

It was a typical Sunday at Seijo Gurasu Kyokai. Because we were in our first year of language school, I preached in English and Uema Tsutomu translated into Japanese. After a meal in a restaurant, everyone came over to our house and we played games until late. The entire day, other than the message in English, Connie and I practiced our Japanese. Around 7 p.m. and Uema san, leaned back in his chair and asked Connie for some green tea. He said, 'I am not feeling very Japanese right now. Perhaps some tea will help me feel Japanese again.' He felt the need to reconnect with His Japanese culture because he had been in a Christian culture all day.

- My ancestors arrived so long ago, that I don't feel any draw back to my Norwegian or Danish roots. What family traditions we have are probably more American than Scandinavian. It is hard for me to imagine losing my Americanness.
- It was okay for Uema to have green tea, but it is not okay for us to go back to the way we were before Jesus.

Very few here in America receive death threats for Christianity. Usually, American Christians allow their passion to fade. They slowly drift away and die spiritually rather than make a conscious decision to walk away. The rationale usually goes, 'they hurt me,' or 'they don't like me,' or 'I disagree with the leadership,' 'I must work on Sunday,' or 'it's my only day off.' We are in a 'choked by the cares of the world' type of soil.

- Can you imagine how easy it would be as a Muslim Background Believer to renounce Christianity and go back to not having a death threat against you and your family? To return to the traditions and culture that raised you, back to the safety of the majority.

The Lord has led me to go through the book of Hebrews this fall.

- To be honest, I loved many of the golden passages in the book but did not like overly Jewish nature of it.
- One scholar calls it 'a strange and difficult book.'¹

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.

- However, now I understand what the preacher was doing. Oh, it is a sermon to a very specific audience by a skilled pastor / preacher. He knows his audience.
- To plead, 'don't go back,' is the reason the author wrote the book of Hebrews.

Here is what I consider the key verse and concept of Hebrews: 'God had planned something better for us (He 11:40 NIV).' Truly, God does have something better for us than our current life in this imperfect world; marred by sin and death.

Something Better

The Book of Hebrews

I am excited because this book has so many practical applications for CIC. In fact, because we are an International Church, we can understand it better than a mono-cultural church. Because of its nature, I must give you some background.

1. Background.

The audience is a small group of Hellenistic Christians in Rome.

What does that mean? Who are the Hellenistic Christians?

It means we have four layers of culture to keep our eyes on to really understand the meaning.

Four cultures in Hebrews.

1. Dominate Roman culture – Greek speaking (elite spoke Latin)
2. Minority Hellenists – Greek speaking Jews outside of Israel
3. Hebrew culture – Aramaic & Hebrew speaking in Israel
4. Tiny minority Hellenistic Christians – former Hellenistic Jews

It is important to **keep these four cultures** in mind because of the purpose of the sermon itself.

- **Judaism** was a legal minority under Roman law. They could lawfully worship Jehovah in Israel or in any number of synagogues throughout Rome. It was safe legally and socially.
- Now that these Hellenistic Jews had converted to **Christianity**, there was a temptation to go back to Judaism.
- **Christianity was not legal**, and the Jews considered it the source of all Judaism's problems.

- Within ten years, **Cesar Nero** would begin his persecution of Christians.
- Perhaps they wondered if ‘their decision to follow Jesus was a mistake.’² Their Jewish families saw Jesus as a deceiver, they were cut off from their culture, isolated, and the Gentile Christians were increasingly calling the shots.

The purpose of the sermon is to encourage the Hellenistic Christians to not go back to Judaism

The preacher uses Jewish symbols & stories ...

- To warn them about turning back.
- To see the obsolete nature of their Jewish symbols.
- To highlight the superiority of Jesus, the Messiah.
- To promise them something better.

The pastor uses the culture they long for – Jewish culture, religion, and its symbols – as a tool to keep his flock from reverting back to Judaism. He shows them how inferior it is compared to Jesus and what Jesus has planned.

