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I

THE REVELATION OF GOD IN HIS SON

1:1—2:18

A. CHRIST THE CLIMAX OF REVELATION, 1:1-3

THE STARTING POINT of the Epistle to the Hebrews reaches the core of Christian affirmation—God has spoken! A succession of inspired writers from both Old and New Testaments bear witness to the fact that God has raised up spokesmen to declare His truth amid the errors to which fallen man is prone. If sinful man is to find his way back to God, only God Himself can reveal the way.

Theologians and philosophers reason out the possibility and the probability of revelation: God is all-powerful; therefore He can reveal Himself to men; He is all-loving; therefore He might be expected to do so. The Bible claims to be such a revelation.

Yet the Epistle to the Hebrews does not begin with argument. It states a truth which its readers will presume to be a basic presupposition: God has spoken!

The early church was composed of converts who had recently come from Judaism. Christianity was not con-

sidered to be a new religion, but the fulfillment of the hopes and promises of the old. A Christian was one who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah of Israel. This conviction produced a life guided by the principle of faith in Him and willingness to do His will.

These converts brought their Bibles with them—the Torah, or Old Testament as it is known to us. The early Hebrew Christians and the Gentiles who subsequently entered the church declared that God had truly spoken “to the fathers by the prophets” (1:1) of the Old Testament.

As Christians, however, they noted a difference between the Old Testament revelation and its fulfillment in Christ. The revelation in times past took place “at sundry times” and “in divers manners.” From Moses to Malachi was a period of about one thousand years. Two millennia passed from Abraham to Christ. Israel had a varied history, including a seminomadic period, one of bondage in Egypt, one of tribal anarchy (the Judges), and a centralized monarchy (under David and Solomon). After the division of the kingdom we read of exile (in Assyria and Babylonia), after which a remnant returned to Jerusalem and its immediate environs. Throughout these “sundry times” we can trace a succession of prophetic spokesmen, men such as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Some of them wrote books. Others had their ministries recorded in the historical books of the Old Testament. Their world included Ur of the Chaldees, Haran, Shechem, Jerusalem, Egypt, and Babylon—the entire area of the “Fertile Crescent.” Days of apostasy and days of spir-

itual triumph saw God's messengers declaring His will to Israel. Moses in the wilderness, Elijah on Mount Carmel, and Ezekiel in Babylon were representative of the "sundry times" of Old Testament revelation.

As God is infinite in His being, so He has many means through which His revelation could be mediated. God spoke through the dreams of a Joseph and a Daniel. Moses and Abraham saw Him "face to face." By the River Chebar, Ezekiel received apocalyptic visions. Unnamed writers were led of the Spirit to take extracts from the chronicles of Israelite and Judean kings or older epic literature such as the Book of the Wars of the Lord, or the Book of Jasher (Num. 21:14; Josh. 10:13; II Sam. 1:18). Law, history, poetry, prophecy, wisdom literature, sacred song and psalm—the Old Testament contains a library of books covering a variety of themes and forms. Hebrews declares that God used "divers manners" in revealing Himself to the fathers.

Looking to the Old Testament as the preparatory revelation of God, the Christian sees the final revelation in Christ. In contrast to the "sundry times" of the Old Testament, the author of Hebrews speaks of God's final revelation as made "in these last days" (1:2). The "last days" are the days prophesied in Old Testament Scripture. Jewish teachers frequently mentioned "the age to come" as the Messianic Age, the time when history finds its culmination in the appearance of the long awaited Messiah. The Epistle to the Hebrews asserts that the Messianic Age has come, the Messiah has appeared. Jesus is God's last word, and beyond Him nothing need be sought.

Prophets faithfully declared the Word of God, but

Jesus was God incarnate. The Son is creator, revealer, and goal of the historical processes. He is the "heir of all things," because He is the Son of the Father to whom all things ultimately belong. The very kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ.

