

Prayers

Thoughts on prayer

Wonderful things sometimes happen on earth, and God is gracious to work miracles amongst us in ways we sometimes see and sometimes do not see. He also uses His angels to care for us and look after us within the turmoil of this world, which again, we do not always understand. As you pray today, remain conscious of God's Almighty hand at work for your protection and guidance.

A prayer for today

Speak to me O Lord, and inspire my heart to greater things. Help me to look higher and further than my spiritual eyes would normally see, grant me a heart to see where You are already at work in this world of Yours, and give me the patience to wait for the releasing of Your Spirit. So may I accept Your greater call on my life and aspire to nothing less than the Kingdom of God which You, Lord Jesus, have made real on earth. AMEN

Meditation

There is something indescribable in all music;
It has the power to deeply move the human soul,
And minister to feelings, spirit, mood, and heart.

There is something inexpressible in rainbow colours;
The same thing can be lit in a million different ways
In the ever-changing patterns of light all around us!

There is something indefinable about food's flavour;
A beautifully prepared dish delights so many senses,
Uncovering emotions, passions, and even memories.

There is something essential about grace and faith,
For the human soul falls short in its true potential
Without contact found, spirit to Spirit, with its Creator.

So dance with all the senses, as led by the Creator;
Hear the heavenly music! see the sights of glory!
And taste the heavenly banquet of God's eternal feast!

Bible Passage

Hebrews 1:5-14

⁵ To which of the angels has God ever said,

'You are my Son; I am now Your Father'

or,

'I will be His Father, and He will be my Son?'

⁶ And then, when He leads the firstborn into the world, He says,

'Let all God's angels worship Him.'

⁷ On the one hand, He says of the angels,

'He makes His angels spirits, His servants flames of fire.'

⁸ But to the Son He says,

'Your throne, O God, lasts forever; justice is the true sign of Your Kingdom ⁹ and You love righteousness and detest lawlessness. Because of this, God, your God, has anointed You with the oil of delight above anyone else.'

¹⁰ And then,

'In the beginning, Lord, You set out the earth and made the heavens with Your hands. ¹¹ Yet when they perish, You will keep going; creation will wear out like old clothes! ¹² You will roll it up like a shawl and change it for another outfit! Yet You remain the same; You will live forever.'

¹³ Now, to which of the angels has God ever said,

'Sit next to me at my right while I put Your enemies under Your feet like a footstool?'

¹⁴ Are they not all spirits serving God, sent to serve those who receive God's gift of salvation?

Review

Yesterday, we read the first verses of Hebrews and its wonderful description of Jesus as God's Son, who has '*dealt with the cleansing of sins*' and therefore become '*greatly superior to angels*' (1:4). This is the bold 'Gospel' declaration of Hebrews, but it is written to Jewish people who had some difficulty in getting to grips with the idea. Many Jews thought Jesus was a great, even outstanding Jew who had taught well, done good and died unjustly, but they were cautious to say more and remained faithful Jews who live by Old Testament Law.

The question of the Jews

One of their questions would have been this; '*why do you say that Jesus deal with all sin, when Scripture already provides an effective sacrificial system for removing the deadly affects of sin?*' (see the sacrificial laws of Leviticus). While we may not think like this, Jews did, and Hebrews will soon describe how Jesus and His deals with sin. But before it does, Hebrews addresses a different and important question for first century Jews.

The Old Testament is full of stories in which God works through angels. For example, an angel assists Abraham, stopping him from killing Isaac as he struggled to understand what God was saying to him (Gen 22:1f.). Also, an angel helped Moses and all Israel as they travelled into the desert to escape Egypt (Ex 14:19, 23:20f.). So it was natural that while many Jews believed in Jesus' great deeds and teaching, they thought God had again come to help Israel by means of an angel. However, Hebrews will have none of this, and it now quotes seven passages of Scripture to make the perfect argument that the Messiah is God's Son and not an angel!

'You are my Son ...'

