

Hebrews 1:1-2a

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[0:00] Please take your copy of God's Word and join me in Hebrews chapter 1. While you're getting there, just a little aside, a little over a week ago I turned 39, and I'm feeling that.

But then I realized that I got an extra short haircut. I sat down with the barber and said, do whatever you want to, which I think is the kind of attitude you should have when you're 39.

And this is the haircut he gave me. And then I got contacts, which I realize that many of you have never seen me without glasses. It's been a while.

The reason I got contacts is because I used to always wear contacts, but we had a baby, and we just paid him off. He's almost three, and I felt like I could afford contacts once again. I just, I want you all to know that I am not having a midlife crisis.

It just kind of all happened at the same time, so I'm okay. I can't guarantee what will happen next January, but at least for now.

[1:12] Our text for today is Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1, and the first half of verse 2. It's my intention, although we know how this goes, to preach a brief sermon this morning as an introduction to the book of Hebrews.

But this brief sermon, I hope, is going to be a brief sermon with a long introduction. So I just want you to hang tight on Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1 and 2, as I work to give you some background to the book of Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews is a gorgeous book of the Bible. It is extremely well written. And we'll talk a bit more about that soon. As such, it can also be a bit perplexing.

If you've ever taken up the task of studying the book of Hebrews, you know exactly what I mean. As we work through it in this next year, I'm sure I'll feel that more than I even do now.

I have a wonderful commentary by a man named William Lane, who's a contemporary, highly respected New Testament authority. And he wrote this in his introduction to his commentary.

[2:25] Hebrews is a delight for the person who loves puzzles. Its form is unusual. Its setting in life is uncertain. And its argument is unfamiliar.

It invites engagement in the task of defining the undefined. Undefined are the identity of the writer, his conceptual background, the character and location of the community addressed, the circumstances and date of composition, the nature of the crisis to which the document is a response, the literary genre, and the purpose and plan of the document as a response. Although these undefined issues continue to be addressed and debated vigorously, no real consensus has been reached.

It's encouraging because we begin a study of the book of Hebrews, is it not? There is probably no other book of the Bible of which more has been written and more opposition exists because we're laboring to define the undefined.

There's some things that are unclear about this book. So, Lane then goes on to do a very careful work to give us what I like to call the probabilities and the likelies.

[3:49] So, you'll hear me use those words quite a bit to say probably. So, we're going to talk about the writer of Hebrews because we don't actually know. We don't have a confidence in who wrote the book of Hebrews.

But we could say something like probably so-and-so or such-and-such, which I won't really do. But we may do that in some other areas, the probabilities and the likelies.

There is, though, one matter without contention. The theme of Hebrews is the supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ.

The supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ. Christ is greater than. You can fill in anything in that blank.

Christ is greater than. And the writer of Hebrews makes the case that Christ is greater than angels. Christ is greater than priests. And Christ is greater than any old covenant institution.

[4:52] Christ is supreme. And Christ is the final word. God has spoken by His Son.

We'll see in our text this morning. And we need now no new revelation. God spoke in Christ and in the New Testament that gives witness to Christ.

So, Jesus is also final in this way. The supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ.

Now, let's talk about some things we can know and maybe guess at about the author, about the audience, and about the occasion of this writing.

Now, the author is presumably within the circle of Paul. Pauline's circle, missionary band. You remember that Paul would travel around. He'd pick up a disciple and leave a disciple behind.

[5:58] They were constantly in this melee of joining and splitting apart. Although, with fair confidence, we can say that the author was not Paul.

So, we can see that he was part of the circle of Paul because in Hebrews 13, verse 23, he says, you should know that our brother, Timothy, has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon.

So, he often has the intention of coming back and joining this people, and he anticipates that Timothy will join him. And this is the Timothy we know as Paul's compatriot.

Right? However, we do not believe that he is Paul because the language of Hebrews constitutes the finest Greek in the New Testament.

Now, you might think, gosh, but Paul's writing. And yes, I agree with you on that. But even as we say that, we have to go, oh, but the writer of Hebrews. It is the finest Greek in the New Testament.

[7:05] Right? We don't really have a standard for that as American Christians. So, we have to look to scholars to help us with it. Again, William Lane says that the writer of Hebrews, Greek, is far superior to the Pauline standard.

And, it contains within it very distinctive imagery. Ship Adrift, chapter 2, verse 1. An anchor gripping the seabed, chapter 6, verse 19.

A double-edged sword, chapter 4, verse 12. And these are all images that are foreign to Pauline usage.

