

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 10, 2017**

THE SUPERIORITY OF THE SON

Hebrews 1:1-14

When you get a letter in the mail (as old-fashioned as it is these days), or a Christmas card, or an email or a text, you want to know who it is from. How much you value it is dependent on who it is from. If you don't know who the sender is, the letter or card or email or text is likely to be less important to you than if you know the sender.

In the case of the Letter to the Hebrews, though, the message is of immense importance even if we don't know who the human author is. Of all the writings in the New Testament, Hebrews is the only book whose human authorship has been a question mark since the early days of the church. The letter itself, which is more like a sermon than a letter, gives no indication of its author. Throughout the history of the church, the list of possible authors proposed includes Paul, Silas, Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Aquila, and Priscilla. The style of Hebrews is so different from his other letters that we can be pretty sure it was not written by Paul. Some biblical scholars today agree with Martin Luther, who suggested Apollos as the likely author. Apollos, as we read in Acts 18, was a Jew from Alexandria (Egypt, not Virginia) who became a disciple and co-worker of Priscilla and Aquila, and proved to be an effective preacher and defender of the Christian faith.

In the end, we don't know for sure who wrote Hebrews. Whoever the author is does not identify himself (or herself). The best we can do is to agree with Origen, the 3rd-century church father, who said: "Who wrote the epistle, God only knows the truth." What we vigorously affirm, though, as with the rest of the New Testament and the Old Testament as well, is that God Himself is the true author of this epistle, which means it bears the stamp of His authority and the seal of His approval.

The overarching message of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ is God's final word, that He is superior to everyone and everything. From beginning to end, the great theme of Hebrews is the finality of the gospel itself and the supremacy of Jesus Christ as the true Son of God and Savior of sinners. In Him, God has spoken definitively and acted decisively for our salvation. As Francis Schaeffer famously wrote a generation ago, "(God) is there and He is not silent."

As we see in Hebrews 1, Jesus is superior to the angels of God. In addition, the letter to the Hebrews makes the case that Jesus is superior to Moses and to the law God gave to Moses. He is the supreme high priest for His people, representing us in the presence of God. He is the supreme, perfect, and final sacrifice offered up for us. He has instituted a new and better covenant between God and us in the covenant of His saving grace. No one and nothing can compare to him and what He has done for us.

In the opening chapter of Hebrews, we have not only a sustained biblical argument in verses 5-14 for the supremacy of the Son over the angels, but also, in verses 1-4, an explanation of the uniqueness of the Son of God in His person and work. It is good for us to be reminded of

these things about Jesus, because the baby born to Mary in a barn in Bethlehem was – is – the majestic, magnificent, eternal Son of God. You see, the letter to the Hebrews, like Christmas itself, is all about Jesus. It is *all* about *Jesus!*

GOD HAS SPOKEN

The letter (or sermon) begins in verses 1 and 2 with the declaration that “God has spoken” in the past at many times and in many ways through His prophets, but now, “in these last days,” He has spoken through His Son. Though He served in the role of a prophet, Jesus was not merely another in a long line of prophets who spoke to the people on behalf of God. More than a prophet, Jesus was and is the very Son of God, superior to all the prophets, spokesmen, and messengers of God who came before (or since), including the angel messengers sent out by God to serve those who will inherit salvation (1:14).

The greatness – more than greatness, the supremacy- of Jesus is laid out in seven statements about Him in verses 2 and 3:

1. THE HEIR OF ALL THINGS

First, He is the *heir* of all things (1:2b). “All things” means *all things*. It includes the entire created universe now and the world to come, which means the new heavens and the new earth. Everything belongs to Him. Though we do not yet see all things made subject to His rule, the day will come when “He has put all His enemies under His feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25). It all belongs to the Savior who took on our flesh and blood and came to live among us. It all belongs to the baby born in Bethlehem. It all belongs to the crucified Savior who willingly took our sin upon Himself and gave His life for us. It all belongs to Him.

2. THE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

Second, He is the *Creator* of all things, the One “through whom God made the universe” (1:2c). This is not the only place in the New Testament where the role of the Son in creation is declared. In the Gospel of John, for example, we are told that “all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). Jesus, the eternal Son of God, was present and active in the work of creation itself. Paul says of Him in Colossians 1:16: “For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him.” *All things* were made by Him. *Everything*.

