

Jesus: God's Decisive Word

Hebrews 1:1-4

This morning we begin a sermon series from the book of Hebrews. The first 11 chapters build to this crescendo in Hebrews 12:1-3 (NASB):

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The book of Hebrews depicts the Christian life as an endurance race. The Hebrew Christians (Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah) were getting weary and considering dropping out of the race. They had started the race well. They had been so committed to Christ that they'd been persecuted: they'd been publicly humiliated and they'd even "accepted joyfully the seizure of their property" (either by government action or mob violence - we aren't told). In the past they had suffered well for the cause of Christ.

But somewhere along the line things began to change. They were becoming spiritually lazy (5:14); they were resisting God's discipline/training (12:3-11); they were less willing to identify with Christ and suffer for their faith; there were those pesky sins that were slowing them down (3:13, 12:1). The author of Hebrews was concerned that they would eventually drift from their commitment to Christ and give up their faith in Christ altogether. He was concerned that they might drop out of the Christian race and to go back to their old way of life (Judaism with its sacrifices and rituals). And so the entire book of Hebrews is written to challenge them to run the race with endurance; the goal isn't merely to finish the race but to "finish strong!"

It seems to me that this challenge is just as relevant to us as it was to the original readers. We face the same temptations and the same spiritual dangers. For example:

- You may be able to think back to a time in your life when you were zealous/passionate about God. . . but now you'd have to admit that you're luke-warm at best. Lots of people my age think back to college as the "glory years" - the time when they were the most devoted to God. Everything seemed exciting and fresh, but now (for a variety of reasons) the Bible and God and ministry seem boring and stale.
- Maybe you can remember the exhilaration of going on a mission trip or or working at a summer camp or participating in some other type of outreach. Back then you sacrificed and took huge risks, but if you were honest you'd have to say that you've been playing it safe for a long time.
- Or maybe you've been a believer for a long time (many years) but you've become disillusioned about the Christian faith. Sometimes suffering and disappointment can make you question everything you've ever believed. You're not so sure that Jesus is

“the way, the truth, and the life.” You’re keeping the label “Christian” but you’re basically going through the motions.

- Or perhaps there is a specific sin that dominates your life. That sin has encumbered you to the point where you’re not running anymore; you’re sitting on a bench watching others run, but you’re in no condition to run yourself.

For a variety of different reasons, it is very common for Christians to grow weary and lose heart. The ultimate danger is that some of us here in this room and in this church might abandon our devotion to Christ altogether. It’s not a given that all of us who call ourselves believers in Jesus will finish strong (or finish at all).

The book of Hebrews seeks to stop us from drifting away from Jesus as early in the process as possible. The core habit/discipline that will accomplish this is “**fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith**” (Hebrews 12:2). If this sounds simplistic and naive (the idea that fixing your eyes on Jesus can affect the entire course of your life), understand that the author has spent eleven chapters arguing passionately that Jesus is superior to every other option available to you. My prayer for all of us is that as we teach through the book of Hebrews we will come to the place that we **love** to fix our eyes on Jesus - to the place where it’s not a chore or an obligation but our heart’s desire. The byproduct will be that we run the race with endurance.

Gordon McDonald likes to tell audiences that if you’re under 40 years old, “most of what you’re doing now is simply running the first laps of the race” (*A Resilient Life*, p. 4). Even though you never know how long you’ll live, most of the significant contributions God has for us to make will happen in the second half of our lives. And so it’s important that we think deeply and clearly about running with endurance.

I’d like to invite you to wade out into Hebrews with me and “hear” what the author is saying. Hebrews is a very intense, theologically dense letter. Our desire is that the book of Hebrews would have the same effect in our lives that the author intended in the lives of its original recipients.

This morning we begin fixing our eyes on Jesus by considering the first four verses of chapter 1. These verses set the tone for the entire book of Hebrews. Here the author gives a very eloquent description of Jesus Christ. His point will be that since these things are true of Jesus, we should pay very close attention to Him and to the salvation He brings. Let’s read the passage and then we’ll go back and notice some details.

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. 3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

The author makes two bold statements that have profound implications for everyone who is tempted to drift away from devotion to Jesus.

First, ***God has spoken to us decisively and fully in His Son.*** (1:1-2a) Listen again to verses 1 and 2a:

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son . . .

The core idea here is that God is a God who is intent upon communicating to humanity. God isn't sitting up in heaven expecting us to figure out things that are beyond our scrutiny. In verse 1 the author reviews how God had spoken "long ago" (our old testament). He says three things about God's communication to them.

