

Hebrews 1:1-4

God Has Spoken

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OPENING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father, as we hear these words of final prophesy uttered by King David, conscious of his own sin and failure, but longing for rulers who would rule wisely and with justice, we cry out to you for our world, for our nation, our state, our city. Pray that you might be pleased to raise up in many of the emerging countries, Christian rulers, who can be utterly trusted, without side or corruption. And among ourselves, likewise, that those who govern us might again become caring fathers and nursing mothers, to the needy, and the broken and lead with justice, and equity, and concern for the poor and needy. And as we long for this we long that we ourselves might be in the world in which we live men and women and young people, upon whom others look and recognize a poise, a stability, an integrity, a graciousness, a sweet righteousness, and most of all, a likeness to your Son Jesus Christ. We pray that you would use this chief instrument of your word today in our lives, to draw us closer to Him. To make us desire to know Him. To increase our likeness to Him. And, to enable us to serve Him. And this we pray for his great namesake. Amen.

Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now, our scripture reading this morning is from the Letter to the Hebrews. And you'll find the passage is in the pew Bible on page 1001. The letter to the Hebrews, Pew Bible page 1001. And for children who have their larger Children's Bible with them, it's on page 1491. And we read Hebrews chapter one, and verses one through four. Let us hear God's word.

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, 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.

SERMON:

If you were here last Lord's day morning, you remember that the sermon was drawn from the first two verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians. It was appropriate to the occasion, because it's the only section in Paul's letters (little section of two verses) in which he refers to both elders or overseers and Deacons in the same breath. And we happened to be ordaining and installing new elders and deacons for our church family. And I said, something of an aside, then perhaps, or perhaps not, but perhaps this is the beginning of a series of messages from Paul's letter to the Philippians. At the church door, the end of the service, one of our esteemed elders, who happens to be in the men's Bible class, into which I'm told a number of ladies sneak Sunday by Sunday, he told me, that's very interesting. And it's going to be very interesting, because Dr. DeWitt just started in the men's Bible class teaching on the very same verses in Philippians. Now, I know I'm not the wisest person in the congregation, but I have enough wisdom to know that when you're elder and better, who also in this instance happens to be your predecessor, has decided he's going to expand Philippians, then if I can use a baseball metaphor, you have three strikes against you, and the wise man, will, in the providence of God go somewhere else. And that is really the providential explanation for reading these opening verses of the letter to the Hebrews. Now, is this the beginning of a series of messages on the Letter to the Hebrews? Or is this the second in a series of messages from the opening verses of the letters in the New Testament? You'll have to come back next week in order to discover the answer to that. But we're going to look at these opening verses today.

Perhaps you've had an experience like this, I know exactly where I was. I know the room. I even know the number of the room in the college residence in which I was sitting, despite the poverty of my geography, I can tell you which direction I was facing when it dawned on me as a teenager (although I'd been reading the Bible for some time) that while all of the scriptures are God breathed, and given to us, as Paul says, "For teaching, and reproving, and correcting and training in righteousness", there are some books in the Bible that function as keys to the whole Bible message. And I resolved then, that as a young Christian, those ought to be the books to which I would give special attention. There is no doubt that Hebrews is one of those books. Hebrews is perhaps supremely in the New Testament, the book that provides us with a whole series of keys about what the message of the Old Testament was. How it's related to the New Testament. How everything that Moses taught is related to the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so it's a very important letter for New Testament Christians to study. And the opening words, in a sense, say it all. They point us to the greatness, the majesty, the glory of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, there are two things about this letter to the Hebrews. The first is this, the author tells us almost at the end, that he's written this letter as a short word of encouragement, or exhortation. If this is indeed the first in a series of messages from Hebrews that stretches on week after week, then I can already justify saying at the beginning of the closing sermon, I'm glad you've stuck with this short series of sermons from this brief word of exhortation, the Letter to the Hebrews.

