

**Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church**  
**The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 1, Verses 1-4**  
**Notes from Tuesday July 14, 2009**  
**Last Revised on July 15, 2009**

**Review from Last Week**

Last week in this class we did a general introduction.

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We talked about this class and Bible study generally.

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We talked about the Bible generally and in general about the New Testament Book of Hebrews.

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That introductory material has been posted to the Google group site. (How many have seen it?)

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Because you can read it any time, we will not spend much time reviewing that material in class.

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The one thing from last week, that I wish to recall now, is the fact that not much is known about the context within which Hebrews was written, beyond what can be inferred from the text itself.

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We do not know who wrote Hebrews.

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We do not know who it was written to.

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We do not know why it was written, when, or on what occasion.

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We do not know whether it was a letter or the text of a speech of some kind or both or neither.

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There has been, for centuries, plenty of speculation regarding authorship and all of these other things.

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But I have no basis for insisting that one bit of speculation or another is necessarily true.

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So in this class we will read this text as it was written and seek to understand it on its own terms.

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Having said all of that, I do not wish to give the impression that this document just sort of fell from the sky.

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We know that it was written during the last decades of the First Century or possibly in the first decades of the Second Century.

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And we know that the document has been accepted as an inspired and authoritative part of the New Testament, by the whole Church, for the past 17 centuries and more.

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Finally we know that this document was originally written in Greek.

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In this class we will be studying modern English and Japanese translations.

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One of the problems we have is that there are very many different translations these days, and that can sometimes be a little confusing.

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So here is what I propose.

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In this class when the Bible is read aloud in English, it will always read be from the English Standard Version

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When the Bible is read aloud in Japanese, it will always be from Shin Kayaku.

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I do not mean to suggest that other translations are bad or even that these are necessarily the best.

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I just think this class will work best if we all read from the same translation.

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If you are already using the ESV or Shin Kayaku, that's great.

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If you wish to stick with a different translation, that's OK too.

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At least you will always know which translation is being read out loud in this class.

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For those who do not have their own copy of the ESV or Shin Kayaku but wish to follow exactly what is being read in class, we have made photocopies of the ESV and Shin Kayaku text for today's lesson.

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We will try to remember to do this for you every week.

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By the way, there is free coffee in the kitchen for anybody who wants it. Please help yourself. And there are vending machines in the basement and just outside the front door. Help yourself to what you need.

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OK, then. Does everybody have a copy of the text in either the ESV or Shin Kayaku? Can everybody hear? Can every body see? Is everybody comfortable? Does anyone have a question or comment?

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OK Let's go.

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Would somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 1, the first four verses, in English.

**First Reading: vv 1-4**

**Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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, <sup>4</sup>having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.**

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Thank you. Now would somebody please read that same passage in Japanese.

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Thank you.

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What we have just read is, I am told, one very long sentence in Greek, and one of the most perfect pieces of Greek rhetoric in the Bible.

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It effectively encapsulates many of the major themes which will be developed throughout the document.

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We will spend all of our time today on just these four verses, and have plenty to talk about.

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Next week we will try to finish Chapter 1

### **God Has Spoken**

Let me reread the first verse of Chapter 1 and the first part of verse 2:

**(vv 1-2a)**

**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,**

By this we are reminded of something very important: God has not been silent.

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He could have, you know, remained silent.

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Nobody can force God to speak, or to do anything. He is God!

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If God had remained silent, then we would not be here now studying the Bible,

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because there would be no Bible for us to study! The Bible is the record of God's speech to man.

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I have heard it said that when the Bible is open, God's mouth is open.

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Without the Bible open before us, we can not hear God speak at all.

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Without hearing God speak, all we can know about him is what we are able to figure out for ourselves, based on human reason and what we observe in Nature.

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In our present, fallen, condition, all of our scientists and philosophers have trouble even finding God, much less telling us about his character, what He thinks about us, what our situation is in connection with him, and what kind of future we have, if any.

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All that you and I know about such things, we know only from what God tells us, in the Bible.

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There is no place else to go for information about these things.

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God's speech to Man, is a gracious act, without which we could not know anything that is ultimately important.

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Thank God! He has spoken. Thank God for the Bible, the repository of God's speech!

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The author of Hebrews divides God's speech into two categories.

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"Long ago, " according to our author, "God spoke to the fathers by the prophets."

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" but in these last days," the author continues, "he has spoken to us by his Son."

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Q. Who is God's son?

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A. Jesus Christ.