To give you just an inkling of what this means, consider that Stephen Hawking describes our galaxy as “an average size spiral galaxy that looks to other galaxies like a swirl in a pastry roll”, more than 100,000 light-years across, or about 600 trillion miles (Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 37). For some perspective, Hawking says: “We now know that our galaxy is only one of some hundred billion that can be seen using modern telescopes, each galaxy itself containing some hundred billion stars” (Hawking, *ibid.*). On top of this, the work of Edwin Hubble has shown that the universe is constantly expanding. Some estimates say that the

most distant galaxy is eight billion light-years away, and racing away at 200 million miles an hour. It is beyond comprehension.

The point of this, in the words of Kent Hughes, is to say that Jesus “created every speck of dust in the hundred billion galaxies of the universe. He created every atom ... with their quarks and leptons and electrons and neutrinos – all of which have no measurable size” (Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*, 25). *Everything* was created by Him. He created it all. And yet He came to live among us.

3. THE RADIANCE OF GOD’S GLORY

Third, He is the *radiance* or *brightness* of God’s glory (1:3a), which means that He shines with the glory that belongs to God alone. Jesus does not merely reflect the glory of God, in the way that the moon reflects the light of the sun. Like the sun (S-U-N) that radiates with light because it is the source of the light, Jesus radiates the glory of God because the glory of God is part of His essence. One might say that Mother Teresa or Billy Graham or some other “saintly” person reflects the glory of God in their words or actions, but Jesus is different. He embodies the glory of God because He is Himself the God of glory.

4. THE EXACT IMPRINT OF GOD’S BEING

Next (fourth), Jesus is the *exact representation* or *imprint* of God’s being (1:3b). The Greek word used here is *charakter*. This is the only place it is used in the New Testament. Its meaning of “exact imprint” refers to the image on a coin that perfectly corresponds to the image on the die, with no defects. What it means here is that Jesus is completely the same in His being and nature as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He is not a replica of God. He is totally God. The mystery of the Trinity comes into play here. God the Son is the same in His essence as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and yet distinct in His person: “One God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.” I can’t explain it. But I believe it. The bottom line is that to see Jesus is to see God and to know what He is like. Which is, in part, why Jesus came: To show us, up close and personal, who God is and what He is like.

5. THE UPHOLDER OR SUSTAINER OF ALL THINGS

Fifth, Jesus is the *Upholder* or *Sustainer* of all things (1:3c). Not only is He the Creator, He is the Sustainer of the universe as well. Paul says of Him: “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). He does it how? “By the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3c) or “the power of His word.” By His speech, by the very words of His mouth, He sustains the universe and holds it together. And, we may add, by the words of His mouth, He is able to sustain His church and hold it together. He is able to sustain you and me. By His word of encouragement and comfort and conviction and counsel, He is able to direct our lives and to keep us from falling apart. The baby born to Mary whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is the One who upholds and sustains all things by His powerful word.

6. THE PURIFIER

Sixth, Jesus is the One who made *purification* for our sins (1:3d). In this we see the high priestly work of Jesus for us, offering the perfect sacrifice to make atonement for our sins. And in this we see the perfect adequacy and efficacy of Jesus Himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Not only did Jesus *offer* the perfect sacrifice; He *is* the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

Leighton Ford, who was one of the featured speakers at the 2016 General Assembly of the EPC, tells of meeting boxing champion Muhammad Ali many years ago. When Ford introduced himself as the brother-in-law of Billy Graham, Ali's face lit up and he said: "O Billy! Billy! I love Billy! I went up and saw him at the house in Montreat and he signed a book for me."

Ford says they got into an interesting conversation. Ali, of course, was a Muslim, but he told Ford and the others present: "You know, I have traveled all over the world. And I have seen all these different religions. It seems to me that they all have the same things. It's kind of like you have a river, and you have a lake, and you have a pond, and you have a stream. But they all have water in them, so they are all the same, aren't they?"

Ford said: "Muhammad, that is very interesting. But suppose you have all of them and suppose they are all polluted. Then you would need a purifier, don't you? That's who Jesus is. Jesus is the purifier."

Ali thought about it for a minute and said: "That's good. I never thought about it quite like that. Jesus, the purifier."

We don't know if Muhammad Ali ever took that truth into his heart and acted on it. But it *is* true. Jesus is the *Purifier* whose blood shed for us on the cross has purified the hearts of all who believe in Him, the hearts of all who receive Him as Savior and Lord, from the pollution of our sin and rebellion against God. In making purification for our sins, Jesus did what no one else could ever do, and what none of us could ever do for ourselves.

