

(((PREACHING *the* WORD)))

HEBREWS

An ANCHOR
for the SOUL



R. KENT HUGHES

HEBREWS

PREACHING THE WORD

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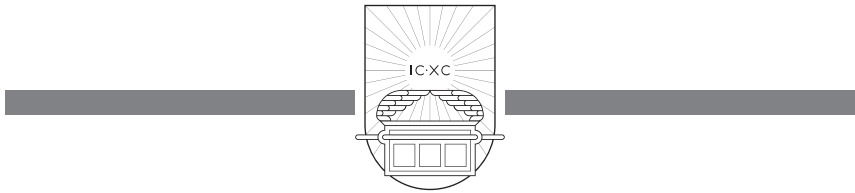
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R. KENT HUGHES

 **CROSSWAY**

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Hebrews

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To
Dr. Charles Lee Feinberg

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

HEBREWS 6:19, 20

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s ethos backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but *he does*.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

1:1, 2a

1

The Eloquence of God

HEBREWS 1:1, 2a



C. S. LEWIS MEMORABLY PORTRAYED the growing Christian's experience of an ever-enlarging Christ in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. Lucy, caught up in her spiritual quest, saw the lion Aslan—Christ—shining white and huge in the moonlight. In a burst of emotion Lucy rushed to him, burying her face in the rich silkiness of his mane, whereupon the great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half-sitting and half-lying between his front paws. He bent forward and touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath was all around her. She gazed up into the large, wise face.

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”¹

Expanding souls encounter an expanding Christ! And this is why I am particularly enthused about this study volume on the book of Hebrews, for that epistle has a double dose of growth-producing power—first, because it presents the greatness of Christ as no other New Testament writing does, and, second, because it repeatedly demands a response from the reader. Seriously considered, Hebrews will make us grow and find a bigger Christ.²

No New Testament book has had more background research than Hebrews, and none has spawned a greater diversity of opinion. There is, of course, broad agreement about several of the most important things. Virtually all agree that the grand theme of this epistle is the supremacy and finality of Christ.

A consensus also exists regarding the general identity of the recipients: they were a group of Jewish Christians who had never seen Jesus in person, yet had believed. Their conversion had brought them hardship and persecution with the result that some had slipped back into Judaism. And thus the purpose for writing was to encourage them to not fall away, but to press on (cf. 2:1ff.; 3:12ff.; 6:4ff.; 10:26ff.; and 12:15ff.).³

There is also universal agreement, first expressed by Origen, that “Only God knows certainly” who wrote this letter. There is also agreement that the author, whoever he was, was a magnificent stylist with an immense vocabulary and a vast knowledge of the Greek Old Testament.

So there is general agreement as to the theme, the purpose, the spiritual status of the recipients, and the anonymity and ability of the author. But from here the mystery darkens, for no scholar has yet proven the exact destination or occasion of the letter—though many contemporary scholars tentatively propose that the letter was written to a small house-church of beleaguered Jewish Christians living in Rome in the mid-sixties before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

The respected New Testament authority William Lane, employing this thesis, has proposed a brilliant historical reconstruction that I think accords with the internal pastoral concern of the letter and makes it come alive.⁴ Hebrews, he notes, was written to a group of Jewish Christians whose world was falling apart. Their Italian locus is most probable because in the closing paragraph of Hebrews the author conveys the greetings of several Italian Christians who were with him (13:24), thus supporting the idea that the harried little church was on Italian soil—very likely in or around Rome.

Their Christianity had not been a worldly advantage. Rather, it set them up for persecution and the loss of property and privilege, and now could possibly even cost them their lives.

We know they had already paid a price for their initial commitment to Christ. As the writer recalls in 10:32–34:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

This description of their earlier sufferings fits well into the picture of the hardships that came to Jewish Christians under Claudius in AD 49. Suetonius’

Life of the Deified Claudius records that “There were riots in the Jewish quarter at the instigation of Chrestus. As a result, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome” (25.4). “Chrestus,” historians believe, is a reference to Christ, and the riots and expulsion occurred when Jewish Christians were banished from the synagogue by the Jewish establishment.

Now, as the author of Hebrews writes, fifteen years have gone by since the Claudian persecution, and a new persecution looms. No one has been killed yet, but 12:4 raises the possibility that martyrdom may soon come—“In your struggle against sin you have *not yet* resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

Lane proposes here that the circumstances accord well with the Neronian persecution that would come with the great fire of Rome in AD 64. The historian Tacitus records that Nero made the Christians scapegoats to remove suspicion from himself (*Annals of Rome* 15:44). Lane concludes, “In the year AD 64 martyrdom became an aspect of the Christian experience in Rome. There were several house-churches in the city, and the group addressed in Hebrews had not yet been affected by the emperor’s actions. But the threat of death and arrest was real.”⁵

The writer of Hebrews was writing to admonish and encourage his friends, a small group of Jewish Christians who were scared stiff! Some had begun to avoid contact with outsiders. Some had even withdrawn from the worshiping community altogether (10:25). The author feared there might be those who, if arrested, would succumb to the conditions of release—a public denial of Christ (6:6; 10:29). The tiny house-church was asking some hard questions: Did God know what was going on? If so, how could this be happening to them? Did he care? Only God could protect them, but where was he? Why did he not answer? Why the silence of God?

The letter arrived, and word was sent out. The congregation gathered. Perhaps no more than fifteen or twenty were seated or standing around the house. All were quiet. The reader began what has been called “the most sonorous piece of Greek in the whole New Testament”:⁶ “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (vv. 1, 2a). Through these magnificent words the beleaguered church was brought face-to-face with the God who speaks—the eloquence of God. God spoke in the past, and he speaks in the present in his Son. And this eloquence, the ultimate eloquence of the final word in God’s Son, would bring them comfort in the midst of life’s troubles.

