

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part two

Sunday, January 15th, 2017 - 10 a.m. - Teaching #1939

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE PROPHETS, THE ANGELS, AND THE SON

Hebrews 1:1-3 - "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] 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. [3] He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high..."

We took time last week to outline the series of events behind the shaping of the tense relationship between Judaism and the birth of the church. It is hard for us to imagine the blunt force of the gospel on Jews devoted to the Old Testament. True enough, the Old Testament - as our text will remind us today - promised and prepared for the coming of Jesus the Christ. But this is not the kind of Messiah many Jewish worshippers were expecting. And that resistance to the gospel is precisely what the epistle to the Hebrews is addressing.

Perhaps this is the explanation for the quick dive our writer makes into the heart of the issue. There is no greeting. No introduction. No pre-ambles. The theme of the entire letter explodes in the first sentence. Christ is the key to understanding the Old Covenant. Our letter's first three sentences provide the outline. Christ is a **superior revelation** to all that preceded Him. He is the **Creator and Sustainer** of all there is. He is the **full revelation of God's glory** among us. And He is the only One who can **purify sinners from their sins**.

1) GOD HAS SPOKEN IN MANY WAYS BECAUSE HE IS A SPEAKING GOD

Hebrews 1:1 - "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets..."

This is a wise starting point for our writer. He is writing to a Jewish audience. And the first thing he needs to say is God had, in fact, spoken through the Jewish prophets. That is, there was nothing **untrue** in the Old Testament texts. They are in every way - even to this day - God's infallible Word.

And no one should overlook this basic point. Our God is a **speaking God**. He **reveals**. He is a **communicator**. And the reason that matters is we would have no way of knowing what God is like - even in the slightest bit - if God didn't initiate His Self-disclosure.

We could speculate about God. We're **designed** for God-search. But we can't find Him on our own. We certainly can and do create idols. But these gods are just extensions of **ourselves**. We are created with the need to worship but don't know the true **object** of our worship unless God speaks and reveals. And this, our text says, God has initiated in the prophets of the Old Testament.

We need to make application of this first point. What we need to know about God cannot be found looking **inward**. Knowledge of the Divine isn't found in some kind of god within or the divine spark of human potential. God has spoken **externally**. We meditate privately, to be sure. But this meditation is on God's external Word. His revelation isn't **subjective**. He can't be known by repeating mantras or meditating on ethical principles. He **speaks**. Revelation comes in history. It is God **bursting into our world** from the outside. This happens **partially** in the common providence of an extravagantly created world and the universal created reality of conscience, but **primarily** through the written and recorded revelation of God's Word.

2) THE REVELATION OF GOD THROUGH THE PROPHETS WAS PARTIAL AND LAYERED OVER TIME

Notice the way the writer describes it - **Hebrews 1:1** - "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets..."

The Old Testament was written over a period of over **1500 years**. And though all of it is **true**, it came in **bits and pieces**. And "**many ways**" would seem an understatement. Consider the ways - to **Moses** from a burning bush - or the tablets of commandment, written **"by the finger of God"** - or coming to **Abraham** as a **mysterious "visitor"** - or entering into a **wrestling match** with **Jacob** - or to **Joshua** as an angel with a **drawn sword** - or to **Balaam** through a **speaking donkey** - or **Elijah** with a **"still, small voice"** - or to **Ezekiel** as a **"wheel within a wheel."**

Now, all of these revelations were **true**. Progressive revelation doesn't move from **less** true to **more** true, or from **less** divine to **more**. It's the **content** that progresses, not the **truthfulness**.

Are you old enough to remember those amazing cameras where you took the picture and in a few seconds the developing picture actually came shooting out the bottom of the camera? It seemed like a miracle to me. But it took a while for the image to sharpen and brighten. At first it just looked like a foggy, murky swamp. But gradually the image emerged. Things brightened and sharpened. Finally you had the full picture.

That's a pretty good illustration of the unfolding of the revelation of God through the prophets. Just like that developing picture had nothing **untrue** in it. I **was** all the picture. There was nothing in it that **wasn't** the picture. But it was the picture **developing**.

