

Jesus is Better:

The Better Messenger (Hebrews 1:1-2:4)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 3, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ We've entered into a season in the Christian calendar called Advent, which is all about the arrival of Christ. That's what *advent* means. It means 'arrival' or 'coming'. When we celebrate Advent, we're **thinking back to the first arrival** of Christ where he drew near to us, became like us, and bore our sins to the cross. And at the same time, we're also **looking forward to the second arrival** of Christ where he appears not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Heb. 9:28).

- ❖ This year we're going to celebrate Advent and prepare our hearts for Christmas by listening to God from the book of Hebrews. We're obviously not going to cover the whole book since Advent only spans four Sundays. **Instead we're going to focus on the main theme of the book, which can be summed up in the word: Better.**
 - The author of Hebrews is introducing to his readers something better. Better than they hoped for. Better than they expected. Better than they even thought possible. It's a word that he uses constantly throughout the letter. I counted up to thirteen instances of this Greek word, which is sometimes translated 'superior' but more often 'better'.
 - So in v4 he describes Jesus as superior to (or better than) the angels. We'll look into that today. But if you keep reading, you come across promises of "better things" (6:9), a "better hope" (7:19), a "better covenant enacted on better promises" (7:22; 8:6), "better sacrifices" (9:23), a "better possession" (10:34), a "better country" (11:16), a "better [resurrection] life" (11:35), and "blood that speaks a better word" (12:24).

- ❖ **All this talk about something better (cf. 11:40) boils down to the fundamental belief that Jesus is better.** That the very person of Christ and his finished work on the cross is better than anything that has come before and anything that will follow.
 - Jesus is better. That's what we're calling this Advent series. And this morning in our text, in Hebrews 1:1 to 2:4, **I want to show you how Jesus and his message is so much better than any other messenger or any other message that has come before or after.** The Gospel of Christ is so much better. That's why we can't neglect it. We can't ignore it. We have to pay much closer attention to it.
 - That's what the author of Hebrews feels compelled to say in chapter 2:1. After arguing for the superiority of Christ over the prophets and angels – through whom God gave us the OT Law – he goes on to say, "*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*"

- ❖ **The author was writing to Christians that he believed were in danger of drifting away from Christ and his message.** Many think he was writing to Jewish believers who were being persecuted for their newfound Christian faith. In many of the major Roman cities, there were laws in place giving religious freedom to Jews, but that wasn't extended to this new sect called Christianity. So there was growing pressure to revert back to Judaism and rejoin the Jewish community. **There was every incentive to neglect the Gospel, to drift away from the Son, and to go back into a religion that was safe and culturally accepted.**

- ❖ This is why the author is so intent on proving that Jesus and the Gospel that he brings is so much better than whatever you received from the angels, whatever you got from Moses, whatever was mediated by the priests, in the temple, with all the sacrifices. Jesus is better. **Why would you revert to the inferior when you've received that which is superior?**
- ❖ Church, the same can be asked of us. **We've be given the greatest gift in all the world, and yet it's so easy to neglect it.** To take it for granted. To give all our attention to more trivial things. Consider this Christmas season. Why would we revert all our time and attention to the busyness of holiday shopping, holiday traveling, and holiday feasting?
 - Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting those things are bad in and of themselves. **But we do give an inordinate amount of attention to pursuits that pale in comparison to the Son of God and his Gospel, which is what this season is all about.** That's why I think the exhortation in Hebrews 2:1 equally applies to us. We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.
 - And that's what I want to help you do this morning. I want to direct your attention to three *bettors*. Whether or not you're convinced there is a God and that Jesus is the Son of God, I hope to demonstrate that the God revealed to us in Scripture is better than you imagined. He surpasses expectations. We're going to consider the better God, the better messenger, and the better message.

No Better God

- ❖ I want to begin by demonstrating that **there is no better God than the God of the Bible.** I think we often take God for granted and don't realize how good we have it – how good it is to have a God like the God of Scripture.
 - Look with me at v1, "*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke.*" Now let's just stop right there. Let's not move past that too quickly. **The God of the Bible is a God who speaks.** That's amazing. Do you realize how good that is?
- ❖ Now not everyone will agree. **In fact I'd argue that most people would be afraid of a speaking God.** Most people would much rather have a mute god, a god made of wood or stone. A while back I traveled abroad and visited some Eastern temples filled with frightening statues in the form of dragons or ghoulish beings. I was taken aback and surprised to see so many worshippers prostrating themselves before these scary-looking images. What's the appeal? Aren't they frightened? I didn't get it.
 - But now I realize that a speaking God actually scares people more. **A silent god is much more appealing even if it's a creepy-looking god.** Because the creepy god of stone can't talk back. A God who speaks is a God who could challenge you, correct you, command you. He could disagree with your values. He could take issue with your life choices.
 - A statue, on the other hand, might be creepy but at least it won't talk back. At least it won't say anything to upset you. It won't judge you. It'll remain perfectly silent. Just the way you like it. A silent god is much more appealing.

