

## A Better Messenger

Hebrews 1:5–2:4

We introduced our new series through the book of Hebrews last week, what we're calling "Jesus is Better." Because that's the major point of the book—to show the superiority of Jesus over everything, especially the old covenant of Israel and all that entails. And while we don't know who wrote the book, or to which church or city he first sent it, we do know what the author was worried about. Because he tells us several times throughout. The author was worried about followers of Christ falling away, not finishing well, wavering in our confession, failing to receive the prize.<sup>1</sup> As he puts it in ch. 2:1, he was worried about the church *drifting away from Christ*.

Now, full disclosure: I believe strongly in the eternal security of the Christian—that once we are saved, we are always saved. I think Scripture teaches this quite clearly—that salvation is not what we do, but what God does, and we can't undo that. He will carry his children faithfully through to the end (e.g., Jn. 10:27-30; Rom. 8:29-39; Eph. 1:3-14; Phil. 1:6). But it also teaches us *not to presume upon God's grace*—to think that just because I prayed a prayer once upon a time, or I agree intellectually with all the right stuff, that I can just now coast. Scripture calls us to watch our life and our doctrine, and it warns us many times not to fall away from the faith, not to forfeit grace, not to let ourselves drift (e.g., Gal. 5:4; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Pet. 1:10).

And one of the easiest ways to drift is to take our eyes off of Jesus. To lose sight of who he truly is, what he has truly done. Sometimes because we have an inflated view of something else—we think it's better than it really is. We're going to see examples of that in this book. But sometimes it's because we have an accurate view of other things, but an *inaccurate* or a *low* view of Jesus. We fail to translate the honor and respect we rightly have for one thing to the even greater thing in our midst. That's what's happening in our passage this morning as the author begins his first extended argument for the superiority of Jesus, in this case, in comparison to angels.

Angels are glorious creatures according to Scripture. They play a significant role throughout God's plan of redemption, in both Old and New Testaments. Some of them continuously worship God—think of the heavenly throne room scenes in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4-5. Sometimes they minister to believers, protecting (Exod. 14:19-20; Ps. 34:7; 91:11-12), guiding (Exod. 13:21-22), even delivering—think of Peter's miraculous rescue from prison in Acts 5. They will be agents of judgment when Christ comes again (Matt. 13:39-42; Rev. 19:17ff). But their essential function is as *God's messengers*. In fact that's what the Hebrew and Greek words for 'angel' mean—messenger. Whether announcing God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 18) or the incarnation of his Son to Mary and Joseph (Matt. 1:20-21; Lk. 1:26-38), or taking men like Daniel, Ezekiel, and John on a heavenly vision tour, the essential role of angelic beings is to deliver a message from

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<sup>1</sup> For warnings against falling away, see: 2:1, 3; 3:12; 4:1, 11; 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:15, 25. For admonitions to persevere, see: 3:6, 13-14; 4:14; 6:11-12; 10:23, 36; 12:1-3, 7, 12-13.

God.<sup>2</sup> And one of the greatest messages they helped deliver, according to Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:53, was Israel’s covenant at Sinai (cf. Deut. 33:1).

This is probably why the author of Hebrews focuses on angels here in chs. 1-2. Scholars have long wrestled with the reason they receive so much attention, why he feels the need to make such a strong case for Christ’s superiority over them. Was this church being tempted to worship angels, as in Colossians 2:18—some new religious teaching? Were they being influenced by early Judaism’s infatuation with angelic creatures, which we can see in some of the intertestamental writings (e.g. 1 *Enoch*; *Jubilees*, Dead Sea Scrolls)? Was there a temptation to view Jesus as simply one of the angels, rather than the divine Son of God (which might help alleviate persecution from Jews if you no longer claim the Messiah is divine)?<sup>3</sup>

The most likely reason is the angels’ role in delivering the old covenant to Moses and Israel. One of the major burdens of Hebrews is to warn readers against reverting to the Old Covenant, and to show how Jesus is better than that covenant at every turn—better than the prophets who bore witness to it (1:1-4), the servant Moses who mediated it (3:1-6), the priests who applied it (4:14-5:10), and, according to our passage, better than the *messengers* who delivered it. The reference to the message delivered by angels in ch. 2:2 is almost certainly the old covenant and its consequences for sin.

