

Hebrews 1A (2014)

- Welcome to our study of one of the most challenging and rewarding of all New Testament letters - the letter to the Hebrews
 - As the title suggests, this letter has a Jewish focus
 - But don't let that fool you into thinking the letter won't have something to say to a Gentile audience like us
 - While this writer may have been concerned with thinking and behaviors unique to a Jewish mindset, we can easily find parallels to our own erroneous thinking today
 - But because the writer tackles Jewish culture, this letter can be particularly challenging for western Gentile Christians to understand
 - And in that way, a study of Hebrews can be especially rewarding for Bible students, because it requires we raise our game if we're going to interpret it properly
 - Ironically, the central theme of the letter is spiritual maturity
 - That is knowing the truth fully, and then living up to the demands that our faith requires
 - It's ironic when you consider that it requires a hefty degree of spiritual maturity to interpret correctly some of the difficult passages in this letter
 - In fact, this will be the third or fourth time I have taught this letter, and my own experience over that time mirrors the message of the letter in a sense
 - I have changed my perspective on various points in this letter
 - And I've come to new and better understanding as I've grown and matured as a Bible student
 - So you could say my teaching of Hebrews mirrors the message of Hebrews, which is
 - To pay closer attention to what has been revealed in Christ

- To press on to maturity
- Leaving behind old thinking
- And seeking to please the Lord
- In this latest teaching of Hebrews, I have all these goals in mind
 - But I also want to remain mindful of not missing the forest for the trees

I can best illustrate the difficulty of interpreting this letter with a simply story of two pastors who go camping together. They reach the camp site, set up camp and turn in for the night. In the early morning hours, the first pastor wakes up to see a night sky filled with the stars of the heavens.

He quickly wakes up the second pastor and says, "Look up into the sky and tell me what you see." The second pastor rubs the sleep from his eyes, peers into the night sky and says, "I see millions and millions of stars."

Then the first pastor says, "Yes, but what does that tell you?"

The second pastor thought for a moment, and then replied, "Well, it means God's infinite power created millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Which tells me that God is great and that we are small and insignificant by comparison. And it speaks to the grace of God that He would concern Himself with us. So what does it tell you?"

The first pastor replied, "Somebody stole our tent."

- As with the study of any epistle (i.e., a NT letter), we need to get our bearings as we start the study
 - By bearings, I means we need to understand a bit about the writer, the audience and the times in which the letter was written
 - That background is very helpful in guiding our interpretation of what the letter contains
 - Immediately we're faced with one of the more intriguing aspects of this letter: the author is unknown
 - This is the only book of the New Testament and one of only a few in the Bible overall where the author is a mystery

- As a result of this mystery, there is a long standing debate over who it might have been
 - As early as 255 AD, church leaders concluded the author of the book was unknown
 - Some speculate it was Paul, Barnabas, Luke, and others
 - From 400-1600 AD, the Roman church declared the letter to be the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews
- And there are some good reasons to think it may have been Paul
 - The writer has a firm grasp of OT pictures of Christ
 - He has an in-depth understanding of the Jewish culture, sacrificial system, law, prophets, OT scripture
 - The closing of the letter sounds a little like Paul and mentions Timothy, a protege of Paul
 - But that's about the only reason to think it may be Paul
- But despite the Catholic Church's point of view, there are more compelling reasons to think it wasn't Paul who wrote this letter
 - First, the writing style is very different from Paul's other letters
 - A large number of Greek words used in this letter are found nowhere else in scripture (including in Paul's letters)
 - And many of Paul's characteristic phrases are missing
 - *Kathos ge grap tai* – "As it is written..."
 - The letter is missing Paul's typical introduction, prayers for the readers, benediction or thanks
 - So if this letter were written by Paul, then he would have had to receive a vocabulary and style transplant prior to writing
 - Therefore, it's very unlikely that Paul was the author
 - A clue to authorship is found in chapter 2, where the writer refers to himself as one who never personally encountered Christ himself (2:3)
 - Apostles were men appointed by the Lord personally
 - And all scripture was authored directly or indirectly by an apostle

