

Hebrews 1:1-2:4

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, as we turn to hear your voice now, we pray that you will open our eyes to the great treasures of your law and open our hearts to the wonder of your promises that Jesus Christ would be magnified in our lives for the glory of his name. Amen.

Great, well, it's the time of year when lots of us are on diet or detox and apparently at the gym you have this phenomenon, the one-month wonders at the gym.

They're the guys who turn up in January, resolve to join the gym, and a month later the gym owners never see them again, until next January probably when they come back.

But it's that time of year because for many of us we know after perhaps a big December of eating and maybe drinking, unless you have a particularly enviable metabolism, most of us know that left to ourselves, we're not going to be fighting fit for the new year.

We're not going to have healthy bodies if we just don't think about it. It's true for lots of us. We need physical training and we need to be intentional if we don't want to drift into being unhealthy and unfit.

[1 : 15] And lots of us know a similar thing about our working lives. We know that we're in jobs where you have to keep your CPD going. You have to keep going to conferences or keep learning in certain ways.

Otherwise, naturally, you drift and the sharpness fades. You become less at the cutting edge of your working life. Now what's true of us physically and also true of us professionally can also be true of us spiritually.

That left unchecked, we drift into this kind of spiritual equivalent of middle-age spread. And the application for Hebrews chapter 1 that we've just had read comes at the beginning of chapter 2.

If you just have a look there with me that we had read. Chapter 2 verse 1. We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard so that we do not drift away.

So this letter, Hebrews, it's a letter. It's described at the end of the letter by the writer as a short letter. I don't know what you make of that compared to the letters you write. And it's written, it's called in chapter 13 of Hebrews, a word of exhortation.

[2 : 26] So it's urging these Christians, and it's urging them not to drift away. Now the original receivers of this letter, Hebrews, they were a group of Christians that we have a lot in common with.

They were probably urban Christians. They were living in a pluralistic society where their faith was very much the minority. And living in a time when living for Christ brought marginalization for them.

And that's Glasgow today, isn't it? And in that kind of environment, not many people make a snap decision one day, I'm just not going to be a Christian anymore.

But much more commonly, what happens is, people gradually just become less keen on being a Christian. Their enthusiasm and commitment wanes from month to month, from year to year.

And only after that, do they eventually get to a point where they think, yeah, I'm not really a Christian. And perhaps can't point to a time when they decisively stopped, but they just realize they're not a Christian anymore.

[3 : 32] The first audience for Hebrews were largely Jewish converts to Christianity. And so the temptation for them is to drift back into being Jewish. And you can see that by the way the material's written.

But that might not be a temptation for us. And yet the urgency not to drift is the same. And the message of Hebrews is as relevant for us today.

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the writer says, so that you don't drift and miss out on the prize of being in glory with God forever. And we avoid that drift by paying closer attention to God's word.

In chapter one, the writer gives us three reasons why we should pay very close attention. And the first one is pay attention because of the finality of the son.

So in verses one and two, there's a big contrast between the old and the new. If you just have a look with me again at verse one. In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

[4 : 39] But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom also he made the universe.

It's extraordinary, isn't it? People all over the world are longing to find God. It's the great quest of human religion. And you find it in civilizations all over the world that people are looking for God or the gods.

And the living God has broken the silence to speak truth, to make himself known in history in lots of different ways. He spoke to prophets to be messengers for him through, he spoke to them through angels, through visions, through dreams.

But the point in verse two is that that revelation has now been completely surpassed. There is a new class of revelation from God. He has made himself known in the person of his son, the eternal son, who was there before all things in verse two.

God made the universe through him. And all things are for him. He's been appointed the heir of all things in verse two. So Jesus is God's ultimate word to us.

[5 : 52] And that means there is a finality to God's word by his son. The contrast is between how God spoke to them then, in the past, and how he has spoken to us in these last days.

Jesus is God's final word to us. From now until the end of time, there will be no fuller word from God than Jesus. So we still need the prophets of the Old Testament.

We need the Old Testament as the word of God. But we read it now as a revelation to us of the son. It is God's word to us by his spirit about the son.

And we accept it as the fullness of God's revelation to us. Perhaps just to clarify what I don't think it's saying here, the writer is saying, I don't think this means that God doesn't speak to his people today by his spirit outside the Bible.

