Jesus is Greater – and why it matters
Hebrews 1:5-2:4

We've started our new series on Hebrews, we don't really know who wrote it, but from what we can tell it was written around the middle of the first century, to a group of Jewish Christians in Rome, who were facing rising persecution and are wondering whether the best thing wouldn't be to just throw in the towel, and press the eject button on being Christians, and turn their back on Jesus, and go back to Judaism. And the writer is writing to them to encourage them, don't do that, stand firm in Jesus.

Hebrews 1:1-2:4

Now we live in strange days, don't we? We live in a day of contrasts. On the one hand we have the new atheists – men like Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens, pressing their case that this physical life is all there is and you're kissing your brains good-bye to think otherwise; whilst on the other – in popular literature and fiction there is this seemingly insatiable desire for the supernatural and the other-wordly. Who would have thought that in the day of Dawkins, books which revolve around the complicated love lives of vampires and werewolves, or million dollar films about hobbits and elves would be at the top of the charts. And amazingly, take a look at the cheap end of the best-seller lists and you'll find more than one romance or story of rescue involving an angelic being.

It's as if all the combined power of the secular, atheistic elite cannot quench the inner desire of people to connect with something deeper outside of ourselves, other beings even, that live on a different plane to us.

And yet, there's still something strange to our modern ears about the writer opening things up by talking about angels. I mean, just imagine that you had a friend. And they had recently become a Christian, but as a result they were beginning to experience opposition. Their family is unhappy about this turn of events and putting the pressure on. Things at work are not going well – their work colleagues are beginning to shun your friend, and his boss is making life really difficult and he's at risk of losing his job. And as a result your friend is thinking about giving up. The pressure and the cost of being a Christian is too much and he's talking about leaving the church and going back to how life was before.

And so thinking it might help them, you suggest they come to see me or Mark. And they do. And you meet up with them a day or two later and ask them how it went. Now, just imagine if your friend told you, 'well, I went to see Martin, and it was ok, but he just sat there and talked to me about angels.' You'd think, 'what? Angels? My friend's on the verge of walking away from the faith and he talks about angels? I mean that just confirms everything I ever thought about the English! Cloud cuckoo land!' And let's face it, I doubt there are any books on Christian counseling that would give that as a way in.

So why does the writer do that? His friends in Rome are feeling the heat, persecution is increasing, they're at risk of losing everything, maybe even their lives, and so they're contemplating turning their back on Jesus and going back to the protection of the synagogue. In fact some of them may already have done

that. So why does he take the tack that he does? Why go into detail on why Jesus is greater than angels?

Well, before we look at that, I want to get you to think like a first century Jew. Because you and I might hear the word *angel*, and think of chubby, naked babies with wings flying around the Sistene Chapel. Or a sexualized, muscled guy with wings on his back. But to a first century Jew angels were revered. These were the beings who stood in the presence of God, and Jewish tradition had it that the Law of Moses, the Covenant of God with His people Israel was put into effect by angels.

Now the Old Testament doesn't say that explicitly, but that was their tradition, and they got it from Deuteronomy 33:2 – 'The Lord came from Sinai [where the Law was given]… with ten thousands of his holy ones.' That is, tens of thousands of angels were there when the law was given. And you see that tradition working its way out in the New Testament. So when Stephen is making his defense before the Sanhedrin, just before they stone him to death, he says to the Jewish leaders, 'you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it' (Acts 7:53). And the apostle Paul says in Galatians 3:19 that the Law 'was put in place through angels.'

So, the people who first heard this letter, when they heard about angels, they didn't think chubby babies, or some kind of sexed up heavenly being. They thought of powerful messengers from God, who had communicated the Law to Moses – which just happened to be the very way of life these Jewish Christians were considering turning back to: to the Law.

Which is why the writer needs them to see that Jesus is way superior to angels, and the message He brings is superior to theirs.

Jesus is Greater

Now if you're in in an argument, and things are getting heated and you want to convince someone you're right and they're wrong, more than likely you'll deploy some authority other than yourself. 'Well, you might think that but I read this article or I saw this television program, or this other person said so and so and they agree with me, so I must be right.' And that's what the writer does here, except he takes what both he and his listeners know to be authoritative – the Old Testament. And through three pairs of quotes, and a seventh one that stands out on its own, he shows them, 'look, I want you to see it in here, this isn't something I or anyone else has made up – it's here, the Son has always been greater than angels.'