God's Eloquence in the Past

Cosmic Eloquence

Even before the prophets of old, the cosmos was filled with God's eloquence. One summer one of my associate pastors and I were walking home together on a particularly clear night. We looked at the North Star, the Big Dipper, the Pleiades. My fellow-minister identified the Dog Star Canis Major (Sirius), the brightest star in both hemispheres. Then we began to joke about how all this happened "by chance." The vastness and precision of our cosmos declares the necessity of a magnificent God!

The argument from order is overwhelming. If I put ten pennies in my pocket and number them one to ten, then put my hand back in my pocket, my chances of pulling out the number one penny would be one in ten. If I place the number one penny back in my pocket and mix all the pennies again, the chances of pulling out penny number two would be one in a hundred. The chances of repeating the same procedure and coming up with penny number three would be one in a thousand. To do so with all of them (one through ten in order) would be one in ten billion! Noting the order and design of our universe, Kepler—the founder of modern astronomy, discoverer of the "Three Planetary Laws of Motion," and originator of the term *satellite*—said, "The undevout astronomer is mad." David sang:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1–4)

The cosmic eloquence of God is deafening, but many will not hear it. And even those who hear, hear partially. As Job said, "Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?" (Job 26:14). The eloquence of God is always there for the believer willing to hear it. So often those who have heard it best have heard it when life was darkest—perhaps while persecuted or in prison. Bunyan, Rutherford, Bonhoeffer, Solzhenitsyn, Colson—

all looked through the bars
and saw the stars.

Prophetic Eloquence

God's people have always had more than the eloquence of the heavens, for they have had the prophets. "Long ago," says the writer, "at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets" (v. 1)—literally, "in many parts and many ways." The emphasis here is on the grand diversity of God's speech in the Old Testament. God utilized great devices to instruct his prophets. God spoke to Moses at Sinai in thunder and lightning and with the voice of a trumpet. He whispered to Elijah at Horeb in "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12 κϵν). Ezekiel was informed by visions and Daniel through dreams. God appeared to Abram in human form and to Jacob as an angel. God declared himself by Law, by warning, by exhortation, by type, by parable.

And when God's seers prophesied, they utilized nearly every method to communicate their message. Amos gave direct oracles from God. Malachi used questions and answers. Ezekiel performed bizarre symbolic acts. Haggai preached sermons. And Zechariah employed mysterious signs.

The significance of this immensely creative and variegated communication is that it dramatically demonstrated God's loving desire to communicate with his people. It was never hackneyed, never boring, never inscrutable, never irrelevant. It was always adequate for the time. It was always progressive, revealing more of God and his ways. It was always in continuity with the previous words of God.

Through God's cosmic and prophetic eloquence men and women rose to live life on the highest plane. Abraham achieved the faith to offer his own son. Moses withstood Pharaoh through mighty miracles. David slew Goliath. Daniel achieved and maintained massive integrity in Babylon. But in all of this (its adequacy, its progressiveness, its continuity, its power), God's eloquence was never complete. As grand as it was, it was nevertheless fragmentary and lacking.

God's Eloquence in the Present

But no more! For in Christ came an astonishing eloquence, the ultimate speech of God—"but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (v. 2a). Jesus is God's final word. The Greek here is simply *in huios*, "in Son"—emphasizing that the person of his Son contains everything. He is the ultimate medium of communication. God has spoken to us in his Son!

An unbeliever was once musing about what he considered to be the impossibility of knowing God. His thinking was that as Creator, God created us in the same way as a dramatist creates his characters and that the

gap was so vast between God and man that men could no more know God than Hamlet could know his author-creator Shakespeare. But as the man thought further, he realized that his analogy suggested just the opposite: for Shakespeare as creator could make it possible. Extending the analogy, Shakespeare could, in principle, write himself into the play and dialogue with Hamlet. The “Shakespeare” would of course be both Shakespeare and one of Shakespeare’s creatures. It is an imperfect analogy, but God the Father did write himself into life in his Son, making the ultimate communication.⁷

This amazing eloquence of God is substantially the same as that described in the chain of thought in John 1, which begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Jesus here, of course, is “the Word,” and though much more can be said about this term because of its rich history in Greek literature, its main significance here is that *Christ has always sought to reveal himself*. An interpretative paraphrase could well read, “In the beginning was the Communication.” From eternity, Christ as the Word has always longed to communicate himself.

Through the Incarnation God wrote himself into life—“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). He put on skin, so to speak. He made it possible for us to know him as we never before could. God in the flesh was the height of communication.

God hath spoken by His prophets,
Spoken his unchanging Word;
Brightness of the Father’s glory,
With the Father ever one;
Spoken by the Word Incarnate,
God of God ere time began,
Light of Light, to earth descending,
Man, revealing God to man.

What is the result of all this eloquence? We meet God the Father! “No one has ever seen God,” says John, but “the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus exegeted God. That is some communication! The astounding eloquence of God!

Ingmar Bergman, the celebrated Swedish filmmaker, recounts that one day while he was listening to Stravinsky, he had a vision of a nineteenth-century cathedral. In the vision Bergman found himself wandering about a great building and finally coming before a picture of Christ. Realizing its importance, Bergman said to the picture, “Speak to me! I will not leave this cathedral until you speak to me!” But of course the picture did not speak. That

same year he produced *The Silence*, a film about characters who despair of ever finding God.

Bergman's problem was, he was looking at the wrong picture. Rather, he needed to listen to the massive eloquence of the Christ of Scripture—"in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." He needed to see the eloquence of Christ's character and speech and actions and, above all, the sublime eloquence of the cross, for there he speaks salvation.

The apparent silence of God in the face of imminent persecution that troubled that tiny house-church two millennia ago provides a touch-point with today, for Ingmar Bergman well-represents our troubled world that bristles at the imagined silence of God. God has eloquently spoken to us in *creation* and through his *prophets* in the Old Testament and now, most of all, through the awesome eloquence of his *Son*.

