

REFUSING TO SETTLE FOR LIFE AS USUAL

hoping for
something
better



NANCY GUTHRIE



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Hoping for Something Better: Refusing to Settle for Life as Usual

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foreword



IS IT REALLY ALL about Jesus?

Back in the mid '60s when I first embraced him, I would tell people it was all about Jesus, but I had no idea what that meant. Sure, Christianity was centered on Christ, but mainly he was the one who got my spiritual engine started. As long as I filled up on Jesus every morning during my quiet time, I was able to putter along just fine, thank you.

Things changed in the late '60s after I crushed my spinal cord in a diving accident that left me a quadriplegic. I felt desperate and afraid. *Oh God, I can't do this. I can't live like this!* My engine would sputter and die before the day even started. I felt small and fragile. Vulnerable. Hopeless. This time I needed him urgently. Every hour. Every minute. *Or else I'll suffocate, God!* I was beginning to see that life really is all about Jesus.

Somewhere in the '70s I realized that the Bible is all about him too. I would read how "Jesus is in the Old concealed; in the New, revealed." So I spent hours sitting in front of God's Word—especially the Old Testament—flipping this way and that with my mouth stick, hoping to catch a glimpse of him in Genesis or Jeremiah, Leviticus, or Lamentations. If I could but find Jesus in the whispers and omens between those ancient pages, I somehow knew I'd gain a clearer, brighter picture of him. But it wasn't easy. Proverbs 25:2 was right: "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter."

The New Testament wasn't any easier. Flipping through the Gospels and Epistles, I finally landed upon the book of Hebrews. In the very first chapter I knew I had stumbled upon something pretty unique. Hebrews is the Bible

commenting on itself, like a built-in, Spirit-inspired owner's manual, like a heaven-sent dictionary or commentary explaining just where and why the Savior is spoken of here, there, and everywhere throughout the timeless pages of the Word of God.

Hebrews provides the hieroglyphics of heaven. It speaks of a better country . . . a grand cloud of witnesses . . . a heavenly Jerusalem . . . and “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.” I liked that kind of talk. It was hopeful. In its pages, I was even able to crack the code behind the whispers and omens of why God had allowed my affliction. In Hebrews I found a home for my aching heart.

Now fast-forward some forty years, to the autumn of 2006. One night after I was situated in bed, my husband, Ken, pulled up a chair, reached for his glasses, and opened his Bible. We had been reading through the Bible as part of our nighttime routine, and that night he announced we had arrived at the book of Hebrews. I turned my head on the pillow and smiled—for the next few evenings I knew we'd be basking in the light of this most unusual and marvelous book. The next morning when I wheeled into my office, my smile grew brighter. There on my desk sat the manuscript for *Hoping for Something Better*. Wow. It was another homecoming for my heart.

Nancy Guthrie has composed a most excellent book, a wonderful guide into Hebrews. My friend possesses a unique authority to write the following pages for she, too, has suffered affliction. . . . She has cried, “Oh God, I can't live with this pain.” . . . She has longed for hope and found it tucked between the paragraphs and chapters of Hebrews.

And friend, Nancy wants to help you crack the heavenly hieroglyphics. So get ready for an adventure. Watch what happens when you flick the switch on the spotlight of Hebrews and observe the way it illumines the dark and mysterious portions of the Holy Writ. Cup your ear and learn the language of all those God-breathed whispers from Deuteronomy and Daniel. Open your heart with each turn of the page, and feel it fill with hope.

I've lived in a wheelchair for four decades, and to tell you the truth, I'm looking for a better country: a place where death, disability, and disappointment are things of the past. It's natural to hope for something better. Sure, a better body and even a better heart. But most of all, that better country, that

world—a new heaven and earth—that will atone for all our hurts and suffice for our tears. It will be a happy world where finally—oh glad and glorious day!—every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Yes, it really is all about Jesus.



JONI EARECKSON TADA

JONI AND FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL DISABILITY CENTER

WINTER 2007

were you hoping for something better?



I THINK SOMEONE SHOULD just be honest with brides and grooms, and it might as well be me. We're waiting for cake. We loved witnessing your vows and we enjoyed getting to hug you in the reception line and we endured the awkwardness of greeting all your relatives we've never met before, but now . . . we want cake.

Why is it that the bride and groom seem to take so long to cut the cake? What are they waiting for? Don't they know we came for cake!

I know there are some people reading this book who don't get this. You're in no rush at all. You have no yearning to savor the doughy goodness between layers of Crisco-sweet frosting because you've filled up on carrot sticks and little heads of broccoli. And amazingly enough to me, you're content with that and a few peanuts and cashews. But most of us are patiently awaiting the cutting of the cake, and we're hoping we can be near the front of the line without appearing overly anxious.

I think I accomplished this appearance of nonchalance at a wedding I attended recently. And as I went back to the table with my slice, everyone was talking about how delicious the cake was. But I have to admit, after all the waiting for that cake, it just wasn't what I was hoping it would be. It was a little light and spongy for me; the icing was more like whipped cream than real frosting; and it was filled with fruit. And I had to wonder if everyone else was just being

nice—doing and saying what they’ve been trained by convention to do and say when they all smiled and said, “Isn’t this cake delicious?”

The truth is, I had been waiting for and hoping for something better, something more satisfying to my sweet tooth. And I couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed.

DISAPPOINTMENT: A FAMILIAR FEELING

A sense of disappointment is a familiar feeling for most of us. There have been so many things that haven’t lived up to their promise, someone else’s sales job,

or our own inflated, if not idealistic, expectations. We extend ourselves for the new house only to find that we can’t enjoy it because of all the little things that are not quite right. We long for years to get married or to become parents only to find that family life is not always as idyllic as we imagined it would be. With each career goal we accomplish, we find out that there is always a downside to the dream and another hurdle to overcome.

In fact, because we’ve been so often disappointed, we’ve trained ourselves not to hope for so much, not to expect too much anymore. We’d rather not build ourselves up for what we see as an inevitable letdown. So we’ve learned to live expecting very little from other people, from ourselves, from life, even from God.

It’s this disappointment with God, or with our experience or understanding of God, that creates real inner conflict. It seems so terribly unspiritual to admit that the Christian life, as we’ve experienced it so far, does not seem to really be what Jesus meant by “abundant life.” It often feels as if we’ve missed it somehow, as if everybody else must be experiencing something we can’t seem to achieve, but we don’t want to admit it to ourselves or anyone else.

We find ourselves living with a nagging hope for something better. We want something better than the “churchianity” of our parents and grandparents; something better than the vague and uncertain spirituality of our neighbors; something better than guilt-induced, holier-than-thou morality; something

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better than here-and-now, health-and-wealth promises; something more than going-through-the-motions religiosity or the latest-fad religious experience. We are hoping for something authentic—something worth opening our hearts to and filling our minds with and giving our lives for.

We don't have to spend our whole lives on an endless and unsatisfying search. There really is something better that is within our grasp. Better than living life with a merely sentimental, superficial spirituality. Better than going through life with a debilitating fear of death. Better than becoming bored and burdened by meaningless religious ritual; better than feeling like an unwelcome outsider or an unworthy hypocrite; better than being bound by shame and regret. There is something better that makes problems worth persevering through, something that makes heaven worth waiting for, something worth running toward and dreaming of.

