

SERIES: Greater Than: The Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews

SERMON: **The Great Communicator**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 1:1-3

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First, I want to thank Josh for his teaching of the Scriptures during my absence this past month. I was here for the first message on Jonah, and I read all the others carefully. I want you to know that I believe he communicated very effectively and faithfully the message of that book. I am very thankful for Josh's giftedness and hard work. And I am very grateful for the rest of the staff, who always carry on their duties with joy and competence.

I also want to thank the church for the study month I have enjoyed these past five years. I trust you will view it as a profitable investment as we begin a new series today on a book which I have been able to saturate myself in for the last month.

I clearly remember the presidential campaign of 1964, the first time I was able to vote. I was in college and was very interested in politics. Lyndon Johnson was from my home state of Texas, but to me he was the epitome of the big-spending, big-government liberal. I became an avid supporter of Barry Goldwater. I read his speeches, watched him on TV, attended a huge rally for him at the War Memorial in Kansas City, and even got to shake his hand.

Goldwater was a really good communicator. Who will ever forget his passionate challenge, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue"? Unfortunately there was so much nuclear hysteria and demagoguery coming from the other side that his message didn't get through to most people.

But the most memorable event of the campaign came in early October, if I remember correctly. I learned that a journeyman actor from Hollywood was going to give a speech in Goldwater's behalf. I didn't know anything about him except that he introduced one my favorite TV shows, *Death Valley Days*. But fascinated by anything related to Goldwater, I tuned into the speech.

I remember that evening like it was yesterday. For some 45 minutes I sat spellbound as The Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan, waxed eloquently on the great themes of freedom, patriotism, free enterprise, God, country, small government, motherhood, apple pie, and why Goldwater was the only logical choice for President. I had never heard anyone speak so convincingly and compellingly. I wondered how anyone could listen to that man and still vote for Johnson. But it was too little, too late. The die was cast and Johnson went on to a landslide victory.

The end result of that speech, however, was that sixteen years later Reagan accomplished what Goldwater never achieved. And he is remembered by many as the Greatest Communicator in the history of American politics. In the 45 years since that first speech there have been many imitators, and there will be more in the future, but I doubt if anyone will ever reach the heart of the true American patriot quite like Reagan did.

Well, I can't help but think about that scenario as I read the opening few verses of the NT book of Hebrews. It's always dangerous to draw human analogies to divine truth, and I certainly don't want to push this one too far. But listen to these words about the One who is truly the Greatest Communicator of all: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." There have been imitators, and there will be more in the future, but no one can add anything significant to the heart of the true believer beyond what God has already spoken in Jesus Christ. There is no more to be said.

It is with a great sense of anticipation and excitement that Josh and I embark with you today on a new expository teaching series from the Scriptures. I will be speaking the first few weeks, but we will be sharing the series almost equally. Hebrews is a powerful and profound, though somewhat neglected portion of Scripture. One of the reasons for this neglect is that Hebrews is somewhat intimidating. Its language is lofty and eloquent; its theology is deeply rooted in the Old Testament; it contains severe warnings against apostasy that are troubling to those who have been nurtured on the doctrine of eternal security; and it is written to people from a very different background than ours. Yet while somewhat intimidating, the book is immensely practical and relevant. I believe our six-month journey is going to be enlightening, convicting, exciting, and profitable all at the same time.

Before we examine the opening verses this morning, I think it's important that we give some thought to introductory matters. Sometimes we are tempted to snooze through introductions, but I beg your careful attention here, for I am going to focus only on what's crucial to understanding the book.

Introductory matters

The recipients. The book of Hebrews was clearly written to Jewish Christians living about thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christianity had spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world, principally through the ministry of Paul and the Twelve Apostles. Since the Apostles were Jewish it was only natural that they would concentrate their evangelistic efforts among Jewish people wherever they traveled. And it so happened there was a distinctive Jewish community in almost every major city of the ancient world, for the Jews had been dispersed from Palestine over a period of several centuries for political and economic reasons. They tended to congregate in the same area of a city, pursuing their own cultural distinctives and following the religious rituals of Judaism.

