

Sermon for Sunday, September 9, 2012
Dr. Dan Doriani
Jesus, Our Lord and Our Hope
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:1

^{1:1} 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 obtained is more excellent than theirs.

^{2:1} Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

1. The Challenge

At the U.S. Open this year, two former tennis champions retired. They were getting old for the game (around thirty years of age), facing injuries and losing the passion to compete. They didn't want to fade away, so they announced, "This is my last tournament. It's time to move on." We have to respect that. Who wants to fade away over a period of years? Yet some are willing to drift along. A couple of years ago someone said: "My policy at work is to locate a lazy, inept person and try to look better than they do. But not too much better. I don't want to get fired, but I don't want people to think of me as a hard worker, a go-to guy."

You may wonder how someone could think that way. Or maybe you're thinking "Not a bad idea!" How does someone get to the point where they do the minimum? Maybe the work isn't interesting or fulfilling – it's just a paycheck. Or we might drift off if we plan to change jobs soon.

We can drift away from relationships with family and friends too. It can happen accidentally. Or there can be a cause. We desert one set of friends because we find another. Or we get lost because a problem rises and we never address it properly.

The same thing can happen spiritually – it happened to the Hebrews. Hebrews 13:15 shows that the letter is a written sermon from someone who knows the church well. The people are his "brothers." He gently exercises authority over them. He is a leader, well-known and respected by everyone. He is separated from them at the moment, but hopes to return soon (13:19). He writes what he would have said in person to a church threatened by persecution, even bloodshed.

Some have defected (10:25). Others lost conviction. They are lethargic, heartless. Earlier they took a bold stand for Jesus, but they have regressed; they are sagging, weary. He draws on shared convictions to appeal to a community in crisis. The group is mixed. Some are mature, some are childish – they "need milk, not solid food." As the cost of discipleship grows, they suffer a failure of nerve. It's an important question: Are we ready to pay the price for discipleship?

The challenge: sometimes it's proper to run and hide from an enemy. There is no glory or praise in dying needlessly. In a time of crisis, Isaiah 26:20 said, "Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until [the] wrath has passed by." And Jesus said, "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another" (Matt. 10:23).

On the other hand, at times the believer must stand up and be counted. In such a time, Habakkuk 2 said, "The righteous will live by his faith and if he shrinks back my soul takes no pleasure in him" (Heb 10:37). Jesus said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father... But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33).

It was a time to stand with Christ. But some have lost their conviction. How does it happen? How is it that a runner is out of shape just when he needs to run twelve miles? How are we weak precisely when we need to be strong? Remember Gandalf in Lord of The Rings? He must battle the terrible power of the Balrog. And this when he is weak from fighting 1,000 orcs and a cave troll. What's a good man to do?

Well, a Christian isn't weakened by orcs and trolls. We get weak because we stop laying aside time to pray, read the Bible and worship. Or we fall away because something happens. We meet a convincing atheist or agnostic. A friend laughs at our faith, but she is cool and we want to be cool too. We can work at a place where everyone scorns the faith. Persecution can weaken us too. It can be subtle.

For centuries, Muslims hardly *persecuted* Christians in their lands. They just made life difficult. Higher taxes. Certain careers forbidden. Slowly the church shrank. Our author states his fear – it's drift: "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Heb. 2:1).

Let me explain the problem of that day. Signs indicate that Hebrews was written for Christians in or near Rome, probably around 65 A.D. They were of the empire, but converts from Judaism. They knew the Old Testament in translation, not the original – so they lived outside Israel. But the book assumes they're Jews who know all about the temple, priests and sacrifices of Israel.

They had already faced persecution once already and endured beautifully: Remember those earlier days when you stood your ground... in the face of suffering.... You were publicly exposed to insult and persecution.... You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you... had better... possessions (Heb 10:32-34).

This sounds like events from 50 A.D. when Claudius expelled Jews and Christians from Rome. Now they face persecution again. Nero was emperor and he was more cruel. Half of Rome burned in a fire and the people blamed Nero. They said he set the fire so he could rebuild the city on a grander scale, to his glory. Nero did all he could to stop the rumors. Nothing worked, so he decided to blame the Christians.

