

## Introduction to the book of Hebrews

Not long ago on talk back radio I heard someone making the comment, - “God, Allah whatever!” In other words – they’re all the same. And of course that’s how many people think. The supreme being is the same regardless of what you call him. The particular religion is just a different pathway to him.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Christianity, with all the failings of its followers, is unique, - because Jesus, with all his perfection, power and majesty, is unique.

So what I want to do in these few Sundays I have here with you, is look at the uniqueness of Jesus, because that truth is something we need to confide in. To do that we’re going to look at some chapters in the New Testament which are not often preached from. The first three chapters of the book of Hebrews.

I suspect the reason the book of Hebrews is not preached through very often is that it is one of the more difficult books in the New Testament. It contains some of the best known passages and some of the most loved verses in the Bible, but apart from those verses and passages, it is a book we can easily overlook.

Today I just want to give a little background to the book and look at the first few verses, to see if I can encourage you to read it.

Unlike the other books in the New Testament, we don’t know who the author was. If you still have a King James Bible, it is titled “The Epistle of **Paul** to the Hebrews” and it was commonly referred to in that way, until the Reformation, around 1,600AD.

Since then it is widely recognised that those words were an addition which don’t appear in a **single ancient manuscript**, so they are not part of holy scripture. While Paul could be considered as a **possible** writer, it is unlikely he was the author. For one thing, scholars tell us that the style of Greek used, is very different from Paul’s style.

The earliest reference to authorship comes from a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian writer by the name of Tertullian, and he spoke of **Barnabas** as the author. Others have suggested Clement of Rome, Apollos, Luke, Priscilla and Titus.

Whoever wrote it had a very good Greek education, because it is evidently written in a beautiful classical style. It appears that the first readers of the letter probably knew who the author was, so the writer **didn’t need** to identify himself or herself.

It was probably written somewhere between 50 and 70AD, but as well as not knowing who wrote it, we don’t know who it was **written to**, other than it was obviously written to Hebrews, - that is Jews who had become Christians. These were people who were well versed in the Old Testament, but they were now being tempted to go back into the Jewish ways they had left behind. As David Pawson wrote, “they have come out of Judaism, but not fully; they have come into Christianity, but not fully, and this is the basic problem for which the letter was written.”

So it speaks particularly to people who wanted to keep a foot in both camps, and I guess many of us can understand that because we may have been there at some point in our spiritual journey. You may be there right now!

*I know I can remember that stage when I was young teenager. I had made a commitment to follow Jesus, so at church and youth things, it was easy to be a Christian, - which is one reason why regular fellowship and worship with other Christians is so vital and necessary.*

*But at school it was much harder. I tried to live as a Christian, but like most kids of that age, I also wanted to be one of the group. I didn't want to stand out as being too different. I wanted to be accepted, - so you go half way, and try to have a foot in both camps.*

*Eventually I realized that is a miserable place to be. It's a bit like crossing a busy road. You soon discover that you can't stay in the middle of the road for long. Or to change the analogy, you can't sit on the fence forever! You have to make a decision... I can still remember when that changed for me and I made a very clear choice and got off the fence.*

Well, with that tiny bit of background let's look at just the first three verses.

Hebrews 1:1-3.

*1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.*

*<sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

One of the words you get used to when reading this book is the word '**better**'. It is used more here, than in any other book in the New Testament. Some translations use 'superior'.

Remember this book was written to Jews who have become Christians but haven't fully left their old religion behind, so the writer is showing them why their **new** faith is so much **better** than Judaism, or any other religion for that matter. In the process of doing that, he shows us how the Old Testament is related to the New Testament, and he tells who Jesus is, and what he did.

In these verses he tells us that **Jesus** is so much **better** than the **prophets**. //

One of the themes that runs right through the Bible is that **God speaks**.

From the beginning of creation with its repeated line, "**And God said...**" as he spoke creation into being, - right through to the end when Jesus says, "Behold I am coming soon".

One of the points of **continuity**, between the Old and the New Testaments is that God speaks. One of the points of **contrast** is that in the **old**, he spoke through **prophets**: and in the **new**, he speaks through **his Son**.

