

Jesus Is Better

Hebrews 1:1-4

Whether you're a competitive athlete or, like me, you prefer watching from the sideline with a bag of Doritos in your hand, it's pretty obvious that the difference between good athletes and a *great* athlete is not just talent or skill or practice or even hard work; it's also the ability to perform well under pressure. It doesn't matter how many free-throws you can make in a row on Saturday morning in an empty gym; can you make it when it counts? When there's two seconds on the clock, you're one point down, and your entire team is depending on you for the win? It doesn't matter how fast you can run the 100 meters in practice; what happens when you've got 11 defenders in front of you intent on knocking you to the ground, a crowd roaring around you, a coach barking orders from the sideline, teammates arguing, and your opponents sneering in your face? That's pressure—an obstacle in front of you and a myriad of voices and opinions around you—what do you do? How do you perform? What happens if you fall before your opponent? What happens if you listen to the wrong voice?

The church in the first century was intimately acquainted with pressure. Not just the recreational kind, but life and death situations. Obstacles with eternity itself hanging in the balance. And this was no less the case for the Christians to whom the book of Hebrews was written.

Now we don't know who wrote this book. Some think it was Paul, others say Barnabas, maybe Apollos;¹ we're not sure. Nor do we know the precise church or city to whom it was written. Some think Jerusalem; others suggest Rome.² But we do know that those who received it were followers of Jesus who heard the gospel from his eye witnesses (Heb. 2:3). We're pretty sure they were Jewish Christians, based on the kind of temptations that the author addresses. And we know that they were facing intense persecution for their faith—the pressure that comes both from a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in front of them, and a confusing myriad of voices around them.

In chapter 10, the author reminds them of the hard struggle they already faced in the past, “sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated” (Heb. 10:33). That persecution has continued and is intensifying, though for this community it apparently hasn't yet reached the point of anyone losing their life (Heb. 12:4, “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”). But that day may be coming soon, and with it, the increased temptation to fall away.

And whenever we find ourselves under pressure, facing an obstacle, there will always be a variety of voices trying to direct our steps. Opponents urging us to give up, Monday-morning

¹ For a brief but helpful overview of the discussion on the authorship of Hebrews, see F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. Ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 14-20.

² For a summary of the various opinions for the book's address and destination, see Bruce, 3-14.

quarterbacks yelling their expert opinions from the stands, teammates arguing over the way forward, others offering us an easy way out.

For the early Christians addressed in the book of Hebrews, some of those voices were apparently telling them to handle the pressure by turning to *new religious ideas*, like the exaltation or perhaps worship of angels (1:1–2:18; cf. Col. 2:18; Heb. 13:9). An even louder and more pervasive voice told them to find shelter and respite in an *old religious system*, specifically the Old Covenant from Sinai and its Levitical structures (3:1–10:18). It was a temptation to revert to Judaism, which promised not only to relieve them from persecution from Jews, but also from Gentiles, since Judaism was at that time still a legal religion in Rome, while Christianity was not.

And the reality is, in every place and every age, the church will always find itself under great pressure. Persecution, opposition, marginalization, ridicule, scorn. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world today face an intensity of persecution not unlike what the first readers of Hebrews faced, if not worse. Earlier this month a megachurch in China was dynamited by the Chinese police.³ In any given month worldwide, it's estimated that over 300 Christians are killed for their faith, over 200 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and nearly 800 forms of violence are committed against Christians.⁴ We don't typically see that kind of violence in America, but we do feel pressure in significant ways. The intense pressure to compromise a biblical sexuality in order to avoid being labeled bigots or written off as being on the 'wrong side of history.' The lure of adjusting our moral and ethical standards in effort to court business or political favors. The personal draw of sin, which tempts us to indulge at every turn. We're running a race, fighting a battle—not with flesh and blood, but the spiritual forces of evil (Heb. 12:1-4; cf. Eph. 6:10-12).

And like the Christians addressed in Hebrews, with that pressure comes a myriad of voices telling us to conform, to give up, give in, go away. Voices telling us how the church must change or die, that sin isn't really that sinful and so go for it, or that grace isn't sufficient and so we need more religious works, or that following Christ is supposed to be easy and so we shouldn't have to suffer. The question becomes *which voice do we listen to?*

It's amid this cacophony that the author of Hebrews points us to the rich and rousing voice of Jesus—Jesus, who is the *full and final revelation of God's salvation*. It's his voice that we need more than anything else, because he is better than everything else. He is uniquely supreme, uniquely worthy of being treasured above all things. And throughout this book the author will go to great lengths to demonstrate this, to show how *Jesus is better*. Better than the prophets. Better than angels. Better than Moses, Joshua, or Aaron. Better than the Mosaic covenant or the Levitical priesthood. Better than anything else we might try to come up with. In him we have a better rest, a better high priest, a better promise, a better covenant, a better sacrifice, a better kingdom, a better inheritance, a better hope. He is the full and final revelation of God's salvation, and so we must resist falling away and instead run our race with perseverance, holding fast to our confidence in him.