That something better is actually some *one* better: Jesus.

But even as I say it, whether or not you are a follower of Jesus, I know there is a voice inside you saying, *Oh, Jesus again, or, Just Jesus? Been there, done that.*

Because some of us have felt disappointed by Jesus, too—at least Jesus as we have understood him and experienced him to this point. Could it be that our desire for something better springs from our underestimation or devaluing of Jesus? Could it be that we've become so comfortable with the Jesus we've constructed that we just aren't that awed by him anymore and we've become blinded to what he is truly worth?

Could it be possible to move from wherever we are now to becoming more solidly convinced that Jesus is worth our costly devotion, our intellectual energy, our emotional investment, our cherished reputation, our everything? Could upping our amazement and affection for Jesus actually be the something better we've been looking for?

UNCOMFORTABLE WITH JESUS

Have you noticed that Jesus seems to make people nervous? When Jesus comes up in the conversation, things get weird. Somehow, while it may be fine to believe in God or be spiritual or even go to church, to talk about Jesus as real and relevant somehow crosses the line of acceptability in most circles.

Why is that? Why does Jesus make people so uncomfortable?

They needed encouragement to hang on to what is true—encouragement to place all their hopes for the future in who Jesus is and what he did.

Perhaps it's because while Jesus may be welcome at the table, he is welcome only as one religious option no greater than any other. The reality is, we live in a time of growing marginalization for those who identify themselves too closely with Jesus. They are just a little bit too radical, bordering on weird.

This was the kind of world the people who received the letter to the Hebrews in our New Testament were living in. Their conviction that Jesus was the Son of God—the sole way to knowing God in a saving way—put them at odds with the culture around them. Their relationship with Jesus and commitment to Jesus were being put to the kind of test all of us secretly hope we will never have to take and wonder if we would pass—the test of persecution. As a result of expressing belief in Jesus, they had been ostracized from the center of Jewish life—the Temple. They were estranged from their

families, their businesses were blacklisted, and their homes and possessions were fair game. It was beginning to cost to follow Jesus—a cost that some of the Hebrew Christians were wavering on their willingness to pay.

They needed encouragement to hang on to what is true—encouragement not to settle for a socially acceptable kind of religion, encouragement to see Jesus in his superiority and sufficiency and to place all their hopes for the future in who Jesus is and what he did. It was seeing Jesus this way that would fill them with the courage and confidence they needed to stand strong. It is the same encouragement we need today.

When Jesus is small in our estimation, so are our courage and commitment. So seeing Jesus in all his beauty and significance will help us stand strong too, when life in this world is cruel and life in the next world seems distant and unreal.

A LOVING LETTER TO DISCOURAGED DISCIPLES

We don't know for sure who wrote this letter to the Hebrew believers and almost believers. We know he was an educated person, a seasoned preacher who knew the Old Testament. He knew the people he was writing to, and they knew him. And while it was sent in letter form, the book of Hebrews is really

more of a sermon than a letter. The author addressed the Hebrews as listeners rather than readers.

This letter was likely sent to a house church in or around Rome, and when it arrived, the recipients likely gathered together and had someone read it out loud. So it was like a sermon in absentia given to second-generation believers and almost believers. Their parents had witnessed the signs, wonders, and various miracles of Jesus, but they hadn't—they'd just heard about them. They didn't have the firsthand memories of seeing Jesus in the flesh to gird them and give them courage when the going got tough.

And they began to wonder if following Jesus was really worth it. They wondered if they really needed to give up so much of what had defined them for so long. Judaism was based on God's revelation in the Old Testament, and it followed practices that were laid down and built upon through the centuries. And while these people believed in Jesus and wanted Jesus, they still had questions about following him and doubts about what they were leaving behind.

What about the Temple sacrifices and the priests? What about Moses and the prophets? Should they turn their backs completely on their religious heritage? Couldn't they cling to Christ and hold on to the ancient Jewish traditions too?

They missed the traditions. They missed the company and approval of their unbelieving family members who walked past them traveling to the Temple and to festivals. The old ways of seeking to earn God's acceptance by keeping the law and following rituals wooed them. These habits were comfortable and familiar and acceptable. The tug of tradition threatened to put these early believers in danger of developing a ceremonial, legalistic version of Christianity. Their desire to blend their belief in Christ with familiar Temple rituals revealed a lack of full confidence in the gospel, a lack of full confidence that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of all the ceremonies and sacrifices.

It wasn't just saying good-bye to the familiar that made following Christ difficult for these early believers. Christianity had not proven to be of worldly advantage to them. In fact, it set them up for persecution—for the loss of property, privilege, and perhaps even their lives. And they were not just being paranoid. Right around the time this letter was written, martyrdom became a reality

of the Christian experience in Rome as Nero made Christians scapegoats to remove suspicion from himself after a great fire destroyed much of the city.*

These early Christians had lost their jobs and found themselves hungry—and worse, their children were hungry. They were objects of ridicule: Some people thought of Christians as cannibals because of what Jesus had said about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (see John 6:51-52). They were people like us, and naturally they were scared. So out of fear, some of them stopped associating with other Christians. Difficulty and loneliness and disappointment were slowly obscuring the truth of the gospel and tempting some toward compromise—or worse, complete renunciation of Christ.

As a result of their desire to cling to their religious rituals and their real fear of persecution, these believers were wavering. The distinctiveness of Jesus was getting fuzzy. They were wondering if they should play it safe and go back to Judaism with a little Jesus thrown in, or if they should keep moving forward with Christ, fully aware of the price they might have to pay for following him.

But then someone showed up with a letter, a letter from someone they knew and respected—a letter that was really more like a sermon. This letter reminded them why they had come to faith in the first place, reminded them of what made Jesus worthy of their worship and their very lives, reminded them of what was ahead for those who love Jesus and put all their hopes in him. This letter challenged and called them to keep on believing—to keep on persevering in the face of persecution and difficulty.

The book of Hebrews is an appeal for endurance in spite of difficulty, perseverance in the face of disappointment. In studying Hebrews, we find that considering Jesus—looking at him, valuing him, running after him, drawing near to him—is the secret to surviving and even thriving when life is hard.

As we study the book of Hebrews together (through the pages of this book and in your personal or small group study using the Bible study for Hebrews at the

*According to R. Kent Hughes in *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 1:19, the description of the persecution these believers had already experienced matches the hardships that came to Jewish Christians under Claudius in AD 49. At that time, Christians were expelled from Rome and banished from synagogues by the Jewish establishment. The author of Hebrews was likely writing around AD 64 or 65, when a new persecution was looming under Nero.

The book of
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end of this book), we'll adopt three of the same goals the writer of Hebrews had when he sent this sermon-letter.

GOAL #1: TO GO DEEPER

Some of us have never really given that much thought to Jesus. We've never really invested energy and attention to examining who he is, what he said, and what he did.

Others of us are so familiar with Jesus that we take who he is and what he has done for granted. We've settled into a comfortable understanding of who he is, perhaps seeing him as less than he is.

We need to go deeper in our examination of who Jesus is and what he has done. Only then can we see that he is worthy of our devotion.

