December 13, 2015

“Christ Is Greater”

Hebrews 1:1-4

**FCF**: Pressure to turn back from the faith

**PROPOSITION**: (magnet) Christ is greater.

(anchor) We must then hold onto Him.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

This is the third in our “First Things First” Advent series, looking at how Christ reveals Himself to us in the first chapters of John, Colossians, Hebrews, and Revelation. Today, we’re in Hebrews 1. It’s worth knowing that the first readers were under pressure, great duress.

 “A Charlie Brown Christmas” – Charles Schultz was under pressure from CBS. They didn’t want child actors. He insisted on it. In fact, some were so young they had to be read their parts. CBS wanted a laugh track. Schultz said no. They wanted to cut Linus’ reading from Luke, fearing it would scare advertisers. Schultz said leave it in or else. Let’s be glad he did.

Pressure and duress – that’s what the early church faced. What sustained them?

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Hebrews 1:1-4

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

For some of us, seeing “It’s a Wonderful Life” – the 1946 classic starring Jimmy Stewart – is a vital part of the Christmas celebration. There are so many memorable moments in the film. One of which is when Mr. Potter tries to lure George Bailey into working for him with an offer of great pay and high privilege. George is initially tempted but finally says (READ quote):

You sit around here and you spin your little webs and you think the whole world revolves around you and your money. Well, it doesn't, Mr. Potter. In the whole vast configuration of things, I'd say you were nothing but a scurvy little spider!

George had a close call there. The pressure was such that he nearly gave up and turned back.

Let me give you a quick rundown of the context of this letter. It’s pretty clear these were mid-first century Jewish converts to Christianity. It’s also fairly likely they were living in Rome, under the rule of Nero. That meant that, given the persecution of the time, they were living with a bullseye on their backs – hunted by the Roman authorities and hated by their Jewish neighbors.

Part of the purpose of this letter was to encourage them – calling them to remain faithful, to stay the course, to hold fast, to hold onto Christ. The theme of the letter then, the reason they could have such encouragement, comes out right here at the start. Christ is greater. He is greater, better, more than the angels, than Moses, the Temple, and the priesthood. Whatever they were tempted to turn back to, Christ was greater. That’s what they needed to take to heart.

As do we. Christ is greater. And so we must hold to Him. How do we see His greatness in this text? In three ways, grouped under the three main Old Testament offices. First, Christ is the greater prophet. Second, He is the greater king. And, third, He is the greater priest.

1. **THE GREATER PROPHET**

First, Christ the greater prophet (READ Hebrews 1:1-2a, 3a). He perfectly reveals God.

1. *Striking Contrasts*

And we see this in a series of striking contrasts set forth from the start.

1. Of timing

In terms of timing, yes, long ago, God spoke at many times and in many ways. But now He has revealed Himself personally in these last days, in this last period of His unfolding plan.

1. Of recipients

In terms of recipients, yes, God had spoken to our fathers, the giants of old, and they passed that on to us. But now, wonderful as that was, He has revealed Himself to us. Now we have heard.

1. Of agents

In terms of agents, yes, God had spoken through such prophets as Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah. But now, He has revealed Himself not just through His chosen servants but through His beloved Son.

1. *Stunning Images*

These are striking contrasts. And they are followed up with some stunning images.

1. The radiance of the glory of God

How, after all, is His Son described? As “the radiance of the glory of God”. God’s glory being the visible expression of His majestic presence. Think of Mt. Sinai or the Temple. And now Jesus is said to be the perfect display of that same glory, but somehow now in the flesh.

1. The exact imprint of His nature

He is also said to be “the exact imprint of His nature”. Think of a coin minted flawlessly with the imprint of a ruler’s face. You see, the Son is not just similar to but exactly like the Father.

Jesus, as the greater prophet, perfectly reveals God to us.

*Illustration:*

Think just of our Christmas customs. The colors have an obvious intent but can easily be missed. The giving of gifts, meant to point to the Magi and Jesus Himself, can be easily eclipsed by greed and self. The lyrics of our carols, so beautiful, often become just background noise.

But with Jesus, there is no mistaking with Him. For He is the greater prophet.

*Application:*

Without Him, we are left in the deepest darkness. No ultimate answers. No meaning, no purpose, direction, or hope. But with Him and through Him we have the Truth. And not just a truth but the Truth. What the late apologist Francis Schaeffer referred to as “true truth.”

Oh, that we would turn from all messages and messengers that would lead us astray. To turn from them and turn to Him, continually in His Word that we would know more of Him.

My friends, Christ is the greater prophet. We must then hold onto Him.

1. **THE GREATER KING**

That said, He is also the greater king (READ Hebrews 1:2b, 3b). Jesus reigns and rules.

1. *Royal Person*

We see this in who He is, in His great royal person.

1. Appointed heir

Jesus is the appointed heir. This is that custom of primogeniture, the right of the firstborn son to the greater inheritance. And his responsibility to then care and provide for his family.

1. Of all things

The extent of this inheritance? All things. Not partial or even great but total. All creation.

1. *Royal Power*

Which takes us from His great royal person to His great royal power.