He never again, he never picks these things up, I shouldn't say again. He never does use any of this imagery. And it's wonderful imagery. If you stick with me for very long, you'll hear me use the same imagery because when I find one that works, I use it.

Right? And Paul doesn't do that in any of his letters. And so, this man, I think with fair certainty, we can say, was in the circle of Paul, but was not Paul.

[8:15] We also, with some fair certainty, can know that he was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian. That is to say, he was Jewish in his ethnic descent, but he was Hellenistic, it means he's a Greek-speaking Jew.

He had been part of dispersion and his family had been spread abroad and then had come down through. So, the Hellenistic Jews were those who were primarily, predominantly, Greek-speaking Jews.

Hebrews. And we can presume this because the book of Hebrews is full, it is, it is just chock full of Old Testament references, but they are exclusively from the Septuagint.

The Septuagint, the Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament. This would have been the Old Testament of the Hellenistic Jews. Much like we pick up our English copies of the text, they would have picked up a Greek copy, a translated Greek copy of the text.

It's called the Septuagint. And all of his citations are from that text. So, maybe he knew his audience so well, who were also most likely Hellenistic Jewish Christians, that he was using their text, but his familiarity with it probably means that it was also his.

[9:39] It was the text that he himself would have learned from. The book of Hebrews is a work of eloquent rhetoric.

Eloquent rhetoric. So, the author makes a case and then spends the letter defending that case. Because of that, I like Apollos as the writer.

I can't know this for sure, but I just like him. If I was going to say, I've got to pick one, that's my guy I'm going to pick. And this is because, and this is as complicated as my argument will be, and then I'll move on.

Luke writes in Acts 18, verse 24, Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, Hellenistic Jewish Christian, came to Ephesus.

He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. And this phrase eloquent man was used to describe somebody who had been trained in rhetoric.

[10:46] So, we know that Apollos was a Hellenistic Jew. He was a Christian. And he had been trained in rhetoric. And Luke then tells us, verse 24, that he was competent in the Scriptures.

What would have been Apollos' Scriptures? The Septuagint, that Greek translation of the Old Testament. That's it. That's why I like him for it. And not beyond.

So, I will not refer to Apollos as the author. I will just say the writer of Hebrews. Now, this eloquence that's here used to describe Apollos can most certainly be used to describe the writer of Hebrews is persuasive speech or writing.

I think we really quickly think of eloquence as beautiful speech. And it can be that. The book of Hebrews is that. But moreover, the word means persuasive writing.

Sometimes beautiful writing is persuasive. But that's the point, is that the author of Hebrews is an eloquent writer. Has made the case very carefully and very well for the supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ.

[12:06] It's very likely that the writer of Hebrews was a trained man. He'd been trained in this art of being persuasive with words.

But at the end of it all, he is unknown and obscure. We're just not sure. Let's talk a little bit about his audience.

Again, as I said, I believe that these were Hellenistic Jewish Christians because of the use of the Septuagint. They were Greek-speaking Christians of Jewish descent.

And these were Hellenistic Jewish Christians that had not seen Jesus but had heard the gospel and believed. This was a church that had been formed by those who had gone out to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 2, verse 1. The writer says, Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it.

[13:11] In other places in the New Testament, Paul will say things like what we have seen and heard. So it's most likely that they hadn't seen but they had heard.

They had heard this good news and believed it and became Christians as such. We also believe, with the kind of certainty that we can have, that this group of Christians had an Italian locust, location, the center.

They were somewhere in the realm of Italy. And there's some clues in the text that they were in an urban environment and so many will say likely they were somewhere in or around Rome.

Hebrews 13, 24, the writer says, Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. But we think he's referring to people who had been sent from them, who knew them, right, or sent from them to where he was are simply saying, oh hey, you're writing a letter back to them?

Please let them know we said hello. So it's likely this is where they're located but once again, unknown and obscure.

[14:25] We're not really sure. Now we know a little bit more about the occasion but not the specifics of it. Why is the writer of Hebrews writing?

Why is it that he thinks it's so important to develop such a beautiful work to convince them of the supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ? We know a bit about what was going on with them.

We believe that this was a first century letter likely written before A.D. 70 which is when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. And we believe this because he uses language speaking of the sacrificial system as if it's still happening.

He doesn't speak of it in past tense. He speaks of it in present tense. And in A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed that service stopped. It no longer existed at that point.

