

1. A Covenant Word

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 September 2011

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, now we're going to turn to God's Word that we've been singing about, and to a short reading from the very beginning of the epistle to the Hebrews, the letter to the Hebrews, in the Church Visitors Bibles, I think it's page 1001.

But I'm going to read from a different version this evening. I'm going to read from the authorized version of the Scriptures, what's sometimes known as the King James Version of the Bible. We're starting a little series this evening on asking the question, what is the Bible? What is the nature of Scripture? What is it that we're doing when we open this book and talk about it as God's Word?

We were looking at that some time ago on Wednesdays with the Wednesday Lunchtime Congregation. We're going to be coming back to that, indeed, this week on Wednesdays. But I thought that it would be useful in this year of 400th anniversary of the translation of the authorized version of the Scriptures, where there's been quite a lot in the news about it and in the media and so on.

It would be useful for us to go back to basics and just ask that question, what is the Bible? And so at the same time, I thought, well, I will get out my old Bible, my old copy of the authorized version, which, when I read in the flyleaf, was given to me Christmas 1978, when I was 11 years old.

[1 : 25] And it was given to me by a 90-year-old lady, one of those stalwart fellow workers in Christ that we were reading about in the end of Romans 16 this morning, an old lady in Holyrood Abbey Church called Miss Campbell, who was for 50 years and more a missionary in China and then in other parts of the world, in Africa and so on.

And this used to be her Bible. She gave it to me. It's a rather lovely Bible. It's one of these ones with very, very thin pages. It has the whole of the Old New Testament. It has all the Scottish Psalter, the Metrical Psalms, and all the hymns from the old revised church hymnry.

And this is all I would need if I was on a desert island. I wouldn't even need the complete works of Shakespeare. This would be it. And it's still very precious to me. So I'm going to read from the authorized version.

I won't call it the King James Version. That's an Americanism that's crept into our language, and I resist it. It's the authorized version presented to His High and Holy Majesty King James.

If you ever read the fly leaf at the beginning of this Bible, it's a very interesting ascription that comes to him. And I encourage you to do that. This is a truly remarkable translation of the scriptures.

[2 : 38] And it's worth celebrating in this 400th year. So anyway, enough of my words which are not inspired, and let us turn to God's words which are.

Hebrews chapter 1 then at verse 1, and in the language of this translation, it is indeed even more majestic, I think, than the modern ones. God.

God. God. God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom He hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds, who, being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, being made so much better than the angels, as He hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

For unto which of the angels said He at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee. And again, I will be to Him a father, and He shall be to me a son.

Amen. May God bless to us this His word. Well, as I said, this is the 400th anniversary year of the publication of the authorized version of the Bible, the version authorized for the public use in the churches of Great Britain and indeed Ireland at that time.

[4 : 27] Popularly known today as the King James Bible, but as I said, that's really an Americanism, and to be resisted. But I won't push that too far.

There's been a lot of publicity in the press, a lot of stuff in the media, many, many people singing the praises of this version of the Bible. The beauty of its language is discussed, and indeed it is a very beautiful language.

The fact of its enormous impact nationally and indeed worldwide is something that has been picked up on, and there have been documentaries on the TV and so on about it.

And certainly being involved in that has made some people think. I read an article a little while ago by Melvin Bragg, the broadcaster, and in doing a program about the authorized version, he said it had caused him to re-examine the Bible of his youth, and it had ignited in his heart, again, a sense of yearning for those days and for the reading of the scripture that was an important part of his life. And he was speaking about how just researching it and making the program had brought all that back to him and had a big impact on him. Now, he, of course, is interested in the cultural importance, particularly of the authorized version of the Bible, and indeed that was absolutely huge.

[5 : 58] I think it could be said that never has there been a book like it in the whole of the English-speaking world. But much more than the cultural importance of the authorized version, the King James version of the Bible, much more important than the cultural impact is the spiritual importance.

And I want us to focus in this little series that we're dealing with not on the adjective, but on the noun. In other words, not on King James, who was popularly known as the wisest fool in Christendom, not on King James, but on the Bible that he caused to be translated.

Now, if you read and understand history, you'll know that it was certainly with mixed motives that King James VI of Scotland, James I of England, set about this translation project.

There were things in the commonly used Geneva version of the Bible that irritated him and he didn't like. So he was far from being pure in his motives. But nevertheless, it was a great thing to cause the Bible to be translated into a common tongue of all the people so that it could be made available to all the ordinary people of this nation.

