

God's Glorious Son-A glimpse of the Trinity

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[0 : 00] Dear Heavenly Father, please send your Holy Spirit into our hearts to soften them and please open our eyes to see your glory in the face of your Son, our Lord Jesus.

Amen. Well, what difference does the doctrine of the Trinity make to us? What difference does it make to our day-to-day thinking about God?

What practical difference would it make to us if Jesus were just an exalted man? Or an angel? Or perhaps just a mode or manifestation of God? How would our lives and worship be different?

I think if we are Christians, we would all want to say that the Trinity is a non-negotiable for us. We understand that it sets us apart in our beliefs from heretics and cults and Muslims.

We know that it puts Jesus in a special category. But I wonder how deep the doctrine goes into our affections. As I look at the articles that come to me in my job as the editor with the Gospel Coalition, I don't get too many articles on the Trinity.

[1 : 07] We are concerned, apparently, about the government and how it's moving to restrict our freedoms, or we're worried about how churches might hold on to young people, or how to keep evangelism on the agenda, or managing the pressures of life and work.

Our concerns, in other words, tend to be practical and evangelical. Maybe Trinitarian theology leaves us cold. Maybe it scares us off with its complicated terminology.

Maybe we worry that it takes us away from the straightforward realities of the Bible and the Gospel. But today, as we have this brief glimpse of the doctrine of the Trinity from Hebrews 1, I hope we'll see that this is a doctrine that is both biblical and practical, and more than that, that it's a doctrine that should cause us to rejoice greatly.

The context of our passage this morning, of course, is a letter to some Jewish Christians in the first century. We don't know too much about where they were located or their circumstances, but we can see that they were in danger of turning away from Jesus and going back to Judaism.

Perhaps it was increasing persecution. There are certainly hints of that later on in the letter.

Perhaps it was the comfort and familiarity of their own heritage, a temple you could visit in person, sacrifices that you could buy and offer for yourself.

[2 : 28] Or perhaps they'd simply lost their first love. They'd stopped meeting together and stopped encouraging one another. But our writer, and of course we can't be sure who he is either, wants to warn his readers that going back from Jesus would be a disaster.

And it will be disastrous because it will mean turning away from what they already have in Jesus. Because in coming to know Jesus, they have come to the end of days, the final revelation of God, because Jesus is God's son.

And in coming to know Jesus, they've been given the key to history, God's secret design for creation, because Jesus is God's heir. And those are our two headings today.

Jesus is God's son, and Jesus is God's heir. The first thing our writer wants us to know is that Jesus brings a radically new kind of revelation because of who he is.

That many times and in various ways, God relayed information to his people by means of prophets entrusted with his words. God acted in history and interpreted his actions through his servants, the prophets.

[3 : 38] But now he has sent someone who is himself a revelation because he's a true son. Now this might not initially seem too remarkable.

The Old Testament, after all, talks about other sons of God. Angels, kings, and the whole nation of Israel are called sons of God at various points. It means they have a special relationship to God or some limited similarity to him.

They share, for example, in his rule over the world. Being a son in this sense is a kind of office. Let's have a quick look at the first diagram. There's God working through his sons, angels, Israel, kings, and so on, ruling and acting through these agents.

And actually Jesus has this kind of sonship too as the Messiah. We see it in verse 5 of Hebrews 1, the verse just after our main passage. There the writer quotes Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7 and says, This is about Jesus being given a sonship, being crowned as God's king, his ultimate ruler over every ruler on earth or heaven.

But Hebrews 1 shows us that Jesus is also God's son in another sense. The reason why he's coming into the world is such a big deal is because he's a real son.

[5 : 09] A son who, like every natural son, comes from God, shares in his father's reality, and is like his father. Notice how verse 3 describes him as the exact representation of God's being.

The Greek word for representation or character conveys the idea of an impression left in clay or wax when a seal is pressed into it.

Jesus is the exact copy of God. And Jesus is the exact representation of God's being. The word for being here in this context means what God is. Just as a child fully shares in the human nature of his or her parents, so Jesus shares whatever God is.

Except in this case, the likeness between the father and son is perfect. Let's have a look at the next diagram. So whatever God is, we see it again in Jesus.

Jesus isn't a bit like God. He is what God is all over again. And part of that, of course, means that he has the same power as God to create things.