So the author of Hebrews is not correcting the Hebrews’ views of angels, or chastising them for some sort of misguided practice. He doesn’t build Jesus up by tearing angels down; rather, he leaves them in their place, with all the proper honor and respect as messengers of the old covenant, and then shows how Jesus is even better—a better messenger. And because Jesus is superior to all angelic messengers, his message of salvation is all the more urgent.

His argument really begins the previous passage, ch. 1:4, where he declares the Son’s superiority over angels (that’s why we read last week’s text again with our text this morning). Then in vv. 5-14 he proves his claim, offering as evidence seven Old Testament quotations. Finally in 2:1-4 he gets to the implications—why Christ’s superiority over angels matters for the church, namely, how his superiority makes his message of salvation all the more urgent.

So look again with me at ch. 1:4, as we take a running start into our passage.

### **The Declaration of the Son’s Superiority over Angels (1:4)**

As we saw last week, the author wastes no time jumping into his argument for the superiority of Christ. In 1:1-4 he made the case that Jesus offers a better Word. He is better than the prophets, because he is the full and final revelation of God’s salvation. And as he concluded that argument, he said (starting in the middle of v. 3): “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” (1:3b-4). One of the results of Christ’s redeeming work is that he has become better than angels, just as the name he inherited is better than theirs. This is

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<sup>2</sup> This summary of angelic activity is drawn from R. Kent Hughes’ work in *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful summary of biblical and historical understandings of angels, see L.T. Johnson, *Hebrews* (NTL; Louisville: WJK, 2006), 82-84.

essentially the same thing that Paul says of Christ in Ephesians 1: that God “raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:20-21).

Jesus is better than angels. That’s the claim the author makes. But anybody can make a claim. I could stand up here and say that I’m the smartest man alive or the greatest basketball player that ever lived (try not to laugh immediately). But what’s the evidence? Evidence matters.

So like an attorney defending his client’s name, the author approaches the bench in vv. 5-14 and offers seven exhibits—seven Old Testament texts—as evidence of Jesus’ superiority over angels.

### **The Evidence of the Son’s Superiority to the Angels (1:5-14)**

The first two make the same point: the Son’s royal identity as Messiah.

#### *1. The Son’s Royal Identity as Messiah (1:5)*

“For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son’?” (1:5). Angels are great—no argument there. But which angel was anointed Messiah, or designated the Son of God?

That’s what both of these Old Testament texts are about, the first one from Psalm 2:7 and the second from 2 Samuel 7:14. God promises to raise up and anoint one of David’s descendants as king that he might sit on David’s throne forever. And as this anointed king he will enjoy a special relationship with God as his Son. And through this Son, this Messiah, God will accomplish his plan of redemption. Angels get to announce God’s redemption, but they don’t get to accomplish it. Only the Son has that honor, and Jesus is that Son.

#### *2. The Son’s Rightful Worship by Angels (1:6)*

Not only does the Son enjoy the unique royal identity as Messiah, this Messiah is worthy of the angels’ worship. That’s the second point. The Son’s rightful worship by angels. Verse 6: “And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’”

Here the author quotes Deuteronomy 32:43, from the Song of Moses. What’s interesting about this passage (and several other passages that the author quotes), is that this verse is about God, not directly about the Messiah. Hebrews has no problem ascribing to the Son what the Old Testament ascribed to God. Because Jesus is God—again, the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And so Deuteronomy 32:43 promises a day when God will vindicate his people, and the angels will worship him in response. “Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people’s land.” According to Hebrews, it was in bringing his firstborn Son into the world that God acted for the vindication of his people. And just as he promised, in Luke 2:8-14, the angels worshiped God together with the Son.

### 3. *The Angels' Lower Status as Created Servants (1:7)*

The next piece of evidence addresses the nature of angels, in order to set up a contrast with the nature of the Son. Verse 7: “Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.’” Here we see the angel’s lower status as created servants.

Psalm 104, from where this quote comes, is a celebration of God and his creation. “He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire. He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved” (104:3-5). Angels have a glorious role, but it’s depicted here as part of God’s created order. They are created, they are servants—which is wonderful, but it’s not the same thing as being king or creator. The Son, in contrast, is both king and creator. That’s what the next two texts tell us.