- ❖ Now I realize most of our non-Christian friends and colleagues aren't bowing down to statues. **But I do think a subconscious fear of a speaking God still haunts them and likely explains their resistance to embrace Christianity.**
 - Among the non-believers we know, most fall under one of two categories. They're either secularists or spiritualists. The **secularist** is the one who says there is no God, or if there is, he's unknowable. You can prove scientific facts and natural laws. But you can't prove that God exists or that there are moral absolutes defining what's ultimately right or wrong. That's the worldview of the secularist.
 - Then you've got the **spiritualist**. He's the one who's not searching for God out there but in here. The spiritualist would argue that, in a sense, we're all gods. That is, we're all capable of forming our own absolutes, our own standards of right and wrong.

- ❖ So one view says, "There is no God". The other says, "God is in you". Those are very different conceptions, but both, in the end, are the same. **Because both are saying that when you get up in the morning you have nobody to obey.** There's no one speaking to you, telling you what to do with your life. You determine that for yourself. That's the modern-day equivalent of bowing down to a god of stone who remains perfectly silent.

- ❖ **And so the challenge is to help people understand that even though a silent god sounds appealing, deep down you won't be satisfied.** It's not what you really want. Rejecting all absolutes. Throwing off all authority. That's not how you were made. You were created in the image of God, to live under his loving authority, to listen to and obey his good Word. That's what you were made for.
 - The alternative is not that attractive in the end. **Just put yourself in the shoes of Israel's pagan neighbors.** These nations only had silent gods of wood and stone to turn to. You think they were satisfied? No, they were jealous of Israel. Israel had a God who actually speaks to his people. Who clearly reveals his will in writing. He tells you what would please him and what would grieve him. And if you do grieve him through disobedience, he tells you exactly how to be forgiven and restored.
 - They would've loved that kind of clarity. No one wants to live in the dark. **No one wants to make things up as you go, guessing and groping, wondering and worrying if maybe I pleased God today or maybe I upset him.** I don't know. That's an untenable position. Something is going to give. That's why so many eventually conclude that there is no God (or you yourself are god), and they start coming up with their own version of right and wrong.

- ❖ **The point I'm trying to make is that you're selling yourself short if your god is not a speaking God like the God of the Bible.** There is no better God. I understand a speaking God can be scary. But I don't think it's just because he speaks. I think it's because, deep down, we don't trust this God. **We're not sure if he's good, and if what he speaks is good for us.** We question the goodness and mercy of his commands, of the moral absolutes which he intends to hold us to.

No Better Messenger

- ❖ So we've got to press further and dig deeper into our text to learn more about this God. And we're told in v2 that to do now that we've got to listen to his Son. His Son is presented to us as a better messenger than the prophets and angels that God spoke through in OT times. This is our second 'better' – **there is no better messenger in revealing God than his own Son.**
 - Let's read vv1-2, "¹Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." When the author says "*long ago*" he's referring to the entire span of OT history. Before Christ, God spoke primarily through human and angelic messengers. The human ones were called prophets. They had the responsibility of speaking for God to his people.

- ❖ And then there were angels. They also functioned as messengers from God to God's people. The obvious examples are found in the Christmas story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary (Lk. 1:26-27) or the angels speaking to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem (Lk. 2:8-9).
 - **But in our text, the emphasis on angelic messengers centers on the message of the Law that they delivered.** We're told in Acts 7:38 that an angel was on Mt. Sinai delivering the Law to Moses (7:53). So later on when Hebrews 2:2 refers to a message declared by angels that proved to be reliable, we're talking about the Law.
 - The entirety of the OT is often described simply as the Law and the Prophets (cf. Mt. 5:17, 11:13, 22:40). So the point being made is that God spoke the entire OT through these messengers – through prophets and angels. But *now* he's doing something different.