Jesus is amazing; he's stunning. And, as the writer to the Hebrews wants us to see, Jesus is better than anything or anyone or any way of getting to know God. He's the something better we've been hoping for. Throughout the book of Hebrews, we are told of the multitude of ways Jesus is better:

- He is better than the angels (1:4).
- He is better than Moses (3:3).
- He offers a better way of living out authentic faith (6:9).
- He holds out a better hope (7:19).
- He is the author of a better covenant (7:22).
- He is a better mediator (8:6).
- He makes better promises (8:6).
- He is a better sacrifice (9:23).
- He offers better and lasting possessions (10:34).
- He offers a better country—a heavenly one (11:16).
- He promises a better reward (11:26).
- He provides a better resurrection (11:35).

Better, better, better. Do you really believe Jesus is better? Is time with Jesus better than thirty minutes more sleep? More restful than a week at the beach? More interesting than your favorite magazine? Do you believe Jesus is smarter than your most intelligent relative or neighbor? More compelling than the latest philosophical fad? More reliable than a big insurance policy?

Would anyone looking at your life be able to see that you believe Jesus is better than anyone else and anything else this world has to offer?

Would they be able to tell that you love him? admire him? believe him? trust him? What evidence is there that you know him, that you are devoted to him?

Is it time for you to let go of every lesser savior so that you can embrace and enjoy someone better—Jesus? I'm not describing one brand of Christianity. This is where a real relationship, a saving relationship, with God begins.

Have you truly grabbed hold of Jesus? Perhaps you've never seen yourself before as someone who needs a Savior. You've never seen a need in your life for Jesus. Maybe you have seen church and religion and tradition but you haven't seen the real Jesus. Because when you see him for who he is, you will realize he is so good you can't resist him.

Will you allow this study of Hebrews to enlarge your understanding of, admiration for, and devotion to Jesus?

GOAL #2: TO DRAW CLOSER

What's the point of the Christian life, anyway? To guarantee a free ride to heaven? The work of Jesus on the cross was not just so that we could gain entry into heaven when we die. The Cross broke down the barrier between us and God so that we can draw near to him right now, today. So we can grow closer to him and go nearer to him. This is something better than staying on the fringes of relationship with God. It is the intimacy and authenticity you have been longing for.

The great theological teachings in Hebrews are not just to increase our theological knowledge; they are intended to serve as the basis for action. And the action the writer of Hebrews wants for his readers is to keep moving forward with God, toward God. He uses a combination of encouragement, instruction, and warning to prod us forward.

It is the same set of motivational tools parents use to get their kids to do what the parents know is best for their kids—a combination of encouragement, instruction, and warning.

This is something better than staying on the fringes of relationship with God. It is the intimacy and authenticity you have been longing for.

Encouragement says, “Let’s dive into that homework and get it done before dinner!”

Instruction says, “You must start your homework before dinner so you will have plenty of time to get it finished.”

Warning says, “If you don’t get your homework done before dinner, you will not get to watch your favorite TV program tonight.”

The tone may be different, but the goal is the same—to get the homework done. And likewise, while the tone may be different throughout Hebrews, the goal is the same—to prod us to draw near to God through Jesus.

Throughout Hebrews, the writer encourages and instructs us with statements that begin with “Let us . . .”

Encouragement

- be diligent to enter God’s rest (4:11)
- cling to him and never stop trusting him (4:14)
- draw near to the throne of grace with confidence (4:16)
- press on to maturity (6:1)
- draw near to God (10:22)
- hold fast the confession of our hope (10:23)

Instruction

- stimulate one another to love and good deeds (10:24)
- lay aside sin and legalism (12:1)
- run the race of faith (12:1)
- show gratitude to God (12:28)
- identify with the rejected Jesus (13:13)
- continually offer a sacrifice of praise (13:15)

Using phrases such as “do not” or “see to it that,” he warns us against anything that will keep us from drawing near to God:

Warning

- pay more attention so you don’t drift away (2:1)
- don’t neglect your salvation (2:3)

- don't harden your heart (3:8)
- see to it that no one has an unbelieving heart (3:12)
- see to it that no one misses the grace of God (12:15)
- see that no one is sexually immoral or godless (12:16)
- don't refuse to listen to God speaking through Jesus (12:25)

The writer of Hebrews knows that because God extends his grace to us so freely, we can be lulled into a state of spiritual laziness, becoming comfortable with where we are and who we are. So he uses encouragement, instruction, and warning to stir in us a desire for something better, to keep us actively moving

forward toward God. Hebrews challenges our superficial interpretations of the gospel that allow us to go easy on ourselves and each other. It shows us that the life of faith is rigorous and requires effort and attention—not so we can earn our salvation but so that we can enjoy the fullness of it here and now. The closer we get to God, the more we find we want of him, and we want to shed everything that is keeping us at a distance from him. And that shedding requires some effort on our part.

The encouragements and instructions and warnings we will discover in more depth in our study of Hebrews were not only for the Hebrews; they are for us, too. We can decide that we will not take them all that seriously—that we will pick and choose the ones that appeal to us (perhaps as we think about someone else who needs to heed them). Or we can decide that because drawing near to God is what we want most of all, it will be worth examining ourselves, responding to the encouragements, following the instructions, and heeding the warnings we find in Hebrews.

For those of us who are followers of Christ, Hebrews will challenge us to set aside our old comfortable ways of approaching the Christian life, which require very little of us, so we can take up a new way of drawing near to God. It will require more discipline and more focus, but it will give us more rest and more joy.

We can decide that because drawing near to God is what we want most of all, it will be worth examining ourselves, responding to the encouragements, following the instructions, and heeding the warnings we find in Hebrews.

If you have not yet chosen to follow Christ, Hebrews will challenge you to stop seeing Christianity as a club to join or a philosophy to follow and help you see that Christianity is about a person to draw near to—a person to hold on to throughout the ups and downs of this life, who will carry you safely into the next.

GOAL #3: TO HOLD TIGHTER

The writer of Hebrews knew he was talking to people who were already suffering, and he knew that their suffering for the cause of Christ was only going to increase in the days ahead. So he gave them the same encouragement that we need when difficulty sweeps into our lives: “Hold on. Don’t give up. Keep a firm grasp on Jesus, no matter what comes.”

These aren’t empty words of motivation. They are based on something in the future that is sure and solid. The hope the writer of Hebrews talks about is the hope that Jesus has made a way for us to draw near to God in this life and that he will usher us into his very presence in the next. He is encouraging these early believers to hold on to the solid truth of the gospel that God saves sinners and has made a way for sinners to come to him. He’s encouraging them to look forward to all that awaits them in eternity, and he wants that confidence to inspire endurance in the difficulties of living life on this earth.

How do we live as if Jesus is our only hope in this life and the next? Hebrews tells us:

- keep up our courage (3:6)
- keep on loving others (6:10-11)
- hold on to the security of God’s promises (6:18)
- draw near to God (7:19)
- don’t waver in unbelief (10:23)

Perhaps we have felt such a weight of disappointment that we have become disillusioned and discouraged. Perhaps we have toyed with the possibility of throwing in the towel on this whole faith thing. If so, the writer to the Hebrews invites us to hold tight, stand firm, and keep going. Don’t we all need that kind of encouragement from the sidelines when life gets hard?