The Son is declared to be the "brightness" (1:3) of the glory of God. God's essential glory cannot be known to man. John writes, "No man hath seen God at any time." He hastens to add, however, "the only begotten son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18). Christ, the Son, is the visible outshining of God's glory. The invisible God can be seen and known in the Person of His Son. It was in the Person of the Son that God appeared to the patriarchs of Israel.

Mankind exhibits a constant desire to "see" God. The heathen bowing before his idol is deluded into thinking that his is a real "image" of God. The desire is right, but the manifestation of it is wrong. God desires to be "seen," but He is only visible in the Person of Jesus, "the express image of his person."

Creation, providence, and redemption are attributed to the Son. He both "made the worlds" (1:2) and "upholds all things by the word of his power" (1:3). Both creation and redemption are described in Scripture as the work of the triune God. Hebrews 11:3 states, "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God." Paul writes that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, . . . all things were

created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Colossians 1:15-17).

The prophets had spoken of one who would Himself bear the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). Hebrews states that this has been done, the Son having "by himself purged our sins" (1:3). This fact emphasizes the futility of man in his efforts to remove his own sins and of the Old Testament ordinances which had to be constantly repeated, bearing witness to their inability to "purge the conscience from dead works." Their value is not minimized. They were part of that Law, which was a pedagogue, leading men to see their need of Christ, the one Redeemer from sin.

The redemptive ministry of Christ formed a prelude to the glorification of the Son "on the right hand of the Majesty on high." Paul tells us that it was because Christ humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross, that the Father "highly exalted him" (Phil. 2:7-9). The preincarnate Christ had a glory with the Father "before the world was" (John 17:5). The crucified Messiah, however, has a new position with all power in Heaven and on earth committed unto Him (Matt. 28:18). This is reflected in the words of Psalm 110:1, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool."

The Epistle to the Hebrews underscores the superiority of God's revelation in Christ to every other revelation, real or fancied. God has spoken in One who brought the worlds into being, became our suffering Saviour, and now is seated at the place of favor and authority, at the right hand of the Father. His message must be one which commands reverent respect and holy awe.

B. CHRIST'S SUPERIORITY OVER THE ANGELS, 1:4-14

1. *He is the Son*, 1:4-6

The superiority of God's revelation in Christ to that which had earlier been mediated by the prophets is re-enforced by the demonstration that Jesus is superior to all angelic beings in His position as the divine Son.

Jesus is declared to have a more excellent name than the angels (1:4). This is the name by which sinners may be saved (Acts 4:12) and to which every knee must bow (Phil. 2:10). The name is expressive of the Person Himself, His glory and attributes. Angels have a name identifying them as messengers, serving God and His children. The name of Jesus, on the other hand, identifies Him as the Saviour of the world and the anointed (i.e. "Christ") of the Father. When the name "Son" is applied to Jesus, He is designated as the beloved of the Father, and heir of all things.

The argument for the superiority of Christ to the angels finds support in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The author of Hebrews looked to his Bible for evidence of the unique sonship of Jesus. He found it in Psalm 2:7, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee," and II Samuel 7:14, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son." Although angels are collectively called "sons of God" (Job 1:6), Christ alone bears the title "the Son." The Psalmist spoke of the day when God's Son was begotten, doubtless a reference to the incarnation, although it is applied elsewhere to the resurrection (Acts 13:33).

David wished to build a temple to the Lord in Jerusalem, but he was told that this project had to be de-

ferred. God said, however, that an "house" would be built for David (II Sam. 7:11). This house, or dynasty, would reign over Israel forever (II Sam. 7:16). Of David's son, God said, "I will be to him a Father" (1:5; II Sam. 7:14). In a general sense Solomon may be regarded as David's son who built the "house" or Temple, but the author of Hebrews sees these words as a prophecy of David's "greater" son, Jesus of Nazareth who bears the distinctive title, "Son of God."

Not only is Jesus designated as Son, but He also is accorded worship, which angels are called upon to render but never receive. The quotation seems to be taken from Psalm 97:7c, rendered in A.V., "Worship him, all ye gods," but translated in the Greek Septuagint as "Worship him all ye angels" (1:6). The Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:43 has a similar translation. Israelite faith never accorded worship to angels. The thrice holy God of Israel alone is worthy of the worship of His people; all other beings were created by Him and are subject to Him.

