

Hebrews 1:1–3

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[0 : 00] The story is told of my grandfather speaking at a conference where he and Bob Cook were on the schedule together. And after an exhausting day of ministry, they headed off to the room that they shared, and Bob Cook got into his bunk, and then my grandfather turned out the light and got into his own bunk.

And there in the darkness, as he often did, he began to speak audibly. God, who at sundry times and diverse manners spake in time past unto our fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.

You can hear the King James Version coming out. I don't know how long he went, but the poor fellow who was underneath him had never heard anything like this in the darkness, and he was kind of taken by the whole thing and didn't know the man, and eventually interrupted him by simply saying, All right then, good night.

And off he tried to go to sleep as my grandfather ran through the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a memorable book.

There's a reason it sounds good when it's recited or read aloud. After all, and this is the first point by way of introduction, it's audible by nature.

[1 : 43] By that I mean it is more like a sermon than a letter. In tone, as well as design. Take a look on the front end.

Did you notice what's not there? It comes to us without a prescript. It's an unconventional epistle. There's no mention made of the author.

Interestingly, the first verses carry no standard introductory greetings. It's almost as if the preacher has entered into the pulpit with a well-prepared introduction, and he just launched right in.

The back end of the book would support the sermon form. Just take a look at chapter 13, verse 22.

These words, I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation. Now, that's a sermon form of language.

[2 : 56] In other words, he bundles up the entire book under a word of exhortation. In fact, those same Greek constructs are present in Acts 13, where Paul begins a sermon on his first missionary journey.

Acts 12, 13. Now, Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga and Pamphylia, and John left them and returned to Jerusalem.

But they went on from Perga and came to Antioch and Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day, they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them saying, Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.

So Paul stood up and motioning with his hand said, Men of Israel, a sermon. So when we come to Hebrews this spring, you are coming to something audible by nature.

Oral sermons are distinguished from other forms of written communication by a goal of exhorting the listener.

[4 : 32] And that's what we have with Hebrews. So as we launch on to our time, grab hold of the insight of my grandpa.

He readily understood it. The book has all the markings of being as an expository message. And so I encourage you to come back week by week, if for nothing else, than to hear the Scripture reading. Because the reading of the word, well done, will fall with all the weight of its original intention by way of orality.

So we should expect then, this book to give us a sense of exegetical awareness of biblical text, followed by exhortations.

It should be a book that makes an argument, and then applies it. In fact, just take a look so you can get a sense of the weeks that are in front of you.

[5 : 45] Look at how chapter 2, verse 5 begin. There are a series of textual references from the Bible, which then he builds an argument from.

And then when he gets to chapter 2, verse 1, if you can just take your eyes away from the chapter divisions, therefore, he moves now from his exegesis to his exhortation, from his biblical argument to his application.

That's the way the whole book's going to go. So as you come week by week, if you are not used to sitting under sermons, well, the very structure of this book is going to unfold along those lines.

It is going to be a treat for us. Not only is it audible by nature, the second thing I want to say by way of introduction today, and that is the focus of today's message, to prepare us for the book.

Let me say something about its first audience. Notice they weren't referenced in the opening, but that doesn't mean that the letter itself doesn't give us clues along the way that can paint a portrait of that congregation.

[7 : 07] A word about the audience. The ones who would have heard this spoken aloud in the context of their Sunday gatherings for the first time.

First of all, all the earliest manuscripts we have of Hebrews include the phrase, to the Hebrews, before the reading of the first verse.

In other words, it came with a title that in some measure intuitively lets you know who the readers were to the Hebrews.

In all likelihood then, the first audience comprised a good number of Jewish Christians. What percent? We don't really know.

But it's a safe bet to imagine that Jewish Christians were the largest segment of the first audience.

[8 : 06] Yet this congregation would not have been culturally or religiously isolated from a broader context. In other words, they would not have been inbred merely within a Jewish context.

The book itself came to you in Greek, in an elevated style, they were probably educated, and more than likely displaced from Jerusalem as the center of life.

They had the common language. And we know a bit of this. All the Old Testament quotations and allusions in the book, and if you just start thumbing through, you'll see them set off all the way through the book.

They actually bear the imprint of the Jewish, I mean the Greek translation of the Old Testament rather than some Hebrew manuscript. So these are Jewish Christians in a pluralistic culture, familiar with living in a Greek world, displaced in some measure from their cultic roots of Judaism, having now been converted to Christ, among others as well, all smattered in.

What a congregation this must have been. Another thing I want to mention, by the way, to the audience is they were beyond a shadow of a doubt the second generation of Christians.

[9 : 39] In other words, it was the generation that came immediately after the apostles. Take a look at chapter 2, verse 3. How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

It was declared at first by the Lord. Here it is. And it was attested to us by those who heard. The writer, whoever he may be, places himself within those who heard and then transferred the message by way of proclamation.