Many of these foreign Jews welcomed the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but they soon found that there was a heavy price to pay for their new faith. They were already considered second-class citizens of the Roman empire because of a pervasive anti-Semitism, and by professing faith in Christ they found themselves rejected even in the Jewish community. So they were in the unenviable position of being outcasts from outcasts, much like the Palestinian believers Pastor Massad spoke of last Sunday.

Persecution has the potential of producing opposite effects. It can either stimulate us to greater faith and renewed spiritual vitality, or it can discourage us and produce spiritual lethargy and

paralysis. It seems like the latter was the experience of many of the recipients of this letter. They had lost their first love, they had become very discouraged, they had quit growing and maturing in their faith, and some were even in danger of returning to the ritualism and legalism of Judaism.

It takes time, of course, for anyone to mature in the Christian life, but the problem for these Jewish Christians was not one of insufficient time. They had been believers long enough to become mature, yet their spiritual age was severely lagging behind their chronological age. They were like a group of teenagers drinking out of baby bottles, or geezers sucking their thumbs. It's cute to see a baby doing those things, but it's pathetic to see adults doing them.

Frankly, this is not an unknown state of affairs in the church today. There are many Christians who have made professions of faith in Christ, have identified with Him and His church, but now 5, 10, 20, or even 40 years later they are still spiritually weak, unable to explain their faith intelligently, unable to share it effectively, and worse yet, unable to honestly affirm that they have a vital, personal, meaningful relationship with God. It's as though they have taken out fire insurance from hell but not much else. Some even second-guess themselves, wondering, "Is this all there is to being a Christian? Isn't there more?" Well, the Book of Hebrews insists that there *is* more, much more!

So much for the recipients. What is the message the writer has for them?

The message. The principal message of Hebrews, in my estimation, is this: "Let us go on to maturity." In order to achieve that goal the author follows a plan which involves three primary factors—profound teaching, strong warnings, and practical exhortations. The teaching or doctrine covers the bulk of the first ten chapters. The warnings, of which there are five or six primary ones, are scattered throughout the first ten chapters, woven in among the doctrinal truths. And the practical exhortations fill the final three chapters.

The teaching or doctrine in Hebrews focuses primarily upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. The reason is that the author believes that the single greatest roadblock to spiritual maturity is an inadequate view of Christ. Not even persecution will undermine the faith of those who understand the incomparable greatness of the Savior, so he opens the book with a brilliant defense of the uniqueness of Jesus and continues that theme chapter after chapter.

Jesus is superior to all other communication from God in the past;

He is superior to the angels;

He is superior to the great prophets of the Old Testament;

He is superior to Moses;

He is superior to Joshua;

He is superior to Aaron;

He is superior to the Melchizedekian priesthood;

He is superior to the Old Covenant;

He is superior to anyone and anything, everyone and everything.

His point is that recognizing and bowing to the superiority of Christ is the key to the believer's maturity.

This is a message we need to hear in our day as well, for there are many rivals for our spiritual attention. There are numerous philosophies, religions, gurus and prophets—both theists and atheists—trying to siphon off our allegiance, pressuring, tempting, and frightening us into listening to other voices and serving other masters. We need to focus on Jesus alone.

Now I have mentioned the author of Hebrews, but I haven't told you who he is. The reason is that I don't know, nor does anyone else.

The author. Most early editions of the King James Version boldly entitled the book, “The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,” but the book itself does not bear his name. The grammar and vocabulary raise serious doubts about whether Paul could have written it. The fact is, down through the centuries there has been considerable debate, generating much more heat than light, over who penned this marvelous epistle.¹ I'm not even going to hazard a guess, for I am of the opinion that the author purposely left his name out. So crucial was it for him to focus the attention of his readers on Jesus Christ that he kept his own name out of the text, much as did the Apostle John when he wrote his Gospel, though in that case his authorship is obvious from other considerations.

With that brief look at the recipients, the message, and the author, let's read our text for today, Hebrews 1:1-3. Please stand for the reading of God's Word:

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” This is the Word of the Lord.

God has spoken!

This is an extremely important truth, but there are literally billions of people on this earth who seem to be unaware of it. They are groping to find God, searching in nature, in philosophy, in the great world religions, in ecstatic experiences, even in the powers of darkness. But their desperate search is so tragically unnecessary, because God is not playing hide and seek, mocking their efforts to find Him; He has actually taken the initiative in communicating with us. The problem is that so many people are looking in all the wrong places.

