

Greater Than Angels

Hebrews

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Bible Text: Hebrews 1:4-9; Psalm 110
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Turn in our Bibles to Hebrews, that's page 1,001 in the church Bible. Hebrews 1. We're really picking up at verse 5, but let me read the first few verses so as you get the background.

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 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. 3 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, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

So as we have been seeing in the last few weeks as we've been beginning our study of the book of Hebrews, the writer of this book wants us to understand very clearly who it is that we're thinking about whenever we think of the name Son of God. And that's a good thing in terms of preparing our minds for this Christmas period. We're so familiar with the earthly elements of Jesus Christ that sometimes we never reflect on who he is as the Son of God. We're very familiar with his humiliation, with his self-humbling, with his being born of a woman, his being reared as a baby and a boy and then a young man. We're familiar enough with his public life and ministry, the relationships he had, the seriousness with which the Bible takes his humanity, and we'll arrive at that in due time once we get into chapter 2. But before we get to the humanity of Christ, the writer wants us to begin where the Bible begins and that is by establishing the identity of the Son of God within the nature and being of the God of Israel himself and that's what he's going to be doing in these chapters before us, and they got this idea not themselves, they got this idea from the Lord Jesus himself.

Let me illustrate this from two incidents that are recorded in the Gospels. The first is recorded in John's Gospel. On one occasion we read in chapter 5 of John's Gospel, the enemies of Jesus knew exactly what it was that he was claiming. This is what we read, we read that the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him. They wanted to do that not only because he was breaking the Sabbath, but particularly because he was "even calling God his own Father, thus making himself equal with God." And throughout John's Gospel, that is how the people of Jesus' day understood his use of this language, the Son of God. In fact, in John 1:18 we're told that the Son is the only begotten God in the bosom of the Father. John says we have seen his glory. In other words, the glory of the Son is the glory of God. It is not a lesser glory or a diminished glory or a subservient glory. It is not that the Father has more glory than the Son has, as you will read in some Christian literature today, but that the glory of the Son is the glory of God. In fact, the Lord Jesus speaks about this in John 17 when he talks about the glory that he had with the Father and he prays that the Father would be glorified and the Son would be glorified because where the Son is glorified, the Father is glorified too. In fact, later on in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. I am in the Father and the Father is in me." To see God is to see the Son. To know the Father is to know the Son. To know the Son is to know the Father. And if that isn't clear enough, in John 10:30, Jesus makes it absolutely explicit, "I and the Father are one."

And it was that claim and these references that led the early church to recognize that Jesus' teaching involves both the unity of the Godhead, there is only one God, and the distinction within the Godhead, you can distinguish between the Father and the Son. Together they are one God but only one is Father and only one is Son. And it was those words in John 10 that prompted an immediate reaction from the people. The Jews picked up stones again to stone him, we're told, and when he asked them why they were going to stone him, they replied, "For blasphemy because you being a man make yourself God." In other words, they understood that for Jesus to say he was the Son of God meant that he had the very nature of God which meant that he was God.

And that's one incident in John's Gospel, then you have Matthew, Mark and Luke and each of them records a confrontation with the Pharisees, another confrontation in which Jesus asks them a question. He says this, "What do you think about the Christ, the Messiah? Whose Son do you think he is?" And they said to him, "He is the son of David." And Jesus said to them, "How is it then that David in the spirit calls him Lord," and Jesus quotes from Psalm 110, "The LORD said to my Lord." Here is David recording a conversation that the Holy Spirit has scripted and given to him. "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" Jesus quotes that and then says to them, "If David then calls him Lord, how can he be David's son?"

Now, in doing that, what Jesus was doing is specifically critiquing their view that David might be speaking about himself or any other Davidic king that would be in the Davidic line and Jesus is telling us that David as he's writing is speaking as a man by means of the Holy Spirit. That's what he says. David in the spirit or by means of the Holy Spirit calls him Lord saying, "The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand." David, in other

words, was under the influence of the Holy Spirit like a man carried along by the tide of the Holy Spirit and he was speaking by the Spirit God's words in that setting.

