

The Message of Hebrews



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Heb. 1:5–14, Luke 1:30–33, Ps. 132:1–5, Heb. 2:14–16, Heb. 5:1–4, 1 Pet. 2:9, Heb. 8:8–12.*

Memory Text: “This is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (*Hebrews 8:1, NKJV*).

A Jewish document written a few decades after Hebrews, around A.D. 100, contains a prayer: “All this I have spoken before you, O Lord, because you have said that it was for us that you created this world. . . . And now, O Lord, behold, these nations, which are reputed as nothing, domineer over us and devour us. But we your people, whom you have called your first-born, only begotten, zealous for you, and most dear, have been given into their hands.”—James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), p. 536.

The readers of Hebrews probably felt something similar. If they were God’s children, why were they going through such suffering?

Thus, Paul wrote Hebrews to strengthen the faith of the believers amid their trials. He reminded them (and us) that the promises of God will be fulfilled through Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, and who will soon take us home. In the meantime, Jesus mediates the Father’s blessings to us. So, we need to hold fast to our faith until the end.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 8.

Jesus Is Our King

The main point of Hebrews is that Jesus is the Ruler, who is seated at the right hand of the Father (*Heb. 8:1*). As God, Jesus always has been the ruler of the universe. But when Adam and Eve sinned, Satan became the ruler of this world (*John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:11*). Jesus, however, came and defeated Satan at the cross, recovering the right to rule those who accept Him as their Savior (*Col. 2:13–15*).

The first two chapters of Hebrews focus especially on the inauguration of Jesus as King.

Read Hebrews 1:5–14. What is happening here?

These verses are arranged in three sections. Each section introduces an aspect of the enthronement ceremony of the Son. First, God installs Jesus as the royal Son (*Heb. 1:5*). Second, God introduces the Son to the heavenly court, who worship Him (*Heb. 1:6, 8*) while the Father proclaims the eternal creatorship and rule of the Son (*Heb. 1:8–12*). Third, God enthrones the Son—the actual conferral of power over the earth (*Heb. 1:13, 14*).

One of the most important beliefs of the New Testament is that in Jesus, God fulfilled His promises to David (*see 2 Sam. 7:8–16 and Luke 1:30–33*). Jesus was born from the line of David in the city of David (*Matt. 1:1–16; Luke 2:10, 11*). During His ministry people often called Him “son of David.” He was executed under the charge that He claimed to be “the king of the Jews” (*Matt. 27:37, NKJV*). Peter and Paul preached that Jesus had risen from death in fulfillment of the promises made to David (*Acts 2:22–36, Acts 13:22–37*). And John identified Jesus as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (*Rev. 5:5*).

Hebrews, of course, concurs. God has fulfilled His promises to David in Jesus: God gave Him a great “name” (*Heb. 1:4*), installed Him as His own Son (*Heb. 1:5*), affirmed Him forever as Creator and Lord (*Heb. 1:8–12*), and seated Him at His “right hand” (*Heb. 1:13, 14*). Furthermore, according to Hebrews 4, Jesus leads the people into the rest of God, and we are reminded that Jesus is the Builder of the house of God (*Heb. 3:3, 4*).

Jesus, then, is the legitimate Ruler of this earth engaged in a war with Satan, the usurper, for our allegiance.

How can we draw comfort, especially amid trials, from knowing that Jesus is the Ruler of the universe?

Jesus Is Our Mediator

An interesting concept of the Old Testament theology is that the promised Davidic King would represent the nation before God.

Compare Exodus 4:22, 23 with 2 Samuel 7:12–14; Deuteronomy 12:8–10 with 2 Samuel 7:9–11; and Deuteronomy 12:13, 14 with Psalm 132:1–5, 11–14. What promises to Israel would be fulfilled through the promised Davidic King?

Israel was God's son, and God would give the Israelites a place where they would rest from their enemies. God also would choose a place among them where His name would dwell. These promises for Israel would now be fulfilled through the promised Davidic King. He would be adopted as God's son, God would give him rest from his enemies, and he would build a temple for God in Zion where God's name would dwell. This means that God would fulfill His promises to Israel through the promised Davidic King. The Davidic King would represent Israel before God.