Because of course, when it comes to matters of God, and eternity, we can't allow ourselves the luxury of 'you can have your version of the truth and I can have mine'. We can't accept the kind of wooly thinking that says your view and my view are both equally valid, even if they contradict each other. After all, if I'm saying Jesus is God and you're saying he's not, one of us has to be wrong. And so the writer takes them to the Old Testament and says, 'come on, let's look at this together. I want you to see how much greater the Son is to angels, in fact, I want you to see that he's God.'

And the first thing he tells them is that:

1. His name is greater
v4-5, 'having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'you are my Son, today I have begotten you.'

What does the name 'angel' mean? It means, 'messenger'. But that's not the name the Old Testament gives to the Messiah. It says, and the writer quotes from Psalm 2, that God calls him 'My Son'. And the writer opens with this rhetorical question: Which angel did God ever say that to? Which angel ever got singled out and called 'My Son', by God the Father. And, of course, the answer is – none. God never said that about any angel. To be given the name 'Son' is infinitely greater than to be called 'messenger', because of what it conveys.

But then he goes on to tell them a second way the son is greater, with the second pair of Old Testament quotes. The Son is:

2.Worthy of Worship
v6: 'And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "let all God's angels worship him."

Now the Bible is pretty clear that only God is worthy of worship. In fact when someone tries to worship an angel in the Bible, the angel is quick to stop it. Because worship is what we offer to God and no-one else. And here the writer says, but look at what the Old Testament says – and it doesn't just *suggest* angels worship the Son, it says God commands it. So the very beings – angels – which we so revere, worship the Son.

Why? Because He is in a different league to them. You see, whilst God commands that the Son be worshipped, in v7 the writer quotes from Psalm 104 which says, 'he makes his angels winds and his ministers a flame of fire.' So, impressive as angels are, these bright burning seraphs are servants, who worship the Son. And the implication is, if the angels worship him, shouldn't we?

But then he moves on to the third pair of Old Testament quotes and the third thing he wants us to grasp:

3. He never changes
Now if it hasn't dawned on you already who the writer is saying Jesus the Son is, it should now as he quotes from Psalm 45 – a psalm that refers to the Messiah as God. V8: 'But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God is forever and ever' and then he goes on in v10-12 to quote from Psalm 102, words originally written about God – but which he uses to describe Jesus the Son: v10: 'You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands.'

In other words he's saying, 'Listen – the angels are created beings, incredible, powerful, sure, but still a part of this creation. But the Son, Jesus, is the creator.'

But there's another reason why he chooses Psalm 102. Just listen again to what he quotes: v10-12 'You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.'

You see, if you read the whole of Psalm 102, you'll see it is written by someone whose life is falling apart, whose world is collapsing around him; who realizes that the only solid ground in this world is God and His faithfulness. That though everything else falls apart, and wears out like a piece of clothing, it's only God who never changes.

And that's what these Jewish Christians were experiencing, and what you and I experience: A changing, shifting, unstable world. Circumstances change, health fails, jobs disappear, friends go away, persecution comes. This world is like shifting sands. But though life is unstable, Christ is solid rock. Though everything else in your life may be up in the air, Christ is firmly planted. And it is only Christ who remains unchanged – the one solid rock you can stand on. It's why the writer will say later on in 13:8, that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.'

And the implication is: why exchange the unchanging Jesus, whose love and grace and faithfulness to you are constant, for something that is passing away?

But then he wraps this section of quotes up with a clever little trick. So far he's quoted three pairs of Old Testament passages, but for his last quote he just gives one – it's the seventh and final quote, and he does it that way to make it stand out, and he brings things full circle by asking the same rhetorical question he asked at the beginning. It's the 4th thing he wants them and us to know about the Son:

4. He Rules

This is the one He wants to get the emphasis. V13, 'and to which of the angels has [God] ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstall for your feet'?

You remember when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, John the Baptist's father? He says to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.' And that's right – angels get to stand before the Almighty God. But Jesus the Son gets to sit at His right hand, in the place of ultimate exaltation. And He rules.

But this verse tells us a couple of other things as well. And that is that Christ has enemies, and they're not yet under His feet. Which is why these first century Christians, and you and I still face trials and opposition, because there are those who oppose God and what he's doing through Jesus: Christ has enemies. But it tells us something else as well: one day Jesus will be totally victorious. And that is why the writer's friends and you and I can face suffering and opposition with hope. You don't see it now, but Christ rules and He reigns and one day every enemy will be under His feet.

But let's just say it again: why does Jesus being superior to angels matter, then and now?

