

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Message		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Hebrews 1:1-14		Gary L. W. Johnson
Date:	April 18, 2021 (a.m.)		

THE ENTHRONED JESUS

Last week we examined the Ascension of Christ into heaven and His exaltation. Vos asks: “What distinguishes sitting at the right hand of God as a stage of the exaltation from the ascension? The ascension had a twofold significance. In part, it had an independent significance as the transition of the Mediator from the sphere of the earth into the sphere of heaven according to His human nature, and concurrent with that, the change of this nature. In part, it was preparatory for sitting at God’s right hand. The lordship and majesty associated with the latter could only be exercised in heaven. For these reasons, it is impossible to speak of the ascension and to highlight its significance without bringing in the kingdom of power with it. Nonetheless, as a distinct stage of exaltation the ascension must be sharply separated from the reception of kingdom power, and the latter reserved for sitting at the right hand.”¹ Douglas Farrow, who has written extensively on the Ascension, argues that the ascension is the culminating event to which all the Old Testament pointed. He calls it “the very climax of salvation history.” Going further, he writes, “without the ascension not only would Luke’s story begin to disintegrate, but the biblical story as a whole would lack the outcome it demands” (p. 23). Farrow points to Luke, because his Gospel ends with the ascension (Luke 24:51-53) and his second volume Acts begins with the same (Acts 1:9-11). After explaining why we can take Luke’s account as history, instead of myth or mysticism, Farrow demonstrates how the ascension plays a key role in the New Testament. Consider a few of his points.

- In Acts 2 Peter’s first sermon “is not a sermon on the Holy Spirit we hear; nor is the focus on the resurrection. What we are offered is a sermon on the ascension of the risen Jesus to the throne, that is, to Israel’s throne *and* the throne of the Presence from which the Spirit goes forth” (p. 25).
- Paul’s experience with the ascended Christ is reported three times by Luke in Acts 9, 22, and 26, and importantly, the report of Jesus is not like that of the apostles after his resurrection. Farrow notes, “The differences we have in view have nothing to do with any alleged spiritualizing tendency in Paul, but everything to do with the fact that the situation of *Jesus* had changed” (21). In short, the resurrected Christ seen in the Gospels is not the same – in status or glory – as the exalted Christ in Acts.
- Hebrews too is informed by the ascension. So much so that Farrow states, “the ascension is that which determines both the shape and the content of his great epistle” (p. 33). Proving his point, Farrow shows in an appendix how the book of Hebrews is structured as a chiasm around the enthronement of Christ as high priest (pp. 279-80).
- Last, “John’s Gospel . . . contains an abundance of references and allusions to the ascension in spite of the fact that an account of it is lacking” (p. 36). Among five evidences for this statement, he shows how John writes his gospel with *retroactive effects of the ascension*” (p. 37).²

I. **THE FINAL REVELATION.** The opening sentence of this grand epistle is so abrupt that it surprises us. There is no formal introduction. The author plunges straight into the exposition of the major theme, namely the uniqueness and finality of the revelation of God in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The writer has what G. Vos has called an intense concern with the subject of *the progressive character of revelation*.³

A. **The Method of Revelation** (Hebrews 1:1). The method is one of contrast. Two great revelations are contrasted – the prophets and the Son. Note *how* these are contrasted.

1. Like the Old Testament prophets Christ spoke the Word of God; but *unlike* them He is the Eternal Word who became the Word Incarnate (John 1:1-14). He is God’s unique Son – the prophets were not. This puts Him in a *different* class.
2. There were *many* prophets. There is *one* Son.
3. The contrast between the *fragmentary* and *incomplete* character of the prophets on the one hand and the *finality* and *completeness* of the word spoken by God in Christ on the other.
4. Finally, note the contrast on “in former times” (in the past, NIV) with “in these last days.” That the revelation in the Son is superior is implicit in the elaborate statement of the qualifications of the Son for revealing divine truth.⁴

NOTE: The authoritative character of the word previously spoken through the prophets “to our fathers” and of the word now spoken “to us” through the Son is established by the fact that in both cases it was none other than God who was speaking.⁵ The contrast can be graphically depicted as follows:

GOD HAS SPOKEN IN THE

	Old Testament Era	New Testament Era
How?	at many times, in various ways	
When?	in the past	in these last days
To whom?	to our forefathers	to us
By whom?	through the prophets	by his Son ⁶

