

Christ Superior

It is a big day at Northshore. We're starting a new series!

We will keep our current series going from the Gospel of Luke (which will continue through the Book of Acts). But I usually like to have a couple of series going at any given time, so we'll get started today with a series from the New Testament Book of Hebrews that I'm calling ***Christ Superior***.



Today, I'm not only calling the series *Christ Superior*, I've titled this message *Christ Superior*.

I think we have a lot to look forward to here in what I currently have sketched out as a 21-part series spread over the coming 11 or 12 months.

This Book of Hebrews will serve as a great compliment to what we are working through in the Gospel of Luke.

- In Luke we have a narrative; our focus is on the Words of Jesus. In Hebrews we have a more theological presentation.
- Luke is a history, a presentation of what happened. In Hebrews we'll have more of an explanation.
- Luke is linear, day by day, step by step. Hebrews sees it all as a whole.
- Luke is what happened. Hebrews is what it means.

Hebrews is especially interesting because there is some *mystery* surrounding the Book; some have described The Book of Hebrews as *The Riddle of the New Testament*. It isn't because there is some riddle to be cracked, or that it contains some sort of secrets... but Hebrews lacks clear answers to some basic questions, including:



- When was it written?
- To whom was it written?
- Why was it written? And
- Who wrote it?

These are all some of the questions that kept the Book of Hebrews out of the earliest lists of the Canon (the accepted Books of the Bible). Do you think much about how we got the Bible?

I'm thinking about doing some sort of online class or Bible study, something we can do together (likely with Zoom) to learn something and provide an opportunity for discussion and community building. Maybe we should do a study on the Bible, how we got it, and how we should read it. If that sounds interesting to you, let me know... or if you have a better idea, I'd be glad to hear that too.

The Bible is, of course, all a result of God working through people. We probably think in those terms mostly when we think about God working through the authors of the Biblical Books (like Luke penned the Gospel of Luke, Paul penned Romans and a lot of other New Testament books). But even the **compilation** of the Biblical Books, the list of the Books that are included, is a result of God working through people... various early Church councils, people thinking and praying and consulting together to invite God's direction and determine which Books comprised the Canon.

The Book of Hebrews was among the latest entries, and a lot of what kept Hebrews out of the earliest lists are questions like these that surround the Book. It turns out that disputes about the Book have persisted throughout the ages, including doubts and concerns from significant figures like Luther and Calvin.

For the record, we don't have any of those concerns (obviously, would we do a series if we had such problems?). Most contemporary churches, leaders, and scholars (especially of our ilk) all agree that Hebrews belongs in the Bible.

But what about those questions?

When was it written? This is probably the least problematic of the questions; we don't know most of the dates of origin of Biblical Books with pinpoint accuracy. Based on several clues within the Book of Hebrews, we can be pretty sure that it was written in what we could call the *second generation* of Christianity. It does not appear to be written by or to those who had first-person experience with Jesus, but more likely written among those in the following *wave* of the growing Church. Nevertheless, it is still likely dated very early in the experience of the Church. A pretty good guess would be around the year 80.

To whom was it written? A lot of our New Testament Books answer that question so clearly that we just go ahead and name the Books after their first audience (like Romans, Galatians, and Corinthians). This Book carries the title Hebrews, but it is not likely written to those living in Israel, not even limited to Jews (although likely written to those with Jewish backgrounds).

If we date the Book around the year 80, and follow some clues in the Book itself, we could have a pretty good guess that it was written to Christians in Rome who were predominantly converts from Judaism (although in the early Church the distinction wasn't really clear, as Christianity was often viewed as a sect of Judaism in those early years). Furthermore, due to the style and content, we can assume that Hebrews was written to educated people, perhaps even to students (an early textbook to something like a seminary).

Why was it written? Again, a number of the other New Testament Books include clear evidence that they were originally written to address certain problems or concerns. Hebrews is more of a general, Christian, theological text. It is clearly meant to encourage and instruct. Perhaps it was written to those wavering in faith, but more likely written to move people forward in faith and understanding.