The healing method of the writer of Hebrews, as we shall see, is to lift the Son higher and higher and higher. He is sure that the eloquence of Christ's person will help his readers meet the challenges ahead. For him, holding up Christ is the most practical thing on earth. Indeed, Jesus, understood and exalted, eloquently informs every area of life.

There are only two kinds of people who hear God's Word: those who are not yet his children, and those who are. True, some are nearer than others on the road to Christ. But nevertheless there are only these two categories.

To those who are not yet true children of God, I give this challenge: Read one of the Gospels through, sincerely praying the essence of Bergman's prayer over it as you go: "Speak to me! Please speak to me!" I also challenge them to carefully study the book of Hebrews, for in it they will find life-changing thoughts that are unique to the New Testament.

I challenge those who are God's children with the thought that Hebrews is a practical book. They may be beleaguered, perhaps even wondering if they can continue on with life. Perhaps they are looking for a manual that will help them handle stress. Hebrews is the "manual" they are looking for, because the essential answer is in the supremacy and finality of Christ.

In the midst of the battle, may this be our lot:

"Lord . . . you're bigger."

"That is because you've grown my child."

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

For a time Lucy was so happy that she did not want to speak. But God has spoken. Oh, the eloquence of God!

But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

1:2, 3

2

The Supremacy of Christ

HEBREWS 1:2, 3



WHEN CHARLES SPURGEON opened this text to his congregation on the Lord's Day evening of May 21, 1882, he gloriously announced, "I have nothing to do to-night but to preach Jesus Christ." From there he went on to show that he was following an august and hallowed train. Luke tells us that the very first Christians "kept right on teaching and *preaching Jesus* as the Christ" (Acts 5:42 NASB). When Philip went down to Samaria, he "*proclaimed to them the Christ*" (Acts 8:5). And when he climbed into the Ethiopian's chariot "he *preached Jesus* to him" (Acts 8:35 NASB). Immediately after Paul was converted, "he began to *proclaim Jesus* in the synagogues" (Acts 9:20 NASB). Regarding his preaching, Paul told the Corinthian church that he had resolved to know nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

So as we take up our study of Hebrews 1:2, 3 we joyfully affirm that the best thing we can do is to preach Jesus Christ! This great text will allow nothing else. The Church has multiple needs, but this is the subject for which it has the greatest need. It is the theme in which the Father rejoices (Matthew 3:17). Moreover the explicit mission of the Spirit is to make Christ known (John 14:26; 16:13–15). Jesus said, "He [the Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:15). So because our text oozes with Christ, we can expect the pleasure and blessing of the Holy Trinity to be upon it as we prayerfully consider it phrase by phrase.

The grand theme of these verses is the supremacy of Christ as God's final word. Christ is held up like a great jewel to the sunlight of God's revelation, and as the light courses through it, seven facets flash with gleaming brilliance. We have given these facets names so they can be easily followed and

assimilated. Christ is: *Inheritor, Creator, Sustainer, Radiator, Representor, Purifier, Ruler.*

Cosmic Supremacy

Inheritor

It is natural for the writer to first emphasize that Christ the Son is Inheritor because sons are naturally heirs. Thus the text naturally flows from sonship to heirship: “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things” (v. 2a). The writer, in stating here that Jesus is “the heir of all things,” is also consciously identifying him with the Lord’s “Anointed” and “Son” in Psalm 2 to whom he says, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Psalm 2:8). (We know that this verse is in mind because Psalm 2:7 is quoted as referring to Christ in verse 5 of our text.) Thus Jesus is specifically said to be heir to Planet Earth and its peoples. But the promise also embraces the universe and the world to come (cf. 2:5–9).²

The immense scope of Christ’s inheritance comes from his dual functions as Creator and Redeemer. As Creator of the universe, he is its natural heir. Paul makes dramatic reference to this in Colossians 1:16b: “all things were created . . . for him.” Or as some have even more graphically translated it: “All things were created . . . *toward* him.”³ Everything in the universe has its purpose and destiny in the heir, Jesus Christ. Romans 11:36 has the same idea as it tells us that everything in the work of creation is *to* him—“to him are all things.” Scripture is clear: everything in the physical universe is *for* him and *to* him and will consummate *in* him as heir of a new creation.

But in addition to his natural inheritance as Creator, as Redeemer he has also earned a vast inheritance of souls renewed through his atoning work of reconciliation on the cross. We are his inheritance! This is a mind-boggling truth, to say the least. It is so stupendous that Paul prayed that the church would have its eyes opened to “the riches of his [that is, Christ’s] glorious inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:18).⁴ The apostle was praying that his readers would understand how highly they are valued in Christ. Think of it—Jesus is heir to all the heavens and numberless worlds, but *we* are his treasures. The redeemed are worth more than the universe. We ought to be delirious with this truth.

But there is even more! In the letter to the Romans we are called “heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). Because Christ and Christ alone is heir to all things, and we live in him, we are heirs of all. “All

things are yours,” says Paul, “whether . . . the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21–23).

Creator

Having introduced the Son’s superiority as Inheritor of all things, the thought naturally moves to his supremacy as the Creator of all: “through whom also he created the world” (v. 2b). The word used for “world” (*aionas*—literally “ages”) is a marvelously elastic and dynamic term that fits remarkably well with what we now know of our expanding universe. Bishop Westcott defines *aionas* here as “The sum of the ‘periods of time’ including all that is manifested in and through them . . . an order which exists through time developed in successive stages.”⁵ Jesus was the agent in whom and through whom the entire universe of space and time was created.

Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking, who has been called “the most brilliant theoretical physicist since Einstein,” says in his best-selling *A Brief History of Time* that our galaxy is an average-sized spiral galaxy that looks to other galaxies like a swirl in a pastry roll and that it is over 100,000 light-years across⁶—about six hundred trillion miles. He says, “We now know that our galaxy is only one of some hundred thousand million that can be seen using modern telescopes, each galaxy itself containing some hundred thousand million stars.”⁷ It is commonly held that the average distance between these hundred thousand million galaxies (each six hundred trillion miles across and containing one hundred thousand million stars) is three million light-years! On top of that, the work of Edwin Hubble, based on the Doppler effect, has shown that all red-spectrumed galaxies are moving away from us—and that nearly all are red. Thus, the universe is constantly expanding.⁸ Some estimates say that the most distant galaxy is eight billion light-years away—and racing away at two hundred million miles an hour. Finally, the fact of the expanding universe demands a beginning, though Hawking now doubts that a Big Bang was its beginning.⁹

We have recited all this to emphasize the stupendous creative power of Christ. He created every speck of dust in the hundred thousand million galaxies of the universe. He created every atom—the sub-microscopic solar systems with their whimsically named quarks (from James Joyce’s *Three Quarks for Master Mark*) and leptons (the same Greek word used for the widow’s mite) and electrons and neutrinos (“little neutral ones”)—all of which have no measurable size.

This stupendous reality is richly corroborated by other cosmic statements in the New Testament.

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:3)

Yet for us there is . . . one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6)

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Colossians 1:16)

Everything was created by him—everything corporeal, all things incorporeal, everything substantial, all things insubstantial.

Sustainer

But not only is he Creator, he is also Sustainer—“he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (v. 3c). He is not passively upholding the universe like “Atlas sustaining the dead weight of the world.”¹⁰ Rather, he is actively holding up all things. He does it by his spoken word. The writer is very specific here. He does not use *logos* (“word”), which is used to indicate revelation, but *rhema* (“word”), the spoken word. Just as the universe was called into existence with a spoken word, so it is sustained by the utterance of the Son.¹¹ The Colossian hymn of creation sings of his sustaining power: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). He holds all those quarks and leptons of the microcosm together by the mysterious coulomb electrical force he made and maintains, and he likewise sustains the fleeing galaxies of the universe. Similarly, if he speaks the word, all would end, not with a Big Bang but with a Big Fizzle or Gulp!

Oh, the immense superiority of Christ as Creator and Sustainer! We cannot create the tiniest speck of dust, much less a mayfly, but he created the universe. He can do what we can never do, materially and spiritually. He can create in us clean hearts (Psalm 51:10). In fact, he can make us into new creations: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). He can do it *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. He can take whatever you are—your “nothingness”—and create a new person. The Greek here is even more exciting: “*If anyone*

is in Christ, new creation!” There is nothing in your soul that is beyond the creative power of God. You are not an exception to his creativity, no matter how unique you may imagine yourself or your problem to be. But he is also our Sustainer. He can sustain the universe, and he can sustain the struggling, harried church. Jesus is adequate for *everything*. “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5 NASB).

Radiator

The fourth facet of the Son’s superiority brilliantly sets forth his relation to the Father—“He is the radiance of the glory of God” (v. 3a). The ESV translation “radiance” here is proper, as against some others that use “reflection.” There is a vast difference between the two, as different as the functions of our solar system’s sun and moon. The moon *reflects* light, whereas the sun *radiates* light because it is its source.¹² Jesus does not simply reflect God’s glory; he is part of it! This was shown on the Mount of Transfiguration when “His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). It was his own essential glory, but it was also the Father’s. This is what blinded Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3; 22:6). This is why the Nicene Creed sings of Christ, “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.”

Representor

The following phrase balances out his identity by emphasizing that he is also the *Representor* of God: “and the exact imprint of his nature” (v. 3b). The word translated “exact imprint” refers to the image on a coin that perfectly corresponds to the image on the die. Jesus is therefore completely the same in his being as the Father. However, there is still an important distinction—both exist separately, as do the die and its image.

Now, when you take these two facets—Radiator and Representor—together, you have a remarkable exposition of the identity of the Father in the Son. As *Radiator*—“the radiance of the glory of God”—Jesus is part of the source, one with the Father. This is what John emphasizes when he says, “the Word *was* God” (John 1:1). But also as *Representor*—“the exact imprint of his nature”—Jesus is distinct, much as John also emphasizes when he says, “the Word *was with* God.” Jesus is all God, “*very God of very God*.” When you see him, you see the Father. But he is also a distinct person. This is all bound in with the mystery of the holy Trinity.

Jesus is a superior revelation of God. When we see him, we know just

what the God of the universe is like. We know how he thinks. We know how he talks. We know how he relates to people. God has spoken in his Son. It is his ultimate communication, his final word, his consummate eloquence. Oh, the superiority of the Son!

Priestly Supremacy

The cosmic supremacy of Christ dazzles the mind: He is *Inheritor*, *Creator*, *Sustainer*, *Radiator*, and *Representor*. These are beautiful, soul-expanding thoughts. But they positively vibrate with glory when we see that they introduce the priestly supremacy of Christ—he is *Purifier* and *Ruler*.

Purifier

We have been all over the universe with the cosmic Son, and then suddenly he is introduced as the priestly Purifier who paid for our sins with his own blood. The thought almost sounds like an aside—“After making purification for sins” (v. 3d). Ceaseless cosmic activity, and then *boom!* his once-and-for-all sacrifice for our sins. Actually this is a cosmic achievement because Jesus did something no man or priest could ever do: offer alone the sacrifice that paid for all sins. That had to be the work of a cosmic being!

Ruler

The immensity of his cosmic achievement is given perspective by the phrase that follows: “he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (v. 3e). He is Ruler. The overarching significance here is that priests never sat down. Levitical priests always were standing, standing, standing—because no sacrifice was complete. The borders of the high priest’s garment was sewn with bells so the people could hear him moving inside the Holy of Holies—and thus know he had not been struck dead. See him enter the Holy Place trembling as he bore the sacrificial blood before the glowing mercy seat. There he entered and stood year after year, high priest after high priest, for the work was never done.

