

"The God Who Speaks" Hebrews 1:1–4

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews 1, verses 1 to 12. 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, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also 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. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, You are my Son, today I have begotten you. Or again, I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, Let all God's angels worship him.

Of the angels, he says, he makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire. But of the Son, he says, 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.

[1 : 1 3] And 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. A bit of an introduction. In 2016, Martin Scorsese, he directed a film, released a film called Silence.

It's about two Jesuit priests, one named Rodriguez, the other Garupe. They came from Portugal, and they traveled to 17th century Japan to find their mentor, Ferreira.

Ferreira, and Ferreira had been rumored to have been a missionary in Japan only to apostatize, to leave the faith, to renounce Jesus. And when they arrive, they find a small but faithful Christian community in Japan, and these lay people are overjoyed to have these two priests visit them and to minister to them.

And it isn't long before the authorities, who are very hostile towards the Christian faith, learn of their arrival. And instead of hunting the priests, they do something pretty brilliant.

[2 : 2 6] They go after the lay people, and they persecute them, hoping to cause a lot of consternation and a lot of frustration and pain within these two priests, so that they would apostatize and then completely crush the hearts and the faith of the faithful laity that follow them.

Rodriguez, who is the main character, he's played by Andrew Garfield, he faces such inner turmoil. On one hand, he wants to spare the Christian community the suffering and the torture and the pain. And on the other hand, he refuses to apostatize. And this greatest turmoil is his frustration with God for being silent, hence the name of the film.

If God were really there and really cared, why not strengthen Rodriguez with a word or encouragement? Why not rescue the people? Why not provide him with direction, with confirmation, that this suffering will pass or that it is not in vain?

And in the end, Rodriguez apostatizes. And it's only then, in Scorsese's film, the book by the same name, I don't think takes such liberties as Scorsese, but only when Rodriguez apostatizes will he then hear the voice of what is presumably Christ.

[3 : 5 1] And Christ says, it is okay. And to apostatize, there is an icon of Jesus that he was to step on. He says, okay, step on me.

It's going to be okay. And the way it's communicated in the movie, it's as if Jesus isn't just okay with it, but it's somehow akin to Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross.

It's a great movie. I'm not sure the message is super great, okay? But the movie itself is beautiful. I commend it to you. It's also not for the faint of heart. So be warned.

But it brings up a really interesting point. The apparent silence of God is something that 17th century priests don't just suffer with, but we suffer with as well.

We want to hear God speak. His silence can be a barrier to our faith. If only God would speak to me, I could believe or I wouldn't have doubt. If only he would make clear his will for my life, I'd follow him.

[4 : 57] It can also be a barrier to our hope. We need to know that God is with us in our circumstances. When they are difficult and when faith is costly, we need to know that he is there.

And it would go a great length for him to just say, I'm here. Sometimes it is hard to believe and hope when it feels like we are praying. Like I said in my prayer, like I prayed, it's hard to believe and hope when we're praying to a ceiling and four walls.

Hebrews is a really remarkable book. The opening that we'll spend time in, verses one to four, is so theologically dense in terms of displaying who Christ is and what he is about.

And it's written, we don't know the author, but it's written what a lot of scholars believe is to a small, fledgling Jewish community in and around Rome in anywhere between 60 and 70 AD.

And this community, they were facing some very real oppression by the authorities. And they needed to know and be assured that Christ truly was the long-awaited Messiah and that this Christian faith is worthy of holding on to even, even, even when their lives hang in the balance.

[6 : 32] You see, the scary thing about God's silence or apparent silence is that it is less about whether God is speaking to us, but actually whether he cares about us.

For speaking is itself an act of kindness. Listen, harsh words hurt, but what I would suggest hurts more is a cold apathy that gives us a silent treatment.

This is what hurts more than harsh words. Not to say that harsh words don't cut, but when you know that somebody doesn't care enough to even acknowledge you, that is the difficulty.

So this is the big question in the letter of the Hebrews, and it's a big question for us today. Does God speak? Does he care? Does he know? Is he with us?

So this Christmas Eve, we're turning to these opening verses. We're going to take a look at Hebrews 1, verse 4. And what's interesting is that I didn't just randomly pick this.

