

The Radiance of God's Glory

Book of Hebrews

Hebrews 1:1-4

May 31, 2015

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

This week we continue in the introductory verses of the book of Hebrews.

Verses 1-4 paint an amazing and glorious picture of Jesus Christ.

Remember where we are headed. Outside the camp. We saw that last week from Hebrews 13. The whole of this epistle, this long and beautiful sermon, is aimed at encouraging us in our faith and motivating us to exercise ultimate faith in Christ so we will go outside the camp, outside the gates of seeming security, to be with Christ. That is because Jesus is outside the camp, seeking and saving those who are lost. Our calling in Hebrews is to join him there and to be willing to share in His reproach because he is worth it. We can stand on the eternal promises of God

because He has spoken, in these last days, by His Son – the heir of all things, the creator of all that has been created. Now we turn, in verse 3, to see Christ’s nature, his character and his work of purification. Read once more the third verse of Hebrews 1, ³ *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,*

The author goes out of his way in this introductory passage to show the supremacy of Christ. Jesus is better than anything to which He can be compared. No being surpasses his power, no name is superior to His name, nothing exceeds his glory. He is the most excellent one.

The Radiance of God’s Glory

What is the brightest light you have ever seen? Have you ever looked into one of those little laser pointers? Man, that really hurts the eye ball. It is really bright. How about halogen work lights? They are really bright and really hot. Do you have other examples? I was pondering the idea of brilliant light this week, as I was thinking about this passage and it caused me to look up some facts on our source of light – the Sun. Now there is an amazing star. First, the sun is huge, in fact one source I looked at said that the sun is large enough that you could put a million earths inside it. A million! The sustained atomic reaction that fuels the sun produces so much energy that scientists have struggled to understand and measure it.

Think about this, the surface of the sun maintains a temperature of around 10,000 degrees (F). And the surface is the coolest spot on the sun.

Researchers estimate that the core of the sun, where the reactor lies, if you think of it that way, is probably around 27 million degrees (F).

According to one web site, if we could harness all of the Sun's energy output for just one second, it would give the United States enough power to last us for 9 million years, at current rates of consumption. The sun is amazing and really bright! Its radiance is beyond what we can imagine.

Yet, verse 3 makes a claim that puts the radiance of the sun into a minor league class. Already we have seen, in verse 2, that Jesus created all things, including the sun. Now the author of Hebrews makes a claim that is so unbelievable that we read it and if we aren't really thinking, we will pass right over it and not understand the significance. He says that Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God! We find it hard to imagine the significance of this statement because we haven't actually seen the radiant glory of God in person. But we have seen the shadow of his glory in creation.

But, God's glory isn't just about brilliance or brightness. That isn't what this verse is saying... it doesn't mean that Jesus is really bright and has some kind of glow about him. No, that is not what this means. God's radiance has to do with his magnificence, his hugeness, his all-encompassing being. Think of it this way, God exists everywhere at once. His is present in all of his creation, every corner, every planet, every single

star... all at the same time. We can't even understand the size of the universe, yet God is present in all places at all times. There are hundreds of millions of stars in the universe that are far brighter, far larger, far more impressive than our sun, yet God's glory overshadows them all combined. He is so magnificent, so radiant, so glorious, that no one can even see him and survive. When Moses that God allow him to actually see him, God granted his request. But, he put Moses in a rock cleft and made him look away. Once God passed by, Moses was allowed to see his back... a clear indication that what He saw was not the full totality of God's glory. Even then, Moses' face glowed like a light bulb when he came down from the mountain with the ten commandments. This glory that Jesus radiates is more than brilliance, it is the very essence and nature of God. As I was writing this message, I simply could not find adequate words to rightly express the deepest meaning of verse 3, so I finally realized that the best way to proclaim how Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God was to let scripture do the job... to use God's own words... after all it was written by the Holy Spirit and who knows the subject better? Listen to these three passages from the Old Testament, in which the Spirit describes the glory of God:

Psalm 19:1, ¹ *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

Psalm 24:7-10, ⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ⁸ Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! ⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ¹⁰ Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory

Isaiah 6:1-5, In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Jesus Christ is the radiance of the glory of God. Every one of these verses describes Jesus. When Moses glowed due to the glory of God... that is the radiance of the glory of Jesus. When the heavens declare the glory of God... that is the radiance of the glory of Jesus. When the Psalmist proclaims God to be strong and mighty in battle, the Lord of Hosts, the King of glory... that is the radiance of the glory of Jesus. When Isaiah sees a vision of God, with the train of his robe filling the temple, with seraphim

worshiping Him and the foundations of the very thresholds of creation shaking at his voice... that is the radiance of the glory of Jesus. Our savior, Jesus Christ, radiates the glory of God to us. He is greater, he is more excellent, he is more radiant than anything we know or can imagine. He is incomparable – without comparison. No words can adequately describe him. Not even the sun, with its brilliance and incredible energy, can hold a candle to the glory of Jesus. He is in a class of his own. He is the radiance of the glory of God.

The Exact Imprint of His Nature

But it doesn't stop there. The verse goes on to say that Jesus is also the "exact imprint of his nature." This is a very difficult phrase to translate into English. The ESV translators use the word "imprint" to give us the sense that Jesus is an absolute duplicate of God's very nature. But don't read that word and think of Jesus as somehow being a copy or that in some way God's nature was "stamped" onto Jesus otherwise human body. That is not what this phrase is saying. The literal translation would be... Jesus is the "representation of His essence." What this is saying is that Jesus is the exact representation, the embodiment of God, as he really is. God's being is made manifest in Christ, so that to see the Son is to see what the Father is like.¹

John 1:14 puts it this way, ¹⁴ *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full*

of grace and truth. When you see Jesus, you see God. When you know Jesus, you know God. When you have the character and nature of Jesus, you have the character and nature of God. Jesus is the exact imprint, the full representation of God's very essence. Know Jesus, know God... fully.

Now, let's pursue this thought a little bit. I don't want to move on too quickly. What do other religions teach about their gods? How does man relate to God in every other belief system? God is always a mystery, there are always things about their gods that are unknown. Their gods are far away, detached, judging, unknowable in a personal way. Many have tried to make Christianity that same kind of belief system. They might say "I believe in God" but what they really believe is that God created the universe and then stepped back. Many think of God as the celestial clockmaker... he created the works, wound them up and then stepped back and let it run. In this worldview, God is aloof and distant, God is unknowable in his essence, God is impersonal and withdrawn. God is judge. God is jury. God is executioner. He is demanding, angry, uncaring. This is the god of our world, this is the god of religion. This is not the God of Christianity.

God is knowable in his very essence because Jesus is knowable and personal in His very essence. God is accessible because Jesus is accessible, calling us his brothers and sisters and coming in human form, the Word became flesh to live among us. And then He sent His Spirit to live in our

hearts. God is personal because Jesus is personal. God is not the proverbial clockmaker. He created the world but he did not step back and let it run its course. Instead, he sent Jesus to this world, who is the exact representation, the exact imprint of God's very nature... because He is God in human form. When we know Jesus, we know God. No other religion can make that claim – that God is knowable in a personal way. When we become like Jesus, we become like God.

But, it doesn't stop there. Since God didn't just wind up the world and let it go, we now see that Jesus sustains all things.

Sustains All Things

Jesus upholds the universe by the word of his power. Jesus created the universe by breathing out his word of command and now we see that he sustains it in the same way. The word translated “universe” is the Greek word “panta”. It means the totality of all things. Think about this. Jesus is sustaining the totality of all that he has created... right now. This is more than just bearing a burden or holding up the world, like the picture of Atlas with the weight of the world held up on his back. No it is not this at all. This verse is saying that Jesus is holding his creation together and not only is he keeping it together, but he is carrying it forward to its appointed end. Everything that happens in this world is under his control and at his command. If this was not so, everything we now know, including our very beings, would fly apart and cease to exist. This is God's providence to all

people at all time, even those who deny His very existence. Every breath they breath, every beat of their heart, every moment of their existence is granted through the power of the word of Jesus. He is not aloof, even from those who hate him and deny his existence. He sustains them and upholds their existence. Listen to what scripture has to say about Jesus upholding the universe by the word of his power:

Colossians 1:15-17, ¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

1 Corinthians 8:6, ⁶ *yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

Acts 17:27-28: *Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’*

Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory, the exact imprint of his nature and he is sustaining everything that exists by the word of his power. But that is not all, it doesn’t stop there, because Jesus also gave his own life so we could be restored to God’s family.

