

Hebrews 1:1-9

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

Maybe you noticed it. Maybe you didn't. There's no mention of a manger. There's not a hint of hay or a syllable about animals. There's no Mary. No Joseph. There aren't any angels either - at least not in the way you might expect. In fact, I think it's fair to say that here in Hebrews there is nothing at all said about what we've traditionally come to know as Christmas. So what does Hebrews have to say to us at Christmas time? Good question.

We can begin to get at an answer to that question by making an observation. The writer is abrupt. If we didn't know better we might even say he's rude. Just like it's rude and impolite to get a gift from someone and not say, "Thank you." It's also considered good etiquette and good manners to start a written letter with a greeting. If you're an ancient Christian writer you might say something like, "To so and so, grace and peace..." So what's up with the writer to the Hebrews tossing common courtesy out the window? There's only one answer that I can think of. It must have been bad. Like when the ambulance shows up at a house, the paramedics don't say, "Good morning and how is your day going?" They walk right in and they get the paddles out.

Like I said, it must have been an emergency situation for the writer to the Hebrews to dispense with a greeting at the beginning of his letter in favor of the swiftest launch possible. It was time to get the paddles out. We're told why. Jesus had suffered a huge downgrade. **"So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he (Jesus) has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say..." (v. 4-5)** Do you see what the writer is arguing? He's saying, "Jesus is better than angels." Actually, I should clarify something. The writer in the section never calls Jesus, Jesus. He calls Jesus, God's "Son." He wants to emphasize Jesus' deity. So why argue that Jesus is greater than angels? Why harp on Jesus' sonship and deity? And why dive into all of that without even a

decent hello or greeting in the letter? Do the math. God's Son had suffered a huge downgrade in the minds of those ancient Christians.

Before we shake our heads in disappointment at those ancient Christians, let's realize something. Hebrews is a unique letter among New Testament letters. Hebrews wasn't written to anyone in particular. It wasn't named after a city and the people there like Philippians and Corinthians and Colossians were. It was a letter written to no one in particular. Actually, let me rephrase. It was written to everyone in particular. This letter was not tailored to the needs of a specific place or specific people. It was written to be universal. Let me put it another way. The letter was written with everyone in mind. That tells us that downgrading Jesus is an all-Christianity problem. What's unique to different times and places is how that happens. For the people at the time of this letter the problem was angelology. In other words, they were really into angels and spirits and stuff and it was really affecting their faith life in a powerfully negative way. For us, downgrades still happen. They just happen for different reasons.

Think about what that means on Christmas Day. I was sitting with my daughter, Elle, reading her a book called *What is Christmas?* The jacket of the book promises "it will help kids know what Christmas is all about." That's when it hit me. The author thought kids would have trouble cutting through the cookies, family, special songs, presents, and Santa Claus to get to Jesus. That's why she wrote the book. Turns out that she was right. I watched a video at the Early Childhood and Kindergarten Christmas program. Child by child they were asked, "What is Christmas?" Without hesitation, almost all of them answered with one word, "presents." It made me aware of a scary spiritual reality. Christmas time is when Jesus has the most competition. None of us should be naive. There is strategy here. This is just like Satan. He never shows up in the lives of mature Christians with a pitchfork. That would be too obvious. The Bible says he shows up looking like an angel of light. He uses the most innocent things in the most evil ways.

Think about it. Jesus downgrades happen all the time in worship and home life. The kids are reciting Luke 2 like they do every year and they get to the part about the angels and they say, "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angels..." Then we grin at each other about how incredibly cute that was. I admit it. I've done it. In that moment, cuteness trumps pondering the fact that for the first time in world history an angel choir just had to sing and why they did. Home life can downgrade Jesus too. The family takes a moment to decorate cookies and the tree, but doesn't take a moment to worship the Christ together - just them. Even Christmas acts like the giving of presents can take center stage in the home over the more important act of receiving God's present, Jesus Christ. Then Christmas Day finally arrives and it can be more about visiting family than about visiting Jesus' manger with my soul. Do you see the downgrades Jesus gets?

