

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Seeing Christ in Our Broken World”
By Eric Howell
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
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If you’ve ever shaken your head and muttered, “It’s not supposed to be like this,” the opening chapters of Hebrews are for you. N.T. Wright, in his book *Simply Christian*, writes about the human dream for a world that is the way it’s supposed to be instead of the way it actually is. He says:

The dream is of a different world altogether, a world where we really belong, where everything is indeed put to rights, a world into which we can escape in our dreams in the present and hope to escape one day for good. . . . The reason we have those dreams . . . is that there is someone speaking to us, whispering in our inner ear—someone who cares very much about this present world and our present selves, and who has made us and the world for a purpose which will indeed involve justice, things being put to rights, ourselves being put to rights, the world being rescued at last (9).

This world that we dream of when we say, “It’s not supposed to be like this” is a world that no one less than Christ establishes and orders. In Hebrews 1, He is described as, “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power. After making 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.” Any world upheld by such a benevolent power would be just, right, and rescued.

It would be a world in which bad things wouldn’t happen to good people. Kids wouldn’t get sick, parents wouldn’t be abusive, innocent people wouldn’t suffer. It would be the world we dream of, the world we would expect to have under the dominion of such a Son of God. A world we get a glimpse of in those moments we nod our heads and say, “This is the way it’s supposed to be.”

As Hebrews opens, more than any other book in the New Testament, it looks like it’s pointing to something very much like the sort of world we are supposed to have if Christ is Lord. Hebrews is not like the other books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible has a form to it. The psalms are poetry. The proverbs are proverbs. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are gospels, and that’s a particular form of writing. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and many of the others are letters. Revelation is apocalyptic. Hebrews is close to my heart. Hebrews is a sermon. A really, really long sermon by a really, really good preacher. We don’t know who wrote this, but Tom Long is right: Hebrews is crafted to be savored and enjoyed, not simply devoured and endured.

In English we miss the alliteration of the opening sentence in Greek, but we can imagine the preacher moving the pulpit, shuffling his notes, pausing in respect of the moment, and then we can hear the cadence, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” Indeed, God revealed himself through prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Elijah: these courageous men who spoke God’s truth

and God's ways no matter the consequences. Some people didn't listen to them, but those who had ears to hear, heeded their words. God spoke through them about the way the world is supposed to be. We might think of Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In many ways God has spoken to us. Some hear God's mighty voice in the thunder of the cataracts of waterfalls. Some hear God in the still small silence of a desert's solitude. Some have heard God in the plain truth-telling of a child's observations. Others have heard God's voice in the clear notes of a cathedral choir. Many have heard God speaking through scripture. Who are we to limit where God can speak or how God may choose to do so? The witness of scripture is that God speaks. "Moses, tell Pharaoh to let my people go." It's not a matter of where God can speak as a matter of how well we are listening.

At many times and in many ways, God spoke, the preacher reminds us, evoking in our memories all of scripture and the powerful witness of our ancient forefathers, but in these last days, the preacher continues, He has spoken to us by His Son. Divine revelation has progressed to a climax in Christ—but "the progression is not from the less true to more true, from the less worthy to the more worthy, or from the less mature to the more mature. The progression is from promise to fulfillment" (FF Bruce, NICNT 45). The bold claim of Hebrews, beginning with a comparison of Christ to angels, is that God may speak and show Himself in many different ways—but all of these—from scripture to sunsets—are promises of something greater still—the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

And the way Hebrews gets you thinking about it, with all sorts of quotes from the Old Testament making the case that the Son of God is greater than angels, you would think that if you were to see the Son of God, He would look like a super-angel. And He'd have super-angel powers and super-angel strength. If you were to see Him, you'd expect it to be like it was for Moses who saw God's glory, but had to be hidden in a cleft of a rock and only could peek out to catch a slight glimpse of the back of God's head. If you saw the Son of God, you might expect it to look like what Peter, James, and John saw on the mountainside when Jesus was transfigured. His clothes were described as gleaming white, like no bleach on earth can accomplish.

And if His looks are that impressive, imagine how His rule is. The world He ruled would be perfect, just, righteous, and good. This is how things should be. Things should be good. But they are not always. The world should be just. But there is still injustice. We should be righteous. But we know we're not. If Christ is Lord, the world should be perfect. But it's not. Not yet anyway. It's a world we can dream of. It's a world we can work toward. It's a world we can hope for and pray for. But it's not a world we live in now. And it's not a world the first hearers of this sermon lived in either.

Verses 8-9: "In putting everything in subjection to Son, God left nothing out of His control." That's the good news of hope and promise. "At present we do not yet see everything in subjection to the Son of God." That's the reality that the promise has not yet been totally fulfilled.

We don't see things, even ourselves, the way we reason we should see them if God is all-powerful and all-loving. We still see unchecked temptation and sin. We still see unexplainable tragedy. We still see unchallenged injustice. We see a seemingly unbridgeable gap between reality and our hopes, between the way the world is and the way the world is supposed to be, between the promise and the fulfillment.