As I wrote about my wedding cake disappointment, I realized for the first time that there must have been some disappointed people at my wedding. We didn't even serve cake. Honestly I can't remember what I was thinking, except that we had a morning wedding followed by a brunch at a restaurant where they offered a variety of desserts. When we were planning our wedding, we thought people would enjoy having a variety of desserts to choose from rather than just cake. The restaurant surprised us with a little one to cut and feed to each other, but nobody else got any of it. And as I remember, it was pretty good. I wonder how many left our reception not quite satisfied and thinking, "I was hoping for something better. . . ."

And I wonder: Are you hungry enough for something better than what you've experienced so far that you will not only read the pages ahead but also complete the study of Hebrews at the end of this book? Oh, I hope so! That is a holy hunger—a hunger that God himself will satisfy.

There really is something better than wasting our lives and attention on the distractions this world offers. There is something better to be found in opening up the Word of God and expecting God to truly speak to us.

In the pages to come, as we work our way through the book of Hebrews, we'll discover together that we've only begun to scratch the surface of enjoying Jesus for who he is and what he has done. There is so much more. There is something better. Together, we'll discover . . .

There is something better than settling for a vague, diminished, distant understanding of who Jesus is, what he has done, and why it matters. It is seeing him more clearly and following him more closely.

There is something better than drifting along in a spiritual stream. It is grabbing hold of Jesus and drawing close.

There is something better than being enslaved to a debilitating dread of death. It is being set free by the promise of unending life.

There is something better than feeling like a hypocrite going through the motions of religion. It is an increasing intimacy with God and integrity with others.

There is something better than trying to work our way into God's good graces. It is resting in what Christ has done for us.

There is something better than staying on the fringes of an intimate rela-

tionship with God. It is boldly approaching him knowing we are accepted because of Jesus.

There is something better than continuing to go over the basics of faith. It is growing up in God by wrestling with deeper truths.

There is something better than trying to live up to an external standard of right and wrong. It is experiencing an internal transformation so that we want to do what is right.

There is something better than expecting to get everything we're hoping for here and now. It is a willingness to wait for all our deepest longings to be fulfilled in heaven.

There is something better than settling for the applause of people. It is anticipating the approval of God.

There is something better than the status of being an insider. It is the satisfaction of being connected to Christ even though we are rejected by the world.

There is something better than pursuing our own dreams of security and passion and significance. It is finding our security and passion and significance in God's dreams for us.

Let's refuse to settle for the Christian life as usual. Let's refuse to settle for anything less than something better.

before we get started



LAST WEEK A MAN who has written probably thirty Christian books told me that he has always seen Hebrews as a book for Jewish people, so he has never spent much time in it. And I had to tell him, “You’re missing out on so much!” I couldn’t help but share with him a few highlights from the truths I’ve discovered in my study of Hebrews that are for him and for me and for anyone else who wants to celebrate and enjoy all that Jesus means to those who place their faith in him.

I hope you’ve come to this book open to working the words of Hebrews into your life and will not depend solely on what I’ve written about it. I’ve created a resource in the back of this book so that you can study Hebrews by yourself or with a small group. To get the most out of the study, I suggest you work through the questions on the passage of Hebrews before reading the chapter on that particular passage. I suggest this for two reasons. First, as you work through the questions with your Bible open and your heart open to hear from God, he will speak to you through his Word, which is a thrilling and life-changing experience. Second, I think you will get more out of the chapter if you have already spent some time wrestling with the passage and its implications. Your familiarity with the passage and your lingering questions about what it means—and its implications for your life—will provide a foundation for you to respond to what the writer of Hebrews wants you to understand, accept, and do.

If you are studying the book of Hebrews with a group, I suggest that you meet first after reading the introduction to discuss what you have read, as well as what you hope to gain through this study. Prior to the next meeting, work

through the questions on Hebrews 1:1–2:4 on your own and read chapter 1 of this book; then discuss as a group the questions as well as truths that have impacted you from the chapter. In this way you can work your way week by week through all ten chapters.

In the process of working on this book, whenever I told someone that I was working on a book about Hebrews, the response was often something like, “Wow, you’re brave!” I’m not sure if I’m brave or just naive—or perhaps confident that God has something important to say to all of us in the challenging book of Hebrews. I know it was not written only for Bible scholars but for ordinary people like you and me.

I have found studying Hebrews to be so rich and so rewarding that I keep going back to it in my daily reading—going over the verses and chapters again and finding myself moved and challenged and changed all over again by its deep truths.

Don’t be intimidated by the idea of studying Hebrews. I have no doubt that while some of the concepts and truths are challenging to grasp, they are worth persevering to understand and own. So open yourself to it, dive into it, chew on it, enjoy it, submit to it. And share it with each other.

And sometime along the way, go to my Web site at www.nancyguthrie.com and let me know how your study is going. I’d love to hear about it.

CHAPTER 1

what is God saying to you?

HEBREWS 1:1–2:4



MY HUSBAND GAVE ME a very thoughtful gift for my birthday last year. Since my birthday fell a week or so after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, he made a donation to the Salvation Army in my honor. I loved it! I didn't need anything or want anything else—and it fit just right!

But then he made a mistake. The morning after my birthday he showed me a catalog and said, "I was thinking about how you are teaching Hebrews this fall and that you might like something to carry your Bible and notes and notebook in, and I saw this bag but I wasn't sure if it was the right color or style or if you would like it, so I didn't get it."

Like it? I loved it! It was the season's color of green in suede and leather with a nickel buckle.

"You know, your mom sent me a check for my birthday that is the exact price of that bag," I told him, picturing myself with this oh-so-stylish tote hanging on my shoulder.

So the next day I sent him an e-mail:

From: Nancy Guthrie

Sent: Monday, September 12, 2005 10:42 a.m.

To: Guthrie, David

Subject: franklin covey bag

If you happen to be by the Franklin Covey place, I would love it if you would pick up that bag for me.

NG

And he e-mailed me back:

From: Guthrie, David

Sent: Monday, September 12, 2005 11:22 a.m.

To: Nancy Guthrie

Subject: RE: franklin covey bag

I was going to “happen to be there” shortly! Still likin’ the green one?

DG

He brought it home that night. I wish you could see it. It is not too big and not too small. It has just the right mix of pockets on the inside, and it matches the green in several of my new fall outfits. I feel so chic.

Can you picture my bag in your mind as I tell you about it? Though you may have developed a picture of it in your mind, it is fuzzy and uncertain. Your mental picture will be slightly off in some way in terms of color or size or style.

So if I really want you to know what my new green bag looks like, I’ll have to show it to you. If you could see the bag for yourself, then you would no longer have to settle for a picture of it in your mind that is slightly off. It would be clear.

In the same way, God wanted us to know exactly what he is like so we wouldn’t have to be misguided or forever in the dark. So he went beyond describing himself and giving us pictures of what he is like. He has shown himself to us—in Jesus Christ. He went beyond words of description to giving us the living Word, the person of Jesus.

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. (HEBREWS 1:1)

From the first words of his sermon-letter, the writer to the Hebrews makes his case for showing these Jewish believers that the very purpose of everything in the Old Testament and their Temple traditions was to prepare them for the definitive revelation of God in the person of Christ.

Just as children are first taught letters, then words, and then sentences, God began revealing himself to us with the “picture book” of symbols and ceremonies. He started giving us a picture of who he is through the Law, the prophets, and the books of poetry—through the story of the children of Israel that was written down by more than forty writers over a 1,500-year time span. It was God speaking, but it was in bits and pieces, in forms and shadows. It wasn’t wrong; it just wasn’t complete.