So that its message might be heard and its contents understood and known. So I want to go back to basics for a few weeks between now and Christmas and ask this question, what actually is the Bible?

[7 : 34] Why was it that King James and others over the centuries, why was it that they thought it was so important that this particular book ought to be translated from its original languages of Hebrew and Greek into the language of the common people?

Not just the language of Latin, the language of the clergy and the learned classes, but the vulgar tongue, the common language of people like you and me. What is the Bible?

Well, the answer the Bible itself gives is that these scriptures, these 66 books of the Old and the New Testament, that these books, these writings, are the revelation of God Almighty to mankind. Not just a revelation, but the only true and complete revelation that can make human beings of any race and class and culture and color, it can make them what the Bible says wise for salvation, because they reveal the person of the Lord God fully to us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is God the Son.

God made flesh, God made manifest to human beings in the scriptures. These are the scriptures, said Jesus Christ, that speak of me, that witness to me.

[9 : 03] It is God's revelation of himself to human beings through the gospel of Jesus Christ, his Son. So I want to spend a few weeks thinking on the nature of this revelation in this word spoken, as we sang, by the prophets and climaxing in Jesus Christ, God's Son himself and preserved for us as the word of God written.

The word of God written. That's what the Confession of Faith of our church, the Westminster Confession, calls the Bible, the word of God written. What kind of a word is this then that we have here in our Bibles, whether it's the King James version of the Bible, or whether it's the ESV or the NIV, or whatever version it is that you have.

And people here have a number of different versions, which is fine. Well, what is the nature of this revelation in the Bible? Well, the first thing that I want to grasp and think about tonight is this, that it is a covenant word.

The Bible is a word of personal revelation of God that's given to us in order that we might have a personal relationship with God.

In other words, God speaks and God works in order that we as human beings might know him. So let's start with absolute basics.

[10:34] If that's so, then a special revelation of God in words is going to be necessary. God must reveal himself to us.

If there is a God and if it's possible for human beings to know him, then God must reveal himself to us. Because if there is a God, then by very definition, he is above and beyond everything in our merely human and finite analysis and description.

That must be so, mustn't it? God must be the ultimate reference point. If he is the creator, if he is the transcendent creator of everything that there is, then absolutely he must be a being of entirely different order to us who are mere creatures.

we need to drive that point home because we live today in a culture of relativism, whether we realize it or not. We tend to relativize everything.

Ironically, that's because we absolutize ourselves. We tend to make ourself and our own experience the very center of the universe. That's what you're doing, actually, if you claim, if you say that, well, all religions are just different ways of looking at the same thing.

[12:00] They're all relative. They're all much the same in the end. You might have been listening this morning to the piece on Radio 4 by John Gray from the London School of Economics and he was speaking about how religion is not like science.

It's not really about truth. It's about myth. And he makes the fundamental mistake of lumping all religion together as though it was really all much the same thing. But you see, in doing that, you're making an absolute claim.

You're claiming that you are absolutely right about religion. The very thing that you deny that any religion can say of itself that it is absolutely true, you are saying by saying absolutely that actually they're all the same in the end.

It's self-contradictory, you see, as well as being rather hypocritical. We relativize everything else because we absolutize our own view and our own opinion and we think what we see in reality is therefore what we judge everything else by.

But you see, if there is a God who is a real God who is omnipotent and who is omniscient and who is infinite and who is eternal, then by very nature he is so far above us and so far beyond us that there is no possible way that as finite creatures we can know him unless he chooses to reveal himself to us.

[13:22] because our world, our whole world of experience, the world that we live in, the universe that we live in is an enclosed system and we are trapped inside that.

And God, if he is a real God, must be outside that. That's why the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was so stupid when he said we've been up to space and we've orbited the earth, remember he was the first one to go into space on Sputnik 1 and we've been up to the heavens and there is no God, he said, coming back down to earth to give this great revelation to everybody as though it was something extraordinary, how ridiculous.

If he could have seen him up there a few miles above the stratosphere then he couldn't possibly have been God. He would have been an asteroid or something or some lost spaceman. Just nonsense.

And all the more nonsense now when we have Voyager spacecraft just about to leave our whole solar system and go much, much further but still it will go on forever and ever and ever and still be within the enormous world of our universe that the scientists can see with their extraordinary telescopes billions and billions of light years away.

But how could the creator of all of that universe be confined within it? It's absurd even to think of that, isn't it, when you put your mind to it? It's rather like saying that a character in a play can look outside the story world that they exist in and come to know the playwright who invented them.