[7 : 35] We had just finished up last Sunday a four-part Advent series in the Songs for the Savior. There are four songs in Luke 1 and 2. They're lovely, beautiful, Christmassy songs.

But Hebrews 1 is the assigned epistle reading for Christmas Day in the Book of Common Prayer. And if you read it, it doesn't seem very Christmassy.

However, when we think about what happened on Christmas Day, it's in fact the most perfect text to speak about, to dwell upon, to meditate on.

So, we're going to look at two points this morning, in verses just 1 to 4. We're not going to read verses 5 to 12, just verses 1 to 4. And we're going to look at words in the past and the word in the present.

So, if you have your Bible, it's a bit of a long intro. Stick with me. We're going to look at verse 1 for our first point, words from the past. Long ago at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

[8 : 44] This letter opens up with a strong affirmation of God's interaction with mankind throughout the ages and throughout time and space. It establishes that God is the one who has spoken.

Right off the bat, it's this affirmation that God is neither silent nor absent. The Bible consistently records God's interactions with mankind from our earliest moments through our darkest times.

God has spoken primarily through chosen leaders and prophets, and he's communicated in various ways throughout centuries, through signs, through words, visitations, symbols, acts, writings.

He has spoken in valleys, he has spoken on mountains, in cities, in desert places. He has spoken to the poor and to the rich, to the young and to the old, to women, to men, to those with great power and to those of lowly estate.

If you remember our songs of the Savior, we have a song that Mary bursts forth called the Magnificat. I magnify the Lord. Mary is this poor servant girl, nobody from nowheresville.

[9 : 53] The next one we look at is the Benedictus, which is the song of Zechariah. He is this high priest, priest in the priestly class. He is like an elite in society.

God is speaking to everybody in between. And the way he speaks is always in the common tongue to common people, ensuring that his words are clear. Sometimes in symbols, sometimes it's hard to understand, but always clear.

So God speaks, not to everybody, but for everyone. He has made himself known, and that is recorded for us in the words of Scripture, both for posterity, proof that he has indeed spoken, but more importantly, so that his words can be widely shared, read, and understood.

His words are public and deliberate. God speaks. He speaks. He's a speaking God. Since his first words to humanity, he has consistently spoken, revealing more and more of his plan for mankind, more and more of his character, of who he is.

What does that mean for us? I think simply put, it means that God, the one true God, is a caring God. He's the one who makes the initiative. He's the one who speaks. He will not allow his creation to wallow in their despair, to experience divine silence.

[11 : 24] He will not allow that to happen. For that is hopelessness, and God will not let his people to remain hopeless. His plan is always to bless, and to redeem, and to forgive, and to purify, and to share, and to love, to right the wrongs, to confront injustice and evil, to dispel the darkness once and for all.

And yet the darkness persisted. Darkness continues. God's people heard his words. Here's one of the reasons why it persists, the darkness does.

God's people heard his words, but did not heed his words. The blame for the darkness that befell us was then placed on the God who spoke words of hope and deliverance, and we have said, you have abandoned us.

You are silent. We are quick to pass blame. In fact, if you're familiar at all with the biblical story, the first instance of sin entering the world becomes a bit of a blame game.

This is kind of the way things work with human beings. And of course, if we are feeling the darkness, it's our own fault. What are we going to do? Of course, we're going to blame God.

[12 : 44] We heard his words, but we did not heed his words. And even worse, we claim that he was silent.

And in doing so, the human race treated with contempt this God of love. So what would God do? He had spoken long ago in many times and in many ways, the author of Hebrews tells us right off the bat.

He's spoken to fathers, to prophets, and everybody in between. He speaks continually, and yet we hear, but we don't heed.

So the question is, what will God do? Maybe some of you remember actual arcades. One of the biggest joys was going to this mall near my grandparents' house when I was six or seven.

I'd get a big, fat pocket full of quarters, and one of the worst things that could happen was I ran out of quarters. Game over. Is this what's happening to us?

[13 : 45] Okay? Have we ran out of quarters in a divine sense? We have heard, but we have not heeded. Let's get to our second point, and let's look at verses two to four.

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. He, the Son, 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 purifications for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. Like I said at the beginning, there's Colossians chapter one, maybe John chapter one. These are the high, high, high, high, high points of what the Bible says about Jesus.

