

HE WHOM ANGELS WORSHIP



Hebrews 1:5-14

Third Message

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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” On the first Easter Sunday two discouraged disciples were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, deep in conversation. A stranger drew alongside and asked “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They were surprised and replied, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” These two were trying to make sense of these recent events: the crucifixion of Jesus and breaking reports that very morning that his tomb was now empty. The stranger set them straight: “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” It could have been a long explanation: they had seven miles to walk. Yet the two did not recognize him.

When they reached their destination they invited the stranger in: “Stay with us.” So he went in to stay with them. At table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and was giving it to them. Only then did they recognize this stranger as Jesus, but at that moment of recognition he vanished. It was then that they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Immediately they hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others (Luke 24:13-35).

Their hearts burned when Jesus opened the Scriptures to them. He explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. These Scriptures were Israel’s Scriptures: Moses and the Prophets.

Seven weeks later, on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers in Jerusalem, Peter was empowered to preach his first sermon. He began, “this is that which was spoken by the prophet” (Acts 2:16 KJV). *This is that!* As he continued his sermon, under *this* he included the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, his exaltation to God’s right hand, and the gift from God through Jesus to them of the Holy Spirit. Death, resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Spirit. These four events constitute *this*. And *this*, Peter said, equals *that*: that which was spoken by the prophet Joel, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...” The transition from *that* to *this* marked the arrival of the last days. Peter was able to put the two together, the old and the new, the former word and the new word, what God said in the prophets and what he has now done in the Son. Peter could not have done this the day before. It required the gift of the Spirit to see that *this is that*.

The writer to the Hebrews does a similar thing in his opening chapter: *this is that*. In his magnificent opening sentence (1:1-4) he has introduced two major themes of his work. First, God has spoken: he spoke in the past to ancient Israel through the prophets, and now in these last days he has spoken definitively to us in the Son. Secondly, the Son has become superior to the angels and inherited a better name. He was exalted to this superior status and name at his ascension, when he sat down at God’s right hand on the Davidic throne, received the great name promised to David, and is now Lord.

The author now brings these two themes together, showing how the superior status of the Son to the angels is in fulfillment of that which God spoke of old; it is in fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. It is his own way of saying *this is that*, just like Peter. *That* is what God had spoken long ago to ancient Israel by the prophets. *This* is what God has spoken to us in the Son. They are connected as promise and fulfillment. As Augustine said, referring to the two testaments, the two halves of the Bible: “The new is in the old concealed, the old is in the new revealed.”

Our author shows how *that* is fulfilled in *this* using a string of seven quotations from Moses and the Prophets, the same sources as Jesus used on the Emmaus Road. By Moses is meant the first five books of Israel’s Scriptures: Genesis through Deuteronomy; what Jews call the Torah, what we call the Pentateuch. This is Israel’s birth narrative, as it were. One quotation is from Moses, from Deuteronomy. The Prophets is a more comprehensive term than we normally think. It includes the books about Israel’s history after the death of Moses, from the entrance into the land through until the exit from the land into exile. It includes the accounts about David and Solomon. One quotation is from that history, from 2 Samuel. The other five are from the psalms. David as psalmist was considered a prophet.

The seven quotations can be taken in three blocks, each beginning with a reference to the angels. Each block contrasts the angels and the Son, showing the superiority of the Son to the angels. The first group is the first three quotations, linked by “again and again.” The first two concern the Son, contrasted with the third concerning the angels. First, the two about the Son:

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

**“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father”?**

Or again,

**“I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son”? (Heb 1:5 NIV)**

The initial question is rhetorical, expecting the answer “none.” God has never said of the angels what he says of the Son.

The first quote is from Psalm 2:7, the second from 2 Samuel 7:14. I quoted both of these last week, because they lie behind God’s appointment of the Son as heir of all things (1:2). In 2 Samuel 7 God promised David a son who would be king, who would build God a house for his Name, and with whom God would enter into a Father-son relationship. This relationship was inaugurated at the coronation and enthronement of the king in Jerusalem. That is the “today” of the Psalm 2 quote. Today came for Solomon on the day of his enthronement as king. Today came for each of his dynastic successors at their enthronement. The line continued for many generations.

But after Judah went into exile there had been no king. For 600 years there had been no Davidic heir on the throne. The throne had

been unoccupied. There had been no “today.” Was the promise dead, along with Solomon and Hezekiah and Josiah, the kings that particularly aroused Israel’s hope? As our author connects what God spoke in the past and what he has spoken in his Son, he is confident that Today has now arrived. The Today towards which all the previous lesser todays pointed. The last days had arrived. At his ascension the Son sat down at God’s right hand as the true king, in fulfillment of these two texts.

He who had always been the Son from before creation, was now installed as Son in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. David’s true heir was on the throne. Of no angel did God ever say this!

What did God say concerning the angels?