[14:58] That's absurd, isn't it? They can't do that. Of course they can't. Unless that is, by some extraordinary means, the playwright were to somehow write himself into his own play and appear in the world of the play as one of the characters, revealing something of himself.

Well, that is precisely what God has to do if we in our world that God has created are ever to know him. We can't find him outside.

He must reveal himself to us by breaking inside. And that is exactly what the Bible tells us that God has done. God must reveal himself to us if we're to know him, but God has revealed himself to us. So that we may know about him, but also so that we might come to know him personally. Because he's a personal God that the scriptures reveal to us.

He's a God of relationship. He's a God of powerful and devoted covenant relationship. And he created us so that we would know him and that we would love him and that we would enjoy him forever in relationship with him.

[16:14] And so from the very beginning, as we read there in Hebrews, long ago at many times and in different ways, God spoke to man. He spoke by both his words and his works all the way through human history from the very beginning.

Words and works that reveal God to us, that reveal the nature of his person, his desires, his wants. Now generally speaking, the Bible speaks about two ways that God reveals himself to us.

First, there is God's revelation in nature and in history. Sometimes we speak of that as his general revelation. And that's what Psalm 19, that we sang a version of, was speaking about.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. And in similar fashion, the Apostle Paul writing at the very beginning of Romans, in Romans chapter 1, says that God's attributes, his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that he has made.

God's character has been clearly perceived in the created order. And therefore, says Paul, we are without excuse, because God has revealed himself to all. What he means there is that any honest and rational person looking out at the world around them and its extraordinary beauty, its extraordinary complexity and wonder, must, must surely ask himself, where did all this come from?

[17:53] Surely an extraordinary mind has woven all this marvellous creation together. Paul says, we are without excuse.

We don't ask that. Why don't people ask that? Some do, of course they do. In fact, somebody here was just telling me not long ago, they were a student studying microbiology and they were driven by their studies into the extraordinary complexity of life as they were studying it.

They were driven to seek answers and to seek the creator who could have made this extraordinary world that they were studying. That's how they began their journey that led them to Christ.

Christ. But many don't do that as you well know. Not just Richard Dawkins who's so famous for rejecting that, but many many people like him.

They do not look at the world around and immediately ask that great question, where is the God who made this? Why is that? Well, the Bible says that in our unrighteousness we human beings suppress the truth.

[19:03] that's what Paul says, remember, in Romans chapter 1. It's as simple as that. It's simply that the human capacity for self-delusion is almost infinite.

And we suppress the truth about that and many many other things because we want to believe something different. Now we know, don't we, the capacity for human beings to collude in self-deception and self-delusion.

It's quite extraordinary. You'll need to open your newspapers today to see that. Think of the world economic situation. Think of the extraordinary collusion in suppressing the truth that is going on day after day after day.

Well, we're being told that the world is in trillions and trillions of dollars of debt, but somehow we can borrow more and more and more and never have to pay it back and things will only get better. It's an absolute delusion, isn't it?

And yet we suppress the truth. Why? Because facing up to the reality of that is far, far too painful. And because the politicians the world over know that their number's up.

[20:13] They had to come clean and tell people what they've been doing over the last 20 years in the absolute extraordinary business of fractional reserve banking and derivatives and all of these things.

We've got an amazing capacity as human beings to hide from the truth when the truth's painful, when the truth would disturb us, when the truth becomes far too uncomfortable to admit.

And so it is with the questions about God. Because if we admitted the truth, that God's revelation even in nature points up to us, then we know that our world would begin to be turned upside down.

That the demands upon us of the reality of a God above who made us and claims us are so vast and so terrible. We'd rather stick our head in the sand and not even look at the sky above that proclaims God's handiwork.

It all goes back to the very beginning, doesn't it, in Genesis chapter 3, when mankind chose his own way. I will be God, not you, is the great cry of humanity right from the beginning.

[21 : 22] Now what happens when God comes and shows very clearly that he is God and not us? Well, man goes and hides in the bushes from the truth. So you see, we are blind by nature to the revelation from God.

At least at best, we see it only very, very dimly. We can't suppress it totally. We can't do that because it is so breathtakingly obvious and real.

And every time something of the beauty and the wonder of this world hits us, whether it's the beauty of a landscape on a sunny day, or whether it's a haunting melody of music that we hear, or a thousand other things beside that touches us deep inside, we're actually admitting that there is something transcendent and wonderful and beyond our comprehension.

But he's even supposing that we could see and did see everything that God has revealed in his works with no words, words. And the words we could still only know in part, couldn't we?