The insertion of a representative in the relationship between God and Israel made the perpetuation of their covenantal relationship possible. The Mosaic covenant required the faithfulness of all Israel to receive God's protection and blessings (*see Josh. 7:1–13*). The Davidic covenant, however, secured God's covenantal blessings upon Israel through the faithfulness of one person, the Davidic King.

Unfortunately, for the most part the Davidic kings were not faithful, and God could not bless Israel as He wanted. The Old Testament is filled with accounts of just how unfaithful many of those kings actually were.

The good news is that God sent His Son to be born as the Son of David, and He has been perfectly faithful. Therefore, God is able to fulfill in Him all the promises He made to His people. When God blesses the king, all his people share in the benefits. This is why Jesus is the Mediator of God's blessing to us. He is the Mediator in that He is the channel through whom God's blessings flow. Our ultimate hope of salvation is found only in Jesus and what He has done for us.

Think about how often you have been unfaithful to your end of the covenant. What does this teach us about how we must rely solely on Jesus for salvation?

Jesus Is Our Champion

Compare 1 Samuel 8:19, 20 and Hebrews 2:14–16. What did the Israelites look for in a king, and how were these wishes fulfilled in Jesus?

The Israelites wanted a king to be their judge and their leader in battle because they forgot that God was their King. The complete restoration of God's rule over His people came with Jesus. As our King, Jesus leads us in the battle against the enemy.

Hebrews 2:14–16 describes Jesus as the Champion of weak human beings. Christ faces and defeats the devil in a solo combat and delivers us from bondage. This description reminds us of the battle between David and Goliath. After being anointed as king (*1 Samuel 16*), David saved his brethren from slavery by defeating Goliath. The terms of engagement determined that the winner of the combat would enslave the people of the other party (*1 Sam. 17:8–10*). Thus, David acted as a champion of Israel. He represented them.

Read Isaiah 42:13 and Isaiah 59:15–20. How does Yahweh describe Himself in these passages?

Hebrews 2:14–16 alludes to the notion that God would save Israel in a solo combat. Note this passage from Isaiah: “For thus says the LORD: ‘Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children’ ” (*Isa. 49:25, ESV*).

As Christians, we often think that we are engaged in a solo combat with Satan. When we read Ephesians 6:10–18, we see that, yes, we are in combat with the devil. But God is our Champion, and He goes to battle before us. We are part of His army; that is why we have to use His armor. Also, we do not fight alone. The “you” in Ephesians 6 is plural. We as a church take the armor and fight together behind our Champion, who is God Himself.

What does it mean to put on the armor of God? That is, in our daily struggles with self, temptation, and so forth, how can we avail ourselves of the power that enables us through God's strength to be faithful?

Jesus Is Our High Priest

Hebrews 5–7 introduces a second function of Jesus. He is our High Priest. The author explains that this fulfills a promise God had made to the promised Davidic King, that He would be “‘a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’” (*Ps. 110:4, as quoted in Heb. 5:5, 6, NKJV*).

Read Leviticus 1:1–9, Leviticus 10:8–11, Malachi 2:7, Numbers 6:22–26, and Hebrews 5:1–4. What functions did the priest fulfill?

The priests were appointed on behalf of human beings to represent them and mediate their relationship with God and the things pertaining to Him. The priest was a mediator. This was true of any system of priesthood, whether Jewish, Greek, Roman, or any other. The priest makes it possible for us to relate to God, and everything the priest does has the purpose of facilitating the relationship between us and God.

The priest offers sacrifices on behalf of human beings. The people cannot bring these sacrifices to God in person. The priest knows how we can offer an “acceptable” sacrifice so that our gifts may be acceptable to God or so that they can provide cleansing and forgiveness.

Priests also taught the law of God to the people. They were experts in God’s commandments and were in charge of explaining and applying them.