Here we are in Hebrews chapter one. So we see God has spoken a whole lot over centuries to many people. We heard, but we didn't heed.

[14 : 54] And instead of getting a big fat game over, God sends his Son to speak. He has spoken again. And this time, it's once and for all.

He did not stop speaking because we thought he was silent. He has given us a revelation of himself so that there is nothing more to be learned about who he is or what he will do.

He has given a final revelation. There's nothing more that he can share either that he's willing to share or that we could potentially understand. But God in his kindness reveals everything through his Son.

He has self-disclosed himself to us. We'll talk about this very shortly. But he takes the initiative to do this. Okay? We do not somehow mentally ascend up to God to understand him.

He self-discloses himself to us in our tongue in a way that we can understand. But through his Son. There's a lot to unpack here. Okay? A whole bunch.

[15:59] But I'm going to try to draw your attention in a succinct way to three key points. The first. God has spoken to our need to know our place. To situate ourselves in this world.

And to know that we have meaning. That we matter. And that we have purpose. God has spoken through his Son. The divine word. Who spoke creation into existence.

Including us. We're going to look at John 1 tomorrow. He is the one who sustains the world in its existence. So he doesn't just create. And then kind of the classic example is like a watchmaker who sets the dial and leaves the watch to do its thing.

No. He not only creates but he sustains. How? I mean these are mysteries. These are high, high things to think about. But the scriptures affirm that he doesn't just create but he holds us together. And it means that the entire universe, the entire cosmos is not some impersonal or endless void that just came about by happenstance but was crafted with divine hands with divine intention.

[17:10] Which means you being a part of that creation means your existence isn't the result of just chance but is ordained by the creator of the creator God himself.

The only one who is not created. The uncreated creator. It is a gift of God. An act of creation from his choice not his necessity and this is a big part of it.

Okay? If God had to create us for some divine reason because he was lacking something so he had to create so that he could then be fulfilled then his creation would not be a self-giving an act of kindness and love.

It would be self-serving. But that's not the case. He does so not out of necessity but out of love. And he creates and he sustains all things because he so desires and has done so with incredible precision and beauty.

And he says of all of mankind that when he created us that we are very good. It's a remarkable thing to think about. Okay? That God creates he sustains he says of us that we're really good that speaks to us to have this divine purpose and meaning.

[18:27] Whether you feel it or not friends I'd encourage you just to consider it. Consider how this is this is a better word than just this idea that we are the product of billions of years of chance.

Now I'm not somehow suggesting that you have to believe that the world was created in six literal days or this was symbolic I'm not even going there but that there is a creator behind everything as opposed to this is all by chance and therefore you're just a really wonderful coincidence that was just splurged into creation.

You were created with intention and beauty and love and truth. I want this to be true.

I'd suggest for you as well that you want it to be true that you want your very essence to matter to a creator and I would also suggest that it is more hopeful reality than any other option.

The second thing that verses two and four tell us is that God speaks to our desire for transcendence so that we know that we are known by God himself and we actually have the opportunity to know him.

[19:49] How does he do this? Well continues on in scripture that he in our text that he reveals his radiance and glory to us in Christ.

In short it means that God is perfectly reflected in his son and he does so for our sakes. God the father and God the son share the exact same essence.

Christ bears the very character of the father as a stamp bears its imprint on the wax it is pressed upon. However however we need to be careful not to push that analogy too far for a stamp and the wax are distinct while the son and the father they are one.

Which is to say that God did not have to reveal himself perfectly in his son for us to behold but he has and that again speaks to the fulfilling of our need to transcend and touch the divine to have an encounter with eternity.

Throughout the Old Testament God has been 100% inaccessible to humanity in this type of way. He is perfect and holy the scriptures say that we are not and therefore we have no business being in his presence with no hope of knowing him.

[21:11] In fact throughout the Old Testament it is said that if a man or woman were to see God they would be undone yet in Christ mankind was not undone but remade.

And through this one man sinful man had the privilege of being in God's presence forever when he had no right to do so. All of our hopes all of our desires to again connect with eternity to transcend this world to touch the divine all of them were accomplished in Christ completely apart from us. And then finally in addition to God speaking to our need to know our place and that we matter in this world and speaks to our desire for transcendence he also and finally speaks to our deep sense of being free from guilt to be cleansed from our sin to have our to have our iniquities atoned for. The reality and feeling that we are tarnished and unworthy of love is a real one. Maybe you feel it now maybe you don't but at some point at some time in your life you will feel the weight of darkness and sin.