The New Testament points outside of itself to the spirit giving gifts to his church that include word gifts, gifts of prophecy, gifts of tongues, words of instruction, that are gifts given by the spirit to the church that are not, you wouldn't find those words in the Bible.

[7 : 05] And for my money, those gifts continue today, given by God to encourage and build up God's people. But those spiritual gifts that God gives to the church, we hold them underneath and we weigh them up against God's full final word to us of his son.

That's the final word. And those gifts are only given to build us up in faith and knowledge of the son who God has spoken of in his word. And so we need to be very wary of anybody saying that they've heard something that is completely new about God or that we're in a new special age, a new era has dawned for us.

We don't need a new messenger, a Joseph Smith, who the Mormons hold up as this after Jesus messenger. We don't need a Muhammad, who the Muslims hold up as coming to straighten things out.

We don't need a new prophet with a new message. Ever since before Hebrews was written, we've been in the last days. There's no new message from God in the last days.

The next big thing that will happen is the son will come in glory. And there doesn't need to be a new message. That's why there isn't one. Because this message is momentous.

[8 : 18] Just look with me at what the writer says about the son in verses three and four. The son is the radiance of God's glory. So if we think about God as a star, if you imagine God, you picture him as a star, then the Lord Jesus Christ is the light and heat emanating from the star, radiating out from him.

He's the exact representation of his being in verse three. So if you'd been walking around the roads of the Middle East 2,000 years ago, you would have seen God himself.

The whole character of God was embodied in this man. Next we hear, he is sustaining all things by his powerful word. It's amazing, isn't it?

You get these comparisons, don't you, to help us understand the universe, all things, the cosmos. If you took the distance between the earth and the sun, 92 million miles, if you reduce that down to the thickness of a sheet of paper, then the distance between the earth and the next star, after the sun, would be a stack of paper from the floor in here to the roof of the church.

And the diameter of our galaxy is the distance of a line of those sheets of paper from here to Birmingham. And our galaxy is one of at least 100,000 million galaxies in the universe.

[9 : 45] And Jesus is sustaining all of that just by his word, by his powerful word. And then we get the climax in verse 3.

After he provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. For the biggest barrier between you and me and a God like that, who is as vast as that, it isn't actually his greatness, it's his goodness.

And in our creatureliness, it's our sin that separates us from that great God. And the majestic son, through his priestly work, his atoning death on the cross, provided purification for our sins.

So that he now sits in the highest place, his work of making us right with God finished, and he's at the right hand of God in heaven. And all of that put together, of course, means he is God's final word to us.

I'm reading a book at the moment about Winston Churchill, and it describes this incredibly important moment in European, well, world history, really, in May 1940. It was the 28th of May, 1940, and there were these seven people who became the kind of, they were the cabinet war, they were the war cabinet for the British government.

[11 : 08] And these seven people had been locked in meetings for three days, almost solidly. And the big question for them was, should Britain try and broker a peace deal with Nazi Germany as it was advancing across Europe?

And there were a number of key voices asking for that. The people in the room remembered the devastation of the First World War and didn't want it to happen again. The German forces were closing in on Paris, and France was capitulating.

Czechoslovakia had gone, Poland had gone, the British Empire was on its own. And there were different voices in that room. One of them was the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, and he wanted a peace deal.

There was Neville Chamberlain, the ex-prime minister. There was Clement Attlee from the Labour Party. And they were debating this issue and they couldn't resolve it. The British ambassador to Italy had got in touch and said, Mussolini wants to broker a deal for you.

If you just come now, surrender some assets, we might be able to get peace from Hitler. And they didn't know what to do when there was a stalemate. So Churchill, after three days, he adjourned the cabinet and he called the full cabinet together at seven o'clock and he made a speech.

[12 : 24] And he spoke as prime minister to the cabinet for the first time. And by the end of this speech, he said, I'm convinced that every one of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate parley or surrender.

If this Long Island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground. And people cheered, they shouted, they clapped him on the back and the decision was made.

That was that. The prime minister had spoken and his word was final. Now when we turn to the words of Jesus Christ, we're being asked to give them that kind of finality.

He's got the authority. He is the man who knows. We listen to him. And that means that for us, Jesus decides things. Now we naturally don't like that because we don't want a God who disagrees with us.

We want a God who affirms our moral opinion about things. And so there's a way of reading the Bible today that's very common among Christians that would say, well yeah, I know it says that then.

