

# THE FINAL WORD

by Ray C. Stedman

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The other night some of us were gathered in a home discussing the state of affairs of the world. We commented on the fears, the tensions, the sense of futility that prevails in so many circles these days. Earlier someone had read the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, where he speaks of the whole creation groaning and travailing in bondage, and futility stamped upon all things. In our discussion the question arose: What can we do about this? As Christians, we knew the answer to the world's problems, but the problem was: How to make the world believe the answer. Among us was a young Christian who seemed considerably troubled by our discussion. With a deeply concerned look on his face, he said, "Why is this? Why doesn't the world believe what we have to say?" Then he added, "I think it's because so many Christians don't act like they believe it themselves." Then he asked the logical, but thorny question: "How can we make Christians believe what they believe?"

That is the very theme of the book of Hebrews: How to make Christians believe, how to make Christians act like Christians. This is what the world is waiting to see and what the epistle was written to effect. It is addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who had begun to drift, to lose their faith. They had lost all awareness of the relevancy of their faith to the daily affairs of life. They had begun to drift into outward formal religious performance, but to lose the inner reality. Doubts were creeping into their hearts from some of the humanistic philosophies that abounded in the world of their day, as they abound in the world of our day. Some of them were about to abandon their faith in Christ, not because they were attracted again by Jewish ritual and ceremony, but because of persecution and pressure. They felt it was not worthwhile; they were losing too much, and that it was possible, just possible, that they had been deceived and the message of Christ was not true after all.

No one knows exactly where these Christians lived. Some feel this letter was written to Hebrew Christians living in the city of Rome. Others believe it was written to the most Jewish city on earth in that day, Jerusalem. That is my own personal conviction. If anyone wished to influence the world of Jewish Christians, surely that would be the place to start. No one knows for certain who wrote the letter, either.

In the King James version it says, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews." It was a favorite jest in seminary to ask, "Who wrote the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews?" No one knows for sure.

If you read this letter in English you are almost sure that Paul wrote it, since so many of the thoughts are obviously Pauline. But if you read it in Greek you are equally certain that Paul did not write it, for the language used is far different than in the other letters from the hand of Paul.

There have been a great many guesses throughout the centuries, including Luke, Silas, Peter, Apollos (the silver-tongued orator of the first century), Barnabas, and even Aquila and Priscilla. Some have felt that Priscilla wrote it; if so, this would be the first letter of the New Testament written by a woman. It is my own conviction (and I trust this will settle the problem) that the Apostle Paul wrote it in Hebrew while he was in prison in those two years in Caesarea after his visit to Jerusalem, and that it was translated by Luke into Greek and this is the copy that has come down to us today.

Whoever the writer was he sees one thing very clearly, that Jesus Christ is the total answer to every human need. No book of the New Testament focuses upon Christ like the book of Hebrews. It is the clearest and most systematic presentation of the availability and adequacy of Jesus Christ in the whole of the Bible. It presents Christianity as the perfect and final religion, simply because the incomparable person and work of Jesus Christ permits men free and unrestricted access to God. In every age that is man's desperate need. There is no hunger like God-hunger.

We shall ignore chapter divisions as we go through this book for, on the best tradition, those were put in by a

drunken man riding on horseback. The first section covers all of Chapter 1 and the first four verses of Chapter 2. We shall move quite rapidly through this epistle for this is one letter in which it is easy to become bogged down and to miss much of the thrust of the wonderful argument. We must move fast enough to see where the writer is going.

The argument of this first section is very simple. Somewhat bluntly and immediately the writer declares that God has spoken to man in Jesus Christ. This is the theme of the epistle. The very nature of that word indicates that Christ is a stronger word than came through the prophets; he also has a greater name than that of the angels; and he himself is a surer word to man than the Law. With that as our program, let us look at the epistle.

**In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. {Heb 1:1-3a RSV}**

In those three short verses we have four amazing themes:

1. First that the word which now comes to us in Jesus Christ, both by what he said and what he was, is a stronger and more inclusive word than God ever spoke through the prophets. When you read the Old Testament you are reading the Word of God. The voice of God is heard through various forms and circumstances. Open the book of Genesis and read the simple, majestic tale of creation and the flood. Then follows the straightforward narrative of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; then the thunderings of the Law, the sweet singing of the Psalmist, the exalted beauty of the prophets, the homespun wisdom of the Proverbs, the delicate tenderness of the Song of Solomon, and the marvelous mysteries of the prophetic writings, as Ezekiel and Daniel. All of it is of God, but all of it is incomplete. It never brings us to ultimates and absolutes.