This is the message our writer confirms with these Hebrew disciples. Their prophets **were** truly God's prophets. God **was** speaking truth. But it was **still developing**. It wasn't finished yet. It lacked the full clarity that was yet to come.

Just one more important clarification - and it's **very** important. Our writer **isn't** saying **God** was evolving or developing throughout the Old Testament. He's not morphing from being a God of **wrath** into a more mature God of **mercy**. God is constant and unchanging. Our author is not talking about God's **being**. He's talking about God's **revelation**. He's saying God **disclosed His mind** by the addition of **one thing after another**. It came in **segments**. It came in **parts**. And it came over long periods of **history**. And it **progresses**. Which leads into our next point:

3) THE COMING AND WORK OF JESUS THE CHRIST MARKS THE FULFILLMENT OF ALL THE REVELATION OF THE PRECEDING PROPHETS

Hebrews 1:2a - "...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...."

And the important words are, **"...in these last days..."** These are **arrival** words. They are **destination** words. They point to the **end of a previous process**. All the previous days were **preparing** for this **end**. Our writer is saying the coming of Jesus in the Incarnation draws the previous order of things to a **close**. First there were the **previous days**. Now we've reached the **last days**. This is the gospel era. This is the age reaching its apex with the return of the Messiah at the close of present history.

But our writer, who writes to these Hebrew disciples, wants to emphasize the former days have not been **scrapped**. They haven't been **cast aside**. They have been **completed - fulfilled - reached their intended goal** - **Matthew 5:17** - **"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."**

Our writer will stress the goal never was a **separate standing Jewish religion**. The goal was the arrival of the **promised Messiah**. And with the coming of Jesus, the Christ, a final **era of fulfillment** has been launched. This doesn't contradict the Old Covenant prophets. This was their own, albeit more dimly realized, understanding of their own prophetic writings:

1 Peter 1:10-12 - "Concerning this salvation, **the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, [11] inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. [12] It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.**"

These are pointed and important words. They line up perfectly with the logic of our Hebrews text. The key idea is Jesus is not to be thought of as just the last in a long string of prophets. In the Christ a new final age has been launched. God's **final revelation** has come. There will be no others.

The application of this doctrinal section is **God's revelation in Jesus the Christ cannot be missed**. There is nothing else to wait for in terms of God's saving word to the human race. All previous revelation finds its target in God the Son, the Word made flesh.

4) GOD THE SON IS THE HEIR OF ALL THINGS BECAUSE HE IS THE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

Hebrews 1:2b - "...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.**"

In one half sentence our text covers both the **future kingdom reign** of the Son and the **pre-incarnate creative work** of the Son. The Apostle John gives even more detail to the Son's creative work:

John 1:3 - "All things were made through him, and **without him was not any thing made that was made.**"

Why does John repeat himself? It seems like bad writing. It's not. John writes to counteract a common heresy that the Father created the Son and **then** the Son did the rest of His creative work. But John won't let that heresy stand. If the Father created the Son then it wouldn't be true to say of the Son, **"without him was not any thing made that was made,"** because the **Son** would have been made apart from the Son's creating work. So John makes his point clear. Nothing exists - **nothing** - that the Son didn't create. Period.

But there's an additional point being made in our Hebrews text. We see at once why the eternal creative right means the Son alone is the logical fulfillment of all the statutes, regulations, observances and laws of the Old Testament revelation. In His creative might He **predates** all of them. The content and terms of all previous revelation are all **His** in a totally unique sense. This is what gave Jesus the right to tell the religious leaders in His day that **He was "LORD of the Sabbath."** It was His day because He **made** it. He alone has the right to fold up the old covenant because He created it.

There's more in our text. Because He is the creator of all things the Son is also the **"heir of all things" (2b)**. All will be restored in Him. He will reign for ever and ever. And, of course, the writer's point is **this can't be said of any prophet in the Old Testament**. These **"last days"** inaugurated in the Christ will surely be consummated with the rightful heir on the throne of a new heaven and new earth.