[13 : 34] I can see it says that for then. But the world is so different now. The culture has changed. We don't know what Jesus would do if he was confronted by what we see in Glasgow today.

And it shouldn't be a surprise that when we start thinking like that we find over time that becoming a Christian costs us a bit less because we have decided Jesus says things that don't really go against what our culture thinks.

On the key issues of our time, the spirit of our age, issues like is there any difference between a man and a woman? Issues like euthanasia, issues about what sex is for, issues like well isn't whatever you choose to believe just true for you?

There are so many religions out there and Jesus speaks into that and he decides. But we get tempted to get around his words thinking things like well you hear language of well I know Jesus says that there but we have to think what trajectory was the Bible on at the time it was written?

What would Jesus do today? Hebrews 1 says God has spoken for us in these last days by his son. So often people say what would Jesus do today?

[14 : 48] It's an often it's a phrase Christians use what would Jesus do? I think it's a good thing to ask but sometimes more than that we need to ask what did Jesus say so that we know how to live as his people today?

What did Jesus say? Let him have authority. So that's our first point pay attention because of the finality of the son. Secondly pay attention because of the majesty of the son.

In the rest of the chapter we get these series of contrasts between angels and the son of God and they prove the point made in verse 4 if you look at verse 4 so he the son became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Just as there is a physical universe the Bible is clear there's also a spiritual universe and there are angels that God has created in that spiritual realm and just as there's been a fall in our world where humanity has turned away from God there's also been a fall in the spiritual realm where some angels led by this senior prince angel Satan rebelled against God and those angels in the spiritual universe they were created by God to serve him and angels are greater than us whenever in the Bible we encounter angels interacting with people in history people are terrified of them they are great things they are awesome things they engage in spiritual warfare they protect God's people and they mediate between us and God so that when Moses went up Mount Sinai and got the Ten Commandments from God it was angels who brought those commandments to him and the stone tablets they mediate for God to his people but the message here is that now somebody even much much greater than angels has appeared and there is a series of words from the Old Testament to help us understand that in verse 5 if you look down we hear from Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel chapter 7 and they were promises

God made about the rescuing king in David's line that he would be the son of God God the son has always been there he has always been this divine second person of the Trinity with God the father but when he came and lived this perfect life and rose from the dead in victory it was like his coronation and God said to the world this is my son and I want that recognized now the thing he was born for the title he always has had give him that title now he is the king he's the son then we get to verse 8 a great verse to show Jehovah's witnesses who believe that the son was created was a creature in verse 8 about the son it says your throne oh God will last forever a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom and if you look in the next verse it's describing this king as God and then another being as God verse 9 therefore God your God has set you above your companions two persons who are both fully God referred to there in verse 13 we read that he now sits in victory to which of the angels did God ever say sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet that's from Psalm 110 which Jesus quoted about himself it was a psalm written by the great king

[18 : 24] King David but he talks in the psalm about his Lord and says the Lord God speaks to my Lord the Messiah the Christ the Son and says sit at my right hand until your enemies are brought beneath you and that promise is what we're waiting for the fulfillment of today Jesus having conquered death is waiting for God the Father to fully and finally bring everything subject to him that's where history is going so what are angels for?

well they've got two roles towards the Son they worship in verse 6 that declaration from God let all God's angels worship him and towards us as people being saved by God angels work towards our salvation that's in verse 14 are not all angels ministering spirits serving spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation I don't know what you think about that but I think that's an extraordinary thing to say in terms of what it tells about the Son and how exalted he is that the big thing God is doing in the world today is saving a people for the Son because he is so exalted a people who will glorify and enjoy the majestic Son forever and reign with him forever so God's angels who are magnificent worship God today by working all around us to protect us and secure the victory of the eternal Son so we should pay attention to him

I don't know if you've seen the movie Arrival came out last year it's about these 12 extraterrestrial spacecraft and they land in different places around the world and of course the first thing that happens is that all the great military forces of the world kind of gather around these 12 spacecraft in different places around the world you know the Chinese army descends the American army descends but then they realize that these aliens that have landed want to communicate with us so this linguist the film follows teams up with others around the world to try and decipher the language of these extraterrestrials so that they can listen to them and of course the whole world is then caught up in this incredible event I mean once you've suspended your disbelief that there's aliens it's pretty believable to accept that if this happened the whole world would be pretty drawn into it because obviously if we found out that there were aliens from a distant world that's all we'd be talking about for a while isn't it the world would stop people wouldn't be going to work it would be a game changer and everyone as the messages got deciphered everyone in the world would be hanging on every word from this life form from another solar system it's obvious isn't it and the message here is that something far greater than that has happened really happened that in Jesus Christ we have God speaking to us the glory of God himself radiating out from God fully revealing

