

Jesus: A Better Messenger

Hebrews: Jesus is Better • PART 1 • Hebrews 1:1-3a

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It is good to be together this morning! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us this morning, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at fourlakescoc.org/visitor.

We are here today to praise God, but we are also here to share the good news that God loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die in our place. We respond to the good news by obeying it – we turn away from sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. And we do have several examples today, starting with an update from the North Colony congregation down in Texas. They say, “Friday is LIT...in Christ! Welcome our New Brother Keith! Also, today we were able to feed over 600 people in the community. To God be the glory!!!” I’m not exactly sure what’s going on there, but it looks good from here! I believe this may be the first time we’ve seen the word “lit” with reference to a baptism! They also had a picture of hundreds of cars lined up, waiting to get the food that was set out by their facility. Congrats to Keith, though!

This next one comes to us from a congregation meeting in Kyiv, Ukraine. As translated by Facebook, they say, “What is the most joyous event in the life of the church? Baptism! Today Tatiana's soul made a covenant with our Lord. As she said, she had been contemplating this step for a long time, but in today's Sunday sermon, the mention of baptism finally convinced her to take it. Hallelujah!” Amen to that!

This next one comes to us from Mark Landis, who preaches in the Philippines. He says, “Today, January 4th, Ronnel Centino (32), and Bernadita Centino (34) were both baptized into Christ. We are so happy they made this great decision. We praise God for giving the increase. Please welcome them into the family.” I love that we have a “before” pic, as these two are making the Good Confession, standing on rocks under an overpass. Great news from the Philippines this week!

This next one comes to us from Ricky Gootam, who preaches in India. He says, “This is Dr. Vijay Raj. He is a very good doctor. He finished his Masters and is practicing in Pitapuram at the mission hospital. Last Sunday he came to me and said he wanted to be baptized. This is baptism, where you are immersed into water and brought out of water. We do not force anyone to follow Christ. But...following and putting on Christ is a commitment to Christ. May many more commit their lives to Christ all over the world in 2023.” Amen to that!

And this last one comes to us from a congregation in Detroit. They say, "Tonight was truly awesome. Message and a Meal was so powerful! If you are not a part of this growing class, you are missing out! We sang praises unto the Lord, prayed and ate a delicious meal! Then we were blessed to hear a word! The room was packed! Two souls were saved tonight. Let's welcome my cousin Krystal Godfrey and my dear friend and brother Tyrone Jordan Brown to the body of Christ! David Calhoun, you brought forth the word and it pricked their hearts! Congratulations on your new life! The angels are rejoicing and we are too! To God be the glory! Praise God! We sung all the way out the door tonight. What a mighty God we serve! Welcome!" This is awesome, but what really got my attention there was "Message and a Meal." I don't know what that is, but it sounds good! We may need to look into that. But we share all of these by way of encouragement, and if we can help with your obedience to the good news, please let us know.

This morning, at the request of one of our young adults, I would invite you to turn with me to the book of Hebrews (p. 1869). The book of Hebrews is rather unusual, because it's the only book in the Bible that seems to have started out, not as a letter, but as a sermon. It seems to be a sermon that was written down. Most of the letters in the New Testament start out with some kind of greeting, "I Paul, an apostle, am writing to the church of the Thessalonians. Grace to you and peace," and so on. Hebrews, though, starts like a sermon, by jumping right into it. Not only that, but we have several statements here and there that sound like something a preacher might say. In Hebrews 11:32, for example, the author says, "***And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson,***" and so on. This seems to be coming from a preacher who is running out of time; the "babies are about to go off," so he speeds up near the end. Twice (in Hebrews 2:6 and 4:4), the author cites passages from the Psalms, not by giving the reference, but by saying that the quote comes from "***somewhere.***" I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like somebody writing a letter (if you were writing a letter you might look it up), but that sounds like somebody speaking. Ultimately, of course, this sermon is written down, and once it's written the author says (in Hebrews 13:22), "***But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.***" Back in the First Century, that was a common way of referring to a sermon. Over in Acts 13:15, after the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials said to Paul and Barnabas, "***Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.***" They were inviting them to preach. Hebrews, then, is rather unusual in that it may be a sermon that was written down.