You will. You will. Things you will say or have said things you have thought or will think acts that you have done or will do they cause a deep stain and this kind of stain does not come out in the wash. [22 : 50] Our frustration with doing the things we know we shouldn't do and doing the things we know we should do it's very real and knowing that there is no health in us as the prayer book tells us prayer book also in morning prayer it will say that we are miserable offenders if you're honest when you're feeling the weight of the things that you have done I'll say this if you allow yourself to feel the weight of the things you have done if you will not just quickly dull it with entertainment or distraction but if you feel the weight of your sin of your brokenness you will realize that indeed you truly are a miserable offender and that you lack goodness truth and beauty against God's own righteous laws and righteous ways you have transgressed the pain of severed relationships and disappointments as you get older they inevitably get stacked and stacked and stacked and stacked until they're completely overwhelming we will go to great lengths to soothe our consciences but to no lasting avail so when God he speaks through his son who makes purification for our sins it is not just that God makes atonement for the sins that we have done but he cleanses us so that we are white as snow something again that he takes the initiative to do that we don't and he speaks to our very need of being cleansed and not only that

Hebrews 1 says after he did all this he then ascended to the right hand of the majesty on high and sat down what does this mean? you sit down after you've completed the work you've done okay after you've completed the work you've done you don't sit down maybe you take a break okay but in terms of this language you sit down because you're done there's no more left to do and this is what the author of Hebrews is drawing our attention to so that Christ he deals with our sin he purifies us in the most complete and full way that that could have possibly been done the job is finished and friends his work is completed I'll wrap this up in conclusion is God silent?

okay is Scorsese's film actual like an actual proper depiction of who God is? I just want to say not a chance okay not a chance he has spoken so very loudly through his son who speaks so fully and perfectly revealing who God is and what he is about however however okay there is a degree of where we take this by faith and even then God helps us out to do that okay we don't hear we don't have a time machine we can't go back and even if we did I bet you we wouldn't believe because we are like I said last Sunday we are inoculated against the things of God often times so we ask God for help to believe and I'm telling you God has spoken through his son in the most loud most unmistakable way possible and this was his initiative not ours and doesn't that speak to how loving God is?

how does God communicate his love for us? it is through the incarnation it is through the Christ child being born in Bethlehem to the Virgin Mary and again this is God breaking through the author of life breaking into the story he is writing purely purely because he loves us and he desires to speak to us while wrestling with the Christian faith C.S. Lewis writes in the second to last chapter of his autobiography spiritual autobiography surprised by joy about how this is even possible and why this is the only true way we could ever hear God speak and this is what he says by the way this is from the second last chapter chapter 14 it's called Checkmate I think it's a brilliant title for a chapter of a man coming to faith a man wrestling with God but this is what he says anyways quote even if my own philosophy were true how could the initiative lie on my side my own analogy as I now first perceived suggested the opposite and here he gives an example if Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet it must be Shakespeare's doing

Hamlet could initiate nothing Shakespeare in principle could make himself appear as the author within the play and write a dialogue between Hamlet and himself the Shakespeare within the play would of course be at once Shakespeare and one of Shakespeare's creatures it would bear some analogy to the incarnation for in these last days God has spoken to us entering his creation yet

remaining fully God he visited us took on our flesh lived a very fully human life died a very fully human death completely undeserved and he rose from the grave conquering death and ascended to heaven to make a place for us that we may be by his help when we put our faith in him and hear again sweet words spoken over us enter into the joy of your master friends

[28 : 43] God speaks he speaks at the incarnation and what he speaks is grace upon grace love upon love to us in his son Jesus Christ let's pray father we thank you that even though sometimes it feels like you are silent you you speak and you have spoken in such an incredible universe altering way through your son Lord help us to have ears to hear enliven our faith help us to be like the man in the gospels who says I believe help my unbelief and let us put our faith and trust and hope in your son who has spoken a far better word than any word that has ever spoken and Lord help us by your spirit's help to endure to the end so that we may hear at the end of the age the sweet words enter your master's rest we pray all of this in the name of the father the son and the holy spirit amen we will respond to God's word by as