But it's not only a word of wonderful exhortation and encouragement. It's also a word of very great challenge. It's a word of encouragement for this very obvious reason. It's written to Christians who faced many causes of discouragement. Many facets of suffering. Some of them had been disinherited,

because they'd become Christians. They had lost their possessions and indeed lost their family inheritance. They'd lost their church. And as they found themselves in times of difficulty, they felt the pressure upon them, perhaps, to give up or to turn back. And the author of Hebrews is writing to them, to give them reasons for not turning back. And especially to expound to them the chief reason for not turning back. Which is quite simply this, that Jesus Christ is everything to the believer. And in particular, that Jesus Christ is superior to everything else to which they might turn. Indeed, there's a vocabulary that punctuates the Letter to the Hebrews, where the author keeps saying to us that Jesus is greater than that. In the word of verse four here, that Jesus is superior to that. And so the key to pressing on in the Christian life, is to see that Jesus is superior. Jesus is great. We need to see what a massively wonderful Savior he is if we are to be able to overcome the sometimes massive obstacles there seem to be to our faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ. And so in a word his message is really this, see the greatness of Christ, and you will keep going on in the Christian life.

I remember on the few occasions, I had conversation with the great Welsh preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, and I heard this from others that when he shook hands with you, at the end of a conversation, his words would always be, "Now he would say, keep on, keeping on, keep on going on." And this is what the pastor who writes this letter to Christians for whom he has a special concern, this is what he's saying. He's shaking us by the hand and in the hand of his letter is this wonderful portrayal of the Lord Jesus. And he says, if Christ is yours, if you're holding fast to Christ, then you will be able -- no matter how we and frail you may feel -- no matter how massive the difficulties may be, if your eyes are fixed on Christ, you'll be able to go on, going on.

But there's another side to all this. Because towards the middle of the letter he's beginning to speak about Christ and he suddenly pauses towards the end of chapter five and he says, "Some of these things are actually quite difficult, hard to understand." It's almost as though he's drawing us in and saying to us, now, I hope you're Christians who want to wrestle even with things that you find hard to understand. You do that in ordinary life. You may even delight to do that in ordinary life. Should you delight any less to do it and your Christian life? But what he actually goes on to say, is very telling. He says, "The reason you find some of these things hard to understand, is because you're dull of hearing." Because your taste buds have not been exercised and strengthened with the solid food of the gospel. And so he says, amazingly, he says to them, You know what I feel as your pastor as I've got to go back to giving you milk. Now, when do you go back to taking milk? When you're sick. You get milk when you're a baby, and that's good. But if you're only able to take milk, when you're 15, or 30, or 50, or 70, it's a sign that something is amiss. And this is the challenge that he presents to them. He says, you know, solid food, the kind of thing I want to teach you, solid food is for the mature. And I suppose many of us here this morning would regard ourselves as mature Christians. Some of us have sat under a whole succession of ministries, and in Sunday school classes where the Bible has been faithfully explained to us. And yet, you see, it's one thing for the various chefs to prepare the meals of biblical teaching, it's another thing for us to have the taste for it. Isn't it? The stomach for it. And so there's a there's a paradox in Hebrews. Wonderfully encouraging but also amazingly challenging paradox. It's a -- there's a question here, that none of us is going to be able to answer until, if we do have a series on Hebrews until the series is over. Was I able to digest it? Am I the kind of mature Christian whom the author describes in chapter five, who have had my powers of spiritual discernment trained by constant practice.

And in order to introduce us to all this, he begins his letter with some of the loftiest words in the whole of the Bible. Actually they're kind of reminiscent of the opening verses of John's gospel that we were

studying in December, in the run up to Christmas. In the sheer magnificence of the picture he gives us of the Lord Jesus Christ. But as he gives us this picture, you'll notice two things. The first is, that he speaks about the way in which God spoke in the past. And now the way in which God has spoken in these last days. Very casual statement, you might think. And we could easily read over it and say, let's get into the meat of Hebrews. But it's on this statement that the way our world views history is based, isn't it? You ever thought about that? Even those of you who are students in our pluralistic world. When there is any dating of events, what we old fogies used to know as BC, before Christ; and, AD in the year of our Lord. And now in our pluralistic society, BCE, before the Common Era, not before Christ, but before the Common Era. And, CE, Common Era. It doesn't make any difference, does it? What before the common era actually means is before Jesus Christ. And in this very remarkable way, our whole view of history -- you can't view history in any other way. Can ya? You might if you were Chinese. You might have another way of doing it if you were of Hebrew descent. But you can't be the ordinary man or woman or young person in the street of Columbia, or New York, or anywhere in the world, without realizing, even if you don't realize it, that Jesus Christ's coming transforms the way we view history. And it has so embedded itself because of the spread of the gospel, that we even think of time in terms of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world. It's a stunning illustration of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the way he puts it is this, he says, "God spoke in the past days, and God has now spoken in the last day." He divides time into two.

