

April 19, 2015

Better Than The Angels

Hebrews 1:4 – 14

The book of Hebrews is written to a group of urban, first-century Christians who were struggling with fear and discouragement because their lives were so filled with troubles. They were so troubled in fact that they were at least contemplating a return to what they had come out of, namely, the ritual observance of the law of Moses, much like their ancestors wanting to return to Egypt when life got hard in the wilderness. The question this book addresses is ***If God really loves us, if we are the people of God, if He is truly committed to His glory and our good, why are we suffering? Why is our life so hard?*** And the writer answers that question by reminding them of one simple fact – life is a journey through the wilderness. It's a journey from weariness into rest. It's a journey from alienation into the presence of God. It's a journey from isolation into the city of God. It's a journey through the wilderness where all your props are exposed and destroyed, and ***the only way you're going to get home is by fixing your eyes on Jesus.***

All the way through Hebrews, the author answers the question by showing that ***fear and discouragement can be dealt with by looking at Jesus.*** In every chapter you find some reference to looking at Jesus or fixing your eyes on Jesus or seeing Jesus in some way. The writer is constantly making reference to the wilderness experience of Israel in the Old Testament and telling his audience: ***'Don't shrink back like they did – don't harden your hearts like they did – don't let unbelief take root in you like they did – look to Jesus'***. And again this week the writer says, if you really want to deal with fear and discouragement in your life, if you really want to be able to face the trouble and suffering in the wilderness with hope and joy, look to Jesus, don't look to angels.

The fact that this letter was written at all, means that there were those in the church at that time who were elevating and honoring angels to at least a position of equality with, if not superiority over, Jesus. Paul dealt with this issue in his letter to the Colossians: ***Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head.*** Colossians 2:18-19 In fact we know that angels were very popular in Jewish literature from the second century B.C. through the first century A.D. A whole hierarchy of angels was developed along with some theological teachings that were not present in the Old Testament. In the re-telling of Biblical stories writers often had angels performing acts that were acts of God in the Hebrew Bible.

But most importantly, in Jewish tradition, angels were intimately connected with the giving of the Law to Israel on Mt. Sinai. This tradition comes from the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 33:2 where he says, ***"The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; He shone forth from Mount Paran; He came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at His right hand.*** Stephen, the first Christian martyr made reference to this in his speech to the Jewish High Council – ***'You stiff-necked people!... you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.'*** What these Jews believed was that it was the angels who were the mediators of the covenant with God. They stood between God and man. The effect of this thinking was to exalt the position of angels in their minds and it developed into worshipping angels and even praying to angels. And evidently many began to think of Jesus as just another angel, like Michael or Gabriel.

I know you might be tempted to say, 'Well that's not a problem for me. I don't worship angels'. And that might be true. But are you settled in your conviction that the only way you're getting through this present wilderness is to keep your eyes on Jesus and nothing else? This is what the writer was trying to convey to his readers. Because they were trusting in angels or Moses or the law or the sacrifices – and Jesus. And the writer is trying to paint this picture of Jesus for them that He is better than all of those things. To be sure, to see an angel, to witness the spectacular miraculous, is a great thing. It's even a good thing. But don't let it draw your heart away from the main thing. Don't let it cause you to focus on the gifts instead of the Giver. Let it instead fill your soul with the awesome superiority of Jesus. So the writer begins to show his readers why Jesus is better.

Jesus is better because He has a better name. *having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs.* We saw last week in the first three verses the exclusive superiority of Jesus in the universe. He is the inheritor of all things; He is the one who made the universe and everything in it, including the angels; He reflects God's own glory; He represents God exactly; He sustains the universe by the word of His power; He died to cleanse us from the stain of sin; and He has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High. All these prove, the author says, His superiority over the angels.

And now the author offers another proof – His name. **5** *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"?* The name the Father gave Christ was **MY SON**. He never gave that to the angels. God never calls any angel, 'Son'. Angels are created beings – Jesus Christ is the Son of God. **That's a better name.** Here the writer quotes two passages from the Old Testament – Psalm 2:7 *"You are my Son, today I have begotten You"?* and 2 Samuel 7:14 *"I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son"?*

When the writer quotes the psalmist: *'You are My Son, today I have begotten You'* he was obviously making reference to a specific time. But what he wasn't saying is that before this time Jesus was not the Son. He has already made reference in verse two to the fact that the Son was pre-existent to everything. He created everything. And although in the the gospels, Jesus always spoke of Himself as the Son of man; when He came up from John's baptism, the voice of God came from heaven, **This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.** But it was His sitting down at the right hand of the Father that openly declared His Sonship. Paul tells us in Romans 1:4 that it was in His resurrection and enthronement that Jesus was *"declared the Son of God with power..."* He has always been the Son of God, just like He has always been heir of all things. But when He had made purification for sins and triumphed over death and Satan, Christ was declared Son of God and heir of all things on a new basis and in a new way. Now He reigns as the God-man Jesus Christ—the Son of God not only by His eternal right, but now by the right of His victory over sin and death.

