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Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #1

Jesus is Better!

Hebrews 1:1-2a

Supposing, just for the sake of illustration, that you come across an envelope in which there is a lengthy letter. It doesn't belong to you but you are determined that it be delivered to its rightful destination. More than likely the first order of business would be to examine the front of the envelope to discover the individual or individuals to whom the letter is addressed. But to your dismay, there are no names there. To complicate matters, there is no address on the envelope. No city is mentioned, no state, no zip code, no country. You are left without a hint as to who might be the intended recipient of this letter.

Your next step would be to look at the upper left hand corner of the envelope, hoping to gain some measure of information from the return address. But again, there is no name telling you who wrote or even mailed the letter. There is no address indicating where the letter originated. Thus, not only are you left wondering *where* and *to whom* the letter is written, you don't even know *from where* and *by whom* it was written.

Desperate for some kind of information you look to the postmark, hoping that the date of the letter might provide at least an initial clue as to when it might have been composed. Alas, there is no postmark. Indeed, the only thing to be found on the front of the envelope is the stamp!

Your only hope now is to open the letter and pray that, like most letters, it will begin with a greeting along the lines of: "Dear Mr. Jones," or "To the Resident Citizens of Oklahoma City, OK," or perhaps even, "Dear Covenant Members of Bridgeway Church." But alas, there isn't even the anonymous, "To whom it may concern"! As a last resort you look to the end of the letter, expecting at minimum to find a concluding salutation such as, "Sincerely yours, Jim Smith," or "Thinking of You, Alice Jones," or something along those lines. Alas, to no avail!

So, without a clue concerning by whom, to whom, when, from where, or for what reason this letter was written you begin to read its contents, praying that the substance of the letter itself will provide some sort of answer, some indication of what it's all about.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Epistle to the Hebrews. By whom was it written? Uh, we don't know. Where was it written? We don't know. To whom was it written. Uh, again, we don't know. Where was it sent? We don't know. When was it written? We don't know. Why, then, for heaven's sake are we launching a study of this letter? That I know! Just like Romans or Isaiah or Philippians, this letter was breathed out by God, which is to say it is inspired, inerrant, and was therefore designed by God to exert its authority and influence over how we think and feel and believe and behave.

As grim as all that may sound, we are not entirely without a clue as to the author, destination, and nature of this book of the NT. There are actually two ways we can gain information about it: first, by looking closely at its contents, and second, by observing what others who lived somewhat close to the time of the letter have said about it. For example, the title, "The Epistle to the Hebrews" is not original. This was the title given to it by the early church over 100 years after the letter had first appeared. We can also find clues about who wrote it by looking closely at the style and vocabulary and subject matter within it.

I don't want to spend too much time on such matters, but let me give you what I believe are the most likely answers to those questions that I asked just a moment ago, to which I responded, "We don't know."

(1) Who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews? Most scholars agree that the riddle of authorship is incapable of solution. Some of the names put forth as possibilities include **Barnabas** (Paul's missionary companion), **Luke** (who wrote the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts), and **Apollos** (this was Martin Luther's suggestion, one which many contemporary scholars have embraced).

Two intriguing but unlikely possibilities are **Priscilla** (the wife of Aquila) and **the apostle Paul**. Now, what I'm going to say next is a joke, so don't be offended by it and please don't send me e-mails. Perhaps Priscilla did write it. After all, in Hebrews 13:22 the author says, "I have written to you briefly" or "in few words." It's just like a woman to write 13 chapters in a letter and call it merely a "few words"! Seriously, though, we know with some degree of certainty that it was written by a man, because the word translated "to tell" in 11:32 is masculine in gender.

Why do I say that the Apostle Paul didn't write it? First, it is unlikely Paul would have said what we read in 2:3. Paul did not depend on anyone's testimony concerning Jesus, having received his revelation of the gospel from Christ personally. Second, there is the complete absence of any introductory greeting, something we find in all of Paul's other letters. Third, there is little if anything of those standard themes we find elsewhere in Paul such as justification by faith alone and union with Christ. And would a genuine Pauline letter persist in the time of the early church without due recognition as having come from his hand?