And he says God revealed himself first of all, in past days, there hasn't been a word from God in past days. And he gives us this lovely summary of the whole of the Old Testament. God, verse one, "spoke to our fathers, by the prophets, long ago, at many times and in many ways." It's a summary of the Old Testament. God did speak to the fathers at many times. You go back to the beginning of the Bible, he spoke to Adam. You move on a little he's speaking to Noah. Move on a little more, he's speaking to Abraham. Move on further he's speaking to the patriarchs. Move on further he's speaking to Moses. Move on further he's speaking to David. Move on around David and he's speaking to the prophets. Many different times. And in actually in many different ways. He seems to have spoken to some as it were face to face. Others in visions and dreams. And others as they have thought through how to apply God's word to the times in which they live. Many different prophets. Many different times. Marvelous! Extraordinary kindness of God that He has not left us in the silence of the universe. But God has spoken!

And yet the author is saying to us, no matter how wonderful those revelations of God may be, those marvelous words of God that we have now in our Old Testament scriptures. How kind he has been. All of these words have been but preliminary words. And fragmentary words. They have been, as it were, pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that is incomplete. Chapters in some great divine plot that are lacking the concluding chapter. And he will say on more than one occasion, unless we understand the fragmentary nature of God's revelation; unless we understand the incompleteness of the Old Testament; unless we come to the end of the book of Malachi, and as we take in what the Old Testament scripture says --, (and there's something in us that says, but where is all this taking us?) then we really miss the point of the whole book. You think, for example, about Abraham getting the promise that in his seed the nations of the earth would be blessed? Who was that seed? Or Moses, saying, one day, God will raise up a prophet who will come right from heaven to speak to us. Or David, having this vision of God's exalted King, whose kingdom would stretch to the ends of the earth. Or Isaiah, and that amazing vision he has in Isaiah 52 and 53, of this figure of the suffering servant who comes over the horizons of future history and is someone who will bear the sins of many. Or Daniel's vision of the Son of man, whose kingdom will be shared with its citizens, and they will enter into the blessing of what he has done. It was all

fragmentary. They were never in the same room. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that they had, they weren't even able to go into the same room and put them down, and then say to one another, Moses, what do you think this is here? Are these different people? Are these the same people? Are these several people? Do you remember how Peter says, in First Peter one verses 10 and 11, he says, at the end of the day, they were scratching their heads and saying, We know that God is showing Himself to us in these different figures. But we don't know exactly who he is speaking about or when he will come. We've glimpses of what he will do. The author of Hebrews is saying to these Christians whom many scholars believe were Christians, with a Hebrew background, have you any idea the privilege of living in the present age? Have you grasped that what the greatest of the Old Testament prophets never saw -- what they longed to see with their own eyes -- all of them who lived in the economy of the last days, lived within the context of an orchestra that was playing the score of an unfinished Symphony. And as it were, as they'd come to the end of the third movement, and as members of orchestras, in that amazing way do, one of them will flip over the page and -- the fourth movement -- it just all stops.