Finally, the priests also had the responsibility of blessing in the name of Yahweh. Through them, God mediated His goodwill and beneficent purpose for the people.

However, in 1 Peter 2:9, we see something else. We—believers in Jesus—are called “a royal priesthood.” This role implies incredible privileges. Priests could approach God in the sanctuary. Today, we can approach God through prayer with confidence (*Heb. 4:14–16; Heb. 10:19–23*). There are, as well, important responsibilities. We must collaborate with God in His work of saving the world. He wants us to teach and explain God’s laws and precepts to others. He also wants us to offer sacrifices of praise and good works, which are pleasing to Him. What a privilege and what a responsibility!

What difference should it make in our lives that we are, indeed, “a royal priesthood”? How should this truth impact how we live?

Jesus Mediates a Better Covenant

Hebrews 8–10 focuses on the work of Jesus as the Mediator of a new covenant. The issue with the old covenant was simply that it was only a foreshadowing of the good things that would come. Its institutions were designed to prefigure, to illustrate, the work that Jesus would do in the future. Thus, the priests prefigured Jesus, but they were mortal and sinners. They could not provide the perfection that Jesus did. And they ministered in a sanctuary that was a “copy and shadow” (*Heb. 8:5, NKJV*) of the heavenly sanctuary.

Jesus ministers in the true sanctuary and provides us access to God. The sacrifices of animals prefigured the death of Jesus as a sacrifice in our behalf, but their blood could not cleanse the conscience. Jesus’ blood, however, purifies our conscience, and through Him, having faith in Him and accepting His mediatory work in our behalf, we can approach God with boldness (*Heb. 10:19–22*).

Read Hebrews 8:8–12. What did God promise to us in the new covenant?

By appointing Jesus as our High Priest, the Father inaugurated a new covenant that will accomplish what the old covenant could only anticipate. The new covenant delivers what only a perfect, eternal, human-divine Priest can. This High Priest not only explains the law of God but also implants the law in our hearts. This Priest offers a sacrifice that brings forgiveness. This Priest cleanses and transforms us. He transforms our hearts from stone to flesh (*Ezek. 36:26*). He really creates us anew (*2 Cor. 5:17*). This Priest blesses us in the most incredible way, by providing us access into the very presence of the Father Himself.

God designed the old covenant in order to point to the future, to the work of Jesus. It was beautiful in its design and purpose. Yet, some misunderstood its purpose. Unwilling to leave the symbols, the shadows, and embrace the truths that the symbols were pointing to, they missed the wonderful benefits that Jesus’ ministry offered them.

“Christ was the foundation and life of the temple. Its services were typical of the sacrifice of the Son of God. The priesthood was established to represent the mediatorial character and work of Christ. The entire plan of sacrificial worship was a foreshadowing of the Saviour’s death to redeem the world. There would be no efficacy in these offerings when the great event toward which they had pointed for ages was consummated.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 165.

Further Thought: Despite all the good and hopeful truths in the book of Hebrews, there also is a series of warnings that reach their climax in chapters 10–12.

These sections have at least two common elements. First, they all compare the desert generation with the readers of Hebrews. Second, they exhort us to have faith.

The desert generation was the one that saw the amazing power of God unleashed in signs and wonders in their deliverance from Egypt. They also heard God speak, from Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments. They saw the column of fire in the night and the protecting cloud during the day. They ate manna, bread from heaven. They also drank water that sprang from the rocks wherever they camped. But when they arrived at the border of the Promised Land, they were not able to trust God. They lacked faith, which is the core of what God requires. “Without faith it is impossible to please Him” (*Heb. 11:6, NKJV*).

