

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 35

Hebrews – Listening to God

God has blessed me with an incredible family. I don't deserve them, and am deeply grateful on a daily basis. My wife Becky, our son Will and daughters Gracie, Rachel, Rebecca, and Sarah are amazing, and we share a family love that runs very deep. It doesn't stop there. My parents (rest Dad's soul) and sisters were equally terrific as I grew up, and they with their extended families are still so today.

One of the things that makes life with my family fantastic is that they all readily tell me, and each other, of their love. They tell each other in a variety of ways. Of course one is by the words of their mouth. We grew up in families that readily said, "I love you."

There is another way my family speaks of their love. They also say they love by their deeds, not simply their words. I see it in the gift of time, of emotional caring and energy, of acts of service, in words of affirmation, and in kind and gentle touching (we are a hugging/pat-on-the-back kind of family).

This is not something new. For as long as humanity has had messages to communicate, there have been different ways to do so. The writer of Hebrews used this fact to deliver the message of the book/sermon. The writer spoke of God's "talking" to humanity, both in words and in deeds.

Our focus this week is on this aspect of the book, looking to see how the book references and utilizes the voice of God both before and in the life of Christ. We see the conversation of Jesus as Messiah one that didn't just begin in the first century. It is a conversation that God had already over a millennium earlier. Jesus was not a new subject, he was an ongoing dialogue of revelation from God to humanity.

TEXT

Hebrews 1:1-2 sets out the theme for the sermon or book.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke (*laleō* - λαλέω) to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken (*laleō* - λαλέω) to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

This is an incredibly provocative thought. God spoke to humans. The Greek places the emphasis on “God.” *God spoke* to our fathers (think “Old Testament”). He used “prophets” who gave humanity to his voice. But God didn’t stop there. The same God who spoke to our fathers, spoke to us. He did so through his Son, who gave humanity to his voice. This “speaking” was by deed, not simply by word.

The Greek word for “speak” is *laleō* (λαλέω), pronounced “lah-leh-o.” I don’t know whether the word’s origin is an onomatopoeia, but it sure sounds like it should be. I know most children learn to speak saying something close to “la-la-la-la.” The word is used front and center in Hebrews in terms of God speaking to humanity. The Greek sets up the point in a parallel fashion, making the sentence in the Greek a thing of poetic beauty.

The first few words use alliteration, with the Greek letters *pol-*, *pol-*, *pal-* starting each substantive word. This is the phrasing, “long ago,” “at many times,” and “in many ways.” Then we get to the core: God spoke! The idea then finishes with the touches “to [our] fathers” “through the prophets.” (also “*p-*” words in the Greek). So it looks a bit like this (taking out articles and conjunctives):

pol- pol- pal-
(long ago, at many times, in many ways)
GOD SPOKE
p- p-
(to [our]fathers through the prophets)

The parallel comment comes next.

But in these last days
GOD SPOKE
to us with (or “by”) his Son.

At the risk of turning this into a Greek lesson, stay with me a bit more for the Greek used. In the Greek, this is part of one long sentence that runs through verse four. While our English versions give an English verb for the first clause “God spoke to our fathers,” the Greek actually uses a participle there (think “speaking” rather than “spoke”). The real verb doesn’t come until the reference to the last days when God spoke by/with/in¹ his Son. There we have the main verb of the sentence.

What does all this mean? It is a tied-up beautiful package. The writer is telling us that God’s speaking to us was really one long event. The speaking to our fathers through prophets was part and parcel of the main verb, of God speaking to us

¹ The Greek preposition *en* (ἐν) carries the range of idea of “by,” “with,” or “in.”

by/with/in his Son. The Old Testament (the writings of the “prophets”) is seen here as the foundation of the later communication. In the Old Testament, we can find the basis and preparation for Jesus.²

This is a passage that is setting up the *fact* that God began the conversation that is Jesus Christ, made man and crucified to save humanity from sin long before the actual incarnation.

It is not surprising then to see that the sermon we call Hebrews is built around Old Testament passages, even as it speaks of Jesus as Messiah. We can look at the passages and see the same message from God speaking to our fathers through the prophets in the Old Testament as we see when God spoke through Christ. Let us look at them in light of the outline we set forth in the first lesson.

Christ is Superior to Angels (1:1 – 2:18)

Here are the Old Testament passages where God was speaking of Jesus:

- Ps. 2:7 “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

This passage gets echoed in the Gospel of John recording of the life of Christ, where it is tied directly to Jesus and his work on earth.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

The writer of Hebrews then references additional Old Testament passages reflecting God speaking of Christ.

- 2 Sam. 7:14 “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.”

This passage is echoed in the final word that is Jesus in many places, including Jesus explaining his role to the apostles just before his arrest and death,

Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son (Jn. 14:13).

² Duvall, J. Scott and Verbrugge, Verlyn, eds, *Devotions on the Greek New Testament*, (Zondervan 2012), at 122-124.