And the fact that He is called Son of God is crucial. Son of God is better than angel. Angel means messenger or servant – Jesus' name is Son of God. There is a very big difference between your son and your servant. They do not have the same status. While it is true that angels are called "sons of God" in the Bible, no angel is ever referred to as 'Son of God'; because like Adam, angels are direct creations from God's hand. But Jesus is the uncreated Son of God from all eternity. So He has a better name.

Jesus is better because the angels are commanded to worship Him. **6** *And again, when He brings the Firstborn into the world, He says, "Let all God's angels worship him."* If angels are to worship Him, He must be greater than they are. Prior to His incarnation they worshipped Him as God. But now they are called to worship Him as Son. The Son who became a man is higher than the angels because He is the very God the angels had always worshipped. And don't be disturbed by the fact that Jesus is referred to as the Firstborn. This is not a word – **prototokos** – that has to do with chronology but rather position. You can't look at this and conclude that Jesus was just another created being – the one born first. What the author is saying is that Jesus is the sovereign of everything.

You see, the firstborn was considered the heir to everything. He was the chief of the Father's estate, and all the dignity and honor and prestige of the family was connected with him. He may or may not even have been born first, as in the story of Jacob and Esau. Esau was the firstborn, but all the honor and authority and rule went to Jacob. You get a little better picture of what that means when you look at Jacobs blessing to his firstborn, Reuben: *"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.* The term firstborn here is a reference to Christ's sovereignty and rule and honor and authority, not merely a designation of chronological order. He's the firstborn. Therefore the angels worship Him.

Jesus is better because the angels are only messengers **7** *Of the angels he says, "He makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire."* Angels are messengers and servants of God to carry out His eternal purpose in the universe. In Genesis 28, God gives us a little glimpse into the workings of the spiritual realm when He gives Jacob a dream of a ladder, or stairway set up reaching from earth to heaven. And on it were angels, the Bible says, **going up and down on it**, and God stood at the top of the stairway proclaiming His promises to Jacob.

When Jacob woke up his immediate statement was *"What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God..."* And the name God gives His house in Isaiah 57 is the House of Prayer. From that we should understand that prayer is the gateway to the heavenly realms, and it is the weapon that engages the hosts of heaven who are for us, to battle the forces of Satan who are against us. Prayer engages the power of God to carry out the purpose of God in the earth. As we pray, the angels go up to God with our requests, and then come back down with the answers. There ought to be a lot of heavenly traffic on this stairway – angels ascending with our requests and descending with the answers.

And when the writer calls them 'servants made of flaming fire' that refers to judgment. Angels carry out God's judgments. We see that first of all in Genesis where God stations the angel with the flaming sword to guard the way back into the garden. That sword is judgment on sin. We see two angels in Genesis 19 who carry out His judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. All the way through the Old Testament, angels appear not only as messengers from God, but as His judging arm. In speaking of the final judgment in Matthew 13, Jesus says, *'And I the Son of Man, will send My angels and they will remove from My kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil, and they will throw them into the furnace and burn them.'* And who is greater in stature and prestige and position? The judge who imposes the sentence, or the prison warden who carries it out? Jesus is better than the angels.

Jesus is better because He is the eternal God *8 But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;* The difference between angels and the Son is that the Son is the eternal God. To say that the Son was just a man, or a great prophet, or some lower case god is to lie against the truth and sin. Jesus is on the throne – the angels are before the throne. There's a big difference. In the gospel of John, there's a scene in chapter five where the Jews were on the verge of stoning Him. He had just healed someone, but He did it on the Sabbath. But the writer says, *"This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God."* The reason Jesus was finally sentenced to death by the Jews was that they understood that He was claiming to be God.

Since Jesus Christ loves what is right, He also hates what is wrong. The word "wrong" is *anomia* in the Greek text and means "lawlessness." Since Christ loves what is right, He would hate what is wrong. The two are inseparable. One cannot exist without the other. You cannot truthfully say, "I love righteousness, but I also like sin." Yet a lot of us act that way. When there is true love for God, there will be true love for righteousness and total hatred of sin. Jesus hated sin. You see it in His temptation, His cleansing of the Temple, and His death on the cross. The more you and I become conformed to Jesus Christ, the more we will love righteousness and hate sin. You can determine how much you are being conformed to Christ by your attitude toward righteousness and sin.