Paul says that we, like the desert generation, also are at the border of the Promised Land (*Heb. 10:37–39*). Our privileges and responsibilities are greater, however. We did not hear God speak at Mount Sinai, but we have seen through Scripture a revelation of God greater than the one at Mount Zion: God in the flesh, Jesus Christ (*Heb. 12:18–24*). The question is: Will we have faith? Paul encourages us to follow the example of a great list of characters, which culminates with Jesus Himself.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** We have learned that Jesus is our Champion who goes before us into the battle against the devil. How can we fight together, united, as a church behind our Champion? What are those things that prevent this unity from happening? What are ways that Satan can weaken us as a church? How did Satan weaken Israel in the past?
- 2** As believers, we are a community of priests under God’s direction. In what ways can your local church offer better sacrifices of praise and good works to God? Please be specific and practical.
- 3** In what ways is our situation similar to the situation of the desert generation just before crossing into the Promised Land? What lessons can we learn from the similarities?

Miraculous Rock

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

A miracle rock stopped the pickup truck of Bounprany Vannady, who was serving as president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Laos.

It was just an ordinary creek. Any car could pass through its shallow waters easily. No car was known to have ever gotten stuck there. But the pickup truck decided to stop just as it entered the creek. It simply stopped.

Bounprany and two young pastors traveling with him found a rock blocking the way, but it seemed to be too small to stop the vehicle. Just to make sure, they moved the rock and tried to restart the vehicle. It refused to start. They hailed down a passing car and tried to jumpstart the battery, but the pickup truck still refused to start.

Since it was getting dark, Bounprany walked to the nearest village. Several villagers came back to the pickup truck to help, but they couldn't get it to start. The village chief invited Bounprany to spend the night in his house, while the young pastors stayed with the pickup truck.

"What are you doing in our area?" the village chief asked.

Bounprany explained that he was taking some sporting equipment to the next village. He was hoping to establish a connection with that village.

As he listened, the village chief sensed that Bounprany was a Christian, and he announced that he was a Christian. He pulled out a Voice of Prophecy correspondence school certificate issued by the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Laos several years earlier. He said he had reached out to a former church leader for support several years earlier but had been dismissed, so now he and about 200 other villagers were worshiping Jesus on their own. He asked Bounprany to teach him and the villagers about the seventh-day Sabbath.

It was at that moment Bounprany realized an angel must have stopped the pickup truck. It was like Balaam's donkey who refused to go farther because it saw an angel of the Lord. This car must have seen an angel of the Lord standing in front of it in the creek, so it decided to stop.

The next morning, the pickup truck started at the first turn of the key.



Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offering that will help spread the gospel to the people of Laos and the other countries of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open an elementary school in Laos.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Heb. 1:5–14, Luke 1:30–33, Ps. 132:1–5, Heb. 2:14–16, Heb. 5:1–4, 1 Pet. 2:9, Heb. 8:8–12.*

Introduction: As we noted last week, the early New Testament Christians read Hebrews as a letter from the apostle Paul. Strictly speaking, however, the writer of the book of Hebrews appears to be anonymous. Speculation has given rise to at least 13 possible authorial candidates, such as Luke, Barnabas, Jude, Stephen, Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos, or even Mary, the mother of Jesus. What we safely can infer about the authorship from the epistle itself are four facts:

First, the author must have been well educated. Hebrews has, by far, the best Greek of the New Testament.

Second, the author was acquainted with Jewish methods of interpreting Scripture, such as *gezerah shavah* (argument by analogy), and other such techniques.

Third, the author is steeped in the Jewish Scriptures. Hebrews has the most extensive use of Old Testament quotes.

Fourth the author knew Timothy (*Heb. 13:23*). All of these facts speak in favor of, rather than against, Pauline authorship. Certainly, the author chose to remain anonymous for undisclosed reasons. His anonymity may even suggest that his message is more important than his identity. At the same time, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge that Ellen G. White attests to Pauline authorship of the book of Hebrews. Moving forward in faith in that divine disclosure, we shall refer throughout the lessons with confidence to the author as Paul.

Lesson Themes: The week’s lesson emphasizes two themes. The first one is Christ our King, and the second is Christ our Mediator.

