



In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

In college I had an English Literature professor who gave us a simple description about how to study for the final exam. He said, "Just fill your head so full of facts that if someone bumped into you, some of it would spill out onto the floor." Unfortunately, I think I had some room left over when I was done studying for that test. Nevertheless, this is an apt description of the mind of the author of Hebrews, our new series we are starting this morning. His head was so full of the Old Testament that if you had bumped into him, Old Testament verses, chapters and maybe entire books would have spilled onto the ground. The first chapter is only fourteen verses long and still there are seven direct O.T. quotations in the chapter. In fact, other than the first four verses, the rest of the chapter is one long string of quotations. This guy knew his Bible!

But who was this guy who quoted verses like a champion Bible quizzier? Was it Paul? Peter? John? Titus? Apollos? All of these names have been suggested as the most likely candidate, but all of them are wrong. Since we are going to be working our way through the entire book of Hebrews, it is important that we understand where this book came from and its overall purpose.

The apostle Paul wrote thirteen of the twenty seven books of the New Testament, so we get very used to saying things like, "Paul wrote this to the believers in Rome" or "Paul said this to the church in Galatia." But in the book of Hebrews, all of the normal clues contained in other New Testament letters are missing from Hebrews.¹

First, Paul always wrote *to* someone—either a specific church or a specific person.

- To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints
- To the church of God in Corinth

- To the churches in Galatia
- To the saints in Ephesus
- To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi
- To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse
- To the church of the Thessalonians
- To Timothy, my true son in the faith
- To Timothy, my dear son
- To Titus, my true son in our common faith
- To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker

Second, Paul always identified himself in the very first word of the very first verse in every one of his letters

- Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.

Third, Peter, James and Jude each followed the same pattern—they identified themselves first and described their target audience (though the intended readers were of a more widespread nature).

- Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. To God’s elect, scattered throughout...
- James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.
- Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James. To those who have been called, who are loved by God the father and kept by Jesus Christ.

Fourth, because these other letters are written by someone and to someone, based on the contents, descriptions and stories of each of these New Testament letters, the date of each letter can be pinpointed to a great deal of certainty. But none of this is the case with the letter to the Hebrews. There is no author listed, no intended readers specified and less personal information by which to determine a precise date.² Here is the one thing we know for certain—Paul did *not* write this letter.

Moreover, it is not a letter in the typical sense, for a letter has a sender and a receiver and this “letter” seems to have neither. The best clue to theme of the book is found in one of the last verses in the last chapter. *Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation* (13:22) This “word of exhortation.” no doubt refers to the entire document. This word for exhortation³ can be translated as either encouragement or exhortation. It is more commonly translated as a type of encouragement but all translators agree that its meaning here is exhortation. We know this first of all because throughout the book the author gave five “warning passages.” There are five separate sections of the book which are heavy duty warnings to not fall into disobedience, etc. Second, we know it must be translated as exhortation because if the letter were primarily a “word of encouragement” the author would not have added the point about bearing up under it. One does not have to “bear” encouragement—it is something that is welcomed and refreshing. It would be like saying, “I hope that you can bear the suffering of a two week trip to Hawaii.” Anyone who heard that would know that you were being facetious and were probably also jealous.

Therefore, we can conclude that since this letter is a word of exhortation, and since it fails to meet the definition of a typical letter, it is best described as a sermon. This is a sermon of exhortation that has as its theme the supremacy of Jesus Christ.⁴

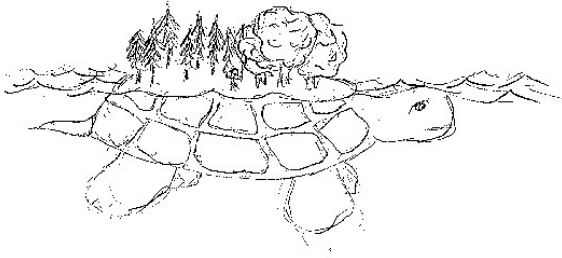
Let me say one more thing about exhortation versus encouragement. You may have heard the old phrase that the preaching of the Word is intended to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. If the Word is faithfully being preached and the Holy Spirit is at work, there will be a balance of these two. However, I also think that sometimes the afflicted don't just need comforting, they also need to be afflicted. This is what happened to me this past week. Admittedly, this has been a very difficult week for me. Not only did I have to do my regular job but I also had to Karen's load of work at home. In addition to all of the running around to baseball, golf, swimming and three doctors appointments, we also managed to freeze two batches of beans and two batches of raspberries, we got all of the laundry done and cleaned the bathrooms. On top of that, I had to field literally dozens of phone calls and emails from Karen and try to walk her thought the death of her step-dad and the grief of her mother, who unfortunately is left in Florida without any family or friends. Then there were a myriad of other things which seemed to pull at me from every direction. I went to bed almost every night exhausted as much from stress as anything else. It has not been an easy week.

