

“The Incomparable Christ”
Hebrews 1:1–3
Dr. Neil Stewart
July 30, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

This is the Word of God. Please take heed how you hear. Hebrews 1:1-3 says [1] *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. [3] He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of His power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the Word of God endures forever.

The Christian life is a tale of two battles; getting the soul to Christ and then keeping your soul with Christ. I'm speaking, from a dying here, an earthly perspective. If God does not keep us kept, we shall not be kept at all but on earth, we bring our souls to Christ and once we get our souls to Christ, keeping our souls with Christ is the battle. We're living sacrifices, but the problem with living sacrifices is they keep on crawling off the altar and the devil uses a number of different distraction mechanisms that's a bit like a jet fighter firing off chaff to distract the heat seeking missile from the target. The devil uses chaff to distract us from following Christ wholeheartedly. He uses the delights of the world, the passing pleasures of sin, and he also uses the dangers of following Christ. These two things like the left and the right hand of a boxer whereas these are the delights and dangers to try and dissuade us from following Christ, to try and make you wonder, is Christ really worth the loss of everything?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed, when Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die. That's not a costly business. It's a bit like the chicken and the egg or the bacon and the eggs of breakfast for the bacon comes first because the chicken just makes a contribution to the breakfast, yet the hog is committed, right? Jesus isn't calling for a contribution. He's not like Erma Franklin calling for a little piece of your heart. He's calling for all of your heart. Lay aside all of your sins, lay aside yourself, your autonomy, all of your treasures, lay them at His feet and give yourself wholeheartedly to Him.

John Calvin's great motto, was a burning heart held in the hands and beneath it, in Latin, it said 'Sincerely and promptly, my heart, O, Lord, I give to thee.' That's what Christ is after. Have you given Christ your heart? That's the question I want to ask you. Do you believe in your head and in your heart the longest distance in all the world, that Christ is worth the loss of everything – your favorite sins, the delights of this world, laying them aside and then the dangers of following Christ. Are they worth embracing? Jesus Christ really is worth the loss of everything. That's the question we face in the Book of Hebrews.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews is addressing Jewish Christians in the first century, who've taken the step of putting their faith in Christ, to become completed Jews, an act of triumphant faith. Yet, from the perspective of their family, their friends, their community, their faith is not an act of triumphant completion, it's actually an act of cosmic treason. They're betraying their Jewish heritage to follow this Carpenter. As a result, these Christians have lost pretty much everything. They've lost their jobs. They have been exiled from the synagogue, from the temple. They're no longer welcome at the family feasts – Passover, Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement, Pentecost and Purim. If this were an American it would be like not being welcome at his house for the 4th of July celebration or Thanksgiving or Christmas or your birthday. Can you

imagine no longer being welcome at your father's house on those great feast days because your parents had regarded you as a traitor to all they held dear?

That's what these Jewish Christians are facing and some of them are beginning to wonder, is Jesus Christ really worth it? I mean, in the past they had all of the smells and bells in the temple, and now they meet somewhere, perhaps like a 7-Eleven, as a house church. They seem so invisible in comparison to all of the glories of the Old Testament worship. They're beginning to wonder, have they moved in the right direction? The response of the writer of Hebrews to these brokenhearted Christians is to give them 13 chapters of some of the most closely reasoned, deepest theology you will find anywhere in the Bible. The lesson there is that intellectual flimsiness will not do, when you face the powers of darkness coming in like a flood. What you need in those days is not little thoughts in your mind, but deep truths in your heart. You need theological fortitude.

There's a story that goes around that is apocryphal and I kind of hope it's true but it's about this arrogant astronomer who is talking to a theologian and he says, "I don't understand why you go into all this theological mumbo jumbo, the communicable attributes, and the arguments about the person of Christ. For me Christianity can all be boiled down to the golden rule – do unto others as you would have them do to you." The theologian says to him, 'I can identify with what you are saying, because I have the same views about astronomy and astrophysics. All this thought about, exploding nebula, the expanding universe, the redshift, black holes for that's just a waste of time. For me, astronomy can all be boiled down to twinkle, twinkle, little star.'

