

HEBREWS 1:5 – 2:18

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II. The Position of the Son in Relation to the Angels (1:5-2:18)

A. The Son superior to the angels (1:5-14)

⁵For to which of the angels did he ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? And again, "I will be to him as a father, and he will be to me as a Son"? ⁶And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world he says, "Let all the angels of God worship him." ⁷Regarding the angels he says, "He who makes winds his angels and a flame of fire his ministers," ⁸but regarding the Son [he says], "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the scepter of justice is the scepter of your kingdom. ⁹You loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, your God, anointed you [with] oil of gladness above your companions." ¹⁰And "You at the beginning, Lord, firmly established the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. ¹¹They will pass away, but you continue, and [they] all will wear out as a garment, ¹²and you will roll them up as a cloak, as a garment they will also be changed; but you are the same, and your years will not end." ¹³And regarding which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool at your feet"? ¹⁴Are [they] all not ministering spirits being sent for service for the sake of those who are about to inherit salvation?

1. The Son's unique relationship with the Father (1:5)

a. Jesus' exaltation to God's right hand made him greater than the angels *because* ("for") no angel has been similarly exalted. That is, God never said to any of them, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Ps. 2:7) or "I will be to him as a father, and he will be to me as a Son" (2 Sam. 7:14). (Note that in the O. T. angels occasionally are called "sons of God" in a collective sense, but no one angel was called God's "Son" in a unique sense. Koester, 200.)

b. The argument assumes an inextricable link between being declared to be God's Son and being exalted in the manner of Christ. To be exalted that way is to have God say, whether literally in association with the exaltation or symbolically by virtue of the exaltation, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" or "I will be to him as a father, and he will be to me as a Son." That is why the absence of that declaration to any angel means that no angel was similarly exalted (and thus that the Son in his exaltation was made greater than the angels).

(1) Guthrie (p. 69) states:

[T]he early church understood these passages to refer to Jesus' induction into his royal position as King of the universe at the resurrection and exaltation. With these events God vindicated Jesus as Messiah and established his eternal kingdom (see Acts 13:32-34; Rom. 1:4). God's becoming the Son's Father, then, refers to God's open expression of their relationship upon Christ's enthronement, an interpretation that fits both Old Testament contexts in question.

(2) Koester likewise notes (p. 191):

The author does not specify when the divine "begetting" occurred. Some related it to the Son's eternal generation (Augustine, NPNF¹ 8.3; Aquinas, *Ad Heb.* § 49) or to the incarnation (Chrysostom; Spicq; cf. Luke 1:35). The Synoptic gospels echo the psalm at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11 par.) and the transfiguration (Mark 9:7 par.). Nevertheless most interpreters connect this text with Christ's resurrection and exaltation, since the quotation supports the exaltation mentioned in 1:2b . . . and since in 5:5 (cf. 7:28) it refers to the eternal high priest in heaven [cites omitted]. Similarly, Acts 13:15-41 relates Ps 2:7 to Jesus' resurrection (Acts 13:33), Acts 4:25-28 relates other parts of Ps 2 to Jesus' passion, and in Rom 1:4 Paul said that Jesus is "declared to be Son of God . . . by resurrection from the dead."

2. The inferior position of the angels (1:6-7)

a. In this context, the reference to the Son as "the firstborn" is a title of honor expressing priority in rank. The firstborn had special prerogatives. He had a special place in his father's heart (e.g., 2 Sam. 13:36-37; 1 Chron. 3:1), shared the father's authority, and inherited the lion's share of his property (Guthrie, 69). It emphasizes the preeminence of Jesus, which is why it serves as a title for him in the N. T.

b. The superiority of the Son to the angels is evident from the fact that when God brings him into the "world" he says "Let all the angels of God worship him" (Ps. 96:7 LXX; see 97:7 MT). This obviously indicates the Son's deity.

c. There is question as to when this bringing of the Son into the world takes place, the answer to which hinges on the meaning of the word *oikoumene*, which is translated "world."

(1) The context favors understanding *oikoumene*, here as referring to the "heavenly world," which is why many leading commentators take it that way (e.g., Bruce, Lane, Guthrie, DeSilva, Koester, Johnson). In that case, this is another reference to Jesus' exaltation. It is at Christ's enthronement upon his ascension to heaven that all the angels bow before him. This brings to mind the heavenly worship scene of Rev. 5:6-14.