It was not until Friday morning when I realized what I had been doing most of the week. On several occasions, I had taken a slice of cake, put a candle in the cake and lit it, put a party hat on my head and had a little pity party for myself. As far as I know, I didn't invite anyone else, except maybe my kids on one occasion when in exhaustion I said, "Do you have any idea how hard this is on me!?" In a week when I most needed to place my trust in the Lord and exclaim, "God, I cannot do this on my own," I forged ahead in my own strength and then felt sorry for myself. I had *at least* three pity parties that I remember.

Can I tell you what I learned from this? I learned that Jesus does not show up at pity parties. What I mean is that he does not show up to offer more pity because at that point, I already had more than enough to go around. In my affliction, I did not need to be comforted at that point—I needed the Lord to afflict me. I needed to see my pity parties for what they were. I needed to be brought even lower so that I could finally raise the white flag and ask for the Lord's help. Do you see, Jesus could not comfort me because not only was I trying to do everything in my own strength, I was also trying to comfort myself. If Jesus had been at my pity party, I think he would have said, "You let me know how that turns out, would ya."

As we study the book of Hebrews together, there will be times that we need to bear up under the exhortation of this sermon. But thankfully, there will also be plenty of encouragement, starting with this morning.

The first thing the author would like us to know is that God is the God who speaks. *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways...* Do you see that verse one is a summary of the entire Old Testament with the main point being that God is the God who speaks. Let's think through these many times and various ways that he spoke.



Of course it all got started in Genesis. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*² *Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*³ *And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*

God did not create the universe with magic pixie dust. He did not create the world on the back of a turtle as the Native Americans believe. God spoke creation into existence. Darkness was over the surface of the deep so God said, "Let there be light." Not only did he speak everything into existence, he also named everything that he created. *He called the light 'day' and the darkness he called 'night'. He called the expanse 'sky'. God called the dry ground 'land.'* He spoke all that there is into existence and then he spoke and named it what he desired. (on a side note, this helps us to understand the incredible amount of stewardship that God granted to Adam by allowing him to 'name' all of the animals.

God spoke to Abram, *"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you, and thus created the nation of Israel. God spoke to Moses, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."*⁸ *So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians. That's deliverance.*

He is a God who speaks to his people. God spoke to Samuel **about** David saying, *Rise and anoint him.* He is the one. God then spoke **to** David through Nathan the prophet, *You are the man.* That's conviction of sin. Finally, God spoke **through** David. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want* (that's the cry of our heart), and dozens of other poems of rejoicing and despair that found its way to rejoicing. God spoke to Ezekiel and told him to lay on his side for 430 days. That's obedience and suffering. God spoke to Hosea, *Go, take for yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness.* God spoke through Ezekiel saying, *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* That's conversion.

God spoke to Isaiah: *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."*² *He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.*³ *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;*⁴ *he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.* That's Christ Jesus.

Our God is a God who speaks. He spoke *through the prophets at many times and in various ways.* There is no other God like our God. There is no other God who has spoken through so many times and in so many ways and all of it perfectly agrees with itself. In the Old Testament there is poetry, history, law, songs, wisdom, ceremonial code, murder, adultery, betrayal, sacrifice, prostitution, genocide, love, mercy and promise. And all of that promise is summed up in verse two of this chapter. *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,*² *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*

Notice that it does not say that he has spoken to us *through* his son but rather *by* his Son. If God merely spoke through his Son we would be limited to his actual words but when the author says by his Son it means all that he is, all that he has said and all that he has done.

God has progressively revealed himself first through the prophets and then through his Son, but we must not think of this progression as a type of evolution. God is not, has not and never will change. The only thing that “changes,” if you could even call it that, is the way he chose to reveal himself. The revelation of himself in the OT is one of promise and the revelation of himself through the Son is one of fulfillment.

Nor should we think of God’s revelation in the OT as incomplete because that word conjures up the idea of “insufficient.” God’s revelation of himself at every stage was perfect and completely sufficient for that time. It was incomplete in the sense that the promise had not yet been fulfilled but it was complete in that God gave to mankind exactly what was necessary and sufficient for them.

The prophets were preparatory and introductory to the life and work of Jesus Christ. We see this most clearly in 1 Peter 1:10-12.

¹⁰ *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.*

The prophets had this sense that there was something greater in their words. There was an eternal promise embedded in their words and that promise was fulfilled in the Son. The author gave seven reasons why the Son’s revelation is superior to that of the prophets.

1. *Whom he appointed heir of all things,*

Remember when I said that the author of Hebrews had so much Old Testament in his head that if you bumped him it would spill out? Here is a good example. This first phrase is taken from Psalm 2, which he will quote in verse five. “You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”

2. *and through whom he made the universe.*

Jesus is the rightful heir of all things Creator of all things. John 1:3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

3. *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory*

Jesus is the brightness of the glory of God. God’s glory is Christ’s glory. This phrase is rightly paired with the fourth one...