First, God spoke "to the fathers." "The fathers" was a designation for everyone who lived under the old covenant (not merely the patriarchs - see Romans 9:5, 11:28, and 15:8). The fact that God had spoken to people in the past meant that there were positive and negative examples of how to respond to God's Word. In chapters 3 and 4 the children of Israel will be held up as an example to avoid: the word they heard wasn't united by faith and they died in the wilderness. In chapter 11 people like Abraham, Moses, and Rahab are singled out as examples to emulate; they responded to God's Word in faith. God had spoken "to the fathers."

Second, God spoke "in the prophets." We should probably take this term in the broadest possible sense to indicate everyone through whom God spoke beginning with the patriarchs down through the end of the Old Testament: Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Malachi. God spoke through many different people to communicate to people in almost every conceivable situation.

Third, God spoke "in many portions and in many ways." "In many portions" denotes that God spoke in piecemeal fashion; He didn't give one comprehensive message all at one time. Sometimes biblical scholars call this progressive revelation: what God spoke to one generation built upon what He had spoken to previous generations. God also spoke "in many ways" (a wide variety of different ways). Most commonly God spoke through the voice or writing of a prophet. But God also "spoke" in more creative ways: in Daniel 5 we read that a hand appeared and wrote on a wall His judgment on the Babylonian kingdom; in Hosea spoke to the people of Israel by having Hosea marry a prostitute (a living parable of their spiritual adultery).

The author mentions how God had spoken to past generations in order to draw a contrast with the way God had spoken in their day:

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son . . .

The wording of verse 2 signals that God has spoken decisively and fully in His Son. The old testament used the term "the last days" to denote that period of time when prophecies are fulfilled and when God establishes His reign on the earth (see Hosea 3:5, Isaiah 2:2, Daniel 10:14). The New Testament boldly claims that the coming of

Jesus the Messiah marked the beginning of the “last days” - days of fulfillment. And so the author of Hebrew writes that “in **these** last day” God “has spoken **to us** in His Son.” One of the core convictions that the author tries to instill throughout Hebrews is that when God speaks He isn’t merely flinging spiritual truth out into the universe to no one in particular. He is actually speaking **to us** - to everyone who is listening. He will say in no uncertain terms that if **God** is actually speaking to us **we had better listen**.

This is especially true since God has spoken to us “in His Son.” Literally it says “through a Son.” This doesn’t imply that God has many “Sons”; rather it emphasizes His exalted status as a “Son.” It could be translated, “through one who is a son.” In light of what we read in verse 1 about God speaking long ago in many portions and in many ways, speaking to us in these last days through His Son should be seen as the fullest and most decisive way He could have spoken to us.

Think about someone you greatly respect, someone you feel like you could learn from. It could be someone you know or it could be an historical figure you’d like to know. One person that comes to mind for me is Eugene Peterson; I’ve never met him, but I’ve learned a great deal about pastoral ministry and about Scripture from his writings. In a sense, Eugene talks to me through his writings. But it would be even more significant if Eugene sent me a personal, hand-written letter. He could also email me or text me or call me or Skype me. But the ultimate communication would be if he showed up at my house, knocked on the front door, and came in for conversation and a meal. Believe me: if he showed up in person, I would savor every moment.

That’s what God has done by speaking to us **in the One who is a Son**. In Jesus God showed up, taking on flesh and blood, and dwelt among us. He stands at the door and knocks. He enters in and has table fellowship with everyone and every church who opens the door. Since God has spoken to us so extravagantly through His Son, it only make sense that we would listen to Him.

God’s Son is incomparably qualified for this role. (1:2b-4) These verses give a seven-fold description of the Son; this description reminds us why Jesus is the decisive revelation and why we should love to fix our eyes on Jesus (He’s **really** worthy of our attention).

... whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. 3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

As we go through this description, perhaps the Holy Spirit would highlight for you one or two truths about Jesus that might captivate you. It may be that you have known the concept of “fixing your eyes on Jesus” for a long time, but it’s been weeks or months or years since you’ve actually fixed your eyes on Jesus. Here’s a chance to take your eyes off of yourself (and everything else really) and fix them on Jesus.

The Son is the appointed heir of all things. The author says of the Son in verse 2, “. . .whom He appointed heir of all things.” This is an allusion to Psalm 2 (which will also be quoted in verse 5). In Psalm 2:8 we read the Father telling His Son:

8 ‘Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.’