In verses 5 to 6, Hebrews sets out two Old Testament scriptures identifying the Messiah as 'God's Son'. Verse 5 quotes first Psalm 2:7, in which God says to the Messiah; '*You are my Son; I am now Your Father*'. Literally, the phrase '*I am Your Father*' is an old way of speaking about procreation, and the Authorised Version says; '*today I begat you ...*'. This is not normal English, but it clearly indicates a familial relationship between the Father and the One who brings salvation, which cannot be said of an angel! The same is true of 2 Samuel 7:14, '*I will be His Father and he will be my Son*' (1:5), from the great Messianic prophecy given to David.

Now any Jew of Jesus' day would have known these passages, but this is how Hebrews works to persuade them to accept that God's supreme work of salvation is done through His only and unique Son, and not through angels. It is a theme the letter will soon develop.

An angel is something quite different

In comparison, verse 6 describes God presenting His Son to the world, and telling angels to worship Him! The verse is a loose quote from Deuteronomy 32:43 (and also Psalm 97:7) saying this; '*Let all God's angels worship Him*'. Be careful, however, for if you look up these two passages, they both say '*let all the gods worship Him*'! Why then do these passages speak of gods and not angels? It is due to an oddity in the Greek version of Old Testament Scripture used in the first century AD (see below - '**Going Deeper**'). However, the point in Hebrews is clear enough; the Son has greater status in heaven than angels.

What then are angels, if they are so much lower in heaven than the Son? To explain, Hebrews quotes Psalm 104:4, and we are told what they are '*... spirits ... flames of fire*' and servants of God; but what does this mean? Many Old Testament passages describe angelic activity as like fire; for example, angels and fire both protect God's people in the desert (Exodus 14:19,20), and an angel appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2f.). So we should not be surprised that angels are described as rather like fire.

The Son

Now then, if angels are like tongues of fire with a heavenly job to do on earth, what is the Son like? To answer, Hebrews quotes Psalm 45:6,7 which describes the Son's eternal qualities and His effective work on earth (moreover, barring translation variations, Psalm 45:6,7 is virtually the same as Hebrews 1:8,9).

Verses 8 and 9 say three things about the Son. First they confirm that He is God, He has eternal qualities, and He is even addressed as 'God'; '*Your throne, O God, lasts for ever!*' Second, these verses confirm the Son's divinity; '*justice is the sign of Your Kingdom and You love righteousness ...*'. This is a New Testament passage to which we must turn if we want to set out the case that Jesus was sinless. Hebrews is not yet describing how Jesus' death brings salvation, this comes later, it simply argues against Jews who said that Jesus, though very good, was sinful just like any other Jew.

Third, verse 9 speaks of God anointing of His Son; '*God, Your God, has anointed You ...*'. Anointing is a sign of blessing and approval, indeed even '*delight*', and if we want to understand God and Jesus then we should make not of these words of passion and commitment. God and the Son are inseparable! Now this is something that might well trouble a regular Jew!

The Son, Creation and authority

Verses 10 to 12 continue the theme of the inseparable nature of God and the Son, quoting Psalm 102:25-27. This Psalm speaks powerfully of God's authority to create as He wishes, but here in Hebrews it takes on some different characteristics.

Apparently, the Son (who is in this passage '*the Lord*') was present with God at Creation (1:10)! This confirms what we know from elsewhere in the New Testament, that early Christians believed that Jesus present at and took part in Creation (Matt 25:34, John 1:1f. Col 1:15). But more than this, the quote speaks of the right of the Son to change and to alter creation at will (1:11,12)! The picture of rolling up an old cloth and changing it for another is powerful, but it makes the point that God can change history if he wants to.

So while Jews wanted their historic understanding of God to stay the same forever, early Christians knew Jesus had changed, and could change everything forever, in a moment. It is a point we do not make so much today, but it must be made, because it is true.

A last, significant comment about angels

One of the favourite texts used by early Christians to demonstrate that the Old Testament points to Christ was Psalm 110:1, and this is now quoted here by Hebrews to wrap up this part of the text; '*sit next to me at my right hand while I put Your enemies under Your feet like a footstool*' (1:13). A detailed understanding of why this quote was used so much by early Christians is not the point here (see Matt 5:35, Luke 20:43, Acts 2:35,49, Hebrews 10:13). Hebrews regards it as possibly the best scriptural authority for the divinity of Jesus.

