

Look at God's last word

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[0 : 00] The readings this morning are twofold. First of all, we are going to read Psalm 110. And after Psalm 110, we're going to read a part of Hebrews, first four verses of Hebrews chapter one. So if you want to have a finger or a bookmark in Hebrews, that will help, I'm sure.

But we begin by reading Psalm 110 of David, a psalm. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy splendor, your young men will come to you like dew from the morning's womb. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. The Lord is at your right hand. He will crush kings on the day of his wrath. He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.

He will drink from a brook along the way. And so he will lift his head high. And in Hebrews, the first four verses of chapter one.

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things.

And through whom also he made the universe. 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. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. Amen. And God will bless to us these readings from his word.

[2 : 22] Effective communication is vitally important, isn't it? I've been conscious of that over these past couple of weeks as I've been trying to save my voice and communicate by sign language with my family, which is not always as effective as one might wish. Effective communication is often far from straightforward, important in domestic life. You know, Joe says to me, Obadiah has beavers on Monday night. And I say, sure. Now, if you're not careful, Joe thinks I've agreed to take him to beavers on Monday night. And I think I've noted a piece of information that will have no practical impact on my life whatsoever. We haven't really communicated at that point, have we? Effective communication, similarly, is vital in business. You're trying to sell your product, trying to nail down a design specification, agreeing who's going to work on which aspect of the project. International relations, effective communication is key. Politicians, diplomats, they have whole teams of people whose job is to work out the details, to put the kind of general agreement that they've reached into official language, into something that you can enforce. This person will do that. This party must do this thing. Similarly, communication is vitally important in our spiritual lives, isn't it?

We have to know what's happening. And by that, I don't just mean that there is very little point in me standing here week by week if I'm not communicating effectively, though that is true. But even more fundamentally, that the entirety of the Christian faith, it depends upon communication, doesn't it?

Specifically, our faith depends upon God communicating himself to us. Because you and I, we are not competent to figure out what God is like. We can't, on our own initiative, just imagine what is God's nature.

Now, that's inherent to the fact that we are finite, created beings. We're not infinite. So we can't comprehend an infinite God. We can't kind of step outside of our limited, earth-bound perspective and see what God is like. We can't do that. We can't even kind of step outside ourselves to get a perspective on what we are like. We're not capable of doing these things. So if we want to know the true reality, if we want to know what is really going on in this universe, then we need a word from the one who stands before the beginning of time and the one who stands beyond the end of time as we know it.

We need God to speak to us. And therefore, considering these first few verses from Hebrews this morning, we have three headings to help us structure our thoughts. First, we consider the fact of these amazing words. Second, we come on to the better last word. And then we'll spend some time reflecting on just how great this last word is. Amazing words, a better last word, and then the greatness of that last word. Maybe you're familiar with the parable of the blind men and the elephants.

[5 : 45] You know the idea there's this group of blind men who are put into a room with an elephant, a calm, docile elephant. Don't worry, they're not getting trampled, but they have no prior experience of what an elephant is like. And each of these blind men feels one part of the animal and reaches a different conclusion about what is in the room with them. One of them holds the trunk and says, it's a massive snake. Another grabs the tail and says, we have a rope here. And eventually, these blind men come to blows, cannot agree on what is there. The morable of the parable, well, we should admit that we're working with limited data. And so we shouldn't be dogmatic in our beliefs, but instead we should work hard to synthesize these different ideas, to synthesize together the world's different religions.

This is the idea of the parable as commonly taught. And as far as the parable goes, it's reasonable. It makes sense. It is true that it is unwise to be over dogmatic with limited information. If we don't know the full picture, then we shouldn't act as though we do. This much is true. But here's the thing. The elephant has spoken. The elephant has declared the truth of its nature. And that being the case, then to refuse to accept what it has said of itself is no longer about being humble in holding beliefs. In fact, to ignore what it has said is the height of arrogance. The elephant has spoken. And so the truth that God has spoken is absolutely fundamental. God has revealed himself. God has taken the initiative. God has chosen to show us the truth of who he is. Chosen to show us what he is like to tell us of his character. So we're not left trying to trying to figure out for ourselves what he's like. We're not meant to be groping around and misleading ourselves, finding partial information. No, God has told us.

Now, starting off a series of sermons, we often spend a little bit of time thinking about, you know, who the book was written to and what circumstances they were in and who was writing these things down.

Helpful to understand what's going on in the minds of the human authors of Scripture. And we didn't do that when we started this series in Hebrews a couple of weeks ago. And we're not going to do it now. And that's largely because we don't know who wrote this book. Because the author doesn't choose to tell us. And because I find myself completely uninterested in all of the scholarly speculation about, ooh, could it be this person? Who cares? If we were meant to know, we would know.

