

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY** **when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

#### **The Supreme Son's Superior Way**

Study #1

(Background; Hebrews 1:1-4)

#### **Introduction: Listening well...**

Last Sunday, Todd Havekost brought a powerful message from 1 Corinthians. Todd urged us, from that passage, to view this life as "training time for reigning time."

One of several memorable moments during that message was when Todd put on an eye patch. He was reminding us to keep our eyes open to see what is all around us, visibly, AND to look at what we can only see through the eyes of faith.

We must see, look at, focus on the unseen realm, the life to come, if we want to live this life well.

I'm grateful for that exhortation to open both eyes and to see. This morning, we're going to switch to another one of the five senses. I'm urging that we must use our ears, we must listen to live well.

These days, the two most often repeated questions at our house are, "Have you seen my...?" and "What?"

I'll not go into my tendency to misplace items, and I'll say that some of the "What?" questions are innocent. I really didn't hear.

But I will admit, sadly, that some of those, "What's?" are due to my lack of attentiveness. I didn't listen to what Kathy was saying.

That's a problem. Inattentiveness is a problem in homes, at work and at school. It's also a problem in our walk with God.

Scripture constantly calls us to "*Listen!*" to what God is saying.

Like in Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils, the whole point is the importance of listening well to God's message.

Will my ears be closed, hard, like pavement? Or will my ears be like deep, rich soil that receives God's message?<sup>1</sup>

When King David was writing about the worship God desired and the worship that he loved to give to God, he provided a vivid image of listening with outstretched ears in Psalm 40.

***[6] You have not desired sacrifice and meal offering; You have opened my ears.***

Fascinating. The word my version renders "*opened*" is, literally, "*You have dug.*"

David imagines a blockhead, a human head with no ears. Then God comes along with His shovel and pick to dig through the cranial granite to make ear holes so that David could listen to His message and could then respond with worship.<sup>2</sup>

As we begin to explore the letter to the Hebrews, let's ask God to help us listen well.

*Orienting to Hebrews...*

Well, here we are in our 42nd year as a church, and we're finally getting around to exploring the letter to the Hebrews together.

Hebrews is a rich New Testament letter. The author teaches. We learn doctrine. It is meaty. It is one of the most theologically profound books in the New Testament. Tons of content.

<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 13; Mark 4; Luke 8.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Eugene Peterson for this insight into Psalm 40.

But the “*What?*” of content is matched by a lot of equally powerful, “*So whats?*” Hebrews self-defines as a “***word of exhortation.***” (13:22)

So, we’ll all hear repeated calls to reflection, to personal growth, and to life change as we listen our way through this letter.<sup>3</sup>

For the next three months or so, we’re taking a congregation-wide journey to “listen” to the compelling message of this letter and to each take next steps with Jesus together as we do.

I’ll set the table for the meal in front of us by addressing some background issues - the who, when, and why - of Hebrews.

First, who wrote it?

## Background:

### *Authorship*

I have long maintained that my parenting style was uniquely effective in training my children to deal with disappointment. If you were hoping to finally learn who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, I’m about to equip you to deal with disappointment.

Over time, there have been tons of educated guessing as to who wrote this letter, and the authorship of Hebrews is still an unknown.

Personally, I think that he didn’t self-identify was because he knew full well that his readers knew full well who he was, so he didn’t need to give his name.<sup>4</sup>

The most prominent names for consideration are Paul,<sup>5</sup> Barnabas, Apollos, Philip, Priscilla,<sup>6</sup> Silvanus, Philip (the evangelist), and Luke - but there are others.

<sup>3</sup> The author says that he has written “*briefly.*” (13:22) So, while we might consider Hebrews a long letter, it could have been much longer.

<sup>4</sup> It is also possible that he was trying to hide his identity from authorities to unnecessarily cause problems for himself or for his readers.

There are some reasons to think that any of these might have written Hebrews and some reasons against most every one of them. So, again, we don’t know.

However, based on the contents of the book we know some things about the author, whoever he was.