The bottom line is that we don't know who wrote it. Although I may on occasion slip and refer to "Paul" as its author, my aim is simply to refer to the person who composed the letter as **"the Author."**

(2) When was it written? Certainly no later than 96 a.d. when Clement of Rome alluded to it in his Epistle to the Corinthians. But more likely it was written **before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 a.d.** The author actually speaks of the ritual sacrifices of the Temple as still occurring (cf. 5:1-4; 7:26-28; 8:4-7, 13; 9:6-10, 25; 10:1ff.; 13:10-11). Had the Jerusalem Temple already been destroyed and its ritual ministry ended, the use of the past tense with regard to these sacrifices would be expected. Furthermore, let's not forget that one of the primary themes of Hebrews is the superiority of Jesus and the new covenant to all that has preceded during the time of the old covenant. If the Temple had been destroyed and the Levitical sacrificial system had come to an end, he would surely have pointed to this in order to reinforce his position. But he doesn't, suggesting strongly that the Temple still stood and that sacrifices were still being offered.

Many believe it was written to the church at Rome before 64 a.d., that is to say, before Nero began his murderous persecution of Christians, because we know from Hebrews 10:32-34 and 12:4 that these believers had not yet suffered death for their faith. The most we can say is that it is probable the letter was composed in the early 60's of the first century.

(3) To whom was the letter written? Some say the church in **Jerusalem** (but see Acts 7:59-60; 12:2; 26:10). Other say **Alexandria**, but the most likely candidate is the church in **Rome**. In Hebrews 13:24 we read, "Those who come from Italy send you greetings." This most likely refers to Italian believers living in the city where the letter was composed. Or it could be that the letter was written somewhere in Italy and is being sent elsewhere. But the probability is that it was addressed to the church at Rome.

(4) Where was it composed? We simply don't know.

(5) What is its purpose? We actually are on more solid ground here. Most believe it was written to Jewish men and women in the church at Rome who had professed faith in Jesus Christ. Soon after their profession of faith and identification with the church in Rome, they had suffered persecution and were subjected both to social indignities and economic pressures. Since Judaism enjoyed the protection of Roman law, some of them were tempted to turn back to their former ways and to revert into the religious life of the Old Covenant under Moses.

It may also be that they were under pressure from a religious group in Rome that undermined or questioned the uniqueness and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, perhaps arguing that angelic beings were superior to him. They also likely argued that the Old Covenant under Moses, together with its Levitical sacrifices and priesthood, were of abiding and eternal value and offered people more hope than did Jesus and his atoning death.

This explains a lot about this letter. ***It tells us that Hebrews is designed to establish the finality and superiority of Jesus Christ to everything that came before him and by doing so to call men and women to press forward in their relationship to Jesus and not to fall back or revert to the ways of the Old Covenant.***

This is why I have entitled this sermon series, **“Jesus is Better!”** The Greek word translated “better” or “more excellent” occurs 13x in the letter. Here is but a small sampling:

“having become as much superior to [or literally, ‘**better**’ than] the angels” (1:4a)

“Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of **better** things – things that belong to salvation” (6:9)

“(for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a **better** hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God” (7:19)

“This makes Jesus the guarantor of a **better** covenant” (7:22)

“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is **better**, since it is enacted on **better** promises” (8:6)

“Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with **better** sacrifices than these” (9:23)

“ . . . since you knew that you yourselves had a **better** possession and an abiding one” (10:34b)

“But as it is, they desire a **better** country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16a)

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a **better** life” (11:35b)

“since God provided something **better** for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (11:40)

“and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a **better** word than the blood of Abel” (12:24).

We see this theme present throughout Hebrews even when the word “better” itself does not appear, as the same point is simply made in different terms. Thus, Jesus is said to be (a) better than the OT prophets (1:1-3); (b) better than the angels (1:4-14); (c) better than Moses (chps. 3-4); (d) better than Joshua (chp. 4); (e) his priesthood is better than that of Aaron, the high priest of the Old Covenant (chps. 5-9); (f) the New Covenant, brought into existence by his blood sacrifice, is better than the Old Covenant or Old Testament; (g) he provides a better tabernacle (chp. 9); (h) a better hope (7:19); and finally, (h) his sacrifice is better than the sacrifices offered up in the Levitical system of former days.

