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THE SON'S SUPREMACY OVER ANGELS

Hebrews 1:4-14

By

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Hebrews Lesson 3

The Son's Supremacy over Angels Hebrews 1:4-14

A few years ago, the *Chicago Tribune* reported the story of a woman in New Mexico who was frying tortillas when she noticed that the skillet burns on one of her tortillas resembled the face of Jesus. She excitedly showed it to her husband and neighbors, who all agreed that the face etched on the tortilla truly bore a resemblance to Jesus.

The woman went to her priest to have the tortilla blessed. She testified that the tortilla had changed her life, and her husband agreed that she had become more peaceful, happy, and submissive since the tortilla had arrived. The priest was a bit reluctant, not being accustomed to blessing tortillas. But he agreed to do it.

The woman took the tortilla home, put it in a glass case with piles of cotton to make it look like it was floating on clouds, built a special altar for it, and opened the little shrine to visitors. Within a few months, more than 8,000 people came to the "Shrine of Jesus the Tortilla." All of them agreed that the face in the burn marks on the tortilla was the face of Jesus, except for one reporter, who said he thought it looked like former heavyweight boxing champion, Leon Spinks.

We may laugh at that story, but to be mistaken about the person of Jesus Christ is no laughing matter. As we've seen in the past two studies, the most crucial question for each person to answer correctly is Jesus' question to His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). If we have an inadequate or incorrect view of who Jesus is, we will not bow before Him and trust in Him as Savior and Lord. Thus our eternal destiny rides on correctly understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Since this is such a crucial matter, it is not surprising that Satan has launched repeated attacks against the person of Christ. Sometimes the attacks have denied Jesus' true humanity. At other times (far more frequently in our skeptical day), he undermines the true deity of Jesus. One of his most dangerous tricks is to lower

Jesus just “slightly” below the status of God. Thus the Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that Jesus is “a god,” and even “a mighty god,” but not God Almighty. They teach that Jesus was created as the archangel Michael and that through him, all other things in the universe were created. Thus they hold to a relatively high view of Jesus, but they deny His full deity. But as Bishop Moule once said, “A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end.”

Satan has used the same tricks to deceive people for centuries. After one trick gets old, he puts it back into his bag and saves it to bring it out later when everyone has forgotten it. Holding to wrong views of angels in relation to Jesus Christ is such a trick. The Jewish Christians to whom our author was writing were tempted by teaching that elevated angels to a position that rivaled or even surpassed that of Jesus Christ Himself.

We know that Paul warned the Colossian church about the early Gnostic heresy that included angel worship (Col. 2:18). It is debatable whether these views were in our author’s mind when he wrote this section (Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 52). There was also a Jewish Dead Sea Sect, which believed in a dual messiah, both of whom would be subject to the archangel Michael (P. Hughes, pp. 14, 53). These views may have infiltrated this Jewish church.

Also, the Jews at this time had begun to embellish the Old Testament teaching on angels (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews* [Moody Press], pp. 24-25). The Bible says that the Old Testament Law was ordained through angels (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19), and it shows that they are impressive and important beings. So if our author was going to convince his readers that Jesus is supreme over Judaism, he had to show how He was not only supreme over Moses, but also over the angels. He had to show them that Jesus’ becoming a man did not place Him beneath the angels in terms of His essential nature as eternal God. In our text he shows (as other Scriptures teach, cf. Col. 1:16) that Jesus created the angels. His overall point here is that...

Jesus’ superiority to the angels rests on the fact
that He is God.

The author uses the Old Testament to prove his point, since his readers accepted its authority. He uses seven passages, all taken from the Septuagint (LXX = the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). We may group his arguments under five headings:

1. Jesus is superior to the angels because He is uniquely the Son of God (1:4-5).

The author says that Jesus has “become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they” (1:4). For the Hebrews, the name signified “the essential character of a person in himself and in his work” (P. Hughes, p. 50). In the sense of His eternal existence and His essential nature, Jesus *always* had a more excellent name than the angels.