- He wrote in an elegant, eloquent style, so we know that he was well-educated.
- The letter is full of quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament, so we know that he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the history, law, poetry, and prophecy found in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup>
- And we know that he was not writing to strangers. He knew his readers well. It seems to me that he had a close, pastoral, shepherding relationship with them.<sup>8</sup>

So, no, we don’t know who wrote Hebrews. But, from the earliest days, the letter was accepted, read, and used by the churches. It was received as inspired by the Holy Spirit, was written with great authority, and came with life-transforming power.<sup>9</sup>

We have lost nothing by not knowing who the author is. But we gain a lot by knowing with confidence for whom he wrote.

### *Audience*

#### Jews

<sup>5</sup> Most scholars reject Pauline authorship. I agree. The Greek writing style and vocabulary are quite different from Paul’s letters.

<sup>6</sup> Anonymity would have been reasonable if a woman wrote Hebrews. But this may be the only evidence (an argument from silence) for Priscilla writing the letter.

<sup>7</sup> We also know that the author was familiar with the apostles and knew (or at least knew about) Timothy. He was almost certainly not one of the original apostles but was likely a second-generation leader. (hinted at in 13:7)

<sup>8</sup> Churches in the early years were small house churches. 20-50 people, at most.

<sup>9</sup> Christians didn’t decide which books were inspired. They agreed which books measured up to the tests of canonicity: Is the book authoritative, prophetic, authentic? dynamic? Was it received, collected, read, and used? F.F. Bruce says that it was at the Synod of Hippo (393 AD) that the church first listed all 27 New Testament books, including Hebrews, which was also included in other early lists.

The author was writing to a Jewish audience. They would have had to have been Jewish - and, therefore, familiar with Abraham, Moses, the Levitical priesthood, Mount Sinai, the tabernacle, offerings and sacrifices, Melchizedek, and more! - to have understood the letter.<sup>10</sup>

And that prompts me to say that if we are going to understand the message of Hebrews, we will each need to grow in our grasp of the themes and the message of the Old Testament.

To read Hebrews without that grasp of the Old Testament is like listening in on a conversation between two people who are experts at something that you know nothing about.

They're geeking out about some obscure sport or some recent technology, and you're lost. You'll be tempted to tune out that conversation and move on to something else.

We can't afford to do that with Hebrews. Its message is too important for us to be tempted to "tune out." We've got to "get it."

So, over the time of our study in Hebrews, I'm going to make it my aim to help you become the Old Testament geek who can get it.

More than simply writing to Jews, though, the writer was writing to Jews who believed in Jesus.

### Jewish Christians

Five times he addressed his readers as "**holy brothers and sisters.**" (3:1; 3:12; 10:19; 13:1, 22)

He told them, "**We have a great high priest**" in Jesus (4:14) and called them "**beloved.**" (6:9)

Throughout the letter, he called them to follow Jesus. He did so using the vocabulary of "**we**" (2:1, 2:3, 2:8, 9; 3:14, 19; 4:2, 3, 11) and "**us.**" (4:14-16; 6:19; 7:26; 10:10; 10:19-25; 11:40; 12:1, 28)

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<sup>10</sup> There are at least 40 quotations from the OT, along with many other allusions.

It's critical that we understand here at the outset that the writer's target audience for all his teachings, consolations, encouragements, and exhortations were to Christians.

### *Date and purpose*

It's important, too, to know that all the books and letters that make up the New Testament were written not long after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Hebrews, included.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of an actual date, we know for certain that Hebrews was written prior to AD 95, when Clement of Rome (an early church father) mentioned it in one of his letters.

And internal evidence suggests that was written prior to AD 70 when Rome destroyed the Jewish temple and all of Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> It was probably written in the mid- to late-60's of the first century.

Finally, why did our unnamed author write this letter?

Well, as will become clear, he wrote to address a problem the readers were facing.

While they had not yet suffered to the point of "**shedding blood**" (12:4 - loss of life), they were suffering persecution by fellow Jews for their Jesus-following ways.

The suffering was intense enough to tempt these Christians to throw in the towel, leave Jesus behind, and turn back to Judaism. They were growing weary of suffering and were ready to give up on following Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> We believe that John's Revelation was the last New Testament book written, dating in the 90's of the 1st century.