- Deut. 32:43 “Let all God’s angels worship him.”

We read of this early conversation coming to fruition on the fields outside Bethlehem at the nativity,

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased! (Lk 2:13-14).”

Returning to the early conversation as set out by the writer of Hebrews, we read,

- Ps. 45:6, 7 “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

Jesus was an embodiment of loving righteousness and hating wickedness, especially wickedness clothed in self-righteousness! (See, e.g., Mt. 23:13-15).

Jesus was never a new idea or a new dialogue. He is the voice and continued conversation from the beginning. He is the embodiment of an unchanging God with a constant purpose:

- Ps. 102:25-27 “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.”
- Ps. 110:1 “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

Compare these to what the Old Testament said of angels:

- Ps. 104:4 “He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.”

The angels were actually used by God in the process of God speaking of Jesus! The writer returns to the Greek (*laleō* - λαλέω) referencing the angels as speaking of

Jesus,

the message declared (*laleō* - λαλέω) by angels proved to be reliable... (Heb. 2:2).

Jesus, however, may have seemed for a while less than angels when he was human, but this was just a flavor of what was to come, as God declared through the prophets:

- Ps. 8:4-6 “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

This is echoed in the early church recognition of Jesus as one who,

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:6-11).

Jesus was prophetically one who would not only be God’s voice to us, but would bring us into relationship with God.

- Ps. 22:22 “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

We read of Jesus constantly praising God to the people. He would teach in synagogues (Lk 4:16-21), give thanks before breaking bread, and always point people to God the Father.

- Ps. 18:2 “I will put my trust in him.”

Of course this is seen as the absolute response of Jesus willingly going to the cross. 1 Peter 2:23-24 explains it,

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who

judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

The final passage quoted from the Old Testament in this section of Hebrews is

- Isa. 8:18 “Behold, I and the children God has given me...”

This was the very teaching of Jesus who instructed his apostles,

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me (Jn. 17:6-8).

Jesus promised his return so that his followers would not be “orphans” as he saw them directly as his children (Jn. 14:18).

This is Jesus, of whom God has spoken, and through whom God now speaks.

Christ is superior to Moses (3:1- 4:13)

Students of the Old Testament should have no doubt. God spoke to the Israelites through the prophet Moses. What the writer of Hebrews makes clear is that even that message was one conjunctive of the word of God in Christ.

Harkening back to the time Israel spent in the wilderness under Moses’ leadership, the writer relies on the Old Testament to teach of Jesus. He makes it clear Moses himself was speaking prophetically of Jesus, the one whom God would speak through over a thousand years later. Hebrews 3:5 calls out Moses as one who, “was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be *spoken* later.” Here we encounter again the verb *laleō* (λαλέω). This is a repeat of its usage in 1:2 where we read of God speaking through prophets earlier and through Jesus later. Moses was faithful to testify to what God would SPEAK of in Christ!

This is why the writer finds it so important that we hear the voice of God with soft receptive hearts. He writes of Moses’ experience:

- Ps. 95:7-11 “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with

that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

The clear implication is that we are not to rebel, but to follow Jesus! This is the meaning behind not “hardening hearts as in the rebellion.”

Like many of the quotations from the Old Testament in Hebrews, you can see that in a version like the English Standard Version, the words are mildly different in Hebrews's quotation than from the actual Old Testament. This is because the writer of Hebrews was likely quoting from a Greek translation of the Old Testament (we call the "Septuagint") which had become the primary Old Testament for Greek speaking Jews throughout the Mediterranean in the first century. See:	
ESV - Ps. 95:7-11	ESV – Heb. 3:7-11 quote of Ps. 95:7-11
Today, if you hear his voice, not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. Forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.” Therefore I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.	Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.

The Israelites after an amazing salvation from Exodus grumbled, complained, and ultimately rebelled against God. Once they arrived at the Promised Land, they were fearful, being happy to maintain status as wilderness nomads rather than becoming land possessors. God sent the rebellious folks back into the wilderness for another forty years, determining that they would not enter into the Promised Land and the rest God had for them there.

This was an historical event, but it was also the voice of God speaking to us, prophetically fulfilled in the lessons we have to learn from Jesus. We have been saved from a bondage to sin, a greater slave master than Pharaoh could ever be. No one should refuse that salvation and the promised rest from God!

This true rest is found in Christ as well. It was not one that even Joshua, the Israelite leader that conquered the Promised Land (and a namesake for Jesus in Hebrew) could offer the people. It is one that God “spoke” of (*laleō* - λαλέω) as coming at some point in the future (Heb. 4:8).

Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14-7:28)

In this section, as the writer explains the priesthood of Christ superior to that of the priests from Aaron’s lineage, we have a repeated Old Testament passage from Hebrews 1:5,

- Ps. 2:7 “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

This time the writer emphasizes that this is an appointment from God. Jesus was never one to claim his position on his own authority. The same God who set up the

priesthood of Aaron, set Jesus up as priest. We should not miss again that this is phrased as God speaking. It is God who “said” (*laleō* - λαλέω) to Jesus, “You are my Son.” This is the ongoing conversation themed in Hebrews 1:1-2.

Using Psalm 110, the appointment of Jesus was to a greater priesthood, one after the order of Melchizedek. (More on this in the lesson next week).

The writer then stops quoting Old Testament Scripture for a bit, but that doesn’t mean the voice of God through the prophets isn’t heard. It is simply summarized as the story and significance of Melchizedek is explored and explained.

Christ’s Covenant is Superior (8)

Chapter 8 unfolds the clear instructions of God to Moses in constructing the sanctuary. Moses was not to build it in just any fashion, because those words God spoke to Moses were part of an ongoing dialogue that would speak with finality in Jesus Christ.

The role of Jesus as priest not only finds meaning in the sanctuary’s construction, but the covenant represented by this work of Christ is of ultimate significance. Here the writer places a quotation from God through the prophet Jeremiah where the conversation that ends in Christ is begun:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Heb. 8:10-12; Jer. 31:33-34).

Christ’s Sanctuary is Superior (9:1-9:12).

In this section, we do not have specific quotations from Scripture, but we do have the writer explaining the instructions God gave for various instruments associated with the Jewish temple. The point was that preparations had to be made before the High Priest would enter the holy place to offer atoning blood for his own sins as well as the sins of the people. This was an Old Testament conversation from God that found its fuller significance in God speaking through Jesus as one who offered his own blood in preparation for his (and our) entrance to God’s holiest dwelling place.

Christ's Sacrifice is Superior (9:13 – 10:18)

Here the dialogue continues as the Old Testament is explained in the person and ministry of Jesus. God's earlier speaking was the shadow as his final speaking in Christ is reality. The blood of bulls and goats accomplish nothing in reality. They were instructions that forecasted the sacrifice of Messiah. Here the Old Testament dialogue is set:

- Ps. 40:6-8 "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'"

This passage is true dialogue of God speaking, with a reply of Christ, also through the voice of the Old Testament prophet. God required sacrifices and offerings, but those were not what truly satisfied his character and justice. Jesus replied in the Old Testament prophet's voice that he would do God's will.

Jesus did not do this for himself. He had no personal need for God's forgiveness. This was done for others. This was done for us.

The Jeremiah 31:33-34 passage is again given, but this time with a breakout for emphasis.

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds

The writer then emphasized the addition,

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

This is the final word from God. In Jesus he has finished the conversation he started long ago in various forms through prophetic voices.

Therefore Persevere and Live Right (10:19-13:25)

The writer continues the voice of God in both the Old Testament conversation as well as the conversation through Jesus in a pointed directive to his audience to examine their own lives for holy obedience to God through Christ.

Merging Isaiah 26:20 with Haggai 2:6 the writer emphasizes God's message finding meaning in Jesus today:

Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

We are to walk in faith! Like so many we read of in the Old Testament, from Abel, through Abraham and the patriarchs, through Moses, the judges, and more, we are to find faith and remain faithful, knowing as God told us long ago in Scripture the message found in Proverbs 3:11-12,

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

Hearing this dialogue from God over the millennia, should properly instill faith and confidence. As Psalm 118:6 asks,

The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me? (Heb. 13:6).

This is the great dialogue of God to humanity. One of interaction, one of sacrifice, one of instruction. It is a dialogue for the ages! God giving us words of love and actions of love.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"God spoke to our fathers by the prophets"* (1:1).

I am amazed at the Old Testament. I am amazed at the depth, the diversity, and the lessons. But my greatest amazement comes from the message. Not just the message of the day, but the foundation of the message of Jesus. I love to spend time in the Old Testament and see the hand of God as well as the voice of God laying out the truth that finds expression in Jesus. I am resolved to study the Old Testament hand in hand with my lessons of the New Testament.

2. *"In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."* (1:2).

When I was trying to figure out the painting scheme for our chapel, I wanted to paint three concepts. I wanted to paint the Old Testament conversation of God speaking through prophets of Jesus. I wanted to paint the life of Christ as God's conversation

with humanity, and I wanted to paint the promised return of our Savior for his people.

The first two verses of Hebrews were my inspiration, and you can find them painted in Greek above the section that has the Old Testament pieces as well as those of the incarnate Savior.

I want to spend time with Jesus. Not only in prayer, but in Scripture. I want to read and reread the gospels. I want to hear in the life of Christ, God speaking to me.

3. *“Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (3:7-8).*

This is my mission. To soften my heart to hear the voice of God. That the Almighty Creator wishes and chooses to speak to me is beyond comprehension. I want to hear his voice with a willing heart.