

God Spoke & His Son is His Speech (Heb. 1.1-4)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

Pastor Ostella

1-13-2008

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² 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. ³ 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, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Introduction

This text has a rare austerity that reminds us of some unique passages of Scripture. If I asked you what these might be, I wonder which texts you would cite. The ones I have in mind are John 1, Genesis 1, and Colossians 1 (“in the beginning was the word” and “in the beginning God created...and...said” and “God made him head over all things to the church”).

The writer thrusts the reader into his topic without preliminaries. There is no salutation, no typical opening section of a letter. It makes us seek some way to get our feet on the ground. We confront so many things so quickly that we need to slow down and find some direction for our thoughts.

The author begins with historical affirmation. He makes a number of claims about God and His Son in a single sentence that extends to the end of verse 4. He shifts attention to God’s Son in the middle of the sentence when he refers to Him by the words “whom” and “through whom” (1.2). This shows us from the “get go” that the writer has a goal: to focus our attention on God’s Son. Although he starts with God as his subject (*God* spoke; God is the subject of the main verb of vs. 1-4), it becomes apparent, immediately, that beginning with God takes us to Jesus. Thus, when we look at the book as a whole, we are to consider *Jesus* the apostle of our confession (3.1) looking to Him as the author and finisher of our faith (12.2). Therefore, we can appropriately outline the book in three divisions that cause us to look at Jesus as God’s Son (1.1-2.4), as Sabbath Lord (2.5-4.13), and as great high priest (4.14-12.29).

Today, we begin with the prologue to the book (1.1-4). We will concentrate on these four verses for the moment, but we do not want to forget that this opens a section that ends with the exhortation of 2.1-4. We may have some lessons to apply before we get to chapter 2, but when we get there, it will be necessary to listen carefully to the author’s precise application of chapter 1. Now, coming back to the prologue, it has two divisions that give us both our title and outline: “God has spoken and His Son is His speech.”

1A. God has spoken

In verses 1-2, the inspired commentator states the *fact* that God has spoken and he presents a *contrast* regarding how God has spoken.

1B. First, we have the fact that God has spoken

He begins with God. God is the subject and the writer tells us that He speaks (1.1, **God spoke**). There are many assumptions already in the air when the word God strikes the listener’s ears. The English word, God, has the root meaning of “to call.” God is the one upon whom men call in time of need. The Greek term here (*Theos*) has the Hebrew of Genesis 1.1 behind it; this conveys the idea of the Almighty Creator who is distinct from all that He created. He is not part of the material universe. He is invisible, and the Almighty Spirit.

What then do we learn from the *statement* of Hebrews 1.1? The statement involves a verb with God as the subject: **God spoke**. We learn that the invisible God, the Almighty Creator reveals Himself. He does so in speech. He makes Himself known by speech communication. He does not remain hidden. He is not silent. He communicates His thoughts, He shares what’s on His mind, and He reveals Himself clearly in the light of day. You have heard the song, “Our God is an awesome God.” Well, here is an awesome statement of fact: our God is a God of communication; He is the God of self-revelation. That shows that He is a God of love.

2B. Second, we have the contrast regarding how God has spoken

There are two means through which God communicates His thoughts. Both tell us much about Him. The means have an identifying and defining quality about them. They come in the form of a contrast between these two phrases “**by the prophets**” (1.1) and “**by his Son**” (1.2).

1) On one hand in this contrast, God has spoken through the prophets (v. 1, **by the prophets**)

The author of Hebrews begins with God in a particular way. He defines God. Meditate for moment on who God is and you realize that the writer gives us a very comprehensive explanation of God in very few words in verses 1-2. God does not hide, so to speak, behind the canvas of His creation. Four phrases orient our thinking to how God spoke through (or by) the prophets.

a) **Long ago**

Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible some 1500 years before the writer of Hebrews penned these words of 1.1. From our vantage point, “**Long ago**” takes us back more than 3500 years.

b) **God spoke in many ways**

He spoke in human speech to Moses directly from the burning bush that was not consumed. By His finger, He inscribed His ten special words, the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. He appeared in the form of a man with his sword drawn to Joshua at Jericho and said to him, “**I am the commander of the army of the Lord**” (Josh. 5.14). God revealed Himself and His purposes by visions and dreams in His communication with Daniel the prophet. He spoke in many ways.

c) **He also spoke at many times**

In other words, God revealed Himself and His purposes in portions, stages, and at different times. If we think in the most general way about the ways and times of God’s speaking, we have to go back to the very beginning of the world. Creation itself, the very act of creating, was a speech act. On day one, light came into being by God’s word: “*God said, ‘let there be light,’ and there was light*” (Gen. 1.3). Of course, Psalm 19 tells us that the very creation is God’s speech that declares His glory and reveals His wisdom. Inescapably, when we think of the Almighty God, we must think of Him as one who speaks. He shows us this fact by telling us that He created all things by the breath of His mouth in Psalm 33.6-11: **6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. 7 He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap; he puts the deeps in storehouses. 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! 9 For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. 10 The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.**

