

Mark 1: 1-15

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Preachers: Matt Coburn, Nick Lauer

[0 : 00] In June 28, 1997, in a letter to the Ocala Star Banner, a man who listed himself as TK wrote this question to a religious column that was penned by the famous evangelist Billy Graham.

And he asked this question, Dear Dr. Graham, I would believe in God if I could hear him speak to me or something, but it's never happened.

If God is real, why doesn't he just do something to let us know he actually exists instead of staying hidden all the time? Is faith just a matter of guesswork?

Now, I would imagine that some of you here this morning have asked similar questions in the past. Or maybe today you're asking those questions.

Why doesn't God speak to me? Why doesn't he do something to let me know that he exists? And I assume that you're here this morning, all of you, because you have some desire to know God.

[1 : 24] But you're wondering how. How does God speak to us? And the reason why that question is in your hearts may be for various different reasons.

One, it may be a question that rises from genuine confusion. You hear the many voices in our culture, in our world, saying this is true and that is true and this is from God and that is from God. And you wonder, which of these is right? I don't understand. These all can't be right, it seems. How do I know? Some of you may be asking questions from a very different place.

From a place of pain. The suffering, the hardships that you've experienced in your lives have brought you to a place where you think, where's God in all of this?

Why does he seem so silent? Now, for some of you, these questions may arise more from what I'm calling a place of distance.

[2 : 24] Oh, you've grown up in church. You know these things. You could recite all the Sunday school lessons that you would want. And yet, over time, God has seemed less and less involved in your everyday life.

Less and less relevant to the things that you're investing in every day. And now, he just seems far off. And maybe, you're at a place of crisis.

Maybe you've just moved here. Or maybe you've been here for a long time. And in the storyline of your life, you've found yourself realizing that to actually believe in God, and specifically to believe in Jesus, is an incredibly costly thing in your life.

And you're wondering whether it's worth it. You're wondering whether it's worth what it will cost to keep following Jesus. You're wondering what you will lose in your reputation with your peers, your relationships with your family, your hopes and dreams for your life.

It's TK's question, isn't it, in different forms. If God is real, why doesn't he do something to let us know that he's really there?

[3 : 44] And that brings us to the book of Hebrews and to our text this morning. We're going to begin a series that's going to begin this fall, and it will actually stretch through probably the whole school year, maybe the whole calendar year.

We're going to be studying this grand book of Hebrews. And if you want to pull out in your pew Bible, it's page 1001, so that'll be easy to remember.

Page 1001, the book of Hebrews. And as you pull it out and find it, let me just give you a brief introduction to this book. And it will be very brief because of all the books in the New Testament, this is the one we know perhaps the least about.

We don't know who wrote it. Despite all the ink that's been spilled in the commentaries, we really don't know who wrote it. And there's a lot of speculation.

And because we don't know who wrote it, we're not sure where it was written from or when it was written exactly or exactly who it was written to.

[4 : 47] Although that last question we can learn a little bit more about because as we look at the book, we can see through the exhortations of the writer some of the life situations.

This book was written to Christians. And it was written to Christians who knew the Old Testament really well. They were aware of Melchizedek and the priestly sacrifices and the temple and the Aaronic priesthood, which means they may know more than we do today.

You may be saying, I don't know anything about those things. That's okay. We'll work our way into these things. But the congregation that this letter was written to knew about those things.

And they were in a situation where it seems some of their fellow believers were turning away. Rather than persevering in their faith in Christ, they were turning away.

Perhaps turning back to Judaism. Perhaps doing so because to be under the Jewish umbrella in the Roman Empire protected you from Roman persecution.

[5 : 55] That is to say, they faced a crisis where continuing to follow Christ would be incredibly costly.

It might cost them their job, their standing. It might even cost them their very lives. And in this light, the writer of the Hebrews writes to this congregation.

And he has one thing to say. Don't turn back. Don't give up. Don't turn away from believing in Christ.

Because Christ is everything. And that leads us to his introduction. It's not a normal letter introduction, is it?

It's an introduction to a book that doesn't give all those niceties that tell us more about the audience or the writer. He just starts with this grand opening statement.