- Yet this author says he received the Gospel handed down from others and not from the Lord personally
 - Since the early church fathers accepted this letter as scripture, then they must have had reason to believe the content was authored under apostolic authority
 - But if the author himself never encountered the Lord, then he could not be an apostle
 - Therefore, the author must have accompanied an apostle, much like Luke shadowed Paul and Mark shadowed Peter
 - Then the content came from an apostle, but the writing was done by another person who accompanied an apostle
 - Perhaps the author shadowed Paul, which would account for the similarities in theology while allowing for differences in style
 - In the end, the proper conclusion is to respect the Lord's decision to obscure the author by not naming anyone, since we can't be sure
- Moving from the author to the audience, things become much more clear
 - The audience for this letter were Hellenistic believers in Jewish churches located outside the city Jerusalem in a region called the Diaspora
 - In the first 40 years of the church, the body consisted largely of Jewish believers
 - You could find two kinds of Jewish believers in the church
 - First, the original believers were the Palestinian Jews living in present-day Israel
 - They were largely poor (Rom 15; 1Cor 16)
 - They followed more traditional religious practices
 - They used the Hebrew scriptures rather than reading from the Septuagint (the translation of the OT into Greek)
 - They were taught and disciplined largely by James, Peter and other key apostles and disciples
 - Secondly, there were Hellenistic Jews

- These believers were scattered in the Diaspora, a region of ten Greek cities outside Palestine
 - These believers were typically more liberal in views and practice
 - They made a point to integrate into the Greek culture
 - They spoke and read Greek, and used the Septuagint
 - They were taught through letters and visits by Paul and other apostles
 - But they were also heavily influenced by false teachers and Judiazers who traveled from place to place countering Paul's teaching with their own false theology
- Like the letters of Peter, James and Jude, this author wrote to these Hellenistic believers living in the Diaspora
 - Hebrews quotes exclusively from the Septuagint version of the OT with teaching that aims to correct liberal Jewish thinking common among Hellenistic Jews
 - The writer disputes Jewish folklore and myth
 - He reorients their understanding of Jewish history and scripture
 - He contends with simplistic assumptions about God
 - And reminds them of the serious nature of their own salvation and the coming judgment
 - In many ways, this letter was a response to the same kinds of spiritual immaturity that runs rampant in the Western, Gentile church today
 - For example, the Hellenistic Jews placed an inappropriate and unhealthy emphasis on angels
 - But so do some Christians today
 - And the writer of this letter worried that some in the church assembly had heard the Gospel without actually embracing it
 - And today many unbelievers congregate with believers, thinking they are Christians because they attend church
 - The writer highlights the dangers of giving into the temptation to sin, of choosing to live an unsanctified life

- And today, sinful lifestyles are becoming the norm in some circles of the church
- In fact, many of our brothers and sisters spend more time rationalizing their fleshly desires rather than submitting to the authority of God's word and to the Spirit
- Finally, this writer warned believers not to live in a perpetual state of spiritual immaturity oblivious to the coming judgment
 - Yet so many believers today are entrapped by the cares, pleasures, worries and riches of this life
 - And they are ill-prepared for to meet the Lord at His coming
- So while the stumbles of these Hellenistic churches were uniquely Jewish in nature, the underlying spiritual problems are common to all believers
 - The need to set aside myths and immature ways of thinking about God
 - The imperative to avoid sin, to live in the Spirit
 - Knowing the demands of faith and mindful of our approaching judgment
- Lastly, we need some understanding of the historical timing and circumstances surrounding this letter
 - Based on comments in the letter, it's likely it was written between 66-69 AD
 - This four year period was the period during which the city of Jerusalem was in rebellion to Roman rule
 - The Romans had retaliated by attacking Jerusalem, but they had not yet succeeded in breaching the city walls
 - While the battle raged outside the walls, the Jewish temple still stood with sacrifices operating daily
 - But to anyone who understood the prophecy of Jesus knew the end for the city and the temple was very near
 - And in fact, in AD 70 the city did finally fall and the temple was completely destroyed

- This writer refers to the temple and the sacrificial system as if they were still in operation at the time he wrote
 - But then he says these institutions were growing old and were “soon to disappear”
 - That wording leaves us to conclude the writer could see the end for the city was near, thereby dating the letter to the latter half of the 60s AD
- Knowing the end for the city was so near gave the writer an added sense of urgency – an urgency that comes across in his writing
 - After the destruction of Jerusalem, persecution against Jews and Christians intensified greatly
 - The Roman Empire under Nero and Titus go after believers with a vengeance
 - And the writer seems to understand what’s coming, by the inspiration of the Spirit
 - And so he warns believers to move on to maturity knowing that difficult times were coming
 - And for many believers, the end of their earthly lives were closer than they realized
 - Once again, the circumstances of this letter echo for believers today
 - We may not be experiencing persecution at the hands of our government yet, but the signs are there
 - More over, we can see that this age is drawing to a close
 - The Lord’s return is imminent
 - Now is not the time to be distracted by sin, and the world’s desires
 - Now is the time to strive for maturity, understanding the nature of our days
- But before we get into all that, let’s start the letter with its beautiful introduction focused on the letter’s central theme: the Lord and His preeminence

[Heb. 1:1](#) God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,

[Heb. 1:2](#) in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

[Heb. 1:3](#) And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power...