4. *and the exact representation of his being,*

The original word here that is translated as ‘representation’ is interesting—it is the word *charakter* (χαρακτήρ). That word looks familiar, doesn’t it? This is the only time this word appears in the entire New Testament and its meaning is a little different than what we are used to. It means “a mark or figure burned in or stamped on, an impression; the exact expression of any person or thing, marked likeness, precise reproduction in every respect, i.e. facsimile.”⁵ The ESV translates this phrase as *the exact imprint of his nature. Therefore, Christ is a perfect copy of God the Father. He is alike in every possible way. In other words, he is God. Jesus is fully divine; he possesses all the fullness of the deity in bodily form, as Paul writes in Colossians. Jesus said it this way: Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father* (John 14:9).

The application is so obvious—to develop the character of Christ then is to have his imprint upon us. Of course we will not become divine, but his righteous actions will become our righteous actions. We can be stamped with the character of Christ. We want to have the imprint of Jesus upon us.

5. *sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

The word *sustains* communicates the idea of upholding and driving forward—this is a statement of an active role in his created realm. You may have heard the term *Deist*. Many of our founding fathers were *deists* who believed that God created everything but then removed himself from the scene. God does not have any active role in the sustaining of the universe not any interaction with his creation. He is distant and far off. Such a God does not speak. But we know that God is no *deist* who creates and then separates himself from his creation.

Let’s think of some of the myriad of ways that God sustains all things. Why do two hydrogen atoms hold together with one atom of oxygen to create a molecule of water? Why are the atoms in a rock held together in such hard density that they are, well, like a rock? Why are the atoms in a gas so much less dense that they can float in the wind? Why does the food I eat turn into energy to fuel my body? Why do my red blood cells carry oxygen from the air in my lungs to every cell in my body?

Why does the moon control the tides of the earth’s oceans? We can get a quick idea of the relative size of the earth and moon by using a basketball and a tennis ball. Obviously, the earth represents the basketball but how far away would you place the tennis ball/moon in relation to the basketball? If you hold the two side by side as I am doing, most people would place the tennis ball about two, maybe three feet from the basketball. But in reality, the tennis ball would be a full 24 feet from the basketball, almost all the way to the back wall of the sanctuary from here. Why does the moon control the tides of earth when it is so small and so far away?

Notice that in each of these questions I did not ask, “how” these things happen. I am not asking a scientific question but rather a philosophical question. **Why** do they happen? They happen because Jesus sustains all things. If Jesus were removed from the equation, everything would instantly cease. Jesus is Creator and Sustainer. Nothing happens apart from his sustaining power and sovereign rule. And did you notice how he sustains all things? He does it by his powerful word. There it is again. God is a God who speaks. He spoke the universe into being. He has been speaking to his people since the beginning of creation and he sustains all of his creation by his spoken word.

Tell me—can the God who speaks also sustain you by his powerful word? Is there bread in his word to sustain you? Is there living water to quench your thirst? Not if you try to sustain yourself like I did this past week. But if you open it and receive it, it is a bottomless pit of sustenance.

6. *After he had provided purification for sins,*

This phrase should shock us to the core. The God who creates the universe and the God who sustains the universe also provides purification for sins?! The God who demands perfection supplies perfection. The God who requires moral purity provides purification of sins. The timing of this phrase is so important for the believer. Jesus *had* provided purification for sins. This is a past tense action. It is done. Therefore, the sins you did when you were ten years old have been purified by the blood of Christ. The sins that you did yesterday have been purified by the blood of Christ and the sins you will do until you take your last breath will have been purified by the blood of Christ. This means that God is not waiting for you to be perfected before he accepts you. He is not waiting for a better you in the future. We are accepted based on the purification for sins made by Christ not upon our the good things that we do.

God is not waiting for you to be perfect to love and accept you—you are loved and accepted right now. This then is the basis for all spiritual growth. We have talked a lot about discipleship the last five weeks and the necessity and beauty of growing in the grace of God, but unless you know that you are fully accepted today, unless you know you have been fully justified in the past, you're not going to grow? Why? Because you are going to keep doing things to become acceptable to God. If I can only pray more...if I can only read my Bible more...NO—you are accepted by the blood of Christ now.

7. *he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

When I sit down in the front row in a few minutes, what will that signify? It will signify that I am done, right? In the same way, when Christ sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, it shows that his work is complete. It is also more evidence of his divine nature, that he has the right to be seated at the right hand of the Father.

Our God is the God who speaks. *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.* On the one hand he is done speaking because there is no new revelation. But on the other hand, he speaks without ceasing every time you open up his word—the word that contains all of the prophets, history and Law as well as that spoken by the Son. Pick it up and read and hear and know the God who speaks.

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July 31, 2011

¹ Interestingly, no one is even sure why it is called “Hebrews,” since this is not original. Though it was obviously written to believers with a strong Jewish background.

² However, it was obviously sent to someone. The author’s most personal remarks come at the very end when he makes mention of Timothy being released and his friends from Italy.

³ (παράκλησις –*paraklēsis*)

⁴ There is probably more exhortation than encouragement overall, but knowledge of the priesthood and supremacy of Christ is itself the ultimate encouragement. Moreover, the passage in chapter four about approaching the throne of grace is some of the most encouraging words in all of Scripture.

⁵Strong, James: *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order*. electronic ed. Ontario : Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996, S. H0