

God Speaks
Hebrews 1:1–3
September 10, 2023

Maybe you've seen the ad where a mother and daughter, sitting at the dinner table, suddenly realize they don't have sweet potatoes for their holiday meal. The mother leans over and whispers, in an accusatory tone, "I gave you a list." The daughter, unmoved, mutters back, "I bought everything on the list you gave me." Then, quite confidently, the mother asserts, "There is *no* list without sweet potatoes on it." So, in a clever nod to what dominates much of weekends in the fall, the mother throws the challenge flag, a football official strolls in the dining room, and they strike up instant replay.

I used the commercial illustration because it's the least intrusive, the least searing. But maybe you've partaken in communication breakdown a time or two. It's either, "You didn't say that," or, "I didn't hear that." We don't have to play the game of telephone to play the game of telephone.¹

Today's passage in Hebrews is essentially a preview. Like John's Gospel, the first few verses introduce—in a beautifully compact way—many of the themes that will unfold throughout the letter. If Hebrews is a film, this is the trailer. If it's a book, this is the prologue. If this is a sermon intended to persuade, the author's opening salvo is this: God has spoken.

If that's true, the question for us is twofold, at least. What has He said? Have we heard Him rightly?

1. God Speaks (vv. 1–2a)

Verse 1: **God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways.** The author of this book and those reading what He wrote—Jewish Christians—seemingly had quite the shared history. The **long ago** of this verse speaks to that shared past. **To the fathers** speaks of the shared *people* in that past, the Israelites—their "fathers."²

In their shared past, and to their shared people, what had God done? He'd spoken. The verse says that He **spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets.** Over the past few months we've seen this up close. The word of the Lord came to Micah. The word of the Lord came to Jonah. In over a hundred other places, *that* kind of phrase introduced communication *from* God *to* a prophet in the Old Testament.³ The author of Hebrews—hundreds of years later—is reflecting on this pattern. God had not been silent.

In fact, He'd spoken **in many portions and in many ways.** These two words are not simply synonyms.⁴ "Many portions" has been translated as, "many times,"⁵ meaning this speaking didn't happen on a single occasion. Over thousands of years God revealed Himself to Adam, to Abraham, to Sarah, to Jacob, to Joseph, to Moses, to Joshua, to David, to the prophets, major and minor, and to others. He'd revealed Himself many times to many people.

And He'd done so, this verse says, **in many ways.** Sometimes God spoke directly, other times in dreams, and still other times in overwhelming theophanies—for example, a vision of Himself on Sinai. Yet, it's not only in *that* multiplicity of ways, the **many ways** He's spoken are also

¹ It *only* takes two to tangle.

² Not to be limited to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. See Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBCT, 53, and Harold Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 38.

³ Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, TOTC, 107.

⁴ Attridge, 37.

⁵ ESV.

reflected in the fact that revelation came in the form of narrative, wisdom literature, poetry, and even apocalyptic genres.⁶

Would the Israelites have known God's character if He hadn't revealed it? No, at least not with any authority. General revelation—that which they could observe—never could've adequately or authoritatively communicated that the God they worshipped was long-suffering, for example.

In the past, God had spoken in many ways to His people, the fathers of those reading Hebrews. He never *had* to speak. Yet, in grace, He'd chosen to reveal Himself.

This pattern pervaded Israel's history. The author describes it as long ago. But he brings up that pattern to point us to that which happened **after**. Verse 1: **God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.**

It's important that we see *both* the continuity—what's the same—*and* the discontinuity—what's not—in these verses. By continuity, we affirm that throughout Israel's history God revealed Himself over and over again. In verse 2 He's *continuing* to do something He's done since Genesis. It's not *entirely* new. However, it is, without question, *new*. By way of discontinuity, we too affirm that—rather than revealing Himself in *many* ways at *many* times through *many* people—He's finally and ultimately revealed Himself through One: His Son.

So, it's *not* that we're to discard all previous revelation. It's that we see His Son as the fulfillment of all that came prior.⁷ And *since* He fulfilled it all, Hebrews will repeatedly show us how the person and work of the Son is key to understanding all that God revealed prior.

I know this is uber-spiritual, but throughout Julie's first pregnancy I was continually curious what the little guy was going to look like. Whose eyes would he would have? What color hair? So, when we went for the initial ultrasound, I'm not sure we blinked. Afterward, they give you a few pictures. We now had this profile view where we could see the outline of the baby's face against a black backdrop. We framed it. The picture was something of a preview. And though it helped *somewhat*, at that point we still didn't know precisely what he looked like. We knew *more*, but it wasn't exhaustive, nor was it sufficient to know what he looked like in detail.

Then, a couple months after he was born, I was in his nursery and I remember looking over at that same ultrasound picture, the outline of his face. And you know what it looked like? Like him. The preview hadn't been exhaustive—*more* was needed—but it was accurate. It was him. And now—with *more* revelation given—I could see that preview rightly.