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God’s angels worship him.” (1:6)

This third text is from Moses, from Deuteronomy 32:43. When said long ago, it called the angels to worship God. But the text now speaks into a new situation: “when God brings his firstborn into the world.” The firstborn is the Son, the heir. When did God bring him into the world? Was it at the incarnation? Or at the ascension? Or is it yet future, at the parousia, at Christ’s return? The Son did enter the world at the incarnation. But the word translated “world” here is not the usual word for earth or world: it is neither *gē* nor *kosmos*, but *oikoumenē*. Given the whole context, this is best understood as God’s realm where he installs the firstborn as heir. So this is yet another reference to the Son’s enthronement at God’s right hand, another reference to Today, when the Davidic covenant was fulfilled. What do Israel’s Scriptures say concerning this day, Today? “Let all God’s angels worship him.” This ancient text still speaks, but now with reference to the exalted Son.

The fundamental divide in the universe is between creator and creature, established in the very first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). On one side is God the Creator, eternal from before the beginning of time. On the other side is everything else, the Creation, which had a beginning. It is appropriate for creation to praise and worship its creator. As we read in our call to worship: “All your works praise you, LORD... Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever” (Ps 145:10, 21).

The eternal Son is on the side of the Creator. The angels are on the side of creation, though they are heavenly beings. The one whom they are now called to worship is the newly-exalted Son. The one who for a little while had been made lower than the angels but is now crowned with glory and honor (2:9). He is the eternal Son who had taken on humanity, and did not put off that humanity when he sat down at God’s side, having become as much superior to the angels as superior to them the name he has inherited (1:4). It is fitting for the angels to worship him.

Our Scripture reading (Rev 5:6-14) showed the Lamb standing at the center of the throne in heaven, receiving the praise, adoration, and worship of all the heavenly creatures: the four living creatures (the cherubim), the twenty-four elders, and an enormous multitude of angels:

**“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12)**

Then the choir grew even larger, encompassing every creature

everywhere, in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea. The entire creation sang:

**“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!” (Rev 5:13)**

Let all God’s angels worship him, the exalted and enthroned Son. The angels never worshiped human beings. God made human beings a little lower than the angels. But now the angels worship the risen Lord Jesus Christ. How much more should those who have laid hold of so great a salvation in Jesus worship him. And so, Christians worshiped God and they worshiped the risen Jesus. This was not something added later. It was something they did from the beginning, as soon as they realized what had happened in the enthronement of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. As soon as they started calling him Lord. It started with Jewish Christians; they worshiped Jesus while holding on to their firm conviction that there is only one God. As Gentiles were added to the church, they did so as well.

This was shocking for non-Christians. How can you worship one who has been crucified? One who has suffered the most shameful death possible, who has been publicly humiliated? One who has been rejected by all: by Jew and Roman alike? But the Scriptures are clear: the one who has been so scorned, rejected, humiliated, and utterly shamed, is the one whom God has crowned with glory and honor and seated at his right hand. He is therefore worthy of our worship. He is worthy of our worship despite the shame he endured. No, he is worthy because of the shame he endured in our place. He experienced death so that we might be set free, liberated to become sons and daughters also. He was shamed so that we might receive honor.

He is honored now at God’s right hand. The eternal Son has returned to the glory which he had with the Father from the beginning. And he took with him the humanity that he had put on to become like us. The risen Lord Jesus Christ has entered into the fullness of God’s glory.

That is the first block of texts. The enthroned Son is he whom angels worship, and whom we worship also.

Moving on to the second block of three texts (vv. 7-12), the first two contrast what God says of the angels (7) and what he says of the Son (8-9).

In speaking of the angels he says,

**“He makes his angels spirits,
and his servants flames of fire.” (1:7)**

This fourth quotation is from Psalm 104:4. This is a psalm of praise to God as creator, who uses what he has created. He sends winds and flames of fire, which can herald a theophany, a manifestation of God’s presence. Similarly he sends his angels; they are his servants or ministers, sent out to accomplish his purposes. But the Son is different: he remains seated on God’s throne, as shown in the fifth quotation, from Psalm 45:6-7.

But about the Son he says,

**“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your
companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy.” (1:8-9)**

Psalm 45 is a wedding psalm, celebrating the king. The psalmist uses exalted language, even addressing the king as God. This language was never realized in Solomon with all his flaws, nor in any subsequent king in Jerusalem. But it has been fulfilled in the eternal Son. He has been enthroned to an eternal rule. The God language that was hyperbolic when used of Solomon is not so of the Son. He is indeed God. It is fitting that this one be king, because he rules in righteousness and justice. This was the vision for the Davidic king, but a vision never fully realized. This king has been anointed with oil. He is the Messiah, the anointed one.

Again we see that the Son is far superior to the angels. They are ministering spirits, sent here and there, but he is seated forever.

In the sixth quotation our author reiterates the Son's eternal status, contrasting it with creation which is ultimately ephemeral.

He also says,

**“In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.” (1:10-12)**

The quotation is from Psalm 102:25-27. This psalm addresses the Lord, meaning Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one true God. But with the ascription of the title Lord to the risen Jesus, our author sees this as applying to the eternal Son, the risen Lord Jesus. The Son was there in the beginning, when the heavens and the earth were created. It was through the Son that God made the universe (1:2). The heavens and the earth will eventually wear out like a garment. They will be changed, just as one puts off one set of clothing and puts on a new set. The world is currently corruptible, indeed corrupted. But it will be exchanged for a world that is incorruptible, imperishable, a world that will not wear out. The New Jerusalem shall descend and heaven shall fill earth. The risen Lord Jesus has already entered into this world of incorruptibility. He is changeless. The Son, the Lord, remains the same. His is an eternal kingdom.

