

A Better Message

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Date: 23 February 2003

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of February 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, A Better Message, and is based on Hebrews chapter 1, verse 5, through to chapter 2, verse 4.

Please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 971. Last week we began a sermon series on the letter to the Hebrews, and this is week 2 of a series that will be done in blocks throughout the year.

Let's pray. For God, we thank you that you have spoken to us in many and varied ways in times past, through the prophets in the Old Testament, and that more recently you spoke through the Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, and you speak to us through these words of Scripture, we pray, so that we may glorify him and not drift from him.

For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen. In October 1994, it was the height of the Rwandan genocide. Three militia spies, boys really, young men, came to warn Bishop Alexis, a bishop of the Anglican Church in Rwanda, that he and those with him were about to be killed.

[1 : 41] He defied them, saying to them, you will not kill us. We are protected by and surrounded by angels. And when the militia came, at the sound of the whistles that would bring them out of the jungles to do their killing, they came towards the church and the buildings where he was, but came no further and inexplicably turned around and went away.

Rescued by angels, he lived to tell the story. There's a growing interest in angels in our society. A number of films and TV shows have had angels, people dying and becoming angels, or angels coming to look after people on earth.

Certainly in New Age bookshops, and probably others, you find books about angels. There are psychics who, presumably for a handsome fee, will connect you to your guardian angel.

I looked up one on the internet last night as I was preparing this, and I didn't get connected to a guardian angel. I'm not going to pay any sort of fee, but just looking at the sort of services that people offer in respect to angels, it's extraordinary.

There's a lady who tells the story of working in a city apartment, but coming out for a break, into a park, seeing a little girl looking very sad, sitting in the park. So she bought a hot dog, took it over to this girl, gave it to her, and this girl said to her, I'm your guardian angel, and she flew off.

[3 : 18] It's hard to know how loopy the person was who wrote that story. Well, there are angels though, and there are angels in the Bible. Periodically they are mentioned in the Old Testament, sometimes with specific roles, certainly part of a heavenly host, God's servants, who have from time to time specific roles.

But having said that, not a lot of attention is paid to them. We're not told in great detail about angels and what they're really on about. But after the end of the Old Testament period, so about 300 years BC, before Jesus, and a bit over 300 years before this letter was written, it seems that in Jewish circles, traditions arose that place more and more importance on the role of angels.

For example, tradition arose that the angels were instrumental as mediators of God's law at Mount Sinai, when God spoke, according to the Old Testament, directly to Moses, who relayed the words of the law to the people of God.

In the time between the end of the Old Testament and Jesus' day, it seems that these traditions arose that seemed to give the angels more of a role, more significance in the actions of God speaking and communicating His law to His people.

And so by the time of Jesus and the letter to the Hebrews, it seems that some Jews and some Jewish Christians perhaps placed angels at a very high level of significance in the spiritual realm.

[4 : 52] Not only perhaps as mediators of God's law, some presumably it seems were at least tempted to, if not already, in some way venerating angels or worshipping angels in some respects.

And certainly it seems that some Jews and perhaps even Jewish Christians were seeing the angels as having a crucial or essential role as intermediaries between them and God.

So they would relate to God through angels in some ways. Now whilst we may not be tempted to worship angels, I suspect, though perhaps I'm wrong, nonetheless, it seems to me that people in general look for some mediation between them and God.

I think it's a reaction to our sinful human nature that we know that we're fallen and sinners in our heart of hearts and so approaching God directly, a holy and perfect, pure God, is somehow an intimidating thing to imagine.

In the Old Testament we see a vision of a prophet, Isaiah, who comes into the temple of God and sees a vision of God and his response is not to sort of embrace God warmly like an old friend but rather to actually fall down in almost horror and fear of the purity and holiness of God and he acknowledges his sinfulness before God.

[6 : 20] I think there's something in our sinful nature that means that we shy away from God to an extent and so we want something to come between us and God to somehow give us a little bit of protection perhaps rather than relate to God directly and I think that fear of God, a reflection of our sinful human nature is seen in a number of different ways that Christians behave.

For example, some Christians will ask me or a minister or a priest to pray for them sometimes because they fear that they can't approach God directly themselves, those Christians, they can. In some Christian traditions there are the increase of priestly roles or rituals that somehow place the priest or the ritual as a sort of means of relating to God.

So there's sort of two steps from God maybe by way of protection. Sometimes you see that reflected in church architecture where in some churches there will be what's called a rude screen across from where the people sit up towards the, as they usually call it, altar or the sanctuary area of a church as though somehow there is a way in which there's some mediation between the people and God himself.