<sup>12</sup> We assume that the temple was still standing in Jerusalem when Hebrews was written, primarily because, given the content of the book (with its emphasis on sacrifice and offering; priestly ministry, the tabernacle) if the temple had been already destroyed (AD 70), the author would have mentioned it.

The author's point in writing was to give these suffering, persecuted, Christians reasons to not give up, but to keep following Jesus, no matter what, even when life gets tough.

*Application (broadly) to us*

So, why are we studying Hebrews?

It isn't because I have any insider information about soon-to-come persecution. It may come and it may not.

Lots of Christians around the world and through the ages have suffered or are suffering persecution. It wouldn't be surprising or unusual if it came our way. But that's not why we're studying Hebrews.

The reason we're going to move through this letter is that I have noticed in myself and in others a temptation to slow the speed at which we follow Jesus when, for any reason, life gets tough.

Tough times may even tempt us to stop following Jesus. And tough times come in lots of shapes and sizes.

It could be a close relationship that isn't working, with a good friend or a family member. It might be a serious health crisis. It might be a career challenge or a financial shortfall, a perceived unmet need of some sort.

Persecution may not be the tough thing that you're facing now. Any hardships might come our way at any moment and pull us away from a vibrant faith walk with our Savior.

The letter that an unnamed author wrote to a few small Christian congregations in the first century will equip you and me with truth about Jesus powerful enough to keep us following Him, no matter what.

Now, to revert to today's start, let's open our ears and listen to the first words of Hebrews.

**Listen! God Has Spoken (1:1)**

***[1:1] God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,***

**In the Past, God Spoke to Us - as God - "in many ways"**

*In Scripture, the prophets spoke about God and nature*

We hear prophets and poets in Scripture telling us that the heavens (Psalm 19) and the natural world (Job) declare the glory of God. (Psalm 19)

I saw some of that natural grandeur and beauty and hostility last week on a camping trip to West Texas. Kathy's brother and I saw amazing star shows at night on the trail, took in grand wilderness vistas, and weathered brutal heat at the Big Bend Ranch State Park.<sup>13</sup>

God has spoken through the desert, through storms, through the sea, and on the mountaintops. We listen to that speaking and learn of His power and creativity.

But God has spoken by other means, sometimes by dreams and visions.

*In Scripture, the prophets spoke by way of dreams and visions*

God spoke to Abraham through a vision that let him know that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan.

God spoke to Jacob's son, Joseph, through dreams that predicted his family's future.

At other times, God spoke something about Himself by the miraculous. Miracles can be worth thousands of words.

*In Scripture, the prophets spoke through the miraculous*

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<sup>13</sup> Every time we go to BBRSP we are impressed by what is true, physically, and spiritually, "Water is life."

God spoke very clearly to the Egyptians by the ten plagues that preceded the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. Those miracles all spoke “power” and “sovereignty.”

Prophets like Elijah and Elisha performed miracles that spoke of God’s authority to suspend the “laws” of nature He Himself had put in place. By those two prophets, people were raised from the dead, famines struck, and droughts ended.

God’s miracles are exclamation marks, shouting His ability to do whatever He wants to do whenever He wants to do it. They speak of God’s meddling, intervening ways.

And then, sometimes, God spoke by speaking.

*In Scripture, the prophets spoke as God’s mouthpieces*

God spoke judgment and grace to Adam and Eve. God spoke deliverance to Noah. God spoke a commission to Moses from a burning bush. God thundered from Sinai as the people trembled at the foot of the mountain.

God also spoke by using prophets as His mouthpieces. They rebuked the nation of Israel for her sin, and they told the people what was going to happen in the future.<sup>14</sup>

God has certainly spoken to mankind.

But, as Hebrews 1:1 tells us, in God’s past speaking, something was always missing.

### **In the Past, God Spoke to Us - as God - “in many portions”**

***[1] God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in many PORTIONS.***

God’s speaking in past times were always true, but never complete.

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<sup>14</sup> God has even been known to use non-humans to get across His message, as in *angels* and even *Balaam’s donkey*. (Numbers 22).

And the reason that all the speakings from Old Testament times came in “*portions*” was because in them, GOD spoke *as* GOD to PEOPLE. Nothing ever bridged the gap between us and God.