But the statement here about His *having become* as much better than the angels refers to what Jesus accomplished through His incarnation, death on the cross for our sins, resurrection, and ascension into glory again. The name that is especially in view here is, “Son of God.” While the angels were sometimes referred to in the plural as “sons of God” (Job 1:6), and while believers are called “sons of God” (John 1:12), no single angel or believer was ever referred to as “*the* Son of God.” That title uniquely belongs to Jesus and signifies His deity, as the Jews themselves knew (John 5:18).

The author backs up the claim to Jesus’ more excellent name by quoting the well known messianic Psalm 2:7, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.” In that psalm, the verse quoted here is preceded by the statement, “I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord.” Because that decree took place in eternity, before creation, the church has affirmed the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ and has said that He is “eternally begotten” by the Father, not made (“The Nicene Creed”). In other words, since God exists in eternity, begetting is not an event that took place in time. Rather, it describes an eternal relationship between the first and second members of the Godhead. They always have and always will relate to one another as Father and Son. Like a human father and son, God the Father and Jesus the Son share the same essential nature, which is the main point. Unlike a human father and son, God the Father did not pre-date the existence of God the Son, because Jesus shares His nature as eternal God (John 1:1-3).

But, in our text, the author omits the statement about the decree because, in conjunction with verse 4, his focus is more on the incarnational aspects of Jesus as the Son of God, than on the eternal aspects of that truth. Some relate "today" to Jesus' baptism, when the Father declared, "This is My beloved Son." Others relate it to Jesus' resurrection, which declared Him to be the Son of God with power (Rom. 1:4). Paul preached that Jesus' resurrection fulfilled Psalm 2:7, proving Him to be God's Son (Acts 13:33).

F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 13) relates "today" to the exaltation and enthronement of Christ, which is an emphasis throughout Hebrews. He explains that this does not in any way question the eternal Sonship of Christ. Rather, he says, "He who was the Son of God from everlasting entered into the full exercise of all the prerogatives implied by His Sonship when, after His suffering had proved the completeness of His obedience, He was raised to the Father's right hand" (*ibid.*).

The second quotation to back up Jesus as God's unique Son comes from 2 Samuel 7:14, where God promised David that He will be a Father to David's son, and "He shall be a Son to Me." That promise had an initial fulfillment in Solomon, who built the Temple, but its final fulfillment was in David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As the angel told Mary (Luke 1:32, 33), "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

Thus the author's first point is that Jesus is greater than the angels because of His unique position as the Son of God, as seen in two Old Testament prophecies. To demote Him to the level of the angels, who are mere messengers (1:14), would be blasphemy!

2. Jesus is superior to the angels because they worship and serve Him (1:6-7).

The overall point of these verses is clear, that the angels worship and serve Jesus, not vice versa. But there are several details that require explanation.

First, the author refers to Jesus as God's *firstborn*. To our minds, firstborn sounds like a chronological concept, that someone

was born first in time in a family. But for the Hebrews, firstborn signified position, not time. The oldest son was *usually*, but not always, the heir to the father's estate. As such, he was in a position of privilege and preeminence over his brothers. The title is used in Psalm 89:27, where God says of David, "I shall also make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." David was not the firstborn son of Jesse. In fact, he was the youngest son. But he was the most prestigious and preeminent son, because God had chosen him above his brothers.

If "firstborn" meant what the Jehovah's Witnesses say it means, that Jesus was the first one created, then why would God command the angels to worship Jesus? To worship anyone less than God Himself would be blasphemy. Surely God would not command such a thing!

There are two other interpretive issues in verse 6. The first has to do with the adverb "again." Should it go at the front of the sentence, and thus mark the following quotation as yet another Scripture that sets forth the exalted position of Christ? Or, should it be connected with the verb "brings" (as in the NASB), thus pointing not to the first coming of Christ, but to His second coming? While some reputable scholars argue for the second view, the majority favor the first view (P. Hughes, p. 58). It is not a major issue, in that all who believe in Jesus would agree that the angels worshiped Him when He came to earth the first time (Luke 2:13-14) and that they will worship Him when He comes again (Rev. 5:11-12).