Sometimes it's reflected in some Christians wanting to pray to saints or to Mary rather than to God directly. Now there are just some ways in which I think our sinful, fallen human nature is reflecting our fear at going directly to God and we're shying away from God.

[8 : 01] And it seems that for some of the recipients of this letter to the Hebrews there was perhaps this fear of God, they were shying away from Him for various reasons and so for some of them at least angels functioned as their intermediary or mediator to help them keep a distance from God.

Well Hebrews is written to Christians who are tempted to stand back and away from God, to keep their distance from God, whether it was to have an angelic mediator or some other sort of mediation or intermediary.

The letter to the Hebrews keeps on exhorting its readers to draw near to God with full confidence. The letter reminds us though that any form of mediation other than Jesus Christ is second rate faith, if not fatally flawed faith indeed.

It encourages us to draw near to God. So this passage we're looking at today is seeking to put angels in their right and proper place, not as a place of veneration or mediation, servants of God but certainly not beings to be adored or worshipped.

Now remember what we saw at the beginning of chapter 1 last week. God had spoken in the past in many and various ways in the Old Testament and perhaps through angels giving the law that was one aspect of that but definitively and finally and fully God has spoken through His Son Jesus Christ.

[9 : 43] Not a revelation of God that does away with the old but a revelation of God that crowns the Old Testament revelation of God. And we see that because in this passage now the writer quotes the Old Testament seven times.

He doesn't do that because it's old hat and out of the way it is still God speaking and he's doing it to show that God's final speech through His Son is indeed anticipated and expected in the Old Testament itself but in the context specifically of where we place angels.

Now this passage begins with a rhetorical question. To which of the angels did God ever say you are my Son today I have begotten you? The rhetorical question is unanswered but the answer is obvious.

God said that to no angel ever. That's fairly obvious. Now angels in the Old Testament are sometimes called sons of God but never in the unique and definitive way in which Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

Now the first quote in verse 5 comes from the Psalms. Most of these quotes are from Psalms. This one from Psalm 2 a Psalm that extolled the King God's King over God's people in a specific role and in a specific relationship with God God as Father the King as Son.

[11 : 11] Of course I'm sure the writer as well as the readers would have probably known that these words were quoted or adapted and spoken by God at both the baptism of Jesus recorded in Mark and at the transfiguration of Jesus recorded in Luke.

So the writer here is using Psalm 2 which speaks of the special King of God extolled and looked up to in a special relationship with God as Father and Son but now fulfilled in Jesus Christ the Messiah King of God.

The next passage picks up the same idea. Same verse, verse 5 quoting this time from 2 Samuel 7 I will be his Father and he will be my Son.

Now the writer here is not just picking up all sorts of obscure things in the Old Testament. This is actually a crucial passage in the Old Testament. It's where God made promises to David the King that David would be the beginning of an eternal dynasty of kings over God's people so that David's son Solomon would reign and then the next son and so on.

But the promises to David were not fulfilled by his son Solomon or any subsequent king in the Old Testament. Indeed the promise was that there would be a king forever and so Jesus fulfills that promise.

[12 : 41] The son of David remember when he arrived in Jerusalem before his death the palm branches were strewn in his way and the people shouted out Hosanna to the son of David. So the Old Testament expected and Jesus fulfilled the role of the Messianic king in David's line and so uniquely can it be said of Jesus Christ I will be his father and he will be my son.

Therefore angels worship him. It is not that he worships the angels or that the angels are generally to be worshipped at all.

The third quote in verse 6 probably from Deuteronomy 32 although Psalm 97 has similar words let all God's angels worship him.

Now they're striking words. It's not just talking about angels worshipping God but angels worshipping the Messiah king of God.

So these words quoted by the writer here are putting Jesus the son of God on a par with God to be worshipped. not lower down the ladder so that God is worshipped but not the son of God but the son of God equally to be worshipped as indeed God was to be worshipped.

[14 : 08] Therefore it's clear angels worship the son of God and are not themselves to be worshipped. That's the basic point he's making.

Angels put in their right and proper place and the son of God put in his right and proper place as well. Now the writer's not satisfied with leaving the issue here.

He's almost making his point with a sledgehammer tour de force of more quotes to underline and underscore the point that he's making. So he goes on in verse 7 to quote this time from Psalm 104 about the angels he says he makes his angels winds and his servants flames of fire clearly saying their angels are servants.