Murray Harris observes: “In spite of these contrasts, however, the emphasis in this verse falls on the identity of the person who speaks (“God . . . he”), and the fact that in both eras it was the same one “speaking” (“spoke . . . has spoken”). The same Greek verb, *laleō* (“speak”), is used in each case, emphasizing the unbroken continuity between the two eras. Both *lalēsas* (“having spoken,” “spoke”) and *elalēsen* (“spoke,” “has spoken”) are in the aorist tense, summing up in a single, comprehensive glance, first a multitude of times when God revealed himself during the OT era, then the whole life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth as God’s final and full self-revelation. It was one and the same person, “the God of Abraham” (Exod. 3:6; Matt. 22:32) and “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:17), who spoke in the two eras. Certainly, there are profound differences between the two Testaments – one is “the Old” or “the Older,” and the other “the New” or “the Newer” – but the speaker is the same in each case. There is progression in the revelation, but the person revealed is the same. We recognize the discontinuity, but rejoice in the continuity.”⁷

II. **THE UNIQUE ORGAN OF THE FINAL REVELATION.** The author states seven facts which demonstrate the greatness of God’s final revelation in his Son. These serve to demonstrate the Son’s supremacy over all the created order and illustrate the Son’s ability to effectively and finally “exegete”⁸ the Father. Note how this unfolds: from His past glory through the incarnation on to the majesty of His exaltation.

A. **“Appointed Heir of all things”** (cf. Psalm 2:8) -- The word “appointed,” by virtue of its

position in the series of facts that antedate the exaltation of the Son, is timeless in force and refers to His appointment in virtue of His eternal Sonship. In fact, Sonship and heirship are closely linked. There was never a time when the Son was not the heir (cf. Matthew 11:27). The entrance upon the inheritance by the Son will occur at the second advent of Christ (Hebrews 2:8; Revelation 11:15).

- B. **“Through Whom also He made the world”** -- The term “world” (Greek *aiōn*) literally means “ages.” Note the clear implication – the priority of Christ to the whole created order can only also mean Christ’s pre-existence and co-existence with the Father.⁹
- C. **“And He is the radiance of His glory”** – He is co-essential with the Father. The noun “radiance” (*apaugazō*, to emit brightness, cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) has both an active sense (radiance) and a passive sense (reflection). In this context it is used in the active sense. The Son radiates the Father’s Glory (cf. Colossians 1:15; John 1:14; 14:9). Note also that it is in the present tense – denoting his eternal nature.¹⁰
- D. **“The exact representation of His Being”** -- This expression means that the Son is the exact replica of the essence of God. “Being” (some translate this “substance” or “essence”) refers not to his bare essence, but His whole nature with all its attributes; and by “exact representation” we are to understand a correspondence as close as that which an impression gives back to a seal.¹¹ The language here is so plain that only “a virtuoso in exegetical evasion,” to quote James Denny, could hope to avoid the conclusion that the Son is very God of very God.¹²
- E. **“He sustains all things by the word of His power”** -- This marks the Son out as the Governor of the Universe. The word “sustains” (NIV) or “upholds” (NASB) is *pherōn te* and is not used in a passive sense (like Atlas supporting dead weight on his shoulders), but in the sense of One causing all things forward on their appointed course.¹³ The Son is directing all things towards the consummation (cf. Revelation 11:15).
- F. **“When He made purification for sins”** -- The NIV translation is completely unwarranted. The word the NIV translates “provided” is *poiēsamenos* and *never* means “to provide.” It means to actually make or accomplish in a very definite sense. The middle voice of this Greek word (a participle in form) also emphasizes when He had *by Himself* made purification for sins. He does so as a Priest. The emphasis is on what the Son actually *does*. This will be developed as one of the major themes in Hebrews.
- G. **“He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”** This is the climax and looks at the finished character of the Son’s work. “He sat down” (literally this is “He took His seat”) suggests the formal solemn act of assuming a position of dignity and authority. The Son is *the Prophet* through whom God has finally and completely spoken. He is *the Priest* who has finally and completely made atonement. And He is *the King* who sits in the authority of enthroned omnipotence.