The writer of the Book of Hebrews is basically telling you that when you're facing the loss of everything, whether it be the alphabet mafia in your job, because you won't wear a diversity pin or whether it's because you're a kidnaped American in the Middle East and a jihadi stands there with a blunt butter knife about to saw off your head and you're sitting there wondering, is Jesus Christ really worth the loss of everything? Yes, He is and to know and to feel that you need theological fortitude, you need to think more and better and deeper when it comes to your theology for a little word about Jesus won't do you in those days. You need to understand the length, breadth, height and depth of the glory of Christ.

The book of Hebrews basically says, as you move from the Old Testament to the New, everything is bigger, better and brighter, and it can really be summed up in these opening verses. These first three verses sum up the glory of our New Covenant religion. They sum up the weight of the Book of Hebrews, and they explain to you why Jesus Christ really is worth everything. He's worth the loss of everything – He's worth parting with your favorite sins, parting with yourself, all your hopes and dreams, and putting them all in the basket of Jesus Christ.

To grasp the incomparable glories of Christ there are two things to realize. First of all, Jesus is God's final Word to mankind. Secondly, Jesus is God's only answer to your sin. Let's work through that together.

First of all, Christ is worth the loss of everything because He's God's final Word to mankind. Long ago, at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things. The idea here is not so much time as in this time and that time, but in pieces, right? That the Old Testament revelation was piecemeal. It's like one of those big jigsaw puzzles. My associate pastor, who was a gunnery sergeant in the Marines, likes putting together Jigsaw puzzles. He's got this big jigsaw puzzle of a library in his office that he's been working on for a couple of years now. He's just finished it. There's like, I don't know, 200,000 pieces. I would have to really fight

back the temptation to want to go and just take one away. I told him that and he said “Niel, I've killed people for less” and I knew he meant it. Jigsaw puzzles can be hard to do and the important thing about jigsaw puzzles is you have to have the box top to kind of figure out what is this picture supposed to be, right?

If you read the Old Testament without the New Testament, it's fragmented. It's broken pieces that are hard to actually connect together. As Augustine said, “the New is in the Old concealed and the Old is in the New revealed.” In many ways God spoke with a thundering voice from the heaven, direct dictation at times. At times it was the inspiration of study and thinking and prolonged reflection. Prophets had visions. There was the earthquake in Elijah's day, fire, and then the still small voice and the wind and so forth. God had all these different ways of speaking in the Old Testament. The writer is contrasting the almost confusing diversity in the Old Testament, all these different ways, these broken pieces, all trying to put them together and make sense of them all and then says compare that but in these last days, God has spoken to us in One who is Son. The writer is contrasting at times the confusing diversity of the Old Testament and how all those pieces find their meaning, their focus in Christ Jesus. He is the climactic God – His final Word to mankind.

That's one of the distinctive features of our holy religion – that the God of the Bible is a God who speaks. It's why He made the world with words and then afterwards He continues, making Himself known with words. He could have thought the world into existence, but He actually spoke it into existence to show you that when you're dealing with the Word of God, you're dealing with the most powerful creative force in the universe and all of the words of God in the Old Testament find their climactic focus in Christ. John 1:1 says *[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Literally in the Greek, this verse reads God was the word. It was the voice of Christ that shattered the silence at the beginning. When everything that ever had a beginning had a beginning it was Christ whose voice called the universe into existence. This is the God who's speaking to you in Christ, His final Word to mankind.

If you walk away from Him, you're walking away from a voice and you're walking it into a place of silence. You're walking away from light out into a place of darkness. The writer of the Hebrews is saying, ‘I want you to listen to God, when He speaks to you in Jesus, don't ignore Him.’ That's the secret. How do you overcome your sin when you're being pulled? We have this awful problem as human beings that the darkness looks bright to us. Jesus says the lamp of the body is the eye. The eye is the organ by which we evaluate treasure. If your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light that is in you is darkness, how great will that darkness be? With this awful problem we look at the darkness and it looks bright to us; it sounds fun to us and it's calling us away.