That's why Genesis chapter 2 tells us that God is a speaking God. He comes down to speak with human beings. They walk and they talk together in the garden in the cool of the day.

[22 : 40] You see, God reveals himself in words, and it's only those words that make a real relationship possible between God and human beings. That's because words create relationships, don't they?

You can't have a relationship without words. You can't have friendships without words. Everybody knows that, even our teenagers today who don't spell real words at all. They just text R-U-O-K-L-O-L, stuff like that.

You've got to know your jargon. I hear that Jeremy Vine, the broadcaster, got in terrible trouble for using the wrong one on Twitter the other day and said something very offensive. You've got to be careful. But it's words of a sort, isn't it?

It's communication. With your thumb. You can't have a real relationship without words. Words reveal who you are.

Words are necessary. They tell somebody else what makes you tick. They tell you what you love and what you hate, what makes you laugh, the things that make you cry.

[23 : 44] Words are what reveal the real you that's inside. are what made. That's why it's so disastrous for the politicians sometimes when they forget they've got one of these things on. And somebody catches their words when they're off camera.

And the real truth about who they really are is revealed. Words reveal our innermost truths. That's revelation, isn't it? It's an unwrapping of who we are.

It's a bit like taking a present, unwrapping the paper, revealing the gift that's inside. That's what words do. When we were refurbishing the church and we were, I was in touch with some of the artists who gave us these paintings, donated these lovely paintings that are down in the wind and elsewhere, I got into communication with one of them.

And we had corresponded a little bit by email about the painting he was going to give us and so on. And anyway, we began to discuss a little bit about things of faith and I asked him if he had any connection with church and so on.

And he emailed me back and he said, no, all I need is in nature. That gives me everything that I need of God. I know everything I need to know about God from nature and I express it in my painting.

[25 : 03] But after a little bit, I said to him, well, think about it because it's true that you can know something of God from nature. And indeed, before I contacted you, I feel I knew quite a lot about you by looking at your paintings.

But, you know, it's only since we started emailing each other and using words that I feel I really do know who you are, what makes you tick, what you're like. And he admitted that and then changed the subject.

But anyway, he took the point. You see, you need words if you're going to know somebody and if you're going to create and sustain a relationship.

And God is a speaking God because he is a God of relationship. He speaks in order to be known by us and he speaks in order that we would know him and engage with him and love him even as he loves us.

Of course, Genesis 3, as you know, put a spoke in that relationship of words, of communication, of love between God and man. It was a great act of betrayal, an act of spiritual adultery.

[26 : 14] And man spurned God. Man spurned his covenant Lord and God and went after another, rejecting God's rule. And of course, that led to a relationship breakdown.

So man hid. He doesn't want to talk to God anymore. But even more seriously, of course, God had to shut man out of his presence so they could not talk anymore.

That's the curse of sin. There's a silence being put between us and God so that there can be no communication in words like that.

And human beings' rebellious hearts, they suppress even the echoes of God's revelation that remain in the world that he's made and so on. We don't want to hear those words.

We shut ourselves off. That's the mark, isn't it? That's the tragedy of broken relationships. We don't talk anymore. It's the first sign, isn't it? Things going wrong. And you see, in a broken relationship, the party who is in the wrong can't put things right.

[27 : 26] It doesn't have the right to, even if they want to, even if they're remorseful and they want to put it right. A broken marriage covenant through unfaithfulness, a terrible thing.

But remorse for wrongdoing on its own, that cannot fix it, can it? Only real grace and mercy from the wronged party has any power to rebuild that relationship and that comes only at great cost.

A price has to be paid. Pain has to be borne. Agonies have to be endured. If there's to be a rebuilding. There has to be a fresh reaching out in words from the wronged party.

Words of forgiveness. Words of fresh invitation. Words of good news. Words that offer hope of redemption and repair and restoration. Isn't that right?

And you see, friends, that is the whole story of this book that we call the Bible. It's the record of this second revelation of God to man. God's revelation in the gospel and in the words of the gospel.

[28 : 36] The good news from God of how that covenant relationship that man was made for but ruined, how that relationship might be restored and made new at last.

And the whole of this book we call the Bible is that revelation. It's the great unveiling in words of the heart of God's love, of God's wonderful purpose of redemption.

And the heart of that redemption in the one who would bear away the barrier to that restoration, who would take away himself the guilt and the curse of man's sin against God.