Roman historian Tacitus said Christians were "hated for their abominations" - they refused to worship the emperor or participate in pagan festivals that everyone celebrated together. Nero publicly tortured and killed Christians for his amusement.

This threat might be the background of Hebrews. Certainly, Hebrews says its readers need to resist to the point of shedding blood (12:4). Fear is natural. But matters are worse because many have grown weak in the faith. They lack the conviction necessary to withstand trial. Hebrews sees three conditions:

1. Some are drifting from the faith (2:1). Maybe they were bruised by cares or wounds that never healed. Maybe they failed too often and gave up, drifted off.

2. Some are becoming lazy and weak (5:11, 6:12). They don't play close attention to God's word. But they are not testing themselves or their culture. Like an athlete with an arm in a cast, they get weaker daily So it was then and so it can be for us.

3. Some consider rejecting the faith altogether (6:4-8, 10:26-31). They could return to Judaism or join the shallow religions of the gods. Today people flirt with atheism or become agnostics or to call themselves post-Christian or post-church.

In that day, some think to escape trouble by laying low, quitting the assembly of Christians. Others might leave the faith altogether and return to Judaism, which is an older, safer religion. The author knows these people and he writes what he would have said in person – "a word of exhortation" – a sermon.

He calls them brothers and refers to shared experiences (3:1, 12; 10:29-34; 13:22). The tone is warm, personal, and authoritative. Things are going wrong. He cares deeply – and he will make sure they hear him.

You may tell yourself, "I don't connect with this. I don't face persecution." But we can drift away or get lazy. And we all face adversity. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33) and we know he's right. Are we prepared for a crisis? Can we do anything to stay strong in the troubles of life? Or if you're strong, what might you say to friends who waver for whatever reason?

Most striking: Hebrews does not begin by addressing the problem. He mentions it occasionally in chapters 2-6, before he tackles it in 10-12. Why this approach? He wants to begin with the solution, not the problem.

2. The Vision of Christ (1:1-4)

Hebrews describes the excellence of Jesus, his supremacy over all gods, over prophets and angels, and any other spiritual being. He presents a vision of the Jesus the prophet – superior to all prophets (1:1-2):

Old Revelation

In various times and many ways God spoke to the fathers long ago by the prophets.

New Revelation

[But now] God spoke to us in these last days by the Son.

If God spoke in many times in the past, his speeches were incomplete. God spoke! But it was not his last word. It was not incorrect, but it was incomplete. God made promises, but fulfillment awaited. He spoke of priests and kings, all of them flawed. Everything was partial, provisional, incomplete.

But now God has spoken his final word. Many prophets spoke God's word, but Jesus is the word and he became the Word Incarnate. There were many prophets, but Jesus is the Prophet, the greatest teacher – and he is the Son.

In the past God spoke many ways. Do we hear a hint that people didn't listen well? We know they didn't. God's word is living and active. If we let it, it penetrates the heart. But many resist. They don't want to listen. Or – more likely, they do and they don't, at the same time. So God varied his method. He spoke through prophets one time, then through history, then through songs and proverbs and visions – according to the ability of Israel to hear and remember.

But now God has spoken to us by the Son. In him, God has delivered his definitive speech. In "the last days" God fulfilled all his promises and all the prophecies. Then he explained what it all meant. He did this by his Son – the great and final prophet.

Antony the monk (around 300 B.C.) was the first celebrity Christian - so famous that even Roman emperors wrote him letters seeking counsel. He told his fellow monks, "Do not be astonished if the emperor writes to us, for he is a man; but rather wonder that God wrote... and has spoken to us through his own Son." May we marvel and make use of his speech, reading and applying it daily.