I want you to notice three important contrasts in these verses.

In the past . . . in these last days.

To our forefathers . . . to us.

Through the prophets . . . by His Son.

Let's consider the first half of these three contrasts first:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets. One thinks immediately of Noah and how God spoke to him and through him to warn the ancients of the coming judgment of the Great Flood. Or Abraham, through whom God gave the Abrahamic Covenant, promising to bless all the nations of the earth through his descendants. God also

spoke through Moses to the Israelites by giving His law on Mt. Sinai. He spoke through Elijah and Elisha and through Isaiah and Jeremiah to denounce the rebellion of kings and people alike, and to call everyone to repentance.

Through other prophets God revealed amazing truths about the coming Messiah. Through Micah He revealed the town where He would be born. Through Daniel, the time of His birth. Through Malachi, the Forerunner who would come before Him. Through Jonah the resurrection was illustrated. Over and over again God spoke through the prophets at many times and in various ways. Sometimes He spoke in dreams, sometimes in visions, through parables or symbols, through an audible voice, on one occasion even through a donkey. But He spoke clearly and He spoke forcefully.

Yet there was something missing in all this communication. It was incomplete. The prophets were channels of truth, but the prophets were not *The Truth*. The prophets spoke words, but they were not *The Word*. The prophets could talk *about* God, but mankind desperately needed a personal confrontation with the living God Himself. So, “in these last days,” that is, in the final great chapter of history preceding the consummation, God decided to speak in a way He had never spoken before. And so we see the last half of the three contrasts:

In the last days He has spoken to us by His Son. The author is speaking, of course, of the Incarnation. John chapter 1 gives us the specifics: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word *became flesh*, and *dwelt among us*, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 17). For the first time since the Garden of Eden, communication between God and man was possible without the barrier that had always separated deity from humanity, the infinite from the finite, for the Son was both God and man. The divine nature could now be seen, the divine character could be observed, and the heart of God could be touched as never before.

God's communication through His Son was unique and supreme!

When God spoke by His Son, He spoke finally and climactically. If the writer had said, “in these last days God *is speaking* to us by His Son,” the meaning would be that He is *continuing to speak*. If he had said, “in these last days God *spoke*,” the focus would be on the simple fact that He *said something in the past*, with no indication of whether He would speak again in the future. But when it says, “in these last days God *has spoken* to us by His son,” the clear implication of the grammar is that God has spoken and has no more to say.

When I was a teen I loved to argue (I'm sure some of you find that hard to believe), and there were times when I would challenge my father on some decision he had made. On occasion he would get tired of the debate and simply say, “Mike, I have spoken.” I knew the argument was over. So also when the author of Hebrews says, “in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son”. Anyone who looks to later prophets for divine communication—whether Mohammed or Joseph Smith or Mary Baker Eddy, or Deepak Chopra—is moving away from God rather than towards him.

The fact that God has spoken uniquely and supremely is then driven home by six great affirmations about the Son in verses 2-3. The first three are that Jesus Christ is the end, the beginning, and the middle.ⁱⁱ He starts with the end.

1. Jesus Christ is the end. The text says in verse 2 that God has spoken to us by his Son, “whom he appointed heir of all things.” When history wraps up and time is absorbed into eternity, Jesus Christ will be the owner and possessor of everything. In Psalm 2 God gives Him this promise: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.” Philippians 2:9-11 speaks of the same fact, though not as a future hope but rather as something so sure that it can be viewed as an accomplished fact:

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This must have seemed like an astounding claim to the great majority of people living 2,000 years ago (just as it seems to the great majority today)—that this vast universe would one day be inherited by one who was born of a peasant girl, in an animal stable, in an occupied country, of a persecuted race, without benefit of wealth or honor or education, and on top of everything else, eventually executed as a common criminal. This One, the Lord of the universe?!ⁱⁱⁱ Yes, He is the heir of all things and to Him every knee will one day bow.

