

## *The Supremacy of Christ*

Hebrews 1 & 2

February 14, 2016

This morning we begin a new series returning to what is supposed to be our primary focus on Sunday morning's, at least during this part of the worship service, the Word of God. It is not that we haven't been focusing on the Word of God but sometimes when we do a series of topical sermons, like the one in the fall on being more missional, or our recent one on evangelism, we start in the wrong place. Our steadier diet should be starting with the Word of God and then allowing God to speak to us through it. The apostle Paul said it is *the sacred writings which are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ* (2 Timothy 3:15). He wrote in his second letter to Timothy:

*<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*  
2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, that which we will be looking at during this series writes:

*<sup>12</sup> For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. <sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*  
Hebrews 4:12-14 (NIV)

Why the Letter to the Hebrews? Well, that is a very good question? It is a very unique book of the Bible. Actually found in the New Testament. I say that because a number of years ago one of the Presidential candidates back then, and I can't remember which one, was trying to demonstrate his/her knowledge of the Bible and referred to Hebrews as being in the Old Testament. Much like one of our Presidential candidates today referred to 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians as "Two Corinthians." If we're voting for our Presidential candidates based on their level or amount of Bible knowledge, we're probably in trouble. It's probably why we are in so much trouble as a nation. There really isn't that much Bible knowledge amongst our leaders.

But in fairness to our politicians, just hearing the title "Hebrews," one would probably think it would be found in the Old Testament. After all, Hebrews were God's chosen people during Old Testament times. In fact it gets its title because it is addressed mostly to Jewish people, the earliest Christians, who were mostly Jewish. It is believed to have been written sometime between 60-70 A.D., some 30 years after Jesus' death, and just before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The earliest Jewish Christians were suffering tremendous persecution not just at the hands of the Roman authorities, but even more so by the Jewish people and the Jewish authorities, who believed they had walked out on the Jewish faith.

Why some throughout history have believed that the apostle Paul was the writer of Hebrews, there really is no direct evidence of that. The truth is we really don't know who the author was.

The primary purpose of the letter was to point out to those earliest Jewish Christians that Christ is the fulfillment of their Jewish faith. He is what everything in the Old Testament Scriptures was pointing towards.

We will be looking at Hebrews during this Lenten and Easter season as a reminder that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of our faith. We get so easily side tracked by all the little things, not just in our busy lives outside of church, but even in church, we often forget what it is all about, or who it is all about.

As I have mentioned recently I am being challenged in my daily devotional reading for this year as I am once again reading through Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*. This was Chamber's thoughts a week or so ago reflecting on Paul's words in 1 Cor. 1:17, "*For Christ sent me to preach the gospel.*" "Paul states here that the call of God is to preach the gospel, but remember what Paul means by the 'gospel'... We are nowhere commissioned to preach salvation or sanctification, we are commissioned to lift up Jesus Christ. Jesus' own words in the gospel of John: "***And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.***"

Our primary purpose as Christians is not ourselves, it is not even other people. Our primary purpose as Christians is to lift up Jesus Christ, and point people towards Him, and allow Him to do the rest. That is what the Letter to the Hebrews is all about:

*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*

Just look at the words used there to describe Jesus: "the heir of all things;" "through whom he created the world;" "the radiance of the glory of God;" "the exact imprint of God's nature;" "the upholder of the universe;" "the purifier of sins;" "the one who sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

Then we get to chapter two and we find a warning, one of several warnings that the writer put in this letter:

*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. <sup>2</sup> For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?* Hebrews 2:1-3a

Well, the answer to that question is that we can't escape if we neglect such a great salvation. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus is the only way to salvation. When we neglect Him, we do so at our own peril.

How did Jesus receive this great honor, that which put Him above everything else? It came only through His death on the cross:

*But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

*<sup>10</sup> For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*

Hebrews 2:9-10 (ESV)

*...that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. <sup>16</sup> For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. <sup>17</sup> Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

Hebrews 2:14b-17 (ESV)

If you need a reason why you should love this Letter to the Hebrews, it's this: Hebrews is to the New Testaments as the Book of Leviticus is to the Old Testament. Now I am sure that many of you would rather we have looked at the Book of Leviticus during this Lenten season, but all kidding aside, Leviticus is a very important book of the Bible. It is just as important if not more important than many of the others.

The Book of Leviticus is all about God speaking to His chosen people of Israel, through His prophet Moses about the worship He requires: the priesthood, the ceremonial cleansing, the Day of Atonement and other feasts and holy days, and all the sacrifices. The central message of the Book of Leviticus is that God is holy and he requires His people to be holy. The book also shows that God graciously provided atonement for sin through the shedding of blood. In fact that was the only way that sin could be atoned for.

The Bible tells us that all human beings are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. It also says that the wages of sin is death. In the Old Testament, very specifically laid out in the Book of Leviticus, the wages of sin was paid for through the death of animal sacrifices. Animal sacrifices that had to be repeated over and over and over again. Those sacrifices had to be brought into the temple by the priests. The priests not only offered the sacrifices for others, but also for themselves, and they were the mediators between God and man. It was a sacrificial system that always fell short.