Part II: Commentary

Christ Our King: The first chapter of Hebrews can be summarized in a short scriptural statement: Christ is “superior to angels” (*see Heb. 1:4, NRSV*). The second chapter of Hebrews can be summarized in this scriptural statement: Christ has become “lower than the angels” for a little while (*see Heb. 2:9*). The question we want to pursue in our study is: What makes Jesus superior to the angels and elevates Him to a kingly position?

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His

Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (*Heb. 1:1, 2, NASB*). Paul wants to tell his audience, and us, that God spoke and still speaks. God spoke in different time periods “long ago,” and He speaks “in these last days.” He speaks to different recipients: the “fathers” and “us.” He speaks through different agents: the “prophets” and the “Son.” God speaks “in many ways.”

What are some of His avenues of communication? God speaks face-to-face with Adam and Eve (*Genesis 3*). God speaks to Moses from a burning bush, something we call a theophany, a revelation of God (*Exod. 3:2–6*); to Balaam through a donkey (*Num. 22:28*); to the boy Samuel, calling him by name (*1 Sam. 3:10*); to Elijah in a still, small voice (*1 Kings 19:12*); through a vision to Isaiah in the temple (*Isa. 6:1–9*); and to Hosea through his family circumstances (*Hos. 1:2*). All these modes of communication have one thing in common: they are incomplete.

The ultimate and climactic utterance of God is “in these last days,” when He speaks through His “Son.” Not only does God speak through the words of Jesus, but God also speaks through Jesus’ actions and character. God’s revelation is progressive. But the progression is not from true to truer, from mature to more mature. Rather, it is a forward and onward movement in His revelation of Himself to humanity. When speaking through the words and actions of Jesus, God Himself is the speaker.

Immediately following the mention of the Son, Paul makes seven affirmations about the Son (*Heb. 1:2–4*) that elevate Him far above any angel. First, Christ is “appointed heir of all things” (*Heb. 1:2*). If He is the prime Heir, His followers shall be coheirs with Him and are “those who are to inherit salvation” (*Heb. 1:14, NRSV*). Drawing on the theme of inheritance, the early Christians affirmed that Christ, through His resurrection and exaltation, was given a heavenly inheritance that His followers share. “Those who conquer will inherit these things” (*Rev. 21:7, NRSV*). By the same token, the Bible affirms that “wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God” (*1 Cor. 6:9, 10, NRSV*).

Second, Christ was the Father’s Creation Agent “through whom he also created the worlds” (*Heb. 1:2, NRSV*). Christ, as Heir, is not only the end-time (eschatological) Agent (through whom God speaks in these last days) but also the Creation (protological) Agent. The protological function of the Son points to His eschatological victory. John implicitly corroborates this by saying that “all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (*John 1:3, ESV*).

Third, Christ “is the reflection of God’s glory” (*Heb. 1:3, NRSV*). Some Bible versions prefer the translation “the radiance of God’s glory” (*NIV*; see also *ESV*). Furthermore, Christ is “the exact imprint of God’s very being”

(*Heb. 1:3, NRSV*). The Greek term translated “exact imprint [character]” implies a mark impressed on an object, especially on coins. Both descriptions of Jesus as God’s “reflection” and as the “exact imprint” make the same point that Jesus is the full and adequate representation of the divine. The two of them share the same “imprint of being.” What Paul conveys here is synonymous with what Jesus testifies: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (*John 14:9, NRSV*). There is no better discloser of God than Jesus Christ. If we want to know who God is, we should get acquainted with Jesus.

Fourth, Christ “sustains all things by his powerful word” (*Heb. 1:3, NRSV*). Christ not only spoke things into existence, but He also sustains things in existence by His powerful Word.

Fifth, Christ “had made purification for sins” (*Heb. 1:3, NRSV*). He who is the instrument of God’s creative activity also is the instrument of His saving activity by cleansing the repentant from his or her sins. Christ’s self-sacrifice purifies “our conscience from dead works to worship the living God” (*Heb. 9:14, NRSV*).