In fact, I think it's probably a deliberate choice that this letter is anonymous, precisely because that emphasizes what we can sometimes lose sight of when we focus on the who and the what and the where and the when. Because there is, of course, another author of all of Scripture, isn't there? And there we are intended to focus. The book of Hebrews, this letter, is full of Old Testament quotations.

[9 : 11] Parts of the Hebrew Bible applied to the lives of those to whom the letter is written. And interestingly, unusually for a New Testament book, interestingly, these quotations aren't ever introduced my attribution to the human author of that part of Scripture. You know, other times when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, it says, Moses wrote, and we get something from Deuteronomy.

Or David said, and part of a psalm. Well, our author here doesn't do that. Consistently, when he refers to the Old Testament, these words are ascribed to their divine author. Christ said, as the Holy Spirit says, God says. Now, of course, today, the idea that the Bible was written down by people, this much is uncontroversial, right? There's no debate about that. We know people wrote it down. We don't have to defend that. But, I mean, it's useful to know, but we don't need to defend that. But what is under attack is this idea of divine authorship. The idea that God himself is responsible for what we hold in our hands this morning. Human authors aren't irrelevant. God chose to use different people. You can see different characters, different emphases shine through in different books. And the pages of the Bible are therefore multifaceted. You can see different angles on the same truth from different perspectives. But in our relativistic age, we need to be willing to say, as verse 1 of this letter does, we need to be willing to affirm this fundamental truth God spoke.

So if you find that you're not feeling very confident about that, if you find that you don't actually quite know how to answer when people challenge you on the idea that God wrote the Bible, then I'd really love to talk to you about that further. Maybe I can recommend you a book to help you think things through. Maybe we can talk it through together because this is fundamental.

We have nowhere else to stand. It's vitally important. If we can't trust that in his word God has spoken, then we're nowhere. So if you aren't sure, well, let's get that thrashed out together because it's vitally important.

[11 : 37] But once we have that, once we believe, once we're confident that in fact he has spoken, then the obvious consequence is that the Bible is authoritative.

When God speaks, we as God's creatures are obliged to listen. It's incumbent upon us to do as he says. And that is every bit as much true today as it was a couple of thousand years ago when the writer to the Hebrews first declared, God has spoken. These words are every bit as relevant today because the God who spoke these words doesn't change. He's the same. He said it. Therefore, we assume it's relevant to us.

So he did indeed, as we're told here, speak at many times and in various ways. He spoke to Moses through a burning bush to Amos with this image of a basket of summer fruit. He spoke to Elijah in the still small voice and so on and so on and so on. Many times, various ways, this multifaceted revelation.

But don't think for a moment that saying that he spoke in many times and in various ways, these different perspectives, don't think for a moment that that means that this is in any way an inconsistent revelation. That's not what the writer to the Hebrews is trying to say.

That's not what we're trying to say. God didn't say something fundamentally different on each of these occasions, but rather different angles on the same thing. And we're not even saying that he said something categorically different when we come to these last days. This better last word, this final, this definitive revelation through the one who is not just prophet, but the one who is son.

[13 : 28] This revelation is not discontinuous with the foregoing. The progression isn't, you know, this is less true and this is more true. No, that's not the progress that we're making. Nor is it progress from a message of sin and anger to a message of life and hope. No. All scripture is God-breathed, said Paul to Timothy. One and the same God revealed throughout time, revealed throughout the pages of scripture.

The same God speaks the same message of salvation. This isn't a different message. It's not a fundamental change. And yet the writer's main point here is, well, actually there is a significant contrast.

The point is, in Christ, God has now spoken fully, decisively, finally, completely. God has spoken perfectly in his son. There is no further revelation required. When you compare what is apparent to the writer, to the Hebrews, what is revealed in God's son, when you compare that to the Old Testament days, where each book has something valuable to contribute. And yet even together, the whole thing is still fragmentary, incomplete, unfulfilled. Every page crying out for an answer, raising more questions than it answers. In contrast to that, suddenly the answer has now been given in Jesus. God's own son answers the questions that the first testament raises. The revelation is no longer partial or incomplete.

So Richard Phillips says, this is why the Christian era is described as these last days. The point isn't last days in the sense that Jesus is about to come back at any minute, as many take this to mean. The other Old New Testament passages do tell us to have that perspective.

But the point here is that the age of fulfillment is at hand, where God's revelation has been made complete. The last days in that it is fulfilled, it is completed, it is perfective, it is decisive.

[15 : 47] We are not looking for anything further, nothing beyond what has been said. These are the last days. They were already the last days 2,000 years ago, and they still are today.

No need for further revelation because we have the complete picture. Now that has a number of implications, doesn't it? Firstly, straightforwardly, that means we can't accept any claims to further revelation that attempt to contradict what God has revealed in his son.