The writer to the Hebrew says, ‘The answer is to listen to God as He speaks to you through all the Old Testament prophets and they find their ultimate climax in Christ the Son.’ Realize Christian, God could not have sent anyone dearer to speak to you. He's speaking to you in His Son. Remember the parable when the father says, ‘They killed my servants I sent, but now I'll send my son. Surely they will respect my son’ – the one who is face to face with the father. In the Greek the John 1:1 passage is the idea not of side by side, but a face to face looking. What is ultimate reality? It's a father looking into the face of his son and the son looking into the face of his father with no need to turn away and find something better with which to occupy themselves. The father is transfixed with the beauty of the son and the son with the beauty of his father. This

is the One the father sent down from heaven into our flesh, into our nature, to speak to us – His Son.

It goes on to say in Hebrews that when God speaks to us in Christ, He couldn't have spoken to us by anyone greater whom He appointed the heir of all things. In other words, what is life all about? Life is all about Christ. Christ is the heir of everything. He is the owner of every second of time. He's the heir of every event of history, every atom in existence, every demon in hell and every angel in heaven. He's the heir of every male and female who ever has lived or ever shall live. They all belong to Him. All of the loose threads of this world find their ultimate connection to Jesus. He is God's meaning behind everything. He is the purpose of the cosmos and our lives.

Don't you want your life to be in step with the rhythm of the cosmos, which is Christ's work? Isn't it jarring when you hear a band and the instruments are out of sync? You think have they gone crazy. They've lost the rhythm. Or it's like, if Tom Cruise walks off the set of Mission Impossible and says "I'm tired of all this driving motorbikes off mountains. I want to be Darcy in Pride and Prejudice." He walks out with his pantaloons, his cravat, his white sleeves and his poofy hair and the director says "Have you lost your mind?" He says "No, I want to be Darcy." The director says 'But this movie is not about Darcy.' "I don't care. I want it to be about Darcy." You would think he had lost his mind and that's what it's like when human beings think life is all about sex, money, power, or all about me or my family and those are all bad answers for the wrong question. Life's not about any of those things in its fullness for life only find its meaning as you connect all of those things as important as they are to Christ. And God has spoken to you through the One who is dearer than anyone, His Son and the One who is greater than anyone, the heir of all things.

The writer goes on. When God speaks to us through Christ, He couldn't speak to us through any one wiser – through whom also, He created the world – the universe of space and time is the idea behind the Greek word. Why is there something and not nothing? It is because Jesus Christ commanded the universe into existence – He spoke. That's incredible. It was His voice. Through Him God created space and time. When you have space, time and matter that's a trinity of created existence and they all must be present immediately for any of the other ones to exist. If you have matter but no space, where do you put it? If you have matter and space, but no time, when do you put it? They've have to be there instantaneously. Where did matter, space and time come from? They came from Jesus Christ. He's the Creator and the heavens proclaim His glory. Every star, every bird, every insect at our first meeting, proclaim to you, I have a Creator. You should worship Him.

Think of the sun for a second. This ball of fire in the heavens, 92 million miles away. It consumes 400 billion tons of hydrogen a second. That's a lot of fuel and yet there's enough hydrogen left over to burn for 4 billion years. So don't panic. But the sun is the nearest thing to a perfect sphere anyone as seen anywhere in creation. The sun is 864,000 miles wide in diameter yet if you measure the East and west pole there at the equator and the North and South Pole, there's only six miles of variation. It's incredible! Where did that come from? Jesus Christ spoke it in to existence.