[6 : 19] In verse 2, he is the one through whom God made the universe. In verse 3, we read that he sustains all things by his powerful word. So in Genesis 1, God creates by his word.

He says, let there be light, and there was light. And he goes on and says other things too and creates them. But in Hebrews 1, we see that Jesus' words keep things going. His word, in other words, is just as fundamental to our existence as his father's.

Jesus is exactly the same, just as powerful, just as necessary, just as truly our creator. But wait, you might say, as you hear this and as you look at that diagram.

Does this mean that Jesus, being like God, is another God? Is he a second God with his own power and ideas? After all, that's how it works with humans, isn't it?

A child comes forth from a parent's body at a moment in time, but then they are separated. One might die and the other go on. Or a man might be just like his father, a real chip off the old block.

[7 : 23] But the strength that he inherits from his father is in his own body. If they work together, they can pool their resources. If one stops working, there is less strength.

But with God and his son, it's different. The link is never broken. We see it most clearly in John's gospel, in the way Jesus speaks of the father living in him or speaking and acting through him. John 14, 10, for example, the words I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the father living in me who is doing his work. In Hebrews 1, this sense of continuity or organic oneness comes through at the start of verse 3, where Jesus is described as the radiance of the glory of God.

Now, that word radiance can either mean the rays of light coming off a light source or the reflection of a light source. But in both cases, the connection is live and dynamic.

Reflections and rays can never be separated from the light source that is producing them. Neither can Jesus be separated from his father. The son can't be the son without the father, and the father can't be the father without his son.

[8 : 34] Jesus is also described here as God's glory or the radiance of his glory. First century Jews would have been familiar with the idea that God's presence would be communicated and mediated by his glory, shining in the tabernacle or from Mount Sinai.

We saw an example of that in Eylee's reading of Exodus 40 for us today. Well, now we see that Jesus himself is that visible embodiment of God's presence.

To see him is to see God. To look at him is to find out what God is like. And once we understand this, we are ready to see something of how the doctrine of the Trinity arises out of the Old Testament.

Let's look at the next diagram. So in the Old Testament, we see that God works through agents, prophets who speak his words, priests who mediate his holiness, angels and kings and humans in general who rule in his name as sons and image bearers.

And alongside that, we see God working through direct manifestations of himself, his glory, his word that comes to people, his wisdom at work in the world. Neither of these categories, of course, is the Trinity in the Old Testament.

[9 : 51] The created agents are real persons, but they are just creatures. And the manifestations might just be, in the Old Testament, God making himself known through visible signs. But with Jesus, those two things come together.

He is God's agent. He's God's prophet and priest and king. But he's also God's living word and wisdom and glory through whom God acts and appears.

He's a distinct person, but he's also inseparably connected to God. There's no difference in power or character because Jesus has the very power and character of God.

So let's try and combine those things in the next diagram. So there is God the Father and God the Son, God's perfect likeness, God's glory, word and wisdom manifest to us.

Just in passing, you might be wondering where the Holy Spirit fits in here. I'm not going to be talking about it, the Holy Spirit, as much as I would like to hear because the Trinity is a very big topic and we only have one talk today.

[10 : 57] But if we were to put him in that diagram, he would be, at least if we go by what we see in the earthly life of Jesus, he'd be right in the middle there. So when Jesus comes into the world, he comes from the Father and he's conceived by the Spirit.

When it's time for him to begin his ministry, the Father sends the Spirit to him at his baptism. So he is anointed for his ministry. When he goes out into the desert to be tempted, it's the Spirit who sends him out, according to Mark's Gospel.

And when he returns from the temptation, it's in the power of the Spirit, according to Luke.

Everything that Jesus does and is on earth comes from the Father by the Spirit.

Now, there's a lot more we could say about that. But the main point here is that Jesus, who is who he is because he's a true son, who shares in his Father's nature in an unbroken unity, which at least in his earthly life means sharing in God's Spirit.

Now, before we go on to the next section, let me point out that this vision of the Trinity is a little bit different from the way we often think about it today. If you ask a well-taught evangelical what he or she thinks the Trinity is, he or she might tell you that it means God is one being and three persons.

[12 : 16] And that, of course, is a true answer. But it will be a better answer if we include the fact that Jesus comes from God. Then we'll be able to see how God is one and three.