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Right. (Just checking)

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The term, "son(s) of God," actually is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe angels and Israel and others besides Christ.

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But here it clearly is Christ who is in view.

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Notice that the author does not think he needs to explain that!

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Hebrews is a Christian document, written by and for and to believers in Jesus Christ.

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It is not written to introduce non-believers to the gospel.

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It is written to guide believers into a more perfect understanding of and obedience to Christ.

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It is written in, what the author calls, "these last days" (ESV)

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meaning these last days when God has already spoken to us by his Son, Jesus Christ.

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The author lived in these last days, so did his immediate audience, and so do we.

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Literally this passage reads "at the end of these days" referring back to the times when the prophets spoke to the fathers by the prophets.

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So we can also understand that these last days, in which we live, after God has already spoken by his Son, are also the days after God finished speaking by the prophets.

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Indeed in Christ God has finally said all that he set out to say.

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All that remains is for this good news to be proclaimed, and heard, and obeyed.

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Take it a step further: All of human history has been divided into two parts, these last days in which we live, after God has spoken by his son, and the time before that, when God had not yet spoken by his Son but sometimes spoke by the prophets

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Another way to describe these two eras is AD and BC.

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Isn't it interesting that even non-Christians wind up paying attention to this distinction, in their calendars!

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Anyway, the prophets in view here are BC kind of guys.

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Who were these guys anyway?

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It is interesting that God had not spoken by the prophets to the author of Hebrews or his audience.

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The grammar does not seem to allow for this.

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He has spoken to their fathers.

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Almost certainly we are supposed to understand "fathers" in the general sense of "ancestors."

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After all, God spoke to them "at many times" and "long ago."

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Q. That being the case, how does the author of Hebrews know, and how does his audience know, what God said to the fathers by the prophets long ago?

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A. The same way we know what God said: The Bible

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Clearly the author of Hebrews understood that he was addressing people who were familiar with the Bible,

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because he quotes from it and speaks of it continually.

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So what we are reading here is a speech directed toward Biblically literate Christians.

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At least this means that they know the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament, plus the gospel of Jesus Christ as it had been taught to them.

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They may also have read some parts of our New Testament, in addition to Hebrews, that is.

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I think it is reasonable, therefore, to understand verse one as a summary description of Biblical prophesy.

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What they knew about God's speech to the fathers by the prophets is exactly what we know, assuming we are reading our Bibles.

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So let's us talk a little bit about Biblical prophesy.

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Q. Who was the last prophet in Israel?

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A. John the Baptist

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According to Jesus, John was the greatest of all the prophets who had ever lived.

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He was therefore, in some sense, a superior representative in the time of Christ of all of the Old Testament prophets.

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Yet he deferred to Jesus and said that his job was to prepare the way for Jesus....to become less so that Jesus could become more.

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John marks the high point and the end of prophesy in Israel.

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Or if you prefer to think of it this way, Jesus marks the end of prophesy in Israel as it was summarized and epitomized by his cousin John.

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Q. Who would you say was the last prophet in Israel prior to John the Baptist?

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A. Probably Malachi.

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That would have been about 445 B.C., just after the remnant of Israel returned from exile in Babylon, about the time of Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem.

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It is interesting and probably important to remember that, during that long, long stretch between Malachi and John the Baptist---more than 400 years---nearly half a millennium---there had not been a single prophet in Israel!

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If nothing else, this teaches us that Israel didn't just manufacture its prophets. When God was speaking it had them. But when He was silent, it didn't.

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We know from the Bible that God spoke sometimes. We can even agree with the author of Hebrews who says that God spoke many times. But he clearly did not speak at all times. There were sometimes long gaps in his communication and he had not spoken for a very long time before the day of John the Baptist and Jesus.

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This helps to explain why everyone got so excited when first John and then Jesus showed up.

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But now that God has spoken by Jesus, He will never speak by the prophets again, at least not in the same way as he did formerly. We live in the last days.

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Indeed Old Testament prophesy had long since died out before John and Jesus came formally to end it.

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Now often when we hear the word "prophets" we think only of the latter prophets in Israel, who are spoken of in the Old Testament books of Isaiah through Malachi.

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These men were active during the days of the divided kingdom, starting in the 8th Century BC, and later when the Northern Kingdom was lost and then when the Southern Kingdom was taken into captivity in Babylon, from where a remnant finally returned, in the 5th Century BC

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Q. Are these, then, the prophets that the author of Hebrews has in mind?

