

The God Who Speaks: Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

Hebrews 1:1–3

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A Book Worth Dwelling In

We begin today a new sermon series in the book of Hebrews, and I want to confess that I feel a little like a kid in a candy store — just looking around at all the magnificent things in this book. The book of Hebrews is extraordinarily well-organized. Its themes and structure are beautiful, filled with both sweeping architecture and carefully placed detail. It is a masterful cathedral constructed to display the supremacy of Christ.

I have titled this series *The God Who Speaks*, and the reason is simple: this is precisely how the book begins. Hebrews 1:1–2 opens with these words:

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.

And it is how the book ends. The theological conclusion of Hebrews falls at the close of chapter 12 — chapter 13 is application and final greeting — and that ending forms a deliberate bookend with chapter 1. Listen to Hebrews 12:22–25:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.

From its first sentence to its last sustained argument, this book is about a God who speaks. And so we will take our time in it.

Who Wrote Hebrews, and When?

The author of Hebrews does not identify himself, nor has the early church settled on a firm attribution. What we can say is that the Greek of Hebrews is the most polished, most elevated prose in the entire New Testament — stylistically distinct from Paul, distinct from Luke, distinct from any other voice we can identify with confidence. Because of this literary quality, some scholars have proposed that the author is the Apollos described in Acts 18:24:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures.

That description fits the author of Hebrews remarkably well — a person of rhetorical skill and deep scriptural command. But I want to share my own imaginative suggestion, offered with full acknowledgment that it has no evidentiary support whatsoever. I find myself wondering whether the author might have been one of the two disciples walking the road to Emmaus — perhaps Cleopas — who encountered the risen Jesus, of whom Luke writes in chapter 24:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

That description of Jesus opening the whole of Scripture to point toward himself is, in essence, the theological project of Hebrews. This book does exactly that: it moves through the Old Testament — its sacrificial system, its priesthood, its covenants and figures — and in every case finds its fulfillment and surpassing in Jesus. We cannot know who wrote it, but we can say that whoever did had been taught to read Scripture in just this way.

As for when it was written: the letter must predate 70 AD, the year the Roman army under Titus destroyed the Jerusalem temple and brought the sacrificial system to an end. The author speaks of the temple sacrifices as ongoing, present-tense realities — which would make little sense after 70 AD. That gives us our latest possible date. The earliest date is harder to fix with precision, but a strong case places the composition around 64 AD, when the Emperor Nero, following the great fire of Rome, began his persecution of the Christian community. The letter is addressed to a congregation experiencing exactly that kind of pressure — suffering that is shaking people loose from their faith and tempting them to retreat. Throughout Hebrews you will hear, again and again, the charge to that church: *stand firm*.

That was their situation. But though almost two thousand years separate us from those believers, the word of this letter is not merely historical. We too need to be reminded to stand firm. We too need to hear the voice of Jesus above the clamor of every other voice competing for our trust and our lives.

The Oldest Lie in the World

To understand what makes this letter so urgently needed — then and now — we have to reckon with the oldest lie in the Bible. It is also the lie with the most catastrophic consequences in all of human history.

The lie is this: *God is not for your good. He does not want you to be content, happy, or fulfilled. He is holding you back. Therefore, to become more truly yourself — more authentic, more alive — you must rebel against him.*

This is the lie the serpent tells Eve, and through Eve, Adam, in the garden of Eden. It begins in Genesis 3:1 with a seemingly innocent question: “*Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?*” When Eve clarifies — no, only one tree is forbidden — the serpent presses further in verses 4–5: “*You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*”

The implication buried in those words is devastating. The serpent suggests that the reason God has set a boundary is not love but self-interest — that God is withholding something good from them, keeping them smaller than they could be, preventing them from becoming what they were made to become. And if that is true, then the path to fulfillment runs directly through disobedience.

It is a lie, and the lie is demonstrably false on its own terms. God is our creator. Why would he create us in order to hold us back? The truth is that God made us as an expression of love, and precisely because he is our maker, he knows better than we do what it means for us to flourish. He is not the obstacle to our becoming; he is the ground of it.

But Adam and Eve trusted the lie. And what they found on the other side of that choice was not a richer, more expansive life. What they found was pain, broken relationship, drudgery, isolation from the God who had made them, and ultimately death. What theology calls the curse of sin and death is simply the reality that you cannot build a life on a lie and expect it to hold.

The Lie in Our Own Age

I am pressing on this because the same lie that entered the garden has never stopped being told. In our own moment, it sounds like this: *In order to be truly happy, content, fulfilled, and authentically yourself, you need to trust yourself. Follow your heart. Let your feelings be your guide. No one cares about you more than you do. Resist anything — any external authority, any tradition, any structure not of your own choosing — that stands between you and your authentic self.*

You can test how pervasive this lie has become by attending a graduation ceremony. Listen to the commencement address. Count how many times you hear something like “believe in yourself” or “trust your own heart.” Then compare that to the word of Proverbs 3:5:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

The contrast is not subtle.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age*, offers a useful framework for understanding the world that has been formed by this lie. He speaks of what he calls the “immanent frame” — a way of picturing our situation in which God has been cropped out of the image entirely. Imagine photographing a waterfall, but there is an ugly telephone pole in the frame. So you adjust the angle until the telephone pole disappears from the picture. The waterfall is still beautiful; the phone pole still exists; but you have constructed your image of the scene in such a way that it is invisible. Taylor argues that this is precisely what modernity has done with God. The world is experienced and interpreted as a closed system in which God is simply absent from view. And he adds what he calls the “buffered self” — a trained incapacity to receive any moment in which God does break through. People have been formed to be blind and deaf to the divine, to explain away any intrusion of transcendence rather than receive it. The result is a culture that tells us we are self-determining creatures, answerable to no external truth, no given structure, no voice we did not ourselves authorize.