And we'll be able to explain the Trinity a bit more easily because we'll be able to use the same explanations that the Bible uses. So we might say, for example, Jesus is like the prophets and priests and kings of the Old Testament who share in God's words and holiness and rule, except Jesus is a son who shares in everything that God is and has been doing from all eternity.

Or we might say that Jesus is like the radiance that comes from the sun. You can't have the sun without the light that comes from it and you can't have radiance without the sun. The two always go together.

Well, Jesus is like that, except he's also a real person. Or we might say Jesus is like a son who is exactly like his father and shares in everything his father is and does.

And God loves his son and is proud of him and wants everyone to know him. Notice, incidentally, that these are all analogies. People sometimes say that you shouldn't use analogies for God, by which they mean that you shouldn't say God is like a clover leaf or water, ice and steam or an egg or something like that.

[13 : 34] And that is a good thing to say because those are all bad analogies. But we really can't get away from analogies. God is so utterly different from us. The only way we can know God at all is by analogy.

And the Bible, of course, is full of analogies. So a more helpful thing to say, perhaps, would be that we should use the Bible's analogies and notice how it qualifies and holds different analogies together.

None of them can tell us the whole truth about God and his son. And if we take any of them in isolation, they'll lead us astray. But if we hold them together and notice how the Bible uses them, analogies will help us to understand God.

So getting back to Hebrews 1, the primary analogy is sonship here, isn't it? But the other analogies that it uses too can help us to understand what that sonship looks like. So Jesus is God's son, but

much more like his father than any earthly child.

In fact, he's like the impression left by a stamp pushed into wax or clay. Or Jesus is God's son, but he's much more connected to his father than any human son or daughter.

[14 : 38] He's like radiance coming off the sun. And the upshot of all of this is that Jesus is the only one who can show us God. Christianity is Christocentric.

That is, it focuses on Jesus, not because he's more important than God the Father or the Holy Spirit, or because some people think he's nicer or more approachable, but because he's the only way that we can really know God the Father and experience the Spirit.

Jesus is the way God speaks to us. But there's also another reason why we focus on Jesus here in Hebrews 1, and that takes us to our second heading.

Jesus is God's heir. Why do you think God created the world? It's the kind of question a child asks, really, isn't it?

One of those huge questions that you learn not to ask as you get older, because nobody will give you a good answer. When I was a kid, my dad's answer was that God created the world to have someone to love, which was not quite right, was it?

[15 : 42] The beauty of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God has always had his son to love. The father and son have always been loving each other in the unity of the Holy Spirit through all eternity, outside time and space.

Love is God's native state, even before the creation of the world, as Jesus says in John 17, 24. So what's the right response? Well, the Bible never gives us a direct answer, but if we read Isaiah 43, verse 7, we hear of God creating and calling people for his own glory.

And other passages do seem to agree with that. Everything that God does and is, or everything God does, is a display of who he is. Heaven and earth are full of your glory, say the seraphim in Isaiah chapter 6.

So God creates for his own glory, for the display of who he is. But the New Testament also shows us that God has a plan within that plan to bring glory to his son.

A plan to do his greatest works in such a way that his son will be honoured alongside him. So Jesus says in John chapter 5, verses 20 to 23, that the father loves the son and shows him all he does and makes him the giver of life and the judge of the world and so on, so that people will marvel at him and so that all may honour the son just as they honour the father.

[17 : 05] Here in Hebrews 1, I think we see that same plan described in terms of an inheritance. Now the idea of Jesus having an inheritance might seem strange.

We've already seen that he is God's son, that he's co-creator and sustainer. How can he inherit anything? How does he not simply already have everything by being God's son?

I think the key here is to understand that God's son develops new relationships to the world in his life as a man. The human existence of Jesus has its own story.

C.S. Lewis helpfully compares it to an author writing himself or herself into a story they're telling. Well, in the story that God is writing, his son appears in the world as a baby and grows in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man, as Luke 2.52 puts it.

He induces trials and temptations and fulfils prophecy and dies for sins and then he's raised as king and saviour of the world. This is the story of Jesus' human life.

[18 : 19] It has its own story. And of course, this story, the story of Jesus, is the key to the world's story. As Jesus dies on the cross for sins and comes back to life, he changes everything.