[7 : 01] This grand opening statement that will comfort the Hebrews. And I think it will also answer TK's question. And maybe our question as well.

So we're going to look this morning at Hebrews chapter 1, verses 1 through 4. So you can look there with me as we read it together. Hebrews 1, 1 through 4.

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 exact radiance of the glory of God. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. 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.

[8 : 12] Please pray with me. Amen. Amen. Lord, we come this morning with great humility before you.

We long to know you. We long to hear from you. God, we want it to be real, not something that we've conjured up or manufactured.

Lord, I pray this morning that you would speak to us by your word, through your spirit. Lord, help us to see all that you would have us to see about how great Christ is.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So the main idea of these four verses, it's really fun when you break it down.

There's actually one central verb in this whole thing in the original language. It's in the second half, or it's in the beginning of verse two.

[9 : 16] The main idea is this. God has spoken. And he has spoken his final and best word in Jesus.

God has spoken to us. And he has given us his final and best word in Jesus. Let's look at these two things, his final and his best word.

First of all, God's final word. Look with me at verses one and two. When you look at these two verses, you see there's an incredible contrast. On one hand, it says God spoke in the past long ago.

And he spoke at various times and in various ways or many times in many ways. He spoke in a fragmentary nature. And he spoke to our fathers, that is those who have gone before us.

And he spoke by the prophets. He says that's what God had done in the past. And then he contrasts all of those things. And he says, but now.

[10 : 24] But, verse two. But in these last days. These days which are the fulfillment of all that's come before. These days in which we expect to see God's final work happen.

In these last days, God has spoken to us. In a single, solitary way. Not a fragmented one.

But a single way. He has spoken to us by his son. Friends, this is amazing. God has let us know who he is. And he has done it in Jesus. Three things that this means for us. First is that God is not only knowable. But he is actively seeking to make himself known in the world. This is the great doctrine of revelation.

[11 : 23] That God is a revelatory God. It is, as one of my seminary professors called it. God's gracious self-disclosure. God doesn't have to make himself known to us.

And yet, he created his world to know him. And so, he is graciously revealing himself. Letting us know his nature and his character. So that we can know him.

Secondly, that this gracious self-revelation has happened in history. It is not just a philosophy that dropped out of the sky. It is not just something that a man had a dream and imagined.

But that this revelation has happened over time. He spoke to the prophets in many times in many ways. He spoke by words. He spoke by deeds. He spoke by delivering his people from Egypt. He spoke on Mount Sinai in the giving of the law. He spoke as he brought his people into the promised land and conquered their enemies. He spoke by raising up David to be their king.

[12 : 31] And he spoke through all of the different and various writings that we have in the Old Testament. And all of that was leading up. Leading up to something greater.

It had a direction and a hope. And the final self-disclosure of God is not vague.

The progress of revelation reaches its pinnacle in Jesus Christ. All the patterns and the types. All the hints and whispers of a Savior.

All the references to kings and priests and prophets. All the themes of being God's people and God's places under God's blessing. All of these great themes find their fullest expression in Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews wants us to know that. And he's echoing what we read in other places in the New Testament. In fact, it's exactly what Jesus himself said.

[13 : 41] Do you remember in Luke 24, 27? After he had risen from the dead, he comes alongside some of his disciples who are mourning because they think he's gone forever. They said, we had hoped that this would be the one.

But he's gone. And after talking with them for a while, he says, oh foolish and slow to believe. Don't you remember that the Son of Man had to die and rise again?

And then he said this, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. He interpreted them to them in all the scriptures, the things concerning himself. Jesus said, all that Old Testament that you know.

All the hopes that you have, they're found ultimately in me. And of course, this is what John says at the beginning of his gospel. When he talks about the Word who was God and was with God.

And the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[14 : 44] It says, no one has ever seen God, the only God. But the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. So God wants us to know him.

And God is active in letting us know this. And you know, one of the things that's really helpful about this is that it answers a question that all of us have wrestled with, I'm sure, at one point or another in our life.

The question of religious epistemology. Now, I'm not sure you would have used those terms. But the question of how do we know anything about spiritual things? And in our world, we have all sorts of answers.