The Son remains the same. One of the best-known verses in Hebrews is “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). We are not. We still have corruptible, perishable bodies. But one day we will put them off and put on ones that are incorruptible, imperishable. We shall put on spiritual bodies—not in the sense that they are non-material, but that they are filled and empowered by God's Spirit as incorruptible. The risen Jesus has already led the way. He has put on his new body. When we hold fast to Jesus, the same yesterday, today and forever, we have a secure anchor that cannot be shaken. We are changeable but Jesus is not, and so, in him, we have stability.

The final quotation is on its own, but echoes the first two and has the same introduction:

To which of the angels did God ever say,

**“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet”? (1:13)**

The quotation is from Psalm 110:1. Of all the verses in the OT this is the one that is most-quoted in the NT. It had a great influence on

the early Christians. This, too, is a Messianic psalm. The Jews knew that no king of Israel had fulfilled this. Instead they were now looking ahead to a future Messiah of whom this would be true. The early church realized it had been fulfilled on Ascension Day when the risen Jesus ascended to heaven and took his seat at God's right hand. God has appointed him heir of all things. So God will bring all creation under his rule. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The opening sentence (1:1-4) has been about the Son, ending with his superiority to the angels. The chain of seven OT texts has shown that this superiority of the Son is in fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures. The Son is now seated at God's right hand, having finished his earthly ministry. He has an ongoing heavenly ministry as our great high priest, interceding for us. But he remains seated at God's side for this.

Verse 14 provides the counterpart concerning the angels. They are not seated.

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (1:14)

All of the angels are ministering spirits. Though not itself a quotation, this echoes the fourth quotation (v. 7). The angels are spirits. That is, they are part of the spiritual realm, the heavenly realm. They are in God's presence, but they stand in his presence, while the Son remains seated. They stand at the ready, ready to be sent on official business, God's business. Even the highest category of angels, the archangels, stand in God's presence ready to be sent.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah in the temple, he said, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news” (Luke 1:19). He had been sent by God on a mission from heaven to earth. Five months later he was sent again from God, this time to the virgin Mary (1:26-27). In Revelation we read of all the angels standing around the throne (Rev 7:11), of the seven angels who stand before God to whom seven trumpets were given (8:2), of the seven angels who were given bowls and told, “Go, pour out the seven bowls” (16:1). All the angels are ministering spirits, sent out in God's service. The Son remains seated.

The angels of the Bible are not the cute cherubs of Raphael's paintings. They are not the angels of current popular imagination. Angels are awesome beings that evoke awe, even fear. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, “they were sore afraid” (Luke 2:9). Zechariah “was gripped with fear” (1:12). In Revelation, John was so awed by the angel showing him the visions that he fell down at the angel's feet to worship him—not just once but twice (19:10; 22:8). On each occasion the angel said, “Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you... Worship God!” (19:10; 21:9). The angels worship God and the angels worship the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son, enthroned at his right hand. He whom angels worship, and so do we.

The angels are sent out in God's service for the benefit of “those who will inherit salvation.” For the benefit of us. We were briefly mentioned in the “to us” to whom God has spoken in his Son (1:2). Now he brings “us” in again in preparation for the next paragraph which will be his first exhortation to us (2:1-4).

God has given the Son all things as his inheritance, and the Son has inherited a superior name. Now we have something to inherit: salvation. But wait a minute, you may say. I thought we had already received salvation. Christ has accomplished purification for sins. We have come to Christ. But this is the beginning not the end of the

journey. We have begun to follow Jesus. We have embarked on a journey, a pilgrimage towards God and his rest. We need to follow the path faithfully. We need to keep following Jesus. We do so by setting our eyes on Jesus, by having Christ before us. Here in chapter 1 the preacher has put before our gaze Christ in his excellence and glory, Christ at God's right hand. He whom angels worship, and whom we worship also. We gather on Sundays to worship, to pay attention to God and to Jesus. We gather to have Christ before us, to look to Jesus.

Christ is before us also in the journey. He faithfully completed the course set before him and has entered into God's rest. We now follow our pioneer, our forerunner, the one who has gone ahead. We don't follow alone. We journey together as brothers and sisters. We encourage one another to not lose heart, to not lose sight of Jesus. We walk this path together.

We persevere in following Jesus. There are dangers along the way. The biggest danger is taking our eyes off of Jesus. And so the author intersperses his exposition of the excellence and superiority of Jesus with exhortations. These exhortations contain warnings, the so-called warning passages of Hebrews. The first will come in the very next verse (2:1), which we will look at next week. This final phrase of chapter 1, "those who will inherit salvation" shifts the focus to us in preparation for chapter 2, which begins with a therefore. Therefore, in light of the excellence of the Son, of his superiority to the angels, of his place on the throne at God's right hand, "we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (2:1). So that we remain faithful. We must pay attention to Jesus: Christ before us.

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