By the way, in saying that Jesus is “better” than everything and everyone in the Old Covenant doesn’t mean those things in former days were bad. Everything God did and provided for Israel was very, very good. God never does anything bad! It simply means that these ideas and sacrifices feasts and rituals and promises in the Old Testament were *incomplete*; they were *preparatory*; they were *foreshadowings*, the substance of which is in Christ alone. ***They were all good. But Jesus is better!***

Let me illustrate. If you are a civil engineer or an architect and have been asked to construct a complex shopping center, you would likely first create a detailed model, a miniature replica, so to speak, of what you eventually intend to build on a life-sized scale. But once the shopping center is finished, you dismantle the model and set it aside, because ***that to which it pointed has now arrived***. Such is the argument of our author when it comes to how Jesus and the New Covenant are the fulfillment of all that the Old Covenant only typified and prefigured.

But why does it matter today? What difference does it make for us living in 2014 to know that Jesus is better than anyone or anything else? How will it help me live faithfully and successfully and with greater victory over sin and temptation? Oh, I'm so glad you asked!

When it comes down to the nitty gritty of life and all our daily challenges, there is only one thing that will sustain you in suffering and empower you to face temptation and fill you with the sort of joy and peace that satisfy the soul. There is only one thing that will equip you to make the hard choices and will captivate and fascinate your mind and supply you with a never-ending abundance of resources to meet your every need. And that one thing is the beauty and glory and majesty and superiority and all-satisfying splendor of Jesus Christ. Jesus is better than anything else this world offers you or anything else with which Satan may tempt you. And Hebrews is here to explain in glorious detail why that is true.

Let's turn now, for just a moment, to the portrayal of Jesus in vv. 1-2a.

When you begin to think about the ultimate meaning of existence you have a couple of questions to answer. **First, is there a God?** The options are limited. Either there is no god, or there are many gods, or everything is god, or there is one God. On the assumption you recognize and believe there is only one God, the second question that must be asked is: **Has he spoken?** Has he made himself known? Has he revealed himself, telling us who he is and what he is like and how we might come to know him and what it takes to be reconciled to him. And the answer we see here in Hebrews 1:1-2 is yes, there is only one God and he has spoken!

"Long ago," that is to say, during the time preceding the coming of Jesus, in what we know as the period of the Old Testament, God spoke in "many times," more literally, in "many parts," that is to say, in a piecemeal or fragmentary way. He also spoke in "many ways" or in diverse expressions, whether by an audible voice or in a dream or through natural phenomena. But "in these last days" he has spoken definitively and finally in and through the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, his Son.

His point is that as wonderful and instructive and multifaceted were the ways in which God spoke to Israel during the time of the Old Covenant, he has now spoken in even better terms, with even greater clarity, and with finality in and through the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. This is what we see in vv. 1-2a. In other words, one need no longer live in doubt about the character of God: Jesus is the perfect embodiment and expression of God's character. One need no longer wonder about God's will: Jesus is the perfect life lived in complete obedience to God's

will. Simply put, the “many times” and “many ways” and “many parts” by which God revealed himself in the Old Testament were like the numerous pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. But ***Jesus is the picture on the box!*** He brings together in himself, with perfect clarity and finality, all the various ways in which God once spoke through the prophets of old.

Just a quick note to point out that the phrase “in these last days” does not mean immediately prior to the second coming of Jesus. ***The NT consistently uses the words “last days” to refer to the entire period between Christ’s first coming and his second coming.*** The “last days” started with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, we’ve been in the “last days” ever since Jesus was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God in heaven. There will be, of course, “last days” of the “last days,” in the sense that this period of the “last days” will come to a close, but we have no way of knowing how close to the end we may be.

Here I simply want us to think about the idea that God has spoken to us preeminently and primarily and finally in and through Jesus Christ!

What I want you to get hold of here at the beginning of Hebrews is that ***the God of the Bible is a speaking God.*** The whole of Scripture, from the Garden of Eden to the New Heavens and New Earth, is a record of God speaking in human history to his people.

Of course, the principal way God speaks to us is through the written word of the Bible. This is the primary revelation of God's voice. This is the repository of his infallible and always authoritative will. The Holy Spirit enlightens and convicts and persuades us concerning its meaning and application to our lives. No alleged revelation, no purported voice, no insight or impression from God will *ever* conflict with the revelation of Scripture. If it does, it isn't God speaking.