(2) Here is how William Lane explains it (p. 27):

[T]he majority of interpreters have identified the entrance of the Son into the *oikoumenē*, with his incarnation [cite omitted] or the parousia [cite omitted]. The context, however, points in another direction. It speaks of the sacrificial death of the Son followed by his exaltation (vv 3b-4). *oikoumenē*, then, concerns neither the incarnation nor the parousia but the entrance of Christ into the heavenly world following his sacrificial death. Christ's entrance into the world (*eis ton kosmon*, 10:5) in his incarnation entailed the humiliation of being made "lower than the angels" (2:7, 9), but his entrance into the *oikoumenē* (v 6) signified his enthronement and exaltation above the angels (vv 3-6) [cite omitted]. The context requires that *oikoumenē* be understood as the heavenly world of eschatological salvation into which the Son entered at his ascension.

(3) It is possible, however, that this is a reference to the parousia. At that time, *every* being (angels included) shall kneel in honor of Jesus' name (of Lord) and *every* tongue shall openly declare that he is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). Whenever the bringing of the Son into the "world" takes place, the fact all the angels are commanded to worship him establishes his superiority to the angels, which is the main point.

d. The superiority of the Son to the angels is evident from the fact God "makes winds his angels/messengers and a flame of fire his ministers" (Ps. 103:4 LXX; 104:4 MT). The point is that angels, as majestic and powerful as they are, are in some way comparable to other created things that God uses for his purposes. They are but creatures sent by God as messengers and servants to others (see 1:14).

(1) This quote from the LXX is regularly translated "He who makes his angels winds and his ministers a flame of fire," but no less a Greek linguist than Paul Ellingworth opts for the translation I have given. See also, Johnson (p. 80).

(2) Ellingworth writes in *Commentary on Hebrews*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 120:

The meaning of the quotation is ambiguous in the MT, which may mean either:

- (a) who makes winds/spirits his angels/messengers . . . , or
- (b) who makes his angels into winds.

The LXX cannot mean (b). In the context of the psalm, which refers to "clouds" and "winds" in v. 3, it probably means "who makes winds his messengers."

The point of the quotation in Hebrews is to show that the angels are (only) leitourgoi – as v. 14 will confirm. The context in Hebrews therefore calls for the translation "he makes winds his angels, and a flame of fire his servants."

3. The eternality of the Son's reign and relationship to the cosmos (1:8-12)

a. In contrast to what is said about the angels, the Son is addressed as God and is said to have an eternal throne that is ruled with justice. Because he loved righteousness and hated lawlessness, God the Father exalted God the Son, he anointed him to a position above all others (Ps. 44:7-8 LXX; 45:6-7 MT).

b. The heavens and the earth were made by the Son in the sense already noted; he was God the Father's agent in the creation of the universe (Ps. 101:25 LXX; 102:25 MT; see also, Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16).

c. The created order as presently constituted will be brought to an end by being radically transformed into something different, into something eternal and free from decay (Rom. 8:18-25). Jesus, on the other hand, remains forever because he has overcome death through the resurrection (Ps. 101:26-27 LXX; 102:26-27 MT).

4. The Son's position at the right hand in contrast with the position of the angels (1:13-14)

a. In v. 13 the writer quotes Ps. 109:1 LXX (110:1 MT) to which he alluded in 1:3. The superiority of the Son to the angels is evident in that no angel has been exalted to God's right hand, to a position of complete supremacy, as has been the Son.

b. On the contrary, angels are servants rather than rulers. They are ministering spirits sent on behalf of the ruler to serve those who are about to inherit salvation, meaning the disciples of the exalted Lord.

- **First Hortatory Interjection** – FIRST WARNING: Do not reject the word spoken through God's Son! (2:1-4)

Therefore we must pay even greater attention to the things that were heard, lest we drift away. ²For if the word that was spoken by angels was reliable and every transgression and disobedience received just punishment, ³how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which having at first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴God giving further testimony both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by distributions of the Holy Spirit according to his will?

1. A caution against drifting (2:1)

1.1. Given the superiority of Christ to the angels established in 1:5-14 ("Therefore"), it is incumbent upon him and them (and therefore upon us) to pay even greater attention than they have been to what they've heard, which is the word spoken through the Son (1:2), the message of salvation (2:3-4).