Jesus the Heir and Creator (1:2b)

Hebrews says Jesus is "the heir of all things" and he "created the world." Jesus is not an heir as we are, gaining goods on his Father's death. No, Hebrews cites Psalm 2, a Messianic psalm, in 1:5. In it God tells Jesus: "You are my son... Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." Jesus is heir because he is the Redeemer. He inherits the vast company of the redeemed. He inherits a universe "renewed by his triumphant work of reconciliation." He is restoring all that we lost in Adam.

Hebrews 1 also quotes Psalm 45: "Your throne O God, is forever and ever. Righteousness... is the scepter of your Kingdom." He rules well.

Jesus is the one Son and Heir, but we are his children and heirs because we are united to the Son in whom God is well pleased. He is Author and Pioneer of our salvation, so that all that is Christ's is ours. So Jesus opens the doors of the universe to us. We do not live in fear of the world. We don't fear science. We don't fear the culture or creative work or business and politics. We don't fear, because Christ is heir of all things and *righteousness is the scepter of his Kingdom*.

Of course we must "Test all things and hold fast to what is good," as Paul says. Yes we can be tempted and seduced, but we *can* "Test all things and hold fast" to the good. Therefore we can go forward without fear into the world.

Jesus is also the eternal Son (1:3)

It troubles some people when we read that Jesus is the Son of God and – in 1:3 - the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature. It sounds as if Jesus is a touch lower than the Father, a reflection of him, but without light in himself. It's an important question.

In great measure, the problem is with us. First, our language is always imprecise and more suited to "earthly things" than to the hidden life of God. We call Jesus a lion. Does that mean we can ascribe the weaknesses of lions to Jesus – that he lays around almost all day? That he is afraid of elephants? Not at all. "Lion" means Jesus is mighty and majestic. So what does Scripture tell us by the word "Son."

"Son" is a term of affection and intimacy and essential equality. We may also stumble that "son" implies subordination to the Father's authority. Is that right? Well, the Father and the Son are equal in glory. Yet Jesus declared that he says what the Father gives him to say and does what the Father tells him to do. Does that bother you? The life of the triune God is largely a mystery. We know that the Father, Son and Spirit are one in essence, power and worth. Yet the Son, especially in his Incarnation, subordinates himself to the will of the Father.

This may seem strange, but we see both equality and subordination all through creation. We understand that this arises from the very character of God. Let's take this to heart. There is no shame or burden in subordinating ourselves to our equal.

Around the age of twelve or fourteen, bright kids start to size up teachers and think, "I'm smarter than my teacher." The child may be right, but the class will still work best – Jesus is pleased – if the student obeys her teacher.

Hebrews also says Jesus is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (1:3). Again, Jesus is not *merely* the radiance or reflection of God's glory. The point is that Jesus is exactly like the Father. He radiates the same glory. He precisely reflects the Father's glory. If we see Jesus, we see the Father.

This is important if you're a seeker. If you wonder what God is like, read the Gospels, Matthew to John, and meet him. The kindness and the austerity of Jesus. The majesty and tender love of children. The rigor toward evil, the grace to the penitent. In every way, Jesus perfectly represents God's character and ways.

Jesus doesn't just talk about God, as prophets do. He doesn't just point to God. Both by his words and his life, he is the precise image of his nature. He says what the Father gives him to say, does what the Father tells him to do.

Beyond all this Jesus "upholds the universe by his word of power" (1:3). So his wisdom matches his power. For Jesus is the wisdom of God. Proverbs 8 says wisdom is God's companion at creation, forming and shaping the world like a master craftsman, for the delight of God and humanity.

Redeemer (1:3b)

Finally, Jesus is the Redeemer. He made of himself a cleansing for sins. He offered himself on the cross as a sacrifice. He did this to bear the punishment of sin, a punishment to which guilty humans are liable. More on this in weeks ahead, but we see that Jesus the King doesn't soar above human troubles. He enters them, and heals them.

Therefore Hebrews invites us to kneel before the exalted Son. He has position of honor, at right hand of the Majesty. He has a throne above angels. He inherited a name more excellent than angels - the most splendid of his creatures.