Who wrote it? To many, that is the million-dollar question. Many have traditionally attributed the Book of Hebrews to Paul, although few scholars would agree. Apparently, attributing the Book to the Apostle Paul was a sort of political final straw that broke the camel's back, getting Hebrews into the Canon. As we can see from the contents of our New Testaments, there is a bias toward including books penned by the Apostles, or those with eyewitness, first-hand accounts of Jesus. So... someone apparently said, "you know, Paul could have written Hebrews." It seems that the possibility of Pauline authorship was enough to get the consensus of Church leaders on board during the time of Athanasius (360) and officially included in the Canon by the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397.

We could take a lot of time talking about why Hebrews was not likely penned by Paul (there are volumes written on the subject); suffice it to say that it doesn't really match Paul's style.

As to who did pen Hebrews, there are a number of educated guesses that are interesting. Here a few of the top guesses, all people who show up elsewhere in the New Testament:

- Barnabas: This is probably the most popular guess. Barnabas was a companion in ministry with Paul (hence the alignment with Pauline themes and theologies). Hebrews is explicitly intended to encourage, and Barnabas was known as Son of Encouragement.
- Apollos: While not counted among the Apostles, Apollos was a contemporary of Paul, an early Church planter, preacher, and theologian.
- Luke: While not a chart-topping guess, some have made the case that Luke wrote Hebrews, in addition to The Gospel of Luke and The Book of Acts (I just thought that was interesting since we are in a Luke series). It would be an interesting trilogy from Luke:
 - A Narrative of Jesus
 - The History of the Founding of the Church, and
 - A theology textbook
- Priscilla (along with Aquila; they were partners in ministry): This is probably my favorite guess (although I, of course, have no certainty on the topic)... my favorite because it would propose that this New Testament Book was written (or cowritten) by a woman. If it was penned by Priscilla, that would explain why there is no author attached to Hebrews since, it turns out, female authorship would have been a liability back then.

Regardless of who penned Hebrews, these educated guesses informed by the text reveals something worth considering: Hebrews was penned by someone who was highly educated, knowing both Greek culture and Jewish theology.

While living under Roman rule in the Roman Empire, the culture was Greek. They spoke Greek. They thought Greek. We get that. Most of us are Americans. Our government is American. Our military is American. But our culture is predominantly Western European, specifically British. We do, after all, speak English.

That Greek culture prized art and order. Philosophically, they knew there was something better. Whether Stoic (thinking they could achieve something better through behavior), or Aesthetic (thinking they could achieve something better through beauty), or intellectual (thinking they could achieve something better through the mind)... Greek culture generally believed that the here and now was a poor copy or shadow of a better reality. There was something **superior**. We are going to see this in Hebrews.

Within that broad Greco-Roman culture in the Roman Empire lived a minority, the Jews. Their theological outlook was different, rooted in the idea of **covenant**... a covenant between God and His chosen people. A covenant broken by sin, from the beginning and repeatedly. A covenant that could be at least temporarily repaired under certain circumstances. A covenant that included the promise of rescue, through the Messiah, the Christ. We'll see this, too, in Hebrews.

Hence the title for the series: **Christ Superior**. Christ is the focus of the Book. Hebrews answers the question: Who is Jesus? Not through a narrative like Luke and the other Gospels, but more theologically.



Christ Superior. Throughout the Book we'll see Jesus set in the highest place, superior to everything else. That is how I've set-up the series. Next week it will be Superior to Angels, then Superior Salvation, and others like Superior Rest and Superior Sacrifice. Christ Superior.

Before we leave the notion that Hebrews was written both from and to these Greek and Jewish perspectives, I think it is worth noting that our culture is neither. We have this same message, this Gospel, this faith which we are mandated to share. But our culture is neither Greek nor Jew, and I think, in a lot of ways, very different.

Our culture is predominantly comprised of Postmodern Secularists, especially in our region here in Greater Seattle. As a culture, we generally think that this is all there is. We are generally faithless. If there is spirituality, it is often amorphous and impersonal, not a covenant with a personal God. If things are going to get better, then it is up to us. Our trust is in ourselves, our technology and wealth and such.

That doesn't necessarily render Hebrews irrelevant to our culture. But just as the writer of Hebrews connected the Gospel to those two worlds (Greek and Jewish), we are charged to make the connections, demonstrating and communicating the Gospel.

There **is** a thread through Hebrews that I believe does resonate with our culture; it is along the lines of **authentic experience**. Our postmodern, secular culture places a very high value on authentic experience. Much of what drives our culture, especially among the young, is a search for authenticity. And our culture prizes experience, again especially among the young. Doesn't that seem true?