The author is writing to Jews who for some reason are hankering for the old, so he wants to tell them how much better it is that God now speaks through his Son, and not just through prophets.

Of course, most of us aren't grappling with the thought that the Old Testament prophets may be better, but we do see that in other religions, including Judaism.

For example, one of the reasons that Muslim areas of the world are so difficult for Christian missionaries, is that Islam is the only major religion that was started after Jesus Christ - about 600 years after to be exact.

Because of that, Muslims believe their religion is better. Jesus is just one of the prophets, to them, and Mohammad, whom came later, is the pinnacle, the ultimate or the highest of the prophets.

But Hebrews tells us that God doesn't speak through prophets now, at least not in the way he did in the past. **He has sent his Son**. Some people are listening to a prophet, supposedly a spokesman for God, - when we have God speaking **directly** through his very own Son, and there's no comparison.

And do you know why the Son is so important? Well, we are now told things about **Jesus** that could never be said of **Mohammad**, or **Buddha** or **Confucius** or **Isaiah** or **Amos**, or any of the Old Testament prophets.

When people talk about a prophet, they can only talk about his life. They usually only refer to the years of his ministry, the period when he spoke as a prophet. If we were talking about Jesus as a prophet, that would be about three years. At the most, they can only go to the years between a prophet's birth and death.

But with Jesus, we go **right back** to the beginning, that is to **creation**. And we go forward, to the **end of all things**.

The Son is the heir of all things, - in other words this whole universe belongs to him. One day he will get it all. He will inherit the lot – absolutely everything.

Not only is he the **heir** of all things at the **end** of this world, but he was the **agent** of all creation at the beginning of the world.

Long before he was a baby in Bethlehem, a carpenter in Nazareth or a teacher in Galilee, - **he created** the **whole universe**. He established the earth and hung it in just the right place in the universe, and he **keeps** everything in its right place.

This earth, which seems so solid and secure, is of course suspended in space, and like everything else in our universe, **it is all moving**.

In fact, if we were near the equator, we know that we would have moved about 1600 kilometres in the last hour. That's **very** fast. Here in Tauranga, it would be a bit less than that, but still fast.

As well as the earth spinning, we are also moving around the sun at over 100,000 kilometres an hour in a sort of off centre elliptical orbit which gives us our warmer and colder seasons.

Now I know it is a statement of faith to say that Jesus created the lot and that he holds everything in place. No scientist can prove that, - but then, no scientist can disprove it either.

That he made and sustains the universe makes Jesus far **better** than the **prophets**, and so does the next statement. *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*

If you want to understand why Jesus is so different and so much better, listen to this.

The Greek word that is translated “the exact representation” is the word “character”, like the characters of an alphabet.

*These days we can put a document through a photocopier and get an exact representation. But the idea here comes from the ancient world of engraving or stamping.*

*An Emperor would get an engraver to carve his portrait on to a stamp or a die, made out of a hard metal, along with the words he wanted,*

*Then that **die** or **stamp** would be used to make an **exact impression** on a **coin** made of a softer metal. A bit like a seal, used to leave the persons mark in wax, to authenticate a document or seal a letter.*

So this is what the writer is saying about Jesus. Like a stamp used to make a coin, the exact imprint of the father’s nature and glory, has been precisely reproduced in the sons’ human nature, and now that is there for the whole world to see.

In the past, God had sent various prophets who were able to give little glimpses of what God is like.

They reflected tiny bits of God’s nature and message which is like the frustration of having just a few pieces of a jig-saw puzzle... But now, **in Jesus**, he has given us his exact portrait. We have the whole picture.

But it is more than just having the full picture of who God is. As well as being the exact representation of God, *the Son is the radiance of God’s glory.*

Think for a moment about the Sun (the S-u-n).

Just this month Nasa have launched their Parker Solar Probe to get up close and personal with the sun. We can’t even look at the sun because it is way too bright. But we can see the **sunshine**, and on a cold day when we feel the warmth of it rays, we are grateful.

What **sunshine** is to the **sun**, **Jesus** is to **God**. Here is Jesus, the exact representation of God, radiating God’s glory. We can’t look at God because like the sun we would be blinded, but we **can** look at Jesus, and we **are not blinded**, but we **are** seeing the real thing.