But we do see Jesus and when we do, we see the very image of the divine in whom both promise and fulfillment rest. But in Him, when we really look hard at Him, we confess that the gospel is very different from what we might have expected. We were expecting to see a super-angel whose power would be unrivaled, whose authority would be claimed by force, a being we could not even lay eyes on.

If you believe the gospel, what we got was an unassuming carpenter, who looks a lot like us, born to unwed parents in a backwoods barn in a nothing outpost. We were looking for a conquering hero, we got a suffering servant. He didn't act the way we thought He would. Instead of marching to the halls of power, He stayed out in the countryside, talking with unsophisticated people, half-breeds, children, outcasts. Rather than speak in bold proclamation, He told stories and suggested that His audience supply the meaning. He healed some people, a lot of people, but He didn't heal everyone. He did some miracles. Pretty amazing stuff. But He didn't always do them. If the Son is greater than the angels, surely, He is greater than the world's power, but He let himself be threatened and eventually arrested by the empire's stooges. And whatever spiritual and emotional suffering He endured in His life—whatever sadness, whatever disappointment, whatever else He went through, it was nothing compared to the suffering He endured at the hands of human powers that tortured Him until He died.

Even until the moment of His last breath, the people closest to Him didn't really believe He would—maybe could—die. Any moment now He's going to throw off the cloak of humanity and save Himself and us. Any time now He'll stop this game—He's made His point right?—and call down the 10,000 angels He commands. Any time now. But He didn't. Shockingly, He didn't.

Some would say that this proves that He was no one particularly special. After all, again according to the logic of the world—why would anyone suffer, why would anyone sacrifice and endure all of that unless they had no power to change it? Some would say that His suffering and death was His final humiliation. But Hebrews calls this suffering and death His crown of glory and honor and says with the benefit of a few years of reflection, "It was fitting that God should make the founder of our salvation perfect through suffering." The rest of Hebrews is about how it is fitting that God should save us like this and how faith is hope in what is unseen.

The preacher of Hebrews knows us very well. He's one of us. In fact, those inclusive words, "we" and "us" appear in opening sentence and continue through the sermon. We, all of us, are in this together. We didn't see it coming. We thought we understood God well enough to predict that if the Son of God comes, He would conquer enemies. He embraced them. We thought He would punish sin. He forgave it. We thought He would defeat injustice. He endured it. We thought He would end suffering. He entered it. Every move He made was counter-intuitive to the logic of the world we inhabit. It is as if He wasn't living by the rules of this world. It is as if He was too busy creating a new one for those who have faith to see.

We really didn't understand God at all, did we? And we still struggle with this. We're still slack-jawed in the face of the atheist's protest, "If your God is so good, why does suffering happen?" And we're that way because when we are honest, we still don't really have an answer that we wish we had. We wish we could say with integrity that all suffering is part of God's master plan or that suffering is the result of sin—don't sin—all will go well for you. But we know our answers are disingenuous. At the end of the day, we have to live with the reality that God left us here in a broken world with the

consequences of its brokenness all around us every day and in the knowledge that we broke it. And we break it again and again. We don't yet see the new world. We don't yet see the fulfillment of the promises.

But we do see Jesus. You and I have never literally seen Him with our eyes, but someone has. Jesus is not just an intellectual paradigm, theological construct, traditional figment, mythological creature, philosophical argument, motivational moment, inspirational sentiment, or political mascot. There were people like you and me who literally saw Him and heard Him and saw what He did. They were witnesses to His life. Christianity is a historical response to their witness. It's not just an idea or ethical construct. It's about things that happened. The libraries full of books and even the sermons and letters collected in the New Testament are about making sense of and trying to live in the world created by the things that happened. Those of you who have walked by the Sea of Galilee and through the streets of Jerusalem come away from that experience with a sharper sense that the Bible is about real things and real people and real places and real events. And that's what our faith clings to in the face of the real world we live in.

But we are also aware that Jesus is not just back there, back then. We do see Jesus. We do see Him with the eyes of faith here and now. All is not dark. All is not hopeless. All is not unjust. All is not wrong. In our world there are pockets of evidence that we are not alone, we are not abandoned, and we are not forsaken to cling to a distant memory of what once was. We do see Jesus here and now if we have eyes of faith. We have windows into the world that will be:

I see Christ in you, the gathered church, the body of Christ, especially on the days we receive communion and you reverently come down the center aisle to be served.

I see Christ in the people who are sacrificing in many ways to serve other people.

I see Christ in your prayers for one another.

I see Christ in the peace of this place in the mornings when no one else is here and the dew is on the grass.

I see Christ in the eyes of my children in the last shadowy dusky moments of another day, talking in bed before going to sleep, hearing the little voice pick the words to "I love you, Lord" as a bedtime prayer.

These are windows to a world we can't see with our eyes, but we can see with faith. These glimpses encourage us to pray for this world, work toward this world, hope in this world, and remember that the world we dream of is a fulfillment of a promise God has made—I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

May God give us the eyes of faith to see Christ's redeeming ourselves and our world, into the darkest and hardest places of our world, that His suffering may be sufficient to perfect the salvation of the greatest sinner, even us, in the name of Christ the Lord, until He comes to reign forever and ever. Amen.