The Christ **came**. This is what those Jewish prophets were preparing and longing for. He inaugurated the last days. And the same Messiah will **close** these same last days when He comes again.

5) **THE SON IS GOD IN EVERY WAY AND HE MUST BE IF HE IS TO SAVE AND RESTORE AS THE PROPHETS PREDICTED**

Hebrews 1:3a - "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power...."

The **third** phrase is perhaps the easiest to deal with - "...he upholds the universe by the word of his power...." We're pointed again to the power of the Son in creation. But His is not only the power **originating** creation. His is also the power **sustaining** creation. And this sustaining work is done, quite logically considering the Son is God, by the exact means as the creation account in Genesis. It is the Son's **word** - "the word of his power" - that keeps creation day by day.

The things scientists define as impersonal laws and mathematical principles and forces are merely different labels for "the word of the Son's power." The Son is sustaining all of creation this very minute. It is His by right.

The **middle** phrase - "...the exact imprint of his [God's] nature...." - is the writer's way of re-emphasizing the Son **is** God, not just **like** God. Hence the emphasis on His **nature**. There is no distinction between the **nature** of the God and the Christ. This likeness isn't **approximate**. It's **exact**.

But it's the **first** phrase that makes clear why this divine identity of the Son is so important - "He is the radiance of the glory of God...." And there's a reason the subject of God's **glory** is introduced exactly where it is.

Here's what we know to be true of each one of us in this church this morning - **Romans 3:23** - "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...." The sweet affinity for God that was once the joy of mankind in the original creation has been lost by sin. Over and over again the New Testament speaks of fallen persons in their unredeemed state as "**enemies**" of God. It is the sad story of **glory lost**.

This surely is on the writer's mind in this phrase. And I think the context will bear this out because in the very same verse the next major theme of the epistle is the **purifying and reclaiming** of fallen humanity through the work of the one who is the "radiance of the glory of God...." - **verse 3b** - "...After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...."

Only the One who **radiates** God's glory can **restore** God's glory. The glory **lost** in the Fall can't be **earned** back. It can't be restored through the keeping of **religious precepts**. No **moral instruction** can accomplish it. And, to the point of today's text, no **prophet or angel** can offer it.

The **Son** alone imparts God's glory to those who, on their own, fall so pathetically short of it. This glorious theme is all over the New Testament:

2 Corinthians 4:4-6 - "...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. [5] For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [6] For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

2 Corinthians 3:18 - "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

What a phrase! - "...the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." No prophet, angel, or religious leader can give this. Personal transformation and restoration with God can be found in no other place than "in the face of Jesus Christ."

You must look to Jesus, God the Son, today if you want glory restored to your heart.

6) **NOTHING ELSE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO BRING US BACK TO GOD**

Hebrews 1:3b - "...After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...."

As this letter was read aloud in the churches the listeners would actually **hear** a contrast we easily miss in our **reading**. The listeners - Jewish believers, raised in the tradition of temple and sacrifice - would immediately hear something strange in Jesus **sitting down** after making purification for sins.

This is something **Aaron** never could to - **Hebrews 10:11-12** - "And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. [12] But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...."

There is no mention anywhere in the Old Testament of a **chair** in the holy place. And that isn't just some oversight. It was **forbidden** for the priest to sit down while offering the sacrifice for the sins of the people. This was a very physical reminder that the priest's work was an **ongoing** work. It was never meant to even **feel** finished.

Jesus sat down after His death, Resurrection, and Ascension because there was, quite bluntly, nothing left to do. We are being reminded there is nothing **lacking** - nothing **inadequate** - about our Lord's provision for your sin.

And we **need** this reminder because our sins - especially when the Holy Spirit starts to **convict us** in a service like this - **feel overwhelming**. And can the death of Jesus - so long ago - really be all that's needed for the glory of God to begin to unfold in my broken life?

And there is still nothing else that needs to be done for my sin and yours. Look to Jesus in repentant faith. There is no one else to pour God's grace and glory into your heart.