They're not to be worshipped. They're not on a throne. They're not the king. They are servants of God at his beck and call to do his will but not to be worshipped.

In comparison verse 8 goes on quoting another Psalm, Psalm 45 which Carol preached on recently. Of the son he says your throne oh God is forever and ever and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.

[15 : 22] You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness therefore God your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. This is saying that the son rules on an eternal throne by contrast to the angels that are just servants winds of fire and flame and so on.

The psalm is about the wedding feast of a king, his own wedding but the words note are very striking. Your throne oh God is forever and ever the quote begins but it's addressed not to God in heaven so much as to the messianic king the son of God who is put again on a par with God to be worshipped and moreover on the eternal throne reigning in righteousness and in truth.

Again the emphasis is on the son of God as the messianic king expected in the Old Testament fulfilled when Jesus came and the comparison continues in the next quote again the psalms psalm 102 this time now picking up the idea that Jesus the son of God not only reigns but as we saw last week as well was involved in the creation itself in the beginning Lord address not to God but to the son of God or the king you founded the earth and the heavens are the work of your hands they will perish but you remain they will all wear out like clothing like a cloak you'll roll them up and like clothing they will be changed but you are the same and your years will never end.

Again the idea is that the messianic king Jesus the son of God reigns forever he was involved in creating the world as we saw last week and indeed the world will pass away but the king the son of God will continue to reign forever.

And then the final quote again from the psalm psalm 110 in verse 13 to which of the angels has he ever said sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet and again the rhetorical question needs no answer for God has never said that to an angel but only to his son.

[17:46] Psalm 110 is in fact the most quoted part of the Old Testament in the New Testament quoted many times throughout many of the books and letters in the New Testament. It's talking about the king the messianic king perfectly fulfilled in Jesus the son of God who's exalted and sits at God's right hand until all his enemies are a footstool for his feet.

That's encouraging to remember in our current world climate isn't it that in a world that looks so out of control Jesus actually reigns on the throne. May not always look like it but it remains true and ought to give us great confidence even when we feel afraid in this world in which we live.

By contrast to the son reigning on the throne at God's right hand are not all angels spirits in the divine service sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.

Notice the angels role it's to serve us Christian people who are to inherit salvation. We worship the son who saves but angels serve the saved.

They're not to be worshipped they're God's servants sent to serve us as well. Now we may think this is a bit of a convoluted argument but remember that for the readers they were tempted to place angels on a very high pedestal indeed.

[19:18] The writer is putting them in their right place. Servants of God to serve the saved, to serve Christian people. By contrast the son of God, the messianic king long expected through the Old Testament fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is on the eternal throne, he reigns at God's right hand, he will reign beyond the life expectancy of this world and this universe, he will reign forever and he along with God is to be equally worshipped with God.

But not so the angels. Servants, but not to be venerated, adored or worshipped. What is the point of this long argument and series of Old Testament quotes?

It is a pastoral point. The writer here is not trying to indulge in complicated theology. He is writing for a very basic pastoral reason, to encourage Christians to stay on being Christian.

Christians don't usually give up being Christian with a conscious decision one morning.

[20:38] They don't usually wake up and think, I've been a Christian but I now decide not to be. Something's convinced me not to be. In my experience that's not usually the case, though sometimes it is.

Christians tend to give up by drifting. And on the waves of our world there are many Christians who are drifting.

For many Christians life is like a pleasant boating trip where we're just bobbing up and down in a very calm life on the waves of life being towed wherever the currents, winds and waves of life take us.

But paying no attention, Christians in this life all too often find they are drifting further and further from security and refuge in God. It looks calm, it looks safe.

But in fact they're drifting, tossed to and fro by every wind and ignorant to the perils of the sea of life. Christians more often than not stop being Christians because they drift.

[21:47] They loosen the ties to God, the anchor of hope is not firmly lodged. They loosen their ties to God's people, to fellowship, to the Bible and to prayer and they pay little heed to their spiritual condition.

They think they're okay, they think they're okay as Christians but in fact they're drifting on the waves of life and drifting further and further away from God.

and I can think in my life of a number of people who are Christians often keenly so and are no longer so, not because of some conscious decision one day to stop being a Christian but because they drift.

The pressures of time mean that they loosen their ties on church fellowship or the pressures of time mean they stop going to Bible study and then they loosen their ties on Christian fellowship, they become less frequent at church, the attraction of other activities or a holiday house means their ties become looser to Christians whom they know and trust, the pressures of time mean they might give up reading the Bible so often or praying and so they begin to drift and the ropes of fellowship and Bible and prayer and church life and Bible study that have secured them closely to God get looser and looser and looser.