Now, here's something to notice. This author makes it very clear that the same God who speaks in Jesus Christ in the New Testament is the God who spoke to the fathers by the prophets in the Old. Hasn't changed his character. He's not a different God. He is one and the same God. But what he's saying is, we don't really fully grasp who he is until we turn the page from the Old Testament, and the record of God's revelation to his people, fragmentary as it was in the past days. And realize the nature of God's revelation in the last days. Now, it's very interesting that he even uses that language, isn't it? "In these last days." I mean, I think this letter was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. So if you're speaking about Jesus, why would you describe this as the last days, and not as the recent days? I mean, something that happened 30 years ago, if we were writing about it, we might say, "and many of you remember how in recent history", but he calls these days the "last days." Why does he call these days the last days? Because he understands that now, that God has spoken in this new way. The old way was through prophets who were His servants. The new way is through a Son. When God - speaks - through - His Son, God has spoken his last word. He has got nothing else to say to you. Because he's said everything to you. Now the significance of that surely obvious, isn't it? If that's the case, then we don't want to listen to those who come along with their new revelations and say, God has given me a new revelation. How do you respond to that, you say God has given his final revelation in His Son, Jesus Christ. It never ceases to amaze me how easily we Christians are taken in and we'll rush to the bookshop to buy the little book that's appeared on amazon.com, or maybe on Oprah or somewhere another with all kinds of amazing little experiences that somebody has had. And of course, they've had to write about it. And we spend so little time reading about our Lord Jesus Christ. And we need to be absolutely clear about this. When - I - send - my - Son - to - you, God is saying, listen to him. Because I have nothing more to say to you. Well, of course! Well, we may argue with God, how dare you do this? I will find some other way to you. See how stupid that is? See how stupid people are who say, Yes, I believe the Bible. But there are all kinds of ways to God. And God is saying, if there are all kinds of ways to me, why in all the world would I send my son to die on the cross!? Would you do that?

If you sent your Son to die for somebody else, and you said there is only one condition on which I will be willing to entertain you, and that is that you come to me conscious of what my son has done for me. And you say, well, that's very nice, but I'm going to come to you another way. There could be no greater insolence to God in the whole universe than saying it's very nice that Jesus died, it's very nice that God sent His Son, but I'm going to find another way! Do you have any idea what Blasphemy that is!? It's fine for those who are atheists and agnostics to make up their own designs. But not for those who

believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. You've lost all sense of logic, if you think there is another way to God. If this God has been willing to sacrifice his Son on the cross. You must be an individual with a heart of iron if you think that. Because you wouldn't give your own son for anybody, and then let that person say, well, you may have done that, and that's very nice. But our relationship is going to depend on something quite different. I'll make up the conditions. You will say as the father who has lost his son, not when I've given my Son.

And that's why the great focus of Hebrews -- and it's astonishing here in these opening few verses, what he actually has to say about Jesus. Listen to what he says about Jesus. He makes six amazing statements about him. Number one, He is the heir of all things. Number two, He is the Creator of all things. Number three, he reflects the very nature and character of God. Everything God has to show us about himself we see in the Lord Jesus. Number four, he is the upholder of all things. Number five, that this great Son of God has come into the world and taken my flesh and then taken my sin in order to become the redeemer of God's people. And now he sits enthroned at the right hand of God, as conqueror over all God's enemies. It's stunning. It's breathtaking. And this is the one he presents before us.

What's his message? It's really very simple. See Jesus, and everything else begins to pale into insignificance. See Jesus, and everything else in your life will find its proper place. Finding it difficult to be a Christian: many challenges, opposition where you work, struggles in your life. Has it cost you greatly to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ? Then the author of Hebrews, who knows exactly what he's speaking about, because he's speaking to people like you if that's your situation, and saying, Now, dear child come and feast on Jesus? Come and fix your eyes upon Jesus. Your problem is you've been looking in the wrong direction. Ah yes, and sometimes he's like an eye surgeon, isn't he? The only thing is when he is the eye surgeon the Word of God is sharper than any two edged scalpel. When he's the eye surgeon, your conscious when he's doing the surgery. And he wants to make a he wants to make an incision. And it may hurt. But you see, he's saying, if I don't make this incision, you're gonna remain in your spiritual blindness and not see the sheer magnitude of the Savior who is offered to you in the Gospel.

Many of you like me as a young Christian were taught that little refrain, isn't it, to one of the hymns. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. Things of earth will grow strangely dim." (They won't go away. Especially the trials and the difficulties they won't go away.) "But the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. He is saying to us, God is surely saying to us, This is My beloved Son. Trust him. Look at him. Listen to him. So my dear friends, where are you looking today? Where is your gaze fixed? Fix your eyes upon Jesus. That's it. It's as simple as that. A child could do that. Oldest person whose struggling even with his or her memory can do that. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Because as he says here, he is absolutely superior. Absolutely superior. Oh, what a great Savior He is. Is that how you feel? Oh, you feel that? Don't you? If you're a Christian you feel that? My! Wow! Hallelujah, what a Savior.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father, more than anything else, we pray that something of the sheer magnitude of Christ's greatness will grip us and enable us to live for your glory. And we pray this in His name. Amen.