Secondly, Hebrews is also rather unusual because we don't know who wrote it. This is the big unknown! Everybody wants to know who wrote the book of Hebrews. Whoever spoke this or wrote this apparently did not sign it. And this right here tells us that it was probably not written by the apostle Paul. I say this because of something Paul wrote over in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, "***I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.***" Paul, therefore, according to Paul himself, always signed his letters. Hebrews is not signed.

Beyond this, it seems that the author of Hebrews is close to Timothy. In a rare personal reference at the very end of the book, the author says (in Hebrews 13:23), "***Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you.***" So, this guy knows Timothy. In the next verse (in Hebrews 13:24), the author says, "***Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.***" So, either the author is sending this from Italy, or (more likely) he is writing to Italy, and he's saying, "The people who are with me from Italy told me to tell you hello." Hebrews is first quoted by Clement of Rome in 95 AD, which supports the idea that it was written to Rome. As to the date of the book, most agree that it would have been written just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Beyond writing in the mid-to-late 60's and being familiar with Timothy, the author of Hebrews is also quite eloquent, and the scholars tell us that the author writes at a high level. The Greek in this book is exquisite, we might say. Even today, we can tell something about someone based on how they write. The writer of Hebrews is top notch, perhaps well-educated, but also very familiar with the Hebrew Bible. With this in mind, several names have been suggested, starting with Apollos. From Acts 18, we know that Apollos was a "***Jew,***" and that

he was *“an Alexandrian by birth.”* This was like saying he was from Harvard or Oxford. Alexandria was a center of education, home to one of the largest libraries in world history. And we also know from Acts that Apollos was *“mighty in the scriptures,” “fervent in spirit,”* he was able to *“speak out boldly in the synagogues,”* and was capable of *“powerfully refuting the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”* Barnabas is another possibility. He also would have been familiar with Timothy, and the name given to him was *“Son of Encouragement”* (that’s what Barnabas means), and that’s what the book of Hebrews is, a book of encouragement. Beyond this, he was a Levite, and the author of Hebrews does focus on the priesthood. Others have suggested Luke, a medical doctor, a traveling companion of Paul, and therefore very familiar with Timothy. Ultimately, though, we don’t know. These are just several suggestions.

We’ve studied the book of Hebrews from time to time, and you have probably heard, and I have probably suggested myself, that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted and were therefore being tempted to go back to Judaism. And that may be part of it; however, as I have dug into Hebrews over the past few months, I’d like to revise that, by suggesting that Hebrews is written to a group of Christians, who (like us) sometimes have a hard time listening to Jesus. Sometimes we get distracted by so many voices calling out to us, and sometimes we need the reminder that JESUS IS BETTER. In fact, this is the theme of the entire book: JESUS IS BETTER. And the question is: Will we listen to him? And really, will we KEEP ON listening to Jesus? Jesus is better; therefore, do not turn back, do not give up! Well, Hebrews encourages us to listen to Jesus. Instead of giving up, the author of Hebrews encourages us to think about how great Jesus is, and to always remember that Jesus is better! Instead of getting sucked into some pit of discouragement and despair, think about how great Jesus is. Jesus is better! In fact, the word we usually translate as *“better”* is used thirteen times to describe Jesus in this book. It’s also translated as *“superior”* or *“greater.”* Jesus is better! Jesus is superior! Jesus is greater! And this is how the book starts. Well, let’s jump right into it this morning, by looking at the first sentence – starting in Hebrews 1:1 and continuing partway through verse 3,

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.