Your heart that is a pump in your chest made of meat the size of your fist that pumps 600,000 gallons of blood a year. That's the same amount of blood as there is water in an Olympic sized swimming pool and it runs on donuts and people say to me, 'Give me evidence for God. I'm thinking, 'Have you lost your mind? Where did it come from?' I mean, you've really got three choices when it comes to the universe. It either came from nothing, no space, no time,

nothing and somehow on Tuesday afternoon, 9:00 in the morning, there was an explosion from nothing and everything came out which doesn't make any sense at all. You only have two other choices. Nothing is off the list. You've got something like mud or dust suddenly exploded and everything came out of nothing, which is pretty devastating because if that's true, then you are just mud that thinks (that's a whole other sermon though). So you've got nothing as the source of everything. You've got something or you've got someone, and that's the Bible's position.

Why is there life? Where did life come from? How do you go from nothing to something? How do you go from something that's dead to something that's alive? Chemicals cooperating to make proteins and life. Have you ever seen non-life produce life? No. The Bible's position is there was Someone who was originally alive and He is the source of everything that lives – in Him is life and the fact that there is life, John says, is the light of man. We all know that life came from Someone who was originally and endlessly and essentially alive, and that someone is Jesus and this is the One who speaks to you. When you ignore the Bible, you're ignoring the God who sent His Son as the climactic final Word. Nobody dearer, greater or wiser could have come.

Thirdly, nobody clearer could have come. What is God like? Hebrews 1:3 says He's just like Jesus. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature. He's the brightness of God's glory. Think about a 60 watt bulb that produces 800 lumens. I don't know what a lumen but it's a way of measuring light. Then you go to one of those halogen spotlights in the Bryant-Denny Stadium, and one of those bulbs produces a hundred thousand lumens. Then you go from that to the sun -a bit brighter. Then you go from the sun to Betelgeuse, which is the biggest star in the night sky. It's tiny, though for it's too far away. Our sun is 93 million miles away, give or take a bit. Betelgeuse is 900 million miles wide in diameter. It's the biggest star we've ever seen and if it was, where our sun was, we would be much nearer the center of Betelgeuse than the edge of the flames. But from the 60 watt bulb to Betelgeuse, they pale into insignificance compared to Jesus Christ. He is the radiance, the brightness of the glory of God.

The writer of Hebrews goes on. He is the exact imprint of His nature. It's like when you go to Amazon or online and you put in your credit card details and you're really nervous, you might get one of the digits wrong because if you get all of the digits right, but you get one of them wrong, the AI behind Amazon doesn't go well. He did his best. He got most of it right. He wanted to buy a Blackstone Grill. We let him buy a little gas burner. Okay. Because he did a good job. He got almost all the numbers, right? No, if you don't get all of the numbers right, you get all of them wrong. It's worthless. You couldn't buy a match. It's got to be all right or it's all wrong. If someone is just like God, he's always going to be infinitely different from God. But in Jesus, you have one who has the brightness of His Father's glory and the exact imprint, the exact representation of His Father's likeness, His nature. One of my friends, Dr. McGraw from Greenville likes to say, 'Jesus is everything the Father is, except Father.' All of the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him. This is the One God is sent to speak to you.

The writer goes on. Nobody stronger could have come. He upholds the universe by the Word of His power. Why is there something and not nothing? Christ spoke. Why is there still something and not nothing? Because Christ continues to speak. When teenagers or others play those games on a PlayStation or a X-Box or some other gaming system and it all seems so real, so tangible, so 3D and the graphics are so clear, that world only exists because of the power feeding the tiny brain in the PlayStation five or X-Box. Perhaps someone is trying to get your attention and you tune out the noise because you're playing. Maybe it was your mom and after three or four attempts, your mom says to dad "That boy never listens to me." Perhaps you have

heard the saying 'when mom ain't happy nobody is happy.' So Dad runs into the bedroom where you're playing and says 'Son, dinner's ready' You say, "Whatever" and Dad grabs the cable, pulls the power plug out. What happens? Every little bit of that little universe you're living in, all of the bots and all of the people return to the nothing from which they were created by the brain in the Ps5.