2. Jesus Christ is the beginning. Verse 2 goes on to speak of Jesus as the One “through whom he (God) made the universe.” This is only one of many times in the Scripture where Jesus Christ is identified as present and active in creation. John 1:3 says of Christ, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” And Col. 1:16 adds, “By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” Far from being a created being Himself, as some cults teach, Jesus is the Creator of time, space, energy, matter, everything.

3. Jesus Christ is also the middle. The text goes on in verse 3 to speak of Him “sustaining all things by his powerful word.” He not only created all things and will be the heir of all things, but it is He who, between the beginning and the end, sustains all things. Colossians 1:17 states it with absolute clarity: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” I believe this means that if Jesus took His hand off this world for one second it would collapse into unbelievable chaos, for the laws of nature in which we put so much faith, and which are the foundation for all our sciences, are laws only because God programmed the computer to operate that way. They are really descriptions of the sustaining power of Christ.

Gravity is a name we have given to one of those laws that provides order and predictability to our existence. When Jesus performed a miracle that “violated” the law of gravity, as when He walked on water or ascended to heaven, there actually was no violation of a law of nature. It was simply that at that point in time He chose to put a different program into the computer that He Himself programmed originally.

Now I am well aware that this sounds like foolish talk to many in the scientific community. Richard Dawkins, a leading atheist, recently wrote in the Wall Street Journal's *Weekend Journal*, September 12-13, 2009:

Before 1859 it would have seemed natural to agree with the Reverend William Paley, in "Natural Theology," that the creation of life was God's greatest work. Especially human life. Today we'd amend the statement: Evolution is the universe's greatest work. Evolution is the creator of life. . . .

What is so special about life? It never violates the laws of physics. Nothing does (if anything did, physicists would just have to formulate new laws. But although life never violates the laws of physics, it pushes them into unexpected avenues that stagger the imagination. . . .

The laws of physics, before Darwinian evolution bursts out from their midst, can make rocks and sand, gas clouds and stars, whirlpools and waves, whirlpool-shaped galaxies and light that travels as waves while behaving like particles. . . .

Never once are the laws of physics violated, yet life emerges into uncharted territory. And how is the trick done? The answer is a process that, although variable in its wondrous detail, is sufficiently uniform to deserve one single name: Darwinian evolution. . . .

Where does that leave God? The kindest thing to say is that it leaves him with nothing to do. . . . Evolution is God's pink slip. . . . God is not dead. He was never alive in the first place.^{iv}

The Book of Hebrews gives us a totally different way of perceiving the world and life. It tells us, in the words of John MacArthur, that "The universe is a cosmos instead of chaos, an ordered and reliable system instead of an erratic and unpredictable muddle, only because Jesus Christ upholds it."^v

Naturally, if as the author of Hebrews claims, Jesus really is the creator, the sustainer, and the inheritor of this universe, then He must be God. And sure enough the author of Hebrews goes on to state that fact as clearly and forcefully as human language will allow.

4. Jesus Christ is God. Look at verse 3: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being." Is there any other being—angelic or human—who could possibly be described in such terms? No, NONE. In fact, that exact point will be made in verse 8, where after asking, "To which of the angels did God ever say . . .", He addresses the Son, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever."

The glory of God, mentioned here in verse 3, expresses the worth of God. When the glory of God is rightly understood, we find ourselves melting before Him, wondering at the awesomeness of His person. Jesus Christ produces that same reaction when seen for who He is. He is the very radiance of the glory of God.

More than that, in Him we see also the very character of God, the exact representation of His being. You ask what God is like. Well, what was Jesus like? You ask what stirs the heart of God. What stirred the heart of Jesus? You ask what God would have you do under certain

circumstances? What did Jesus do when He faced similar situations. Jesus is God. As Paul states in Col. 1, “God was pleased to have *all his fullness* dwell in him.”

