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THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

Hebrews 1:2b-3

By

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Hebrews Lesson 2

The Supremacy of the Son Hebrews 1:2b-3

How many of you have ever visited the Canadian Rockies, near Banff and Lake Louise? If you have been there, you know that it is some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. Marla and I have visited there twice, and both times we were awestruck by the magnificent beauty of the glacier-capped mountains and turquoise lakes. Each evening that we camped at Lake Louise, we drove over to a viewpoint to watch the hour-long sunset that began around 9 p.m. It is difficult *not* to feel close to God in a place like that, as you drink in the handiwork of His creation!

If gazing on beautiful scenery causes us to rejoice in our glorious Creator, then gazing on the Lord Jesus Christ should cause us to worship even more so. Creation reveals God's "invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20). But God's Son is "the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3).

My verbal description of the beauty of the Canadian Rockies is woefully inadequate. At least once in your life, I hope that you can go there and drink in what God has made, because you have to experience it personally to appreciate it. Likewise, my feeble attempts today to describe to you the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ are going to be deficient. I hope that you will not only listen to what I say, but also that you will take the time personally to visit these verses over and over again, asking God to reveal more of the beauty of His Son to your soul!

Last week (also, see my message, "The Crucial Question," on Luke 9:18-22, October 2, 1999) I said that the most crucial question for every person to answer is Jesus' question to the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" *Everything* hangs on the correct answer to that question! If you are mistaken about Jesus' identity, you will not bow before Him as Lord and Savior, and you will spend eternity in hell. That is why the cults, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, are so destructive. They mislead and deceive people about the person of Jesus Christ.

If you answer that question correctly, you will recognize that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, the only One who can save you from your sins. You will fall down before Him in adoration and praise. You will yield yourself totally to Him in love and live to glorify Him. You will spend eternity with Him, singing with all of the angels and saints, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain..." (Rev. 5:12). As Jesus told Peter after he answered that question, the correct answer cannot come from any human source. The Father in heaven must reveal it to you (Matt. 16:17). So let's pause and ask God to reveal the supremacy of His Son to our souls.

Our text continues the opening sentence of Hebrews. The author is showing that Jesus Christ is God's supreme and final revelation to us. All of the Old Testament prophets pointed ahead to Christ. The New Testament reveals that God's eternal purpose is to sum up all things in Christ (see Eph. 1:10-12).

Now the author unfolds seven brief, but profoundly packed phrases that reveal the supremacy of God's Son. Together they reveal the threefold office of Christ as God's *Prophet*, revealing His final word; God's *Priest*, who made purification for our sins; and God's *King*, who is enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty on high. The arrangement of these seven statements may be chiasmic, with the first and last statements speaking of the Son in His incarnation and the clauses in between speaking of the Son in His eternal existence (Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 49).

Although there is some deep theology here about the relationship between the Father and the Son, I was a bit surprised to find John Calvin emphasize that the point of the author is not theological, but practical: "His purpose was really to build up our faith, so that we may learn that God is made known to us in no other way than in Christ: for as to the essence of God, so immense is the brightness that it dazzles our eyes, except it shines on us in Christ" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker reprint], on Hebrews 1:3, pp. 35-36). The practical import of our text is:

Since God's Son is supreme over all, we must bow before
Him as the Sovereign Lord.

Let's consider the seven phrases that reveal His supremacy:

1. Jesus is supreme as the heir of all things.

As the Son, Jesus is also the heir. The early church fathers and the medieval writers associated this statement with Psalm 2:8, where the Father says to the Son, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession" (P. Hughes, p. 39). Thus it speaks of Christ in His role as Redeemer and as Lord over the nations in His kingdom. Leon Morris (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelain [Zondervan], 12:13) says that *heir of all things* "is a title of dignity and shows that Christ has the supreme place in all the mighty universe. His exaltation to the highest place in heaven after his work on earth was done did not mark some new dignity but his reentry into his right place (cf. Phil. 2:6-11)."

Calvin (p. 34) says that the word heir is ascribed to Christ in His humanity "for this purpose, that he might restore to us what we had lost in Adam." Calvin applies this truth by saying, "It hence follows that we must be very miserable and destitute of all good things except he supplies us with his treasures" (p. 33). As Paul proclaims, if we are in Christ as His children, we are heirs with Him (Rom. 8:15-18; Gal. 4:4-7). All that is His is ours! We will someday share His glory throughout eternity!

But you only share in Christ's inheritance if you are in Him through faith. If you have not applied the purification of sins that He obtained to your sinful heart by faith, then you are not His child and you do not share in His inheritance. Make sure that your trust is in Him alone!

But many of His children are only vaguely aware of their inheritance. Thus, we should pray for one another and for ourselves, that "the Father of glory may give to [us] a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him," that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened, "so that [we] will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18).