But when you open the pages of the New Testament and read the four-fold picture of Jesus Christ, you find that all the Old merges into one voice, the voice of the Son. The syllables and phrases by which God spoke in the Old Testament are merged into one complete discourse in Jesus Christ. Therefore, God's word to man has been fully uttered in the Son. There is nothing more to be said. Jesus Christ is God's final word to man. Therefore, the word through the Son is greater than that through the prophets because it includes and surpasses theirs.

2. It is also greater because the Son forms the boundaries of history. The writer says, "Whom he has appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world." In that phrase, "the heir of all things," he is looking on into the future as far as the eye of man can see.

This last week a teenaged boy sat in my study with a very worried expression on his face. We talked about various things in his life, but finally he said, "I want to ask you a question." I said, "Go ahead." He said, "Where is it all coming to, anyway? What is happening in the world? Where is all this tremendous stirring and tumult going to end?" I told him it would end exactly as the Bible predicted it would end.

The prophetic pattern woven into the revelation of God has already been fulfilled to the very letter, as far as we have gone in history. Jesus himself, in Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13, those great prophetic passages, indicates plainly what the end would be. He himself is the terminating point of history. All things will end with him. This is Paul's argument in the letter to the Ephesians, that all the events of the ages shall find their fulfillment and meaning in Jesus Christ.

He stands at the end of the future as he is also at the beginning of the past, for he is the creator of the worlds. All things come from his hands, he is the originator of all the processes of life, nothing began or exists but what began or existed in him. Jesus makes this claim himself to the astonishment of the Jews. He said, "Before Abraham was, I am," {John 8:58b}.

3. Further, his word has greater power than the prophets' because he sustains the matter of the universe.

We read, "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power." In the hills behind Stanford University they are building a new linear accelerator, some two miles long, a gigantic instrument. What is it for? Scientists hope it will prove to be a great lever by which they can pry the lid off the secrets that lie behind matter. They are trying to find what makes the universe "tick," what holds it together. And as man probes deeper into the secrets of the universe around him he discovers more and more that he is confronting the mystery of an untouchable, unweighable, unscalable force; that he stands face to face with pure force. What is that force? Scientists never name it, in fact they cannot name it, but the Scripture does. The Scripture says that force is Jesus Christ, that he holds everything in place, whether it be large or small. The reason we can sit here comfortably in these seats, though our earth is whirling at a furious rate, and not be hurled off into space, is simply because he sustains the universe. He is the secret behind everything that exists.

4. More than that, in the final statement here, his word comes with superior force because he redeems man and nature.

**When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, {Heb 1:3b RSV}**

I stated earlier that we all feel the futility which is stamped on everything today. Why is it that nothing ever completely satisfies?

If we can but get certain things we think we will be happy, but once we get them we soon lose all interest. Why is this?

We do not believe that the world was intended to be this way, and the Scriptures confirm this. They reveal the fact that the world in which we live is a world in desperate need of redemption. It needs to be brought back out of uselessness and restored to its proper relation where it was originally intended to be. All this is included in the great statement, "When he had made purification for sins." When he had come to grips with the thing that is destroying human life and making this universe such an unpleasant place in which to live, when he had dealt with it fully, he took his place beside the Majesty on high. That is why his word is greater than the prophets.

In the next section the writer moves on immediately to compare Jesus with the angels. The ancient world made a great deal of angels. They worshipped them in many of the ancient religious rites. Angels are the demigods of the Roman and Greek pantheon. Therefore, this letter was written to people who particularly had an interest in angels. The writer deals with this very rapidly, but very thoroughly. This subject may not interest us as much today as it did then, but it is still a tremendous revelation of the person of Christ. The Lord Jesus, says the writer, has a greater name than the angels, first because of his relationship.

**... having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.**

**For to what angel did God ever say,  
"Thou art my Son,  
today I have begotten thee"? {Heb 1:4-5a RSV}**

The contrast is between a Son and a servant. Angels are servants, but Christ is the Son.