5. Jesus Christ is also the forgiver of sins. We read in verse 3, “After he had provided purification for sins, He sat down.” Here we pass from the cosmic functions of the Son to His personal relations with His people. His wisdom which created the worlds and maintains them in their proper order produces in us a sense of awe. But His grace which has provided a remedy for the defilement of sin by the sacrifice of His perfect life calls forth a sense of indebtedness which the former could never evoke. The hymn, “It Took a Miracle,” portrays this truth beautifully:

*My Father is omnipotent, and that you can't deny.
A God of might and miracles—'Tis written in the sky.
It took a miracle to put the stars in place,
It took a miracle to hang the world in space;
But when He saved my soul,
Cleansed and made me whole,
It took a miracle of love and grace.*

What an amazing truth is found in those simple words, “He provided purification for sins”! If it weren't for Jesus everyone of us would be condemned to eternal death, for everyone of us is a sinner. Everyone of us has violated even our own standards, to say nothing of God's standards. But Jesus made provision for our sin and offers forgiveness and restoration to lost sinners.

But notice it says, “He *provided* purification for sins.” That's different from purifying sins. The provision has been made and it is absolutely sufficient, but God requires that each individual sinner appropriate the provision, accept it personally, believe it implicitly. Have you done that? Have you confessed your sin and put your trust in the sacrifice that Jesus made?

6. He is the final victor. “After he had provided purification for sins, *he sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” Remember His words on the Cross, “It is finished.”? He fought all the battles. He defeated all enemies. He paid for our sin. There was nothing left to be done, so He sat down, resting in the completeness of His work.

When I was a teenager the Boston Celtics had a coach named Red Auerbach, perhaps the greatest basketball coach of all time. He put together the Celtic dynasty that won more championships in a short period of time than any other team in history. He had a habit that was considered psychological warfare against opposing coaches and players. Auerbach would conclude at some point in a game that the Celtics were far enough ahead that the other team could no longer catch up. Up until that point Auerbach would coach energetically, pacing the sidelines, waving his arms, yelling at the referees.

But when he concluded the game was safely in hand, he would sit down on the bench, light up a cigar (yes, in those days one could light up a cigar indoors), and watch the rest of the game with a smug look on his face. When Red sat down, the game was over. No team ever came back against the Celtics once he sat down.

Well, Jesus made provision for the purification of sins, and then He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. No cigar. No smug looks. But make no mistake about it, the game is over! Jesus is the Victor! Jesus is Lord! There are no more doubts about the outcome of history. And since all that needs doing has been done, we, too, are invited to rest in the finished work of Christ.

Conclusion: Now many of the things this passage speaks of are not new to most of us. We know and believe that God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, that Jesus forgave us of our sins by dying on the cross, and that He is presently seated at the right hand of God until such time that every knee bows and every tongue confesses that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. We know all these things, but we must not treat them lightly. We must not think that these truths are somehow unrelated to how we live.

There is that danger, you know. Hebrews 2:1 says, “For this reason we must pay *much closer attention* to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” There is constant pressure in life to drift, to get entangled in the urgent and to neglect the things that are truly important. We can be very religious and still forget Jesus. We can be very busy in church work and leave Him out. We can compartmentalize our faith on Sunday and lose track of His presence during the week. We can walk through this amazing creation but fail completely to see His fingerprints all over it. We need to deliberately make a choice to say, “If Jesus is the final Word spoken by God, then I must not drift away or neglect Him.”

In these few verse God has given us His evaluation of Jesus Christ, His hand-painted portrait. A person who says that Jesus Christ is anything less is a fool and makes God out to be a liar. To reject Jesus as the preeminent Son of God and Savior is to be shut out from His presence for eternity. To receive Jesus is to enter into all that He has prepared for those who love Him. There are no other choices.

i. Among the candidates who have been championed besides Paul are Philip, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Mark, and even Priscilla and Aquila.

ii. John MacArthur uses this terminology in his commentary, *Hebrews*, 10.

iii. There were hints all along, of course, that He was no ordinary man. In infancy He brought fear to the heart of a king. In boyhood He puzzled the learned doctors. In manhood He walked upon the waves and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and charged nothing for His services. He never wrote a book and yet all the libraries of the world could not hold the books about Him. He never wrote a song, yet He has furnished the theme for more songs than all others combined. He never earned a degree, yet all the schools together cannot boast of as many students as He has. Throughout history great people have come and gone, yet He lives on. Herod could not kill Him. Satan could not seduce Him. Death could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him. See John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 9-10.

iv. *The Wall Street Journal, Weekend Journal*, Saturday/Sunday, September 12-13, 2009, 1-2.

v. MacArthur, 17.