2. Jesus is supreme as the creator of all things.

"Through whom also He made the world." *World* is literally *ages* in the Greek text. Here it refers to "the whole created universe of space and time" (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the He-*

brews [Eerdmans], p. 4). It means that Jesus is Lord over time and all that has been created in time, because He created it. As John 1:3 asserts, "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." Or, as Paul puts it (Rom. 11:36), "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

These affirmations show that Jesus Christ is eternal God, one with the Father before time began. Athanasius, who contended against the Arian heresy (whose modern counterpart is the Jehovah's Witnesses), said that when the sacred writers affirmed that Jesus created the world, "they proclaim the eternal and everlasting being of the Son and thereby designate him as God" (in P. Hughes, p. 40). The Jehovah's Witnesses latch onto Colossians 1:15, where Paul refers to Jesus as God's "firstborn." They say that the term means that Jesus was created, not eternal. But they fail to notice that verse 16 explains ("For") the term in verse 15: "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him" (Col. 1:16). "Firstborn" is not a chronological term, but has to do with the legal rights of authority and inheritance. The fact that the Father created all things through Jesus shows that Jesus is Almighty God!

Think of the intricacies of the atom, or the mysteries of human and animal DNA, which modern science only barely understands. It all reflects amazing design, and that design is often interdependent, so that you can't have only part of it. The parts depend on the design of other parts that work in harmony. Or, consider the immensity of the universe. Our galaxy is just an average-sized galaxy that takes 100,000 light years to cross (600 trillion miles). Modern telescopes can see about 100,000 million galaxies, with each galaxy containing 100,000 million stars. The average distance between these galaxies is three million light years. Some estimate that the most distant galaxy is about eight billion light years away! (These figures are in R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* [Crossway Books], 1:27, citing Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* [Bantam], pp. 37-39.) Jesus spoke all of this into existence out of nothing (Heb. 11:3; Gen. 1:1)!

3. Jesus is supreme as the radiance of the Father's glory.

The early church fathers often used this verse to refute the heretics, especially the Arians. Theodoret says that the Arians rejected Hebrews from the canon because of this text (P. Hughes, p. 41). This statement and the next, that Jesus is “the exact representation of His nature,” reflect both the oneness of the Son with the Father and yet His distinctness from the Father. Thus the two phrases fit together and balance each other (P. Hughes, *ibid.*).

The ascription of Jesus as “the radiance of His glory” pictures the rays of the sun displaying its brilliance. Jesus, of course, reflects the Father’s glory, but also possesses an inherent glory of His own, as seen on the Mount of Transfiguration and by John in Revelation 1. Athanasius asks, “Who does not see that the brightness cannot be separated from the light, but that it is by nature proper to it and co-existent with it, and is not produced after it?” Ambrose explains, “Where there is light there is radiance, and where there is radiance there is also light; and thus we cannot have a light without radiance nor radiance without light, because both the light is in the radiance and the radiance in the light” (both citations in P. Hughes, p. 42).

In other words, “the Son is co-eternal with the Father, just as brightness is coeval with the sun.... The Son exists essentially in the Father and the Father in the Son” (Herveus, in P. Hughes, p. 43). The reason it is important to affirm this, as Athanasius saw, is “that a false doctrine of the person of Christ must inevitably result in a false doctrine of the work of Christ and consequently undermine the whole system of the gospel” (P. Hughes, *ibid.*).

4. Jesus is supreme as the exact representation of the Father’s nature.

The Greek word translated *exact representation* refers to the engraved character or impression made by a die or a seal as, for example, on a coin. The word translated *nature* “denotes the very essence of God. The principal idea intended is that of exact correspondence. This correspondence involves not only an identity of the essence of the son with that of the Father, but more particularly a true and trustworthy revelation or representation of the Father by the Son” (P. Hughes, *ibid.*). As Jesus told Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). To know God, we must know Him as He is revealed to us by the Son (Luke 10:22).

While these terms express some deep theology concerning the nature of the Trinity, and thus were rightly used by the church fathers to defend the faith against destructive heresies, we should not forget Calvin's point, that these terms teach that we can only know God through Christ. We never could have understood the God "who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16), unless Jesus had come to earth as a man to reveal Him.

The story is told of a devout Hindu man who was confronted with the claims of Christ. But he could not grasp the concept that God had taken on human flesh in the person of Jesus. This Hindu regarded all of life, including insects, as sacred. One day as he walked in a field wrestling with the concept of God becoming man, he came upon an anthill with thousands of ants. This anthill was in the path of a farmer plowing the field.

Gripped with a concern that you or I would feel for hundreds of people trapped in a burning building, he wanted to warn them of their impending destruction. But, how? He could shout to them, but they would not hear. He could write in the sand, but they would not understand. How could he communicate with them? Then it dawned on him: if he only could become an ant, he could warn them before it was too late. Now he understood the Christian message, that God became a man in Jesus to communicate to us His message of salvation (*Teacher's Manual for the Ten Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity* [Campus Crusade for Christ], pp. 18-19).

Thus we've seen that Jesus is supreme as the *heir* of all things; as the *creator* of all things; as the *radiance* of the Father's glory; and, as the *exact representation* of His nature. Next,

5. Jesus is supreme as the sustainer of all things by the word of His power.

This phrase refers to Christ's "carrying forward and onward of all things to the predestined consummation which is also implicit in their beginning" (P. Hughes, p. 45). It refers to His sustaining providence and governance of all things (*ibid.*). "It does not simply mean 'sustain,' but has the sense of active, purposeful control..." (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], p. 316). The use of the present participle in our text indicates that Jesus is

continually upholding all things in the universe by His word of power (*ibid.*). If He ceased from doing this, the universe would disintegrate! Paul states the same truth when he says, “in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17).