Do you realize that when Jesus Christ speaks to you, God is speaking to you and He's speaking to you through the One who upholds the ground beneath your feet; the feet that stand on that ground, the whole body where Jesus Christ is sustaining you in existence. Do you realize if you're not giving your life to Jesus, not only are you getting the meaning of life wrong by a massive amount, but you're actually defying God. You're saying, "I know the universe is all about Christ, but I want it to be all about me" and you're walking and serving yourself in this world. As you are doing this, you realize the only reason you still have existence, body and soul is because Christ is mercifully and so patiently holding you together. If He stopped speaking just for a moment this universe, all of the stars, all of the nebula, all of the space, all of the time, all of the human beings, would return not just to atoms or to dust but to the nothing from which He created us. This is the Savior that God sent into this world to speak to you.

Isn't He lovely? What is God like? He's just like Jesus. When John watched Him, touched Him and rested his head upon His bosom, he saw all different types of people interacting with Jesus and He interacting with them – boys, girls, mother, fathers, old men, young men, rich men, poor men, religious men, irreligious men, self-righteous women, prostitutes, lepers, blind men. John saw Jesus make His way through them with such wonderful teaching and such wonderful ways of teaching. John's summary was, *[14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). God is speaking to you. He's telling you 'My Son is of surpassing treasure and value. Can you see it? Can you hear it? He really is worth the loss of everything.

There's a second reason is not only is Christ God's final word to mankind, He's also God's only answer to our sin. He upholds the universe by the Word of His power and after making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. What is sin? There is something terribly wrong with this world, right? Just watching the news, you see the violence, the murders, the rapes, the theft, the disobedience. This world is full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil mindedness. Men are whisperers, back biters, haters of God, violent, pride boosters, inventors of evil things. We're disconcerting, untrustworthy, unforgiving, unloving, unmerciful. What's the essential problem? The essential problem is sin, right? So, what is sin? Our catechism would say it is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. That's helpful.

John Piper's definition of sin is that sin is the glory of God not honored, the holiness of God not revered, the greatness of God not admired, the power of God, not praised, the truth of God not sought, the wisdom of God not cherished, the beauty of God not delighted in, the goodness of God not savored, the faithfulness of God not trusted, the law of God not obeyed, the justice of God not respected, the wrath of God not feared, the grace of God not prized, the presence of God not sought, and the person of God not loved.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews is much simpler. What is sin? Sin is that which leaves you dirty, soiled in the eyes of God. You know that – when you gossip, when you slander, when you're jealous, when you give in to envy, when you become bitter in your heart and you lose your temper with your children, when your lost on line or when you fornicate, do you feel clean? When you're selfish, do you come away and think, 'Oh, I feel so much better about myself. This selfishness me feel alive and powerful'? No, you come away feeling grubby, grimy and dirty.

I just came back from a vacation to the beach and one of my least favorite things about vacation is packing up the truck. We have six kids and packing is a nightmare. It's 97 degrees and by the time you're finished, you're like soaking from sweat. I hate getting into the car all sweaty. So, I go and get showered and come out all clean. I can go on vacation and relax. This time, I had everything packed when I got the shower, got clean clothes on, walked outside and realized, I forgot to put the bikes on the back of the truck. I had to get the heavy bike rack, stick it into the tail hitch, and then put the bikes up, after which time I'm covered in sweat again. My wife tells me to go get another shower. I say, 'No, forget it.' I got in the car and we drive to the beach. I feel really grimy, sticky and horrible. I don't like that. I like feeling clean and sin makes us not just sticky, horrible and grimy on the outside, but all the way down to the core of our being.

Isaiah tells us that even our best deeds are like filthy rags. That's very delicate. The actual word for filthy rag is a blood-soaked menstrual cloth in the Hebrew. Even our best deeds before God are unclean and impure. We think God can't be so fastidious. Well, think about it yourself. If you've got a glass of water, how many drops of Ebola virus are too many? Just one. Get a new car. How many scratches are too many? Just one. Got a wedding dress. How many stains are too many before you ladies wouldn't want to wear one? Jesus says, be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. Not only are we not perfect, not only do we have a stain here or there, we're like a wedding dress that's been dragged through an open sewer in Bangladesh somewhere, and we're dirty. We're defiled, not on the surface, but right down to the core of our being and we need Someone to make us clean and God says Jesus Christ is the only One who can do it. He has done it.

