

The God who Speaks

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[0 : 00] Now to our Bible reading, it may surprise some of you we are reading in the New Testament, but I do realize there is a New Testament in the Scriptures. And we are turning to page 1001 unto the letter to the Hebrews.

We're starting a new series on this letter, and we're going to read this evening chapter 1, verse 1, to chapter 2, verse 4. So, Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1.

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 we appointed heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

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

[1 : 14] For which of the angels did God ever say, You are my Son, today I have begotten you? Or again, I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, Let all God's angels worship him. Of the angels, he says, he makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.

But of the Son, he says, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. And you, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you remain. They will all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up. Like a garment, they will be changed.

[2 : 22] But you are the same. Your years will have no end. And to which of the angels has he ever said, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, 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, While God also bore witness, By signs and wonders, And various miracles, And by gifts of the Holy Spirit, Distributed according to his will.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Now, could I ask you please to have your Bibles open at Hebrews 1, Which is on page 1001.

- [3 : 35] And let's have a moment of prayer. Come now with prayer and contemplation.
- See how in Scripture Christ is known. And Father, Father, as the two disciples long ago on the road to Emmaus, Found their fears lifting, And their futures brighter, That as we hear the Lord Christ himself, Coming to us in the Scriptures, We indeed rejoice, That his words may change our lives, That his words may come to us with all the power and the freshness, As when they were first given by the gracious Holy Spirit.
- We ask this in his name. Amen. In a number of churches in England, I haven't actually seen this in Scotland, On the lectern, Or on the pulpit desk, There is an inscription, Which only the preacher can see.
- And it's the words of John 12, Verse 21. The words that some Greeks at the Passover feast said to the Apostle Philip, Sir, We would like to see Jesus.
- And that's a hugely important thing for the preacher to see, Or even if it's not visible in front of him, It's a hugely important thing for the preacher to remember. Reminding that the preacher is not there to talk about himself.
- [5 : 20] Not there to give his own ideas. Not there to project himself. He is there for one reason only, To lead people to Christ.
- Sir, We would like to see Jesus. That leads us very directly into what the author of Hebrews is doing. The author of Hebrews is determined that we are going to see Jesus.
- Now, given this series, the general title, Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus. That's the NIV translation of chapter 12, verse 2. Let us look to Jesus.
- Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. That's what Hebrews is saying. This is what I'm writing about. I want you to fix your eyes on Jesus. Allow me a few moments of introduction.
- I promise you it will only be a few moments. First of all, who wrote this letter? And the short answer is, we have no idea. That doesn't prevent the commentators writing page after page about it.
- [6 : 26] It's always much easier to write if there's no real evidence, because no one can contradict you. Almost certainly, it was not Paul. The style is very different from Paul.
- And in any case, all Paul's letters identify himself as the author. However, two candidates offer themselves. One is Luke, and the other is Apollos, the learned, eloquent preacher, teacher.
- There's no real evidence. I think when people suggest one of these men, they're looking in the New Testament for the kind of person who might have written such an eloquent and powerful letter.
- And they've come up with these two names. And I think there's an important point. The important thing is the message and not the messenger. We don't need to know who wrote this.
- What we do need to know is what he wrote. Secondly, when was it written? Once again, we don't know. Probably before AD 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was destroyed, because the author speaks about the temple ritual as still going on.
- [7 : 33] Once again, we can't prove this. More importantly, who received it and what were their circumstances? What kind of people received this letter?
- Very probably, they were Jewish Christians who were tempted to go back to Judaism. Or possibly some Gentiles who had come from paganism and wanted a real religion with temples, altars, and priests.
- Interesting, one of the Roman writers described the early Christians as atheists. They didn't appear to have anything that a religion needed. They didn't appear to have temples.

They didn't appear to have priests. They didn't appear to have altars. Now, our author is saying, but we have all these things. We do have them. You just can't see them. So, these are probably the kind of people who receive this letter.

Almost certainly second and third generation Christians who are in danger of falling away. Chapter 5, verse 12. Paul says to them, you ought to be teachers by now.