- ❖ Look back at v2. God's doing something different in "*in these last days*". **Now that's not referring narrowly to the end times, to the days right before Jesus's return.** It's referring to an indefinite age that began with the coming of Christ, extends into our day, and will one day culminate in the Second Advent and the start of a new age, of a New Heaven and Earth. So I wouldn't disagree with any doomsday preacher who says we're living in the last days. I would just add that Christians have always been living in the last days.
 - **So if we're still in the last days, then v2 implies that God is still speaking to us now through his Son.** That means there are no other messengers to turn to. There's no one else coming after Jesus. He's the final messenger. He has the final Word.
 - This is why the author is surprised that his audience – Christians from a Jewish background – would be tempted to drift away from the Gospel and revert back to Judaism and the OT Law. **If you *now* have a superior message from a superior messenger, why would you return to something inferior?**

- ❖ So let's consider some ways the Son of God is superior to the prophets and angels. Just think. If you wanted to know God, to know his heart, to know his will – but you couldn't speak to him yourself – **then who better to speak for God, than his only Begotten Son, than his heir?** In v2 it says the Son is the one "*whom [God] appointed the heir of all things.*"

- ❖ Imagine if you were back in the Victorian era, you visit Downton Abbey, and you call upon the master of the house. If he's not home, who would you prefer to speak to? If you had a request, who would know his will the best? Who would have the authority to speak on his behalf? Would you prefer one of the servants? A valet? A butler? A maid? Or would you prefer to speak to the master's eldest son, to the heir apparent?
 - If you notice in v7, angels are described as God's ministers or servants. They're like butlers. But in vv5-6 it says Jesus is God's begotten Son, his firstborn, his heir. **So if you want to know God, you want to know his heart, to know his will, then you have a far better messenger in the Son than in anyone else, human or angelic.**

- ❖ Now I realize this emphasis on Jesus being the Son (the heir) of God could lead to dangerous, damnable error if we're not careful. If you imagine them as two separate beings. That's why, if you go back to v2, **the author is quick to affirm the Son's oneness with God as Creator.** "*Through whom also he created the world.*" The Son was with the Father in the beginning. When God spoke, the Word created.
 - **If you read on in v3, it says the Son is the radiance of God's glory.** That again stresses their oneness. The Son radiates the glory of God like sunbeams radiate the glory of the sun. Do you realize when you look at a sunset, you're not actually seeing the sun. What you see are sunbeams that have radiated from the sun, traveling at the speed of light. I read that it takes 8 minutes and 31 seconds for those beam to travel to earth. So you're not actually looking at the sun but at sunbeams that left the sun 8 minutes and 31 seconds ago. The sunbeam and the sun are distinct but not different. And if it were not for the sunbeam, you'd never be able to see the sun.
 - In the same way, the Son is the radiance of the Father. When you look to God, you don't see the Father but you see the Son, sent from the Father to show us the Father. The Son radiates God.

- ❖ If you keep reading v3, it continues to emphasize their unity. **It says the Son is the exact imprint of God's nature.** The imagery is of a stamp embossing its image, an exact imprint, onto a coin. So the image on the coin is a perfect picture of the image on the stamp. The point is to say that everything in God is found in the Son. There's no difference, no deficiency.
 - **V3 goes on to say that the Son is the powerful upholder of everything.** He upholds the universe by the word of his power. But he's not like the mighty Atlas holding up the universe like dead weight. The word "*uphold*" conveys a sense of carrying something along. So the Son of God is carrying us along towards a goal.

- ❖ And that goal is hinted at in the end of v3. "*After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*" The Son of God had a goal. **He had a reason to be born. How many of us can say we had a reason to be born?** That we had a goal in mind? No, birth happened to us. We had no say in it. We had no purpose.
 - But Jesus came for sins. To make purification for sins. Our sins! It says later on in chapter 9:26 that Jesus "*appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*"

- ❖ Friends, all the brokenness you experience, all the pain you suffer, all the guilt and shame you feel, is a result of sin in this world and sin in each of our hearts. **Sin, at its root, is the rejection of God's good rule, a throwing off of his loving authority.** Sin is closing your ears to a speaking God, treating him like he's silent, and living as your own authority.
 - Such an attitude drives a wedge in our relationship with God. For our sins, we are put away from his holy Presence. **But for our salvation, Jesus appeared in his first Advent to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself** – by the putting away of his own glory, his own honor, his own comfort and safety.