Pointedly and soberly, we must say, His word in and through the creation is *not* sufficient for what we need in our fallen and sinful state. The creation reveals the Lord; it is His clear speech, but it only renders all people without excuse for the sinful lives that they live (Rom. 1.18-20). We need something more, and the next phrase points us to it.

d) **God has spoken to our fathers**

In other words, the writer of Hebrews stresses the fact that God has spoken through the writings of the OT (roughly 1500 BC to 400 BC). These writings reveal the plans of His heart (Ps. 33.11) to save wrath-deserving sinners. He is the God of the OT, the God of Adam and Noah. He is the covenant keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joshua, and David. God is one who reveals Himself in direct words, saving words, in human words, in preserved words in the writings of the OT. Those writings disclose the undeserved love of God for polluted sinners who go their own way in disobedience, and those writings reveal His gracious promise of a coming redeemer. Therefore, we need something more than His speech in creation and His speech in the OT. We need the redeemer that God promised in the OT. That leads us to God’s Son.

2) On the other hand in this contrast, God has spoken through His Son (v. 2, **by his Son**)

God spoke by the prophets but now He has spoken by His Son. The contrast includes reference to three things: time (**Long ago, at many times ...but in these last days**), recipients (**to our fathers...**

to us), and focus on God's Son (**whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world**).

a) Time

Previously, the disclosure of God's plan to save undeserving sinners was incomplete because the time of accomplishment had not yet arrived. Now, because of the coming of His Son into the world, the last days are here. Jesus brought the last days of the history of redemption to realization by His appearance, by His birth and life-work.

b) Recipients

In the past, God spoke *to our fathers* by the prophets, now He has spoken *to us* by His Son. The recipients of God's speech through Christ are not only the writer and original readers of the book of Hebrews. When he says, "to us," he refers to the people of the last days. God has spoken to His people in the time between the comings of Christ. Here in the twenty-first century, we can be sure that God has spoken by His Son in a very direct and personal way *to us*. We are the people of God upon whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Cor. 10.11). We are in the dawn of the new day (Rom. 13.11-12).

c) Focus

The focus here is without question on the Son.

Interestingly, the fact that God is the Creator of the world comes up as a sub point. He says that the Son is the one **through whom also he created the world** (v. 2). That should catch our interest. The writer so directs our attention to God's Son that it is by knowing that Jesus is co-Creator with God that we learn that God is the Creator. The point here is not to reveal God as Creator but *to reveal the Son* as co-Creator with God.

The first clause describing Christ in verse 2 (**whom he appointed the heir of all things**) associates creation with the appointment to be heir of all things. He *is* the heir. This argues for the conclusion that this appointment refers to God's decree or plan. In other words, in view is the eternal covenant (God's eternal plan and decree). His covenant purpose from the very beginning of creation has the appointment of Christ as heir of all things at its center. Co-creation of all things has bound up with it an appointment by the Father that the Son *will inherit* all things. From the very beginning of the world, the Son has this appointment out in front of Him to keep. He *is* heir and therefore *will have* an inheritance. Thus, down the road of history in the consummation of God's plan, Jesus will receive all things as His inheritance. It all moves in its unfolding on a historical plane from creation to consummation. In other words, everything that He created is for Him. Paul states this in Colossians with some amplification: **For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him** (Col. 1.16).

Hence, without losing the fact that it is God who spoke, the text cracks the curtain of God's eternal covenant giving us insight into the agreement between the Father and the Son. The implication is unmistakable: the Father promised the inheritance of all things to the Son. Consequently, the focus of God's speech is His Son. This opens the way to the second main point of the prologue (and it hangs over the content of this book on atonement).

2A. God's Son is His speech

In verses 3-4, the subject is the Son. That is the case because of the agreement from the beginning that the Son is heir of all things and will therefore receive all things as His inheritance. The text sweeps from creation to consummation, but to get there, an obstacle must be overcome.

The obstacle comes into view from the perspective of its remedy. The obstacle is sin. Marvelously, sin is overcome by the heir. He overcomes by making purification of sins as part of the journey from creation to consummation.

Consider the shift in thought that emerges when the Son becomes the subject of verses 3-4. It is a striking shift in thought because God is the subject of the main verb (and main clause) in verse 2 (**God spoke**). This main clause governs the *single* sentence that runs from verse 1 to 4. You

should note that the KJV reflects the grammar of the Greek text by not introducing a period until the end of verse 4. How does that compare with your translations?

It may take some extra intake of air to read the text as a single sentence, but doing so gives us a sense of both the austerity and the density of this remarkable prologue: **God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, ² 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; ³ 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; ⁴ being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.** In the KJV translation above, notice that verses 2, 3, and 4 do not begin with capital letters (that is my doing). Note also that a comma and three semicolons mark the breaks between these verses; again, there is no period until the end of verse 4. You would think that God is the subject of this single sentence. Well, He is and He ain't.

At the end of verse 2, we noted how Christ came into focus in the contrast between God's speech long ago and in these last days. God is still the subject; His speaking is still the point when all the attention focuses on Jesus *because the Son is the speech of the Father*. In other words, God speaks and the Son is what he says.