### 4. *The Son's Righteous Reign as Divine King (1:8-9)*

In vv. 8-9, the author of Hebrews again quotes from the Psalms. “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’” (1:8-9).

Psalm 45 is an ode to Israel’s king. And what’s remarkable about this ode is that in v. 6, the king is addressed as God. The same verse that Hebrews quotes here—“Your throne, O God, is forever.” Psalm 45 gives us a foretaste of a special king to come, and there’s only one king that this psalm can be fully applied to—the eternal Son of God who is the Messiah. Who reigns with righteousness and justice before his Father.

### 5. *The Son's Eternal Reign as Unchanging Creator (1:10-12)*

He not only reigns as the righteous king, he also reigns eternally as the unchanging creator—again, setting him apart from and over the angels. Verse 10, quoting Psalm 102:

And, ‘You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end’” (1:10-12)

Notice again how the author takes a psalm talking specifically about God and applies it to the Son. Jesus’ divinity is on full display (just as his humanity will be on display in the rest of ch. 2). He is eternal and unchanging and therefore incomparably worthy.

### 6. *The Son's Victorious Reign with the Father (1:13)*

But there’s one more—v. 13, which quotes Psalm 110 (a psalm that we will see again and again in Hebrews): “And to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’” He finishes just like he started, asking a rhetorical question about God’s interaction with angels, meant to highlight the unique role and favor of the Son. Here we see his victorious reign with the Father. God uses his angels to accomplish all sorts of things, but at the end of the day, none of them ever take a seat next to him on his throne. Only the Son.

Angels are great, but the Son is greater. So finally in v. 14 the author summarizes the nature, role, and purpose of angels.

### *7. Summary Argument: the Proper Estimation of Angels (1:14)*

“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (1:14). Angels have their place. They are ministering spirits, that’s their nature. They have their role, their mission—they are sent out by God. They have their purpose—to serve us, those who are to inherit salvation. They are God’s messengers, sent for our sake.

But what if something better than the angels is here? What if there is a better messenger in our midst? What are the implications of Christ’s superiority when it comes to listening to God’s messengers? This is what the author draws out in ch. 2:1-4.

### **The Implications of the Son’s Superiority to the Angels (2:1-4)**

A little over a year ago when I was down in North Carolina, a friend took me to a nice restaurant. It wasn’t coat-and-tie and fancy-crystal nice, but the menu was extravagant. I think we had something like eight or nine courses. And every time the wait staff appeared with another course, I thought, ‘Ah, this must be the main dish.’ Only to realize when they appeared with another course ten minutes later, that that was just another appetizer.

As you might guess, we were singing the praises of that wait staff. We were happy to receive anything they would deliver. But imagine if, for the next course, instead of sending the wait staff to deliver it, the chef herself appears to deliver that course in person. And when she arrives and you see it, you realize that everything else you’d been eating truly had been a mere appetizer. This was the main course. If that were to happen, what should be your response?

If you’re willing to eat what the waiter delivers, how much more eager should you be when the chef herself brings the food out? The chef is worthy of greater honor and attention, as the designer and creator of the meal. That doesn’t mean the wait staff is unworthy of honor, or that to build the chef up you have to tear the waiter down. Rather, whatever respect you rightly have for the wait staff during the appetizers should be translated to the chef who is even more worthy of respect, and therefore worthy of us enjoying and being nourished by her main course.

This is the argument the author is making in Hebrews. He is appealing to the rightful respect his readers have for angels, and then showing how Christ far exceeds that standard, and is thus deserving of greater respect and attention. Listen again to ch. 2:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (2:1-4)

Again, the author’s not tearing angels down in order to build Jesus up; rather, he leaves them in their place, with all the proper honor and respect as messengers of the old covenant, and then shows how Jesus is an even better messenger, with a better message. How everything God’s

people had enjoyed at the hands of angels up to this point, as good as it was, had been a mere appetizer. Now that Jesus has appeared, he has delivered the main course—a message of great salvation. A message declared by Christ himself, attested by eyewitnesses to his death and resurrection, and corroborated by great signs and wonders among the apostles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. And because Jesus is a better messenger, his message of salvation is all the more urgent. “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard from, lest we drift away from it” (2:1).