So you're reading a letter written to a congregation of Christian adherents, many of whom had some cultic, religious background and affinity with Judaism before they walked into the church or walked out of the synagogue.

What else do we know about them? Let me put it this way. This congregation had been through a lot.

Get this now. I'm going to put this right where we can begin to apply it all series long. Their faith in Christ did little, if anything, to improve their present situation in life.

[10 : 57] Now this is a great contrast to the way in which the Christian faith is presented today. The Christian faith is presented today not only is that which is true, not only is that which you ought to believe because it actually meets your deepest real needs, not only because it might be beneficial for you, that's the way the gospel is often moving today.

But know this, the Christian faith, the proclamation, the word that this congregation understood and grabbed hold of, Jesus Himself, did very little, if anything, to improve their situation in life.

We know this. Just take a look at chapter 10. Chapter 10, verses 32 through 34, where He speaks about an earlier time that followed their conversion to Christianity.

He says, But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

They had come to a belief in the gospel message, and the consequence was not that their lives began to get sorted out in a good and healthy way, but they were now subject to sufferings they hadn't endured before and reproaches.

[12:36] In other words, they began to be shamed in an honor-shame culture, shamed by others for what they did believe, looked down upon, mystified, marginalized, as it were.

All those elements are going to be present in the letter. The elements of a people that are beginning to know that my faith in Christ isn't getting me on very well in the world in which I live.

Christians like those in this book can be found in ever-increasing numbers in the church, even in the West, at last, there's a beginning recognition among believers to the realities that when you take up with Jesus, your expectation should be suffering and shame.

I was in Cuba a little over a year ago, met a pastor and his son.

The pastor had come to Christ as an adult. Before that, he was part of the Communist Party and influential in the country. He was a professor at the university. His wife had gone through the medicine school and was a doctor.

[14:04] They were in the very top elite in Cuba. They came to profess faith in Jesus through a living room house church conversation.

And upon doing so, had their property confiscated in the sense that they were told by the government, anything that comes off your land, we are taking 80% of it.

We used to let you get away with more, not any longer. You're like everyone else in the country that has fallen out of favor due to your faith in Christ.

In fact, your tenured position at the university is gone. You're now a day laborer in the tobacco fields. you're going to make a dollar a day and your ability to practice medicine has been revoked because you've taken up with Christ.

And he and I sat and talked about the very live implications of taking up with Jesus under the cloud of his rising aromatic leaves.

[15:16] Well, it's the way it's been. All of this, though, began to take a toll on the congregation known as the Hebrews.

All of this takes a toll on Christians. Many of you are already experiencing the birth pangs of the fullness of this letter.

If you're a junior high student, a high school student, there isn't one here among you that isn't aware that as soon as it becomes known that you are a Christian or a follower of Christ, there are live consequences among your peers.

We have, in our own midst, I am sure, PhD students, staff, and even faculty who live sometimes under the real or imagined fear that their faith in Christ and their attachment to this word proclaimed through the scriptures may, in some places, keep them from gainful employment.

there isn't a mother here with little ones under toe that doesn't walk into Bixler Playlot or anywhere else and strike up a conversation with another mother in the neighborhood who doesn't know that if it becomes known that she has a relationship with Christ, it might be not only the end of that conversation, but it might be the end of any meaningful relationship.

[16:52] relationship, there isn't a person here at work, whether it be someone in business or finance or law or the classroom or in the service industry, just mention that you have heard from God in the message you believed about Christ and Katie bar the door.

There's no telling where it might lead. the audience first hearing this sermon put down in letter form, just like many of you have hit the wall with faith.

Some of them will learn even stop going to church altogether. Whoa, I went, I was in for a while, not sure, not sure based upon all that's coming at me as a consequence.

You ever wonder why someone doesn't get here three, four weeks in a row? You think it's just because they're busy or they got something else to do? No, subtly, unconsciously, they begin to

wonder, is this thing really doing anything for my life to begin with other than downside as opposed to something upside?

No wonder so much of the exhortation then in Hebrews is cast in the form of appeals like, hey, don't drift away, don't fall short of attaining your rest, don't let go of your confession, don't lose heart, strengthen your feeble arms and your weak knees.

[18 : 27] In other words, Hebrews is for us. It's for a people who are nearing the point of exhaustion in faith. It's for a people who are beginning to wonder, should I really go on with it?

Might I be better without it? A people who are tired, tempted to conform to conventional and culturally acceptable religious patterns.

There are those, you know. You can be a religious adherent in a way that sidesteps the suffering and the shame of the message proclaimed of Christ and Him crucified in a word that's fulfilled through the Old Testament Scriptures.

You can get on with faith and leave Jesus aside. It's for a people who are coming to realize that a religion may be a little more tactile, may be a little more sensory loaded, may be a little more experiential, will be more acceptable, rather than one that's so textual, one that's rooted in the scriptural authority, one that's exclusively centered on Jesus as the only mediator.