The prophets reflected little bits of God, like the moon reflects a little bit of sunlight. But in Jesus, we are **not just seeing a reflection**, we are seeing God’s radiance and God’s exact image.

**Now - why is all that important?** Well, you know there are religions, groups and cults, who see Jesus as someone very much less than God. As I mentioned of Islam, the Koran refers to the “prophet Jesus”. And you’ve probably had at least one of those groups knocking on your door at some stage.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, see Jesus as an angel or actually an archangel. He is also the son of God, but certainly not Jehovah God.

But look at some of the truths they have to overlook in the Bible, to believe that. (You may like to take notes at this point.)

**Firstly**, and you will know this one. John 1:1. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**.* And in verse 14, *The Word became flesh and lived among us.*

Now I know that in their own translation, they change that to saying, “and the word was **a** god,” in other words, not **the** God. But the bible says the **word** is **Jesus** - and **Jesus** is **God**.

Now they can't change these next scriptures.

**Secondly**. John 20:28. When Thomas the doubter was confronted with the risen Lord Jesus, he said to him, “My Lord and **my God!**” And Jesus didn't tell him off, or correct him. Jesus accepted the adulation of being called ‘Lord and **God**’ by Thomas.

**Thirdly**. Let me ask you this question. Who raised Jesus from the dead?  
**God right?**

Well, in John 2:19 **Jesus** said, “*Destroy this temple, and **I will raise it again** in three days.*” And verse 21 says, *the temple he had spoken of was his body.*

So Jesus says quite clearly that **he** would raise his own body from the dead. To do that, **Jesus had to be God**.

**Fourthly**. Go back 500 years to that well known verse in Isaiah 9:6,  
*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, (Who is that child, that son? Jesus - right? Anyone have any doubts about that?)*

Now think about this. *And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***  
The child Isaiah is talking about - is also called Mighty God?

**Fifthly**. John 8:58 *Very truly I tell you,*” Jesus answered, “*before Abraham was born, **I am!***” Jesus applied to himself, the sacred name of God. A name that was reserved **exclusively** for Yahweh - God.

This was the name God gave to Moses, so he could tell the people who it was who had sent him. Exodus 3:14. “...say to the Israelites **I am** - has sent me to you.” Here in John's gospel, Jesus is attributing that name to himself. So either Jesus was deranged, or he **is** God.

As well as those verses we could look at several others, including:

John 1:18, which refers to Jesus as “God, the one and only, who is at the Father's side...”

“I and the Father are one.” John 10:30

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” John 14:9

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,” Col 2:9

Can you see why we believe that Jesus is God? // Or as Hebrews says, Jesus is “*the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*”

As well as that, he is *“sustaining all things by his powerful word.”*

Right now, Jesus is the one holding this universe together, whether people acknowledge that or not...

And then finally, the Son has done something the prophets could never, ever do. He has *“provided purification for sins,”* and then *“he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”*

This letter was written to Jews who were starting to doubt if Jesus really was who he said he was. They are contemplating leaving the Son and going back to the prophets. There was this tug to go back to the old ways. To go back to what they were familiar with. To what they had known in the past. A pull between the **old** and the **new**.

So the writer reminds them of something that only the **new** can give them. There is **no one in the world**, no one in the **whole of history** who can provide **purification for sins**. The priests in the Old Testament tried so hard to do it. They offered up thousands of thousands of bulls, goats and lambs, but their work was never finished.

They had to keep **standing** and offering sacrifices, because purification of sins was never achieved. They stood there doing it one day, and then have to go through it all again the next day, and the next...

**That is – until Jesus**, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, - provided purification for sins - once and for all.

Then, having done that, he was able to **sit down**, // an expression which meant the work was done. It was finished. It had been completed. He could sit down at the right hand of God, the throne room or control centre of the universe, where he has all authority in heaven and on earth.

For us there is nothing more to be done, except to acknowledge, and believe, and accept what **Jesus** has done – and make it our own.

And then, with a fully completed salvation – we thank him, we worship him, we live for him and we serve him.