So Hebrews chapter 7 verse 27 and 28 he says he has no need speaking of Christ like those high priests to offer sacrifices daily first for his own sins and then for those of the people since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

[15:39] For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests but the word of the oath which came later than the law appoints a son who has been made perfect forever. So you see that present feeling to the text that he's writing there.

So it likely happened this letter was written before the temple was destroyed. It also likely happened we don't know but probably after the Christian persecution under the Roman emperor Claudius. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote in Life of the Deified Claudius quote there were riots in the Jewish quarter at the instigation of Crestus as a result Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. Modern historians widely agree that Crestus is a reference to Christ. It's a mishearing it's a Romanization of the word Christ.

And so this Roman historian tells us that there was a time we think around AD 49 when Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome.

[16:49] So that may place this group having already bore up under some persecution as we'll see in a moment sent out of Rome possibly living still in an urban environment on the edges of their suburban Christians.

They were a suffering group of Christians and they would suffer further. It's the purpose of the very writing of this letter.

It's a very pastoral work. Hebrews chapter 10 verse 32 and following but recall the former days possibly these days under Claudius when after you were enlightened you endured a hard struggle with sufferings sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction and sometimes being partners with those so treated for you had compassion on those in prison and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Part of his writing to convince them of the supremacy of Christ is to remind them that they also believed in the supremacy of Christ.

That they had suffered and in the process of suffering had lost property. Possibly they were driven out of Rome altogether.

[18:22] And then they would suffer further. The author writes Hebrews chapter 12 verse 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

It would seem there's a hint there that no one had yet been martyred for their faith but that this was coming their way. So we see there's a great deal of suffering that has happened to these Hellenistic Jewish Christians and we're going to see in our study of it that the temptation for them then was to simply go back to Judaism.

This had been accepted by Rome and there was no persecution for those who worshipped God in that way. It was Christ followers who were being persecuted. It was Christ followers as Jesus said who were suffering the way he suffered.

They were the ones who were filling up what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ. So there was this temptation to say oh but the old ways weren't too far off the mark were they?

And the writer of Hebrews says absolutely you cannot go back you know this Christ and he is supreme and he is final.

[19:42] So at the end though we don't know the specific circumstances verses and so it is still a bit unknown and obscure. Even the literary genre of this letter is a bit of a head scratcher.

I would suggest to you that it is written more as a sermon than as a letter. In fact it kind of starts out that way.

You see all of Paul's letters begin with a greeting. This does not. There is no greeting whatsoever. It just launches right in to the discourse. And it remains at this pace almost to the very end.

All the way through chapter 13 and verse 21. And then there seems to be this postscript added to it. Like, oh and by the way, goodbye. Seems to be the way that it's written.

So this man who's most likely trained in this rhetoric, unable to be with them and speak these words, wrote the words down. It's like a sermon manuscript.

[20:48] And I am so encouraged by that possibility because most of the preaching we have recorded in the Bible are very short presentations. Oh, I love that there's a 13 chapter one now.

It's pretty fantastic. It helps me preach longer than 45 minutes to make a case for such a thing. Again, there's a thesis, right? The supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ, which he lays out in verses one through four.

And then he goes on through the rest of the text to defend what he's saying in those first four verses. And then he ends with chapter 13 and verse 22, I appeal to you brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

So he even calls what he's written a word of exhortation. He uses the Bible to make his case. Very sermon-esque in that sense. He is appealing to what we now call the Old Testament, what was their scripture in their day.

[21:59] And in doing so, he exposes both the unity and the disunity of the old and new covenants. We don't, as New Testament Christians, disregard the Old Testament.

There's much continuity between the two. There's also discontinuity. And we should be careful and think through this very carefully. I think the book of Hebrews is going to serve us well as we work on that together.

William Lane again. Hebrews is impregnated with the Old Testament. The writer makes vital use of the Old Testament text in developing his persuasive sections as well as those that are more theologically oriented.

Every chapter is marked by explicit or implicit references to the biblical text. The writer's use of scripture expresses his conviction of the continuity between God's speaking and action under the Old and New Covenants, which had urgent implications for Israel and for the church.

He presupposes both an essential unity and a development between the old and new economies of redemption. A detailed knowledge of the Old Testament is indispensable for understanding what the writer of Hebrews is endeavoring to say.

[23:20] He assumes on the part of his audience a deep familiarity with our contents. I don't know that we could say of us that we have a deep familiarity with the Old Testament text.

Hebrews is going to help us to become more familiar with it. We're going to have to do some work together because the writer of Hebrews assumes a deep familiarity.