[8 : 40] And you're still on the elementary stages. Now, it suggests a period of time elapsing. There had been persecution. Chapter 10 talks about this.

But probably it had eased by now. But what we have is a group of people who are discouraged, disillusioned, in danger of going back.

In danger of falling away. Probably in an urban setting. Here we have no continuing city, says the author in chapter 3. And he also talks about the eternal city.

And the two cities most likely are Rome and Jerusalem. Once again, we can't prove either. My own hunch is it's probably Christians and Jerusalem.

But once again, nothing particularly depends on it. So, to them and to us, what is the remedy if we're in danger of falling away?

[9 : 38] What's the remedy if we're becoming disillusioned and discouraged? The remedy is eyes fixed on Jesus. Consider him, he's going to say in chapter 12.

Now, the trouble, of course, about saying that, it's easy for that to become a rather sentimental slogan, isn't it? Focused on feelings. Imagining what we've got to do is to have warm feelings about Jesus.

By the way, feelings matter. We mustn't denigrate. We mustn't say they don't count. That's not really what the author is meaning. The author is saying, we can fix our eyes on Jesus because we have a God who speaks to us.

We're so accustomed to that, we don't realize how astonishing this is. Think about it. If God didn't speak to us, we would have nothing whatever to say to him.

You know that great story back in 1 Kings 18, when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal. They had an all-day prayer meeting, becoming increasingly vehement, increasingly hysterical.

[10 : 48] What did they say the whole day? Oh, Baal, hear us. They had no idea what to say to Baal because Baal hadn't spoken to them. Whereas when Elijah spoke to God, he spoke to the God who had revealed himself in his covenant to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God who had spoken.

You see, the fact that God speaks to us shows us that he cares deeply for us. He cares for us. If he didn't care, he could have left us in the dark.

So, the title for this particular evening is the God who speaks, the God who has spoken and the God who is speaking. So, how does God speak?

And first of all, I want us to look at God's final word. Verse 1, in those last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

Verse 2, in those last days he has spoken to us through his Son. The last days are the whole time between the comings of Christ.

[11 : 54] Not a particular period at the end of that time, the whole time. And it's the last days because God has spoken his final word, the word made flesh.

And this already is relationship. It's not the kind of words that are just there to fill in space. The Scottish poet Edwin Muir, listening to a particularly turgid and boring preacher, wrote, the word made flesh, here is made words again.

God is not like that. God's speaking is clear, powerful, and in person. Verse 2, by his Son. Literally, in Son.

God himself comes to us in his Son. And he's unique because not only does he bring the message, he is the message. Remember, ultimately, the gospel is not about Christ.

The gospel is Christ. He himself is the message. And regularly, he is described as better. I wonder, when I was preparing this, why the author doesn't just say best, he's best.

[13 : 07] I think the point is this. When you think of the way we use the word better, we're always saying, this is better than that. And so on. Best is a rather abstract idea.

You can't really prove it. It's a way out there. Whereas if we say something is better, there is a comparison. And the author is saying, whatever comparison you make, throughout time and space, Jesus is better.

And he's better because in him, God has come to us. God has spoken. We'll come to that shortly. But in him, Jesus, in Jesus, God has come to us.

And without that, there is no gospel. If Jesus is simply the highest specimen of humanity, standing at the head of the human race, as he stretches out his hand across the gulf to touch God, then all we can do is to hang on to his coattails and hope he'll drag us up.

And of course, if we try to do that, one of two things is going to happen, isn't it? We're either going to become very conceited, but we feel we're doing rather well, or we're going to become utterly depressed and we realize we can't make it.

[14 : 20] In fact, so contradictory is human nature, we'll probably feel those two things simultaneously. And though the point is, Jesus is not reaching out to God.

Jesus is the hand of God reaching out to us to raise us up to him by grace. And you see, the word is already a relationship. After all, the relationship of the Father and the Son already established.

And that's what Jesus says in John 17, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. How do we fix our eyes on Jesus?