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A. He does not ignore them entirely.

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He quotes from Jeremiah 31:31-34, twice: once in Hebrews 8:8-12 and again in Hebrews 10:16-17.

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This is the passage where God in the mouth of Jeremiah proclaimed that a New Covenant would eventually replace the old one that God had made with Israel at Sinai, which is an important point to our author.

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In addition our author quotes briefly once each from Isaiah (Isa. 8:18 at Heb. 2:13), Habakkuk (Hab. 2:3-4 at Heb. 10:37-38), and Haggai (Hag. 2:6 at Hb. 12:26)

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But otherwise our author seems to look past this class of prophets and back the former prophets in Israel and other men by whom God spoke in a much earlier time

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He quotes from the Psalms about 18 times and probably assumes that most of these were written by David and/or about David and the one who would finally come to fulfill the promises that God first made to David.

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Well before the time of John and Jesus, the Jews had already begun to read many of the Psalms as Messianic prophesy, just as the early Christian church would later do, and as we should still do now.

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He quotes once each from Proverbs, 2 Samuel, and Joshua.

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He quotes from the Pentateuch about 9 times (about 3 times each from Gen, Ex. and Dt.)

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By examining the passages of Old Testament scripture quoted in Hebrews, and the authors own arguments, I conclude that he was not especially interested in the latter prophets in Israel---they guys we may think of as "the Prophets."

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He was interested in all men by whom God spoke in the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament, going all the way back, to the very beginning, including some men whom we may not always have in mind when we hear the word "prophets."

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And it occurs to me that if the general class of prophets in view here includes Noah, for example, as seems likely, then we are talking about how God spoke to the fathers of all mankind, and not just to the fathers of the Jews!

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Be that as it may, in verse one, I think the author wants to capture the whole long and varied history of God's speech to the ancestors of Man, by a progression of men referred to here loosely as prophets, whose prophetic speech was recorded in the Bible, and of whom John the Baptist could have been ultimately and absolutely the last.

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Starting in verse 2, the author says, "but, in these last days..."

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The "but" has been added by the translators, but I think it accurately conveys the author's desire to contrast all that God spoke in the Old Testament with what God spoke by his Son in these last days

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The contrast can be drawn this way, after John Calvin:

<b>Verse 1</b>	<b>Verse 2a</b>
Long ago by the prophets	Now by the son
Then to the fathers	Now to us
Then at many times	Now as at the end of time

To Calvin's table, we might add multiplicity (Verse 1) and singularity (Verse 2a).

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We might also add incompleteness (Verse 1) and completeness (Verse 2a).

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Or promise (Verse 1) and fulfillment (Verse 2a).

These are the kinds of contrasts in view here.

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Verse 1 is in some sense the Old Testament.

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Verse 2s is in some sense the New Testament

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What the two have in common, is that God is the one who has spoken in both.

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There can therefore be no contradiction or inconsistency in the speech found in the two testaments.

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What God has ultimately spoken to us by his Son in the New Testament, is the continuation, consolidation, and completion of what he spoke to the fathers by the prophets in the Old Testament.



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 There is progression from promise to fulfillment.

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 Because we now have the advantage of knowing the Son in the New Testament, we can understand some of what was otherwise obscure in the prophets of the Old Testament.

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 And God's revelation of himself is progressive, up to Christ.

---  
 The Jews will remain lost if they will not come as far as the Son, because without him they cannot understand what God is saying by the prophets either.

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 They are stuck, as it were, in the Old Testament, with only one possible way out: Jesus.

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 Having come to Christ, we Christians are in a better situation than any of the fathers, so we had better be very careful to hold on to Christ. This is a point that our author is working towards.

---  
 We had better not try to turn back to the prophets, as if such a thing were possible. It is to Christ that the prophets were pointing us. Going back is a meaningless tragic mistake. One that would bring Satan some glee.

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 We had better not attempt to "progress" beyond Christ, as if that were possible.

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 In Christ God finished speaking. His revelation was complete.

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 Whatever we may think lies beyond Christ or beside him is nothing to do with God, and only a matter of our own imagination, an idol, or worse, a demon.

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 All that I have said so far has arisen, in my mind at least, from the 1st verse of chapter 1 and the first part of verse 2.

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 Admittedly my remarks anticipate things that will be developed hereafter, in Hebrews and elsewhere in the Bible.

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 But there it is.