We can't accept anything that claims to go beyond, anything that claims to go further, because we have the definitive last word. Now this applies obviously to things like, you know, the Book of Mormon, but also applicable to the kind of, the more minor, the more subtle versions of further revelation, where people have, or at least say that they have, dreams or words from God.

Should be cautious about that. Now, I do not deny the possibility that God speaks to people directly today, that God sends dreams to people in particular situations. I think that does still happen. There's evidence to suggest that it does, and it fits with God's character that it would. But we have to be cautious. Whilst I hope that a fair proportion of these really are God speaking, if we want to figure out, well, is this telling us true things about God or not, then it seems to me that if God's spoken fully, finally, and definitively in his son, then any words or visions or dreams that do anything other than point us back to that authoritative revelation, to that full, complete revelation, any words that do something other than point us back to that should make us very skeptical indeed. God has spoken his last word.

[17 : 46] He's spoken in and spoken through the one who is himself the word. He's spoken to us by his son. And what a son he is.

The writer here doesn't actually specify that he's talking about Jesus. I mean, that's not in any doubt. But what he does do is he overflows into this description of what the son is like and what he has done. This whole third verse interaction, this whole paragraph in our Bibles, the whole thing is a single Greek sentence. It just bounces from one thing to the next to the next of how amazing Jesus is. He can't wait to get it all out.

All these amazing things about the greatness of this last word that God has spoken. First, he has been appointed the heir of all things. This one seems to be a reference to Psalm 2. Psalm 2 verse 8 says, Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. Inheritance, heir. And that's important because Psalm 2 is a messianic psalm. Psalm 2 is addressed to the Lord's anointed, the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ.

These words are synonyms. The one who is acclaimed as God's own son. At this son's request, the sovereign Lord, says Psalm 2, will give him the nations as in his inheritance.

[19 : 16] And the writer to the Hebrews says this inheritance has now been declared. He's been appointed as the heir. Probably that's viewed as happening when Jesus sat down at God's right hand, having made purification for sins.

The timing of when this appointment happens isn't really the point. In English, appointed kind of implies a time, but not so much the word in Greek. And similarly to be heir, well, that kind of implies to us that, you know, the inheritance comes on the death of the original owner.

Well, that can't be the case here, can it? No, the point of being appointed heir is that it is his by right. That the nations are his because of who he is, because of his nature, because they are rightly his possession.

The nations, Psalm 2, even more than that here, heir not just of the nations, but heir of all things. Nothing at all is outwith the authority of the Son.

Nothing belongs to anyone else. His royal inheritance now inaugurated and to be consummated at the end of the age. Second, the universe was made through him.

[20 : 31] It's amazing, isn't it, that there was the man who walked around in Galilee and revealed God to us.

That's amazing. This Galilean preacher, this prophet. But this is so much more, isn't it? Not just a man walking around in the dust.

No, he is the one who made the universe itself. He created all things. I mean, it's not a new or different idea here in Hebrews.

We get the same thing in John chapter 1, in the beginning was the word. Colossians chapter 1, through whom all things were made. But what I find really interesting here in Hebrews in particular, I find really fascinating the word that he chooses to use to refer to what's created.

So you have this normal word for world, the word cosmos in Greek, which understandably is sometimes translated universe, because sometimes the word is used to refer to all of creation, not just this particular planet, this world.

[21 : 38] That's the normal word when you want to talk about what's created. But here the writer chooses instead to use the word *ionex*, which is more typically translated ages or eternity.

The word that he uses here actually refers more to time than to space. Now, universe is a perfectly valid translation. I'm not casting any doubt on that at all.

It's a good way of putting it. And the word is clearly used here and in other places with that sense of universe, you know, all that exists. Everything that exists, God made it.

That's the fundamental point. But I find it fascinating because, I think because I'm relatively used to the idea that God made the world, that God created the universe.

You know, I almost feel like I can wrap my head around that, or at least it's a familiar idea to me.

What blows my mind is the idea that God made time itself.

[22 : 40] That before God chose for there to be so, there wasn't time in which to do anything. That there wasn't, you know, time in which a big bang could occur until God said anything.

Until God did it. God created the sun and the moon to govern the day and the night. And he created the framework in which they govern it.

All of time, all of space. You know, the physicists talk to us about the, you know, how space and time relate to one another and affect and distort one another. God is sovereign over all of this.

However much you dive into the physics of our universe, however much you can wrap your head around the what's and the how's, it is all because God chose to create it.

Anyway, the sun made the universe. It's just a bit of space. Precisely because he's the mediator of creation. Therefore, he's appointed heir of all things. The whole of time and space has always been his because he made it.