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (HEBREWS 1:2)

To the letter’s recipients, “in these last days” didn’t just mean “recently”; it referred to the anticipated messianic time. The Old Testament had said that “in the last days,” the Messiah would come. But the phrase also means, in a sense, “finally.” It is saying that God has been speaking in bits and pieces and now we have his final, complete, and authoritative Word. There is no fuller or more final expression of God than Jesus. Nothing further is needed; this is it.

And this is good for us to know, because many people today claim to have a word from God for us, and we are right to be skeptical or at least make sure it is confirmed by Scripture. Because Jesus himself is God’s final and complete Word. God has given us his written Word, the Bible, and his living Word, Jesus, and we need nothing further to know and follow God.

God wants us to know what he is like, so he told us about himself. He began

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revealing himself to us in the Garden of Eden, as he showed us his love for beauty and order in his creation. He revealed the power of his wrath in the Flood and his ability to save in the ark. He revealed his ability to deliver us from captivity and bring us to the Promised Land in the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt. He revealed his love for holiness and righteousness in the Law. He revealed his plan for the ages through the prophets. And he gave us some hints about how he was going to take care of our sin problem in the building of the Tabernacle and in the festivals, feasts, and sacrifices. He showed us his wisdom in Proverbs and his passion in Song of Songs. All of these gave us snapshots of what God is like and what he is doing in the world.

But our vision of God was still fuzzy and uncertain until . . . “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NKJV).

In the person of Jesus, God has spoken and is still speaking into our lives.

Sometimes our feelings may tell us that God is silent. But when we complain that God is silent, when we're straining to hear the voice of God, what we are really saying is that we have exhausted this final decisive Word he has spoken to us in the person of Jesus and in the pages of Scripture. It's as if we are saying the Bible has nothing further to say to us, that we've seen all there is to see in Jesus and heard all there is to hear in the gospel, that it has no power to speak into our current situations.

But have we? Have we exhausted what Jesus has to say to us through his words and his ways and his work?

Or have we only given it a casual hearing, skimmed his Word like the newspaper and decided it simply doesn't apply or has no appeal?

WHAT IS GOD SAYING?

In Jesus, God is saying, “I want to show you who I am.” We would never know God if he did not speak to us. And he wants us to know him for who he really is, not for who we want to make him to be. So many times we want to make him into a God who suits our liking. We hear people say, “Well, the God I believe in would never . . .” or “I believe God is . . .” almost as if we can determine what God is like merely by the whims of our own imaginations.

God doesn't need our help in designing his personality or deciding what

he should be like. He is I AM, the eternal, self-existing one. And he wants us to see him and know him for who he really is.

One day when my son, Matt, was in early elementary school, he and I were driving along in the car discussing some lofty topic. I made the statement that we don't really know what Jesus looked like since we don't have a picture of him. Matt replied, "Yes we do. I've seen it."

Of course he was talking about the traditional painting of Jesus that we've all seen countless times and have come to think of as an actual rendering of the physical likeness of Jesus.

But while we don't have a photograph or a reliable painting of Jesus' outward appearance, Hebrews 1 paints a picture of the person of Jesus for those of us who want to see him and know him.

Jesus Is the Beloved Son (1:2)

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (HEBREWS 1:2)

Larry King once said that if he could land an interview with God himself, he would have one question: "Did you have a son?"

I suppose that is because he knows that this has been the crucial question of history and religion. Was Jesus merely a good teacher and a prophet? Or was he the divine Son of God, the singular Savior?

Just this week I read a newspaper article about a church in which the pastor is "questioning the existence of a personal deity, and he says he doesn't believe Jesus is God." This is the pastor of the church. When I read this, I couldn't help but think to myself, *Then why bother with religion? Why bother with calling yourself by his name?*

Some religions diminish Jesus by calling him "a" son of God, suggesting that there have been others. But John describes Jesus as *the* Son of God, "the Father's one and only Son" (John 1:14, NLT).

Two times during Jesus' life, God spoke in an audible voice from heaven: when Jesus was baptized and when he was transfigured on the mountaintop. Both times he said for all to

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hear, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). And at the Transfiguration he added, “Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5). Jesus is loved and honored by his Father. God himself has broken the silence of heaven to tell us that we need to listen to his beloved Son, Jesus.

Jesus Is the Appointed Heir (1:2)

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things. (HEBREWS 1:2)

God, the creator and owner of this world, has chosen Jesus to inherit everything. It’s all his. So what does this mean in practical terms? This means that Jesus, the Son of God, can make good on all that he has promised to give us. Why? Because he has all the resources. He is the heir of all things.

Romans 11:36 says that “from him and through him and to him are all things.” Everything that exists, exists for Jesus.

In the end Jesus will have under his complete control and ownership all things—all natural resources, all governmental power, all human intelligence, all the riches of the earth. Everything will be at his disposal and command.

And while Jesus doesn’t have to split the inheritance, he will.

My parents recently bought the house next door to my brother. He has been the “in-town” child living near my parents for years while my sister and I have lived in other cities, and he has enjoyed telling my sister and me that because of the heavier load he has carried for parental care, when the inheritance comes, it is not going to be split evenly three ways. (I think he’s kidding. You are kidding, right, Tom?)

While Tom may kid me about being stingy with our inheritance, I’ve been adopted into another family. And I know my brother, Jesus, will not keep his inheritance to himself. Jesus has promised that he will share all that he inherits. In Romans 8:16-17 we read that “the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.”

Have you ever heard the Spirit of God whispering to your own spirit that you are his child? If so, then one day Jesus will share with you all that he pos-

esses. In fact, Jesus is so generous, he offers to share his inheritance with anyone who will trust in him.

Jesus Is the Universe Creator (1:2)

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . through whom he made the universe. (HEBREWS 1:2)

You might have thought that God the Father created the heavens and the earth and that Jesus did not appear on the scene until he was born in Bethlehem. But Jesus was with God the Father as the Living Word from eternity past. While God the Father is the source of all creation, it was Jesus, his creative agent, the Living Word, who called creation into being.

Jesus has the ability to create something out of nothing. John 1:3 says that “all things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (NASB).

But the word in Hebrews 1:2 for what he has created is not *kosmos*, which refers to the physical universe. It is a word that is translated “the ages.” So Jesus not only created the physical earth, he created time, space, energy, and matter—all without effort—just by speaking it into being.¹

When we look through a telescope at amazing outer galaxies or when we touch the delicate finger of a tiny baby, we don’t have to wonder where it all came from. As we welcome the changing of the seasons or study the rise and fall of empires throughout history, we recognize that it is Jesus who set it all in motion. The Bible tells us the maker of all things is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Is the Radiant Glory (1:3)

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory. (HEBREWS 1:3)

We see the sun by means of seeing the rays of the sun. They are the essence of the sun flowing out of the sun. The round ball of fire that we see in the sky is the sun streaming forth in its radiance. To say that Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory is to say that Jesus relates to God the way the rays of sunlight relate to the sun. We see God the Father by seeing Jesus. Jesus is the radiance of God streaming down on us so we can see him and experience him and know him.

Jesus is the radiance of God streaming down on us so we can see him and experience him and know him.