Because drifting is a real threat. Nobody walks away from Jesus overnight. Nobody in this ancient church was going to go to bed one night, having delighted in Jesus as the Son of God, resting in his glory and the sufficiency of the cross, and then wake up the next day deciding that actually the Messiah hasn’t come yet, and if we’re serious about God we need to get back to the Old Covenant. That doesn’t happen overnight. It happens through drift. Like forgetting to tie up a boat on the dock, and after a while the wind and the current slowly carry it away. We take our eyes off Jesus, we loosen our grip on the gospel, and allow ourselves to become distracted, disinterested, disengaged, self-dependent, such that over time we’ve drifted so far out to sea that we can no longer see the shore of Christ’s sufficiency. We wonder if we ever really believed it in the first place. And we think the Law is the only way to row ourselves home.

We cannot afford to neglect such a great salvation. And so we need to do two things in response to this passage this morning. First, we need to ask ourselves honestly, where are we prone to drift? Where am I tempted to take my eyes off Jesus, to loosen my grip, and risk being drawn away?

Perhaps I have an inflated view of something—I think that something else is better than it really is. And so the rest and peace, or the significance, security, and satisfaction that come properly from Jesus, I think we can find in other things. Things that ultimately disappoint and slowly destroy us.

But perhaps, as is the case in our passage, I have an accurate view of something truly good, but I fail translate that into a superior view of Jesus. Angels are good. Coming to church is good. Reading my Bible is good. Maybe I have a great, healthy view of the importance of church or of Bible reading—but I have failed to let that high view of those good things translate into an even higher view of the Savior whom it’s all about. I know what I’m supposed to do and I do it, but I’m not engaged with Christ in it. My faith becomes impersonal and routine. And that, my friends, is just as dangerous as being drawn away by lesser things—to be comfortable with good things that are disconnected from Jesus. You can drift with good theology and doing good things for God, if you allow those doctrines and deeds to become detached from the person of Christ and his supreme worthiness.

And so what do we do with hearts so prone to drift? Our second response to this passage is to look again to Jesus. The best way to prevent drift is to pay careful attention to Christ. “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard from, lest we drift away from it” (2:1). Much closer attention to the *salvation* we have in him.

The main course that Christ delivers is what the author calls “such a great salvation” (2:2). And it is. Because it decisively deals with everything that is wrong with this fallen world. The sin that stains the image of God in us and separates us from our Maker, that corrupts our hearts, decays our relationships, and ruins our lives; the brokenness and injustice that pervade this world as a

result; the death that results from sin and covers this world like a shroud; the guilt and shame we bear, the fear, the sorrow, the loneliness, everything that's wrong with this world as it is—Jesus came to accomplish a great salvation that deals with it all. There is no person beyond the scope of his love, no sin beyond the reach of his grace, no sorrow he does not understand or share, nothing sad that will not come untrue through the salvation he has accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection.

Some of that great salvation we enjoy already—through faith in Jesus Christ we can already be forgiven, justified, reconciled to God, and made new. Sin's penalty has been paid in full, and its power has been broken. In Christ we have a new life, a new hope, a new family, a new identity, a new purpose, a new inheritance, and a new power to follow God by the Holy Spirit. But we are not yet home. The presence of sin remains; sadness and brokenness remain; the temptation to drift remains. And so while we wait for our Lord's return and the day when we will enjoy the fullness of our great salvation in him, we must keep our eyes fixed on Christ, "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" (12:2, NIV).

We have a great salvation in Christ. And because he is a better messenger, his message of salvation is all the more urgent. May we pay careful attention to him, lest we drift away.

## **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. What do we learn about the Son in 1:5-14? How does the author make his case?
3. What do we learn about angels in these verses?
4. How would you summarize the main point of 1:5-14?
5. What does the author want us to do with this information (see esp. 2:1-4)? What is he afraid will happen if we don't?

### **Questions for Reflection and Application**

6. Where are you prone to drift from the gospel, personally? What do you think causes that?
7. How does this passage help us prevent drift?
8. What's so great about our salvation in Christ?