The text says 'having made purification for our sins' which means He did something that no priest had ever done before. He sat down because the work was done. A woman's work is never done, they say, and it's true. A priest's work was never done in the Old Testament. They never sat down. In fact, they tied bells to the hem of their garment as they walked about. So people would know if they were struck dead. They'd hear the bells stop tinkling and that meant not good because the bells would never stop because it was always more blood to be offered or more beasts to be slain. Always more work to be done. Here in the New Testament, you come to Jesus and He has finished the work of purification.

Whoever you are, God has spoken to us in Christ. He could have spoken through no one dearer than His Son, nobody greater for He is the heir of all things, nobody wiser through whom He made the world, nobody clearer for He is the exact radiance of His glory and the expressed image of His nature and substance. There is nobody stronger for He upholds the universe by the Word of His power. Not only has He spoken to us in Christ, He's come down to us in Christ to redeem us and even the name Jesus, which means Savior lets you know that without Jesus the best you can be, the wealthiest you can be is lost. But with Jesus, the worst you can be, is saved. Christ is here and He's calling us. He's bidding us come and die.

As that great American philosopher Clint Eastwood said, 'dying is a poor way to make a living boy.' The Christian life can feel like death as we deny ourselves, we turn away from our favorite sins. We lay ourselves down, give ourselves up, pour ourselves out, take up the cross and follow Jesus, which is the only way not to be a great Christian, but to be any Christian at all. As we begin our way down the Calvary Road and the devil comes and goes, is it worth it? You look the devil in the eye and say, "Oh, yes, He is worth it" because Jesus is the final Word of God to mankind. He's lovely and He's the only answer to my sins.

As Jesus is going through the crowd and Christ never in a hurry, this woman is there with the flow of blood and she's perpetually dirty. She has this thought, "If I just reach out my hand and touch Him, I'll be clean." Jesus hasn't changed. She touched Him and she was clean. Christ turned around and said, 'Who touched me?' The disciples said "What do you mean who touched You? Everyone's touching You. We're surrounded by people touching you." There's a wonderful truth there that even though people were touching Him with their hands, here's a woman reaching out to Him with her soul and Jesus was exquisitely sensitive to it. I tell you now, if you reach out to Jesus now, perhaps it's been your daily habit that you come to Christ, you touch Him for strength, for wisdom, for guidance, for help, for forgiveness, for grace, for mercy and the moment your soul reaches out before you call, He answers you in all of His fullness floods into you and all His power. Yet you're reading this today and you've never yet touched Jesus.

I'm telling you Christ is here in this place and He's come for you. He's calling to you as the voice of God, His final word to mankind, and the only answer to your sin problem. Touch Him. Take Him as your Savior and He will take you as His brother and will come into union with you as two globules of water coalescing on a windshield, and the two become one and the waters mix and they can no longer be separated as the globules become one together. Likewise, as you become into Jesus, He takes you into Himself. All of your sins become His, all of your shame, all of your guilt, all of your filth, and all of His righteousness becomes yours. You know Him as the Word from heaven is true. If you're from God, it is real and Jesus will be to you what His name says 'Jesus – you will call Him for He will save His people from their sins.' Let's pray.

Prayer:

Oh, Lord, our God, and Father in Heaven, we come this day to trust in Jesus afresh. His call is so uncompromising as He bids us to come and die and yet O Lord, give us eyes to see His unsurpassable worth. He's worth the loss of everything and more for His God, the Son in our flesh has come to save us from our sins, from ourselves and from the wrath of God. We offer this prayer to You O God, in Jesus' Name, Amen.