But Jesus, a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, sat down. “And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:11, 12). From the cross Jesus shouted, “It is finished” (John 19:30) and then, reassured, took his seat forever.

Jesus’ colossal work underlines the utter blasphemy of the thought that

we can pay for our own sins with works of righteousness. There is only one way to purity, and that is the blood of Christ. The only way to justification is by faith in his blood (Romans 3:25; 5:9). Paul says, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:21, 22).

Lastly, there is the *ultimate* significance of Jesus’ sitting down at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven—and that is his ruling exaltation! This was prophesied in Psalm 110:1—“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” While on earth our Lord applied the Psalm to himself: “But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69).

“The right hand” is the place of highest honor. Paul says, “He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:10). And again he says, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:9, 10).

Dare we mention anything else? We must, for our souls’ sake. It is here, in this supreme exaltation at God’s right hand, that Christ intercedes for us. Paul asks, “Who is to condemn?” And then he answers triumphantly, “Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the *right hand* of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Romans 8:34). The thought is utterly sublime but true—this glorious cosmic being at the apex of his splendor is praying for you and me! Can it really be? Yes! God’s Word says it is so. Wonder of wonders!

Do you see why we can do no better than to preach Jesus Christ? What can be added to the eloquence of the sevenfold supremacy of the Son? He is:

Inheritor. As Creator he is heir to the universe. As Redeemer he bought our souls and so made us his personal inheritance.

Creator. He created the universe’s one hundred thousand million galaxies, each with a hundred thousand million stars, each six hundred trillion miles across—and each fleeing away in never-ending expansion. Awesome!

Sustainer. He is sustaining the galloping galaxies as well as the submicroscopic universe of atoms—all by his spoken word.

Radiator. Like the sun, he is the source and radiator of divine glory—not a reflection, but part of it! *He is God.*

Representor. He is the exact representation of the Father’s being. He is everything God is, yet separate. He is *with* God.

30 HEBREWS

Purifier. He is the cosmic sacrifice who paid for our sins with his blood in order to purify us.

Ruler. He sits, having paid for our sins once and for all, as the supreme priest. He is at the right hand of Majesty in ineffable exaltation. And wonder of wonders, he prays for us.

Do you know this Son? Has his eloquence spoken to you? He is God's final word. There is no other!

[He became] 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"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire." But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." And, "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." And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

3

Christ's Superiority to Angels

HEBREWS 1:4–14



IN HIS PREFACE TO *Screwtape Letters* C. S. Lewis complains about the progressively distorted picture of angels that has come down to us through religious art. Says Lewis:

Fra Angelico's angels carry in their face and gesture the peace and authority of Heaven. Later come the chubby infantile nudes of Raphael; finally the soft, slim, girlish, and consolatory angels of nineteenth century art, shapes so feminine that they avoid being voluptuous only by their total insipidity. . . . They are a pernicious symbol. In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying "Fear not." The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say, "There, there."¹

Later, in his imaginative best-seller *Perelandra*, Lewis created a spectacular corrective to the traditional picture when he described Dr. Ransom's encounter with planetary angels:

. . . far off between the peaks on the other side of the little valley there came rolling wheels. There was nothing but that—concentric wheels moving with a rather sickening slowness one inside the other. There was nothing terrible about them if you could get used to their appalling size . . . suddenly two human figures stood before him on the opposite side of the lake. . . . They were perhaps thirty feet high. They were burning white like white-hot iron. The outline of their bodies when he looked at it steadily against the red landscape seemed to be faintly, swiftly undulating as though the permanence of their shape, like that of waterfalls or flames, co-existed with a rushing movement of the matter it contained. For a fraction of an inch inward from this outline the landscape was just visible through them: beyond that they were opaque. . . . Whenever he looked straight at them they appeared to be rushing towards him with enormous speed: whenever

his eyes took in their surroundings he realized that they were stationary. This may have been due in part to the fact that their long and sparkling hair stood out straight behind them as if in a great wind. But if there were a wind it was not made of air, for no petal of the flowers was shaken. . . . Their bodies, he said, were white. But a flush of diverse colours began at about the shoulders and streamed up the necks and flickered over face and head and stood out around the head like plumage or a halo.²

Lewis was perhaps a bit extravagant, but his portrayal was certainly in line with some of the encounters recorded in Scripture. For example, when Isaiah saw the Lord high and exalted in the temple, he also saw hovering above him two seraphim (“burning ones”). These heavenly beings were equipped, insect-like, with three pairs of wings. Two fiery wings covered their faces, two wrapped over their feet, and two glowing pinions beat the air as they intoned the *tris hagion*: “*qadosh, qadosh, qadosh*”—“holy, holy, holy” (Isaiah 6:1–3). Understandably, Isaiah was traumatized. Others had similar experiences with angels. For example, when Manoah and his wife, in response to an angelic visit, offered a sacrifice, “when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar”—*whoosh!* (Judges 13:20).

Angels definitely can be awesome. But what are angels? What does God’s Word tell us? Angels are mentioned over one hundred times in the Old Testament and more than 160 times in the New Testament. They exist in vast numbers. On one occasion they are described as assembling in a great throng “numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” (Revelation 5:11). In most cases they are invisible, as was the experience of Balaam when the Lord had to open his eyes so he could see the angel blocking his way (Numbers 22:31). Or consider Elisha’s servant who had his eyes opened so he could see that he was protected by encircling chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17).