1.2. The danger of not doing so is that one will drift away from God's ultimate revelation, will be pulled gradually toward an abandonment of one's commitment to Christ. That was happening then, and it is happening today.

2. Motivation for heeding this admonition (2:2-3a)

2.1. Given that every transgression and disobedience of the word spoken by angels, meaning the Mosaic law, was justly punished, it follows that those who neglect the great message of salvation that was given by the Son, who is greater than the angels, have no hope of escaping punishment. The author is warning them about the danger of being apathetic toward the gospel by telling them there are catastrophic consequences associated with that course of action.

2.2. The word spoken by angels is a reference to the Mosaic law. There are only hints in the O.T. of an angelic role in the giving of the law (Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:17), but it is mentioned in nonbiblical Jewish writings (*Book of Jubilees* 1:27; 2:1, 26-27; Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.36) and at several other places in the N.T. (Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19).

3. The message of salvation (2:3b-4)

3.1. The message of salvation came initially from Jesus and was confirmed to the author and his readers by those who heard Jesus.

3.1.1. Though that message was prophesied in the O.T., it was not until Jesus that it was proclaimed as something that had arrived. The Savior, the basis of God's forgiveness, had appeared in human history, and people now are called to respond to that appearance.

3.1.2. The author and his readers were "second generation" Christians in the sense they received the word from those who heard Jesus rather than from Jesus directly. That word was "confirmed" to them by those who heard Jesus, meaning the original hearers guaranteed the accuracy or faithfulness of their message (and thereby guaranteed its truthfulness because it was from Jesus).

3.2. God himself also confirmed the truth of the message from the original hearers by the various miraculous manifestations that accompanied their preaching of it (see, e.g., Mk. 16:20 [note textual issue]; Acts 2:22, 3:1-10, 14:3-11; Rom. 15:18-19; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:1-5).

B. The superior Son for a time became positionally lower than the angels (2:5-9) – This section resumes the exposition on Christ (1:5-14) that was interrupted by the hortatory interjection (2:1-4). The author introduces Ps. 8:4-6, which contains both elements of exaltation and incarnation, and thus serves as a transition from the prior focus on the exalted status of the Son to the discussion in 2:10-18 about the Son's solidarity with humanity.

⁵For he did not subject to angels the coming world, concerning which we are speaking. ⁶But someone solemnly testified somewhere, saying, "What is man, that you are mindful of him? Or the son of man, that you are concerned for him? ⁷You made him for a little while lower than angels, you crowned him with glory and honor, ⁸you subjected all things under his feet." For in subjecting all things [to him], he left nothing [that is] not subjected to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him, ⁹but we see the one who for a little while was made lower than the angels, Jesus, having been crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death on behalf of everyone.

1. Submission of all things to Christ (2:5-8a)

a. The fact noted in 1:13 that God never said to an angel that he would make his enemies a footstool for his feet is reflected in 2:5 in the statement that God did not subject to angels the coming world. That is the world about which he was speaking in 1:11-12, the eternal world that will continue after the world as presently constituted, the world subject to corruption and decay, is brought to an end at the return of Christ.

b. At that time, every being shall kneel not in honor of an angel but in honor of Jesus' name (of Lord), and every tongue shall openly declare that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). On the part of some, this will be forced reverence, a submission to one whose power they cannot resist. F. F. Bruce remarks on the Philippians text, "Not only human beings . . . but [also] angels and demons, in joyful spontaneity or in reluctant fear, acknowledge the sovereignty of the crucified one – all beings, in fact, in heaven, on earth, and in the world below."

c. Ps. 8:4-6, which the writer cites, refers not only to the Son's supreme exaltation but also to a brief time when the Son came to earth and took on a status or position (as a human being) that was lower than that of the angels. This is part of the transition to 2:10-18 where the author focuses on the incarnation.

2. What we do and do not see at present (2:8b-9)

a. There is a tension between the fact Jesus *already* has been exalted as Lord over all and the fact some things, like death, are *not yet* subjected to him (1 Cor. 15:25-28). This tension is reflected in the Psalms the writer cites. Psalm 110:1 (cited in 1:13) alludes to a future subjugation of all things to Christ ("*until* I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"), whereas Ps. 8:4-6 suggests that the subjugation of all things to Christ is an accomplished fact ("You . . . *subjected* everything under his feet"). The author here clarifies this relationship.

b. Guthrie explains this well (p. 99):

The author, in effect, answers the question, "Which is it? Have all things been subjugated to the Son, or does his universal dominance lie in the future?" with "Both!" . . .

