

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)

Choosing to Refuse Spiritual Drift

(Hebrews 1:5--2:4)

Study #2

Introduction: Paying attention where attention is due...

When I'm flying, I don't pay much attention to the pre-flight instructions from the flight attendant. I've heard it before. I use that time to doze off, open the laptop, or start a book.

On the other hand, if I want to travel on 1604 past IH-10 this weekend, I'll pay attention to news about closures on that soon-to-be-wonderful mess of an intersection.

If I'm going camping, I'll pay attention to the weather forecast for the time I'm on the trail. I don't usually change my camping plans based on weather, but I want to be prepared for heat, cold, or storms.

The closer to home, the more personal, and the higher the stakes, the more important it is to pay attention to what is spoken.

With that warning in mind, we're paying lots of attention, again, to the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, where the stakes are really high, and the message is intensely personal.

We launched this series of studies last Sunday. I told you that we would be exposed to lots of content from the Old Testament. OK. Most of what we'll read today are quotes from various psalms. (specifically Psalms 2, 97, 104,45, 102, or 110!)

It makes sense that the writer would quote psalms, given his target audience. He was writing to small groups of Christian Jews who knew these psalms. They grew up with them. Quoting psalms gave credibility to the message.

It will be our treat today to see how skillfully our author weaves the message of these psalms together to deliver his message.

Our passage for today picks up where we ended last week, with a comment about angels.

The Angels are Inferior to the Heir of All Things (1:4, 5)

About Angels...

Why were angels introduced?

You might have been surprised last week when you heard what might have seemed like an out-of-the-blue comment about the superiority of Jesus to angels.

Specifically - ***[4] [the Son] having become so much better than the angels, to the extent that He has inherited a more excellent name than they.***¹

Some scholars believe that the writer made this comparison between the son and the angels because many first-century Jews were preoccupied with the theme of angels. And that may be the case.

Today, for the most part, we are not preoccupied with angels. But, since they are a major part of what we'll see in the Bible today, we'll consider them now.

¹ The meaning of the verse is that the name / title "***Son***" - which was the name of the second Member of the Trinity from all eternity - has been vested with new and deeper meaning now that He is not only fully divine, but fully human, thanks to the incarnation. The idea of "***inherit***" indicates that the Son acquired this new significance to His Name by virtue of His faithfulness to God. (1:3)

What we know about angels

First, there is way more about angels that we don't know than we do.

We don't know how or when they were created,² how many there are, or what their limitations and abilities are.

We do know that they are not animals, not human, not God. They are a different class of sentient beings.

We also know from the impression they usually make on people to whom they appear that they are impressive beings.

Trace through the New Testament occurrences of angels - especially in the New Testament narratives surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus - and you' hear angels saying, ***"Don't be afraid!"***³ People who saw angels were often terrified. They looked human, but, in an unsettling way, not quite. Human-ish. They are awesome beings.

But, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, God has said things about the Son that He has never said about angels.

About the Son... (v. 5; Psalm 2:7)

[Hebrews 1:5] For to which of the angels did He ever say, (Psalm 2:7) "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE FATHERED YOU"?
And again,
"I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM
AND HE WILL BE A SON TO ME"?

Crowning the kings of Israel (Psalm 2)

That's a quote from Psalm 2, so let's see what that verse meant in its original context.

We call Psalm 2 an enthronement psalm. That is, it was read on the day that a Jewish king was crowned king in Jerusalem. The ***"Today"*** of the psalm is the day of enthronement for a king of Israel.

On that day, the king inherited a name. He would be referred to as God's ***"son."*** (lower case) People viewed the king as having been adopted by God.

That idea aligns perfectly with the promise made to King David that David's descendants would be God's "sons." (That promise is a part of what we call "The Davidic Covenant.;" 2 Samuel 7)⁴

This kind of enthronement never happened to an angel.⁵ As impressive as angelic beings are, they are not meant to rule. But it did happen to Israel's kings. And it did happen to God's capital-S Son, Jesus. Again, listen to Hebrews 1:5.

Crowning the Son! (v. 5)

[5] For to which of the angels did He ever say, (Psalm 2:7) "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE FATHERED YOU"?
And again,
"I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM
AND HE WILL BE A SON TO ME"?