He brings sinners back to God and gives the universe a new future. He vindicates all of God's purposes. He neutralises Satan by satisfying the demands of the law.

He shows that he is the only one worthy to rule creation. So, as the second half of verse 3 says, So both things are true.

God's son is eternally and unchangeably great and sovereign, the one who creates and sustains the universe. But he also became superior to the angels in his human life.

By providing purification for sins, he changed history and claimed his reward. And Hebrews 1 tells us that this was God's plan for the world and for his son from the very beginning.

[19 : 33] In verse 2, it says, He appointed him, him who he created, heir of all things, who he created through, heir of all things. And notice that this fits with what we see in other parts of the New Testament too.

In Ephesians 1, 9 and 10, for example, we hear of In Colossians 1, 16, we read that Three verses earlier, Paul writes that In other words, God had always planned for the world to belong to his son, for his son to inherit the world.

And I think this puts a slightly different light on things, doesn't it? We are used to thinking that Jesus came into the world as an emergency measure. We sinned, God was a bit surprised, he did something radical.

And it is true that Jesus came into the world to save us, that it is a radical measure. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, says Paul in 1 Timothy 1, 15.

But Hebrews 1 and Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1 show us that as Jesus came to die on the cross for us, he was also fulfilling a deeper plan.

[21 : 08] God's plan for him to become the saviour of the universe and the centre of everything. And that tells us something amazing. It says that when we become Christians, we aren't just forgiven and given hope and a new future, we are also given also a part of the gift that God the Father is giving his son.

We are part of the inheritance of Jesus. We get to share in the love of the Father for his son. In Hebrews, this makes everything more wonderful, but also more serious.

It makes things more serious because rejecting the gospel of God's son is much more serious and dangerous than rejecting the law of Moses. So in Hebrews 2, verse 3, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Or Hebrews 10, 29, how much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the son of God? If we turn away from Jesus, we are saying no to the very reason for our existence.

God made us to belong to Jesus, his son, and we are saying we don't want to be a part of that. And of course, we're also dishonouring God himself. God is a proud father and we are spitting in the face of the son that he loves, who is the exact representation of his being.

[22 : 30] How will that end in anything but disaster? But Hebrews has good news as well as warnings. As we go on to Hebrews 2, we discover that Jesus' inheritance belongs to his people as well.

He doesn't just redeem us from our sins, he brings us to glory and makes us his brothers and sisters. In later chapters, we hear about how Jesus takes away our sins and brings us closer to God than any human priest or earthly temple could bring us.

And by the end of the letter, we've gone from warnings to celebration. Our writer tells us that in coming to Jesus, we've come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous, made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

So in the end, the doctrine of the Trinity is a joyful doctrine. It tells us that love is at the centre of everything. We exist because God the Father loved his son and wanted to give him an inheritance.

[23 : 52] It tells us that when we put our trust in Jesus, we don't just find out what God is like. We don't just get our sins forgiven, though both those things are absolutely and fundamentally true. We also become part of a great celebration.

We join the Father as he points to his son, and we join Jesus as he honours the Father who sent him. We experience the power of the Spirit as he opens our eyes to see the glory of God shining in the face of Christ.

This is the gospel. This is the outworking of the gospel that we've been given. And I think it's true to say that we will never get to the end of this. There are depths here that we will never plumb.

There are implications that we will never exhaust. It'll keep us going for eternity as we discover new aspects and implications of who Jesus is and what he's done for us. And we'll climb higher and higher and see ridge after ridge.

In the meantime, let me finish with a quote from Charles Spurgeon. Allow me most earnestly to impress upon you the absolute necessity of being sound on the doctrine of the Trinity.

[25 : 05] If we know the Father and know the Son and know the Holy Ghost, all things will appear clear. This is the golden key to the secrets of nature. This is the silken clue to the labyrinths of mystery.

And he who understands this will soon understand as much as mortals ever can know. Lord God, thank you for sending your beloved Son into the world.
Thank you for the way your glory and goodness and kindness shone out from him. Thank you that he made atonement for our sins with his blood and that he now rules at your right hand.
Thank you that because of the way you saved us, Jesus is our brother and you are our Father.
Please make our minds and hearts respond to these wonders. Fill us with joy so that we can overflow with praise and serve you with willing hearts.
Please use us to glorify your Son and yourself by the power of your Spirit. Amen.