Now, this has led people, of course, in their understanding of prophetic speech in the Old Testament to recognize a distinction between the prophetic setting of a text and, if you will, the divine context of a text. So the prophetic setting of a text is David is speaking or writing at a particular point in history. He was a live and well and he was in a lyrical mood and the Holy Spirit had overtaken him and he's speaking words by the Spirit at a particular day. He could have told you it was before dinner on such-and-such a day of such-and-such a month in such-and-such a year. It happened to David at a particular point of time, about 1,000 years before Christ.

But the events that are captured in David's words could very well take place in God's time which is no time, outside of time, in another realm altogether, and the early Christians, including the writer to the Hebrews, including the Lord Jesus and his use of Psalm 110, noticed that throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Psalms but elsewhere as well, there are a series of conversations embedded in which the Holy Spirit inspires a prophet to, as it were, take different personas in a conversation, a dramatic conversation that reflects something of the inner life of the Godhead itself. Sometimes he speaks in the persona of the Father or in the persona of the Son or sometimes even in the persona of the Holy Spirit about events and conversations that took place in eternity past, if we can call it that.

Now, that's the background then to these quotations we're going to look at in a moment. The number seven, there are seven biblical quotations here. Seven denotes their completeness, their perfection, and therefore the perfection and all-sufficiency of the revelation that has been given in Scripture. And as we look at these, he is intending to justify his assertion in verse 4 that the Son is superior to the angels. The Son is superior to the angels.

Now, you'll notice that many of these quotations come from the book of Psalms and he reads them messianically, that is, he reads them as references directly to the Son of God. Now, in reading these Psalms, we need to kind of help ourselves a little bit here. There is among some modern scholars an assumption that texts in the Old Testament, for example, must always have meant something or meant something which the audience, the original audience or the speaker, the poet, the prophet or whatever, that made sense to those who were contemporaries of the people. So for example, Psalm 2 is often regarded as an enthronement Psalm. It was written for a royal coronation or words to that effect.

Now, I work on the assumption that they are wrong in making that assumption and my basis for thinking they're wrong in making that blanket assumption is simply that the Bible tells us otherwise. In 1 Peter 1, the Apostle Peter is reflecting on the way in which God used the Old Testament prophets. You can read it, 1 Peter 1:10-12. Don't look it up. It wastes my time and yours. You can listen to me read it to you. I do that pretty well. He is writing, Peter is writing about the salvation, "the prophets who prophesied about the salvation that you have experienced searched and inquired, carefully inquiring what

person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories." Now listen, "It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you." It was revealed to people like David that what they were writing about in some of their Psalms, what Isaiah was writing about in some chunks of his book, would not make sense to either him or his hearers at that time. They were not serving themselves, he says, "but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."

So we bear that in mind, that as we read some of these Psalms we are not to pretend for one minute that they were understood as they were intended to be understood by the Holy Spirit to the people in the times to which they were given. And yet we're told again and again if you look at the text again, we're told that these things, these Scriptures, were in fact God's speech. "To which of the angels did God ever say," or again in verse 6, "again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.' Of the angels he says, of the Son he says, 'This is God's speech to us.'"

So here's the big question this morning: the writer is intending to point out to us that the Son is superior to angels. Why angels? We don't have decorations in our Christmas tree because they are verboten. We would not be having an angel at the top of the tree because angels are not fairies. They don't look like fairies. They are different beings altogether. This writer assumes the reality and the role of angels in our experience.

The Bible talks a lot about angels. I wonder if you'd like to hazard a guess which part of the Bible, Old Testament or New Testament, speaks more about angels? I'd tell you to put up your hands but then you might think we're charismatics and then nobody would put their hand up anyway because we're Presbyterians. We are very much hands down people. But I wonder if you could guess? 108 times in the Old Testament there are references to angels. 165 times in the New Testament there are references to angels. I'm guessing you didn't expect that kind of balance of reference.