The eternal Sonship of Jesus

Now, to review, the second Member of the Trinity existed with the Father and the Spirit as "Son" from all eternity.

Applying this verse to Jesus does not in any way deny His eternal Sonship.

But here the author tells us that something happened on a certain ***"Today"*** that forever changed Jesus' ***"Son"*** status.

² As opposed to humankind, for we find the description of the creation of the first man and first woman in Genesis 2.

³ See Matthew 1:20; 28:5; Luke 1:12-13, 30; 2:10.

⁴ 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2 were taken Messianically by the community at Qumran. Theodor Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, 1964.

⁵ Angels are, collectively, called ***"sons of God,"*** but never in this kingly sense. (See Genesis 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1, 38:7)

The inherited Sonship of Jesus, the God-man

On some **“Today,”** the Person of the Son was **“fathered”** by Almighty God. That **“Today”** was not the day that Mary conceived Jesus by the agency of the Holy Spirit or on the day that He was born in Bethlehem.

That **“Today”** was the day that Jesus, made **“purification of sins”** by dying on the cross for you and me and then **“sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.”** (Hebrews 1:3)

Prior to His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus was a Son by virtue of His eternal nature.

After that **“Today,”** now, like all Jewish kings, Jesus, has become “Son” in a new and expanded sense. He, now and for all time fully divine and fully human, is King of kings and Lord of lords!⁶

As our writer continues to quote from Old Testament psalms, he doesn't write about what God didn't say about the angels. He writes about the preeminence of the Son.

The Son Has Authority Over All Things (1:6-12)

The Son Receives the Angels' Worship (vv. 6-7; Psalm 97:7; 104:4)

[6] And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, (Psalm 97:7) “AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM.”
[7] And regarding the angels He says, (Psalm 104:4) He makes His angels winds, And His ministers a flame of fire.”

More on angels... (v. 7)

First, look at the second verse (v. 7) where it seems to me that we learn something about angels.

This psalm likens them to elements of nature.

- Like wind and fire, angels are immaterial and unstable.
- Like fire, angels are pure and purifying.
- Like wind, angels may be still, move fast or move slow. They may blow like bitter cold in the winter or hot, may be helpful like a windmill or destructive like a hurricane, are wholly unpredictable.⁷

Angels worship the “firstborn” (v. 6)

That description validates what we have always thought. Angels are amazing. Awesome...and they worship the Son, here called **“the firstborn.”**⁸

The central thought here is that in the ages to come, the super-impressive angels will worship the Messiah, God's Son. The Son's role as king now takes center stage.

The Son Fulfills the Role of King (vv. 8-9; Psalm 45:6-7)

[8] But regarding the Son He says, (Psalm 45:6) “YOUR THRONE, GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE SCEPTER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM.
[9] (Psalm 45:7) YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS;
THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF JOY ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS.”
The reign of the king of Israel

The reference to “God” / “god”

⁶ And, by the acquisition of the new significance of the name **“Son,”** the way is prepared for Him to inherit all things. (1:2; 2:5)

⁷ Or, maybe, as one scholar suggested, *“The angels are portrayed as executing the divine commands with the swiftness of wind and the strength of fire.”* (F.F. Bruce)

⁸ Jewish tradition was to give inheritance rights to the firstborn son. So, calling the Son **“firstborn”** emphasizes His inheritance of the world to come.

You'll remember that Psalm 2 (quoted in v. 5) was an enthronement psalm. Psalm 45 (quoted here) is a psalm that celebrated the marriage of a king.⁹

So, as we have already done with Psalm 2, let's look to see what these two verses (8-9) meant, originally, in Psalm 45.

The Jewish king of Israel is referred to here, by way of extreme hyperbole, as "god"

It may sound odd to us, but it was always the vision that the Jewish king would be a righteous king, upholding God's Law and God's ways, opposing lawlessness. He would be God's representative to the nation, the lower case "god" to the nation.¹⁰

Then, as we keep reading, we come to a very important reference to the king's "**companions**."¹¹

The reference to "companions"

In both the ancient and modern worlds, a king, or a president, or a prime minister will surround himself with close, trusted family members and friends to serve in his kingdom or cabinet.¹²

He will often give these "**companions**" weighty responsibilities and significant leadership roles.¹³

Hebrews says that what that psalm says about the king of Israel, in hyperbole, is fulfilled, in fact, in the coming reign of the Royal Son.