III. **THE SUPREMACY OF THE NEW REVEALER.** Verse 4 is transitional. The contrast with the prophets is completed and the contrast with the angels will occupy vv. 4-14. The participle translated “he became” (NIV) “having become” (NASB) indicates that the writer is moving in the orbit of the Son’s humanity. “What was proposed in the eternal counsels (cf. v. 2, *appointed*) is realized in His resurrection and ascension. His inheritance of the title of Son is by the Father’s eternal appointment. In that sense, that is, as Mediator, He entered into His inheritance of Sonship. And the name *Son* is a measure of His superiority to angels, who are merely messengers (cf. 1:14).”¹⁴

CONCLUSION: Contemporary Christianity, busy accommodating itself to the mindset of modern culture (modernity), puts little emphasis on theology and even less on doctrinal preaching. Rather, contemporary Christianity simply uses the Bible merely to corroborate the validity of what is already found within its own consciousness which, says David F. Wells, “is another way of saying that we are

putting ourselves in the place of the Bible.”¹⁵ Many people do not realize that the popular expression, “Christianity is life *not* doctrine!” was coined by 19th century theological Liberalism. The writer to the Hebrews thought differently. He begins with one of the most masterful theological statements ever made! Contemporary Christianity, for the most part, simply ignores such statements. Instead of a hearty doctrinal feast for hungry souls, most of what we see in contemporary Christianity is popcorn and fizzy drinks, peanuts and marshmallows, colored balloons, vain repetitions, and a general overall emphasis on entertainment. The emphasis is on personal fulfillment, and as Erroll Hulse has noted, “There is also a concern that we should be seen as the happiest people on earth rather than the holiest.”¹⁶ How tragic. If we would give the Lord Jesus His due, let us carefully note *who* He is. Let us *consider* the Son. Later in time, *Behold* He comes! The beloved Son, the only begotten of the Father has come. Listen to Him! (Matthew 17:5).

ENDNOTES

¹ G. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics* III (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 235.

² D. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Eerdmans, 1999).

³ Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), p. 68. Note his words: “The unity and continuity of the Old and the New revelation are strictly maintained. In both *God spoke*, the participle *having spoken* is a preparation for the finite verb *hath spoken*. The whole organism of revelation lies in these words. Whatever diversity may exist, still it is all a divine word. The responsibility of people under the New Testament may be greater, but this is not because the New Testament has more authority or more of God in it than the Old Testament.” pp. 70-71.

⁴ *ep eschatou tōn hēmerōn toutōn*, literally “at the (latter) end of these days.” This expression is found in the Septuagint and corresponds to the Hebrew *be aharith hayyamim* (cf. Genesis 49:1 and Daniel 10:14) it “expresses the notion never merely of a simple future which is to follow the present in the course of ordinary historical development, but always that of the end or final period which is to conclude all history and forms the utmost boundary of the speaker’s circle of vision.” Cf. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* I (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 40. Philip Hughes also notes this and adds that the expression “designates the eschatological time of the Messiah.” *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 37N. The word “eschatological” is derived directly from the Greek word *eschatou* in 1:2 and is used theologically to refer to “last things” or “end times.”

⁵ “The past tense of the verb *spoke* indicates further, that God’s speaking is complete.” Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁶ The expression “in His Son” is without the article in the Greek text and literally is “in Son.” The RSV translates this “by a Son.” But the noun is used in an absolute sense of the word and is equivalent to a proper name, cf. Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Baker, 1984), pp. 27-28.

⁷ M. Harris, *Navigating Tough Text* (Lexham Press, 2020), p. 195.

⁸ The word “exegete” refers in Biblical studies to someone who does “exegesis,” from the Greek word *exēgeomai*, to explain, interpret, declare. This term is used in John 1:18 in reference to the Son make God (the Father) known.

⁹ “In light of this teaching it is not surprising that the title *Son* itself implies the consubstantiality of Christ with the Father,” Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ “He only,” comments Thomas Goodwin, “is the brightness of His Father’s glory; we all are but stars shining with a borrowed light.” *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* V (James Nichol, 1863), p. 547.

¹¹ Cf. B. B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory* (rpt. Baker, 1974), p. 279.

¹² James Denny, *Jesus and the Gospel* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), pp. 40-41.

¹³ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 6.

¹⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *Believers Bible Bulletin*: Special Christmas: Hebrews 1:1-4, December 23, 1979 (Believers Chapel).

¹⁵ D. F. Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 229.

¹⁶ E. Hulse, *The Believer’s Experience: Maintaining the Scriptural Balance Between Experience and Truth* (Zondervan, 1978), pp. 22 and 134.