The author of Hebrews says that God has now bridged that gap.

### **In These Days, God Has Spoken to Us - as One of Us! (v. 2)**

***[2] in these last days, He has spoken to us in His Son.***<sup>15</sup>

The story that tells us of God’s Person and His ways is complete in His Son, Jesus, the One who walked on earth for thirty-three years, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day rose from the grave.

The writer now makes rapid-fire remarks about Jesus, beginning with a word that is critical to understanding the whole letter.

### **Listen! God’s Son Has Been Appointed Heir of All Things (v. 2a)**

***[2]...whom He appointed heir of all things***

We will hear a lot about the theme of “inheritance” in Hebrews. The letter has a lot to say about how believers in Jesus may receive an inheritance.

But that is not the point of the reference here. Here, the One who inherits, the Heir, is Jesus.

- At some point, Jesus, God’s Son, was made something that He previously had not been: an heir.
- At some point, God gave Jesus something that He did not formerly have: an inheritance.

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<sup>15</sup> The original Greek does not include the definite article with “*Son*.” Reading along in Greek, we translate, “*In these last days, God has spoken in Son...*” The absence of the article (“the”) gives the noun, “Son,” an adverbial sense, something like, “*In these last days, God has spoken ‘Son-wise.’*”

Jesus is now the heir of “*all things*”; He will inherit “*all things*.”

Hold on to that thought. We’ll come back to it shortly.

We continue to listen, to ask God to open our ears, as the writer lists truths about God’s Son that, taken together, explain how He came to be appointed “*heir of all things*.”

### **Listen! The Son is Supreme and Excels Over All (vv. 3-4)**

#### **The Son is Sovereign Over Creation (vv. 2b, 3b)**

*The Son framed the ages*

***[2b]...in these last days has spoken to us in His Son...through whom He also made the world***

The translation captures the thought. “*God made the world through His Son, who was the active Agent of creation.*” But the phrase is, literally, “*[the Son] made (or “framed”) the ages.*”

The Son put the world together. He put history, the ages, together.

The Son put the various realms of sky, earth, sea, deep space, and heaven together. There’s more. Listen.

*The Son rules the cosmos*

***[2b]...in these last days has spoken to us in His Son...[3b]...[who] upholds all things by the word of His power.***<sup>16</sup>

The Son is the Power source controlling the universe. He keeps all the systems necessary to run the cosmos - stellar cycles that allow

us to predict a solar eclipse to the minute, the hydrologic cycle, the seasons, the tides - going strong by His powerful word.<sup>17</sup>

There is nothing in all of creation that is as powerful as the Son, its Creator. And there is more.

#### **The Son is the Exact Representation of God (v. 3a)**

***[3a] And He is the radiance<sup>18</sup> of His glory and the exact representation of His nature...***

*In terms of His Person...*

The Son gives us a perfect image of whatever God is.

Pull out a coin and you’ll see stamped on it the image of Abraham Lincoln (penny), Thomas Jefferson (nickel), Franklin D. Roosevelt (dime), George Washington (quarter), and John F. Kennedy (half-dollar).

The coins are the stamp of the presidents’ image. Jesus is the stamp of God’s image.

We say that God is Jesus-shaped. Whatever we might have wanted to know about God, we discover by looking at Jesus.

*In terms of His life...*

Jesus’ miracles “speak” God. After turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana, He gave sight to the blind, healed the lame, cast out demons, walked on water, calmed storms, fed multitudes, cleansed lepers, and raised the dead.

At the end of His Sermon on the Mount, people who had listened were amazed. They had never heard anyone “speak” like THAT before.

<sup>16</sup> The Apostle John started off his Gospel with the same thought. *[1] In the beginning was the Word. [2] And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.*

<sup>17</sup> See Colossians 1:17.

<sup>18</sup> Greek *apaugasma* (*απαυγασμα*)- radiance (active) or reflection (passive).

In every way and in all His ways, Jesus was the exact representation of God.

The Son then did what no one would have ever imagined God would do.