You listen to late night television gurus. You listen to your own experience. You listen to various written things. You spend your life spending your rational energy seeking to understand what God must be like, what God could be like, what God should be like.

But what the writer of the Hebrews wants us to see is that the ultimate foundation for us to know God doesn't rely on us and our efforts to try to figure it out, our efforts to try to somehow grasp our way to God.

[16 : 08] Because God is there and he has revealed himself to us. What a glorious thing it is that he is revealing himself to us.

It means that even our imperfect knowledge of him, when based on his self-revelation, is worth more than anything else that we could come up with on our own.

The writer of Hebrews answers the question, how do we know God? Look to Jesus. What has God said to us? Look to Jesus. Why hasn't God showed himself to me?

Look to Jesus. When we're in a time of pain or a time of distance, we often think, why doesn't God speak to me? Why is he so silent?

The reality is that he has spoken, not in a subjective and ephemeral manner, but God has spoken in an objective manner. We can always look back to Jesus and know that God is there.

[17:18] This is good news for us too because it keeps us, for those of you who are here, particularly in the university, what you find in an academic exploration of Jesus is lots of people who will often ask a question, what must Jesus be like or what should Jesus be like?

Friends, let me just blow up that imagination. There is only one Jesus that we know anything about, and it's the one that we know in the Bible. If we think that Jesus should or ought to be something else, then we need to come clean and admit that we're just making a Jesus that we think is right.

And so, when we want to know Jesus, it's the Jesus that we have in the Bible that we're to look at. I was a little nugget that takes a lot more explanation that I can't explore fully.

But I do want to say it. This is the good news. God has spoken to us, and He's spoken to us in Jesus, and the Jesus that we know is here in the Bible.

And so, shameless plug, my invitation is for you to come back week after week after week because the whole rest of the book of Hebrews is about the glory of this Jesus.

[18:44] And what an incredible thing God has done for us in Him. And my second shameless plug is if you come back in the evening, we're looking at the Gospel of Mark, and you know what we're going to study there?

Who Jesus is. So come back in the evening, too. The only way we know God is the Jesus who was and is.

And the writer of Hebrews goes on, and he, thankfully, he is not vague about who this Jesus is. But he is, in fact, incredibly particular.

He gives glorious and lofty particulars about who this Jesus is. This Jesus is not just the final word, but he is the best word that God has spoken.

He is the best word because he is the full expression of God to us. As we keep looking through this passage, three things that I want you to see about how Jesus is God's best word to us.

[19:52] First of all, he is God's best word because he is the focal point of all creation. Did you see it in verse 2? Jesus is the one through whom he created the whole world.

And verse 3, he is the one who upholds the universe by the power of his hand. And, going back to verse 2, he is the heir of all things.

The beginning, the middle, and the end of all of creation is about Jesus. From him, by him, for him. Nothing was made apart from him. There is nothing in this world that is outside of his creative power. And nothing holds together apart from him.

Friends, think about what that means. The very gravitational force that holds matter together, that means that this church building doesn't just explode, is Jesus' power holding it together.

[20:57] The very fabric of our society, so that it doesn't descend into complete chaos and mayhem, is because of Jesus holding things together.

The very ability that you have to relate to your family, to your friends, and to your peers, is because Jesus is sustaining this world, and he is sustaining you in your life.

All things that are continuing on in this world are sustained by Jesus. Everything in your life is meant to fit in the frame of from, by, and for Jesus Christ.

Your family, your work, your success, your entertainment, your health, your pleasure, your money. Everything is meant to be framed by this transcendent creator, sustainer, air, Christ.

Some of you have just moved here to start a new season of life. Why are you here? Friends, whatever else it is, Jesus wants you to know that he has brought you here.

[22:25] He will sustain you here. And he intends for you to invest your life in a way that will produce something that he will inherit. However you think about your work, your career aspirations, your relationships, think about that.

For some of you, you've lived here for a long time in the New Haven region. You've invested here in your life by choice or by not choice, but you're here. Friends, the same thing is true.

Jesus, who created and sustains and inherits the whole world, has brought you here for this season. And the chaos of your life right now is not overwhelming to him.