⁹ Perhaps the wedding of Solomon.

¹⁰ We Americans have never lived under a monarchy, so it is difficult for us to reckon with the language of kingship here.

¹¹ The Greek word is "metochoi." (*μετοχοι*)

¹² There are records of this happening throughout the Ancient Near East, and among the Greek and Roman rulers. Caesar appointed Herod for this reason.

¹³ See the story of Rehoboam, the ungodly son of Solomon. (2 Kings 12) Wise men advised Rehoboam to take it easy on the people after Solomon's taxing ways. But the young king's "**companions**" advised him to treat the people harshly. Rehoboam listened to them, which led the northern tribes (Israel) to split from the southern tribes (Judah), dividing the nation.

The reign of the Son

The reference to "God"

First, the Son, Jesus, is God in the flesh. That is made clear in the Prologue of John's Gospel where John identifies Jesus as the "**Word**" who also created the world.

And John couldn't have been clearer when he wrote in his first letter -

[1 John 5:20] And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

Hebrews looks forward to a righteous reign for this Royal Son, who is God Himself. Then, second, the Royal Son will have, just like all kings have, "**companions**."

The reference to "companions"

King Jesus is going to have close and trusted family members and friends serving in His kingdom.

And with all that has been said today about how impressive and majestic the angels are, we might guess that the "**companions**" are going to be angels - and we would be wrong!

The idea of "**companions**" (Greek: *metochoi*) who rule with Jesus in His kingdom occurs four other times in the letter to the Hebrews. Each time it is clear that the reference is to Christians.¹⁴

Early readers of this letter would have associated the "**companions**" with the apostles. And no doubt that the apostles are in view. But there is no reason to stop there.

¹⁴ See Hebrews 3:1, 14; 6:4; 12:8 - for metochoi.

In fact, here is a spoiler alert: What we will see in Hebrews is that every Christian has the chance to become the Son's "**companion**" in His coming kingly reign IF we walk with Him faithfully in this life, firm until the end, even when following Jesus is tough.

The last quote from psalms in this section is from Psalm 102.

The Son Does NOT Change (vv. 10-12; Psalm 102:25-27))

**[10] And, (Psalm 102:25) "YOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS;
[11] (Psalm 102:26) THEY WILL PERISH, BUT YOU REMAIN; AND THEY ALL WILL WEAR OUT LIKE A GARMENT,
[12] (Psalm 102:27) AND LIKE A ROBE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END."**

The words of the psalmist applied to himself (Psalm 102)

Psalm 102 starts with the psalmist crying out for help because his enemies are trying to kill him. He suffers. He is persecuted.

He prays that God will not "**take him away**" (that is, will not let him be destroyed). He prays for life and for deliverance from his enemies in a hostile and unstable world where everything is in flux, everything is transitory.

To that, we say, "**Amen!**"

This is our reality: Every human institution, every nation, every organization is unstable. No person is completely reliable. Nature is capricious.

That was the psalmist's reality, too. But then he focused on the LORD. God is changeless. Stable. Permanent. The psalmist found rest for his soul in God.

The words of Psalm 102 come with great impact to us as they are applied to the Royal Son.

The words of the psalmist applied to the Son (Hebrews)

The writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 102 to teach us that Jesus, the Royal Son is immutable, unchangeable, solid, eternal.

His eternality guarantees the immutability of His coming kingdom. He will be King forever. Even when heaven and earth are undone, when the earth is shaken, the Royal Son's kingdom will endure, unshaken.¹⁵

So, to sum up what we've seen so far...
...the angels serve; the Son rules.
...the angels worship; the Son is worshiped.
...the angels are linked to the natural creation (wind, fire); the Son is the Creator and will outlast them.
...the angels change; the Son is immutable.

The writer then switches back to the theme of angels, which tells us that we've come to the end of this section.

The Angels Serve the Heirs of Salvation (1:13-14; Psalm 110:1)

Angels Do Not Reign (v. 13)

[13] But to which of the angels has He ever said, (Psalm 110:1) "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET"?