In comparison (1:14), Hebrews concludes that although the work of angels in serving God is wonderful, and they certainly help those who have received God's gift of salvation, they do not minister salvation and must not be thought to do so. It is all a matter of getting things in perspective; the Son of God is everything, and angels are but God's helpers.

Going Deeper

Gods and angels (1:6)

In verse 6, the Scripture quote '*Let all God's angel's worship ...*' comes from Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 97:7, except that in today's Bibles both Old Testament passages call other '*gods*' to worship the one true God, not '*angels*'!

So why has this confusion come about? Put simply, the common Greek version of the Old Testament used in the synagogues of Jesus' day (called the 'Septuagint') translates both these passages '*let all angels worship ...*' so Hebrews is perfectly correct in quoting the Old Testament as it was then known; it is just unfortunate that the translation is not what we now know to be correct, and it looks strange to us!

However, there is a reason for this translation oddity. The Jewish and Greek scholars who translated the Old Testament version known as the Septuagint were concerned to eliminate all

references to 'other gods', in their quest to defer to the 'one God' in whom the Jews believed. After all, the second commandment forbade even the belief or possibility of believing in any other 'gods' (Ex 20:4f.). They felt that Old Testament passages inferring the existence of other gods must either be heretical, or just references to other heavenly beings such as angels, so here in Psalm 2:7, they felt it best to translate 'gods' as 'angels'.

Of course, none of this matters to Hebrews as we read in now, because all this makes no difference to the meaning of the passage. Nevertheless, we are duty bound to explore the matter, because things are not what we might expect. If we really believe Scriptures to be God's Word, such things must be sorted out!

Application

Discipleship issues

The use of Hebrews

One of the impressive features of this passage is the way the author uses seven passages of Scripture to make what he considers to be a watertight case, telling Jews that Jesus, God's Son is not an angel. We may think his choice of Old Testament texts is a bit esoteric, and we know only one or two of them. Yet Jews of the day would have known them all, and to our shame, we who claim to be people of God's Book, often know it only vaguely, and sometimes with little understanding.

Today, when we try to make a case to people for the saving grace of God in Christ, we start from a different place than the author of this letter. Certainly, if those we are speaking to already know Scriptures, then it could be good to argue the matter from known texts. However, we are often faced with trying to explain God's love in Christ to people who have no knowledge of God's Word, and Hebrews will not be the best place to start!

This letter is best thought of as a vital insight into how the Old Testament connects with the New, bring out how God's action throughout history comes together in Christ to make salvation effective in any age. Now this may well be a complex matter to be argued by seasoned Christians, but the letter can also be helpful to people who come into Christian faith from a Jewish background, and also to those who are led by God to work hard at trying to understand all Scripture, and fathom His eternal purposes.

Seven passages of Scripture

Now then, I wonder where each one of us would go to select seven passages of Scripture which argue the case for the saving grace of God in Christ?, I would ask you to think about whether you could identify seven short passages which you feel will say everything which needs to be said about the work of Jesus Christ; his life, death, and resurrection. The exercise of doing this is an important way of checking out where we are with our beliefs, and whether we are changing in our understanding of it in any way. This could be good or bad, but the exercise enables us to keep an eye on ourselves, by the Lord's guidance!

Questions for groups

1. *In your group or privately, list what this passage tells us about angels, and what it tells us about the Son. What does God say to you through this passage?*

2. *Discuss / consider what would be the value, or perhaps the dangers, of keeping for personal use a set of 'proof texts' which you believe to be a basic explanation of your faith?*
 3. *To what extent does this passage explain to people today the relationship between the Father and the Son?*
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Final Prayer

Give us humility, Almighty Father, in the face of the great truths of the Gospel. May we handle them with dignity and care, and always remember that we are dependent upon You for everything, including our wisdom and understanding. Guide us in all truth, Almighty Father; AMEN