The insurmountable issues that you are facing, the unresolvable problems that you feel, might bury you. None of these are greater than the one who created, the one who is sustaining, the one who

will inherit the whole world.

Jesus is God's best for us because he is the focal point of all creation, and therefore everything is for him. Secondly, God's best word is, Jesus is God's best word for us because he is the fullness of God's revelation.

[23 : 49] Look with me at verse 3. These incredibly rich words. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

The radiance of the glory. What does that mean? The closest analogy is like the sun. The sun who sends out beams of light, not of a different nature, but the same energy that is the sun is being then sent out so that all other things can be seen by it.

Jesus is this radiance of the person of God. And he is the exact imprint of his nature.

Now, the imprint of his nature, the phrase there is used to describe the making of coins in the first century. You take a blob of metal, and you take a print, and you stamp it.

And that stamp gives it an imprint. And what he's saying here is, Jesus is the exact imprint of the nature, the character, the very essence of God himself.

[25 : 01] He's not just a reflection. He's not just a mode. He's not just a spiritual form. But there is a physical embodiment.

As the writer of Colossians says, the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form in Jesus Christ. So that if we want to know what God who we cannot see is like, Hebrews says, we can look at Jesus.

Jesus is what the Father is like. Jesus is what his nature is like.

And it means we don't have to look anywhere else. The exact imprint of his nature means that we don't have to look for something beyond Jesus, something more than Jesus, something older or younger or newer than Jesus to tell us about who God is.

But God in Jesus has shown us everything that we need to know. And so he is the authority about ultimate things. Jesus is the one who shows us.

[26 : 16] So friends, look at Jesus to see what God is like. Look at his compassion for the outcasts, the lepers, the widows, the despised tax collectors.

See his love for his friends and for his enemies. Watch him react in righteous anger to pain and suffering and death in his world. Watch him command with a word of power the forces of nature around him.

See Jesus in his patience and his kindness towards his disciples when they repeatedly misunderstood him and his teaching and acted in foolish ways. And he's like, watch him exert his authority over spiritual powers that stood up against him.

Consider him as he overcomes the curse of sin and death by rising from the dead. This is Jesus. This is God in his human form.

And when we want to know what God is like, that is where we look. Finally, Jesus is God's best word because he is the finisher of redemption so that we can draw near to God.

[27 : 36] Look with me in verse 3, the second half. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. Now we've already said that his audience understood the Old Testament pretty well.

And when they heard the words purification for sin, it would have downloaded into their brains all of these images of the Old Testament, particularly the temple.

The temple that was built with varying levels of holiness leading into in the very innermost sanctum of the temple was the Holy of Holies where the glory of God dwelt and manifested in a physical form in that location.

But in order to get there, there were sacrifices that had to be made because the sin and the rebellion of the world, the ways in which humanity had refused God, refused to believe him, refused to honor him, refused to worship him, that sin was such a great offense against their creator that there had to be a consequence.

And the consequence of that sin was death. And so sacrifices had to be made and blood had to be spilled for one to approach the Holy of Holies. And so you see in this whole Old Testament picture that we'll explore for weeks when we get to chapters 8, 9, and 10, purification for sins, the sin that we bear into the outer courtyard of the temple is covered by blood so that ultimately at least one, the high priest, might enter in to the Holy of Holies once a year.

[29 : 25] The writer of Hebrews will say to us, only when our sin is covered by the blood of a sufficient sacrifice can we draw near to God.

And here it says, Jesus has done this. After he made purification for sins, the verb tense is completed action, not ongoing, not partial, but completed action.

After having made purification for sins, he sat down. He sat down because he had no more work to do in doing what had to be done so that people like you and me could draw near to God.

Later on in the book of Hebrews, the writer will refer to the priesthood in the temple. It says Aaron stood in the temple every day and the Aaronic priesthood had to offer, had to offer sacrifices every day.

Because they weren't done. Because the sacrifices they were offering weren't complete and weren't sufficient. But Jesus went in once, said when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down.

[30 : 51] Because the work was done. And friends, what good news this is for us. What an incredible thing it is.