The term “God’s glory” had deeper meaning for the original Hebrew recipients of this letter than it does for us today. These Hebrews remembered hearing about the glory cloud of God’s presence that lit the sky and led the children of Israel in the desert. It was the tangible presence of God in their midst. And now the writer of Hebrews is saying that Jesus is the ultimate cloud of glory. In fact, Jesus is the fire of God’s glory that will not burn or consume us. Jesus enables us to relate to the glory of God in human form.

Standing in the Temple one day, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). We live in a dark world, and perhaps there are circumstances in your life right now that would cause you to say that your world is very dark. Into the darkness of this world God sent his Son, Jesus, so that we could see and live in the radiance of his glory. Even now, Jesus is the only sure source of light for the dark places in our lives. He brings the radiant light of God’s presence into our darkness.

Jesus is God’s full personality and power and purpose in a person. He’s a precise copy, a perfect imprint, an exact reproduction; he is no less than God himself in human form.

Jesus Is the Exact Representation (1:3)

The Son is . . . the exact representation of his being.
(HEBREWS 1:3)

Did you ever have one of those Hallmark sets for sealing envelopes? I had one in grade school. I would light the candle and melt the wax onto my stylish stationery envelope and then press onto the wax a big metal seal with an *N* and hold it until the wax hardened. When I pulled away the metal seal, a perfect *N*, an exact representation of the metal seal, was left in the hardened wax.

Jesus is the perfect, personal imprint of God in time and space. As Colossians 1:15 says, “He is the image of the invisible God.”

Some people see the God of the Old Testament and Jesus of the New Testament as two dramatically different beings—

a sort of good-cop/bad-cop scenario. They like the gentle, nonjudgmental Jesus on the hillside teaching and healing, but they reject the vengeful God of judgment they've picked up from selected Old Testament stories.

But Jesus is not the softer side of God. Jesus is God's full personality and power and purpose in a person. He's a precise copy, a perfect imprint, an exact reproduction; he is no less than God himself in human form.

Jesus Is the Powerful Sustainer (1:3)

The Son . . . sustain[s] all things by his powerful word. (HEBREWS 1:3)

Everything in the universe is sustained right now by Jesus. Imagine if the sustainer suspended the law of gravity for just a few moments. Imagine if the sustainer tilted the axis of the earth a few degrees. Jesus didn't just make the world and leave it on its own. The reason there is order to the seasons and the sun keeps coming up in the morning is because Jesus Christ is the powerful sustainer.

But understanding Jesus as the sustainer is not just about his holding the physical world in place; it is more about Jesus' governance and authority and direction of history. Jesus oversees the progression of time, the course of history. And he does so by the power of his word. No further effort required.

Think about the implications of this. Jesus sustains everything in this universe with the power of his word. And you are on the fence trying to decide if Jesus is up to your standards? You wonder if he is strong enough to take on your situation? You doubt that Jesus is smart enough to deal effectively with your doubts and questions? You question if you can trust him with your life?

Whenever you wonder where this world is headed or if it is spinning out of control, you can rest in the confidence that Jesus is sustaining all things by the power of his word. Nothing happens by accident in this world. He says so, and it is done. The "all things" he is sustaining includes you and those you love. He is strong enough and sovereign enough not only to guide this universe into fulfilling its destiny but also to bring you into the fullness of all he has for you in himself. As it says in Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." Jesus is the powerful Sustainer—sustaining you, upholding you, completing you.

Jesus Is the Sin Purifier (1:3)

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (HEBREWS 1:3)

Do you remember watching the television coverage of Hurricane Katrina? I found that I plugged my nose from the inside while I watched, because I imagined I could smell the stench through the TV screen. Looking at the sludge-filled homes and trashed neighborhoods, I couldn't help but wonder, *How will it ever become clean again?*

Likewise, when the radiance of God's glory shines into our lives and reveals what is there, and we see ourselves for who we really are, we can't help but wonder, *How can I ever become clean again?* It seems impossible. We wonder how we'll ever get rid of the stains of our past failures—the blot of divorce, the ugliness

of cruelty, the emotional debris left behind by sex outside of marriage, the filth of what we've let our eyes see, the contamination of the words that have passed across our lips, the corruption of our selfish motives, the utter apathy in our hearts toward God. We realize that we are utterly ruined by sin.

And while that may sound miserable—and it is—it is the best thing that can happen to us. It is when we realize that we are ruined, that we can't clean up our act ourselves, that we recognize, perhaps for the first time, how relevant Jesus is. Jesus is the sin purifier. His blood is the only cleanser that will take away the stains sin has left in our lives.

And I have to wonder, if that doesn't mean something to you, have you really seen yourself the way God sees you?

We tend to compare ourselves to other people and think we look pretty good. But when we see ourselves the way God sees us—in contrast to the beauty and perfection of Christ—we see ourselves as we truly are: covered and contaminated by sin, inundated with dark thoughts of God, and plagued by indifference toward God—perhaps the ugliest sin of all.

Have you ever realized that you are ruined by sin, desperately in need of the sin purifier? Have you ever asked the sin purifier to come into your life and clean up the mess you have made?

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We don't have to get our lives cleaned up before we give ourselves to Jesus. That is like cleaning up the house before the maid gets there. We can come to him as we are, and he will take away the ugliness of our sin and give us his own perfect righteousness. This is the gift that makes it possible for us to one day enter the very presence of God.

You see, no one goes to heaven because he or she has been good. Who could ever be good enough to enter the presence of a holy God? No one. What you and I desperately need in order to have any hope of living forever in the pure presence of God is to be cleansed by the sin purifier—to trade in our sin-stained record, sin-plagued thoughts and motives, and even our own spot-ridden righteousness, for the righteousness of Christ, the perfection he offers to us as a gift.

He will give you his own righteousness if you ask him to, but he doesn't rush into your life uninvited. Have you ever invited the sin purifier to cleanse you and cover you with his perfect righteousness?

Jesus Is the Seated Ruler (1:3)

He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (HEBREWS 1:3)

I've found it is impossible to take a nap when I have a long to-do list running through my mind. I can't really rest because there is work to be done. But when the work is done, I can rest.

There were no seats in the Old Testament Temple as God designed it. None were needed because the priests could never sit down. Their work was never done. It was day after day, year after year, making sacrifices to cover sin, never finished until . . .

Until that day when Jesus uttered his final words as he hung on the cross. Do you remember what he said? "It is finished." What was finished? The work he had come to do—the giving of himself as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sin. He finished the work. And now that the work has been completed, he is seated.

Did you really hear that? The work is done. The work

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required for us to come into the presence of God has been completed by Jesus. Not only is he now resting, but we can rest too. We can stop trying so hard to work for God or work our way to God. The work has been completed by Jesus on our behalf. We can rest.

But this verse doesn't just speak to Jesus being seated; it tells us *where* he is seated. Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father, the place of honor and usefulness, power and authority.

Romans 8:34 says that Jesus is "at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, making intercession for those who belong to him. Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, telling him what you need when you don't even have the words for it or the will to ask for it.