We fix our eyes on Jesus as God's final word because we know that when we listen to him, we're listening to God.

And the author goes on to say two particular things about this final word. He says he is the creator and the heir and the goal of the universe.

[15 : 28] Creation of the Bible is never simply a theoretical idea. Creation is always linked with practical living. When the devout Jew tumbled out of bed every morning and says, Hear, O Israel, Yahweh your God, Yahweh is one.

He was turning his back on every other godlet in the universe, every other value. And this is what Psalm 139 says, Where can I flee from your spirit?

Wherever I am in this vast universe, you will be there. Now the universe is a terrifying place, isn't it? Particularly as revealed by modern astronomy, the vastness, the unthinkable numbers, the light years, the galaxies, and so on.

The fact that Jesus is the creator means that the universe is also our Father's house. And very often in the Old Testament in the Psalms, the word temple means not the Jerusalem temple, but the whole universe.

In his temple, says Psalm 129, Every whit utters glory. And that Psalm is not talking about the temple, it's talking about creation and a thunderstorm, in fact, breaking over the Mediterranean.

[16 : 37] So, one day, all will be plain. And he is the exact image. In other words, everything that is true about Jesus is true about God.

It's not that we're going to discover sometime there is another God who is different from and superior to Jesus. In him, the fullness, the exact image of God dwells.

But he is also the Savior. Because one of the things, when you think about the vastness of the universe, the power of God, the power of the creator, how on earth can we in our smallness and sinfulness stand before a God like that?

And the author says this, verse Psalm 3, After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. Background, the great day of atonement, when the sins of Israel, as it were, a kind of almost a kind of spring cleaning, when the sins of the year were presented by the high priest of the time.

The difference, of course, was he presented his own sins. And there was a tense moment to see if he had come out of the most holy place. Because after all, a sinner going into the holy place could easily have been destroyed.

[18 : 03] After all, Aaron's own sons had been destroyed by offering impious worship there. So you see, the background is the day of atonement. And pointing to his role as the great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

Now you see the practicality of all this. Christians are fearful and apathetic, as we so often are. They're disillusioned.

They look around them. They look at their lives. They look at the progress of the gospel. And everything seems to be against them. Now notice what the author is saying.

He's not saying our Savior is adequate. That's not enough. He's saying he is above and beyond all possible opposition. Past, present, and future.

And since, as he's going to say at the end of the letter, he is the same yesterday and today and forever. There's inexhaustible resources and an unshakable relationship.

[19 : 08] He never stops giving. He never stops loving. He never stops caring. God's final word. Fix your eyes on God's final word.

His son in whom he speaks. His exact image. The creator of the universe. The goal of the universe. And the Savior who makes us fit to stand in his presence.

But then the author also speaks about God's age-long word. Long ago. Beginning at many times. And in many ways. God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

Remember the prophets is shorthand for the whole of the Old Testament. You see, you're not really escaping from the Old Testament at all. Because the author won't let us. You see, the author is saying, if we're going to understand Jesus Christ, we need to know what went before.

That's why so many of these Old Testament quotations here are from the Psalms. It's only in the spirit, the atmosphere of praise and worship, that these ideas can really make an impact.

[20 : 17] Later on, he is going to particularly deal with the desert wanderings of the people of Israel. But here at the beginning, particularly from the Psalms. And he's saying, if you want to understand your Savior, you need to know your scriptures.

That's still true. And the first thing he says, this early revelation had great variety. Many times and in many ways. It's something like 1500 years, probably the period over which the Old Testament comes together.

Varieties in style. Sometimes God speaks directly. Like to Moses, like to Jeremiah. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. The word of the Lord came to Moses.

The word of the Lord came to Isaiah. Other times, the spirit uses the writer's experience and knowledge of God. See, when David says, the Lord is my shepherd.

I don't imagine the Lord actually dictated these words. It's under the guidance of the spirit as David reflects on his experience. Sometimes in vision, as in Daniel, for example, and Ezekiel, where the veil between this world and the other world is torn apart.