Long ago, God had spoken, revealing Himself. Now, He'd done so definitively. We don't need *more* revelation than God putting on flesh.⁸ What He's said in His Son is sufficient.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father already made this clear. Recall those that stood on that mount with Peter, James, and John. Moses and Elijah, whom many say represent the Law and the Prophets, which often represented the entirety of the Old Testament. They stood there. Yet, with Moses and Elijah present—representing all the revelation that they represented, what did the Father say to Peter, James, and John? **This is my Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!** (Luke 9:35).

God speaks. The Son is how you hear.

⁶ Schreiner, 53; Attridge, 37.

⁷ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 87.

⁸ Schreiner, 54.

2. God Speaks in His Son's Splendor (vv. 2b–3a)

Verse 2 goes on to detail the *magnitude* of revelation in the Son.⁹ Verse 2: **in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things.** We'll see this more clearly in next week's passage, but this is an allusion to Psalm 2 where the Father said to His Son, **Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession** (Ps. 2:8).¹⁰ In this ancient culture, a father promising his son an inheritance wouldn't have been a leap in their thinking. It's the logical fruition of sonship.¹¹ So, what might the Son of God receive? The Father promises the Son the ends of the earth. He will give Him the nations. Hebrews 1 doesn't promise *less*; in fact, it extends this inheritance to *all* things.¹²

When the author wrote **in these last days** in verse 2, "last days" describes the period of time that *began* with Christ's ascension/exaltation and ends with the subjugation of all things.¹³ Chapter 10 of Hebrews will detail that end point, that the ascended and ruling Christ is **waiting from that time onward until his enemies be made a footstool for His feet** (Heb. 10:13). The Father promised this future. The Son is the end, the *telos*, the goal of all things. He is where all things are headed. *To* Him are all things (Rom. 11:36).

Because *from* Him are all things. Verse 2: **in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.** The heir of all things is, also, the agent *through whom* the universe was made. This is the same kind of language used in Colossians 1:16: **for by Him all things were created**, as well as John 1:3: **All things came into being through Him.** The One in whom God has spoken is *both* beginning and end, or to use John's language—*alpha* and *omega*—or to use Hebrews 12 language, both author and perfecter (Heb. 12). *To* Him are all things. *From* him are all things.

And *through* Him are all things. That's what the second half of verse 3 makes plain: **and upholds all things by the word of His power.** You and I can't be certain on a particular outcome—an end—*unless* we can control *everything* that leads to it. I might say, "This is the goal of this effort." However, something *outside* my control could scuttle my aim. So, how is verse 3 related to what verse 2 asserted? Among many things, His present sustaining of all things means that the *end* God has purposed will certainly be fulfilled. Since nothing now or ever is outside His control, nothing will ever thwart Him. He will carry creation to its intended goal.¹⁴

The One in whom God has spoken is the One through whom He made all things; He's the One in whom all things will be one day summed up; and we know this is possible because He has for every moment of history, on every continent, in every era, upheld and sustained it all.

Maybe you ask, why does any of this matter for the book of Hebrews? Why does the author—and the One that inspired him—begin *here* when talking to these weary, persecuted believers? When we were studying suffering in Paul's life through the book of Acts and when we considered suffering within the Psalms this summer, we noted a similar emphasis. That is, we can't cross the street of our present without looking both ways—at God's faithful past and our certain future. Because one of the significant differences between feeling as if the details of our lives are meaningless *or* seeing purpose in the day to day is whether or not we believe there's an Author of each moment.

⁹ Cockerill, 91.

¹⁰ Schreiner, 55.

¹¹ Cockerill, 92. My kids can't wait to get a lot of books on Hebrews.

¹² Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 14.

¹³ Harris, 13; Cockerill, 90.

¹⁴ Harris, 15; Schreiner, 58.

The secularist can't steady his or her feet with these truths. No one purposefully crafted their world; certainly no one fashioned him or her. In that framework, there's luck, happenstance, mother nature, karma. There isn't kind providence directed by a Sovereign. And, in that worldview, neither is history headed toward a particular end. That's at least one reason why this author emphasizes this on the front end. In the midst of difficulty, he's concerned with our hope: **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful** (Heb. 10:23).

That faithfulness is exhaustive. He upholds every single thing. We should take note of the phrase that explains *how* the Son does this. Verse 3: **and upholds all things by the word of His power**. He does this by His word.

The Father speaks. The Son speaks as well. In fact, He's *just like* His Father. Which is what verse 3 portrays. Speaking of the Son in whom God speaks: **He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature**. To briefly return to the Mount of Transfiguration, there the disciples were given something of a glimpse of this glory. There, Christ's deity shone through the veil of His humanity.¹⁵ But it wasn't *only* there. John's Gospel echoes this truth. When the Word put on flesh and dwelt among the disciples, John writes that they'd seen **His glory**. What glory was that? **Glory as of the only begotten from the Father** (John 1:14). We don't have adequate language for this weighty outshining splendor, but when Chris preached this text a while back, he wrote that Christ is, "the totality of divinity shining as unrelenting beams in a cloudless sky; the perfect harmony and infinite beauty of all of God's excellencies—here they are, in this Man who is more than a man."¹⁶ The Son is the radiance of His Father's glory.

