, has established a superior covenant, has opened a superior way to God. See what you have in Christ and cling to Him.

God's word to the fathers

V1, 'Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.' The author begins comparing the OT revelation with the NT revelation in Christ. This move to begin with revelation, God's word is the logical starting point for believers. All of what we believe and practice must be based on the authority of the word of God. Those wanting to return to Judaism might be

thinking that this is a safe move because the OT is God's word and things like the temple, circumcision, the sacrifices are all recorded in the inspired scripture. The author shows how the OT has points of continuity and discontinuity with the word of God through His Son. There are several things to note here.

Firstly, God speaks. God spoke the world into existence. God revealed a limited measure of His reality and being through nature; general revelation, creation, is declaring the glory of God, Ps. 19:1. Even Adam in the Garden was not made with a fully formed database, he did not have all things written upon his heart, God spoke His word to him. God has not left us without a witness. Many demand that God reveal Himself not aware that if they were to stand in the direct presence of God they would die because of their sins, God in His mercy does not reveal Himself as He is. God has given His word. It is His word that helps us to know what our finite minds cannot grasp and our finite senses cannot experience. He tells us about Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He tells us about ourselves that we are made in His image, that we are male and female, that we are made for marriage and family and to walk in His ways; that we were made sinless but then we fell in sin and we are under a curse with a fallen nature in need of redemption. He reveals that there is no way we can save ourselves and our only hope is Christ. He reveals by His law our sin and how we need Jesus to be a sin bearer, and has recorded how He has died upon the cross in payment for our sins. The way of salvation is not a mystery but is a universal call to repent and believe and be saved because of what Christ has done.

God has been speaking from the beginning. And we are told that God spoke in many ways. These words are of course referring to the many ways God spoke in the OT be it dreams, audible voice, a donkey, parables, poetry, historical narratives, angelic messenger, etc. God spoke through the prophets. Here we are being told about the manner of God's speech, that it was the inspired revelation of God. God's message does not derive its source from man, but from the Holy Spirit moving upon human instruments, and without violating their wills but moving so as to ensure God's inerrant word is communicated through them, God bears them along by His Holy Spirit. As Peter says, 2 Pet. 1:21, 'For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.'

And from the beginning God has been speaking about His saving work in His Son. God promised a child born of woman who would defeat satan and rescue us from our sins, Gen. 3:15. The rest of the OT is a development of this idea, Jesus revealed this to His disciples on the Emmaus road, Luke 24:27, 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.' Peter says the same, 1 Pet. 1:10-11, 'Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.' Adam; Noah; Abraham; Jacob; Judah; Moses; Joshua; Samuel; David; Solomon, Isaiah; Jeremiah; Jonah; Daniel; Job, all and more were given insight into some aspect of this grand unified story, this grand message of salvation that God was revealing from the beginning. The OT revelation is inferior, not because it was not inspired, not because it is not the word of God, it is! No, it is inferior because it was still incomplete, the Christ all these single puzzle pieces were pointing to had not yet arrived to make sense of all of the dots. To leave Jesus for the OT is to go back to the unfinished tapestry. It is like a fairy tale with no Prince Charming. A conflict with no resolution.

God's word through His Son

V2, 'but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.' This brings us to the beginning of v2. God's final word is the word of His Son. There are several contrasts that have been noted between these two verses. God has spoken by His Son, not merely by a prophet; He has spoken by His Son singular, who has the Spirit without measure; not through many prophets in a fragmented way who only each had a portion of the Spirit; God has spoken in these 'last days' as a reference to the eschatological day of God's visitation that means salvation for His people and judgement for His enemies, a day of fulfillment; where God in the past spoke long ago, in types, shadows, partial glimpses and promises that yet awaited fulfillment. There is continuity in that it is the same God who speaks; it is the same salvation being spoken of; both messages bear the qualities of God's revelation as inspired and inerrant; but the word that God speaks in His Son is His final, climactic and fullest word. Where in the OT God spoke 'by the prophets' in the NT God spoke 'in Son', there is no 'His' in the Greek. This indicates that a superior medium is being used.

The Son is God's best and fullest communication of Himself. He is the 'Word' the communication of God; He is the light of the world; the law came through Moses but God's grace and truth are revealed in Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the Son has made the Father known. John 1:18, 'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.' Is there a God; who is He; what is He like; how can I know Him? these are our most earnest and important questions, and here is the answer, God has spoken, in His fullest, most clear, way in His Son. More than being a message, He is God made flesh and a living embodiment of God's nature. There is no other place where God has revealed Himself in this way. All of the OT pales in comparison to what we have revealed in Jesus.

Now I do not have enough time to show you all the ways that Jesus reveals God, so let me leave you with just one point, that the Son reveals God the Father. Turn to Heb. 2:12, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers.' Here Ps. 22:22 is telling us that one of the things Jesus came to do was to tell of God's name to His brothers, that is us. He is in Himself, the image of the invisible God, Col. 1:15; and no one can know the Father unless the Son reveals the Father to them, Matt. 11:27; it is to those who believe in His name that they have the right to become children of God and call upon God as Father, Jn. 1:12; it is Jesus who taught His disciples, that is believers to pray to God as 'Our Father,' who spoke to us of the Father who gives rain to the righteous and the unrighteous as our example, Matt. 5:45; who reveals to us that God is like the Father of the prodigal son who is willing to receive those who repent; who tells His disciples after the resurrection that He will now ascend to His Father and their Father. Jesus tells that He alone is the way to the Father and that to see Him is to see the Father, John 14:6-7, 'Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." now the OT spoke of God as being like a Father who has compassion on His children, Ps. 103:13-14, but through Christ we have been adopted into such a sonship that was inconceivable in the OT, the Spirit has been given to us to teach us to cry as Jesus did, Abba, Father. The OT was full of grace, but compared to the grace of God revealed in Christ, John 1:17 is not exaggerating when it says, 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'

What do I want you to see? Imagine you were these Jewish believers considering whether it was worth it. What would you lose if you left; what would you gain if you went back to Judaism? Hebrews says everything. We have gained so much in Christ; see what you have in Christ. Sinners become the adopted children of God in Christ. Next to Him, what is persecution; what is gaining the whole world; what is that favourite sin. God has given His best in Christ and we should hold on to Him for all we are worth. This is the message of Hebrews.