[21 : 31] And, of course, the hard work of the authors in studying and writing. And the author is saying all of these, like an hourglass, focus on Christ.

The whole revelation, all its enormous variety from Genesis to Malachi, or if you're Jewish, from Genesis to 2 Chronicles, comes through this figure of God's final word.

And he's showing us, in particular, two things about this age-long word and what it says about Jesus. First of all, Jesus is greater than angels.

Can you imagine any modern preacher or any modern writer beginning a sermon or a lecture on the greatness of Christ and saying, oh, he is greater than angels?

We can't, of course, can we? Because angels have fared very badly in the history of the church. They've often been ignored. We don't know where to fit them in. They've sometimes been exaggerated.

[22 : 39] You know, the kind of sensational stories you sometimes get from people like American tele-evangelists who almost claim to be able to conjure up an angel on the screen, and so on.

Angels are hugely important in God's universe. Bless the Lord, says Psalm 103, you angels, you mighty ones who carry out his word.

Dressing the great apologist of the middle of the 20th century, Francis Schaeffer, when he went on university missions, almost always would begin with a talk on angels.

And the reason for this was he wanted to show to the students he wasn't coming to teach some moralizing platitudes. He was coming to talk about a supernatural message, a message that dealt with the unseen world, a message that was greater than simply good advice.

Long ago, I think it was 40 years ago, in 1975, Billy Graham wrote a book on angels. I haven't read it for many years. I'd lost my copy. But he gave it the very interesting title, God's Secret Agents.

[23 : 51] And that seems to me exactly right. God's secret, they work for God, but they work unseen. They, and yet, of course, they know far more than we do.

So when the author says, Jesus is greater than angels, he's saying something hugely important. After all, read through the Bible. Read all the great events, creation, exodus, the stories of the prophets, stories of Jesus himself, and miss out all the references to angels.

You're not going to have very much Bible left. Angels are at the very heart of Revelation. So, Jesus is greater in the supernatural world.

That's what he's saying. If you read your Old Testament, you'll find that out. Angels are servants. Jesus is the Son. But he's great in history as well, because not only is he greater than angels, he is the King who is to come.

Quotation from Psalm 2, in verse 5. You are my Son. Day, I have begotten you. And then continue from Psalm 89.

[25 : 00] I will be to my Father. He shall be a Son. The covenant with David. This is the King who is going to come from David's house. No angel will bring the reign of the Davidic King on earth.

Only the Son will. And angels worship him. So, he says, Jesus, supreme in the supernatural world.

Jesus, supreme in the historical world. And then he talks about, he quotes once again from the Psalms, verse 8 and 9, from Psalm 45, Psalm associated with Solomon, where God speaks to someone he addresses as God.

The Father speaks to the Son, and says, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. Angels' task is to serve. The Son's task is to rule.

And he goes on to talk about his eternal kingdom, quoting from Psalm 102, in verses 10 and 15. This kingdom will never end, because the Son will reign in it.

[26 : 14] Angels have an honor's place in that kingdom. But angels, angels, verse 13, angels do not sit at God's right hand.

Angels are servants. The Son is supreme. Verse 14 is a particularly interesting verse. Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

When did you last thank God for the ministry of angels? Angels? And if not, why not? Because angels are part of God's gracious provision as we journey to glory.

I don't thank God often enough for that either. And I think, I'm just reminding myself, as well as all of us, angels are God's provision as we make our way to glory.

God's unseen, God's secret agent, as Billy Graham called them. So, the final word, Jesus Christ. How do we find out about him?

[27 : 22] We find out about him in the scriptures. And finally, in chapter 2, the present word. God fully reveals himself in his Son, the living word.

And the written word, faithfully and fully, points to him. And that's why, he says, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.

The community have begun to sit loose to the word of God. Now, it's a community which have had the word of God for several generations. Chapter 13 says, remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you.

That's clearly the leaders of an earlier generation who either have gone or else are no longer active in serving the Lord. So, they've had the word, but they haven't been paying it attention.