2. His reign is eternal, 1:7-14

A contrast is drawn between the nature of angels and that of the Son. Psalm 104:4 is quoted in verse 7: "Who maketh his angels spirits; and his ministers a flame of fire." According to the laws of Hebrew parallelism the "angels" and the "ministers" must be related terms. Angels are ministers, servants of God. Jesus, however, is deity: "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom" (Ps. 45:6). The fact that the Messianic king was anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows (Ps. 45:7) is a

further reminder of his preeminence. This is no mere creature. He has the supreme place in accord with His divine Sonship.

In an extended quotation from Psalm 102:26-28 the eternity of the Son is contrasted with the transient nature of the earth and the heavens—"They shall perish; but thou remainest" (1:11). To none but the Son has the Father addressed the words, "Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (1:13; Ps. 110:1). The Lord Jesus is seated "far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:21).

By way of contrast to the exalted Son, we are reminded that angels are "ministering spirits" (1:14). They are servants of God and His people. The Christian is to be thankful for their ministry, as for every gift of God's love. He recognizes Jesus, however, in a unique position. As the Son of the Father, He alone receives the absolute loyalty of the regenerate heart.

C. THE DANGER OF NEGLECTING SALVATION THROUGH THE SON, 2:1-4

The author of Hebrews has shown the claims of Christ to the absolute loyalty of His people. God's last word is Christ, the fulfillment of the prophetic hopes of Israel. This Christ holds a unique relationship to the Father and stands in contrast to angels, who are created beings and servants of God and His people.

On this doctrinal basis, a warning is given. Men must listen to the Son. It was necessary during the Old Testament economy to give heed to the word mediated

through angels. Paul stated that the Law "was ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator" (Gal. 3:19). This Law was steadfast, so that "every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward" (2:2). When Nadab and Abihu offered "strange fire" before the Lord they died (Lev. 10:1-7). Achan took of the spoil of Jericho, and Israel was defeated on the field of battle until he and his family were stoned (Josh. 7). Although provision was made for the one who had sinned "through ignorance," the Israelite who sinned "with an high hand" died without mercy. God was not arbitrary, but a strict concept of justice was maintained.

The argument proceeds from the lesser to the greater. If judgment fell on those who transgressed the Law given through the mediation of angels, how much more serious will be the state of the one who rejects the Word of God's Son! We, now, should give even "more earnest heed" (2:1) than did those who lived under the former economy.

The warning contains an unanswerable question: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" (2:3). Emphasis is properly placed on the "we." Those who perished under the Mosaic economy are a warning to us. The Gospel has brought greater privileges, and greater responsibilities. We dare not presume upon God's grace. His standard of righteousness has not altered, and He still expects obedience from His people.

This "great salvation" of the Messianic Age was first proclaimed by Jesus Himself. He both "proclaimed" the good tidings of salvation and made them possible by the sacrifice of Himself. This word did not cease with the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Messiah, how-

ever. He commissioned His disciples to proclaim the Gospel to every creature, assuring them of His continuing presence and of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The preaching of the Gospel was accompanied by “signs and wonders, and . . . divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost according to his own will” (2:4). These terms refer to the various types of miracles experienced in the early Church. “Signs” bore testimony to Christ as the Messiah. Jesus showed Himself Lord of nature by stilling the storm on Galilee. All who observed such acts were brought face to face with the claims of Christ. “Wonders” such as the feeding of the five thousand, and “miracles” of power, such as the casting out of demons, likewise served to authenticate the mission of Jesus. The risen Lord continued His ministry through the “gifts of the Holy Ghost” granted to the Church (I Cor. 12:1-11).