Jesus Is the Angels' Authority (1:4-7)

He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (HEBREWS 1:4)

The Hebrews who originally received this letter saw angels as the ones who delivered the Ten Commandments, so they recognized that angels have power and authority. But some of these early believers were confused about where Jesus fit in with the angels. They wanted to see an organizational chart so they could understand the chain of command. This writer made it clear that Jesus is the one the angels worship and obey. Angels are created beings, but Jesus is the Son. While angels do God's bidding, God has exalted the Son, and the angels serve him.

People today love the idea of angels. I think it is because angels offer spirituality with no demands, a touch of the supernatural without any kind of commitment on our part.

I get letters from many people who have lost loved ones. So often these hurting people find comfort in the idea that the person who has died is "now an angel in heaven watching over me."

In fact, as I was studying this first chapter of Hebrews I received a letter from a woman who had lost a child. She also sent me the manuscript for a sweet and beautiful book she had written for children on the loss of a sibling, in which an angel showed the child around heaven. She was asking for my advice and

endorsement, and I found it very hard to know how to respond. Here's what I wrote to her, in part:

Your letter with your children's book manuscript arrived at an interesting time. I am diligently studying the book of Hebrews. The writer of this letter to the Hebrews knew that the people of that day found it easier somehow to worship angels than to worship Jesus.

I think your book is very sweet, and I know your heart is to create a resource that will take some of the sting of death from children who have to experience it, which is a worthy goal. But I think it is very important to comfort children and each other with the truth, and the best source of truth is the Scriptures. So we have to be very careful that what we write is faithful to the teachings of Scripture.

I have a hard time with the strong emphasis on angels at the expense of a focus on Jesus in the book. It is Jesus who will make heaven all that it will be, and I think we do a disservice to adults and to children if we take the more sentimental route of a focus on angels and diminish Jesus in the process. I can't help but believe that if our children had any message to send us from heaven it would be, "Jesus is beautiful! Jesus is everything! Jesus is worth waiting for!"

Angels are important. God created them, and they serve an important function in this world in service to God and to his saints. But people do not become angels when they die. Babies do not become angels. They're better than that. They are God's beloved children who rest safe in his arms. And while we might find it comforting to think about them watching over us, if we really think about that, do we want them to have that kind of sorrow and responsibility? Or do we just want them to enjoy Jesus and enjoy a perfected body, a perfected mind, and perfected emotions . . . complete perfection?

Angels are ministers and messengers. People are quick to credit their "guardian angel" when they feel they've been supernaturally taken care of, and certainly Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are sent to serve the saints. But

angels don't initiate this service on their own. They're sent. And shouldn't the real credit go to the one who sent the angel?

I suppose the question of angels comes down to this: Why settle for the servants when you can know the Son? Jesus, the Son, is served by the angels of heaven, and he is the one who sends angels to serve us.

Jesus Is the Enemy Defeater (1:13)

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? (HEBREWS 1:13)

Do you sometimes look around at the world and wonder where it is headed? Doesn't it sometimes seem like it is in a steady spiral downward—morally, politically, and socially?

When you see looters walking off with television sets and murderers who are set free on technicalities and corrupt corporate officers who make off with workers' pension funds, don't you long for someone to make things right? Don't you long for evil to be punished?

Evil *will* be punished, my friend. The enemies of God—those who have rejected him and rebelled against him—will one day experience the wrath of God. They will get what is coming to them. You can rest in that. You can surrender your right to revenge because of that. "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Jesus' defeat of his enemies is sure and certain.

And if you have been God's enemy until now, you can become his friend. We all start out as enemies of God. Romans 5:10 says, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" This is how good Jesus is. He has extended himself in love so that his enemies can become his friends.



Are you starting to see Jesus a little more clearly now in your mind's eye?

So many people want to reduce Jesus to a great moral teacher. They want to pick and choose what appeals to them about what he said and what he did. But

Jesus is the transcendent God of the universe. If you find yourself struggling to wrap your brain and heart around all that Jesus is, you're beginning to see him for who he really is.

If all of this is true about Jesus, can you see that you must give your life to him—and keep giving your life to him?

Honestly, most people don't see that. Most people in this world live with a vague sense of who Jesus is and no acknowledgment of the need to respond to him. But when we see Jesus for who he really is, how can anyone reduce Jesus to a "take it or leave it" religious option? How could we assume that we can be neutral about him or take bits and pieces of him, or ignore him?

Jesus is worthy of our worship.

Jesus is worthy of our very lives.

If you find yourself struggling to wrap your brain and heart around all that Jesus is, you're beginning to see him for who he really is.

HOW CAN WE KNOW WHAT GOD IS SAYING IS TRUE?

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

(HEBREWS 2:3-4)

If we're going to be intellectually honest, we have to ask and answer the question, How can we know that what this writer to the Hebrews is saying about Jesus is true?

Spoken by Jesus

For one thing, what the writer of Hebrews wrote about Jesus is compatible with what Jesus said about himself. Over and over again, Jesus made it clear that he is the only Son of the Father in heaven, that God has entrusted all things to him, that seeing him is seeing the Father, and that he has the power to forgive and cleanse sin.

Jesus was clear that he is the source of salvation and that there is no other. We receive that salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT HIMSELF

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). Jesus is the beloved Son.

“All that belongs to the Father is mine” (John 16:15). Jesus is the appointed heir.

“Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him” (John 13:31). Jesus is the radiant glory.

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is the exact representation.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51). Jesus is the powerful sustainer.

“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2). Jesus is the sin purifier.

Confirmed by Witnesses

In addition to Jesus’ own words, Jesus’ words and actions were confirmed by those who witnessed his person and his power.

The second-generation believers reading this original letter hadn’t heard Jesus speak with their own ears. They hadn’t heard him on the hillside teaching. They hadn’t seen him on the cross dying. But people who were there, who did hear and see, confirmed these events in the Gospels and the other pages of the New Testament, making it a reliable record.

Validated by Signs

Along with telling people he was the Son of God, Jesus did some things that made his words impossible not to believe. He said, “Though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him” (John 10:38, NKJV). Jesus claimed to be God, and then he did things only God could do. He walked on water and healed the sick;

he knew people's inner thoughts and motives. He lived a life uncorrupted by sin.

His disciples were also able to do things that only God could empower them to do. God gave them the ability to raise the dead and heal diseases. This was God's way of giving them credibility, so that people would believe what they said about who Jesus was and how to be saved.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH WHAT GOD HAS SAID?

God has spoken eloquently—on his own terms, in his own way, in his own time. But are you really listening? How can you experience what God is saying?

Pay Close Attention (2:1)

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. (HEBREWS 2:1)

Tim Keller has said that this instruction to “pay more careful attention” could more accurately be rendered as “be furiously obsessed with.”² The writer is saying that unless we remain furiously obsessed with the original message of the gospel, we are going to drift. We can get sidetracked by the latest fads in religious thinking, the latest best-selling book, the newest “it” teacher. So we have to stay focused on the person and work of Christ, on who Scripture reveals him to be. We can never exhaust the Word's meaning or implications in our lives.

When we want to pay close attention to something, we clear away distractions; we set aside the time and space so that we can listen. We make plans and provisions to listen. If we want to listen to music, we buy a car with a CD player and we put CDs in the car. If we want to hear from family and friends, we exchange phone numbers or set up Internet access to our homes so we can call or e-mail each other.