Ordinarily when angels are visible, they have a human-like appearance and are often mistaken for men (see Genesis 18:2; 19:1, 2; Mark 16:5). Sometimes they have shined with glorious light (Matthew 28:3; Luke 2:9). Other times they have appeared as fabulous winged creatures—seraphim and cherubim (Exodus 25:20; Isaiah 6:2). The Hebrew word for angel is *malak* and the Greek *angelos*. Both mean “messenger,” designating their essential functions as divine message-bearers. As God’s messengers they can wield immense power—for example, staying entire armies (2 Kings 19:35) or delivering captives (Acts 12:7–11).

Regarding angels’ specific function, there are at least four:

- 1) Angels continuously *worship and praise the God they serve* (Job 38:7; Psalm 103:20; Isaiah 6:1–3; Revelation 4:8; 5:9–12).
- 2) Angels *communicate God's message to man*. They assisted in bringing the Law (Acts 7:38, 53). Angels revealed the future to Daniel and to the Apostle John (Daniel 10:10–15; Revelation 17:1; 21:9; 22:16). Gabriel announced the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Matthew 1:19–24; Luke 1:11–28; 2:9–12).
- 3) Angels *minister to believers*. “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them” (Psalm 34:7). “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11,12). Angels have dramatically delivered believers from prison (Acts 5:19; 12:6–11). Angels rejoice at the conversion of sinners (Luke 15:10). They are present within the Church (1 Corinthians 11:10). They watch the lives of believers with interest (1 Corinthians 4:9; 1 Timothy 5:21). They carry believers away at death to the place of blessedness (Luke 16:22).
- 4) Angels will be *God's agents in the final earthly judgments and Second Coming*. They will call forth the elect with a loud trumpet from the four winds (Matthew 24:31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17) and will then separate the wheat from the chaff (Matthew 13:39–42). The book of Revelation tells us they will open the seals, blow the trumpets, and pour out the bowls of wrath. They will also execute the judgment against Satan and his servants (Revelation 19:17—20:3, 10).

What awesome beings are angels! And what terrific power they wield! But despite all their cosmic excellencies, their significance dwindles in the presence of Christ. Thus, we come to the grand theme of Hebrews 1:4–14, *Christ's superiority to angels*.

Why does the writer expound it here? Because some of the Jewish believers to whom he was writing were in danger of compromising Jesus' superiority and lapsing into Judaism. They were under pressure first from the imminent threat of Nero's persecution for being Christians, and secondly, they were pressured because of ostracism by their Jewish countrymen in the synagogue. They were being tempted to compromise. If they would simply agree that Jesus was an angel, perhaps even the greatest of angels, but not God, they would be accepted into the synagogue and escape the awful pressure. Such a prospect was tantalizing because it did not require an outright denial of Christ, but only a different affirmation of him and his greatness as an angel. And the prospect was also face-saving because it did not deny that they had had a real experience with an exalted being.³

It takes only a little thought to identify with this temptation, because the supremacy of Christ brings tension in everyday life. The world bristles at “Jesus only.” But one does not have to deny him outright to get along. Rather we are encouraged to simply affirm that he was the very best of men to ever walk on this planet—that his ethics were exalted—that his life was heroic from beginning to end—that he is the supreme example for sacrifice. If one does this, the pressure will be off. What a temptation for the Hebrew Christian in a life-threatening context. A simple change of emphasis on the person of Christ from Son to angel and one would be spared suffering.

But the writer of Hebrews is determined that his friends not fall to this; so he creates a mosaic of Old Testament texts from the Septuagint that powerfully demonstrate the superiority of Christ over angels. The argument has many sub-surface puzzles regarding the author’s use of the Old Testament Greek texts, but the argument is clear as he presents five superiorities of Christ.

A Superior Name

Christ’s superiority is first adduced because he has a superior name: “[He became] 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’? Or again, ‘I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son’?” (vv. 4, 5).

According to Jewish thought, a person’s name revealed his essential nature and could express rank and dignity. Jesus had the name “Son” from all eternity, and it is the name he will always keep, as the perfect tense of the phrase “the name he has inherited” indicates. No angel was ever called “Son,” though sometimes they were generically referred to as sons—for example, “the sons of God” presented themselves before the Lord (Job 1:6). But no angel ever had the title “Son.”

The writer establishes this through two Old Testament quotations. The first is from Psalm 2:7, “For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’?” (v. 5a). Psalm 2 was already a famous messianic psalm, understood to be fulfilled in a future day by a descendant of David who would be crowned king.⁴ Its words were recalled at Jesus’ baptism when a voice from Heaven announced, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

Jesus was always God’s Son, and God was his Father. But the phrase, “today I have begotten you” evidently refers to Christ’s exaltation and enthronement as Son subsequent to the resurrection, because Romans 1:4

says Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.” And in Acts 13:32, 33 Paul specifically proclaims that the resurrection fulfilled Psalm 2:7: “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’” (cf. Ephesians 1:20). “Son” is Jesus’ eternal name that was given exalted declaration in his resurrection and exaltation. No angel ever had that!

Our author further grounds his argument with a second quotation, taken from 2 Samuel 7:14, “Or again [implying, to which of the angels did God ever say], ‘I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son’?” (v. 5b). This is also a quotation from a well-known messianic passage, commonly called the Davidic Covenant, in which the prophet Nathan told David that after his death his son would build a house for God and establish a royal throne that would endure forever. God’s words to the Son—Christ—were, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.”

Since Solomon failed to fulfill this, as did the following Davidic kings, the later prophets looked forward to a greater son of David who would fulfill it. The fulfillment of that ancient promise was celebrated in the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32, 33; cf. Luke 1:68; Romans 1:3).

So we see that Jesus is superior to the angels because he always was God’s Son and because two Old Testament sonship prophecies were marvelously fulfilled by him at his incarnation and resurrection and exaltation. His name is “Son,” while all that can be said of angels is that they are messengers. How dare anyone ever think of demoting him to the position of an archangel, much less to a perfect man!