The author has only two arguments:

1. Jesus is superior to everything.
2. God has promised us something better.

I don’t want to lose your attention.

- So, some weeks I will dig in deep, like today. Other weeks, I will summarize two or even three chapters because we want the preacher’s meaning.
- We don’t need to go over every nuance of Jewish religion because you and I are not tempted to return to Jewish roots.
- We have former Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and secularists here at CIC.
- I will try to pull the meat from his arguments and apply it to us here.

Other interesting tidbits ...

- Did they flee Jerusalem after Stephen’s martyrdom (Acts 8:1).
- Preacher uses the LXX – Greek language OT

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), 24.

- The author is unknown, perhaps Apollos (Acts 18:24-25).³ Or possibly Apollos' mentor, Priscilla (Acts 18:18). The author was a well-educated, second generation, Greek-speaking Jewish Christian who knew the LXX, Greek philosophy, and preaching techniques.
- It is an expository sermon - verse by verse – through 8 OT passages. Ps 8:4-6, Ps 95:7-11, Ps 110:4, Jer 31:31-34, Ps 40:6-8, Hab 2:3-4, Pro 3:11-12, Ex 19:10-23.

With all that as a background, let's finally jump in.

The preacher starts with his best argument as a hook.

2. Hebrew's Summary, 1:1-4.

'In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of Majesty in heaven. ⁴So he became as superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (He 1:1-4 NIV).'

This is one sentence in the Greek, and it summarizes the entire book.

- God spoke, God revealed Himself to us.
- But Jesus is superior to the prophets and the angels, Jesus is the greatest and complete revelation of God to us.

3. Verse 1-2a.

'In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (He 1:1-2a NIV).'

The preacher's arguments throughout the sermon will be that Jesus is greater than blank. In today's passage, Jesus is greater than the prophets and angels.

Let's not quickly go past the phrase 'God spoke.' This is basic to our faith. God wants to reveal Himself to us through more than a beautiful sunset.

- God first spoke to us through his prophets, then the written texts of the OT, but now He has revealed Himself in Jesus.

³ 'The most widely favored view today', 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), 21.

- All the Torah that was revealed to Moses on Mt Sinai, all the prophecies spoken through Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah, were incomplete until His son.

This is not a progression from ...

- Less worthy to more worthy
- Less mature to more mature
- Less true to more mature,
- But a progression from 'promise to fulfillment.'⁴

4. Seven Facts about Jesus.

These seven facts will show that Jesus is the greatest, superior to anything in Judaism.

1. Heir of everything.

'Whom he appointed heir of all things,' He 1:2b.

- This is alluding to Psalm 2 – 'Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession (Ps 2:8 NIV).'
- These are the last days, and creation is careening towards its finale. Then, everything will be handed over to Jesus to rule.

2. Creator.

'And through whom also he made the universe,' He 1:2c.

- This is alluding Prov 8, where divine Wisdom was there at creation.
- This has the feel of John's – 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (Jn 1:3 NIV).'
- Or Paul's – 'For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible (Col 1:16 NIV).'

3. Reflection of God.

'The Son is the radiance of God's glory,' He 1:3a.

- He is God Himself made visible.
- Radiance means a reflection of God's glory.

4. Exact representation of God.

'And the exact representation of his being,' He 1:3b.

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *NICNT Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Willam B. Eerdmans, 1990), 45.

- The word used here is like Caesar's image stamped on a coin. The stamping of each coin is just like the others before it and after it. God's image has been stamped on Jesus; He is God's exact likeness.
- Not just the image but the material as well. 'What God essentially is, is made manifest in Christ. To see Christ is to see what the Father is like.'⁵

5. Sustainer of Everything.

'Sustaining all things by his powerful word,' He 1:3c.