- These opening verses present the writer's primary purpose in writing and it reveals his plan for how he will structure his arguments
 - The theme is the superiority of Christ in God's plan
 - God has worked in variety of ways to reveal Himself
 - But all that revelation culminated in His Son Christ
 - And the writer's method for making his arguments will be contrast
 - This letter is a study in contrasts: between what God has done in the past vs. What God has done now through His Son
 - Throughout the letter, the writer will draw these contrasts from old ways to the new way in Christ
 - The point isn't to diminish the past, for it all had a good purpose
 - The writer's point is to elevate Christ way above anything else in God's plan
 - While the old things were good in their own way, Christ is far better than they were
 - And so Christ's preeminence demands are complete attention and exclusive devotion
 - The old gives way to the new
 - They don't combine or work together - except that the Old existed to lead us to the new
 - That is the writer's plan of attack as he draws one contrast after another throughout the letter
- Looking at this initial contrast, the writer contrasts the way God delivered revelation to His people in days past as compared to the way He has revealed Himself to men today

- First, notice God spoke in the past
 - Our God is a God of the word
 - He is not a silent God, like the mute idols men make for themselves
 - He has chosen to make Himself known to His Creation by His word, by speaking to men
 - Nor was God satisfied to be found by what had been made, though all Creation testifies to Him Romans says
 - Even as He brought all things into existence by His spoken word
 - Nor was He content to provide His revelation in written form alone, though this is how men have preserved it
- The Lord determined to reveal Himself to men through a spoken word, speaking to the fathers and the prophets
 - Our God is not silent
 - He will make Himself known, but that knowledge comes in times and in ways the Lord chooses
- The writer says these past revelations came in portions and in many ways
 - The word portion just means parts
 - No one father or prophet received the entire revelation of God's spoken word
 - One father, like Abraham, received one part, while another prophet, like Isaiah, received another part
 - Once receive it in a dream, like Joseph, while another received it from a burning bush on a mountain, like Moses
 - One receive a small portion, like a minor prophet, while others were given a life long ministry of revelation
- But none of these men heard everything from God
 - They were each a stepping stone along a path the Lord planned from the beginning of time

- Each step was making progress toward a final message
 - Exodus depended on Genesis
 - And 1&2 Samuel depended on Judges
 - And Daniel depended on Jeremiah, etc.
- God's word is progressive, like the unveiling of novel one chapter at a time
 - That's why the books of the canon are not organized according to date they were written
 - They are ordered according the progressive revelation of God
 - Each book provides a portion of God's revelation built upon what has been revealed by earlier books
 - Job was probably the first written book
 - But the revelation in that book depends on the events of earlier books
- Where was all this progressive revelation leading?
 - The writer tells us in v.2 that now we enter the last days when all speaking is of and by His Son
 - Past revelation came by a father or prophet
 - And past revelation came in part
 - But now all speaking by God comes through the Son
 - Both the source of the revelation and the portion have become much greater than what God used in the past
 - The writer calls this time "the last days" to emphasize that all that earlier revelation has now reached it's intended purpose
 - We've received the full measure of God's revelation in the Person and words of Jesus Christ
 - Abraham could not be said to be living in the last days, because more revelation came during the days *after* Abraham
 - The same was true for Moses and for the prophets later

- There was always more revelation to come so the “last days” had not yet arrived
 - But today, we can say we’re in the last days, because the full and complete revelation of God has arrived in Christ
 - All of God’s word is completed in Christ
 - There is no more revelation to come, no greater prophet, no greater portion still be revealed
 - So when a Joseph Smith or the Jehovah’s Witnesses or some other cult leader comes along claiming to have something new from God to reveal, we can know automatically they are false prophets
 - Now that the Son has come, the time for portions is over
- And Christ’s preeminence extends back to the beginning of everything
 - Hebrews tells us in v.2 that Jesus is the One who made the world as described in Genesis 1
 - And of course, Genesis teaches that the creation process was itself the result of God speaking creation into existence
 - This is why John takes to calling Jesus by the title “The Word” in his Gospel
 - Jesus is God's spoken word, according to John

[John 1:1](#) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[John 1:2](#) He was in the beginning with God.