It begins to dawn on second generation Christians. It begins to dawn on those who have made a profession and now beginning to walk on a bit that being with Jesus brings trouble.

[20 : 02] That being in association with Him opens them up to ridicule, reproach, misunderstanding certainly, if not marginalization.

The first audience of Hebrews had had enough. And the book is for all who are beginning to grasp that the Christian faith can wear you out.

It's for everyone whose active mind has entertained the question about the staying power of those early sermons that converted you. It's for those who have asked, was it really God who was speaking to me in those messages that drew me into the Christian faith?

I know of a man now dead, dear friend, Chicago public school teacher, beloved person, one-time member of Holy Trinity, born Jewish, converted to Christ, baptized under my hand, on his knees in a Jewish synagogue of all places, who then would write me later on, under the swelling disturbance of his newfound faith in Christ and its implications for his life.

Amen. Oh, the book of Hebrews is for him and all like him.

[21 : 56] So when you're considering the deep needs of the first audience, I can well imagine the writer of Hebrews knowing that he has to address the one inescapable question that's running through their minds in the middle of every night.

here it is. Was it really God who spoke to me in those early sermons that took me from one form of religion to an entirely different way of relating to God, namely, faith in Christ?

Did I really hear from God? In the silence of that season, did he speak to me in the message of his son?

And so knowing all of this about the audience, the writer to the Hebrews, who was one beyond a shadow of a doubt, a preacher, if he was anything, sits in the silence of his study and pens an introduction that the entire letter will spill out of, and when he wants to address those needs, he says, long ago, had 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 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, and after making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Father on high.

[23 : 50] For the writer, that's the word the weary church needed. And he will now fashion argument upon argument, upon argument, to support his thesis.

Notice the main clause in the opening. There's only one independent clause, one line that can stand on its own, that everything else is subject to and in subordination of.

God has now spoken to us through his son. Everything else is in relationship to that. God has spoken.

God has spoken. When you lay awake at night wondering whether the message you converted under is worthy of any staying power given the implications that have come upon you, the preacher launches from the pulpit, God has spoken.

And he's done so in a particular way. he's done so in continuity with the past through the prophets, but one that supersedes the past.

[25 : 14] In Jesus Christ, particularly in his sacrificial death and his present ascendant reign, we have heard from God.

the word preached to them about Jesus as the great shepherd of their soul was nothing less than the very word of God to them.

It was truthful. It was worthy of their ongoing belief. it was worthy of their endurance of suffering and shame.

It could be trusted, though all hell rise against them. It is also the word that everyone questions and wonders over at some point after having taken up with him.

In 1961 to 63, the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman wrote his celebrated trilogy, Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light and the Silence.

[26 : 32] The origins of his work, The Silence, are worth retelling. While listening to a classical composition by Stravinsky, Bergman was reminded of a recent visit he made to a 19th Century Cathedral.

There he had seen a stained glass. Get this, it depicted Jesus as the Good Shepherd, an image which this letter will end on. And according to Bergman, he stood in front of that stained glass window of Jesus that was shimmering before him and he calls out to the glass, speak to me.

Fortunately for all involved, the glass did not reply. And so he demanded again, speak to me. Speak to me!

Speak to me! I will not leave this place until you speak to me! Silence!

So Bergman triumphantly leaves the cathedral and later that year writes The Silence, which is a play, a film, about our inability to have a connection with God.

[27 : 58] One movie critic, review of the film, recalled the quote, unnerving feeling that God had abandoned these characters to a dubious salvation in their own connection.

If that's the question you're asking, does God speak? Did He speak? did I actually become a Christian under a vibrant word of God?

Should I think about becoming a Christian? Knowing the implications the preacher's already laid out for me this morning, the preacher of Hebrews says that, well, God in the past has spoken many times, many ways.

We'll get into some of those in the letter, how He used to communicate Himself to the prophets, to our fathers, but He has spoken to us through His Son, decidedly, definitively, clearly.

Notice the way it's put there. What was previously part of prophetic discourse, verse 1, now, in these last days, the age upon which the end has fallen, Jesus came.

[29 : 31] Notice what He has to say about Him. Whom He appointed the heir of all things. Now, get this.

There are many within my own culture who like to speak of economic opportunity when it comes to inheritance. in fact, that's our favorite phrase. Everybody needs to get some economic opportunity. Those who have often speak of economic opportunity. Those who do not have often speak of economic disparity.

opportunity. But if you are one today who likes to think of economic opportunity and your life has unfolded in such a way that you have resulted in greater capacity, get this.

He is the heir of all things. He's the inheritor of all things. It's all His.