At various points early Christian teachers present Christ's exaltation over the powers as a *fait accompli* (Eph. 1:20-22; 1 Pet. 3:22). This accomplished fact, however, might seem confusing at best and tacitly absurd at worst to someone looking at a church ravished by the forces of darkness. Persecuted Christians in Rome may have been asking, "Why are we being hurt by powers already placed under the feet of Christ? Has God not subjected all things to the Son?" The author, referring to Psalm 8, answers this question in the affirmative, but, based on Psalm 110:1, goes on to explain we have yet to see the *full* impact of his authority. This latter point aligns with other exaltation passages in the New Testament, which, also based on Psalm 110:1, speak of the subjugation of all things as a future event (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:25-26).

This tension between the "now" and the "not yet," between what is present reality but not yet seen, expresses what may be referred to as "the inaugurated rule of Christ." That is, the reign of Christ and the reality of Christian experience have begun, but will not be fully actualized until a final consummation at the end of the age. The Son's rule is already a reality; that reality, however, must be confessed by faith until we see its full impact at the end of the age.

c. Though we do not yet see the final subjugation of all things to Jesus, we "see" (are aware of through the gospel) Jesus, who has been crowned with honor and glory because he became a human subject to human authority (was made lower than the angels) and died as a sacrifice for humanity's sins. The reference to Christ's tasting death on behalf of mankind leads into the next unit, which deals with the Son's suffering on behalf of the heirs.

C. The Son lower than the angels (i.e., among humans) to suffer for the "sons" (i.e., heirs) (2:10-18)

¹⁰For it was fitting for him, on account of whom [are] all things and through whom [are] all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. ¹¹For both the one who sanctifies and those being sanctified [are] all of one; on account of which reason he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹²saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers, in the midst of the assembly I will sing praises to you." ¹³And again, "I will have confidence in him," and again, "Here am I and the children God gave me." ¹⁴Since therefore the children have shared blood and flesh, he also likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might nullify the one having the power of death -- that is, the devil -- ¹⁵and free these, as many as were held in slavery by fear of death through all [their] living. ¹⁶For clearly he is not concerned about angels; rather, he is concerned about the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷For which reason, he was obligated to become like the brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest [in] the things [pertaining] to God, in order to make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For because he has suffered, having been tested himself, he is able to help those being tested.

1. The appropriateness of the Son's suffering (2:10)

a. Having mentioned Jesus' death on behalf of mankind, the writer proclaims that it was fitting or appropriate for God to save people, to bring many sons to glory, through the means of Jesus' death.

(1) It was fitting or appropriate because it is in keeping with his nature.

(a) Because God is absolutely holy and glorious, he cannot simply wink at sin. To forgive sin without payment of a penalty would be to condone the evil, to trivialize it, and to open God to the charge of being unjust. It would be to exercise mercy *at the expense of* justice.

(b) So, regarding our sin, there is tension between aspects of God's nature, between his justice and his mercy, between his holiness and his love. But that tension is not irreconcilable. The cross is where God's justice and mercy, his holiness and his love are manifested *simultaneously*. Because in his love he desires to forgive us of our sin, he sent Jesus, his Son, to take upon himself the punishment for that sin. He didn't wink at it; he didn't condone it; he didn't trivialize it. Far from it – he bore it!

(c) So in the cross God is able to satisfy both his holiness and his love; in other words, through the cross he is able to forgive consistently with his being, he is able to forgive *justly* or to forgive *righteously*. That is why it was fitting for God to save people through the means of Jesus' death.

(2) When the writer says it was fitting for God "to perfect" the author of their salvation through sufferings, meaning through his death, he is not suggesting that Jesus ever was "imperfect" in the sense of being flawed or errant.

(a) God "perfected" Jesus through his death in the sense it was that act that fulfilled or completed God's plan of redemption. Jesus sinlessly and flawlessly fulfilled his mission at every step, but that mission was not completed until he endured the cross. So until that time Jesus' obedience was not yet perfect in the sense it was not yet complete.

(b) As a rough analogy, a person who has bowled all strikes for 9 frames is flawless to that point, but there is a sense in which his perfection is not yet complete. It's not until the game is finished, until the intended end is reached, that he is perfect in a deeper and fuller way.