D. THE SON AND HUMANITY, 2:5-18

1. *Man's lowliness and dignity*, 2:5-8

As the contrast between Christ and the angels is continued, our attention is focused on the future. Not only was Christ operative in the creation of all things, including the angels, but He is ruler of the “age to come” (2:5). Angels may be honored as God’s creatures, but rule has been entrusted to the Son. Human history will not end in futility, but in the reign of Christ. His death has redeemed men, and it also brings about the removal of the curse on nature (Rom. 8:22-23).

The eighth Psalm asks the pointed question:

What is man, that thou are mindful of him? Or the Son of Man that thou visitest him? (2:6)

The question arose from the Psalmist's contemplation of nature (Ps. 8:3). In contrast to the vastness of God's creation, man appears to be insignificant. Why should God care at all about man? Does He not have much else in which He may delight? The question is not answered. Instead we read:

Thou madest him a little [or "for a little while"]
lower than the angels,
Thou crownedst him with glory and honor, . . .
Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet.
(2:7-8)

The subject is still man. The expression "son of man" in Psalm 8 is synonymous with "man." Man was made as a creature of honor. He was given dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Yet, "now we see not yet all things put under him" (2:8).

2. *The necessity for the incarnation, 2:9-18*

a. To fulfill God's gracious purpose, 2:9-10

Man was created as a noble creature, with capacity to glorify God and live a life of richness and honor. What happened? Why is it that he does not have the dominion assigned to him? The answer is an obvious one—sin. Man fell from his innocency and lives as a rebel. The original place of honor has been vacated.

Although we may be disappointed as we look upon man, Hebrews reminds us that we should look elsewhere. In Adam, man sinned. We do not see man in the place of dominion, but we can look to a man—the one perfect man, Jesus. Although essentially God, He "was made a little lower than the angels" (2:9), i.e. He became a

man. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Son of God took upon Himself our humanity. As man, He suffered the death of the Cross. Now, however, the glorified Man, Christ Jesus, is “crowned with glory and honor” (2:9). Man sinned, but the Man, Christ Jesus, is the Redeemer from sin. Man disobeyed, but the Man, Christ Jesus, was “obedient unto death” (Phil. 2: 8).

Not only does Jesus, as man, exhibit in His Person the will of the Father, for mankind, but He is so identified with His people, those who commit their lives unto Him, that they become a new humanity. By the grace of God He tasted death for every man (2:9).

The words “tasted death” mean more than “died.” Death is the natural lot of fallen man. “The wages of sin” cannot be refused by the members of sinful humanity. The death of Jesus, on the other hand, was very different. He who was without sin and therefore not under the curse of mortality “tasted” death in order that the sons of men who trust in Him might be spared that ordeal. “In his own body on the tree” He paid the debt for the sins of His people.

There was no other good enough to pay the price
of sin;
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let
us in.

Now death is not a source of terror to the Christian. When Stephen was stoned he simply “fell asleep” (Acts 7:60) after seeing a vision of the risen Christ standing to welcome His faithful servant home.

It is with reverence we read that the “captain” of our

salvation was made perfect through sufferings (2:10). Perfection of character, absolute holiness, was His before Calvary. Yet the word "perfect" has another sense. It may speak of completeness. As the Redeemer, Jesus had to redeem. He was the sinless teacher, but man needed more than a teacher, however holy. The completion of the work for which Jesus entered the world demanded suffering. Jesus suffered and died in order to bring "many sons unto glory."

Jesus is now "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9). From the depths of humiliation He arose to the heights of exaltation at the Father's right hand. He is now "in glory." Yet Jesus does not enjoy this glory alone. He endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" of bringing "many sons unto glory." He identified Himself with humanity in becoming "the son of man." Now He associates us with Himself in giving us the "power [or "authority"] to become the sons of God" (John 1:12). He was "sanctified," or set apart, to enter the world as Redeemer. His people are likewise sanctified, set apart as those whose lives are now indwelt by His Spirit and lived to His glory.

b. To make one the Saviour and the saved, 2:11-15

The union of the Redeemer with the redeemed is set forth in bold terminology. The Sanctifier and the sanctified have a common origin—in God and His sovereign will. He is not ashamed to call them "brethren" (2:11). They are not only "sons of God," but also "joint-heirs with Christ."