But there are several other ways in which God has communicated with his people. For example, he spoke audibly on several occasions and, I believe, may still do so today (although quite rarely). Among those who heard the audible voice of God are Abraham (Genesis 22:1-2,10-12), Moses (Exodus 3:3-6), the nation Israel (Deuteronomy 5:22-24), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-10), Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-13), John the Baptist (at the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16-17), Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:5-6; cf. 2 Peter 1:17-18), the general public (John 12:27-30), Paul (Acts 9:3-7; 23:11), Peter (Acts 10:9-16), and John (Revelation 1:9-12).

God also speaks to us through angelic messengers, as he did to Joshua (Joshua 5:13-15), Samson's parents (Judges 13), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:6-13), Daniel (Daniel 9:20-27), Zacharias (Luke 1), Mary (Luke 1), Philip (Acts 8:26), Peter (Acts 5:19-20), and others (see esp. Hebrews 13:1). God also communicates through dreams (Genesis 20:3; 37; Daniel 2,4,7; Matthew 1,2; Acts 2,10) and visions (e.g., Numbers 12:6; Daniel 10:1-9; Acts 2:17; 9:10-12; 10:1-6; 10:9-16; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 22:17-18), and even through creation itself (Psalms 19, 104; Romans 1:18ff.).

Many of my friends would happily acknowledge that God spoke often and in a variety of ways *until the death of the last apostle*. But with the close of the biblical canon, God's voice has fallen silent. Whatever he needs to say, he has already said. Whatever we need to hear, we can find in the words of the inspired biblical text. If it can legitimately be said that God speaks today it is **only** in the sense that his voice is alive and fresh and always relevant in the words of Holy Scripture. Is that true?

What reason do we have to believe that God will continue to speak and communicate with us beyond what the Bible explicitly says, but never contrary to it? In other words, if God has spoken to us finally and definitively in and through Jesus Christ and the inspired writings that bear witness to him, what reason do we have to believe that his voice might yet still be heard today?

Many argue that this opening statement in Hebrews 1 rules out any possibility that God will speak directly and personally beyond the time that the canon of the NT was closed. In other words, once the last of the 27 books of the NT were composed, God ceased to speak through any means other than those 27 books, or through the 66 books of the OT and NT combined.

Is that what we are to understand from Hebrews 1:1? No. I do believe that we are being told that nothing God will ever reveal through other means will ever be in conflict with the full revelation of himself and his will in Jesus Christ. That is to say, God will never say anything through a spiritual gift or any other means that isn't perfectly consistent with what we know to be true of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The revelation of God in his Son is the final standard against which all subsequent revelation must be judged.

But the most important reason why I believe God, through the Holy Spirit, will continue to speak to us is because *the very books of the NT which bear witness to God's revelation in his Son tell me so!* You see, those called cessationists argue that the books of the NT are the final revelation of God to mankind. In one sense they are correct. *God will not give us any inspired and inerrant*

books or letters that are binding on the conscience of all Christians everywhere. There will be no new books of revelation that we must add to the canon, slipping them in behind Revelation or in between Ephesians and Philippians.

But they are wrong to say that God will never again speak or reveal anything beyond what is in those 66 books. Why? Because those 66 books tell us so! ***It is in the 27 books of the NT that God tells us to anticipate hearing his voice through spiritual gifts!*** Let me say this as clearly as I can. God has spoken finally and fully in and through Jesus Christ in the sense that everything we need to know about him and his will for our lives can be found in the 66 books of the biblical canon. But it is also in those 66 books that God says he will continue to speak through the revelatory gifts of the Holy Spirit such as prophecy, word of knowledge, and word of wisdom.

Conclusion

As we close, let's return momentarily to the theme that Jesus is better. There are countless strategies and methods promoted by people in the church to help you resist temptation and defeat sin in your life. Sadly, though, many of them are little more than "Just Say No" campaigns: grit your teeth, clench your fists, and shout at sin in a very loud and angry voice: "No!" That might work in the short run, but it will fail miserably over the long haul.

The only way to experience long-term and sustained victory over the pleasure that sin offers is by experiencing the superior pleasure that comes from knowing and loving and following after Jesus Christ. He is better! Merely declaring that "sin is bad!" won't do it. You must experience and enjoy "Christ as good!" The strength to live a good and godly life filled with joy and peace and purpose comes only when your heart drinks daily and deeply from the well of spiritual pleasures that are found only in Jesus. That is the appeal of the author of Hebrews: Jesus is better. Come to him. Listen to him. Rest in him. Trust in him. Enjoy him. Put your hope in him. He is better.