WHO IS JESUS?

Hebrews 1:1–14

Key Verse: 1:3b

“After he had provided purification for sin, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

Have you ever known somebody only second-hand? People told you about the person, but you never actually met him? It’s not the most solid knowledge, right? People’s ideas, opinions and prejudices can skew the real truth. In the letter to the Hebrews the author wrote to those who never met Jesus while he was on earth (2:3). In their small Christian communities many ideas started circulating about him. The author wants to clear up who Jesus really is. Why does it matter? What difference does it make whether we know somebody or not? In Jesus’ case, getting it right makes all the difference in the world. As we begin to study Hebrews we want to meditate on Jesus’ identity and on what he did for us. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In chapter 1 the author introduces many of the themes of his letter. And he uses many of the same tools of communication. He loves to make contrasts to Jesus. He also loves to quote Old Testament Bible verses. We don’t know who the author is. But he knew the people he was writing (13:19). He also knew they were familiar with the Old Testament stories and people. He wrote using the best Greek in the New Testament. So they were likely Greek-speaking Jews well-versed in the Scriptures they heard every week in their local synagogues, and who now believe in Jesus. They knew the law and the prophets, the priesthood, and all the rules and regulations of the temple worship. In later chapters we also find some details about them. When they first converted from Judaism to Christianity they were persecuted (10:32–34). They sacrificed and suffered a lot. And these pressures continued. They were tempted to turn back to their old Jewish faith, which would be way easier. They could just follow the law and keep the rituals and no longer face the pressures against Christianity. So the author is out to prove that that’s not an option for them. Throughout this letter he talks about drifting away (2:1), turning away (3:12), falling away (6:6), throwing away one’s confidence (10:35), falling short of the grace of God (12:15), turning away from God (3:12; 12:25), and being carried away by strange teachings (13:9). He tells them not to “shrink back” (10:38,39). And he repeatedly says to persevere in faith in Jesus (10:36; 11:27; 12:1). To persevere in faith, they need to know who Jesus really is. We may be different from them, but in many ways we need the same message.

Look at verse 1. Here the author reminds his readers of how God worked in the past. He spoke to his people through the prophets at many times and in various ways. In the Greek it implies that these were imperfect, partial revelations. Read verse 2. Jesus is so different from the prophets. Why? Because he’s God’s Son. He’s heir of all things. In fact, God made the universe through him (cf. Jn1:3). The point is that God “has spoken to us by his Son.” It tells us that God is the God who speaks. He’s not a concept or a supernatural power; he’s a person. He really wants to speak to us personally. He speaks through the Bible and especially through Jesus, to whom all the Bible points (Jn5:39). He wants to have a personal relationship with us. He wants us to know that he knows us, and he wants us to know him. It reminds us of John 1 where Jesus is called “the Word” who makes God known to us (1:1,14,18). Throughout Hebrews the author repeats how God speaks or has spoken (2:2; 3:5; 4:4,8; 11:4; 12:19,24,25). We really need to hear his voice (3:7,15; 4:7; cf. 12:19,26). Hebrews urges us not to refuse him (12:25) but to obey him (4:2; 5:9; 11:8).

The author goes on to show how different Jesus is from the prophets. Read verse 3. No prophet ever came anywhere close to this. In Hebrews the author’s going to talk a lot about Israel’s greatest prophet Moses (3:2,3,5; cf. 3:16; 7:14; 8:5; 9:19; 10:28; 11:23,24; 12:21), and he tells us that Jesus is far greater even than him. Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory. Jesus is the exact representation of God’s being. Jesus sustains all things by his powerful word. Jesus provided purification for sins. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven. If we have Jesus now, why would anyone want to go back to Moses?

Read verse 3a. What should we learn from this verse? It’s mainly about getting to know God. Because God created people in his own image (Ge1:26,27), all people have this built-in desire to know him. But how can we know him? Because we’re made in his image, we already have inborn knowledge of God. Also, God reveals his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—through what has been made, through nature, and it’s “plain” and “clearly seen” (Ro1:19,20). God reveals his character, his justice, mercy and faithfulness, through his words in the Bible and through his dealings with his people. But God reveals himself most fully through Jesus. He is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” We can see the clearest, most vivid picture of God as we read what Jesus said and did. As God the Son, Jesus sustains all things through his powerful word (cf. Col1:17). Anyone interested in getting to know God has got to take a long, hard look at Jesus.

Read verse 3b. Here the author turns from who Jesus is to what Jesus did. He did two things no one else ever did. What are they?