Jesus is better because He is the anointed One *therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."* God never anointed any of the angels. In fact in the Old Testament, anointing was reserved for kings, and the word 'Christ' means 'Anointed One.' When Jesus ascended into heaven, the Father anointed Him and gave Him the name above every name and He assumed the kingship then. As the anointed One He is king – angels can't be king.

Jesus is better because He created the angels *10 And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of Your hands; 11 they will perish, but You remain; they will all wear out like a garment, 12 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."* Here is one of the strongest appeals to the supremacy of Christ – He created everything. If He was there in the beginning, He must have been before the beginning, which makes Him without beginning. Once the heavens and the earth did not exist – but He always existed. And one day He spoke a word and the universe leapt into existence. The earth and the heavens are not eternal – but He is. Everything else will perish – but He remains forever. Everything else will wear out and get rolled up like a bad carpet, everything else will fade away – but He never wears out. He never fades. He never gets rolled up. He is always the same. Later on the writer makes the definitive statement: *'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.'*

Jesus is better because He sits on the throne *13 And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?* The one who sits on the throne is unquestionably greater than those who do not. The destiny of Jesus Christ is that ultimately everything in heaven and on earth and under the earth will be subject to Him. All the enemies of Christ will be humbled and broken before Him – in fact that is where He will rest His feet – on the footstool, on them. This is to rest. When you sit down and put your feet up, you intend to rest. And that is just the picture here. You never see angels sitting on the throne. In fact the only place I know where an angel ever sat down at all was at the empty tomb. They are otherwise engaged in going up and down on the ladder of prayer carrying out the desire of the King. And then even when it is all over they are standing around the throne day and night worshipping God.

Finally, the writer ends with this: *14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?* The conclusion here is that, as awesome and mysterious as angels can be, they after all, are only our servants. Their main purpose is to care for those God has elected and called out for salvation. Another rendition of this verse says, *But angels are only servants. They are spirits sent from God to care for those who will receive salvation.* Angels are created beings who are sent to give help to those who are called by God into His kingdom. John Calvin wrote, **"Angels are the dispensers and administrators of the divine beneficence toward us. They regard our safety, undertake our defense and direct our ways."**

First of all there are enemies of our salvation – enemies that want to bring the work of Christ to nothing and make it fail – enemies that want to keep us from inheriting salvation – enemies like demons, false religions, false ideas, sinful impulses, evil people. So God sends His angels to serve us so that we persevere in faith and inherit our salvation. Angels were created, not to compete with Christ but to worship Him and honor Him and the chief way they do that here on earth is by serving us so that we hold fast to Christ and trust Him and love Him and treasure Him until that day we finally see Him in the fullness of our salvation. We won't take the time right now, but all the way through Scripture we see angels engaged in guiding, encouraging supplying, enlightening and empowering God's people.

Secondly there are dangers to our mortal being from which angels protect and deliver us. It was angels that got Lot and his family out of Sodom. It was angels that God sent to protect Elisha and his servant when they were being menaced by the King of Aram. Elisha's servant looked out and saw they were surrounded by thousands of enemy troops. *"Alas, my master! What shall we do?" He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.* These were angels. And this is not only Old Testament stuff.

In the early 19th century, John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed all during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers were gone. A year later, the chief of that particular tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, "Because of all those men with you there." Paton knew there had been no one else there, but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station.

What this means is that all who come to Christ will be brought all the way through the wilderness of this life safely home. Jesus is better than the angels because He's the one who sends them to help us all the way to glory. Angels were created not to compete with Jesus, but to worship Him and honor Him and serve His purposes. And the main way that they do that is by serving us so that we hold fast to Christ and trust Him and love Him and treasure Him until we finally reach Him in the fullness of our salvation. The question this morning is do you have this exalted view of Jesus? Is He better in your eyes? Does your heart echo the words of the psalmist: *Your unfailing love is better to me than life itself... 'You satisfy me more than the richest of foods... I lie awake thinking of You, meditating on You through the night... I sing for joy in the shadow of Your protecting wings!*' Are you convinced that Jesus is on the throne and rules over everything? Have you embraced the truth that He rules over you? Are you persuaded that it's only by keeping your eyes on Him that you'll make it through this wilderness? Jesus is the mighty God who was crushed for our sins and raised in resurrection power for our salvation. You can trust Him all the way.

O Father, captivate us with the love of Christ; kindle afresh the fire in our spirits, and open the eyes of our hearts to ponder, and meditate, enjoy and savor His glory and His goodness and His supremacy. And when You have captivated our hearts, lead us, we pray, to labor and even suffer to lead others into this all-satisfying passion. For Your own sake, Father, and the glory of Your dear Son Jesus. Amen.