



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

LIFT

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
September 2, 2007*

It's good to be back this morning. We had a great time last weekend down at my dad's retirement celebration. After 21 years as pastor there, it's a big change for him, so we were glad to be there to mark the occasion.

Speaking of changes, summer is just about over, and so is our time with Elijah and Elisha. I thoroughly enjoyed digging into some of the wild stories from their lives. But now, as we prepare to enter the fall, we're going to switch gears and tackle a completely different kind of study, looking at the book of Hebrews. We're jumping hundreds of years forward in time, and we're going from narrated stories to a letter written to one of the first churches.

It's like we've been in history class the past couple months, and now it's time to go to CHURCH. I'm gonna do a little preachin today, and it's the kind of preachin that needs a few "amens" here and there. So I'm telling you right up front today, it's perfectly fine for you to chime in whenever you feel like it with a "hallelujah" or a big "Yes!" as we go along.

The book of Hebrews makes me think of John Cochran. When I was in college, I had a drama professor named John Cochran who came from Yale, where he had taught the likes of Meryl Streep and Danny Glover. He was this intense man with piercing eyes... and he completely intimidated me. If you made a mistake or didn't complete an assignment and you tried to explain why, he would say, "The world is not interested in excuses." He was one of those larger than life characters who had a mystique about him. I did a few plays and I wanted nothing more than to make him think he'd discovered the next star, but every time I was around him, I would get all tongue-tied and generally be the opposite of impressive. I know it's hard to imagine that now. He must have just rolled his eyes sometimes. But I was so starstruck by him that I kept trying. My anxieties were outweighed by my appreciation. And I ended up learning a great deal from the man.

The book of Hebrews has a similar effect on me. It's an awe-inspiring letter. The thought of preaching through it is intimidating, because it is such a powerful piece of writing. It's kind of got a mystique to it for me. Hebrews is one of the most profound chunks of Scripture, and it would be impossible to do it justice.

But my anxieties about it are smaller than my appreciation of this book. I am captivated by it and I am bound and determined to keep trying. Because Hebrews deserves our attention. We need its message desperately. It is a message that is all about Jesus. It's like a Jesus elevator – lifting him up above everything.

We don't know much about the person who wrote Hebrews. People have speculated about it for thousands of years. Some people used to think it was Paul or Barnabas, but that doesn't seem likely from a few clues in the letter itself. Other people have suggested Luke or Apollos, but we really have no way of knowing, because it doesn't include the normal introduction and greetings that most letters have. Because of that and its very stylized writing, some people think Hebrews was originally someone's speaking notes instead of a letter. But again, we don't really know.

We do know that the author was familiar with his first intended audience. He knew people they knew. He knew the circumstances they were living in. Most of the original readers seem to have had a Jewish background, or at least a good grasp on the basics of Judaism and the Old Testament Scriptures. It was a church that had suffered greatly under persecution. Life had not been easy since deciding to follow Christ. There's some support for the idea that the church the letter was addressed to was in Rome. In the year 49 A.D., Emperor Claudius issued an edict kicking all the Jews out of Rome "because of the disturbance over Christ." In other words, Christian Jews were seen as creating friction within the larger community because of their differences in beliefs. And they ended up getting the boot.

It appears that some people in the church were beginning to ask the question: Is it worth it? Is there anything that distinct or unique about the gospel that makes it worth the trouble?

So the writer of Hebrews sets about painting a picture for them. He describes Jesus in detail as the most unique, most spectacular figure in history. He explains how Jesus is above everything and everyone in the universe.

For some people in the church, Jesus hadn't been all that special. He was one holy man among many. So our author lifts him up and shows the church how much more to him there is than meets the eye.

If there's one thing Americans value it's the idea of equality. The notion that all people are created equal is woven tightly into our culture. It's one of the ideals that makes America great and so attractive to people from all over the world.

But in general, most people use the same logic when it comes to religion. All beliefs are considered equal. The average person sees every faith as a different road leading to the same destination. We like to keep everything flattened out and not suggest that one religion is better than another. Talking about your religion being more true than someone else's is about the least politically correct thing you can do.

If somebody does try to make the claim that Christianity is the one true way to God, it is immediately pointed out how flawed the church has been down through the centuries, how many wars have been fought in the name of God, how many scandals have rocked the church.

And that's a valid point. Can we really say we believe Christians have a lock on truth when we haven't lived like it?