[23 : 46] Third. Third in this litany of amazing things. Third, he is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. It's enthusiastic language, isn't it?

Expressive. Expressive. Expressive. Jesus manifests God's own glorious presence. Like the rays shining out from the sun that demonstrate its nature. So Jesus is the radiance of God's glory.

Or even more than the rays shining out from the sun, because he's not just showing us the Father's glory, but he is the radiance of God's glory, which means there's a sense in which he's the twin source of that glory.

Except we're then getting into the mystery of the Trinity and how God, Father, and Son relate together. He is the radiance of God's glory. F.F. Bruce says, In Christ, the glorious light of God shines into the hearts of men and women.

He's the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. This term here, this comes from coin minting. You know, you've got your original, you've got your carefully carved image, what you want to display, the queen's head or whatever it might be.

[25 : 00] And each time you stamp it, it produces that exact representation. What you start with is what you get. This isn't a partial reproduction.

No, he is the exact representation. This isn't a cheap knockoff. This isn't the photocopy of the photocopy of the photocopy that you can barely even read. He is the exact representation.

Jesus said the same thing to Philip. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. He's spoken to us in his Son. We see him.

Truly, genuinely, exactly. Jesus shows us the Father. And the way these verses are structured, it seems intended to focus attention in on this twofold idea.

The radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. Jesus is uniquely qualified to be the final, definitive, never-to-be-bettered manifestation of the Father.

[26 : 00] That's who he is. Do you want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. Fourth, he's sustaining all things by his powerful word.

This is stark contrast, isn't it, to the sort of set-and-forget theories of the deists, you know, the wind-it-up-and-let-it-go theory. No, the one true and living God is intimately involved with his universe day by day.

Without the active intervention of the Son as sustainer, everything comes to pieces. The atoms stop holding together unless he holds them.

Atlas-like, he bears the world on his shoulders, upholding all things. But even more than that, not just kind of the dead weight hanging there.

The thought here in this sense of sustaining is of actively carrying things along, taking things forward, progress towards a goal. The Son bears the universe towards its intended goal.

[27 : 04] Dynamic, not static. Purposeful, not stoic. Fifth, he provided purification for sins. Perhaps you and I would have started there.

Because we rightly see this as fundamental, as central to the Son's role. If he intends to bring everything to its goal, well, purification for sins is a necessary step, isn't it?

The root to the new heavens and the new earth, that root lies through the cross. If we're going to dwell in perfect harmony in the presence of God, we must first be washed clean.

Our sins must be atoned for. We must be purified and cleansed from all our unrighteousness. And he has done it. He has made purification for sins.

He has provided it at such a cost. Having done this sixth, he sat down at the right hand. This is the first of the quotations from allusions to Psalm 110 that run their way through the course of the book.

[28 : 09] And that we'll come back to next week as well, I'm sure further down the line as well.

Psalm 110, we read it earlier. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

Jesus applied these words to himself. That's recorded in Mark chapter 12. This is what the apostles announced following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus has been enthroned.

He sits in this place of honor. He sits in this place of authority. His enemies may not yet be fully vanquished. They may not yet realize. They certainly don't yet acknowledge their defeats.

But it is certain that the day will come when there will be a footstool to the son who is seated at God's right hand. Seated at his right hand.

This is the place of authority. And notice he's seated there. Not standing. He sat down. Work complete.

[29 : 14] Chapter 10. Jesus is going to be contrasted to the Aaronic priests who remained standing throughout their service. Their sacrificial service in the temple never finished.

But Jesus' work is done. Once and for all. And he sat down. Seventh, he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

But we're going to leave that for next time. This verse is still part of that same sentence running from verse 1 through verse 4. But this verse is also the transition into the next section.

Well, we're going to look next week at Jesus, the one who is greater than the angels. That's quite a way to start a letter, isn't it?

What an amazing revelation. God chose not to finish with speaking at many times and in various ways. He chose to speak through the one who is his own son.

[30 : 18] The one of whom all of these things are true. The one of whom it may rightly be said when any comparison is proposed. The one of whom it may be said Jesus is better.

Jesus is greater than any other. So look at God's last word. Look at this definitive, final, full revelation.

Don't be tempted to go back to the partial revelation as if that were sufficient for us. Don't be tempted to look for some further revelation as if we needed more than he has said. The one who is the radiance of God's glory.

The one who is the exact representation of his being. He has spoken God's last word. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you. Thank you that you have revealed the Father to us. That as the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, you have made him known.

[31 : 32] Thank you that in this final definitive revelation, we know your will. We know your character. We know your attitude to us.

We know all that you intend for us to know. Keep us fixed on these things. Keep us looking to Jesus.

Looking to the last word that you have spoken. Amen.