The other issue in verse 6 is the source of the quote. It is similar, but not exact, to Psalm 97:7 [96:7] in the LXX. But it is verbatim from the LXX of Deuteronomy 32:43. The problem is, this line in the LXX is not in the Hebrew Bible. But it has been found in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and so perhaps was original.

The main point of verse 7 is that the angels belong to Jesus ("His angels") and that they obey His commands. Thus they are His servants, and not vice versa. Also, the terms "winds" and "fire" point to the transitory, changing nature of their service, as contrasted with the eternal sovereignty and glory of Christ, as portrayed in verse 8. The point is that Jesus is superior to the angels because they worship and serve Him.

3. Jesus is superior to the angels because He is the God who reigns eternally (1:8-9).

Note the contrast between the angels (1:6-7) and the Son (1:8). Here the author quotes Psalm 45:6-7. This psalm celebrated a royal wedding, perhaps of King Solomon or one of David's other descendants (Bruce, p. 19), addressing the king as God. F. F. Bruce (*ibid.*) explains that this is not the only place in the Old Testament to use such hyperbolic language (see Isa. 9:6; Jer. 23:5-6). Some would translate it as, "God is your throne," but other than theological bias, there is no reason to do so. If someone objects to the Son being addressed as God in verse 8, they still have to contend with verse 10, where He is addressed as the Lord and Creator.

The author's clear point is that, as God, Jesus reigns forever and ever. His rule is marked by the love of righteousness and the hatred of lawlessness. These qualities marked Jesus' earthly life and ministry, and they will supremely mark His coming kingdom, when He rules the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). The oil of gladness refers to His triumph over sin and death and His return to His rightful glory. The "companions" may refer to angels, but more likely refers to the "many sons" that He brings to glory through His suffering and resurrection (2:10, 11). Note also that righteousness and joy always go together. It is Satan's lie that righteousness is boring! In God's holy presence are fullness of joy and pleasures forever (Ps. 16:11).

Thus Jesus is superior to the angels because He is uniquely the Son of God; because they worship and serve Him; and, because He is the God who reigns eternally.

4. Jesus is superior to the angels because He is the eternal Creator of heaven and earth (1:10-12).

This sixth quotation is taken from Psalm 102:25-27, which begins, "A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord." The psalmist has gone through some difficult trials, which he describes in strong poetic language in the first part of the psalm. He feels as if he is about to be taken away in the midst of his days. But in his weakness and desperation, he considers the eternity, power, and unchangeableness of the Lord as Creator. He says that even though heaven and earth will perish,

God remains. Like a man throws away old clothes, God will throw away the universe, but He remains the same, and His years will never come to an end.

The remarkable thing about the quote is that in the psalm, these verses clearly describe Almighty God, and yet the author of Hebrews applies them directly to Jesus. Oscar Cullman observed, "We should generally give much more consideration to the by no means self-evident fact that after the death of Jesus the first Christians without hesitation transferred to him what the Old Testament says about God" (in P. Hughes, p. 68).

To this Jewish church, these words were not just a theological statement about Jesus' superiority to the angels. They were also meant to be a source of great comfort in the midst of trials. The same eternal Creator who sustained the psalmist in the midst of his calamity would sustain them in the midst of their troubles. And that eternal Creator is none other than their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (13:8). Even if you are taken away in the midst of your days, you have a lasting refuge in the eternal, unchanging Lord Jesus Christ!

5. Jesus is superior to the angels because He sits at God's right hand, whereas they are sent out to serve the saints (1:13-14).

Verse 13 introduces the seventh quote with a rhetorical question: "But to which of the angels has He ever said, 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet?'" The implied answer is, None! The quote comes from Psalm 110:1, which is cited in the New Testament more often than any other Old Testament verse (14 times). Jesus used these verses to stump the Pharisees. He asked them, "Whose son is the Messiah?" They correctly answered, "The son of David." Then Jesus asked, "Then how does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,'" and quoted this verse. His clinching question was, "If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his son?" (Matt. 22:42-45).