2. The Son's solidarity with the "sons" (2:11-13)

a. Both Jesus and those who are sanctified by his atoning death all share the same Father; they are all sons (and daughters) of God (Jn. 1:12-13; Mat. 5:9; Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26), though Jesus is the Son in a unique sense. For that reason, Jesus is not ashamed to call his disciples brothers. However the society may reject them, Jesus identifies with them.

b. In support of the assertion that Jesus is not ashamed to call his disciples brothers, the author quotes three O.T. texts that he reveals are properly seen as prophecies about Jesus. The quotes are from Ps. 22:22 (21:23 LXX) and Isa. 8:17-18, though the second statement ("I will have confidence in him") also appears in texts other than Isa. 8:17.

c. Psalm 22 clearly was understood by first-century Christians to be about Jesus. Isaiah 8:17-18 presumably was understood messianically because Isa. 8:14 describes the Lord as a "stumbling stone," which words were applied to Christ by other N.T. writers (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:8), and because Isaiah's children were considered signs and portents from God which suggests that 8:17-18 may have a significance beyond what is obvious.

d. These texts support that Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers by the reference to "my brothers" and his close association with "the children" (he is with them and God gave them to him) and by his expressions of devotion to the Father which stress his sonship and thus link him fraternally with God's other sons (and daughters).

e. There is uncertainty as to when the author understands Jesus to fulfill these texts, to say these things, but that uncertainty does not detract from his point. Whether these are statements the Son made before the Incarnation, during his earthly

ministry, after his ascension (in which case at least some of the references probably are to the parousia), or in some combination thereof, the fact he made them anywhere at any time emphasizes the solidarity of "the Son" and "the sons." The writer was not concerned to spell out the timing and location of the sayings because that was not significant for his purpose.

3. The reason for the Incarnation (2:14-16)

a. Since the children of God are human, made of blood and flesh, the Son also became a human in order to nullify the devil's work of death. He became a human being to conquer human mortality, to conquer death by providing resurrection life for the children of God, and as a result to free them from the fear of death.

b. The way he accomplished this nullification of the devil's work was through his own death. By his sacrifice for sin, Jesus removed that which gives death its sting, that which makes it painful (1 Cor. 15:56). Death without the yoke of sin is a passage into the glorious presence of Christ (Acts 7:59; Phil. 1:23), which leads ultimately, at Christ's return, to the resurrection of the body. So death is no longer to be feared, the subtext of which is that the threat of death should not draw them away.

c. Donald Hagner remarks (p. 52):

The devil has been defeated in principle in and through the ministry of Jesus (Luke 10:18) and especially through the cross (cf. John 10:31), and yet he is not destroyed, but continues to have real, if limited, power (cf. Eph. 4:27; 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:7; James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8). In a similar way, the NT can say that Christ "has destroyed death" (2 Tim. 1:10), and yet death continues to be a reality with which humanity must reckon. The devil and death are clearly overcome in Christ's work, even if in this interim period between the cross and the return of Christ we do not see the full effects of Christ's victory.

d. For, as these Christians well understood, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was not for angels but for the descendants of Abraham, meaning humans who through faith inherit the promises of Abraham (Rom. 4:11, 9:6-8; Gal. 3:7-9).

4. Conclusion (2:17-18)

a. These verses lead into the central section of Hebrews (4:14 – 10:25) that focuses on Jesus' high priesthood. The sections are linked by a number of common words and phrases. But before developing that theme, the writer interjects another hortatory section from 3:1 – 4:13.

b. It is because of his concern for God's children, descendants of Abraham, that he was obligated to share fully in their humanity because only by doing so

could he be a high priest able to offer the ultimate sacrifice, to make atonement for the sins of the people.

(1) The high priest was the preeminent religious figure in the old covenant. As Guthrie notes (p. 174), "he oversaw the ritual worship of God and functioned as the main representative between the nation and Yahweh. . . . Although the high priest shared a number of duties with the other priests, he alone entered the Most Holy Place on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-25)."

(2) As the writer indicates in 5:1, every high priest is taken from among human beings, so for Jesus to serve in that role he needed to become a human.

c. The writer then closes this section of the address with a note of pastoral encouragement. Jesus is intimately familiar with the conflicts and tensions between faithfulness and human existence. He was tested in the extreme through his suffering of death and yet proved himself to be a faithful high priest. So he is uniquely able to help those who are facing the hardships that accompany faithfulness.