But it doesn’t stop there.

Makes Purification For Sin

Now verse 3 shifts from the nature and character of Christ to his ultimate work on the cross. In Hebrews chapters 9 and 10, we will study the deep meaning of this act of purification, but here we are being given the big, global word picture. This one who created all things, who providentially sustains all things, has also provided purification for all that had been disgustingly degraded and spoiled by sin. In other words, Jesus not only keeps the universe and all that is in it functioning, he is also the means of escape from the filth that encumbers it. Know this... God hates the filth of the world, He hates the sin that has destroyed the perfection of his creation. Psalm 11:5 makes it clear, God hates the wicked and those who do violence. Luke 16:15 says, *You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.*

Judgment has come on that sin and it will soon be eradicated totally from this world, when Jesus returns to rule. Yet, the very one who will judge is also the one who gave himself for the purification of sin, to release us from slavery to sin and death. The one who would send us to hell has given us new life, in Him. This is unthinkable... our perfect, holy, sinless, all powerful God came to earth as a man, fully man and fully God, to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin and to reconcile to Himself a lost, filthy, rebellious, corrupt bunch of God-haters. Unconditional grace and mercy is

now being poured out on us, lavished upon us through the death of Christ on the cross to pay the penalty for all we have done wrong. In our rebellion, Jesus made purification for our sins.

One of the great themes of the book of Hebrews is Jesus as our high priest. We will be learning a lot about the Old Testament sacrificial system, the role of the priests and how the sacrifices are a picture, a faint shadow, of the coming sacrifice of Christ. But know this for now, the sacrificial system was a bloody mess. Millions of animals died to temporarily grant the people purification of their sin. But in verse 3, we see that Jesus came to make one last sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice. His blood is given once and for all time to purify all who believe... it is finished. Jesus is the purifier.

And yet, it still doesn't stop here. Jesus is the radiance of God, the exact imprint of God's nature, the sustainer of all creation and the purifier of all who believe, but there is more... Jesus now sits at the right hand of God.

Sits at God's right hand

He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. The fact that Jesus has atoned for our sin and now sits at the right hand of God is the centerpiece of the theology of Book of Hebrews. The teaching of this epistle is centered on these two truths. Hebrews will come back to this over and over, making sure that we know that our hope and our faith is rooted in this truth. Here are the two central truths of Hebrews: 1.) Jesus has made us right with God through his sacrifice and 2.) His work is now

done, it is finished. He is seated at the right hand of God, he is in the power seat. All of creation has been made a footstool for his glory. This is so clearly stated in Psalm 110:1, *The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.* This is the most quoted Psalm in the New Testament and the author of Hebrews will use it four more times to make sure that we understand something very clearly: Jesus is in control. He is over all. His excellencies are greater than anything else that exists. His power is absolute and nothing is moving him out of the power seat. It is all his to rule over, as he wills. That is what this verse means when it tells us that he sat down at the right hand of God. The visual picture of sitting makes it clear that his work is complete. Jesus isn't literally sitting, but his position in the Trinity is at the right hand of God, the most powerful position... and his completed work is pictured by him being seated. All of this is to make us secure in our faith. We can trust him, we can trust his work. He created us, he cares for us, he saves us. We can trust all of that to be true because he has been seated at God's right hand, not like the priests of old who never sat down because their work was never finished.

That is why, in verse four, we read that the name of Jesus is more excellent than any other name, even the name of the mighty, powerful angels. Having nothing more impressive, majestic or powerful with which to compare Jesus, the writer concludes the thought with this fact... as impressive as the angels are, Jesus is more excellent. Nothing can

compare. Our holy God, who in love became the perfect man to bear our blame. On the cross he took our sin, by His death we live again.

Let's sing that as our closing benediction.

[Sing the Gospel Song]

Endnotes:

¹ O'Brien, Peter T., *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), p. 55