

We understand more about our world than any of our ancestors. Thanks to science and technology we know more about ...

- The **origin and expansion of our universe**.
- The **human genome and the complexity of our bodies**.
- We carry enough **computing power** in our hands to access most information in the world.

And yet, I saw a bumper sticker the other day, 'Just a Hogwarts girl in a muggles world.' For those who don't know, that is a Harry Potter reference. The popularity of the Harry Potter books / movies – or any of the zombie, horror, and most sci-fi - reveals that we long to see and interact with unseen realities.



Solomon noted that 'He has ... set eternity in the human heart (Ecc 3:11 NIV).' Despite all our knowledge, there is part in our heart that longs to interact with the supernatural. There is a pull to see the unseen.

The Lord has **led me to go through the book of Hebrews** this fall. It is 'a strange and difficult book'¹ for several reasons.

Hebrews can be 'strange and difficult' because ...

1. Five different cultural layers.

- Roman culture (Greek)
- Hebrew culture (Aramaic)
- Hellenists culture – Greek speaking Jews outside of Israel
- Hellenistic Christians – the target audience, former Jews
- Our modern culture.

2. It is a sermon to a very specific audience. They knew exactly what he was talking about. Some parts are mysterious to us given the layers of culture involved.

3. Its uses symbols dear to the Hebrew culture to make two arguments.

¹ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 710.

- Don't go back to Judaism.
- Jesus, the Messiah, is better than Judaism. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the OT looked forward to.

Today's symbol and argument is that Jesus is better than the angels.

Something Better

The Book of Hebrews – Better than Angel



Here is what I consider the key verse and concept of Hebrews: 'God had planned something better for us (He 11:40 NIV).'

This may surprise us because most of us have never encountered an angel. **I believe I have encountered demons, but no angel.**

- This is a strong argument for a first century former Jew.
- 'God ... communicated with his people through angels, and surely they, as supernatural beings, must represent the highest power next to God,' but the preacher cries out that even they 'cannot match the glory of the son.'²
- Also, there is evidence that the early Christians were developing an unhealthy preoccupation with angels.³

The preacher will prove 1) from OT scripture that Jesus is greater than the angels, and 2) that only God's son can lower himself to save humanity.

What does this have to do with us today? Most here today are not tempted to go back to Judaism. No, but we might be tempted to go back to ...

- **A bottle of pills** or **a line of coke.**
- **A bottle of booze.**
- **A church** of dead ritual.
- **Islam** or **Buddhism** - and be free of the family pressure & persecution.
- **Your college ideology** - that puts me in control of everything – I am the god of destiny.

² R.T. France in Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition 13* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2006), 40.

³ Col 2:18; 1Pe 3:22; Re 22:8-9, c.f., France, *Expositor's*, 40.

Let's jump right in.

1. Superior to Angels, 1:4-14.

'So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (He 1:4 NIV).'

That is the first argument: Jesus is superior to the angels.

To prove his point, he quotes extensively from the OT.

- Just like a good preacher today will quote well-known passages, he quotes seven back-to-back passages in 'staccato-like' fashion.⁴
- These passages and their context were well-known to these Hellenistic Christians.

Here is a quick summary of what the OT quotations meant to his listeners.

Seven OT quotes ...

- Ps 2:7 (v. 5a) - none of the angels are called 'God's Son.'
- 2Sa 7:14 (v. 5b) – the angel Gabriel called baby Jesus, 'the Son of the Most High.'
- Dt 32:43 (v. 6) – the angels worship him.
- Ps 104:4 (v. 7) – angels are powerful, but they obey him.
- Ps 45:6f (vv. 8-9) – he was anointed as Messiah; he is of David's line.
- Ps 102:25-27 (vv. 10-12) – he was at creation and is eternal.
- Ps 110:1 (v. 13) – he sits at God's right hand. He has been enthroned as king.

The last one is a **known Messianic Psalm**, and it is a *theme throughout Hebrews*: 'To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet (He 1:13 [Ps 110:1])?"'

- Only 'The most exalted angels are ... privilege(d) ... to "stand in the presence of God" like Gabriel ... but none of them has ever been invited to sit ... in the place of honor at his right hand.'⁵

Jesus is greater than the angels, and has something better planned for us. Don't turn your back on him. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

To **conclude his point**, he says, 'Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation (He 1:14NIV)?' Angels are mere servants, not rulers, not saviors.

⁴ France, *Expositor's*, 40.

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *NICNT Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Willam B. Eerdmans, 1990), 64.

Note here that **salvation is in the future** – ‘who will inherit salvation.’ Yes, we have **assurance of salvation now**, *but until we draw our last breath, we are to hold on by faith and there is the real possibility of falling away.*

Five times he warns his people. He senses they are in danger about falling away or going back to Judaism.

2. First Warning, 2:1-4.

‘We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ²For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment (He 2:1-2 NIV)?’

We understand it is a warning, but what to make of verse two?

What message was spoken by angels?