When I was young, it seemed like we wanted stuff. The young today seem to want time. They want relationship. They want authenticity.

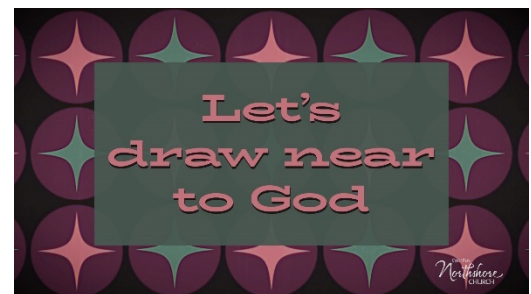
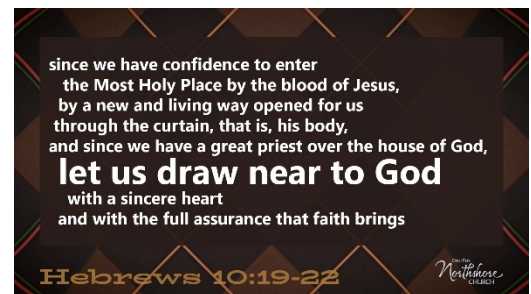
I've landed on a key verse in Hebrews, and I think it aligns with the desire for authentic experience. It is in chapter 10:

since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near to God¹

This is the invitation of the Book of Hebrews: Let us draw near to God.

Let's draw near to God. This authentic experience can be compelling today. Of course it is likely compelling to us here today; just by being here we have taken a step, drawing near to God. But more than that, I think this compels those around us in our networks, in our culture.

When we genuinely draw near to God, we are changed, authentically changed. That change opens the door for others to join us as they seek authentic experience.



¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 10:19–22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So... with all of that as background (important background that sets the stage for what lies ahead, in this series and in our own individual study and devotion), let's begin to walk through Hebrews.

Our text begins:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways²

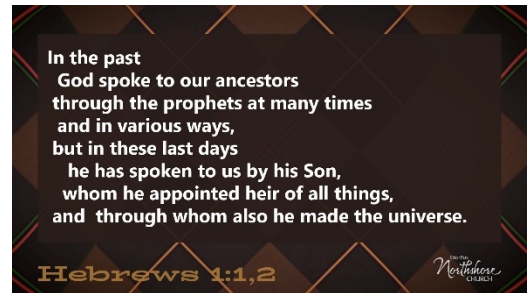
The text begins with a reminder that God has not been silent... that throughout time He has spoken through His people. Many voices, many circumstances, many times and many vehicles. He spoke in triumph and failure, confidence and anguish, proclamation and tears, words and actions. He provided direction, correction, comfort, rebuke, and help. While seemingly sporadic, there was a continuity.

² but in these last days he has spoken to us **by** his Son³

Not merely *through* His Son, as He did through the prophets, but **by** His Son. Jesus was not merely the messenger; He is the message. He was not merely words about God, or even words from God; Jesus is the Word of God.

These days, these last days, the days two millennia ago that persist today, are last days in that the Christ is revealed. He whom God promised through the prophets is known. He is the Messiah. He is the Christ. He is Jesus. While we do not know how long these last days will continue to persist; we know who finishes these days. His identity is plainly revealed. Jesus is the Victor and finisher.

he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.⁴



² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

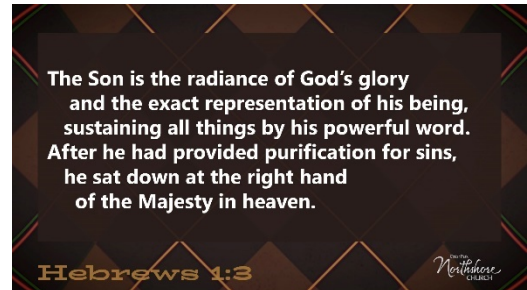
³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 1:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 1:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

These are profound theological statements that further expand our understanding of Jesus. He is the heir, the inheritor of all things, which points to an end. AND the Son is also the beginning, the means of all Creation, eternal and present before the beginning, one with the Father and the Spirit.

³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.⁵

Not only the beginning and the end, but everything in between as well, "sustaining all things." Jesus is the foundation for all that is and continues to be now.