The author wastes no time getting to his point. Unlike most letters in the New Testament, that start by identifying the author and the address, and then a greeting, often followed by a prayer,

³ Russell Goldman, "[Chinese Police Dynamite Christian Megachurch](#)," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 2018.

⁴ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.

Hebrews jumps right into the subject (which has caused many to suggest that it's not strictly a letter, but more of a sermon—though it does contain the traditional conclusion of a New Testament letter, with a list of greetings at the end, 13:22-25). But look again with me at ch. 1.

The Announcement of Jesus as the Full and Final Revelation of God's Salvation (1:1-2)

The author opens with a bold announcement: that Jesus is the full and final revelation of God's salvation.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (1:1-2)

God has always been a revealing God. He's always been a God who speaks. Which by itself is utterly amazing. That God would not only create us, and rule us, but *reveal* himself to us, so that we might know who he is, what he's done, who we are, and what he expects of us. That's literally what set God apart from all of the idols in the ancient world (which proved that they were in fact no gods at all)—that “they have mouths, but do not speak” (Ps. 115:5). Their followers had no clue what their pagan gods expected of them. “All of them are put to shame and confounded; the makers of idols go in confusion together” (Isa. 45:16). But the LORD speaks: “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right” (Isa. 45:18-19). God is a God who speaks.

And as the author of Hebrews acknowledges, long ago—that is, before Christ—he did this at many times and in many ways. He has spoken in creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). He has spoken through his poets. “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3). And of course, he spoke through his prophets. “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god’” (Isa. 44:6).

But something new has happened with Jesus. Something so significant, that we can no longer listen to the prophets or the Old Testament alone. There is a new voice, a full and final voice that completes the prophetic witness. “In these last days he has spoken to us *by his Son*” (Heb. 1:1-2).

It's not that the prophets gave wrong information that Jesus now corrects; *God* was the one speaking through the prophets. It's that they gave *incomplete* information. God's revelation of himself in that former time was “diverse and partial.”⁵ If the portrait of God's salvation was a puzzle, and you poured all the pieces of the Old Testament onto the table and put them together, you would see a general outline and some clear themes, but the picture would be sporadic and incomplete. Because you're missing some essential pieces. Now that Jesus is here, what Hebrews is telling us, is that *we have all the pieces*. We can see the whole picture, because Jesus is the full and final revelation of God. And so you can't go back to just the partial picture, which is what a lot of the voices speaking to these early Christians were trying to get them to do. To deal with the pressure by going back to Judaism as though Christ had never arrived. But that would not only be foolish, like hiding the most important pieces of the puzzle as though they don't exist. It

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTC; Nashville: B&H), 54.

would be eternally dangerous. Because God’s salvation has been revealed to rest fully and exclusively in his Son. To forfeit Christ is to forfeit God, life, and salvation.

Jesus is the full and final revelation of God’s salvation. With him a new age has begun—what the Bible calls “the last days,” the time between the cross and new creation (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:1; Jms. 5:3; Heb. 9:26; 2 Pet. 3:3). And in these last days God has spoken by his Son.

So why is the Son qualified to be this full and final revelation of God? How do we know this is true? Why should we listen to him, instead of any of the other voices telling us what to do, where to go, how to escape—even our own voice? Why listen to Jesus above all other voices?

That’s really what this whole book is about—how Jesus is better. But that’s specifically what the author goes on to demonstrate in the rest of v. 2 through v. 4: the qualifications of Jesus as the full and final revelation of God’s salvation.

The Qualifications of Jesus as the Full and Final Revelation of God’s Salvation (1:2-4)

In just three short verses, the author offers seven reasons why Jesus alone is qualified to be the full and final revelation of God. Why his voice is better than all other voices. As Kent Hughes puts it, “Christ is held up like a great jewel to the sunlight of God’s revelation, and as the light courses through it, seven facets flash with gleaming brilliance.”⁶ He is the heir of all things, the creator of all things, he radiates God’s glory, he shares God’s nature, he upholds the universe, he completed the work of redemption, and he rules with his Father from heaven. And therefore we should listen to him! A few brief comments on each of these points.

1. He is Heir of All Things (1:2)

Jesus is uniquely qualified to reveal God, because God’s entire plan for creation and salvation has always been ultimately about him. He is the heir—the rightful inheritor of everything. Just as God promised his Messiah long ago in Psalm 2: “The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession’” (Ps. 2:7-8; cf. Heb. 1:5). It’s all for him.