This is the age we live in. And this is the age the book of Hebrews addresses.

The God Who Breaks Through

Hebrews does not argue against the secular age abstractly. It simply announces the fact that God has spoken — decisively, personally, and finally — in the Son. Against every version of the lie that God is absent, or that God is against us, or that we are better off trusting ourselves than trusting him, Hebrews sets this: God stepped into the world. He made himself known. He broke through the immanent frame. And he did it in Jesus.

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. (Hebrews 1:1–2)

Notice that phrase: *these last days*. The writer is not speaking of a distant future. He means the era we are in — the age inaugurated by the coming of the Son, the age in which we now live. These are the last days. And in these last days, God has not gone silent. He has spoken his final, fullest word, and that word is a person.

The good news at the heart of this book is this: though men and women have turned away from God, have hidden themselves from him, have constructed a world with God cropped out of the frame — God did not hide himself from them. From us. He came.

Seven Characteristics of the Son

In the opening three verses, the writer gives us seven descriptions of the Son that together explain why his voice carries a weight and authority greater than any other voice in the world. It is worth noting that in Scripture the number seven frequently signals completeness, wholeness, and the presence of God. These seven characteristics, taken together, are a portrait of the Son's perfection and divinity.

The Son is the heir of all things. The writer says that God appointed the Son “the heir of all things.” Every ruler, every power, every authority in this world exists in a kind of provisional state — there is One to whom everything belongs, and toward whom all of history is moving. In that sense, every claim to ultimate authority in this world is, to use a political analogy, a lame-duck administration. Jesus is the heir. We do well to orient our lives accordingly.

The Son is the agent of creation. God created the world “through” the Son. The opening of John's Gospel echoes this: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Before there was a cosmos, the Son was the instrument through whom it came to be.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory. The writer says he is “the radiance of the glory of God.” In the Old Testament, the most dramatic expression of God's glory was the shekinah — the visible, luminous presence of God that filled the tabernacle and later the temple. That phenomenon is an instance of what theologians call a theophany: a visible manifestation of God. When the writer says the Son is the radiance of God's glory, he is not saying that Jesus reflects God like a mirror reflects light. He is saying that Jesus *radiates* God — he is himself the theophany, the visible presence of the living God in the world.

The Son is the exact imprint of God's nature. “*The exact imprint of his nature*” — the Greek word translated “imprint” is the word for the impression left by a seal or a die. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Not an approximation, not a partial representation — an exact imprint.

The Son upholds the universe. He “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” Not only did all things come into being through him; all things continue to exist through him. The sustaining of creation — every molecule held in its place, every law of nature maintaining its consistency — is his ongoing work.

The Son is the purifier. Here is the humility at the center of this portrait. After making “purification for sins” — this is how he enters the story. The one through whom the worlds were made and by whose word they are sustained stepped down into human flesh and died. He absorbed the consequences of our rebellion in order to forgive it. Is God for us? Is he against us? Is he holding back? Look at Jesus as the purifier. That question has been answered.

The Son is the enthroned ruler. Having made purification for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” He is not only the heir of all things — he is now the reigning Lord of all things. The ascension is not a withdrawal; it is an enthronement. Our Lord reigns.

Pay Closer Attention

These are the reasons the voice of Jesus carries a weight that no other voice in our world can match. And this is why the writer, at the opening of chapter 2, draws the conclusion he does:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. (Hebrews 2:1)

Lest we drift. Lest we give the great lie another hearing. Lest we crop God out of the frame and go looking for life on our own terms.

The book of Hebrews is a call to listen — to the God who has not gone silent, to the Son through whom he has spoken his final word, to the voice that is greater than every competing voice in our age. We begin this series asking the same question the writer asks of his congregation: are you listening?

The Lord’s Table

Today is the first Sunday of the month, and we observe the Lord’s Supper together. I want to close by returning to the passage with which we began — the end of Hebrews 12 — because it speaks directly to what we are about to do.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. (Hebrews 12:22–25)

The blood of Abel cried out for judgment — that is what we read in Genesis, where God says to Cain, “*your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.*” But the blood of Jesus speaks a better word. It speaks forgiveness. Jesus himself told us so on the night he was betrayed, when he took the cup and said to his disciples,

 | “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the*
 | *forgiveness of sins.*” (Matthew 26:28)

This table is where we receive that word. The God who speaks has not spoken condemnation. He has spoken forgiveness, purchased at the cost of his own Son. Come and receive it.