The words of David (Ps. 22:22) are quoted to illustrate the identification of Christ with His people:

I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee (2:12)

As the Psalmist had "brethren" among whom he praised the Lord, so Jesus is associated with His "brethren," with whom the Father delights to have fellowship as they are united by faith to His beloved Son.

Two other verses from the Old Testament, Isaiah 8:17 and Isaiah 8:18, are quoted as from the lips of Jesus (2:13): "I will put my trust in Him" and "Behold I and the children which God hath given me." The first is an expression of personal faith in God. In the second, the prophet Isaiah associated himself with his children, given him by God as "signs" to the generation to which he ministered. As Isaiah both trusted God, and stood before God with his children, so Jesus is presented to us in Scripture as wholly mindful of the Father's will, trusting Him in every detail. He, too, does not stand alone, but with His "children."

This identification began with the incarnation. The children are "flesh and blood," i.e. human beings. To be identified with them, He had to become a partaker of "flesh and blood" (2:14). The real deity and the real humanity are both stressed in Hebrews. Only as Jesus became true man could He purchase our redemption.

Jesus became man in order that He might die. This statement runs counter to our usual concept of God's will. Life is a gift of God, but life sometimes comes "through death." Satan is the prince of death. As man obeyed his voice, sin entered the world, and death by sin. Yet in Christ, death became the medium for the destruction of the power of Satan. The Devil himself is a de-

feated foe, defeated by the power of the Prince of Life.

The redemptive work of Christ delivers man from the "fear of death" (2:15). Sin is a dread reality. Man is conscious of his dependence upon God and of the fact that a day of reckoning is at hand. To the Christian, however, the sting of death is removed. Because of sin, man fears death, but Jesus has taken on Himself the sin of His people. If we reckon that the "wages of sin is death," we also glory that "the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The fear of death is a "bondage," but the Christian is God's free man, freed from fear and enabled to draw nigh to the very throne of grace through Christ, "the new and living way," with the utmost confidence of acceptance. Paul could triumphantly declare, "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

c. To enable the Saviour to sympathize with the saved, 2:16-18

The glorious purposes of God in redemption are addressed to men, not to angels. Hebrews 2:16 in the Authorized Version appears at first sight to refer to the incarnation—"He took not on him the nature of angels." Able scholars, including Delitzsch and Westcott, consider the verse a continuation of the theme of redemption. Jesus did not, according to this understanding, take hold of angels to redeem them, but rather directed His atoning love toward the fallen human race. It was specifically to the "seed of Abraham" that His ministry was first directed. When "his own received him not," the message was sent to the "highways and hedges" where all—circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free, were given the message of God's boundless love.

In order to redeem His "brethren" Jesus was "made like unto his brethren" (2:17). He became a true man. A High Priest must be a human being, chosen from among men. If he is to understand and represent fallen humanity before the Majesty on High, he must know the meaning of temptation and suffering. One of the early heresies in the Christian church was known as Docetism. The Docetists said that Jesus "seemed" to be a real man, but He was not really human. The humanity of Christ was an illusion. The author of Hebrews leaves no room for Docetism. To become our High Priest, Jesus had to share our humanity—even to the point of suffering.

The priesthood had both a Godward and a manward aspect. There was a ministry in "things pertaining to God" in order to effect "reconciliation for the sins of the people" (2:17). As the High Priest of the Old Testament presented sacrifices to God in order to effect reconciliation, so Jesus offered Himself to the Father. As High Priest, Jesus was "faithful." He performed the ministry entrusted to Him. He was also "merciful." He had compassion on His people. Although He was personally free from sin, the humanity of Jesus enabled Him to know the motives of men, their temptations, and their weaknesses. The bruised reed He did not break. Even the Jerusalem which rejected Him was the object of His tender love. He wept over its sins. He spared no invective in denouncing the sham pretense of the hypocritical Pharisee, but the penitent sinner found Him ever ready to offer a word of understanding and forgiveness.