Jesus, "the radiance of God's glory," what a powerful statement. The radiance of God's glory was not in crushing power, nor in splendid wealth, or even stunning beauty; the "radiance of God's glory" was in humility, service, sacrifice, and love.

I don't know what image might come to mind when faced with a phrase like "the radiance of God's glory." Perhaps it is golden and filled with brilliant light. Maybe it looks something like nature at its best with snow-capped mountains of sunlight bouncing off the surf. I suppose our imaginations are limitless when imagining "the radiance of God's glory" and all of that might be aspects of it.

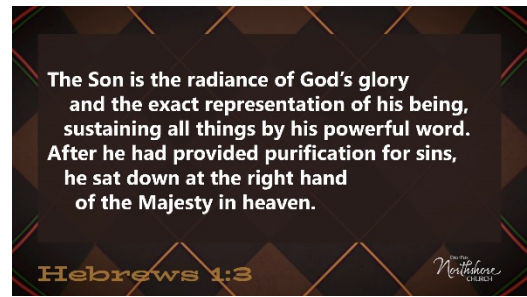


But we do not need to imagine. Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory"; Jesus demonstrated "the radiance of God's glory." Not in power, but humility and obedience and even suffering. Humanity threw the most sinister, humiliating, debased plan we had at Jesus with the Cross, and He transformed it into "the radiance of God's glory."



⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 1:2-3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The prophets spoke on behalf of God and about God, painting a mere picture of God. Jesus is “the **exact representation** of His being.” Not just a dimension or aspect of God, not merely a word for a moment in time, but His very being, exactly His being. We know all of God when we know all of Jesus.



This came up simply in a conversation with a friend this week. He was *confessing his sins*, informally in the course of a casual conversation. In this case he was reflecting on how he found himself being a bit selfish, wrapped up in a party of self-pity; God, through both circumstances and a sense of God’s own personal urging, snapped him out of it. My pal said something along the lines of “God said to me, ‘hey idiot, get over yourself.’” Then he said, “I don’t know if God really talks to anyone like that.”

I responded by saying that the best way to know God’s character and ways and attitudes and such is to know Jesus. Knowing Jesus and how he dealt with selfishness (especially from those who ought to know better), I asked if he thought Jesus might speak to him like that. We agreed that he probably would... so... there you go.

When we know Jesus, we know God, “the exact representation of his being.”

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.⁶

This conclusion to our short passage for today points to the work Jesus accomplished, and the work Jesus continues.

The profound work He accomplished was “purification for sins.” This is “the radiance of God’s glory” in action, not demanding payment for sins, but providing payment for sins... not merely specifying the way, but being The Way.

He is the Way for all of us, and the Way for each of us. Friends are sins are forgiven when we believe, when we trust in Jesus.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 1:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The profound work He continues is “at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” Alive and active, Jesus reigns even now. Jesus is there, not as prosecutor or even judge, but as advocate. The “radiance of God’s glory” having paid the price, providing “for the purification for sins” stands eternally to advocate and intercede on our behalf.

This is Jesus.

This is Christ... Christ Superior.

- The Glory of God
- The Victor, and finisher of all things
- The Creator
- The Sustainer
- The Redeemer
- The Mediator



So... let’s draw near to God.

It is a lot to take in... but lean in, draw near to God. We could be overwhelmed, just with these first three verses, but stick with us; let’s see what God will do in us and through us. Let’s draw near to God.



Let’s draw near with heart, head and hand. Let’s know the love of God as He has revealed it in Jesus, and continues to reveal. Let’s dig deep and understand, committing our intellect to God’s glorious work in us and through us. And let’s apply what we know, are knowing, and continue to learn, to our work... demonstrating the love of God and the transforming power of Jesus through our actions.

In all of it, let’s be trailblazing leaders, showing others that they too can have an authentic experience knowing God, eternally, by knowing Jesus.

Let’s take a moment, now, and pray together towards that end.

Our Father. Thank You that we know you now and forever through the exact representation of Your being: Jesus. Give us gifts of faith to believe and see and experience all that You have for us by knowing Jesus. We believe today. Jesus, I believe. Jesus, we believe. Give us gifts of confidence and courage to draw near to You. Give us gifts of opportunity to demonstrate all that You are doing in us. We thank You, again, through and for Your Son. And we pray again in that glorious name: Jesus. Amen.