**First,** Jesus provided purification for sins. At first that might seem like no big deal to us. Today people don’t take sin seriously. Sin offers us “fleeting pleasures” (11:25). But no matter who we are, sin makes us impure, whereas God is holy. No matter who we are, sin leaves us with a guilty conscience, whereas God is blameless. No matter who we are, sin hardens our hearts. Sin stains and is impossible to get rid of. In the Old Testament God set up a system of animal sacrifice to teach his people the reality and seriousness of sin (10:3). But those sacrifices were only symbolic; they could never actually take away sin (10:4,11). And they had to be repeated again and again. In all of history, Jesus alone provided purification for sins. How? He sacrificed for our sins once for all when he sacrificed himself (7:27). He has appeared once for all to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself (9:26). He sacrificed his own body once for all (10:10). Thus he made atonement for our sins (2:17). When Jesus shed his blood, he obtained our eternal redemption, made a new covenant of forgiveness with us, and sanctified us (8:8–12; 9:12; 10:29; 13:20). His shed blood cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God (9:14). By his blood we can come into God’s holy presence (10:19). This is the gospel, the good news! As we study Hebrews, may God help us not to keep hiding from him in our sin, full of guilt, but to accept the blood of Christ newly, let him cleanse us, and really draw near to God (7:19; 10:22).

**Second,** Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3b,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). This is the other half of the gospel, and it’s a major theme of Hebrews. Jesus not only died for our sins; he rose again, he ascended to heaven, and he is now seated at God’s right hand. “Sat down” means he finished the work of salvation. Jesus accomplished it all. That he’s at God’s right hand also teaches us a few things. The right hand symbolized a person’s power and authority. At God’s right hand Jesus shares all the authority and power of God. He was disgraced by people and thrown away like garbage, but now, at God’s right hand he’s totally vindicated, and victorious (13:13; Col3:1; Rev3:21).

But also, because he’s at God’s right hand, Jesus can speak most closely with God the Father. What are those two talking about? Hebrews says that Jesus is always interceding for us (7:25; cf. Ro8:34), meaning Jesus is always praying to God for us, whether it’s for our forgiveness when we sin, or for our guidance when we’re going astray, or for our strength when we falter. Jesus who ascended into heaven is our great high priest (4:14). Because he himself was fully human, made like us in every way, he’s merciful and faithful to us (2:17). Fully human, tempted like us in every way, he’s also able to empathize with our weaknesses (4:15). Jesus our great high priest truly meets our need (7:26).

So what should we make of all this, that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God? Like the early Christians, living a life of faith is still hard. There are many social pressures around us to conform. There’s ridicule and persecution. And as Christians we all have our own cross to carry, just as our Lord Jesus did, and that cross involves shame (12:2; cf. Mk8:34). We also have our own sins within us, which so easily entangle us (12:1). We can grow weary and lose heart (12:3). We can give up meeting together (10:25). Our hearts can become sinful, unbelieving, and we can even want to turn back to our old life of sin (3:12). What can we do? Hebrews tells us to fix our thoughts and our eyes on Jesus (3:1; 12:2). Jesus at the right hand of God is our apostle, our high priest, and both the pioneer and perfecter of faith. When we look at Jesus, our faith is renewed, and we can have hope. Our heavenly hope in Jesus is another major theme of Hebrews (3:6; 6:11, 18,19; 7:19; 10:23; 11:1,13–16). This hope is the best hope there is. Our hope in Jesus at the right hand of God gives us great encouragement; it makes us confident, firm and unshakeable. Our hope in him enables us to persevere. The key verses of Hebrews are 10:23,24: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds…” This is Christian perseverance—holding on to our hope in Jesus, and encouraging one another to do good deeds of love. We can do it because Jesus is seated at the right hand of God.

Look at verse 4. Why does the author suddenly switch his contrast from the Old Testament prophets to angels? It’s because there was an idea circulating among Greek-speaking Jews that God could be approached only through angels. Some were even saying that Jesus was the highest angel of God. Why did they think so? It’s because God gave the law to Moses through angels (2:2; Ac7:38, 53; Gal3:19). The author of Hebrews proclaims clearly that Jesus is far superior to angels. It may sound strange. But it’s still easy for us to get distracted by great people, whether it’s saints, or servants of God, or people who dominate our media today, or even ourselves. We need to stay focused on Jesus.

In verses 5–14 the author explains with various Scripture quotes that Jesus is superior to angels. To sum it up, unlike angels, Jesus is God’s Son. Angels worship him. Unlike angels, Jesus is God who has an eternal throne and is exalted above all. Jesus is the eternal God. God the Father is going to make all Jesus’ enemies a footstool for his feet. Angels are just spirits sent to minister to people who inherit salvation. When we realize who Jesus is, everyone else pales in comparison.

Read verse 3b again. May God help us draw near to him through Jesus, who provided purification for our sins. May God help us fix our eyes on Jesus seated at God’s right hand, so that we may be filled with hope and persevere in faith as his people in this dark world.