I. As we get into this, let’s start by noticing that GOD HAS SPOKEN.

Again, no personal greeting like we might find in a letter, but the author jumps right into it with the reminder that God has spoken. He spoke *“long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways.”* This right here summarizes everything God ever said, from the creation all the way up to the time of Christ. He communicated to the *“fathers.”* We’ve been looking at this in our Wednesday class. I hope you’ve been joining us for that. But in the book of Genesis, we see God communicating directly to Adam, and to Noah, and to Abraham, and to Isaac, and to Jacob. He spoke directly, he spoke in dreams and in visions, and sometimes he spoke very dramatically, *“in many portions and in many ways”* – under the stars, or maybe by having a smoking oven and a flaming torch passing through animals that had been split in two. Sometimes he spoke through the *“prophets”* – through men and women like Elijah and Elisha, and Moses and Huldah, and Ezekiel and Daniel. And nobody got the whole picture at any given time, but they had *“portions,”* or pieces, a little bit here and there, but never all at once. He spoke in dreams, to Joseph and Nebuchadnezzar. He spoke to Moses through the burning bush. He spoke (in a sense) to all the people, leading them through the wilderness using a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He spoke through the written word, with his own finger on the stone tablets, or sometimes dictated through the prophets. He spoke using physical illustrations – a basket of summer fruit in Amos, or by telling a prophet to lay on one side for nearly a year as he did with Ezekiel. He spoke through angels – to Abraham and to and to Mary and Elizabeth. He spoke to Balaam through the mouth of a donkey. He spoke to Gideon using wool that was either wet or dry. He spoke to King Hezekiah using the shadow on a sundial.

And ultimately, all of these prophecies pointed to Jesus. We think of what Jesus said to the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, *“O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory? Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”* Or, we think about what Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room (also in Luke 24), *“These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”* Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, *“Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”* When God spoke *“long ago,”* therefore, he was preparing his people for the arrival of his Son, *“He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways.”* God has spoken!

II. And this leads us to Jesus, a BETTER MESSENGER, we might say.

The shift in this passage (between God has spoken and now God has spoken to us in his Son) is the difference between getting a series of letters from a friend and having that friend actually show up for a visit. This is personal. On one hand, God has spoken long ago to other people, and now he has spoken *“to us in His Son.”* This is happening right now. This message is for us. He’s speaking to us now, *“in these last days.”* This is it. This is God’s final message, and it comes through Jesus. Jesus is a better messenger. The *“last days”* refers to that period of time between Jesus’ first coming and his Second Coming. And for this period of time, Jesus is God’s messenger. He is greater than the prophets. He is better than those old dreams, and the angels, and the talking donkeys. He’s even better than the prophets. You might remember what happened at the transfiguration, when Jesus appeared on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, and Peter (thinking he was doing the right thing) offered to build three little shelters honoring Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah, but that’s when God spoke from heaven and said, *“This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!”* And all at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. Jesus alone! Jesus is the better messenger.

Well, at this point, the author of Hebrews now gives us a series of reasons why Jesus is better.

A. To start with, as the Son of God, Jesus is the APPOINTED HEIR OF ALL THINGS.

Normally, we think of an heir as someone who inherits something once his parents die. Well, obviously, God the Father hasn’t died, so *“heir”* in this case must be a title, a title of great honor. We think of the parable Jesus told about the man who planted a vineyard and rented it out to some vine-growers. He then went on a long journey, and when it was time for the harvest, he sent a slave to collect the rent, but the vine-growers beat the slave and sent him away empty-handed. They do this to a second, and then a third, and finally, the landowner decides to send his *“beloved son,”* reasoning, *“They will respect my son.”* The vine-growers, though, reasoned with one another and decided that since the son was the heir, they would kill him to get the inheritance. Well, when Jesus told this parable, the Pharisees clearly got the message. They were the wicked vine-growers, and Jesus was the *“heir,”* the respected Son. And that’s what the writer of Hebrews is telling us here. Jesus is not just a servant, he’s not just another prophet, but he is the better messenger. He is the Son, the *“appointed heir of all things.”*

B. But he also tells us that Jesus is the One “THROUGH WHOM ALSO [GOD] MADE THE WORLD.”

In other words, Jesus is the Creator. He made us. He made everything we see around us. As John tells us in John 1, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”* Jesus is the Eternal Word of God, the Creator of absolutely everything we see around us. As Paul would go on to write in Colossians 1:16, *“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.”* In just a few moments, we plan on singing about that time *“when Christ, the mighty Maker, died for man, the creature’s sin.”* He

made us, we sinned, and then he died for us. Therefore, as God's final message, he deserves to be heard; he deserves to be listened to.