[John 1:3](#) All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

- In verse 3, John says that it was the Word (Jesus) that created all things
- We know from John 4:24 that God the Father is all Spirit, meaning He doesn't exist in physical form
- There is no physical substance to God the Father

- Therefore, the Creation cannot experience the Father as He truly is, because we are bound to a physical dimension, yet He is not physical
- Secondly, we know that God's Spirit is likewise invisible according to John 3:6-8
 - The Spirit can only be known by observing His work in the Creation.
 - John said, all things were made by and through Jesus, and the writer of Hebrews has just affirmed that truth as well
- Notice next the writer of Hebrews says the Christ is the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of the Father's nature
 - First, Jesus is the radiance of the Father's glory
 - How do we know the sun has risen?
 - We can see the beams of light that emanate from it
 - Those rays of light are the radiance of the sun,
 - And so we can know of the sun's brightness because something has come from the sun and allowed us to perceive it
 - Likewise the Son of God is the radiance of the Father's glory
 - In a real sense, the Son of God is the light emitting from the Father (John calls Jesus the Light of the World)
 - The world can know the Father and can perceive His glory by seeing what has come from him in the Son
 - And Christ is the exact representation of the Father's nature
 - In Greek the word translated exact representation is the same word for character
 - The word is also used to describe the impression made when an image is stamped into the face of a coin
 - Jesus is an exact representation of the character of the Father
 - And Jesus came into the Creation so that by Him we might know the invisible Father

[John 14:7](#) "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him."

[John 14:8](#) Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."

[John 14:9](#) Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

- Paul also echoes this truth in Colossians telling us Jesus is the "image of the invisible God"
 - Therefore, the only Person in the Godhead Who has entered into and become a part of the physical creation is Jesus
 - Jesus was the actor creating the world in Genesis 1
 - And Hebrews also tells us Jesus was the member of the Godhead who became flesh as an ambassador of the Godhead to His Creation
- So when God the Father determined to reveal Himself to a Creation through His Son, He began that revelation with His Son as the Creator speaking it into existence
 - After the Son made the universe, He continued to be the Logos of God, speaking God's revelation to men throughout history
 - That revelation came in those many parts, progressively revealing more and more about the Creator and His plan for redeeming His Creation
 - And all that revelation pointed to its source: to Christ Himself
 - Leading up to the day Christ appeared incarnate, giving substance to the word and fulfilling all that it foretold
 - Someone once said that the OT is the NT predicted
 - While the NT is the OT fulfilled
 - Now that Jesus has appeared in physical form, he has given us the final, complete and full revelation of Who God the Father is
 - And as such, there can be no greater revelation to come
 - And all past revelation must be interpreted and understood in light of what we have come to know in the Person of Christ

- We can begin to understand this process (at least to some degree) by drawing an analogy to how we communicate or reveal our thoughts in the physical word
 - When we desire to share something of ourselves to the world around us, we must first conceive an idea in our mind
 - No one can see our thoughts
 - They are invisible, yet they certainly exist
 - Without our thoughts, we could purpose to do nothing at all
- If we want to reveal the invisible part of ourself to the world, we must transfer the invisible realm of our mind into the physical realm for others to receive and understand
 - The brain communicates our thoughts to our mouth where it becomes logos: spoken words
 - Once the spoken word leaves our mouth, it enters the physical world as sound waves and yields its intended effect
 - The spoken word becomes a revelation of our thoughts
 - When someone hears our spoken word, they come to know of something that was previously invisible and unknowable
 - Still, the world's knowledge of our internal thoughts will be a partial knowledge at best
- But what if our thoughts could be made incarnate, if they could take on physical form and live apart from us
 - If that were possible, then the world could come to a complete and full understand of our invisible nature through that incarnation
 - Our entire nature - our thoughts and character and personality - would be on display in a physical form
 - We could be fully known
- Likewise, God the Father worked with God the Son (i.e., the Word) to reveal Himself to His Creation first by His word and ultimately through an incarnate Christ
 - So truly, to know the Son by His word is to know the Father

- With that introduction, the writer is now poised to examine various ways in which the Hellenistic churches of his day were failing to live in the light of the revelation of Christ
 - Next week, we examine the first of those failures
 - The failure to accept the Christ as superior to all other messengers