A Superior Honor

The next point in the author’s argument for Christ’s superiority over angels is that he is worshiped by angels. “And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’” (v. 6). Here he turns to the final lines of verse 43 of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:43). The Jews considered these final lines to be messianic.⁵ Remarkably, the line he borrows, “Let all God’s angels worship him,” is not in the Hebrew original but is a Greek addition. Nevertheless, it expresses the divine mind regarding

Christ, and the Holy Spirit had the writer incorporate it into the inspired text of Hebrews.⁶

Its obvious application is to the angelic worship that had its first occurrence *on earth* at the Incarnation when all God's angels worshiped Christ as "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest'" (Luke 2:13, 14a). Jesus was undoubtedly worshiped by angels in eternity past; he was worshiped by angels during his thirty-three years on earth; and he is worshiped in eternity present—a worship to which we have been given a dizzy glimpse:

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!"

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"
(Revelation 5:11–13)

Angels (unless they are fallen angels) do not worship other angels, for that would be angelolatry! The only one they can and do worship is God. Our job is to lift up Jesus!

A Superior Status

Next the writer demonstrates the superiority of Christ to angels by contrasting their statuses: the angels are *servants*, but the Son is *sovereign*.

Psalm 104:4 is quoted regarding the angels' being servants: "Of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire'" (v. 7). The Septuagint here differs slightly in emphasis from the Hebrew by emphasizing that angels become and do the work of winds and fire, whereas the Hebrew of Psalm 104:4 says, "He makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire." As to why there is this variation, we can only speculate. But the emphasis of the writer of Hebrews is clear: angels sometimes spectacularly inhabit wind and fire to do God's bidding—as when the angel shot up through the flame of Manoah's sacrifice—but in doing this they are only servants.

On the other hand, Christ, the Son, is eternally sovereign. Here the writer quotes Psalm 45:6, 7, a nuptial Psalm addressed originally to a Hebrew king, but phrased in language that could only be fulfilled by the ultimate Davidic king, the Son:⁷

But of the Son he says,

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." (vv. 8, 9)

His *throne*, his *scepter*, his *anointing* give us the dimensions of his brilliant sovereignty. His throne—his rule—will never end. His scepter—his authority—will be executed in his righteousness—a righteousness that he established in becoming a sacrifice for our sins. His being anointed with the oil of joy refers to the heavenly joy that was his as sovereign King of kings. It was "the joy . . . set before him" (12:2).

Angels, his servants, may at his request take on wondrous forms, become seraphim thirty feet high or men three hundred feet high, and perform feats beyond not only the capacity but the imagination of mankind. But they are still *servants*. He is the eternally enthroned, sceptered, anointed *sovereign*. It is impossible to logically think of Christ and angels as peers, any more than we could think of a sovereign and his slaves as equals.

A Superior Existence

For the fourth proof of Christ's superiority, the writer quotes Psalm 102:25–27, which contains a broken man's rising awareness and celebration of God's transcending existence (which, of course, describes Christ's existence by virtue of his creatorship: "through whom also he created the world," 1:2). Psalm 102 reads as it is recorded here in verses 10–12 of our text:

And,

"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.”

What stupendous thoughts! As a man during his lifetime outlives many successive suits of clothes, so Christ will see and outlive many successive material universes, yet will himself remain eternal and unchanging.⁸

In contrast, angels, because they are created, are temporal (though Christ has apparently willed to keep them immortal) and changeable and dependent. To the suffering Jewish believers who first heard these words, these sure words about Christ must have felt like refreshing rain. Their world was not only changing—it was falling apart. But their superior Christ remained the same—eternal and unchanging—“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).

A Superior Vocation

The clinching argument for Christ’s superiority over angels is vocation: Christ *rules*; angels *serve*. That Christ rules supreme is proven by a passage quoted more often in the New Testament than any other (fourteen times). Jesus even quoted it himself and applied it to himself at his trial (Mark 12:36). It is Psalm 110:1, which is quoted here in verse 13: “And to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’?” The answer is, of course, a resounding, “None, not one, no one!”

Christ’s absolute rulership is dramatically seen here in that it was the custom for a defeated king to prostrate himself and kiss his conqueror’s feet (see Psalm 2:12) and for the victor to put his feet on the captive’s neck so that the captive became his footstool (see Joshua 10:24). One day every knee will bow before Christ, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord (Philippians 2:10, 11; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24, 25). And all the angels will be in that number, both good and evil, for the Son is infinitely their superior.⁹

In contrast to Christ’s superior ruling vocation, the angels’ vocation is that of serving. “Are [angels] not,” the author writes, “all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (v. 14). This does not mean their serving is a disgraceful vocation. Far from it! It is a sublime privilege. The point here is, however, that it is inferior to the Son’s vocation of ruling the universe.

So to the beleaguered Jewish believer who was being tempted to say that Christ is an angel and thus escape persecution, God’s Word issues a clear call: Christ is superior to angels because he has a superior *name*—he is Son; a superior *honor*—all the angels worship him; a superior *vocation*—he

is Sovereign King; a superior *existence*—he is eternal and unchangeable; a superior *status*—he rules the universe.

But there is something more here for the harried church—a double encouragement. First, this supreme Son is their God. Later the author of Hebrews would say to them:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (4:14–16)

Christ's *cosmic* superiority, *prophetic* superiority, *priestly* superiority, and *angelic* superiority were all at the believers' service in a world that was falling apart.

Second, in respect to Christ's angelic superiority, all angels had been sent by him as "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." The force of the original Greek is that they are perpetually being sent out to help God's people—one after another.¹⁰

On a dark night about a hundred years ago, a Scottish missionary couple found themselves surrounded by cannibals intent on taking their lives. That terror-filled night they fell to their knees and prayed that God would protect them. Intermittent with their prayers, the missionaries heard the cries of the savages and expected them to come through the door at any moment.

But as the sun began to rise, to their astonishment they found that the natives were retreating into the forest. The couple's hearts soared to God. It was a day of rejoicing!