C. Beyond this, we also find here that Jesus is the RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY.

Some of the older translations might use the word "*reflection*," but that's not really it. The word used here is a compound word referring to a "flashing" "away from." We might think of the light emanating from the sun. I think of the flash I used taking pictures of football games back in high school. This flash was so powerful it could light up the press box at the top of the bleachers on the other side of the football field. It was so bright it was almost dangerous. It was "radiant." One of the Greek dictionaries I consulted defined this word by using a word I'd never heard before. And that doesn't help, does it? They used the word "effulgence." Have you ever used the word "effulgence"? I've never used the word "effulgence." I don't think I've even heard it before. But I looked it up, and the word refers to "a state of being bright and radiant; splendor, or brilliance." It comes from a Latin word meaning "to shine out of." Jesus is the "*radiance*," the "effulgence" of God's glory. The glory of God shines through Jesus Christ. And again, we think back to the transfiguration. Usually, Jesus appeared on this earth in human form, just like everybody else, but for a brief moment, his divine nature was allowed to shine through, "*And He was transfigured before them*," according to Matthew 17:2, "*and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.*" And later, in Acts 9, his glory is enough to blind Saul on the road to Damascus. Jesus, then, is the "*radiance*" of God's glory.

D. And not only that, but as the final and greatest messenger, Jesus is also THE EXACT REPRESENTATION OF GOD'S NATURE.

Other translations refer to Jesus being God's "*express image*," "*exact imprint*," "*the very stamp of his nature*," "*the image of his substance*," "*the representation of his essence.*" We would recognize the actual Greek word in English as the word "**CHARACTER.**" Jesus is God's "*character.*" It comes from a word meaning "to engrave or inscribe," and the word was used to describe both the engraving and the tool that was used to make it. The Greeks would use the word to refer to the image of a Roman emperor on a coin. It wasn't some stick figure drawing, but it was the emperor's "*exact image.*" We think of our coins today. If all I had was a quarter, I could recognize George Washington if he were to walk in this room. And that's true, because the image on the coin is his "*exact representation.*" In some very similar sense, then, Jesus is the "*exact representation*" of God's nature. We think of Philip asking Jesus, "*Show us the Father.*" And Jesus replies, "*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*" (John 14:9). Jesus, then, is better. He is the the better messenger.

E. And this brings us to our last big thought in today's passage as we learn that Jesus UPHOLDS ALL THINGS BY THE WORD OF HIS POWER.

We think of Colossians 1:17, where Paul says that "*He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.*" As we sometimes sing, "He's got the whole world in his hands," doesn't he? Jesus is the reason why the entire Universe doesn't descend into absolute and total chaos. He holds it together. He "*upholds all things by the word of his power.*" Notice the emphasis on Jesus' powerful "*word.*" He is the Eternal Word of God. And if he can hold the Universe together, then he can also hold me together. He "*upholds all things by the word of his power,*" but he also knows the number of hairs on my head. He knows what keeps us up at night. He knows everything there is to know about us. He knows our worries over our elderly parents. He knows the concerns we have about this upcoming semester. He's aware of every health concern. He knows what's in checking, and he already knows about that bill that's showing up tomorrow. He knows what we were thinking when we walked in here today. He "*upholds all things by the word of his power.*" Jesus is better. He is a better messenger. His word is living and active.

Conclusion:

This morning, we have opened the book of Hebrews, and we have found encouragement: Don't give up, because Jesus is a better messenger. We certainly appreciate every message from God (including everything that came through Moses and the prophets), but Jesus is better. Jesus is the answer to those messages; he is the fulfillment of those messages. He is the heir, creator, the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's nature, he upholds all things by the word of his power. He is the living and eternal Word of God. And now, thanks to inspired authors, we have the Word in front of us this morning. We have it with us. Let's listen to it. Let's read it. Let's absorb it. And let's allow it to change us. And above all, let's not give up! This is the message of Hebrews. And I'm hoping we can come back together next Lord's Day morning to look at Jesus again in the rest of Hebrews 1.

Michael has chosen some songs to help us appreciate Jesus for who he really is, so as we start preparing our minds for the Lord's Supper, let's pray together:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and only God, creator of heaven and earth. Thank you, Father, for Jesus, your Son, and thank you for inspired word. We are thankful for the encouragement it provides. And today, we pray for strength to never turn back, for we know that even when we are discouraged, Jesus is always better. He is certainly better than anything this world may have to offer, and his message is a message of hope and forgiveness.

We come to you through Jesus, our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com