He knows his audience and he knows that he can both explicitly and implicitly quote the Old Testament text and just keep right on moving. This would have been read as a single sitting.

This was a sermon. And we're going to break it up over a year and a half. We've got some work out ahead of us to wring out all that the writer of Hebrews intends by God's good hand for us to understand.

So imagine for a moment with me, likely a small church, likely meeting in a home on the edge of Rome, having been kicked out of the city, being tired, beat down, beleaguered in their pursuit of Christ.

[24:40] They had already suffered much, feeling a temptation to walk away from this faith. Some of them we'll see in Hebrews chapter 10 had already stopped gathering together with the church.

They had just ceased doing it altogether. This is a tired group of Christians. And the word goes out. Hey, we received a letter from the author of Hebrews.

And so they're gathered together, eager expectation. What is the word that he's bringing to us? We want to hear. God seems to be silent.

What would you say to us from the text to help us at this time? And somebody stands up and opens the letter and says, long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son. Beloved, this is God's word to us.

[25:54] It was written for his glory and our good. We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

Christians. The writer of Hebrews, out of a great love for this little beat-down beleaguered church, employs his eloquence to speak of the eloquence of God.

Our God is a God who speaks. He is not silent. In Hebrews, he uses, our God uses, an unknown author writing to an unknown audience.

He uses an obscure author and an obscure church to make much of himself. Our God is a God who communicates and he communicates convincingly about himself that we would know him.

What an astounding reality. May we make much of him as we consider this little bit of text this morning. First, let's consider the eloquence of God in the past.

[27:18] The writer of Hebrews says, long ago, many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. God says, now I don't think the writer of Hebrews intends to leave this little point out, but I just want to add, not only is there a prophetic eloquence, God's people to hear from, but there's also a cosmic eloquence.

God spoke the world into existence and he designed it in such a way to say, look at me. Here's the creation and it exists to worship the Creator.

Psalms 19 verses 1 through 4, the heavens declare the glory of God, His greatness, His grandeur, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork.

Day to day it pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words whose voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tent for the Son. Our God speaks cosmically that we would know Him.

[28:39] There's a cosmic eloquence to our God. There's also this prophetic eloquence. At many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophet.

God spoke to Moses at Sinai in thunder and lightning and with a trumpeting voice. God spoke to Elijah at Horeb in a still small voice.

God spoke to Ezekiel in visions. God spoke to Daniel in dreams. God appeared to Abram in human form and to Jacob as an angel.

God spoke by the law, by warning, by exhortation, by type, and by parables. He spoke in many ways.

When the prophets prophesied, they used as many varied forms. Direct oracles, questions and answers, bizarre symbolic acts, sermons and mysterious signs.

[29:51] At many times and in many ways, God has been declaring to the world, I am. And He has been telling the world how it is that we can know Him.

And He has been doing this in the Old Testament and now on into the New progressively. He has been revealing Himself ever more across the text with now the great fulfillment, the great finality in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Many times and in many ways. And consider these Hellenistic Jewish Christians who had this Old Testament text that God had been silent for many years.

God did not have a prophet. The book was closed in a sense and then with Christ it reopened and God roars into the world again.

Know me by my Son. So let's consider the eloquence of God in the present. The writer of Hebrews says but in these last days He has spoken and there's this precious conjunction pay attention when you see the conjunction but in these last days God spoke in this way at time many times and in many ways but no more now God has spoken in his son God spoke he has spoken and he is now today speaking in his son I came across trying to search for the lyrics of an entirely different song the lyrics to a hymn that we should probably learn called

[31:57] God is spoken by the prophets by a man named George W Briggs please somebody tell me if you know him and we shouldn't sing a song I love the lyrics of this three verses he wrote God has spoken by the prophets spoken the unchanging word each from age to age proclaiming God the one the righteous Lord mid the world's despair and turmoil one firm anchor holding fast God eternal reigns forever God the first and God the last second verse God is spoken by Christ Jesus Christ the everlasting son brightness of the father's glory with the father ever one spoken by

the word incarnate God of God ere time was born light of light to earth descending Christ as

God in human form verse three God is speaking by the spirit speaking to our hearts again in the age long word declaring God's own message now as then through the rise and fall of nations one sure faith is standing fast God abides the word unchanging God the first and God the last good he's spoken to us in the present in these days by his son and now the spirit testifies through the scripture to his son we have such a treasure!

in it God and so lastly the eloquence of God in the person of Christ he has spoken in the last days by his son this could be translated in his son a familiar text to you may be John chapter one verses one and two and then I'll read verse fourteen in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God he was in the beginning with God in verse fourteen and the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth here in our English text the word translated word is the Greek word! It's a manifestation of it's a representation of the thing that it speaks to you could think also in terms of word being a good word to put in this place but you could also think in terms of communication or eloquence God has spoken by his son he has communicated to us eloquently by his son God's desire to make himself known he did most fully he communicated that to us in Jesus Christ and so I just want to reread John chapter 1 verse 1 and 2 and verse 14 and I'm going to replace the word word with the words the phrase eloquent communication

I just want you to hear it this way just Christ in the beginning was the eloquent!

