

JESUS WAS NO ANGEL

Hebrews 1:5-14

The opening lines of this sermon, as we saw last week, draw our attention to Jesus, God's last word and first word to his creation. Hebrews 1:1-4 sets out Jesus' credentials, concluding with a statement about his superiority over the angels. The rest of this chapter is very much a comment on this last verse. It consists of seven quotes from the Old Testament, mostly from Psalms.

Verse 5 begins this section with a question – “To which of the angels did God ever say...?” The Preacher, like most preachers, never answers his own question. The answer is self-evident – none. These are not words directed at any angel, but to the Son only. The first verse quoted is Psalm 2:7 where, in its original context it referred to the special relationship that God had with the king of Israel, but by the time this sermon was written down these words had a distinctly Christian slant. Matthew, Mark and Luke all use this verse from Psalm 2 in their accounts of Jesus' baptism and Paul uses it as part of his account of the resurrection. In quoting Psalm 2:7 the Preacher is not so much directing the congregations thought to the original setting and meaning, but to their current understanding of it. He is, in effect, saying, “You know that God raised his Son, Jesus from the dead. Have you ever heard of God doing this for any angel?”

To underline this meaning the Preacher adds a second quotation, this time from 2 Samuel 7:14, again referring to the king but again given new meaning by the early church, this time speaking about the special relationship that exists between God and the Christians and so, as Jesus is the first-born Son, of the unique relationship they share.

If God did not say these things to the angels, what does he say to them? The next two quotes, (1:6-7), are directed at angels. “Let all God's angels worship him.” is a quote of either Deuteronomy 32: 43 or Psalm 97:7. In either case it is taken not from the Hebrew Old Testament, which we use, but from a Greek translation called the Septuagint (LXX) that was in common use at this time. The Preacher's point is clear, angels do the worshipping, Jesus is the one worshipped.

The next quote, this time from Psalm 104:4 is again the LXX. In our versions, based on the Hebrew wording, Ps 104 says, “He made the winds his messenger, flames of fire his servants.” This tells us that God takes natural elements (wind and fire) and uses them for his own purposes. The Preacher uses this verse in a very different way. He says that his angels are His winds and flames (1:7). That is, they are fleeting and passing. Like the wind they blow and then they are gone. Like fire they burn then flicker out. But not so with the Son.

1:8ff draws a contrast with angels for, quoting Psalm 45:6ff, the Preacher says that the Son is ever-lasting. Again twisting the original meaning of the Psalm, which probably is a wedding song, the Preacher makes a startling claim. It may slip by if you

don't pay attention, but this verse is one of the few places in the New Testament where Jesus is directly referred to as "God". Jesus' reign is eternal and exalted above all others, including angels. This is again underlined by the next quote, (1:10-12), this time from Psalm 102:25-27. The contrast with angels is clear – "They (as part of the created order) will perish, but you remain... they will be changed, but you are the same."

The final quote (1:13) returns to the original question, "To which of the angels did God ever say...?" The Preacher then quotes a verse which is one of the most widely quoted passages in the New Testament. Psalm 101:1 is either quoted directly or unmistakably alluded to in Mark 12:36; Acts 2:34-35; Ephesians 1:20-22; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 10:10-13; 1 Peter 3:22 as well as here. It's not stretching the imagination too far to suggest that as this verse is being read out in the early church the congregation would join in to complete it. As the Preacher reaches the climax he has made his point: God never spoke to any angel this way.

1:14 draws a simple conclusion – angels are there to minister not only to Jesus but also to all who will inherit salvation.

Now, all this is very interesting, but I find why spend 10 or 11 verses telling people about how Jesus is superior to angels. Isn't it obvious? What was the problem? The Preacher seems a little long-winded. Why spend so much time on a subject he hardly mentions again, and has little to do with the rest of his argument?

Some have suggested that this early congregation had a problem with angels. Perhaps they were elevating them to a point that they were in danger of worshipping them. This is certainly a problem and I have met with some perilously close to this same heresy today. But although that may explain some things, it does not tell us why the Preacher never refers to it again. If it is so important that it comes at the beginning of the sermon, why does it not come back to it?

So if the problem is not that the congregation thought too much about angels, what was the problem? Perhaps it was simply this, they thought too little of Jesus.

We can see from 12:4-13 that these Christians were suffering some sort of persecution and as a consequence they were having difficulty hanging onto their faith. They were weary and disheartened. All they could feel was exhaustion, all they could see was trouble. As for Jesus, he appeared to be precious little help. All they could see of him was the bloodied, bowed and beaten figure on the cross, one who cried out in pain and seemed unable to save himself, much less anyone else. Certainly Jesus shared in their suffering, but that is not the same as transforming it. The problem was that Jesus was all too vulnerable, too weak, too human.

The Preacher's response is not to try to lift their spirits with platitudes. He does not pat them on the head and say, "There, there, it's not that bad." Nor does he give them glib advice like, "Look on the bright side" or "Count your blessings." He knows their suffering is real. So he preaches the truth of the Gospel that goes beyond what they can see. The eye is a poor guide, he tells them. What they must trust is what they have heard. (2:1)

What they can see of the world is not the whole story. The truth goes much further than they can see. Jesus may seem to be lower than the angels, but it is through him that salvation comes. He may have been bloodied and bowed, but he is the heir of all things. The whole book of Hebrews is oriented in this direction. Chapter 1 is not a diversion – it sets the scene for all that follows, showing by different ways and means

that, "he becomes as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs." (1:4)

Suffering brings weariness, and the weary congregation is in danger of looking for a Gospel without the cross, redemption without sacrifice, a faith without pain. They look for something that does not exhaust them with demands to put one foot in front of the other and follow on in daily obedience. They look for a beautiful vision of an unspoilt heaven full of lovely angels singing untroubled hymns. Anything but a weeping, suffering Jesus.

But the Gospel is not to be reduced by such longings to nothing more than the power of positive thinking. The Preacher's purpose is to set before the congregation a clear picture of Jesus, the glorious, the suffering and the triumphant Son.

Amen

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