They've been letting it, letting it sweep over them. And it's a word to us as well, how often the word escapes us by the time we've reached the church door, far less during the week.

[28 : 30] And the other word he uses is drift, a boat drifting away from its moorings. The idea here is not a sudden storm, but the gradual slipping off the rudder as it moves away.

So, we need to not only, it's important not only to attend a Bible teaching church, but to pay earnest attention. And in our own private reading as well, pay close attention to what we read and to what we hear.

And there are two things here as well. First of all, this is a supernatural word. Since the message is declared by angels. Angels were involved in the giving of the law.

Stephen, in Acts 7, and Paul, in Galatians 3, tells about how angels were involved in the giving of the law to Moses. And in 1 Kings 22, when good King Jehoshaphat foolishly entangles himself with the evil King Ahab, the Lord sends a lying spirit.

And how does the lying spirit work? Through the prophets. So, see, the message of angels, the message of prophets are very close together. And notice, this proved to be reliable.

[29 : 48] Read the story, he says, it proves to be reliable. How shall we escape if we neglect? Notice, he doesn't say, how shall we escape till we disobey? How shall we escape if we neglect?

We don't pay close attention. We allow it simply to drift over us and ignore it. God speaks in his son. God speaks in the scriptures. It's a supernatural word.

But it's also an everyday word. It was attested to us by those who heard. The end of verse 3. Notice two things there. Those who heard.

That is a very important thing. It's the preaching rather than the preacher. The message rather than the messenger. It's not those who were bright, those who were learned, those who were eloquent, those who heard.

That is, what's the qualification for sharing the gospel with others? What's the qualification for sharing Christ with others? It is hearing, is it not? Fixing our eyes on him.

[30 : 53] Hearing what he says in scripture. As I said at the beginning, the preacher is not there to do anything other than point to Christ. I read this, Sinclair Ferguson says, the preacher makes up the sermon.

He does not make up the message. I think that's hugely important. And that's important as well. Those of you who give talks and so on. It is the message.

The Lord Christ himself. Honor the message. Because that is what will save us. And the second thing is, it was confirmed by God.

God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit. Now, almost certainly, that was not happening among the churches to whom this, to whom this letter came.

But they were well aware of how particularly in the early days, God confirmed the word by various miracles. And I think the important thing is this, well, God also bore witness.

[32 : 01] If God chooses, along with the preaching of the word, to give miracles and wonders, then that is, then that's up to God. If God chooses to do it, we can't mandate it, we can't guarantee it, God may choose to do it.

Perhaps not surprising, it tends to happen more often in cultures where, which have maybe been dominated by witchcraft and so on.

cultures into which the gospel has never made any kind of inroad. So, sometimes with signs and wonders. The important thing to remember, of course, is the greatest miracle of all is the changing of a person's life.

The gospel word is not something accompanied by the power of God. The gospel word is the power of God to salvation. And the Holy Spirit takes that word and brings someone alive.

So, it is, it is a word, a present word, a word which is speaking to us now. God is speaking by his spirit as we sang.

[33 : 07] So, we'll never exhaust this subject. I'm almost slightly amused by chapter 13, verse 22. The author says, I have written to you only a short letter.

I think if we had written a letter as long as Hebrews, we'd feel we had done justice to our subject. The art of letter writing is, of course, dead nowadays. E-mails and texting and Twitter and all the rest of it have ended these wonderful letters we used to get.

However, it's an inexhaustible subject. That's why you say it's only a short letter. I can never exhaust Jesus Christ. Isn't that what John says? Many other things Jesus did if they were written the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

There is no situation therefore he cannot handle. As the author spoke to these Christians then, he speaks to us now and he brings to us a Christ not trapped in the past nor trapped in the present or in the future but one who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, how we praise you that you have spoken to us.

[34 : 27] Spoken to us in human flesh. The word became flesh and lived among us. And for the sake of those who did not, who were not alive at that time, you have given to us the written words which so fully and faithfully points to him.

And so help us as we live our lives in this world to take courage from these words and to rejoice in the one who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.