The psalm's original meaning

In the Old Testament, Psalm 110 is well-known for its focus on the coming reign of the righteous king. This psalm looks forward to the reign of the Royal Son, the Messiah.

¹⁵ See Heb. 12:26-28 where this point is proved.

The meaning of the psalm as it occurs in Hebrews

The point here is that it is the role of the Son to rule and to reign. The Son will triumph over His enemies.

It is explicitly NOT for the angels to rule and reign. But...angels do have a role to play in the lives of the Son's "**companions.**"

Angels are Ministering Spirits (v. 14; Psalm 103:20)

[14] Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to provide service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

Angels are "ministering / serving spirits"

As we have seen, angels are impressive beings. But today we understand that they fill inferior roles. They worship the Son AND they serve people - or at least those people who will "**inherit salvation.**"

Contrary to popular understanding, the author doesn't say that every Christian has a guardian angel. In fact, he doesn't even say that every Christian is in view in this verse.

Let me explain.

A word about writers, authors, books, letters...

All words have ranges of meaning. In one context a word will mean one thing and in another context it will have a slightly different meaning. Both are legitimate meanings.

And one author may use a certain word in one way, while another author will use the same word in a somewhat different way. Both are legitimate uses.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews has a writing style that is different from the other writers of the New Testament.

In terms of polish and style, he is similar to Luke. In his theological focus, he is similar to Paul. But the most glaring uniqueness of the author of Hebrews is his Jewishness.

His themes are not those of the Gentile world, but of the Jewish world. That is fitting, given that his target audience was Jewish-background Christians.

In addition, his vocabulary has a definite Jewish slant. When using words that have a broad range of meaning, his usage always ranged toward the extreme Jewish end of that range.

That is exactly the case with his use of the word "**salvation,**" (Greek *σωτηρια*) which he uses here.

We understand this because there is a very broad range of meaning for the word "save" in English.

We can save money or time. We can save coupons, be saved from drowning by a lifeguard, or, if we are a goalie, make a save by stopping the ball or the puck from going through the goal.

In English, we can also use the word the word "save" to describe God's work of giving someone the gift of eternal life when they believe in Jesus. And we very often use "save" to mean that.

The Bible also uses the word to refer to deliverance from final condemnation from God. But that is by no means the most common use of the word in the Bible.

Salvation / *Σωτηρια* has a very broad range of meaning in Scripture. Most generally, it means deliverance.

The word can refer to deliverance of someone from anything - from a shipwreck (Acts 27:20), from sinking while walking on the sea (Matthew 14:30), from dying on a cross (Mark 15:30; John 12:27), from a flood (1 Peter 3:20), or from sickness (Acts 4:9).

So, in writing here that angels serve those "**who will inherit salvation,**" does he mean to say that angels serve those who have been justified before God on the basis of faith in Jesus and who have received the free gift of eternal life?

Well, given that the Greek translation of the Old Testament that our author was using (we call it the Septuagint, or LXX) almost never used "save" in that way, probably not.

A survey of the use of the word - salvation / σωτηρια - in the Old Testament shows that it has a fairly fixed meaning.

It refers to deliverance from earthly enemies or from troubles and the enjoyment of God's blessings that follow that deliverance.¹⁶

The word hardly ever (if ever) refers to justification before God or to receiving eternal life from God on the basis of faith.¹⁷

The angel's service to those who will inherit salvation

So, if we put ourselves in the shoes of the Jewish writer and the first-century Jewish readers, we would not assume that the word "salvation" here relates to eternal life.¹⁸

No. Our author is referring to a deliverance *from* trouble and *into* God's blessings.

Couple that understanding with the word "*inherit*" and we get a clear idea of what the writer to the Hebrews is saying here.

Specifically, angels will serve those who will inherit great enjoyment of God's rich blessings in the life to come because, even while suffering greatly, they are still following Jesus.¹⁹

¹⁶ For a sampling, see Psalm 3:3, 9; 17:3, 36, 47, 51; 34:3; 36:39; 37:23; 43:5; 68:30; 70:15; 117:14, 15, 21, 28; 139:8; 143:10.