- ❖ **This is why you can trust the speaking God of the Bible to be a good God.** That what he speaks is good and for your good. Yes, he speaks a word of judgment against your sins, but he also speaks a word of mercy and pardon, promising to put away your sins if you put yourself in his hands. If you trust the Son, he'll bring you back to his Father.
 - For this, for what he accomplished, Jesus has inherited a name more excellent than the angels (v4). A name above every name. He was highly exalted. Seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. His enemies have become a footstool for his feet (v13).

- ❖ We're reminded in v13 that no angel – not even the highest archangel – is seated at God's right hand. That honor is reserved for the Son of God alone. According to v6, it says *“Let all God's angels worship him.”* **The job of the angel is to be a worshipper. But the job of the Son is to receive worship.**
 - According to vv7-9, the job of the angel is to minister (serve) in the royal court of God. But the job of the Son is to rule sitting on the throne forever holding the scepter of uprightness. According v14, the job of the angel is to minister to the saved. But the job of the Son is to be the Savior himself.
 - If the Son is superior in every way, on every level, compared to the angels of God and the prophets of old, then you've got to pay much closer attention to what he has to say, to the message he has to bring.

No Better Message

- ❖ That's the transition to Hebrews chapter 2 and to our final point. **If there is no better messenger than the Son of God, then there is no better message to heed and obey than the one he brings.** Trace this argument with me. Hebrews 1 argues for the superiority of the Son (who speaks the message of the Gospel) over the prophets and angels (who speak the message of the Law). And now *“Therefore”*, in Hebrews 2:1, *“we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard from the Son, lest we drift away from it.”*

- ❖ I don't think many of us are in danger of outright rejecting the Gospel, denying its truthfulness, or abandoning the faith. **But I do believe many of us are in danger of slowly, subtly, unconsciously drifting away from the Gospel.**
 - That's when we take it for granted. We assume we already learned it. We heard it and believed it when we got saved. So we want to move on to advanced Christianity.

- ❖ It's tempting for Christians, especially those who grew up in Christian homes and churches, to tune out when preachers get to the part in the sermon about Jesus taking on our flesh, dying for our sins, rising again to give us hope of eternal life. Or they groan at yet another Advent series or Easter series. Why do we keep going back to the basics all the time?
 - But that's the problem. **We assume the Gospel message is just the basics.** It's just for lost people. For seekers to learn. But here the author is talking to Christians. Telling them to pay much closer attention to the Gospel you already know and believe. **That word for "pay attention" can even carry the connotation of being obsessed or addicted.** The word is found in 1 Timothy 3:8 where it says that deacons must not be *addicted* to much wine. They must not *pay attention* to much wine.
 - So what's your attitude towards the Gospel? Are you addicted to it? Are you obsessed with it? Are you giving it much attention at all? Or have you taken it for granted? Did you already move on?

- ❖ **Christian, you will never graduate from the Gospel.** Every time you go digging into this message of God's grace centered on the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, I promise you you'll find more gems. You'll never exhaust the Gospel. I've heard it said that the Gospel message is shallow enough for a child to wade in and yet deep enough to drown an elephant. So don't ever stop preaching and applying the Gospel to your heart.

- ❖ Look back at chapter 2:2-3, "*For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*" **Notice that the author of Hebrews is not trying to pit the Gospel against the Law – the message of the Son against the message of angels.** No, he affirms that the Law declared by angels proved to be true and reliable. If you disobeyed the law, there was just retribution. There were consequences. God never reneged his Law. He never relaxed his Law. It was reliable.

- ❖ So his point is this: **If neglect of the Law reliably resulted in punishment, then how much more the Gospel?** How much worse would it be if you neglect the superior message of the superior Son? And why would that be the case?
 - Because Jesus is not just another in a long line of messengers. He's the one all the other messengers were speaking about. Jesus *is* the message. The last message. The final word. **So if you neglect him, there's no one coming after to offer you another option.** To offer another way of salvation.

- ❖ The problem is when you see Jesus as merely offering one way to God. And you try to compare his way versus other ways. But the point of our passage – the point of Christmas – is that Jesus *is* God. **The Gospel message is not about telling you how to find God. The Gospel is saying that God has come to find you in the person of Christ.**
 - Have you been found by God? Have you been saved by his Son? If you're not sure, then listen carefully. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts but open them and receive his grace. Don't neglect his great salvation but receive it by faith.