[30 : 43] Don't tell me what's yours. Other than by way of stewardship to Him. And for those who speak of economic disparity, who know nothing but its resulted life of paucity, remember this, Jesus said, while I am the heir of all things, I'm going to share it with all who are in me.

What is mine, He says, is yours. So, while the world continues to fight this fight, and we need to be well versed in it, the ground game of the church is this, in distinction from the world.

When the world looks at a poor man, David Barr really helped me with this, when the world looks at a poor man, they say, what's his problem?

But in the church, if we see a poor man, we have to look at the rich man and say, what's his problem?

Because Jesus, Christ, is the heir of all things. Which is why, in an assembly like this, we can shake the foundations of our world.

[32 : 13] when that happens, that no one's in need.

When that happens, the argument has been won. When that happens, they shall know we are Christians by our love for one another.

So this band of first century listeners who were falling under the weight of a faith that only led them into difficulty and reproach and marginalization and misunderstanding, for them, they needed to know that God has spoken through His Son and get this about Him.

He is the heir of all things. On what account? Because He is the creator of all things. That's the way it puts it. Just think of the time dimensions, the temporal aspects of that phrase.

He is the end of it. It's all going to Him anyway. You ain't going to take a U-Haul with you. It's all going to Him. And He's the one who got it all underway.

[33 : 39] He has spoken through the Son. Which then ought to enable us to change every pattern of our own lives, to willingly give ourselves to those in need, and to ensure that we all endure, that we might receive the eternal rest.

God's God. Wow, what a phrase. The end of all things and the source of all their beginnings.

Notice, He's the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature.

I mean, you think of the prophetic discourse of which Moses was the preeminent prophet. When Moses himself would go up onto the mountain, he would ask for the glory of God to pass by.

God said, you can't handle my glory, son, but I will tuck you in over here and be able to see me walking away from you. And then Moses came on down and people began to realize he had this emanating glory that came from his face because he had been somehow close to the very presence of God.

And what this writer is saying is, you think you've got stuff in Moses. He's just a fading glorious display of the splendor of God, but in Jesus you have the exact imprint of his nature and the full manifestation of his glory.

[35 : 11] I mean, he is it, he says. So when you are wondering, is he really getting anything done? Is there really any reason to keep going on?

Remember that Jesus is the glory, the exact imprint of the nature of God? And that this one who has this splendid outpouring is the same one who made purification for sin, who was willing to suffer.

He was willing to make absolute purification for sin, to leave that great context in the sky, descend upon this earth, die on a cross, have his father turn away from him, although he had all the glory of being with him in everlasting eternity, and for that moment endured things that you and I couldn't even imagine.

He alone, not you, he alone can say, my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? He alone can say, are you speaking?

He alone, through his prayers to God, in his moment of excruciating spiritual dissonance from the father, was heard, was heard, and answered.

[36 : 44] Therefore, he who was laid down for the purification of sins is also the one who now presently sits at the right hand of the father on high. And as you and I walk through this wasteland of a world, and we begin to wonder whether or not God is saying anything to me, and the messages that I became a Christian under, do they have the strength to enable me to keep going?

Remember where he is. Where is he? Don't look for him and come on down and don't look for him. Get your eyes up. he reigns and he will take us to be with him. What an opening to the letter.

Hebrews is a sermon that is ready made for the challenges of your own faith. It is here for those who have hit the wall. It is for all who are experiencing the downside effects of following Jesus.

It is those who are asking the question, where do I go in the world to hear God? To his son, inscripturated in this book, by faith.

[38 : 01] My grandpa, I opened with him, I closed with him. Now that is kind of a conventional sermon. I don't do that very often. But there you go. I took off in one place, I land in the same. So my grandpa comes back in and in his later life he goes to Norway to see his Norwegian roots with my mother and their siblings.

And in every little Norwegian church from which he came, he would enter the church in the middle of the week with nobody around and he would enter the pulpit. And my uncle tells me that in every church, every church, my grandfather would go to, he would get into the pulpit and he would immediately stand behind a pulpit with no one around and he would say, long ago, and at many times, and in many ways, and he would begin to recite Hebrews.

Because he knew. This is the sermon for all who are wondering whether God actually spoke to them in the message they grabbed hold of in Christ.

Before Jesus left, he gave us another word. it's the word of the sacrament. It's here. While he sits at the right hand of God, he's given us this meal that when taken by faith, draws you into his presence and strengthens you to endure for another week.

It is open, then, to all who have faith in Christ. If you do not have faith in Christ and don't believe that God has spoken through him, then we ask you to simply, quietly wait and observe as people from a multitude of races and backgrounds stand patiently in line to taste, as it were, the speech of God, that they might live well in ways that please him.

[40 : 19] Paul writes, For I received from the Lord what I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For all who need a word from God, may this sermon be attached to your mind and faith and may this supper strengthen you to please him.

The gifts of God for the people of God.