What provisions have you made so that you can pay close attention to what God has said in his written Word and in his

We have to stay focused on the person and work of Christ, on who Scripture reveals him to be. We can never exhaust the Word's meaning or implications in our lives.

living Word—Jesus? Have you determined when during your day and during your week you will set aside time to study God’s Word so that you can pay close attention to what he is saying to you through this study of Hebrews? Are you willing to leave behind a casual approach to listening to what God has to say to you, or does a new level of accountability make you uncomfortable and uneasy?

Do you find yourself too sophisticated, too busy with “important” things to be “furiously obsessed” with Jesus? If not, what provisions and plans are you willing to make so that you can pay close attention to Jesus?

Don't Drift Away (2:1)

It doesn’t take any effort to drift. If you’ve ever gotten on an air mattress and floated down a river on a sunny day, you know that there is real pleasure in drifting—at least for a while. But it doesn’t necessarily take you where you want to go.

We have been invited to tie up our air mattresses to the safe and secure harbor of salvation. But some of us have just never made that commitment. We haven’t tied ourselves to Jesus. And we’re in danger of drifting. We may be interested in Christ and intend to stay close, but time and circumstances cause us to drift, and without even realizing it, we may find ourselves slipping away completely from the opportunity to know Jesus in a saving way.³

Others of us have tethered ourselves to Christ, and yet in our hearts and minds we are drifting. If you’re honest, would you have to say that as you look back over your life, there was a time you were more in love with Jesus, more fascinated with his Word, more attuned to his Spirit than you are now? Was there a time you were closer to Jesus? You never made a decision to drift away. You never intended for the relationship to grow cold. But you’ve drifted. You’ve lost that firm grip.

This word of warning is for all of us: We need to nurture our furious obsessions with Jesus. Let’s anchor ourselves to him, stay close to him, and not allow ourselves to drift.

Don't Neglect Salvation (2:3)

How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (HEBREWS 2:3)

One Sunday I got to church, and in the middle of the service I realized something embarrassing. I had forgotten to put on any makeup. I must have planned

to do it after breakfast and then just forgot in the rush of getting out the door. Even though my husband assures me that I'm "one of those women" who looks good without makeup, I was horrified.

Some of you natural beauties may think that is silly—but others of you are horrified with me. You would never show up in public without washing your hair or putting on your makeup. Others of you would be horrified at the thought of neglecting your yard. You would never let the grass go to seed and the weeds overtake the flower beds.

You would never neglect your family, never fail to buy needed food or provide clothes for your children or get involved in their education. You would never neglect your business, never fail to return phone calls and e-mails or follow through on projects.

And yet some of us can be completely comfortable neglecting our salvation. We just take it for granted.

But what is interesting and unexpected in this passage is that the writer is not telling us here to get to work. What he's really saying is don't neglect being loved by God. Don't neglect being forgiven and accepted and protected and strengthened and guided by almighty God. Don't neglect the sacrifice of Christ's death on the cross. Don't neglect seeing the radiance of God's glory in the face of Jesus. Don't neglect enjoying the free access to the throne of grace. Don't neglect the inexhaustible treasure of God's promises. This is a great salvation. Don't neglect so great a salvation.⁴ It is the something better you've been hoping for.



Remember my green bag?

I could have just looked at the picture of the green bag and said, "That's a nice bag. It would be nice to have a bag like that. Someday I'll get myself a bag like that."

That's what many people do in regard to Jesus. They think that maybe someday they will get around to getting Jesus. And somehow they never get around to it. There is this

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incredible salvation available to them, and they neglect it. They never claim it for themselves.

I also could have bought the bag and then just put it on the shelf for someday when I needed it, never making it part of my life. What a shame, to put Jesus on the shelf, never making him a part of our day-to-day lives.

God's message to us in Jesus requires a response. God has spoken to us plainly, clearly, personally in the person and work of Jesus. And we need no other word. Jesus is everything God wants to say to us.

Are you listening?



Jesus is everything God wants to say to us.

CHAPTER 1

Take some time to read Hebrews 1:1–2:4 and work your way through the following questions before reading chapter 1.

List at least six things we are told about Jesus in verses 1-4.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Which one of these aspects of who Jesus is do you find especially meaningful, and why?

What do you think it means that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son” (1:2)?

Some say that Hebrews 1:1-4 expresses the most important idea in history. How would you express this idea in your own words?

What is the common concept of angels today? Compare that view with what the writer says about the duties and position of angels in 1:4-7, 13-14.

STUDY GUIDE

What does each of the following passages add to your understanding of the role of angels?

1 Kings 19:5-7

Psalms 34:7

Luke 1:13, 30

Acts 10:3-5

Acts 12:23

Revelation 5:11-12

As you follow the line of argument in 1:5-14, what does the writer intend to prove about Jesus Christ's position in relation to angels?

What responsibilities and authority does the Son have according to 1:8-9?

The writer has shown Jesus as superior in rank and in power to the prophets and to angels. What is Jesus shown to be superior to in 1:10-12?

According to 1:13-14, where is the Son? Where are the angels? How does this add to the superiority of Jesus?

Put into your own words the warning in Hebrews 2:1-4.

How does the culture we live in entice us to drift away from what God has said? What difference does understanding who Jesus is make in our tendency to drift?

STUDYING HEBREWS IN SEARCH OF SOMETHING BETTER

Do you see yourself as paying careful attention to Jesus or drifting away? What changes can you make in your life to guard against drifting away? What divine promises can you cling to in fueling these changes?

What was the reason for the signs, wonders, and miracles of Jesus according to verses 2:3-4? (See also John 10:38 and Acts 2:22.)

CHAPTER 2

Take some time to read Hebrews 2:5-18 and work your way through the following questions before reading chapter 2.

What point do you think the writer was trying to make to his readers by quoting Psalm 8 in 2:6-8?

Hebrews 2:5 says God did not intend angels to be in charge of the world to come (when the world is redeemed and returns to its original perfection). According to 2:6-8, who did God make to rule over the earth?

Understanding that Psalm 8 celebrates humanity's original destiny and that it is also a prophetic or messianic psalm, who is the ultimate "son of man" who fulfilled our original destiny?

Hebrews 2:8 says that "we do not see everything subject to him" (referring to both humanity and the ultimate man, Jesus). What evidences of this have you observed in the world and in your own life?

NOTES

1. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 14.
2. Tim Keller, “Christ: The Final Word” (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, February 6, 2005).
3. MacArthur, 44.
4. Keller, “Christ: The Final Word.”
5. John Piper, “Who Will Rule the World to Come?” (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, May 19, 1996).
6. MacArthur, 70.
7. John Piper, “Jesus Is Able to Help Those Who Are Tempted” (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, June 23, 1996).
8. Tim Keller, “The Rest Giver” (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, February 20, 2005).
9. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 124–125.
10. John Piper, “He Is the Source of Eternal Salvation for All Who Obey Him” (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, September 22, 1996).
11. MacArthur, 177.
12. John Piper, “Jesus: From Melchizedek to Eternal Savior” (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, December 1, 1996).
13. *Ibid.*
14. Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), chapter 23.
15. R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books), 1:154.
16. John Piper, “Let Us Press On to Maturity” (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, October 6, 1996).
17. MacArthur, 146–147.
18. Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1914), 1:562.
19. MacArthur, 239.
20. Hughes, 1:233–234.
21. According to Hughes, 234, “During the Passover, for example, a trough was constructed