The angels, their primary calling is to serve and worship God. We're told that they were created before we were created, that they were spectators, created to be spectators, first of all, as God made the universe. They were the first of the creation. We're told that they excitedly sang about the handiwork of God in making everything that God made. Today there are many people who are fascinated with angels, they write books about angels. Most of the books are nonsense, of course, but nonetheless they are fascinated with them. In the ancient world, people worshiped angels. Many of the Jews regarded angels as intermediaries between God and humanity and they do appear very often in the Bible as those who have been sent as messengers of God, commanded with a message to communicate it to people. Sometimes they turn up at unexpected times, for example, with Abraham and to Jacob. They appeared to Daniel and, of course, they appeared to Joseph and Mary in the New Testament.

Angels are very significant in the unfolding plan and purpose of the Bible. They are spirit beings. They are not like us. They have a heavenly form that when someone sees that

heavenly form, their breath is taken away, they are forced to worship and sometimes they are downright terrified at the sight of angels. Occasionally in Scripture, angels appear in a human form in order to communicate with people. Apparently angels are intersecting our lives more than we realize, so much so that by the end of Hebrews in chapter 13, verse 2, we are encouraged to look out for strangers since we may be entertaining angels without knowing it. Angels are active all over God's universe all the time and we know some of these angels by name. We know the name of Michael and of Gabriel and of Lucifer. Lucifer, who was one of the great archangels of God who fell into sin and took with him a third of the angelic host in his fall before the world was made. Well, the Jews believed it was angels that God used as intermediaries to give Israel the law at Mount Sinai.

So angels are very important but they're also very important at another level, you see, because angels are the measure of ontological status in the Bible. Let me tell you what that means. Ontology has to do with being so angels are quite pivotal in the Bible as a kind of measure by which you gauge what is important and less important in terms of the universe or the created order. Richard Baucham, Professor Baucham, puts it like this: to be above the angels is to be God. To be below the angels is to be human. That's the basic cosmology of the Bible. The angels are in between and God is above and humans are below.

So, you see, people began to ask the question: could it be that the Christ was merely one of the angelic host and was one of these intermediaries that God used and then elevated to kind of deified status? People came up with that idea.

Over this Christmas period, we're going to be singing a lot of songs and hymns that were written by a man called Isaac Watts. Isaac Watts wrote most of his hymns when he was a young guy, kind of freckly teenager, and then finished round about 20-22 writing the hymns that we use today. But Isaac Watts had a strange view of God. He did not believe in the Trinity. He believed that the Archangel Michael was the one that God used as the Christ, and that God filled Michael and then Michael the Archangel became the Christ and that the Archangel Michael was the first among all the princes of heaven, that is, all the archangels of heaven. He was the first. And you can see a trace of this, for example, in one of our well-loved hymns, it says, "When I survey the wondrous cross," and his original words, "where the young Prince of glory died." He was thinking of Christ as being one of the Princes of glory who died in our place, the very orthodox view of salvation and the very unorthodox view of God. Later on he believed that the eternal soul of Jesus, his human soul was eternal and that God raised Jesus up to God's status after the resurrection.

But here in Hebrews 1, the author is stating absolutely and unambiguously that Jesus in this great ontological scale is above the angels. He is in the God side of the equation by nature and by eternity and that's important because in the next chapter, he is going to be talking about what happened at Bethlehem, what happened at the Incarnation. What happened in the Incarnation is that the eternal Son of God who is on the God side of the angels, made himself a little lower than the angels for a time in order that he might learn obedience by what he suffered, in order that he might suffer death, and in order that he

might make many of us children of God, as adopted children in the family of God. To understand the implications of the Incarnation, to understand what is really going on at Christmas, we have to first of all realize that he was rich beyond all telling; that he was God beyond our imagination; and that it was this one who came into the world for us and for our salvation as we confessed earlier on.