The missionaries bravely continued their work. A year later the chieftain of that tribe was converted. As the missionary spoke with him, he remembered the horror of that night. He asked the chieftain why he and his men had not killed them. The chief replied, "Who were all those men who were with you?" The missionary answered, "Why, there were no men with us. There were just my wife and myself." The chieftain began to argue with him, saying, "There were hundreds of tall men in shining garments with drawn swords circling about your house, so we could not attack you."

This story, recorded in Billy Graham's book *Angels*, is one of the great tales of missionary history. The missionary was the "legendary" John G. Paton of the New Hebrides.¹¹

What an astounding story! One of a kind, we might think. Actually it

is just one of several similar accounts. Perhaps over the years our Lord has dispatched the same detachment of angels to protect his missionaries again and again—a special “missionary protection platoon.” Possibly tall soldiers in shining clothing is the MO of angelic protectors.

Norwegian missionary Marie Monsen, who served in North China, experienced the intervention of angels on several occasions. In her autobiography *A Present Help*, published in 1960, she tells how looting soldiers had surrounded the mission compound but never entered—leaving the missionaries unharmed and happily perplexed. A few days later they learned why when a marauder explained that as they were about to enter the compound, they saw “tall soldiers with shining faces on a high roof of the compound.” Miss Monsen said:

The heathen saw them, it was a testimony to them, but they were invisible to us. It came powerfully to me and showed me how little we reckon with “the Lord, the God of Hosts,” who sends forth his angels, mighty in strength “to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14 rv).¹²

In 1956 during the Mau Mau uprisings in East Africa, a band of roving Mau Maus came to the village of Lauri, surrounded it, and killed every inhabitant including women and children, three hundred in all. Not more than three miles away was the Rift Valley Academy, a private school where missionary children were being educated. Immediately upon leaving the carnage of Lauri the natives came with spears, bows and arrows, clubs, and torches to the school with violent intentions.

In the darkness lighted torches were seen coming toward the school. Soon there was a complete ring of terrorists around the academy, cutting off all avenues of escape. Shouts and curses could be heard coming from the Mau Maus. They began to advance on the school, tightening the circle, shouting louder and louder, coming closer. Then inexplicably, when they were close enough to throw spears, they stopped. They began retreating and soon were running into the jungle. The army was called out and fortunately captured the entire band of raiders. Later, at their trial, the leader was called to the witness stand. The judge questioned him: “On this particular night, did you kill the inhabitants of Lauri?” “Yes.” “Well, then, why did you not complete the mission? Why didn’t you attack the school?” The leader of the Mau Maus answered, “We were on our way to attack and destroy all the people and school . . . but as we came closer, all of a sudden, between us and the school

there were many huge men, dressed in white with flaming swords and we became afraid and ran to hide!"¹³

Jim Marstaller recounts the following story, told to him by his "Uncle Clyde," Clyde Taylor, founder of the National Association of Evangelicals:

Dr. Clyde Taylor, who married my grandfather's sister . . . and my Uncle Charlie Marstaller were missionaries in the early 1920's to a head hunting tribe in South America. They were beside a river in the forest living in a thatched hut.

One day, late in the afternoon, they noticed a dugout being paddled down the river with only one man in it. Their immediate thought was that the warriors were coming to kill them that night. The dugout could hold over 40 men and they realized that the men were probably going to try to kill them that night.

Uncle Clyde and Charlie had a .22 rifle in their hut and took it and some ammo out into the tall grass off to the side of their dwelling. There they stayed all night, in their own private prayer meeting, expecting that if attacked they would fire the gun into the air to frighten the head-hunters.

Nothing happened that night and they had no trouble with the tribe for the rest of their term in South America.

They both returned home after their term was over, and it wasn't until 9 years later that Clyde was able to visit the field. One day he encountered one of the men from the tribe who had since become a Christian; so he asked the native about what happened that night.

The former head-hunter said, "I remember that night, there were 44 of us and we were coming to set fire to your hut. When we got there and surrounded the hut we realized we could not attack because there were hundreds of men, dressed in white, with swords and shields, standing all around your hut and even on the roof. That is why I am a Christian now."

Uncle Clyde realized then that God had protected them with His angels and used this account to be an encouragement to many others throughout the rest of his life.¹⁴

In March 1980 I taped an interview with Mrs. Carol Carlson, a missionary from the church I serve as pastor, College Church in Wheaton (Illinois). Mrs. Carlson and her husband, Edwin, served in China and Tibet for over fifty years. Mrs. Carlson told of several deliverances, including this one:

It was early in 1922 that we arrived in West China at the station called Titao, and the gatekeeper there impressed us as a man rather different from the type of Chinese we had met thus far during our first days on the field. He was bold and forward and sometimes rather brassy, not the quiet, polite Chinese we had met thus far. But he seemed to be very greatly loved by all the people on the station and we understood this when they told us he had been a professional brigand; that is, a member of a robber band that worked

the area not too far from Titao, and that the band had come one very dark night expecting to attack the mission station. They were on their way down a side street and as they drew near to the walls of the mission compound, the men were terrorized by the sight of men in white walking up and down on the wall. Of course they couldn't go any farther. But his curiosity was aroused as to what kind of people the missionaries might be and what it was they were teaching there in the church. So, little by little, he began to come and listen, which, of course, resulted in his conversion—and he was indeed a faithful, very loyal, and very useful helper for many years there on the station.

What astounding stories! And what a unified witness not only to the power of angels, but to the superiority of Christ who makes his angels “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” (v. 14).

The message to the harried, trembling church of the writer's day, and to the Church universal, is this: Our superior Christ has assigned his angels to minister to us. And if he wills, he can deliver us anytime and anywhere he wishes. Christ is superior to everything. He is adequate in our hour of need. We must believe it and trust him with all we are and have.



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