The Lord Jesus Christ, God the Son himself. What is the Bible? Well, the whole Bible is God's word of self-revelation which comes to its zenith, its climax, in the person and the work of God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's God's word of revelation, of self-revelation which climaxes in God's work of redemption. But from the very beginning, all God's words, all his words of redeeming grace pointed to the great climax, the zenith of that story, the Lord Jesus Christ right from beginning to end.

[29 : 56] This is one great story in this book we call the Bible. The whole Old Testament promises and prepares for God's salvation through the coming in the flesh of the Savior.

The whole New Testament shows forth the fulfillment of everything that was promised from the Old through the prophets. All these scriptures, Jesus said, all these scriptures that you search, they speak of me.

Remember on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, the risen Lord Jesus with those two disciples?

Everything he says from the law of Moses and the Psalms and the prophets must be fulfilled.

And then he opened their minds so that they would understand the words of scripture. The scriptures, the Bible, all the scriptures are a covenant word from God, a word of personal revelation of God himself, in order that despite, despite the sin that separates us from him, we should be able at last to come to know him, to come to know him intimately and wonderfully through his savior, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The whole Bible is a covenant word of self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ the Son. It's revealing to us the God who is our savior.

[31 : 18] Savior. We could sum it up like this. The Old Testament prepares for the Christ. The prophets speak the word of promise. The priests speak of God's saving provision for sin through sacrifice.

The kings speak of God's promised kingdom and his rule that was to come. The whole Old Testament prepares for Christ. The gospels reveal Christ.

They present Christ to the world as king, great David's greater son. As the prophet who speaks God's word with absolute authority. As the great high priest who bears away people's sins.

The acts of the apostles Christ is proclaimed to the whole world. In the epistles the faith is passed on in the church and preserved for the future. And then in John's revelation, the very last book of the Bible, we have the unveiling of the final perfection of God's glorious kingdom and his eternal reign.

The whole Bible is the good news of God our Savior, revealed and fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. Prepared for, presented, proclaimed, passed on, and perfected.

[32 : 34] It's the five Ps that sum up the Bible I was taught in Sunday school. It's quite good. And that's what the Bible is. It's a covenant word from God.

It's his word that offers and his word that makes possible a restored relationship with God, with God our creator. Because the God who is our creator became also the God who is our redeemer.

God must reveal himself to human beings if he is truly God and not just a construct of our imagination. Otherwise, he's no more powerful than we are ourselves.

But all through the ages, the prophets spoke until in these last days, God spoke in the person of his son and he has revealed himself. He's revealed himself fully and finally and forever in the finished work of Christ the Redeemer.

God must reveal himself, but God has revealed himself. himself. But there's another thing. That revelation therefore demands response, doesn't it?

[33 : 49] There can't be any relationship without words, without a revelation of a person's true being. But neither can there be a relationship without a response to those words.

A man can reveal himself, he can unwrap his heart and his soul to the woman that he loves. And he can get down on one knee and take her hand and offer himself to her in a covenant word, in a life changing, future creating word, can't he?

Will you marry me? That's a word of power. That's a word that transforms the future. That's a word that has the power to create a relationship, a covenant relationship, for the rest of that person's life.

But unless there's a response, unless she responds and says, I do, then there won't be a marriage, will there? There won't be that creation of a new covenant relationship.

In fact, if she doesn't respond and say, I do, there will be a breaking off completely, very probably, of such relationship as there was. And you see, friends, that's the way it is with the Bible, with God's revelation to us.

[35 : 10] It is a personal revelation of God to man. It's a covenant word that offers life, that offers intimate knowledge and fulfillment that we were created for in relationship with God himself through Christ the Savior.

It's God saying to each one of us, come, come back to me. Come through Jesus Christ my Son, come and be mine again, be what I created you to be.

That's what God's word is in the scriptures, in the Bible. A word of personal revelation calling us to covenant relationship with himself.

Jesus said, no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. there must be a revelation from God. But there is.

And so Jesus went on and said, come to me, come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is kind.

[36 : 28] God's personal revelation to you and to me. And the question is, what has your personal response been?

Has there been one? There has been one because there is only one way to respond that doesn't say to God, I do not want you, I reject you.

And that is to say, yes, Lord Jesus Christ, I will come to the Father through you. I will come to know you as you have revealed yourself to me. I will be yours forever.

What has your response been to the covenant word of God's personal revelation? And what will it be today and tomorrow and every day?

that's a question for us tonight. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you for your words to us, words of love and of truth, words of such wonderful promise in the gospel of your Son.

[37 : 42] Help us, we pray, to respond to your revelation, to stand on your promises, to take you at your word today and every day, that we truly might be yours as you long for us to be.
For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.