And so how we live, the race we run, the battle we face, what we do under pressure—it’s not ultimately for us. It’s for him. We are part of his inheritance, his prize, his treasure (cf. Eph. 1:18). And so what kind of gift do we want to be? And how can the pressures we face refine us into a more pure and perfect prize? God’s whole plan of salvation is moving toward this end—the inheritance of the Son. Which makes Jesus the full and final revelation of God’s salvation.

But Jesus is not only the end, he’s also the beginning.

2. He is the Creator of All Things (1:2)

“ . . . in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, *through whom also he created the world*” (Heb. 1:2).

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 23. Hughes lists these as Inheritor, Creator, Sustainer, Radiator, Representor, Purifier, Ruler.

The Son was God’s agent in creation. As John 1:3 tells us, “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (cf. Col. 1:16). And because he is the creator of all things, he is uniquely able to reveal the Father’s plan of salvation to us, because *he was there when they planned it before the beginning of time* (Jn. 17:4-5, 20-26; Eph. 1:3-11).

God’s plan of salvation has always been about restoring what was lost in the beginning. When you restore a car, your goal is not to make it into something different, but to restore what is broken and realize what it was meant to be. In the same way, God made this world good. He made people in his image that we might know and enjoy and serve him as children and servants of his kingdom. That vision was shattered by sin and rebellion. But God, in his mercy, sent his Son to redeem what was lost. And because he was there in the beginning, active in creation, he knows the blueprint, and is therefore uniquely able reveal God’s redemption to us in a way far beyond what the prophets could ever foresee.

3. *He Upholds the Universe (1:3)*

If you look at the middle of v. 3, we see that the Son is not just the creator and inheritor, he is also the sustainer of all he made. What he created by his Word (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, etc.; Ps. 33:6-7), he also sustains by his Word: “. . . he upholds the universe *by the word of his power*.” Or as Colossians 1:17 puts it, “he is before all things, and in him *all things hold together*.”

And so if Jesus can hold together the subatomic particles that make up life, together with the billions and billions of planets and stars throughout the universe *simply with his word*, then he can hold us together under pressure. To doubt him would be like trusting a mechanic to know how restore a car, but not trusting him to know how to put the key in the ignition. He is able. And because he upholds the entire universe, there is no pressure, no trial, no temptation, no difficulty beyond the scope of his jurisdiction or beyond the measure of his power.

4. *He Radiates the Glory of God (1:3)*

We should listen to Jesus not just because he is the end and the beginning and the sustainer of all things, but because he radiates the very glory of God. He doesn’t just imitate it or reflect God’s glory (as some translations put it), he *radiates* it; that’s language of being the source. It’s the difference between the moon and the sun; the moon reflects light, but the sun radiates it.⁷ Jesus radiates God’s glory; he is the ultimate revelation of God’s beauty and majesty and incomparable worthiness (cf. Jn. 1:18; 2 Cor. 4:6). Think of what Peter, James, and John witnessed on the mountain of transfiguration—“his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matt. 17:2).

And the reason he is able to radiate God’s glory is because he shares God’s divine nature.

5. *He Shares God’s Divine Nature (1:3)*

“He is the radiance of the glory of God and *the exact imprint of his nature . . .*” (1:3). As one author explains, “The word translated ‘exact imprint’ refers to the image on a coin that perfectly corresponds to the image on the die. Jesus is therefore completely the same in his being as the

⁷ This illustration comes from R. Kent Hughes, 27.

Father.” He shares his divine nature. “However, there is still an important distinction—both exist separately, as do the die and its image.”⁸

This is the mystery of the Trinity—one God in three persons, coeternal and coequal in divinity, glory, substance, and power. We see this dynamic between Father and Son in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.” He was with God—“the exact imprint,” and he was God—“of his nature,” “the radiance of his glory.”⁹

And so Jesus is uniquely qualified to reveal the Father to us. If you were doing a book report on a novel and encountered something confusing in what you read, you could read essays or reviews that try to explain it, or you could try to track down and interview the author. Listening to Jesus is like doing both. He is both the author and the interpreter of God’s glory and salvation. The radiance *and* the imprint. No other voice can claim this on God’s behalf—to be both the messenger and the source. So again to quote Hughes, “When we see [Jesus], we know just what the God of the universe is like. We know how he thinks. . . . how he talks . . . how he relates to people. . . . [Jesus is] his ultimate communication, his final word, his consummate eloquence.”¹⁰ The radiance of his glory and the exact imprint of his nature.

But the author of Hebrews is not done. . . .