God's character even while he sustains every star and planet even while he makes our hearts beat he has spoken to us so that the question for us is are you listening to him but there's a challenging side to all of that and it's our third point this morning pay attention because of the severity of the sun pay attention because of the finality of him of the majesty of the sun but thirdly because of the severity of the sun there is this way of reading the Bible where we sort of think oh Old Testament harsh New Testament nice Old Testament God of judgment punishment New Testament God of forgiveness love and if that were true then we've not got too much to worry about when it comes to how we respond to this sun but let's pick things up in chapter 2 verse 1 the writer says we must pay the most careful attention therefore to what we have heard so that we do not drift away for since the message spoken through angels that's the law to Moses was binding and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation so when we read the Old Testament about those people of God when they broke his law there were punishments when they broke the covenant they were punished with severity a severity that when we read it as 21st century western readers we find it harsh it's not harsh it's just but we find it harsh and the writer says see that and see it as a warning to us today don't think oh well that was back then but God is much more lenient now no we should be thinking how much more for us that we should be careful for if we break the covenant that God has made for us in his son

God is not going to let us off the hook we would face just punishment if we turn away from the son if we give up our faith in him that's how you break the new covenant you stop trusting the son giving up on Jesus is really really serious God's covenant with us is a binding one and I guess the reason we wouldn't always think about it like that is that people who do turn away from the son would often say well I just don't think it's true I just don't believe it intellectually so the writer goes on to reassure us as of course we could go to lots of other places in the bible or we could come to Christianity Explored to investigate it he says in verse 3 it is true it is true this salvation was first announced by the Lord the Jesus of history it was confirmed to us by those who heard him those eyewitnesses God also testified to it by signs wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will it is true and the stakes could not be higher pay attention because of the severity of the son so that's Hebrews 1 there's a fair number of us at St Silas who love getting up the mountains in the highlands aren't they there are

[25 : 09] Monroe baggers in our midst who tell me how many Monroe's they've climbed and this opening section of Hebrews is like Monroe bagging theology Monroe bagging Christology you can't get much higher than this we're up on the mountain top and we're considering the majesty of God the son it's not the Jesus we've just seen on Christmas cards is it and lots of us are here because we've encountered Jesus the man in the gospels and we're building our lives on that man and we trust that he's God because there were moments when he demonstrated that he could do things only God can do that was the Jesus of history but in Hebrews 1 it's as though the veil is drawn back for a moment and we see the Jesus of eternity and we realize his majesty friends when we turn to the Bible let's listen to Jesus trembling awestruck because it's the voice of the one who is reigning over the universe he has made and if we don't do that then we are missing out on the reality of the universe crown him the lord of years the potentate of time creator of the rolling spheres ineffably sublime he is a great king he is eternal he is divine he is sovereign he is a great king he is a great prophet through whom

God has spoken finally to us and he is a great priest who has provided purification for our sins and now he is sitting in victory over the universe and he will inherit it that's the message that the drifting Christians need to hear so let me ask you if you would reflect yourself on what trajectory you're on as a Christian today what direction are you going in in the Christian life compared with how you were a year ago or just before Christmas or five years ago or twenty years ago are you more keen more joyful in Christ more satisfied with him serving him more wholeheartedly witnessing to him more boldly or are you in danger of spiritual drift and if you are drifting what could you do today to make sure you pay more careful attention to the sun let's pray together then a cloud appeared and covered them and a voice came from the cloud this is my son whom I love listen to him we praise you almighty God and heavenly father for speaking to us in these last days by your son the creator sustainer and heir of the universe by your spirit we ask for your help to listen to him obediently as your final word to listen to his voice worshipfully as we grasp his majesty and to listen to his words carefully for we recognize that our response to him decides our eternal destiny thank you for your grace to us in him that he made purification for our sins before sitting down at your right hand in majesty blessings be upon him amen amen ■ remember again