[35:59] the eloquent! communication was with God and the eloquent communication was God he was in the beginning with God and the eloquent communication became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth see beloved we are created for worship this intrinsic it is built into us worship is inevitable you will worship something things you'll worship others we have a whole culture built on that people are famous for being famous you'll worship yourself all the various manifestations of who you think you should be or what you deserve you'll worship a job you'll worship a sports team you'll worship a political ideology worship is inevitable but worship that is not placed fully on

God himself the creator is called idolatry it's called idolatry the worship of lesser things and it is damning for us and it is heartbreaking to God we were created to be worshipers of God his creation singing his praise as the rest of creation does but we as humans marred by sin turn away from the creator God and turn to lesser worship there is no higher good for man than he would worship the one who created him God gives this to us in so many ways communicates it to us in so many ways because he loves us he knows the best thing for us is to orient our worship as it should be oriented fix it firmly on him Jonathan Edwards once wrote and this is on the front of your bulletin in very tiny font thank you Andy for making this fit he wrote

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature the enjoyment of him is our proper and this the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied all of the idols will fail us at some point God is the only one that will satisfy to go to heaven fully to enjoy God is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here better than fathers and mothers husbands wives or children or the company of any or all earthly friends these are but shadows but the enjoyment of God is the substance these are but scattered beings but God is the sun these are but streams but God is the fountain these are but drops but God is the ocean infinitely greater infinitely worthy of all of our worship

I want to read now John chapter 1 verse 18 no one has ever seen God the only God he's talking about the word there the eloquent!

communication Jesus Christ who is at the father's side he has made him known we can know God and we can worship him rightly because God has spoken to us in these last days by his son my hope for our study of Hebrews I hope that we would greater appreciate both the continuity and the discontinuity of the old and new covenants and therefore the old and new testaments that the scripture would become more precious to us because God has spoken to us by it it is this book that gives testimony to who Christ is we don't worship the Bible but we worship the Christ of the Bible it's a precious thing to those who follow

[40:45] Jesus secondly I hope that we would greater love the risen Christ that we would greater love the risen Christ that we would so love the risen Christ that we would worship him with greater fervor in the face of opposition that we would be a people who persevere to the end for the glory of God this is the goal of the writer of Hebrews he is saying to these people Christ is better he is supreme don't give up press on to the end there's a great glory that awaits you don't look for ease and comfort in this world look for Christ because in him God has spoken I want to conclude with a small anecdote I'm reading now to our boys the

Chronicles of Narnia we've read the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe and we've just finished reading Prince Caspian and yes in that order because it's the published order and it's the right way to read it I stand by that without apology and in Prince Caspian the Pevensies the children if you're not familiar with the story I'm going to totally confuse you there's four children and their siblings the Lion Witch the wardrobe they're drawn back to Narnia and it's many thousands of years on the throne and it's very far into the book it's a little over halfway into the book before the character in C.S.

Lewis' writing that represents Christ shows up and his name is Aslan and he is a lion right Lewis' writing is just fantastic my heart skips a beat when I see the name on the page it stands out on the page oh good Aslan is on this page this is fantastic wonderful writing Aslan doesn't show up until much later in the story and it's the youngest of the Pevensie children that notices him first she sees him the others don't see him finally she actually encounters him and I just want to read a little bit to you Lewis writes she rushed down so that she was kissing him and putting arms as far around his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane Aslan Aslan dear Aslan sobbed

Lucy at last the great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell half sitting and half lying between his front paws he bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue his warm breath came all around her she gazed up into the large wise face welcome child he said Aslan said Lucy you're bigger that is because you are older little one answered he not because you are said Lucy I am not but every year you grow you will find me bigger not good for a time she was so happy this is happy I promise I'm not having a midlife crisis for a time she was so happy that she did not want to speak but

Aslan spoke let's pray together