I think the author of Hebrews gets us back on track by saying the issue isn't whose religion is superior. The issue is Jesus, and he's superior to everything. Just about every faith in the world has a respectable place for Jesus in their understanding. He's always considered a good teacher or a prophet or source of wisdom. And sometimes Christians don't see him all that differently. But Hebrews tells us that Jesus is so much more.

Do you remember ever watching a movie on TV and seeing the message "This movie has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your screen." I always thought that was so thoughtful for somebody to go to the trouble to make the movie fit MY TV.

Of course what it really means is that they've cut it down to size. They've trimmed off part of the picture. Movies are shown on wider screens than standard TV sets, so only part of the image would show. That's why today there are so many widescreen TVs, because people don't want to lose part of the image.

We format Jesus to fit our lives, and he generally fits best when he is pared down. We prefer the pocket sized Jesus who doesn't make too many demands, who doesn't rock the boat and who blends in nicely with life. So we crop him down to a manageable picture.

We lose so much when we do that. The author of Hebrews gives us the widescreen version. And we discover a Jesus who is so much bigger, so much more powerful, so much more awe inspiring than we ever imagined.

When we were down at my dad's retirement dinner, they had an open mic time, where people from the church stood up and shared what my parents meant to them. It was very moving. The associate pastor got up to speak. He's also leaving in a few months, and he was reflecting on his time working with my dad. And he said, "I came into this job with a high view of the structure (meaning a high view of his position and the way the church works). I'm leaving this job with a high view of God, with a high view of Christ."

What an awesome thing to be able to say. That's the effect Hebrews should have on us, taking us from being religious people to being people with a high view of Christ. Maybe we are good church people, love our friends, love the worship. Hebrews gives us more reasons to love Jesus. Other books of the Bible may seem more practical, but none of them gives us a more thorough understanding of how vast Jesus is, and I hope that by the end of our study we'll walk away not just knowing a book of the Bible better, but knowing Jesus better, having a higher view of him.

This morning I would like to look at the first four verses of Hebrews with you. Normally, I won't get this microscopic, but these four verses are packed with information that sets up everything else the author will talk about.

Hebrews 1:1-4

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

The world's fastest elevator is in the world's tallest building in Taipei, Taiwan. It travels 3,333 feet per minute and goes from the fifth floor to the 89th floor in 39 seconds. They should give you seatbelts when you ride that thing.

This little paragraph in Hebrews moves at that kind of speed, taking us like a rocket from ancient history up to heaven. No introduction – just BAM! Straight to the point. It goes by so quickly you could miss how much is happening in a short amount of time. So we're going to slow it down, break it apart and see exactly what the author is saying to us.

The entire section flows from the author's firm belief that God speaks. He starts off saying, "In the past, God spoke." That's an astounding concept, isn't it? It is in God's nature to want to communicate with us. He's not silent or evasive. He's not off trying to hide from us. Instead he is making himself known.

But there's been a progression or a change in that communication. God is using different methods than before. Before, he spoke through prophets – his messengers to the world. And he would employ various means to communicate – dreams, visions, pillars of cloud, burning bushes, angels. There was this buffer zone between God and his people.

Have you ever played with one of those gadgets that has hundreds of metal pins sticking through plastic? You push your hand or face into the pins and it makes an impression. From the other side you see a surreal portrait of yourself. It's recognizable, but not exactly the original.

That's a rough analogy for how God spoke through prophets. He pressed his word into them and moved them to speak, as if they were those pins. People would hear the word of God, but it was through a mediator. There was always something between them and God.

That was the past. Now, the author says, God does something radically new and different. He bypasses the middleman and speaks directly to the world through his Son.

Jesus himself is God's speech, his voice. The Bible calls him the Living Word, because he expresses God perfectly. No more filtered messages.

It's not that the prophets said or did anything wrong. They were just partial. Both the content and the delivery method of communication are more complete in Jesus.

When we were expecting Isaac, some friends threw a baby shower for Karin. Being her first baby, Karin really wanted her mom to be a part of everything, but Karin's parents live in Minnesota, so she wasn't expecting anything besides a card or phone call from her. So, when Karin opened the front door and saw her mom standing there, in person, she immediately burst into tears. Having the real live thing was better than any long distance communication could have been.

God surprised everyone and showed up in person with Jesus. It was completely different and unexpected – and far superior to any long distance communication that he had used in the past.

Jesus was different from all the prophets before him because he was God's Son, and in rapid succession, the author of Hebrews lists off seven things that set Jesus apart from anyone else. It's an interesting list, because hardly anything on it is what I would have come up with. These are not the typical Sunday School answers about who Jesus was. Again – this is why we need Hebrews.