### **The Son Made Purification of Sins (v. 3c)**

***[3c]...When He had made purification of sins...<sup>19</sup>***

*The death of Jesus*

When we come to the end of His earthly life, nobody recognized the Son as the miracle-working Creator and Sustainer of the universe He was. No, they nailed Him to a cross. He died a horrible death.

It was Jesus' choice to die on a Roman cross, because in no other way could He win salvation for us. He had to offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice to pay the price to redeem us from our sin.

And glory to God, the cross wasn't the end of the Son's story.

After dying on a Friday, those who came to embalm His body on Sunday found the tomb empty, because He had been raised from the dead.

Of all the powers that hold sway over us, none is so powerful as death. And yet, Jesus conquered death. Not even the grave could hold Him. By the Son's resurrection, God spoke of His own power and love.

*The exaltation of Jesus*

***[3c]...When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,***

Having faithfully finished the work He came to earth to accomplish, Jesus has now "**sat down.**"

At the end of a hard day's work, we may sit down because we're tired. That isn't why the Son sat down.

No, the image of Jesus sitting down takes us back to the Old Testament place of worship - the tabernacle.

In the innermost chambers of that tent, there were a few pieces of furniture. A table. A lampstand. An altar. The ark of the covenant. But there was no chair.

There was no need for a chair because the work of the priest was never done. There was always one more offering to bring, one more sacrifice to make.

But now that the Son has finished His work (the work of making "**purification for sins**" by His death and resurrection for people like us) there is nothing left for Him to do. So, He sat down at the Father's right hand.

If we look at any phase of the life of the Son, we are looking at God Himself. In Him we see God's wisdom, God's love, and God's power.

Through the Son, God speaks of His creative work. Through the Son, God speaks of His redemptive work. Through the Son, God speaks more completely than He ever had since the world began.

And as we have listened to all of this, we now listen to the final words of our letter's introduction.

### **Conclusion:**

***[4a] having become so much better than the angels...***

The Son "**became**"<sup>20</sup> something He had not been.

In eternity past, when the Son was in glory with the Father and the Spirit, He was exalted above all things. And throughout human

<sup>19</sup> The Greek phrasing stresses the finality of Jesus' sacrificial work.

<sup>20</sup> Greek *ginomai* (*ginomai*) here which means "became" speaks not of the divine nature of the Son, but of the human nature which did not exist eternally.

history, the Son was preeminent and supreme over everything, including the angels.

But something happened at Bethlehem.

When the third member of the Trinity was born to the virgin, Mary, in Bethlehem's stables, He took on humanity and was made ***“a little lower than the angels.”*** (Hebrews 2:9)

While Jesus walked the earth, He lived and loved and serve like no one else. He taught and performed miracles in dependence on the Father and the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

But He didn't look very majestic. He was, in every way except sin, just like one of us.<sup>22</sup> As lowly as us, and lower than the angels.

Not anymore. Now the Son is ***“so much better than the angels.”***

So much better, ***[4b]...to the extent that He has inherited a more excellent name than they.***

There's that thought again of *inheritance* that we saw in Hebrews 1:2.

From eternity past, the second Person of the trinity had always had the name and position of “Son.” And it had always been exclusively a reference to His deity.

But now He has inherited the name ***“Son”*** with a new and deeper significance, since He is both fully God AND fully human.<sup>23</sup>

And on what basis did He receive this inheritance?

The Son's inheritance was not given to Him by virtue of His being the second member of the trinity, but by virtue of His faithful life.

He is ***“heir of all things”*** because He faithfully persevered in carrying out the Father's assignment to become one of us, live a perfect life, offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and conquer the grave.

This is Jesus, the Son, our Savior. He is preeminent. The Jesus way of living is superior to any way that came before (Judaism, the Mosaic Law) and anything that might vie for our allegiance today.

Nothing compares to Jesus - and we give to Him our unalloyed trust, commitment, and love.

<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 12:28; Isaiah 42:1, fulfilled in Jesus per Luke 4:14-19.

<sup>22</sup> That thought is made explicit, here in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi: ***[ 2:5] Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, [6] who, as He already existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, [7] but emptied Himself by taking the form of a bond-servant and being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death: death on a cross.***

<sup>23</sup> See Romans 1:4; Philippians 2:9-11