Because maybe you, like me, wrestle with the question, what do I have to do to know God? How do I make myself good enough? I don't feel good enough to approach God.

How can I do that? How can I go to God with the mess of my life? And the writer of Hebrews says, it's finished.

Jesus has done everything. What you are called on is to trust in that work. To believe in this Jesus, who having made purification for sin, sat down.

There is no more sin left to be purified because his sacrifice was sufficient for all who believe in him.

[31 : 57] Friends, do you see? It's in the particularities of this Jesus. Jesus who is the from and by and for of creation. Jesus who is the exact representation of God.

Jesus who has made a way so that we can draw near to God and know him. It's in these particularities that we find Jesus to be a sweet and precious Savior.

This is his word to the Hebrews. Don't let go of this Jesus because there's nothing else like him. We will see over and over again as you see in verse 4.

He's better than the angels. This will begin an argument where Jesus is better than all sorts of things. Jesus is greater than all these things. And he's saying, that's why there's nowhere to turn. Even though following Christ may be incredibly costly, he says, don't give up because you will only be turning away from the one who truly is the representation of God, who truly is God's best and final word to us.

[33 : 21] So if you, too, are in a place of crisis, if you're wondering, is it worth it? Is it worth it to keep following Christ? The writer of Hebrews says, yes.

He has done the ultimate thing. He has made access to God possible. Don't turn away. Don't give up.

If you are at a place of distance where your questions about where is God spring from this sense that your everyday life has become disconnected, see that he is the one who created and sustains and for whom everything is.

and therefore, all the details of your everyday life are created for him and by him and sustained by him.

And so begin to ask him to show you that. Begin to see how caring for children, the long hours in the lab, and the time spent commuting to work, the time at your desk at school, whatever it is, that all of this is meant to be within a context of Jesus' sovereign reign in your life.

[34 : 47] If your question about God comes from a place of pain, let me assure you, God is not silent. God has spoken. God has spoken in his son.

He is not far off. He is near. And not only has he spoken in revealing his son, but that son came to walk on this earth.

He came to bear the trial of living in this fallen world. And so he knows your pain because he's experienced it.

He knows your suffering because he suffered too. Jesus says, I understand and I know.

He bore the greatest pain and the greatest suffering that the world will ever know on the cross when he died for our sins. And so he's able to comfort us in our pain.

[35 : 59] He is not far off. He is with you. And finally, if your questions about where is God and why haven't I heard from him come from genuine, confusion?

Where can we find hope and meaning in life? Where can we find a true word? Let me close by reading Billy Graham's response to TK.

No true faith is guesswork, nor is it merely wishful thinking or a vague hope which has nothing to support it. Faith in God is based on solid evidence because God has already spoken to us. What do I mean? Let me use an illustration. One day, many years ago, I was walking with one of my sons near our house and we accidentally kicked an anthill. We could see them scurrying around, no doubt alarmed at what had happened to them.

My son was very concerned because we had disturbed them and expressed the wish we could somehow tell them that we were sorry. How could we possibly do that? I asked him since the gap between us is so great.

[37 : 11] After a few moments, he replied that he supposed the only way would be for us to become ants. And he was right.

And I went on to remind him that this is exactly what God has done for us. How could he ever tell us that he loved us and wanted to be our friend? The only way was for him to become a human being like us.

And that is exactly what God did in Jesus Christ. As the Bible says in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son. Yes, you can know God.

For God has spoken to us so that we can know him. Don't go through life apart from God, but open your heart and life to Christ today. Jesus is God's best and final word for us.

Let's pray. Oh God, we thank you that we are not left to grasp.

[38 : 18] We are not left to grope in darkness hoping that we might somehow find you. Lord, as your word says, in you we live and move and have our being.

You are not far from us. And in fact, you have revealed yourself to us. You have made yourself known and you have made yourself known in the glorious and wonderful and exalted person of Christ.

God, I pray that today that would give us great hope that we can know you and that you have spoken. Lord, and that as we leave from this place and go into our world, as we leave from this place and go into the everyday things that we do, that our hearts would be filled with the greatness of Jesus, with confidence that because of Jesus we know you and you have spoken.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.