Seven roles of Jesus, seven things he does in the universe. First, he is

Jesus the Receiver

Look back at verse two:

...in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things...

Did you ever think of God as having an heir? What do you think of when you hear the word heir? Death comes to mind, doesn't it? But that's obviously not the significance here. Otherwise, Jesus would be waiting a mighty long time for his inheritance, because God never dies.

This is one of those inheritances that is passed on while the father is still alive. It is more about God the Father's intention and relationship with Jesus. To call Jesus an heir of God means that he is a receiver of three things from God. First, **his love**. There is a closeness indicated in naming someone an heir. Those who aren't close are cut off from the inheritance. God is telling the world that he has chosen Jesus and that he loves him. On more than one occasion in Jesus' life on earth, a voice from heaven spoke out loud and told the world, "This is my Son, whom I love."

Second, Jesus receives God's **wealth**. The verse said he was appointed heir of all things. Everything that is God the Father's is also God the Son's. He has at his disposal all the resources of the universe.

Third, Jesus has received God's **authority**.

I can show you this picture of Elvis, but I can't sell it to you. I'd have to get permission from Lisa Marie, because she owns the rights to the image of Elvis. Lisa Marie inherited Elvis Presley's entire estate. She got his money. She got his property. And, she got the authority to say what happens with his image and name. She now acts on his behalf.

Being the heir means that Jesus acts with God's own authority. This is something the other prophets throughout history couldn't claim. There was a clear line and they didn't cross it. But Jesus has been given the full power to speak and act for God.

Now you might ask, "If Jesus is God, what's the distinction here? If the Father and Son are one, why talk about inheritance? Isn't God just God?"

I think the author is wanting us to recognize the significance of Jesus' work on the cross. That was not just another human dying – that was God's own son. That was tearing at the very fabric of the Trinity. To speak of an heir is to say that the human Jesus is also the divine Jesus and what he did in a physical body had the full weight of God behind it. His death on the cross sealed his inheritance.

In Revelation, the big crowd of people around the throne of Jesus say to him,

Revelation 5:12

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!

Jesus is the great receiver of all that is his Father's. Another title the author of Hebrews gives to him is

Jesus the Prerequisite

The passage continues to talk about him and says

through whom he made the universe...

When we stop and think about Jesus, our minds immediately go to the Jesus who was born in a manger. We think about him out walking with his disciples, teaching in the synagogue, dying on a cross, rising from the dead. What we don't often think about is the fact that Jesus existed before he was born.

The Son of God is eternal, just as the Father is eternal. He predates the world. He didn't come into being when Mary got pregnant – he always was. Before he was human, he was still the Word of God.

The writer of Hebrews says he had a special role in creation. I think that's fantastic to think about, because how did God create the world? He spoke. It was the power of his Word that brought the universe into existence. Jesus was just as important for creation as he is for salvation.

In the book of Proverbs, the author talks about Wisdom, which is closely linked to God's Word. And you can hear Jesus saying these words from Proverbs 8:

Proverbs 8:23-31

*I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.
When there were no oceans, I was given birth,
when there were no springs abounding with water;
before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
before he made the earth or its fields
or any of the dust of the world.
I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.*

When God said, "Let us make man in our image," the "us" included the Son. Some people might have had the mistaken notion that Jesus was an enlightened person who obtained status as a "son of God" through his great life, and that we can do the same. But Hebrews sets the record straight: Jesus always has been. And he's the prerequisite for every created being.

The author goes on to say that

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,

Jesus the 3-D model

My dad grew up on a farm and used to drive a John Deere Model B tractor that he always talks about. So for his retirement, someone bought him a precision model replica of it, that had terrific detail and working parts. Turns out it wasn't quite the same year though, so it wasn't an exact replica of what he had. But it was close.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is an exact model of God. He embodies God perfectly. He reflects his Father's glory and is a perfect stand-in for him.

We went and saw Evan Almighty this week, the modern day version of Noah's Ark. Morgan Freeman plays God in it. He's one of my favorite actors. But I found myself constantly asking, "Would God really say that? Is that what God would do?" I'm sure he got some things right. But there were probably many things he got wrong. Yet I found myself wishing for that face to face kind of experience of God, that in the flesh person. And that's exactly what Jesus is for us. No guessing whether or not he got it right – he was exactly right, because he is one with God.