Throughout this letter time and again the writer exhorts the readers not to drift, to not give up being Christian and so the convoluted argument which we might think a bit complicated about angels and the sun is in order to stop Christians drifting.

[23 : 42] That's why the writer speaks about Jesus in the way that he does and he concludes with an exhortation at this point. If angels were important as vehicles for God's law and he doesn't dismiss that idea, then how much more important is Jesus as the communicator of God's final and full and definitive word?

And if disobedience to God's law which was mediated by angels brought about severe but just penalties as it did, then how much more important is it that we pay attention to God's final full word in Christ?

And if you think back to the Old Testament law, it did have harsh penalties for disobedience and transgression. Commit murder, it wasn't treated lightly, you lose your life.

Commit idolatry, you lose your life. That's a serious law and the people of God in the Old Testament were exhorted to heed it. But how much more important is the word of God communicated to us through Jesus Christ?

Not because the Old Testament is done away with and made redundant and is waste of time, not at all, but because Jesus' word is even more important than it.

[25 : 05] You might put a comparison this way. If year 10 exams are important, how much more so VCE? It's not that year 10 is unimportant, but that VCE is even more important.

That's the comparison that the writer is making here at this point. If God spoke in many and various ways in the Old Testament and that was God speaking and it was important as it was, how much more important is it to heed God speaking finally and fully and definitively in Jesus Christ.

Pay attention is what he's saying to Jesus Christ and don't drift. See what he says at the beginning of chapter 2, Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we've heard so that we do not drift away from it.

For if the message declared through angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

And the rhetorical question leaves no doubt about the seriousness. How can we escape? There is no escape is in effect what he's saying at the beginning of verse 3. If we fail to heed God's word in Christ there is no escape, you will not get through this life alive.

[26 : 18] I must say I've given up listening to air stewards telling me the safety procedures for the plane that I'm in.

I don't fly hugely often but they're pretty boring and I prefer to read my book. And I figure to myself if this plane's going to crash, I'm a goner. Why bother knowing how to put up this particular life jacket or wear the particular exit is?

It'll be pandemonium, doesn't matter, I'll go to heaven and forget about getting out of the plane. Now I ignore these air stewards at my peril.

God is speaking to us in scripture, in Jesus Christ, words of life and death. You see there is only one safe rescue place to get out of this life alive, Jesus Christ.

And if we fail to pay attention to Him, there is no way out of this life alive at all. No guardian angel can help us. No other intermediary exists to plead our case or to rescue us.

[27 : 30] Jesus is it. So pay attention and stop drifting. And if you think the punishment for transgression of God's law in the Old Testament was severe and it was death for idolatry and murder and so on, then failing to heed Jesus' word or God's word in Jesus will have just as severe, if not more so, ramifications.

There is no other way out of this life alive than through Jesus Christ. And don't be fooled into thinking that these words of God in Christ are fake or a myth or unreliable or untrustworthy. There are plenty of people who dismiss God's word today as myth and fake, often under the cloak of scholarship, sometimes by heretical bishops, with apologies to a non-heretical bishop who's here today.

the writer here makes it clear that the word of God came to Jesus and was heard by the first generation apostles who reliably passed it on to the writer amongst others in the second generation and who reliably wrote it down in this letter to pass on to his readers and that includes us centuries later.

It is reliable and trustworthy and the word of God in Christ was attested by signs and miracles. We have no reason to doubt its authenticity and reliability and trustworthiness.

[29 : 02] This is not a fake air steward standing up giving us hoaxed ways of getting out of a plane alive. This is somebody who knows the real deal and he's telling us this is the one way out, Jesus Christ.

See what he says at the end of verse 3 and through verse 4. This word of God spoken in Christ was declared at first through the Lord himself. It was attested to us by those who heard him, the original apostles.

While God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will and you can see that for example in the book of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament.

This is a reliable and trustworthy word that God has spoken and we turn deaf ears to it at our eternal peril. Be attentive to it. Don't drift from it.

That's why the writer has written it for our benefit. This is a word of escape, Jesus Christ. A word of escape from eternal death and the punishment of hell.

[30 : 07] It is rescue, it is life indeed and there is no other way out than in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who reigns at God's right hand over all things.

Involved in the creation and the heir of all things at the end of history. So if Jesus truly is the maker and the redeemer and the Lord over all, then his word is the most important word we can ever hear in our life and we're deaf to it at our peril.