The text directs us to who Jesus is, and what He does as the Son in an amazing combination of terms that reflect both His deity and humanity in the accomplishment of redemption. Here is my translation of verses 3-4 regarding the Son: **"being the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, while upholding the universe by the word of His power and having made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become superior to the angels to the degree that His name by inheritance is more excellent than theirs."** Two things here show that the Son is the Father's speech.

1B. Who He is shows that He is the speech of God

As the radiance of God (v. 3, **being the radiance of the glory of God**), Jesus *reveals* the beauty of God's essential nature and essence. He radiates the beauty of God like light radiates the brightness of the sun. He is of the same essence as the Father. If you see the Son, you see the Father.

As the imprint of God (v. 3, **being... the exact imprint of his nature**), He is the accurate and true representation of God like a coin is the true representation of its stamp. The thought here is equivalent to the teaching that Jesus is the image and perfect reflection of God. He is *the revealer* of God *in human terms* as the incarnate Son. He is God's speech in human terms; He is the Word that was with God and was God and became flesh (Jn 1. 14, **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth; 1.18, No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known**).

Finally, He upholds the universe by the word of his power (v. 3). Here we learn that the properties of matter and the way the universe is maintained *reveal* the Father's plan: the powerful word of Christ *reveals* the powerful word of His Father in accord with their time transcending covenant.

Therefore, God spoke and the Son is His speech.

2B. When He sat down and where He sits show that He is the speech of God

The "when" and the "where" of His enthronement indicate that He reveals God by His humiliation and exaltation. At this juncture, the writer only hints at the saving work of Christ stating it as something that Jesus did *before* He sat down at the Father's right hand: **having made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become superior to the angels to the degree that His name by inheritance is more excellent than theirs.** We have no development here of the purifying work of Christ. How Jesus did this is the subject of much of the entire book. In chapter 2, the writer will oscillate back to this theme and then expand on it.

Literally, the text says, "having made a cleansing of sins" (v.3). Thus, Jesus reveals the mind of God regarding polluted, unclean, and defiled people. The person and work of the Son communicates the love of God toward fallen sinners. Jesus paid it all; He forged the way by

which sinners have cleansing from their sins. He did a cleansing work. He washed sins away in a cleansing flood (not a potentiality, in the book, we have the details of what this involves).

As we come to the end of this rich prologue, we encounter a comparison with angels in verse 4. We have to wonder why it is present since it seems out of place. They are the highest created beings in nature and access to God. They are superior in many respects to man. Consequently, when Christ became a man, He entered a state of being lower than the angels. The comparison with angels marks the humiliation and exaltation of Christ as God's Son. It gives a reference point by which to understand the incarnation. In humiliation, He was made lower than the angels and having accomplished the work of purification, in exaltation, the Son of God incarnate received a name more excellent than that of the angels. He has a supreme title that is higher than any title given to angels because He has a status of superiority.

What makes this a powerful and important point is the fact that Jesus has this position as a man. It is a man, this man, the Son that has the title of heir of all things.

Therefore, as the incarnate Son, as truly God and truly man, and as the radiant beauty of the Father's glory, as the perfect image of God, and in other words, as the speech of God embodying loving communication with sinners, the man who walked the dusty roads of Galilee had the right to sit down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Conclusion

Jesus endured humiliation as the incarnate Son (making purification for sins), and He experienced exaltation (sitting down at the right hand of the Father). Thus, His humiliation and exaltation embody God's word of salvation to undeserving sinners. In His humiliation and exaltation, God speaks and tells us of His undeserved grace and saving love to wrath deserving sinners. We therefore have three final remarks.

1) The prologue reveals Christ as God and man in two natures

The mixture of ideas relating to the Lord's deity and humanity is profound; separation of these ideas is impossible: being God, upholding the universe, and making purification for sins are inseparable. We have a marvelous testimony to the fact that no one knows the Son but the Father (Mat. 11.27).

2) This text reveals Christ as the saving word or speech of God; the focus of God's self-revelation over the ages. This is a great review of redemptive history. We have the reminder that God has spoken. Previously, He promised redemption. In Christ, He revealed redemption in its accomplishment.

3) Both of these facts (who Christ is and what He has done) that reveal the Almighty as strong in saving love, call for worship of the Father and the Son. This man, this Son, is worthy of worship because He is not only co-Creator of all things, rightful heir of all things, sustainer of all things, but because He is the radiant and exact reflection of the Father and as such He is the perfect revelation of God in human terms.

We are to worship the Father and His Son because God has spoken and His Son is His speech. Jesus is what He says when God speaks. In both His humiliation and His exaltation, Jesus *communicates* God's saving word, the message of saving grace, and the fellowship of love from the Almighty to needy wrath bound sinners. He is God's communication of love by which sinners have washing from their sins. We know this because God spoke and Jesus sat down at His right hand after making purification for sins and receiving a position of superiority above that of angels.

The only right response to these opening words of Hebrews is worship with thanksgiving, awe, and reverence.

Let us bow down before the majesty of the Son; may the Holy Spirit enable us to praise Him rightly with our lips and sincerely from our hearts; may the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be our portion with thanksgiving, awe, and reverence. To triune God be all glory both now and forevermore, amen.