Twice the Bible says that angels acted as intermediaries when God gave Moses **the Law on Mt. Sinai**.⁶

- *So, because the angels **helped to give the OT Law**, and the Law had serious consequences if disobeyed, **how much greater** are the consequences if we ignore God’s Messiah?*

The preacher of Hebrews **believes** it is possible to fall away: ‘How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation (v. 3a NIV).’

- *The word picture is of a boat drifting away, or of a ring slipping off the finger and becoming lost.*⁷
- You don’t need to reject Christ, **just ignoring him** is enough to start drifting.
- The preacher even **includes himself** ‘we do not drift.’

Is it possible for a real Christian to lose their salvation?

- On the **one hand**, if we are trusting God daily, we can have great assurance.
- On the **other hand**, let me give you some things to think about.

⁶ Two sources: 1. Ga 3:19 and Dt 33:2 ‘The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes (Dt 33:2 NIV [see LXX]).’

⁷ Bruce, *NICNT Hebrews*, 66.

Some say those who fall away 'must not have been a real Christian.' **But such a trite idea avoids an honest look at what the bible says.**

Can Christians fall away?

- Our ultimate salvation is future, Ro 13:11, 1Pe 1:5. We live in a **dangerous time** – in *between* the cross and our ultimate salvation – **it is a time of proving our faith (1Pe 1:7).**
- Jesus' parable of the soils, Mt 13:4-9. Jesus said that three soils 'they received the word with joy.' But only one of the three that sprouted was good. Two fell away due to persecution, or the cares of this world.
- Human freewill & God's sovereignty are both Biblical and complementary. We are to 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us (He 12:1 NIV).' **Holding / held:** 'I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me (Phil 3:12 NIV).'

All the **Pentecostals should get excited** about the next passage: 'This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (He 2:3b-4 NIV).'

- The very fact that **our preacher appeals to the signs and wonders** *means* that they were still common! **God still does miracles.**

Now his second argument. Jesus is greater, because he went lower than the angels.

3. Jesus and the Angels, 2:6-9.

'But there is a place where someone has testified: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? ⁷You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor ⁸ and put everything under their (angels) feet." In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. (He 2:6-8 NIV).'

- The **original Psalm** (Ps 8:4-6) referred to the first Adam being less than the angels. **Our preacher** applies it to the second Adam who **is 'the only one ... capable of undoing the effects of Adam's fall.'**⁸

Our preacher has been **careful not to use Jesus' name**, but now he reveals it in a dramatic fashion. 'But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (He 2:9 NIV).' Jesus **purposefully made himself lower** than the angels, becoming fully human to suffer death 'for everyone.'

⁸ Bruce, NICNT Hebrews, 73.

- It was God's plan of grace.
- **But now**, 'God (has) exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name (Phil 2:9 NIV).'
- **Jesus is greater than the angels, and has something better planned for us. Don't turn your back on him. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.**

Just one more segment. Again, the preacher is encouraging them not to return to Judaism because Jesus is superior to the angels.

4. Jesus, Able to Save.

'In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹ Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (He 2:10-11,14-15 NIV).'

One of the great statements of God's character: '*God, for whom and through whom everything exists (v. 10).*' Wow. **You were created for His purpose and His pleasure.**

There is another **key word** in the book, perfect: 'The perfect Son of God has become the people's perfect Savior ...(but) to become that, he must endure suffering and death.'⁹ We are being made perfect, too.

Angels cannot bring salvation; they are beings of the heavenly realm. Salvation must be brought to this realm – it takes like materials to recreate humankind.

Jesus – both divine & human: This is a **paradox**.

- 1:3 – the 'exact representation of his (God's) being.'
- 2:11 – he 'shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power ... of death.'

This must have been a **real mystery to the earliest Christians**.

How can death appear triumphant?

He died in weakness and disgrace and all their *hopes died* with him.

- Yet, **within one generation** they were 'proclaiming the crucified Jesus to be the conqueror of death.'¹⁰

⁹ Bruce, *NICNT Hebrews*, 80.

¹⁰ Bruce, *NICNT Hebrews*, 85.

- That Jesus had **broken into the strongman's house** and taken the keys to death and hell (Lk 11:21) and destroyed the devil's work (1Jn 3:18).

'For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (He 2:16-18 NIV).'

Jesus is greater than the angels, and has something better planned for us. Don't turn your back on him. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

Jesus did not turn back or drift away, he faced even greater temptations than we do, and yet he stood firm.

Conclusion

Let me share the story of a former parishioner. When she and her husband joined the church they met with me and told me they both had an addictive past. Both had been clean and sober for over 20 years. She successfully raised three kids, all of whom were now out of the house. One look is all it took when they were on vacation to meet a grandbaby. He said, 'you want to drive through the old neighborhood?' They were both high for over a week. He came home and got cleaned up, but she stayed down there doing horrible things to get drugs. The last time I met her she was a wreck; the drugs had regained their control. She was 65 years old.

My point is that the pull to go back is strong.

- Make the pull to follow Jesus greater than the pull to go back.
- Jesus has a **better future planned** for you than that other religion, or secularism.
- **Paul says** to fix our eyes on the unseen – that's great, *except for* these Hellenistic Christians. Our preacher is **more specific**: 'Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (He 12:1-2 NIV).'