This is the point that he's making, then, in verse 5, "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'?" This explains why it is that when you look at the life of Jesus of Nazareth, he is so fond of the word "Abba, Father." He uses it all the time. That is the way he relates to God. And even though we are listening to him in his humanity, nonetheless we realize that in his humanity he has become conscious that his relationship to God is a relationship of a Son to the Father. Strengthened by the Holy Spirit, he's able to read the Scripture and come to that conclusion. He would have reflected, for example, on Psalms like Psalm 2 that have these words that are quoted here in verse 5, "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you." At his baptism, the Father chimes in as he's being baptized by John the Baptist as he's fulfilling all righteousness, as he's identifying with sinners in being baptized there by John in the desert. The Father breaks in on the event, you remember, and he actually quotes from Psalm 2, "You are my Son. You are my Son."

And this is the full quote, "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you." Notice there are two clauses there. The second defines the first. He is a Son in a natural, we might say, relationship with God. He is a Son because he's been begotten of God. Before all ages, he has been begotten of God. He has always been of the Father, sharing the nature of the Father. He has always been God of God, very God of very God; from all eternity, God. An eternity is an unchangeable thing, that's why many of the old commentators say that when you read the word "today," we're listening to the word "today" from God's perspective in which "today" means "the present; the constantly present; the unchangeable eternal present." All the time. He is always the one of whom God says, "Today I have begotten you." He is eternally begotten of the Father. To this very day, God can say of the Son, "My Son, today I have begotten you. You are the perfect fruition of my life and my being and my essence and my substance as God. You are the perfect effulgence and outpouring of my being." It was pleased for the Father that all the fullness of deity should dwell in the Son. That's what these early Christians recognized when they read Psalm 2. Here is David reporting the Son's own testimony. "The Lord said to me. The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.'"

Now, this verse then applies, first of all then, the way it's used here, to the very nature and identity of the Son of God. This verse is also quoted in Acts 13 where the Apostle Paul is making two propositions: the one is that what was promised to the fathers has been fulfilled for us, their children; and on the other hand, that God has acted by raising him from the dead. Then he provides two sets of Scriptures: one to support the former proposition, what God promised to the fathers was fulfilled for us; and then the other Scripture, evidence that God had promised the resurrection of the dead. The fulfillment of the promise is based on this verse. It is written in the second Psalm, "You are my Son." God raised him from the dead as a declaration of his Sonship. He was made Son of God

with power. God raised him from the dead to demonstrate to the universe that those words spoken to him in eternity past, "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you," were true. He is the only begotten Son of God. He is the Son of God with power. He is the Son of God from all eternity and with all the nature of God within him.

"Today," then, underlines permanence. Today, permanence. "I have begotten you," underlines perfection. "You are my perfect Son. From all eternity you have perfectly expressed my life, my essence, my being. His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity," Micah 5. "From the womb before the daystar, I have begotten you," says God in Psalm 109.

This is the background, then, to these words, "I will be to him a Father and he will be to me a Son." In the flow of this chapter, those words are spoken, they are used when Nathan the prophet is talking to the people of his day, but they refer not to Solomon and to no other human king on the throne of David, but they refer to the one who will come to occupy that role as the Messiah, the one to whom God will say, "Let all the angels of God worship him."

So here's my first point: the Son is superior to the angels. And secondly, the Son is worshiped by the angels. Look at verse 6, "again when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" Now, that word "firstborn" appears out of the blue there. What does he mean? Well, we already know what he means because way in the beginning of this chapter, "God has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed the heir of all things." In the ancient world, the firstborn son was the heir, the firstborn son inherited everything. The Son of God is described as the heir of all things. God has given him life, he has given him God-hood, he has given him everything. God the Father's great joy is to give everything to his Son.