Here in Hebrews 1, God reiterates and magnifies this promise by saying that He would inherit not only the nations but also the whole universe (“all things”). This inheritance will be fully realized at the very end of the age (see Heb. 1:13, 2:8-9).

God made the entire universe through the Son. Literally this phrase reads, “through whom also He [God] made the **ages**.” The term referred to both “time and space” and therefore refers to “the entire created universe,” both the material and the immaterial realms. We read similar affirmations in John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16. When God created the universe, He created through the agency of the Son. Since everything was created by the Son in the beginning, it’s only appropriate that He would also inherit and reign over the universe after His crucifixion and exaltation.

The Son is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature. These two phrases emphasize the Son’s relationship to the Father. First, the Son is the “radiance of His glory.” Throughout the Old Testament God is depicted as One so radiantly glorious that a person couldn’t survive the experience of seeing Him in all His glory (e.g., Exodus 33:20, Isaiah 6:5; in the NT - 1 Timothy 6:16). But God’s glory became accessible to humanity when the Son became one of us. John wrote (in John 1) that when Jesus took on flesh and blood and dwelt among us, “we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Jesus shows off just how glorious God is.

Similarly, the author says that the Son is “the exact representation of [God’s] nature.” If you want to know what God is like, look at His Son. The Son accurately and compellingly represented His Father. Jesus made this claim when He told His disciples, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:8). These two affirmations taken together tell us that because of His identity as God’s Son, Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His nature. This is one more reason to pay attention to what God has spoken through His Son.

The Son upholds all things by the word of His power. Jesus is not only the Creator; He is also the Sustainer of the universe. Whereas deists (and others) would say that God created the universe and then steps back to let it run on its own (or not), the Bible teaches that the Creator remains involved in creation and directs it towards its appointed ends. Specifically the Son does this “by the word of His power” or “by His powerful word.” Throughout Hebrews, the word of God and the word of the Son is powerful and active and effective. It’s an obvious thing to pay attention to Someone whose word is that powerful!

The Son made purification of sins. Hebrews 9 will explain this concept in greater detail. But the core idea is that sin defiles us and renders us unclean. Therefore we need to be purified or cleansed from our sin. Hebrews will argue that the blood of animals cannot permanently cleanse humans from sin; only a sinless human can serve as a sacrifice that will cleanse humans from sin. The Son Himself was that sacrifice that accomplished this purification of our sins. This purification allows us to enter into the very presence of God in worship and prayer (4:14-16, 10:1-10, etc.).

The Son is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Hebrews will develop this truth quite fully in later chapters. The fact that the Son is “seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high” means that His work is completed and that He is enthroned in the place of honor (see Hebrews 10:11-14). The One who gave Himself as the sacrifice for our sins is now exalted to the place of honor; there He will remain until His enemies are made “a footstool under [His] feet” (Psalm 110, Heb. 1:13). Jesus’ exaltation is yet another reason why He is uniquely qualified to speak to us.

The Son is superior to the angels. Finally, the author says of the Son:

4 having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

The term translated “better” is found 13x in the book of Hebrews. The author systematically shows how Jesus is better/superior to every aspect of the old covenant: He is superior to Moses, superior to the priests, superior to the temple sacrifices, superior to the old covenant itself, etc. He begins by showing how the Son is “much better than the angels.” This may seem obscure to us, but to Jews in the first century angels were exalted because they mediated the old covenant; the Law was delivered through angels (see 2:2). Our author claims that the Son is superior because He has inherited a more excellent name than they: namely, the Son of God.

Read the rest of the chapter when you can. He quotes six passages from the Old Testament to show how the Son has been exalted over angels. His point is that the Son therefore mediates a better covenant than the angels did. Therefore, as we’ll see next week, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard from the Son “so that we do not drift away from it.” As I mentioned at the beginning, the author is challenging them to run with endurance - to not grow weary and lose heart. Our stability and our stamina in the race comes from fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus at the Lord’s Table. One of the gifts Jesus has given the church is the practice that we call “the Lord’s Table” or communion. Jesus said that when we eat the bread (which symbolizes His body) and drink the cup (which symbolizes His blood), we should remember Him. At the Lord’s Table we fix our eyes on Jesus and remember who He is, what He has done for us, what He is doing for us, and what He will do for us. The first four verses of Hebrews 1 tell us many things about Jesus that are worthy of our attention. I invite you to fix your eyes on Jesus as we celebrate the Lord’s Table. Please hold the bread and then the cup until everyone has been served, then we’ll eat and drink together as an expression of our unity.