This is good to remember when we feel like God is far away or hard to understand. We have his permission to turn to the stories of Jesus for answers. We can study the Christ of the Bible for clues as to what God the Father thinks. He personifies everything that is true about God. Nothing that he did or said could be out of character with his Father.

When injustice angers me and I wonder how God feels, I can see Jesus getting angry. When I wonder how God will respond to my sin, I can watch how Jesus interacted with all the sinners in his life. When I don't understand suffering in the world, I can see a Jesus who also weeps and suffers.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. To know Jesus is to know God. As Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

The writer of Hebrews continues on to tell us that Jesus is

sustaining all things by his powerful word

Physicists have analyzed the universe, breaking it down to its most basic part, the atom. Even the atom itself has smaller parts. But what scientists haven't been able to answer is what holds the atom together? They cannot explain why everything isn't just flying apart. So they've simply named the phenomenon as the strong force.

It may not sound very scientific, but Hebrews gives us an answer:

Jesus is the Strong Force

Colossians 1:17-18

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Not only was Jesus instrumental in creating everything, he is necessary for sustaining it. He's the glue. Again, it is that Word which is so powerful and effective. We're not just talking about the physical world that he holds together – Jesus sustains us spiritually and emotionally as well.

I don't know how many times I've been in a crisis and the Word of God has become my strength to lean on. There is a vitality in Jesus that gives us life.

The writer of Hebrews then describes Jesus another way when he says,

After he had provided purification for sins...

This is probably the role we most often associate with Jesus – dealing with our sins. But I like the fact that he doesn't say he paid for our sins or he forgave our sins. Here the emphasis is on purifying. The author is calling him

Jesus the Cleanser

A couple weeks ago, I pulled a big spoon out of the dishwasher that still had a hunk of food stuck to it. It had been through the wash cycle already, so the spoon was sanitized. That crusty bit of lunch couldn't hurt me. But it still wasn't very appealing to think of using it.

Sometimes I feel like that spoon – like my sins are still clinging to me, even though Jesus has forgiven me. Like there's a big ugly stain on me forever. But John tells us straight out:

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

It's completely removed. We're spot free. We're purified. What an awesome truth. One of my favorite verses is from Revelation where Jesus says, "Behold, I am making everything new!" We're not just pardoned – we're recreated.

Jesus is the Cleanser. But the sentence in Hebrews doesn't end there.

After he had provided purification for sin he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven...

This is **Jesus the Sitter**. He sat down at God's right hand. Why is that important? Because sitting down there showed that his work is done. Karin was once asked to draw a picture of her family at the dinner table, and she drew her mom's chair as empty. Her mom never sits down, because she never stops working to get the meal ready. Sitting means completion. There is a finality to what Christ did on the cross. It is solid and sure. He said "it is finished" and he meant it. The hard job of eliminating our sin has been

accomplished. When we're feeling uncertain in our relationship with God, when we're not sure where we stand, we can rest in the knowledge that Jesus is sitting.

P.T. Forsyth once wrote, "The feeble gospel says 'you may be saved.' The might gospel says 'God has redeemed.'" There is something firm and reassuring in knowing that Jesus has finished the job. He is seated on the throne.

Because of all these things, the writer of Hebrews draws one final conclusion about Jesus:

So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

This is **Jesus the Way Better**. He's not just distinct from other humans – he's above all the spiritual beings as well. He's not one more in a line of messengers. Jesus is the end all, final destination, in a league of his own. He's beyond comparison.

And that's the central message of Hebrews. Jesus is way better than anything else this world has to offer. What else or who else could we turn to that is more compelling, more gracious, more compassionate, more truthful, more capable or more loving? There is nothing and no one else like him.

As we come to communion this morning, I want to invite you to look at that list and choose one role of Jesus that you can thank him for today.

If you are depleted, think about Jesus the Receiver, who has all God's love, wealth and authority that he is ready to share with us. Paul prayed for the Ephesians that Christ would strengthen them out of his riches, and that can be your prayer as well.

If you're at a loss of where to go next, thank Jesus for his creativity as our Prerequisite. Ask him to create a way for you today.

If you're struggling with knowing God, thank Jesus for being the 3D model and being an accessible, tangible picture of God.

If you're falling apart, ask him to be your Strong Force, to hold you together.

If you're overwhelmed by your own sin, claim him as your Cleanser and ask him to make you new.

And if you're caught in doubt and uncertainty, focus on Jesus the Sitter, whose work is done and whose grip never fails.

Jesus is way better.