### **The Supremacy of Christ**

Now beginning with the second part of verse 2 and continuing to the end of verse 3, the author gives us a seven point exposition of the supremacy and finality of Christ.

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 He wants to be sure his readers understand why what God has spoken by Jesus is His final word.

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 His treatment of Christ, his "Christology" is the fancy word, is fully consistent with what is said elsewhere in the New Testament, it seems to me.

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What is unique about the treatment in Hebrews, is the emphasis given to the priestly function of Christ, and the author begins to touch on that subject even here at the beginning of the document.

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Let's reread this before we discuss it:

**(vv 2b-3)**  
**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,**

That he lists seven (7) things is probably not happenstance.

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Seven is a number which in the Bible is often used to communicate ideas of completeness and perfection.

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Our author has almost certainly structured his argument so that it will have seven parts.

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Later in verses 5-14 of Chapter 1, he will quote exactly seven (7) passages from the Old Testament, probably also to communicate the supremacy and finality of Christ and the completeness and perfection of what God speaks by him.

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Now let's look at the seven points set forth in verses 2b - 3

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**(#1) God has appointed the son to be the heir of all things.**

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In other words, everything in heaven and on earth, ultimately belongs to Jesus, by the appointment of God.

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We cannot point to anything in all of time and space of which Jesus is not the rightful heir.

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That which does not belong to Jesus, finally does not exist! Ponder this. It is important.

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But there is more.

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**(#2) Everything was created through Jesus.**

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We must not suppose that the Father somehow made heaven and earth and then willed it to the Son.

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The Son and the creator are one.

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Jesus is on both ends of history: the origin too and not the destination only.

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His is an eternal inheritance.

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Never, even in the mind of God, beyond time, has there been anything which did not belong to the Son.

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Any man who thinks he can worship God apart from the Son of God just doesn't understand how the universe is organized.

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**(#3) Whenever we worship God, we are worshipping Jesus.**

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Remember, it is only as God speaks that we can know him.

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Jesus is God's speech: the completion and the summary of all that God has ever spoken and wishes to say.

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Therefore it is only in the Son that God's glory will ever reach us.

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Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God, our author tells us.

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This is a powerful metaphor.

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The language will permit us to think of either reflected glory (like the moon) or a kind of radiation (like the light emanating from the sun). I prefer the latter.

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In either case, it means that we can not know God except as the light of Christ.

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We can't find God anywhere else or in any other way. Just forget about it.

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Finally the only information that gets to us about God is information about Christ, which means that the OT prophets were also speaking of him, albeit in a glass darkly.

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But there is more still.

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**#4 When the light of Christ reaches you, it is not something different from God.**

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He is the exact imprint of God's nature. (ESV)

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The Greek words here translated as "exact imprint" is "charakter."

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This word is used only here in the New Testament.

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It is more evocative than the word eikon used elsewhere in the Bible to describe Christ's relationship and resemblance to the Father.

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Jesus is not just a symbol or representation of God. He somehow is God.

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The Greek word here translated as "nature" is "hypostasis" which might also have been translated "being" or "fundamental reality."

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Said differently Jesus is what God is.

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He is the only one in whom we can understand God.

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Without Christ we cannot understand God at all.

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But there is even more.

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**#5 Jesus has not only God's character but also all of God's power.**

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This universe continues to exist, only because Jesus says so.

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He "upholds" it by "the word of his power "(ESV). That is: by his power and by his will.

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This means that the universe would immediately cease to exist, were Jesus to foresake it for an instant.

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It is worth noting here the mistake of maintaining a dualistic world view.

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We do not live in a universe in which good and evil do battle on equal footing.

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That is nonsense. There is actually no real contest between good and evil.

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Evil can create nothing. It exists only by distorting God's good creation.

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Christ could eliminate all evil, in less than a nanosecond, by simply dissolving the universe!

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But that would be the end of you and me!

---  
Herein lies God's surpassing greatness, which is seen ultimately and only in Christ!

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In all of the ways listed so far, Jesus is simply great and powerful: the son of God and God.

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And so, of course, he is infinitely greater than the prophets of old, angels, whatever!

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Indeed he is literally and infinitely greater than all of the prophets and angels rolled into one.

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He is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and omni..everything.

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But there is actually something more amazing than all of that stuff.

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In this consists his true glory and God's true glory.

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**#6. He made purification for sins!**

Instead of dissolving the universe, and evil with it, or not making the universe in the first place, which amounts to the same thing, God through Christ made the universe and then God

in Christ made purification of sin! So that sinners like you and me can continue to exist, and ultimately be made perfect like Jesus, and live with him eternally, and all of this without diminishing God's glory---no! rather magnifying God's glory beyond all measure or possibility of description.