Hebrews says Jesus is greater than angels in four ways. Jesus has a greater name. He is Son, they are "messenger" (1:4-5). Jesus has greater dignity. He receives worship; they render it (1:6). He reigns forever, they are servants (1:7-9). He is creator and enthroned ruler of all. They serve those who will inherit salvation (1:10-14).

So Jesus is far superior to the greatest creatures. Even angels are weak changeable, ephemeral. Jesus never changes. Therefore we listen to him, stay loyal to him! Good news, the *mighty angels are our allies*. Indeed, though they are greater than we, God places them at our side, to minister to us, heirs of his salvation (1:14).

3. Our Hope and Responsibility

For about twenty years, people have tried to understand why some people are more resilient than others. Why does one person suffer the loss of a job, the death of a spouse, or mistreatment as a child and sail through, while another is crushed? There are several answers.

- Resilient people are resourceful. They have problem-solving skills. They believe they can do things to cope, to improve their life
- They are ready to seek help. They have social support and are connected with family and friends.

We see the wisdom in this research. The Hebrews needed resilience; hope in the face of another round of persecution. They were weakened. We do too. But they and we are not quite like Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*. He was weak from fighting orcs and a cave troll. The Hebrews were weak from lack of exercise.

When weak we must turn to the right resource, the right friend. There are many resources, many friends. But Jesus is prophet, creator, the Son and Redeemer. Stay close to him, Hebrews says. Don't drift away from the faith. It is perilous.

Danger is not apostasy but drift

Notice 2:1 "Lest we drift away." Is drift so bad? It can be. Ships lose anchor and drift off to sea. Important thoughts drift or slip from memory. Heedlessness is the danger. Carelessness brings disaster if someone puts a car in neutral on a gradual slope. In those days if a ship lost its anchor, the result could be death. All who live on the sea knows this.

One year I spoke at a family camp nestled in hills of Appalachia. I spent time with a couple with two younger children. The wife had been a missionary in Asia. When she returned to the States, she married a church leader. They were earnest, mature people who came to Christian camp on vacation. One evening she asked me, "I wish someone would do a retreat for Christians who no longer care. Why do so many Christians *lose their zeal, get stale, drift off*? Why have I lost my zeal?"

She wasn't complaining about the camp, she was indicting herself. What good is a Christian camp, whatever its quality, if no one cares? What good is it to go to a retreat and feed off the faith of others if there is nothing inside you? That was her question. What does Scripture say?

Hebrews says people drift because they fix their eyes on the wrong things. Not many people decide to ignore God, the Bible, prayer, service and community. So how does it happen? I asked a Christian leader. He mentioned three things.

- A focus on money. The distraction of worry, debt. The dangerous pursuit of riches.
- Living for personal peace and pleasure, worldly entertainments.
- The pain of untimely death, chronic disease, long unemployment, loneliness – the hardship that leads someone to wonder, "Does God care?"

Yet there is something behind these. We believe we need something, but we doubt that it is God. We no longer pray because we doubt that God hears. We skip the Bible because we trust our own wisdom.

Hebrews says the cure is to look again to Jesus (3:1)

Return to Jesus, to gospels, to reflection on him, as person, as Savior, as Lord. How can you do this? Remember the Hebrews heard this first and like you and me, they never saw Jesus, They heard about him second hand – like us. Hebrews says, "Meditate on him, ponder him."

We drift off and get lost when we take eyes off Jesus. We turn elsewhere – to one hundred places: Money, friends and counselors, family, career, weekend travels, sports, as participant or spectator, even religious activities. Stop staring at the problem!

So let's keep our eyes on Jesus, Son of God and prophet, creator, sustainer, Redeemer. Attested by signs, wonders and miracles, even by the Spirit, giving us conviction that He is Lord. So set your minds on Jesus, the hero of the faith.

That is the message of Hebrews. In the midst of troubles, stay strong. How? Not by fixing your attention on your troubles. Yes, we need a plan, but more we need hope, help and support. Jesus, creator and redeemer is our prophet and priest, creator, sustainer, and redeemer. Let's keep our eyes on him. Then we will be ready for the crisis, the combat.