6. *He Completed God’s Work of Redemption (1:3)*

Jesus is not only the beginning and end, the creator and sustainer, the interpreter and the source, he is the one who fulfilled God’s great plan of salvation and fully accomplished it for *all people* and *all time* through his life, death, and resurrection. “After making purification for sins, [Jesus] sat down . . .”

The Son is the final act of God’s salvation for us. The author of Hebrews is going elaborate on this *a lot* as the book unfolds. One of his major goals is to demonstrate how Jesus is a better high priest, who represents a better priesthood, offers a better sacrifice, and accomplishes a better purification for our sins. What he did for us as our righteous representative in his life and our substitutionary sacrifice in his death, to cleanse us from guilt and bear God’s wrath against our sin, truly changes everything. It’s the heart of the gospel, and it’s a salvation available to everyone through faith in Jesus Christ. It’s our *only* hope for salvation; there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

And so those voices that would lead us away from Christ to some other solution, new religious ideas or old religious systems—again, they’re not just foolish. They are deadly. There is no life, no salvation, no God outside of Christ, who is his full and final revelation.

And we know his salvation is complete because “after making purification for sins, *he sat down*.” Hebrews 10:11-13 says, “And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, *he sat down* at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his

⁸ Hughes, 27.

⁹ The connections between Hebrews 1:3 and John 1:1 were brought to my attention in Hughes, 27.

¹⁰ Hughes, 27-28.

enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.” He sat down because his work was done. Salvation was complete.

Which means that he is not just the *full* revelation of God, but the *final* revelation. The last word. God’s revelation bears witness to his redemption. He makes himself known for our salvation and godliness. And so because redemption is now complete, we’re not waiting for any further word from God. Jesus is the final word, and he has fully revealed the Father to us.

7. He Rules with his Father from Heaven (1:3-4)

Verse 3 again: “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”

When Christ sat down, it not only signaled the completion of redemption, but the coronation of his heavenly reign. He didn’t sit down in a beach chair to relax, but on a throne to rule. And there he sits today, at the right hand of his Father in heaven, ruling us by his Word.

Of all the voices an athlete hears during a game—from the stands, the sidelines, the team, the opponents—what’s the one voice she must train herself to hear above all other voices? The coach. In the same way, when our King speaks, we need to train ourselves to hear him above every other voice. He will guide us. He will comfort us. He will warn us, encourage us, sustain us, strengthen us, and carry us through. The Son is the full and final revelation of God.

Heeding the Son’s Voice

And so the question we need to ask this morning, and as we journey through Hebrews in the months ahead: *what voices am I listening to?* Whose words have I trained myself to hear? Whose opinions and instructions have the most influence on my life? Is it the voices within? The voice of selfish desire, telling me to give in to the pressure and indulge in sin? Or selfish ambition, urging me to take matters into my own hands in order to get results? Is it a voice of self-loathing or self-doubt, telling me to just give up?

Or am I listening more to the voices around me? Those telling me that Jesus isn’t enough; that there are new and better ways to experience God? Or easier ways? Is it the voices that tell us the cross isn’t enough, that we have to do our part to contribute to our own salvation? Is it the voices that tell us to give up, or to give in, to follow our own path? Or voices that warn us the church must change or die? How have I trained myself to listen to most?

What we need, more than anything else, is to hear the voice of Jesus. To listen to Jesus, to look at his face, is to see the glory of God displayed in a full and final way. And the more we listen to him in his Word, the more we look at him with eyes of faith in the gospel, the more confident we will be when the heat is up and the pressure is on, to know which way to go. The more conviction we will have to persevere through whatever circumstances in order to get there. Because in Jesus we see how incomparably worthy God is, how faithful and true, how righteous and holy, how supremely powerful and utterly satisfying. And so as the author says in ch. 12, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:2-3, NIV).

That’s what this book is about. A call to press on in the faith, to persevere, to not fall away, to hold fast our confession and our confidence in Christ, because *Jesus is better*. He is worthy. There is no greater treasure, no safer anchor, no greater hope, no better Word than what we have in him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these opening verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
2. Discuss the author’s description of the Son of God. What do we learn about Jesus? Why does the author want us to know this?
3. According to these opening verses, how should we understand the relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus?
4. Why do you think understanding that is important for the first readers of Hebrews? Why is it important for us?
5. In one sentence, how would you summarize the main point of this introduction?

Questions for Reflection and Application

6. What does it look like for us to listen to the voice of the Son today?
7. What are some practical ways for doing this or making it a priority?
8. What other voices do you find competing for your attention, allegiance, or imagination?
9. Which voices (whether inside you, around you, or above you) have the most practical influence in your life today?
10. What is at stake in prioritizing the voice of Jesus?