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This is the mystery that even the angels long to look into!!

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And one that the author of Hebrews will explore rather fully as we read on.

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For now he wishes mainly to emphasize that when the Son of God made purification for sins, he did something that nobody else every could have done, and so was exalted above everyone.

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The work here translated purification is, by the way, very rare in the New Testament, as a description for what Christ accomplished.

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Indeed it is only used this way in one other place: 2 Peter 1:9.

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This word is used frequently in the NT and in the Greek OT to describe cultic purification in Israel.

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Thus again we see the author's rather unique depth of focus on the Priestly role of Christ.

## **#7 Finally, After he did all that, he sat down.**

To sit down in the presence of God is a very big deal.

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Only the son can do that.

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But it means that before he sat down, which was always his right, the son of God was standing up!

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Not just standing up, but working.

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Not just working, but serving.

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Not serving angels or every good men.

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But serving sinful men who hated him.

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And we know that this work involved humiliation, suffering, pain, fear, loneliness, and death on a cross.

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No son of a human king would submit to such things. But the Son of God?!

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It's kind of hard to believe. He seems for a time to have been not only lower than the angels, but lower than anyearthly prince, and lower even than all men --- cursed to die on a cross.

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Yet when he finished and sat down, purification for sins had been eternally finished.

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And he sat down eternally at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

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When he sat down, that sealed our salvation, and it became very difficult to tell the difference between the son and his father, seated as they were, together, wrapped in majesty.

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This, the author of Hebrews wishes to emphasize, is what the Old Testament is talking about, and not a contradiction of it.

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Although I doubt that any of the prophets of the Old Testament had imagined anything so sublime.

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That the Messiah would be literally the Son of God and not merely a better version of David.

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That he would make purification for sin and not merely restore the borders of an earthly kingdom.

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That he would make purification for sin in this way.

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We know these things now, but the prophets of the Old Testament could only see them very dimly.

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How could they have imagined that God took us so seriously, and he took sin so seriously, and he took his own holiness so seriously, that he would come down here in Christ and made purification for our sins.

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It is this purification --- the priestly office of Christ ---which the author of Hebrews wants to look at much more closely.

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But for starters he needs for everyone to understand that Jesus Christ was the goal and purpose of the prophetic speech of the Old Testament.

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And he needs for everyone to understand that, having made purification for sins, Jesus has been exalted above everything and everyone.

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There is no space between God and his Son, so there can be no being greater than the son, not even in heaven, not even an angel.

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Thus he concludes this thought in verse 4

**(v 4)**

**having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.**

Q. What name did Jesus inherit?

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A. Son of God. That certainly.

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A. God. That too! And in all its fullness.

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A. And while we are at it, we can probably add names like Ultimate Prophet, Perfect Priest, King of Kings. Lord of Lords...

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He is, of course, Lord of the Angels too.

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When God created the heavens and the earth, he did so through the Son, as we have discussed.

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The heavens are where angels come from

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Like everything else in creation, the heavens and the angels belong to the son of God.

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And they were created for him, and he sustains them, and etc.

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They are no less subordinate to Christ than we who have been redeemed by Him.

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Indeed next week we will read that the angels were created to serve...us!

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But we do not need to pursue that thought very much farther.

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Just as the author of Hebrews seems not to be very interested in prophets, *per se*, he seems also not to be very interested in angels.

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Prophets and angels are mentioned here not to teach us about prophets and angels, but to teach us about the Son of God. And this is how it should be.

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Now that God has spoken in his son, our interest in the prophets needs to be subsidiary to our interest in the son.

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To leave Christ and return to the prophets, or even to set the prophets beside Christ as things of comparable worth or importance would be a tragic mistake, as we have already discussed.

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John the Baptist, the greatest of all prophets knew this: that he must defer to Christ.

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Likewise to turn aside from the son to study the angels would be a tragic mistake.

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Just like the prophets, the angels exist to serve the son of God and those who belong to him, even us!

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In the last chapter of the Revelation to John, you may remember that John fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had showed him the new Jerusalem. And the angel said, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."

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That is the point that every proper angel will always make!

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Of course angels exist: no less than prophets and apostles, priests and kings

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But all are subjects and servants of Christ

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Amen!

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Next week we will read on into Chapter 1

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Any questions from today?