The baby born to Mary at Christmas came for the express purpose of making purification for your sins and mine. He is the reason we celebrate Christmas.

7. THE KING WHO SAT DOWN

Seventh and finally, the author of Hebrews says that when Jesus had done all these things, when He had finished His saving work and fulfilled His mission on earth, "He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3e). That He sat down indicates that His mission was accomplished. He is a seated high priest, in contrast to the priests of the old covenant, who constantly stood as, day after day, they offered sacrifices on behalf of the people – sacrifices that could never take away the sin and guilt of the people. But Jesus did, once and for all, in His perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice of Himself.

So Jesus is seated, not standing. He is seated in the place of highest honor “at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” – which means, in the presence of God the Father. Having been superior to the angels from all eternity because of who He is, Jesus is now acknowledged as superior to the angels by what He has accomplished as the eternal Son of God who became a man – born as a helpless baby in a stable – and gave His life as a sacrifice for us, to enable us to become the children of God.

THE SON’S SUPERIORITY

The name Jesus has inherited is the name “Son.” Son of God. Jesus is, always was, and always will be the one true Son of God. It is the name above all names. He has no rivals for this title. And He has no equals. Even the angels of heaven, as important and great and powerful as they are (though we are almost entirely unaware of their activities and their ministry on our behalf), cannot compare with the greatness of Jesus the Son.

His name “Son” is superior to theirs (1:4-5). His honor is superior as well, for He is worshiped by the angels (1:6). His vocation is superior, too, for He is the sovereign King (1:8-9) and the angels are servants (1:7) or ministering spirits (1:14). He is also superior in His existence, for the angels are created beings but He is eternal (1:10-12). And He is superior in His status, for He rules the world (1:13) “with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love” (Isaac Watts, *Joy to the World*).

WHY WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS

We celebrate Christmas not for its sentimentality or family traditions or humanitarian spirit of giving, as much as they may add to our attachment to the season. As Christians, we celebrate Christmas because we celebrate Jesus. We celebrate Jesus because of who He is – the eternal Son of God who is the Creator, Sustainer, Upholder and Heir of all things; the Radiance of God’s glory and the exact Imprint of His nature; the Purifier from all our sins; and the sovereign King who reigns at the right hand of God the Father. He is the One who left the glories of heaven to come and live among us, who was born in a stable and laid in a manger, who lived a sinless life and died a horrible death for us and for our salvation; who rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where He is now seated at the right hand of God the Father. From there, in the fullness of time, He will come again to judge the living and the dead and to bring all of history to completion.

THE ANTIDOTE

We celebrate Christmas because we celebrate Him and what He did for us. Here is one way to look at the radical importance of Jesus and what He did:

“Most ailments,” writes Gregory Koukl, “need particular antidotes. Increasing the air pressure in your tires will not fix a troubled carburetor. Aspirin will not dissolve a tumor. Cutting up credit cards” – as practical as it may be – “will not wipe out debt that is already owed. If your water pipes are leaking, you call a plumber, not an oncologist, but a plumber

will not cure a cancer. Any adequate solution must solve the problem that needs to be solved, and singular problems need singular solutions. Some antidotes are one-of-a-kind cures for one-of-a-kind ailments. Sometimes only one medicine will do the job, as much as we may (wish) it to be otherwise.

“Mankind faces a singular problem.” There are infinite varieties or evidences of the problem, but it all comes down to a singular root. “People are broken and the world is broken because our friendship with God has been broken, ruined by human rebellion. Humans – you and I – are guilty, enslaved, lost, dead. All of us. Everyone. Everywhere. The guilt must be (atoned for), the debt must be paid, the slave must be (set free). Promising better conduct in the future will not mend the crimes of the past. No, a rescuer must ransom the slaves, a (benefactor) must pay the family debt, a substitute must shoulder the guilt. There is no other way of escape” (Koukl, *The Story of Reality*, 131-132).

Only one antidote will cure our sin. Only one antidote will fix what is wrong with us. The antidote we need, the antidote everyone needs – the Savior we all need – is Jesus. Only Jesus. He is superior in every way to anyone or anything else in which you may put your hope. Only Jesus can rescue us from the mess we have made of our lives. Only Jesus can rescue this world from the mess we have made of it. Only Jesus.

But there is hope and there is victory – victory now and throughout eternity – in the supremacy of Jesus the Son.

He is the reason we celebrate Christmas. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.