Here we're told that when the firstborn is brought into the world, God says, "Let all the angels of God worship him." Those words come from Psalm 97. In Psalm 97, it's a Psalm about the Messiah, "The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice." He describes the glory of the Messiah, of the Son of God before he comes into the world, "Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before him. All worshipers of images are put to shame, worship him, all you gods!" And there the word "gods" in its context means the angels. In fact, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, adds that, "worship him all you angels."

That's what they're calling us to do and to be. By God's command, these creatures that are higher than humans spend their time worshiping the Son of God as God. John Bunyan put it like this, "If Jesus Christ be not God, then heaven will be filled with idolaters," because wherever you go in Scripture, when you go to Daniel the prophet, there the angels are worshiping the Son. You go to the book of Revelation and all over the place in the book of Revelation the angels are engaged in the worship of the Son. John tells us in Revelation 19, "After this I heard a loud voice of a great multitude saying, "Hallelujah!

Salvation and glory and power belong to our God." Once more they cried out, "Hallelujah!" And the 24 elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne saying, "Amen! Hallelujah! Praise our God! Hallelujah! The Lord God Almighty reigns! Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come!" It's all God in Christ who is receiving the praises and the glory of the angelic host.

And when the day comes, when the time comes, as the time will come when the kingdom of this world which is so engrossed in its rebellion against Almighty God, the kingdom of this world which all the time and increasingly is turning its back upon the people of God and the word of God, is suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, when the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, it is the angelic hosts, we read, who will lead the praises of heaven. In Revelation 11, the "angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.'" The angelic host worshiping and acknowledging Christ.

And when the last day comes, when Christ has brought the kingdom to his Father, when he has delivered up his own people safely out of the great tribulation and presented them to his heavenly Father, the highest beings in the universe will be the first to add their voices to the chorus. "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign." Hallelujah! It is the business of the angels to worship the Son.

Now, what lessons do we learn from this today? Well, I think simply these: that when we come to these kinds of Scriptures, we have to, in a sense, ask the Holy Spirit that he would renew our minds; that he would regenerate what was dead, regenerate our intelligence that we might think God's thoughts after him. That we must be very careful, I think of that man, Isaac Watts, that I mentioned. One of the problems was as he got older, as he went on in his life, he was more and more captivated by the rationalism of his day and the more captivated by the rationalism of the day he was, then the more his approach to God and his understanding of God was flattened out, lost its way. And the unitarianism that followed was partly due to Watts and others who had abandoned their grasp of God. And the salutatory lesson is that someone can say great things about God that we still love to hear and to use ourselves in our praises and yet themselves be lost to God. It's above my pay grade to be able to pronounce on Isaac Watts as a man in relation to his God but certainly in relation to what we know he believed about God, he was dishonoring the glory of the Son.

You see, it is not a small thing when someone says the glory of the Son is less than the glory of the Father. It is not a small thing when we take away anything from the Son of God. Heaven is watching. The Father is listening. The Father has given all the glory to the Son. The Son shares the Father's throne, which means he reigns with the Father as God with the Father. You can't separate them. "I am in the Father, the Father is in me." And when it says that all the angels of God worship him, the Father is saying, "I want

everything in heaven and earth and under the earth, I want everything everywhere to honor my Son the way I honor my Son."

I want to put Jesus Christ before you this morning as the one whom God the Father from all eternity has wanted us, wanted you to honor as Lord and as Savior and as God and as mighty and as beautiful and as gracious and as kind and longsuffering and tender and terrifying as the Judge. I commend him to you. Jesus Christ is Lord.

Let's pray together.

Father, as time moves toward Christmas, we pray that you would help us to get our heads around the fact that the one who came in utter humility that first Christmas is the one who from all eternity without any beginning has always been your only begotten Son, your Beloved. Father, we pray that as the Lord Jesus is beloved to you, that he would be beloved by us, that we would love him and want to serve him and would want other people to find him to be their Savior. We pray in his strong name. Amen.