¹⁷ The word *sozo* appears more than three hundred times in the Greek translation of the OT (Septuagint). 98% of its uses refer to "deliverance from temporal calamities" such as death, from enemies, troubles, or physical ailments. Only six uses have a spiritual context, and none of those have the "eternal life" meaning.

¹⁸ The same would be true for the other letters written to primarily Jewish audiences: James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude.

¹⁹ After all, if Jesus inherited a better name than the angels by virtue of His faithful life, it is only reasonable to assume that the people who will "*inherit salvation*" (the Son's "*companions*") will have done so by virtue of their faithful life.

We are not told what sort of service the angels provide. But two ideas surface here that are great encouragements to us to be faithful to follow Jesus, even when life gets tough.

- (1) The Royal Son will win the final victory.
- (2) Angels will help us through troubles as we faithfully follow.

Today, our time together in Scripture ends with a warning.

About the warnings in the letter to the Hebrews...

The book of Hebrews follows a pattern of giving content and then following that content with a warning: Don't ignore the content!²⁰

Before reading the warning, let's not be confused about the recipients of the warning.

The writer, clearly a Christian, issues this warning to fellow Christians. Six times we read "*us*" and "*we*." This warning - and all of Hebrews' warnings - are directed at those of us who believe in Jesus.²¹

Here is the letter's first warning.

Conclusion: A Warning... (2:1-4)

[2:1] For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.

[2] For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every violation and act of disobedience received a just punishment, [3] how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, [4] God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders, and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

²⁰ Each successive warning in Hebrews increases in solemnity and weight. This first warning is the most gentle.

²¹ The most serious failure in the interpretation of Hebrews is the eviscerating of its warning passages by saying that they are addressed to unbelievers.

After reminding us that those who didn't obey Moses ("**the word spoken through angels**"²²) were punished,²³ the writer assures us that the "**so great a 'salvation'**" message of Jesus that we have just heard is far greater than the message of Moses.

Christians must place the "**so great a salvation**" message in the first place in our hearts and minds. We've got to pay primary attention to that.

And what is the "**salvation**" in view? It is the unbelievably glorious but true possibility of being Jesus' "**companions**" in His coming kingdom.²⁴

By all means, we don't want to "**neglect**" or ignore this! We don't want to "**drift away**" from a focused attention on this glorious possibility.

But...drifting away is a possibility.

Like a boat that is tied to a dock will drift away when the rope connecting the boat to the dock is removed, so a Christian who doesn't rope himself to the possibility of being Jesus' future "**companion**" will drift away from following Jesus when life is hard.²⁵

Drift doesn't happen overnight. Drift and neglect are slow to develop and are usually preceded by a gradual decrease in prayerfulness, a decrease in service for Jesus.

This leads to a cooling of passion for Jesus, which paves the way for drift.

Arm yourself against drift by paying way more attention to the supremacy of Jesus than to anything else.

Pay more attention to Him than to announcements about closures of 1604 and IH-10, weather reports prior to a camping trip, the rise or fall of the stock market, the reports of problems abroad or at home, or any other news that may come our way.

Arm yourself against drift by thinking long-long term. Don't make a 5-year plan or a 10-year plan for what you want your life to look like in a decade. Make a 90-year plan, or a 200-year plan.

What do you want your experience with Jesus to be like in glory? Do you want to reign with Him, be one of His "**companions**"?

Great! Follow Him now.

Todd was right last week. This life is training time for reigning time. Imagine yourself serving in Jesus' glorious cabinet, an inheritance you have received because of your faithfulness in following Him here and now.²⁶

²² See Galatians 3:19; Acts 7:53 (Also Ps 68:17)

²³ We will soon see an example of that punishment in Hebrews 3-4 as the writer explores the generation of Israelites who died in the wilderness after refusing the land of Canaan that God offered them. The punishment mentioned here does not equate to an eternity in hell, but is a judgment against the people of God.

²⁴ Same thing as the salvation of 1:14.

²⁵ Greek usage: Of a ring that constantly slips off a finger. To take a wrong course. A crumb of food passing into the windpipe.

²⁶ Perseverance to the end and faithfully doing the will of God are the conditions for obtaining the inheritance-salvation in Hebrews. Hebrews describes salvation in terms of co-rulership with Christ in the coming kingdom.