This refutes the idea of Deism, that God created all things, but then bowed out and let everything run on its own. Scripture shows that there is not a single atom in the universe that acts apart from God’s providential governance. Every raindrop, snowflake, gust of wind, and lightning bolt obey God’s command (Ps. 148:8). He directs everything from the roll of the dice (Prov. 16:33) to the rise and fall of nations (Job 12:23). He determines in advance the number of days that each of us will live (Ps. 139:16). Our text says that Jesus exercises this immense power simply by speaking, or as Calvin says (p. 38), “with a nod.” This means that there is no such thing as random chance or luck. We are totally dependent on God, and we must receive all things as coming from Him according to His purpose for our good (Gen. 50:20; Job 2:10; Rom. 8:28).

6. Jesus is supreme as the One who made purification for our sins.

The juxtaposition of Christ’s upholding all things by the word of His power and the next phrase, “when He had made purification of sins,” is stunning! The almighty Lord who could simply “let go” and sinners would disintegrate, instead left the glory of heaven, took on the form of a servant, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross, to purify us from our sins (Phil. 2:5-11)! “Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me” (Charles Wesley)!

The Greek aorist tense indicates that Jesus accomplished purification for sins once and for all. The author will expound on this further in chapter 10. Jesus did not just make purification of sins *possible*, but *effectual* through His death on the cross (see 10:10, 12, 14, 18). What I am about to say here is controversial, but I ask you to consider it and ask God for understanding. I believe that on the cross, Jesus did not actually make purification of sins for all people. If He did, all would be purified, and everyone would go to heaven. Rather, He actually secured purification of sins for all that the Father had given to Him (John 6:38-39).

C. H. Spurgeon put it this way when he preached on this text (“Depths and Heights,” [Ages Software], sermon 2635, p. 521):

I tremble when I hear some people talk about the disappointed Christ,— or about his having died at a peradventure, to accomplish he knew not what,— dying for something which the will of man might give him if it would, but it might possibly be denied him. I buy nothing on such terms as that, I expect to have what I purchase; and Christ will have what he bought with his own blood; especially as he lives again to claim his purchase.

It is of great comfort to know that our purification is secure because Christ paid for us and He will get what He paid for!

7. Jesus is supreme as the One who sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Christ's sitting signifies the *completion of the work of redemption*. In the Old Testament, the priests always stood in the Holy of Holies when making atonement. But Jesus offered Himself for our sins once for all and took His seat on high. His sitting at the right hand of the Majesty on high (a reverent term for God) also signifies His being in *the place of highest honor*. This is not a literal place, in that God, who is Spirit, does not have a right hand or left. But it uses human language to convey that there is no higher designation possible! Sitting at the right hand of God also pictures Jesus as the *Sovereign Ruler* of the universe (1:8, 13).

While this phrase affirms Jesus' deity (how could any created being sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high without being consumed?), it also indicates a degree of subordination of the Son to the Father (P. Hughes, p. 48). Though equal with God in His essential being, the Son voluntarily submits to the Father to carry out the divine purpose (1 Cor. 15:24-28). Paul uses this order in the Godhead to argue for the leadership of men over women in the local church (1 Cor. 11:3-16). Men and women are equal in their being and as heirs with Christ, but there is to be an order of headship and submission to reflect the image of God.

Conclusion

When I went to Coast Guard Boot Camp, we were pretty much on our own for the first weekend, which was a holiday. But

in our barracks was the office of the most ill-named man I have ever met, Mr. Angel. This man's reputation went before him and grew bigger up to the first moment that he strode into the barracks and sent terror into every heart. We had heard that he was meanness personified. For recreation, he liked to go into bars and pick fights. A sign on his door said that before he was through with you, you would know his shoe size from intimate contact with your behind. He reputedly marched one company off the end of a pier into the water to see if they would obey his commands.

So when Mr. Angel stomped into our barracks and barked, "On your feet, squirrels!" (plus a few unrepeatable expletives), there was not a single man who stayed on his bunk and said, "I don't feel like getting on my feet just now!" The point is, because Mr. Angel had authority to do you great bodily harm, you obeyed his every command! Whatever Mr. Angel commanded, we did with great haste!

I hope that you see that this glorious description of our Lord Jesus Christ is not just interesting theology, but that it applies practically to every one of us. If Jesus Christ is who the writer here proclaims Him to be, then we all must bow before Him in worship and obey His every claim on our lives. To brazenly disobey the Sovereign, Almighty Creator and Lord of the universe would be utterly arrogant and stupid! God's Son is supreme over all. We must live to obey Him completely!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is our understanding of who Jesus is so vitally important?
2. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that Jesus is the highest created being. Can a person believe this and be saved? Why not?
3. How can we know that the claims of Christ are genuine and not made up later by His followers?
4. Can any for whom Jesus made purification of sins reject Him and be lost? Defend biblically.

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