Sixth, Christ, after accomplishing His atoning work, “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (*Heb. 1:3, NRSV*). This seated position is a direct allusion to Psalm 110:1, quoted at the end of the first chapter: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (*Heb. 1:13, NRSV*). Jesus told the Sanhedrin in His trial these very words: “You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power” (*Matt. 26:64, NRSV*).

Seventh, Christ has “become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (*Heb. 1:4, NRSV*). How superior is Christ to the angels? This question is answered in the chain of quotations that follow (*see Heb. 1:5–14*). Christ deserves worship (*Heb. 1:6*), something the holy angels do not accept (*Rev. 19:10; Rev. 22:8, 9*). Christ has a throne and a scepter (*Heb. 1:8*). He has been anointed as King (*Heb. 1:9*). He created the heavens and the earth (*Heb. 1:10*), and He sits at the right hand of God (*Heb. 1:13*). “Christ became superior to the angels,” in this context, points to His enthronement ceremony, as pointed out by the lesson in Sunday’s study.

In summary, what makes Christ superior to angels? God spoke in many and various ways to the fathers in the past; but in these last days, He speaks through the Son, who became Heir of all things, is the Creator of all things, is the reflection and imprint of God’s very being, sustains all things, made purification for sins, and sat down at the right hand of God. Thus, Christ is exalted above, and superior to, the angels, who are ministering spirits in service to those who inherit salvation (*Heb. 1:14*). Moreover, Christ accepts worship on His throne at the right hand of God. Christ is our *King*.

Christ Our Mediator: A mediator is a person who stands between two parties to bring a settlement or to establish a relationship. In Judaism, Moses is the primary mediator of the Sinai covenant (*Gal. 3:19, 20*). In the pastoral epistles, Paul tells us that “for there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (*1 Tim. 2:5, NKJV*). Hebrews contributes to this topic by saying that Jesus “is the mediator of a better covenant” (*Heb. 8:6, NRSV*) or the “mediator of a new covenant” (*Heb. 9:15; Heb. 12:24, NRSV*). Two questions beg answers: (1) What is this covenant in Hebrews? (2) Why is the new covenant better?

To the first question: the covenant in Hebrews refers to a binding agreement, a deal between its parties. Paul talks about the first and obsolete covenant (*Heb. 8:13*) and the second or the better covenant (*Heb. 7:22, Heb. 8:6*). With the first covenant, God established a system of sacrifices, Levitical priests, and ceremonies (*Heb. 5:1–4*). However, moral perfection could not be attained through this Levitical priesthood, because it was weak and ineffectual (*Heb. 7:11, 18*). Why could moral perfection not be attained? Because the blood of bulls and goats could not take away human sins (*Heb. 10:4*). Why was the first covenant weak and ineffective? Because the priests were mortal and thus finite and would die (*Heb. 7:23*). Furthermore, the priests needed to sacrifice first for their own sins before they could sacrifice for the sins of the people whom they represented (*Heb. 5:3*). Thus, the first covenant was faulty and became obsolete with the arrival of Christ’s superior sacrifice and better Priesthood.

To the second question: with the second covenant, God chose no mere mortal priest, but One who lives forever (*Heb. 7:24*). There were no more bulls and goats offered that never could take away the sins of the people anyway. But Christ offered Himself once for all (*Heb. 7:27, Heb. 9:14, Heb. 10:12*). Thus, He came to remove sin through His own sacrifice (*Heb. 9:26*) and to cleanse the conscience from dead works (*Heb. 9:14*). That is the reason that the second covenant is qualitatively superior and that Christ is the Mediator of this superior, new, and better covenant. Christ is our *Mediator*.

Part III: Life Application

Thought Questions:

- 1. If God spoke in the past but also speaks today, how does He speak**

to you? How do you discern His voice from other “voices” vying for your attention?

2. If we are coheirs with Christ of the kingdom of God, how should we evaluate the transitory things of this world?

3. If Christ sustains all things with His powerful word, how has He sustained you through difficult circumstances?

4. Listen to the hymn “Jesus Paid It All” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 184). Pay attention, especially, to the refrain while thinking about what having Christ as our Mediator really means.