But in Jesus we have the fulfillment, once and for all! Jesus went to the cross, sacrificed his own life for the death that we deserved and thereby took the penalty for our sin upon himself. A little further ahead in Hebrews it tell us that Jesus,

*Unlike the other high priests, Jesus does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered Himself.*

Hebrews 7:27

Jesus was not only the highest priest, but He himself was also the sacrifice. And because His sacrifice was pure, He made the propitiation for all mankind's sins, something that all the Old Testament sacrifices together could not do. While all of Jesus' roles are important, "the purification for sins" is the one most needed for us. And then it says in Hebrews 1:3, "He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high." That "he sat down," is significant. In the Old Testament sacrificial system there was no place for the priest to sit down.

The priest had no place to sit because God knew it would never be appropriate for him to sit. In the Old Testament the priest's responsibility was to sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice, over and over again. So the priests offered sacrifices daily – and never sat down. But Jesus offered one sacrifice, Himself, and said, "it is finished!" He then went and sat down with the Father. It was done. What could not be accomplished under the Old Covenant, even after centuries of sacrifices, was accomplished once by Jesus Christ for all time.

There are four very significant points in Jesus sitting down at the Father's right hand:

1. It is a sign of honor.

To sit at the right hand side of the King was the highest place of honor. When Jesus' disciples, James & John, were arguing about which side of Jesus they were going to sit on, while the left wouldn't have been bad, the right would have been best. Jesus said, "it's not for you to decide, that's up to the Father." To be seated at the right hand of the Father is the highest honor.

2. He sat down as a sign of authority.

*"He is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. 1 Peter 3:22*

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."* Matthew 28:18

3. He sat down to rest.

Why is that important? Because it signifies that His work was done.

*But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.* Hebrews 10:12

4. He sat down to intercede for us.

*Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.* Romans 8:34

He is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for all who belong to Him. While Mennonites have traditionally believed in “the priesthood of all believers,” with a small p, there really is only one High Priest with a capital P. In the New Covenant we do not have to go through priests to offer our sacrifices and our intercessions, we can go directly to the one who was the sacrifice and sits at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us. We have the direct line.

If you haven't picked up on it already, the writer of Hebrews talks a lot about angels in his letter. At the time the Jewish people had a very high view of angels. There was God, there were the angels just a little bit below God, and then there were human beings, down here. According to the biblical record God has always used angels to help Him carry out his purposes, in heaven and here on earth. They were instrumental in helping Him communicate His commandments and Law to the Israelites. Some were selected to deliver very special messages for God – like the angel Gabriel. Other angels have fallen. Angels are created beings whom God uses to help him carry out his mission in different places and at different times, but it is possible that we can put angels too high and that is what many of the Jewish people had done during that time. The writer of the letter is addressing that in chapter two, verses five and following.

*<sup>5</sup> For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. <sup>6</sup> It has been testified somewhere, “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? <sup>7</sup> You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, <sup>8</sup> putting everything in subjection under his feet.” Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.*

It is very important for us to try and distinguish just exactly who the writer here is talking about and when. In the very beginning here he is not talking about Jesus as the “Son of God”, with a capital S, that who the writer of Psalm 2, was talking about in our Call to Worship, this morning. No he is talking about men and women, human beings, referred to as “the son of man,” with a small s. He is actually referring back to Psalm 8:

*LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. <sup>2</sup> Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. <sup>3</sup> When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, <sup>4</sup> what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? <sup>5</sup> You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. <sup>6</sup> You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, <sup>8</sup> the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. <sup>9</sup> LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Psalm 8 (NIV)

The normal meaning of “son of man” in Hebrew is nothing other than man (and woman). In the original Hebrew it is said that man is made a little lower than God. So Psalm 8 then sings of the glory of man, who was made a little less than divine, and whom God meant to have dominion over everything in the world. Dominion not in a bad, overpowering way, but in a caring and good stewardship way.

But, the writer of Hebrews goes on to point out the fact that is not what has occurred. Man was meant to have dominion over, to be good stewards of everything that God has given us on earth, but for the most part it hasn't happened. We humans are frustrated by our circumstances, defeated by our temptations and sin, over powered and overruled by other human beings. We were meant to be free but have ended up being slaves to sin. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian writer, C.K. Chesterton is attributed with the quote, "whatever else is or is not true, this one thing is certain – man is not what he was meant to be." Do I get an Amen?

Then the writer of this letter to the Hebrews goes on switching from the "son of man," with a small s, to the "Son of God," with a big S. No, not Superman, but someone even better than Superman. Into the human situation came Jesus Christ. He suffered and He died, and because He suffered and died, He entered into glory. And that suffering and death and glory was for are all mankind, because Jesus Christ died to make men and women what we ought to be. Jesus Christ died to rid us of our frustration, our bondage, our slavery to sin and to give us the dominion we were supposed to have in the manner we were supposed to have it, when we were originally created.

As William Barclay wrote in his commentary on "The Letter to the Hebrews" regarding these verses in Hebrews 2:5ff

"In this passage there are three basic ideas: 1) God created man, only a little less than Himself, to have mastery over all things; 2) Man through his sin entered into frustration and defeat instead of mastery and dominion; and 3) into this state of frustration and defeat came Jesus Christ, in order that by His life and death and glory, He might make man what man was meant to be."

That's really what this Letter to the Hebrews is all about. The writer of Hebrews sees in Jesus Christ the One, who, by His sufferings and His death and His glory, can make us what we were meant to be, and, without Him, could and can never be. In that way, there is really no better book of the Bible to look at during the Lenten and Easter season, other than perhaps the gospels.