As we saw in verse 3, Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of the Majesty on high affirms His supreme authority and lordship. No created being could occupy that place. In the Bible, when men encountered angels, they often fell before them in fear and obeisance,

but invariably the angel did not accept such worship, claiming, "I am a fellow servant... worship God" (Rev. 19:10). But even when He was on this earth with His glory veiled, Jesus accepted and encouraged those who fell before Him in worship (Luke 5:8-10; John 9:35-39; 20:26-29). How much more should we worship Him who now sits on the throne of God! How blasphemous it is of the Jehovah's Witnesses to say that Jesus is a created being, an angel! As verse 14 states, the angels are "ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation." To mistake Jesus for an angel is to mix up the Lord with His servants!

The descriptions of angels in the Bible show that they are impressive beings. In Genesis, two angels rescued Lot and his family from Sodom and then called down fire and brimstone from heaven on the wicked cities. On another occasion, an angel struck down 70,000 in Israel on account of David's sin (2 Sam. 24:15-17). One angel went out into the camp of Sennacherib's army and struck down 185,000 soldiers in a night (Isa. 37:36). An angel shut the lions' mouths so that Daniel was kept safe, and an angel revealed to Daniel the amazing prophecies of things to come. When Daniel saw the angel, it wiped out his strength and took his breath away (Dan. 6:22; 9:20-27; 10:17). An angel delivered Peter from prison and then struck the proud Herod Agrippa, so that he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:3-23).

The Bible teaches that angels guard believers (2 Kings 6:15-18; Ps. 91:11-12; Matt. 18:10) and look in on our church services (1 Cor. 11:10), although we are not able to see them. And yet, as great and powerful as angels are, they are just servants who stand before Him who sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high! Worship Him alone, because He is Almighty God!

Conclusion

I want to encourage you to apply this message in two ways. First, *if anyone tries to persuade you that Jesus is not fully God, recognize it as a temptation that comes straight from Satan!* He is currently deceiving a billion people worldwide with the lie that Jesus was a great prophet, but that He is not God (Islam). Even in our country, millions think that Jesus was a good man and a great moral teacher, but they do not bow before Him as Savior and Lord. All of these lies lead people into hell. If He was not God in human flesh, His sacrifice could

not atone for our sins. He is the only way for us to know God and have our sins forgiven. Hold firmly to His absolute deity!

Second, I want to challenge all of you to do something that may be outside your comfort zone: *Buy and read a good systematic theology to ground yourself in the doctrines of our faith.* It is to our shame that most Jehovah's Witnesses can run circles around evangelical Christians when it comes to knowing their Bibles. Granted, they do not know their Bibles correctly, and they pervert the truth. But could you refute them from your Bible?

We live in a day that despises doctrine and opts for experiences and feelings. But if our experiences are not resting on solid truth, they are planted in air! Our lives must be founded on the truths of God's Word. The practical sections of Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews all follow chapters establishing solid doctrine

I recommend Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan] or the abridged edition, *Bible Doctrine*. There is a good one-volume abridged version of Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* [Baker]. Or, although it is not a systematic theology, read Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster] (get the version edited by John McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles). As Calvin himself believed, the aim of theology is not head knowledge, but godliness that stems from knowing God (see McNeill's introduction, pp. li, lii). Just five pages a day will get you through the whole thing in less than a year. Ask God to deepen your knowledge of Him and our exalted, divine Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it absolutely essential to the Christian faith to affirm the full deity of Jesus Christ?
2. A Jehovah's Witness tells you that "firstborn" means that Jesus is not eternal, but created. What Scriptures would you use to refute him?
3. Does God still use angels to minister to His saints? Are most "angel encounters" today genuine or counterfeit? How can we evaluate such encounters?
4. Why must sound doctrine be the basis of our Christian experience? How can we counter the anti-doctrinal bias of our day?

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