

**Lake Joseph Community Church  
August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019.**

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 1:1-4

**Who is Jesus and why does he matter?**

Wow. The hymn we just sang [Crown Him with Many Crowns] makes some pretty bold statements about Jesus, doesn't it?

The Lamb upon his throne, ... the Lord of life .... a matchless king ....  
Have you ever wondered .... How did Jesus move from being an itinerant Jewish rabbi to *that*?

Who is Jesus and why does he matter? Plenty of people have lots of varied ideas about that. But if we want to know what Christianity's answer to that question we need to look into the Scriptures.

Today's reading is taken from a book that almost didn't make it into the Scriptures, for primarily one reason: no one could be *sure* who wrote it, *exactly* when it was written, or even who *specifically* it was written to.

This was a big problem for the early church because they very much preferred writings to be clearly identified as first-hand or at very least second-hand accounts originating in the apostles, the first followers of Jesus.

Sometimes, we assume that people back then didn't care as much as we do about sources of information and verifying authorship. But that's simply not true. There were quite stringent guidelines that *excluded* many well loved writings from being included in the New Testament.

**Don't forget, reverence and care around Holy Scripture was deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition out of which Christianity grew.**

**In Judaism, highly trained scribes copied the Scriptures by hand, letter by letter, so to retain and replicate across the centuries and millennia, exact copies of the original Hebrew Scriptures.**

**The early Christian community was equally careful around the authentication, preservation and copying of its earliest writings, particularly those originating from the apostles. And this is why inclusion in the NT of the book of Hebrews, thought to be written somewhere around A.D. 80, was still being debated until around the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (whereas many other NT books were already established as sacred writings 150 years earlier).**

**So *why was* the letter now called the book of Hebrews eventually *accepted* into the New Testament, if it didn't measure up to the usual qualifications of known authorship?**

**Simply put, it was because it was and is considered to be an *extraordinary articulation of who Jesus is*. It paints one of the richest and most complete pictures of his identity and his purpose.**

**Simply put, if you grasp the Jesus of the book of Hebrews, you will worship Him.**

**So let's dig into this letter:**

**There are *two main ideas* about Jesus that the writer of Hebrews wanted to get across. Both of these ideas addressed concepts prevalent in the ancient culture of the day.**

**The first was linked to an idea pervasive in the ancient *Greek* world .....**

- **The Greeks believed everything visible in this world is simply a shadow of a pure ideal that ultimately exists beyond this world.**
- **That ideal is what gives birth to our concept idea of things like beauty or truth; an 'ideal' against which all 'shadows' of this world are measured.**

**So, for instance, even the most beautiful flower was seen as only a shadow, of the ideal of Beauty itself.**

**The deep love of a mother or father for their child, was still seen as a secondary effect of the perfect ideal of Love itself.**

**All truths bore only a resemblance to the ultimate Truth itself, and so were in some sense simply a shadow of it.**

**No matter how wonderful or worthy a thing was, the Greeks believed there was an ultimate perfect Ideal that was behind the very definition of worthiness.**

**The writer of Hebrews linked into this Greek idea, so pervasive in the people he would have been writing to ..... so he wrote,**

**..... across the centuries ‘God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ .... ‘He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.’**

**God had long been sending rough sketches of himself in things like the intricate beauty of the natural world, and the human longing for connection with the transcendent.**

**He had further developed these sketches of his nature through the various perspectives of the prophets .... some particularly focused on social justice (like Amos), some on forgiveness (like Jeremiah), some on the holiness of God (like Isaiah). Each grasped and presented a fragment of God to the people.**

**But Jesus, the writer of Hebrews says, presents not a fragment of the truth of God .... but the Truth itself. In Jesus God revealed Himself fully.**

**Similarly, the prophets revealed their *sketches* of God through various means; sometimes through words and sometimes through dramatized actions:**

hiding a loincloth, tearing fabric into twelve pieces, building a wall of bricks, lying on one side and then the other, shaving their heads and beards.

All of which were to represent physically something God wanted them to pay attention to. The prophets, as limited human beings, had to use human actions and materials to try to convey *something* of God to the people.

**But Jesus, the writer says, revealed God by being himself.**

**So Jesus was not one more shadow of the ideal of God .... but was the exact imprint of God himself. God with us.**

**So this was the first idea presented in the Letter to the Hebrews:**

**No more guesswork. No more piecing together half measures. If we want to know what God is like we simply need to look right at Jesus.**

**The *second idea about Jesus* that the book of Hebrews wants its readers to grasp is linked to *another idea* that was pervasive at the time of it's writing.... but this one didn't originate in the ancient Greek world .... but in *the ancient Jewish world*:**

**This was the idea that a mediator was needed to bridge the gap between imperfect human beings who sin, and a perfectly holy God.**

**The Ten Commandments, and in fact the whole collection of other Jewish laws meant to help people live holy lives, were actually the means by which people realized that they could never themselves bridge the holiness gap. For this reason God had given them a means of recognizing their wrongdoing and making regular sacrifices as a means of demonstrating their repentance and renewing their covenant with God.**

**The problem was, because of the fallenness of human beings themselves, this was a never-ending cycle, lived out in both individuals lives and in the life of the people of Israel as a whole.**

**Year after year they would promise to live as God's holy people, and year after year they'd screw up!**

**Year after year on the day of Atonement one chosen priest would enter the Holy of Holies and offer again a sacrifice, first for his own sins (as a fallen human being), and then for the sins of the people, with the hope that they would again open a path to God.**

**Addressing this *Jewish worldview* was what the writer of this letter had in mind when he presented Jesus as the sacrifice that would finally bring an end to this seemingly never-ending cycle. In the self-sacrifice of Jesus; God's son, the incarnation of God himself.... in His sacrifice had finally come both the only perfect priest, and the perfect sacrifice, that could finally bring to God a sacrifice of such tremendous worth that it would open for all time the path to God.**

**This is why the writer of Hebrews writes 'When he (Jesus) had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.**

**These two key thoughts about Jesus: (1) as the exact imprint of God's being and (2) the one sufficient sacrifice and mediator, pervade the entire letter. This afternoon take the 25 minutes or so it would take to read the whole thing. In this letter we see a repeated pointing from the past into the future .... with Jesus seen as the key to both.**

**As New Testament scholar William Barclay wrote:**

**"To the Greeks, the writer to the Hebrews said: You are looking for the way from the shadows to reality; you will find it in Jesus Christ.**

**To the Jews, the writer to the Hebrews said: You are looking for that perfect sacrifice which will open the way to God which your sins have closed; you will find it in Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: Letter to the Hebrews*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky, 2002) p. 5

**Jesus is not one part of the Christian faith, He is at its very heart. He is the answer to the mysteries and dilemmas of the past. He is our hope for the future.**

**And this is why every person's consideration of Christianity will always come down to one question: What will you do with Jesus?**

**Is he a figure of a long past time, or is he Lord of all time?**

**Is he one example of self-sacrifice among many, or is he the only sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world?**

**Was he one man forced to taste death for himself, or was He the Son of God who freely tasted death for all humankind?**

**Was he one human being in a vast creation, or is he the One through whom all things exist?**

**The letter to the Hebrews pushes the question on us, just the way it has pushed it on every generation of people since the time of those who read it first: 'what will you do with Jesus?'**

**The Jesus of the book of Hebrews invites you to worship Him, and give yourself to Him as the Lord of Life itself. May he stand at the very center of our worship this day. And at the very center of our lives.**

**Amen.**