1. Agent of creation

Jesus is the agent of creation. It is all for Him and all through Him. He summoned all things into being. Everything from the furthest star to the tiniest sparrow owes its existence to Him.

1. Sustainer of creation

For He is the agent of creation. And the sustainer of it as well. The word that spoke and “it was” speaks and “it continues to be”. He upholds, keeps together, maintains, and sustains all things.

Jesus, the greater king, reigns over all things at all times. No matter how things appear.

*Illustration:*

It doesn’t always look that way (READ Luke 2:18-19). Of course she did! She’s heard from Gabriel, Elizabeth, Joseph, and the shepherds. All of this One she’s holding in her arms, conceived in scandal, born into poverty, laid in a feed trough. Jesus’ rule isn’t always apparent.

*Application:*

But that doesn’t make it any less real. And that’s often where we get into trouble. For we insist that the King do things according to our demands and timetable. That’s not what kings do. Which, again, because of our flawed approach, can take us into deep doubts and despair because He’s not giving us what we want. Or He’s giving us what we don’t want. And, after enough time of steeping in that, we can begin to think that maybe there just isn’t a king at all.

Which is why passages like this can be so good to read. For with His royal person and power, He can be trusted. My friends, Christ is the greater king. We must then hold onto Him.

1. **THE GREATER PRIEST**

Beyond that, He is the greater priest (READ Hebrews 1:3c-4). What does this mean?

1. *A Sacrificial Work*

Partially, this is speaking to the great sacrificial work of Christ on our behalf.

1. A long history

For 1500 years, going back to the Passover and on through the age of the Temple, there had been sacrifices – the shedding of blood for the covering, forgiveness, washing of sin. Which pointed to the gravity of sin, the reality of cosmic justice, and the necessity of a greater sacrifice to come.

1. The time fully come

And, with Jesus, the time had fully come. Think of the words to Joseph (READ Matthew 1:20b-21). Jesus is the greater priest, representing the people before God. And, beyond that, He served as the sacrifice Himself. Think of the clear words of John the Baptist (READ John 1:29).

1. *A Completed Work*

Jesus’ is a sacrificial work. But, beyond even that, it is a completed work as well.

1. Their work was never done

For the temple priests in Jerusalem, their work was never done. There were no seats to be found. There was work to be done, day and night, throughout the year. It was constant and continual.

1. The finished work of Christ

But Jesus’ is a finished work. Look at the text. After making purification for sin, the sacrifice that all the others had been pointing towards, He sat. Why? The work is done. It is finished.

Jesus, the greater priest, offered Himself to bring us to God, making us right with Him.

*Illustration:*

Even the more secular tunes of the season, if you listen, speak to it this. Some speak of a longing for home. Or “White Christmas”. No, it’s not explicitly Christian. There’s no reference to shepherds, angels, or a manger. But it’s getting there. How? A snowfall evokes something deep within us. If you trace the image in the Bible, what you find is a whiteness, a purity, a theme of cleansing. There’s something instinctive with the image of snow. And so the song fits.

*Application:*

We need a prophet whose word shapes our lives. We need a king whose rule governs our lives. And we need a priest to make purification for our sin. And we have all that with Jesus.

There is security and comfort here. Note there are no qualifications made. Which means that no one can go too far. And it doesn’t matter what you’ve done. He can make you clean.

And there is a reminder worth hearing as well. Christian, there is nothing to be added. It is finished. So there is no need for beating yourself up, going through rituals. Self-purification is not needed. Worse, it’s not right. It’s dishonoring to the One who gave Himself already.

My friends, Christ is the greater priest. Let us then hold onto Him.

**CONCLUSION:**

The readers of this letter were being urged to hold on, to hold fast. But how? Was it to be by sheer grit? No. They were to hold on by holding to the One who was holding onto them.

Let’s think for a moment about sanctification – the ongoing work of Jesus to make us more like Him, pressing the gospel deeper into our hearts and changing us from the inside out. His living and dying in our place was a once-for-all work. It is monergistic, all of Him. But our living and dying for Him is a continual work. And it is synergistic, with both of us involved. We obey, we follow Him, we walk in His ways – we work because He is at work in us. It’s synergistic. It’s not one or the other. It’s both. That’s how we grow to become more like Jesus.

We need to know something of this, the dynamics of sanctification. Not only that but the assurance of sanctification. For when it comes down to it, however sensitive our consciences may be, a Christian need not worry about falling away from the faith. Think with me. Sheep do stray. But that’s why we have a shepherd – to guide, provide, protect, and to bring us back.

Or, if I can mix the metaphors, God never plants trees that do not flourish. Some of you may have experience with the root-ball Christmas trees. That’s when, instead of chopping the tree down, you actually dig it up. It sits in a bucket during the Christmas season. And then, come January, you take it outside to replant it. My family tried that when I was growing up. I seem to recall a dead ugly tree a few months later. God’s plantings never go like that. What God plants will flourish. What He starts, He will finish. What He begins, He carries out.

My point is this. How do we hold fast, hold on? By holding to the One who is holding onto us. My friends, Christ is greater. He is the greater prophet, the greater king, the greater priest. He is greater, better, more than whatever we would turn back to. So let us hold to Him.

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