That's what's beating in God's heart when he starts in on this letter. That's why he had to dispense with the niceties and lay a message on us. **"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the**

exact representation of his being, sustaining everything by his powerful word.” (v. 1-3) Do you see what he’s saying? He saying, “God talked through a lot of people in a lot of different places about his Son, but he’s not doing that anymore. He doesn’t have to. He’s here.” Do you feel the gravity of that? The writer is purposefully saying, “Jesus is it. He’s God’s message. Tune in. He’s the beginning and end of what God is saying and doing for humankind. And by the way, if you’ve got any doubts about that - the writer goes on - know something about this message. He’s not just a message. He’s the one who has been willed the universe. He is the heir appointed of all that exists. And he’s not just a recipient of all that exists. No, that’s not just it. He’s much more than that. He’s the *creator* of it.” So let’s get this straight. Jesus is God’s final message to people. He’s been willed everything and he’s the one through whom God made the universe. Do you see what that makes him? The writer tells us so we don’t have to wonder. It makes seeing Jesus equal to seeing all the radiance of God’s glory. Seeing Jesus = seeing God. He is the exact representation of God’s essence. Do you see what that makes Jesus? That makes Jesus - in a word - God. That’s the ultimate upgrade - the highest heights of deity.

There are no shortcuts to getting the mind and the heart around the arrival of God to earth. That is a Holy Spirit worked wonder that God has to place in our souls. But it is real! And it is incredible! God actually came at Christmas time. You know what I find amazing? I find it amazing that no one - absolutely no one - questions the reality of Jesus’ birth. Have you ever thought about that? People question what Jesus accomplished; what he means for us; what his identity is; but no one questions whether or not he was actually here. Jesus actually was born. And *we know* that he is God, which means that God really walked here - in the flesh. When Koine was here about a week ago, there were a lot of great songs in the concert, but the one that really struck me - maybe because I was thinking about these verses from Hebrews - was *Mary, Did You Know?* The entire song is devoted to upgrading Jesus to the heights of deity. The song just nails it! Mary, did you know that he walked where angels trod? Mary, did you know that when you kiss your baby that you kiss the *face of God*? Mary, did you know that your son is the great I Am?

That is an overwhelming reality. The one who has been willed all things and will receive it as something properly owed him. The one through whom the sun, the moon, and the stars came into being. The one who still upholds this universe with his word of grace. The one who knit me together in my mother’s womb. That one is here. He came. He’s here - in the flesh. And don’t be confused. God didn’t come as an anthropologist. Jesus didn’t sit in the skies and say, “Father, I wonder what it’s like to live with the natives. Can I go check it out?” God came because there was a God-sized job to do. Only God could bring a sacrifice that would purify all the Jesus downgrades that have happened in history. Only God could provide a purification that would infinitely produce rivers of forgiveness that run richly and powerfully over every aspect of our brokenness. Correction. Only God *did* provide the ultimate and forever purification. Interesting, isn’t it? The writer to the Hebrews - even on Christmas Day - takes us right to the foot of the cross, **“He provided purification for sins.” (v. 3)**

So what is the writer to the Hebrews saying to us today? He’s saying, “Strip away the manger. Forget about Mary. Don’t worry about the hay or Jesus’ stepfather, Joseph. On

Christmas Day, give Jesus the ultimate upgrade. Claim his deity for your own soul. Realize that God showed up because there was a God-sized job to do: the purification for all sin." See? Now we're talkin'. If you catch my drift, it's not so much what you do at Christmas time, but what's in your soul when you do it. Eat those cookies. Enjoy your families. Smile when the kids are cute. Open your presents. Do everything that is Christmas at Christmas time. And through all the warm and grand trappings of Christmas, let your soul stop and peer into the manger and just marvel that all the fullness of the deity is laying there. That the owner, maker, receiver, and upholder of all that exists - was squeezed out of a birth canal. That he met his mother and began to experience the world as one of us and for all of us. And he did it all because there was a God-sized job to do. He arrived to provide THE SACRIFICE for purification. You know what that means? It means that it's not just happy talk to say that you're a purified, holy person. You actually are. Amen.