- Creation is only one side, sustaining his creation is the other side.
- Paul wrote 'In him all things hold together (Col 1:17 NIV).'
- Jesus is not like Atlas, struggling to hold a dead weight on his shoulders, but as one who joyfully moves things along towards the completion of His plan.

6. Savior.

'After he had provided purification for sins,' He 1:3d.

- The description changes from who Jesus is to his relationship with us.
- He works as our high priest – doing something prior sacrifices or priest could not do.
- This theme will be gone over extensively later in the sermon.

7. King.

'He sat down at the right hand of Majesty in heaven,' He 1:3e.

- One of the earliest confessions of earliest Christians was that Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of God.
- It is from Ps 110:1, where Jesus quoted 'The Lord says to my lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet (Ps 110:1 NIV)."'
- Paul would write and it is one of the earliest songs of the church: 'Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11 NIV).'

If you are paying attention, you will have noticed that Jesus is ...

- The Prophet – through whom God has spoken His final word.
- The Priest – whose work accomplishes cleansing of sin.

⁵ Bruce, *NICNT Hebrews*, 48.

- The King – who sits enthroned over all other authorities.
- Stand and praise Jesus?

That leaves just one more passage for today.

5. Jesus is Superior.

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

This passage is the last one of this first segment, but it is also the first one for the next segment.

Point by point, our preacher is going to hammer away at the point that Jesus is greater than all the OT symbols and rites. They want to go back to an obsolete (8:13) and unfulfilled revelation.

He uses the terms ...

- 12 times – ‘better’ (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24).
- 8 times – ‘perfect’ (2:10; 5:9; 7:11; 9:11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:2).

The only term used more is ...

- 20 times – ‘sacrifice’ (5:1, 3; 7:27; 8:3; 9:9, 26, 28; 10:1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 18, 26; 11:17; 13:15, 16).

Conclusion

What is the takeaway for us today?

When we look at Jesus, we should not even think about going back to what we were before Jesus.

If we truly see how awesome Jesus is, we could never contemplate going back to

- Islam.
- Buddhism.
- Hinduism.
- Or, secularism.

Most of us in this room know someone who has slid into secularism, sometimes called humanism. It is the religion that man is in charge, his research and thoughts know everything. It is what every public school and university teaches as its foundation.

But, as a former pastor here once taught us. Secularism does not answer any of the big questions in life.

Big Three Questions of Life

- Where did I come from? Secularists usually avoid this question, because every secular explanation of existence fails scientifically. It all starts with a Creator.
- What's wrong with the world? Sin.
- How can it be fixed? Jesus.

Recently, I came across an article in the Wall Street Journal about how young people are returning to faith in Britain.

People are starting to notice a quiet revival in Britain among young people. The author of an article in the *Wall Street Journal*⁶ says,

- 'A secular worldview is actually pretty depressing. People are seeking more.'
- He writes, 'What brings a sense of purpose, what brings hope after death, what brings the possibility of forgiveness when you mess up? Those are the big three questions that humanism has very poor answers to.' – Dan Hitchens, *WSJ* 9-4-25

This is our moment to share the wonder of Jesus in bold bright colors. The article states that traditional churches are dying, but churches that boldly proclaim Jesus are growing.⁷

Jesus came here for a reason: to show us the way to God.

This is the second article in the Journal that I noticed about growing faith among young people. An earlier article was about young men coming to Christ. According to the article, our culture has so become so feminized, that there is no future for young men. They are turning to Jesus because our culture has rejected them.

⁶ Dan Hitchens, 'Has Britain Stopped Secularizing?' in the *Wall Street Journal* (Sept 4, 2025), accessed 9-6-25, 6 a.m. Also noted as growing is Eastern Orthodoxy and High Church Anglicanism. Growth is among the 18-24 year-olds and immigrants.

⁷ He writes that the growing churches in the UK - Pentecostals are listed first - 'are those that make the boldest doctrinal claims ... diet version(s) doesn't have the same appeal.'

This is our moment to release our sons and daughters to change the world.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16 NIV).'