The Danger of Drift

Now you could answer 'why does this matter?' by saying, nothing could matter more. You've got to think right about God – if you get who God is and what He is like wrong, everything else goes wrong, including society. And you'd be right. To think right about God is crucial. And arguably every sect or cult goes wrong precisely because it gets who Jesus is wrong.

But that's not the tack the writer takes.

Chapter 2:1, having established Jesus is far superior to angels says, 'therefore [this matters because] we must pay more careful attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.' And that's why he's gone into such detail. These Jewish Christians are in danger of drifting away from what they have heard about Jesus, and going back to Judaism and the law, put into place by angels. They're in danger of not paying attention to the message brought by the Son.

Now, don't you think it's interesting that he talks about drifting away and not running away? Because they're two different things aren't they? To turn around and run away requires some definite decision, some action. But drifting away – like a boat from it's mooring, can be much more insidious. You just have to go with the flow, you just have to be carried along by the currents. If the boat isn't anchored properly, or tied up properly, it doesn't need the skipper to give any command, it will just drift away. And that's the danger his friends were in – under pressure from the world, under the threat of persecution, under the pull of their Jewish community, under the draw of the grandeur of the Old Testament Law, to slowly drift away from the message of salvation in Jesus.

But what about us? You see, if they were in danger of drifting back to Judaism and the Law because of the angels involved in giving it, because of its grandeur, that's hardly likely to be your problem is it? I mean I don't think anyone has ever come to me and said, Martin, you won't be seeing so much of me, because of the angels.

So what are the parallels here for you and me? Well, firstly, there's the whole question of whose voice you take as authoritative. One of the points the writer is making here is that his friends shouldn't turn back to something lesser, something instituted through created beings, when the Gospel came through Jesus, God's Son. And whilst it might not be angels for you and me, it might be some TV personality – like Oprah Winfrey, America's High Priestess, or some religious leader, or philosopher or simply a friend, whose message you begin to listen to more than the Gospel.

Secondly, it doesn't have to be bad things that make you drift away. Sure these guys were feeling the heat of persecution, but there was also the draw of the Law and the grandeur of the angels. And so for you and me, it doesn't have to be bad

things, things we'd label as sin, that make us drift – it can be good things, great things, even God's gifts to us, like family, or work, or sport, things he's blessed us with. Things that aren't wrong in themselves, but you find yourself increasingly more drawn to them than to Christ, and you're in the current and drifting.

But thirdly, like these Christian's he's writing to, there is always the danger of drifting back to the Law, because it can seem so spiritual and good. And rather than clinging to Jesus, and anchoring ourselves on who He is and what He has done for us, rather than trusting in His grace and love for us, which we know we don't deserve, we drift back to the Law, and think we have to earn it. We drift back into thinking I need to keep the rules, and that's how I earn God's love and blessing; we drift back into thinking I'm made right with God by being good, or at least better than others, by living a certain way, or giving my money away. We drift back into thinking we're saved and life will flourish because of what we do rather than because of Jesus and what He has done; we drift back into judging others because they fail to meet our standards, and we forget we are all debtors to Jesus' grace.

So, if that's the danger, how does the writer tell us we can avoid it?

Well, he gives us three things here. The first is simply to recognize the danger, and that we're all at risk of it. Did you notice how in 2v1 and v3 he uses the word 'we' – *we* must pay closer attention, how shall *we* escape if *we* neglect. The writer knows he's no better than his friends, he knows he's at as much risk of this as anyone else. And having the humility that realizes that you need to tie your boat to Christ as much as anyone else is the first step in making sure you don't drift.

But the second line of defense against drifting is the fear of the consequences if you do. The writer says to them, look, if people were punished for rejecting God's law, which was declared by angels, v3, 'how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?', the gospel. And it's another rhetorical question: how can flee the burning house if you refuse to use the fire-escape? What hope of rescue is there if you turn away from the one who's come to rescue you? And the answer of course: none. You can't drift away and think it doesn't have present and eternal consequences. So you don't want to go there.

But as we finish just notice the third line of defense against drifting: v1 –'we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.' If there is this danger of drifting back into law, and if Jesus is who the Bible says he is, then the Gospel, the good news of God's love and grace to us in Jesus, is not something to neglect, it's something to marinade in. It's something to soak in. If we want to avoid drifting away then the surest way to ensure that doesn't happen is to let the message of what the writer calls this 'great salvation' – of who Jesus is and what He has done for us, sink in and penetrate our hearts