I once visited a ranch as the guest of the hired man on that ranch. When we came onto the property we had to drive around the big house and go to the bunkhouse in the rear. I stayed with him there in the bunkhouse and never once got into the big house with him. There were some beautiful sorrel horses in the pasture and I suggested we take a ride. He said, "Oh, no, I'm not permitted to ride those horses." So we had to ride some mangy fleabags out to the pasture. A few weeks later I became acquainted with the son of the household, and he invited me out to the ranch. When I went out with him, it was entirely different. We went right into the big house and he took over as all teenagers do. After a sumptuous meal we went out and rode the sorrel horses all

over the range. What a wonderful time we had.

That is the difference between a son and a servant, and that is the difference between Christ and any angel. He is greater because of his relationship, the fact that he is a Son. Blood is always thicker than water.

As C. S. Lewis points out, what we make with our hands is always something different than we are, but what we beget with our bodies is always the dearest thing in the world to us because it is part of us. Thus, the angels were made; the Son was begotten. What we beget has the same nature we have; what we make is always different. The angels, being made, cannot have the same relationship as the Son, who was begotten.

Here is the final answer to the cults. Both Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus Christ was nothing more than an angel, the highest created angel. They identify him with Michael, the Archangel. But this passage in Hebrews utterly demolishes that theory, for Christ is a Son, and not angel. To what angel did God ever say, "Thou art my Son."

Second, Christ is greater than the angels by the demonstration of worship.

**And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,  
"Let all God's angels worship him." {Heb 1:6 RSV}**

We only worship that which is superior to us. The worship of the angels at Bethlehem is testimony to the deity of the babe in the manger. John Bunyan said, "If Jesus Christ be not God, then heaven will be filled with idolators." For in Revelation and Daniel, those books that give us a glimpse into the heavenly realms, we see ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of angels engaged in worshipping the Son. So he is seen to be greater than angels by the demonstration of worship.

Third, his superiority is evidenced by the demonstration of authority. This section begins and ends with a word about the angels, while in between is the contrast of the position of the Son.

**Of the angels he says,  
"Who makes his angels winds,  
and his servants flames of fire." {Heb 1:7 RSV}**

What are angels? Servants and ministers, depicted by wind and fire. In our daily life wind and fire are two elements which are more than man can handle for they frequently get out of bounds, yet they are made to be servants of men. These symbolize the angels, superior in being to men, yet servants of men. The quotation concerning angels is from Psalm 104. Then he moves to contrast the Son, quoting from Psalm 45.

**But of the Son he says,  
"Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever,  
the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom.  
Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;  
therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee  
with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades." {Heb 1:8-9 RSV}**

The Son is the originator of all things. Behind all material things lies the thought and intent of the heart, and he says of the Son, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever... Thou hast loved ... and hated." What God loves and hates is the motivation for what takes place within the universe. No angel can make this claim.

Again he moves to another quotation, this time from Psalm 102:

**And,  
"Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning,  
and the heavens are the work of thy hands;  
they will perish, but thou remainest;  
they will all grow old like a garment,  
like a mantle thou wilt roll them up,**

**and they will be changed.**

**But thou art the same, and thy years will never end." {Heb 1:10-12 RSV}**

Christ is not only the originator, but the sustainer of the universe, the one behind all things, eternally keeping it going until at last it runs down.

Notice a very interesting thing here, you scientists among us. There is here described very plainly what has been called The Second Law of Thermodynamics, the degenerative faculty in the universe. All things will grow old like a garment, but not the one who made them and keeps them, i.e., the Son.

His third argument in this contrast with the angels is taken from Psalm 110:

**But to what angel has he ever said,  
"Sit at my right hand,  
till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet?" {Heb 1:13 RSV}**

Again, here is the One who waits at the end of history, the termination point of all events, the One for whom all things exist, and toward whom all things are moving, the heir of all things. All things find their purpose and meaning only as they relate to him.

Now he comes back to the angels again in Verse 14:

**Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation? {Heb 1:14 RSV}**

Again, what are angels? Servants! But the Son is God!

Christ is not only a stronger word than the prophets, and has a higher name than the angels, but, in these next four verses, the writer comes to a third conclusion: He is a surer word than the Law.

**Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation. It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will. {Heb 2:1-4 RSV}**

What is his conclusion? We need to pay attention!

This convinces me that the writer of this letter, whoever he was, was a preacher. There is nothing more heartbreaking than preaching to people week after week and to see certain ones constantly exposed to truth that you know could change their lives, set them free, transform their very existence and bring them out into a realm of experience they hardly believe existed; you know this, and yet nothing is more heartbreaking than to see them, week after week, lose the whole effect of this, simply because they do not pay attention. This is why Jesus said again and again to the people of his day, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," {cf, Matt 11:15, 13:9, 13:43, etc.}. It is not too often we are able to hear truths like these, truths that go to the heart of life. But he that has ears to hear, let him hear.

I am aware that, even as I speak, some of your minds may be drifting away to golf, or some problem you are concerned with. You are held captive by some trivial matter, and these things that strike so deeply and can mean such transforming release go right over your heads. There will be some who will go out from here and not understand this message because they are drifting. So the warning is: let us pay attention, lest we drift.

There are two reasons why this message is particularly valid:

First, it is valid by comparison with the Law. If the word spoken by angels, that is, the Law of Moses, had validity and those to whom it was given found that it was absolutely true in experience, then this message also

is true. If angels could give a word like that, how much more the word that comes by the Son? That is his argument.

The confirmation of this was the testimony of Israel's history. Here is a race of people, the Jews, to whom the Law was particularly given. They were told that if they would obey it they would be blessed; if they disregarded it, they would be cursed. There is no people on the face of the earth who show a more consistent pattern of cause and effect than this people. Wherever they have gone, in obedience there has been blessing; in disobedience there has been cursing. If the Law had that effect, a Law spoken by angels, how much more shall the words spoken by the Son have effect?

The second confirmation is, this message is valid in view of the form of its communication to us. It was spoken, first of all, by the Lord! That is a most impressive argument. What Jesus Christ has to say is the most authoritative word the world has ever heard. This message did not originate with the apostles, it did not come to us by means of prophets, it came through the Lord himself; he spoke it.

Second, it was confirmed by eye witnesses. This is an unimpeachable argument. Any court in the land will accept evidence if it is confirmed by enough eye witnesses. Here is the evidence of Christianity confirmed to us by numerous eye witnesses who were there and wrote what they saw and heard and did.

Third, it was attested by signs sent from God himself, by wonders and miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his own will. It still is attested this way. How can we explain the gifts that develop among Christian people, the ability to do certain things, except as we recognize the Spirit of God at work in our midst? What an impelling argument this is!

It all focuses down to one question which the writer leaves hanging in the air: How shall we escape if we neglect such great salvation? That is not a threat, it is simply a question. It is addressed both to the Christian and to the non-Christian:

- To the non-Christian it says, Where are you going to go? How will you get out of God's universe? How can you escape the inevitable? Indeed, why seek to avoid that which is unavoidable -- a confrontation with the One who is behind all things? How can you escape, and why attempt to do so? Especially when his purpose is not to curse but to bless? How can you find deliverance by any other route, by any other path, or by any other channel, since it does not involve the One who is behind all things?
- To the Christian the writer is saying, it is not enough that we know Jesus Christ: we must use him. We can lose so much, even knowing him, unless there is a day-by-day walk with him. We lose peace and freedom and joy and achievement. We are subjected to temptation, frustration, bewilderment, bafflement and barrenness without him. And if we do not go on as Christians, if we do not grow, a serious question is raised: Have we ever really begun the Christian life? Or is this but a self-deceptive fraud, attempted in order to meet outward standards but without any inward change in the heart?

He leaves the question hanging in the air, haunting, unavoidable. And that is where we shall leave it. How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Answer that in the loneliness of your own hearts.

## **Prayer**

Our Father, the truth you have set before us is not one to trifle with. We are dealing with the very secrets of life, the very basis of the universe. The claims of the Lord Jesus are incomparable, they can never be surpassed. We pray, therefore, that we may face up to this, and realize that there is no way of working out the problems of human life except as we work them out in fellowship with him. As we go on in this letter, we ask to see this even more clearly, and may hearts right now open their doors to thee. Lord Jesus, you are the One who is the secret of human life and behind all the mysteries of the universe. May you enter our

lives in grace and begin to reign. We pray in thy name, Amen.

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