In part because, verse 3, He's, **the exact representation of His nature**. Maybe you've heard that this language is like that used for the imprint of a coin, or like a seal pressed down upon wax.¹⁷ What the language communicates is an *exact* correspondence between the impression and the seal that made it.¹⁸ For the sake of orthodoxy, though this verse maintains that the Son is a distinct person, it also upholds the unity of Triune essence. The Father's nature does not differ from the nature of the Son, even in the slightest of minutiae. It's an *exact* representation. The Athanasian creed says it this way: "We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal."¹⁹ In short, if you're going to argue that Christ is less than God, you dare not use Hebrews. He's God become flesh.

Why would this aspect need to be emphasized? To illustrate, some of the dangers of technology in our day are clearly apparent; and some are more subtle. One particular subtle danger of our disembodied age is the separating of words from the person that spoke them. Tech permits this. I can be anonymous and speak. Or someone can say they're someone *else* and pretend to speak on their account. Or from the other direction, I can talk to quote "people" that I don't actually know as people. Or, through some platforms, I might speak to others in such a way that I just forget that they *are* people. In short, *all* this separates words from the people speaking those words. It's disembodied communication. It's always been there to some degree, but it's been heightened in our day. It's subtle. But the dangers are pervasive.

¹⁵ Phil Ryken, *Luke*, 471.

¹⁶ See *God Made Known: He is not Silent* here: <https://cdn.subsplash.com/documents/JF89ZG/source/ccae5b5e-b71f-45c2-b281-62bcfc43851f/document.pdf>

¹⁷ Peter Lewis, *The Glory of Christ*, 126.

¹⁸ Cockerill, 94.

¹⁹ For an excellent devotional resource that includes this creed, see Jonathan Gibson, *Be Thou My Vision*, 143.

Especially if we were to separate what *God* has communicated from who *He* is. The God to be known is *not* a set of facts to memorize; the God to be known is a Person. And knowing Him is the point of our life. Thankfully, He's revealed Himself. He's spoken. Peter O'Brien writes, "To stand before God's Word is to stand before Him."²⁰ So, God has spoken, saying first, "*He* is how you hear Me." If we were to ask Him to explain that further, He'd answer, "Because He shows who *I* am."

3. God Speaks in His Son's Session (v. 3b)

Verse 3 continues, **When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.**

We'll come back to this, but don't miss that "when *He*" refers to the One described thus far. The One through whom the world was *made* is *also* the One who *made* purification.²¹ That language was used in the Greek Old Testament to describe cleansing.²² It assumes filth. As Jim noted a couple weeks back, in this passage we've seen Christ as prophet. God speaks *in* and *through* Him. Here we see Christ introduced as priest. He's made purification. Though we've not come close to earning access, though we're far from holy, He's mediated. We've had our **hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water** (Heb. 10:22). His work is why we might draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. He made purification of sins.

He's the One through whom God speaks, the better prophet. He's the better priest. And the throne of David always pointed toward a better Ruler. Verse 3: **When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on High.**²³ Generally, priests didn't sit. Sitting signified a completed work. Peter Lewis wonders if this is why there's no chair among the tabernacle furniture. In his words, "The idea of a seated priest was virtually a contradiction in terms."²⁴ Hebrews 10 describes this: **every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. . . . And then it describes what's better, not a priest standing: but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God** (Heb. 10:11–12).

Hebrews 1:3 anticipates that argument to come. It's noteworthy from a grammatical perspective that the *main* verb of verse 3 is this one: **sat down**. The three verbs preceding this final clause actually anticipate and modify this one.²⁵ What does that mean? Is this significant? Well, if that's the case, you might translate this verse, "As the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, the One upholding all things by the word of His power, after *He* had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high."²⁶ Why is it significant to *connect* all those dots? Because if He were not the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, He couldn't have sat down. He wouldn't have been worthy.

Further, this connection is significant because it's from *that* place—the throne—that He sustains all things. He's not merely sitting; He's ruling. This is, again, why the created order will reach its intended goal. And the pinnacle verb of verse 3 keeps us from limiting the "all things" He sustains to the laws of science, to nuclei, to the earth's rotation, or even to our next breath. As the better King—ruling over all—and as the better priest who finished the work—He forever sustains

²⁰ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 23.

²¹ Harris, 16.

²² Attridge, 46.

²³ This is an allusion to Psalm 110, which we will look at repeatedly in this study.

²⁴ Lewis, 129.

²⁵ Harris, 16.

²⁶ See Cockerill, 96.

our purification. We blew it, yet again. Christ still says, “clean.” He sustains by His word. And He pleads for you.

He has the power to do so. He’s at the right hand of the Father, the place of supreme authority and highest honor.²⁷ Sitting where He does, He shares God’s power without limitation.²⁸ Being seated—His session—shouts power, protection, and triumph.²⁹

Conclusion

God has spoken in His Son. *He* is how you hear. He shows us who God is. And, to be more specific, He shows us this in what He’s done. The maker of all things, the end of all things, and the sustainer of all things took *all* of our sins upon Himself. And having finished that work, He sat down to rule. The Lamb sits upon the throne. God has spoken. Hear Him.

²⁷ Harris, 16.

²⁸ Cockerill, 97.

²⁹ Schreiner, 58.