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God's greatest word

by Scott Grant

Hebrews 1:1-4

Longing for clarity

Most of us at times think that it would be nice if God would speak to us directly. Then, we think, we could be absolutely clear about what he wants of us. Alas, God doesn't seem to relate to most of us on that basis, at least not very often. His efforts to communicate don't seem all that effective, and we long for more clarity.

The writer of Hebrews, on the other hand, seems quite satisfied with God's efforts to communicate. In fact, he seems to say that God has already said all that he really needs to say. And God really doesn't need to say anymore because of the greatness of what he has already said. God has spoken, and his message concerns his Son. God's final, greatest word to us is personified in his Son, Jesus Christ.

This is what the writer of Hebrews tells us in the first four verses of the book. So if we're longing for something more direct from God, something absolutely clear, let's listen to these verses, and see if we can hear God's direct, clear message to us - his final, greatest word.

Hebrews 1:1-4:

(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.

God's final word (1:1-2a)

The structure of these verses revolves around the verb "to speak." God has spoken. Why do we speak? We speak because we want to be heard. We want our thoughts to be understood by another. Why do we want our thoughts understood? We want connection. We want to relate. It's no different with God, who created us in his image, somewhat like him. Why does God speak? He wants connection; he wants to relate - he wants to connect and relate with us. In the first two verses, it is recorded that God has spoken to people, to "the fathers" and to "us." God has not spoken to himself, he has not spoken into the air; he has spoken to people, because he wants to relate with people.

The writer, for his purposes, says that God essentially has spoken twice, earlier and later, and he distinguishes between those two efforts to communicate. They can be distinguished in the following manner:

	Earlier	Later
Recipients	Fathers Us	
Timing	Long ago	Last days
Messenger	Prophets	Son
Measure	Many portions	Entirely

Manner	Many ways	One way
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God's earlier speaking was directed to the fathers, who would be previous generations of Hebrews (Hebrews 3:9, 8:9). His later speaking was directed to "us," who are the writer and his readers. The writer uses the pronoun "us" again in Hebrews 2:4 in reference to himself and others who heard the gospel from the original apostles, "those who heard" directly from Jesus. So he, the writer, was not among those who walked with Jesus when he walked on the earth. We think our lives would be different if only we, like the disciples, could see, touch and hear Jesus in physical form. But the writer wasn't among those, and he doesn't seem to feel cheated. In fact, he seems to think God has spoken to him and his contemporaries rather clearly. The same is true for us: God has spoken to us clearly.

God spoke to the fathers "long ago," but he spoke to the writer and his contemporaries in "these last days." What are the last days? The last days, in fact, were predicted by the prophets as the age in which their prophecies would be fulfilled (Isaiah 2:2, Jeremiah 23:20). The last days began with the advent of Christ, the fulfillment of those prophecies, who appeared at the "consummation" (Hebrews 9:26). The words "these last days" convey the concept that the message is a current one. Because we are still in the last days, God must think his later message is still current. His later message is relevant to us, to our times, to our culture, to our lives.

The earlier message came through the prophets, a number of people such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. His later message, though, came through one man, his Son, one who is certainly more intimate with him than the prophets. It's not that the prophets didn't receive God's thoughts accurately; they did. But if God is speaking through his Son, the one who is most intimate with him, he is speaking his most important words. So this message that comes to us is God's most important one. It is a message that calls for our attentiveness.

God's later message, then, as it comes to us today, is clear, relevant and important.

God's earlier message was spoken "in many portions," meaning incrementally, and in "many ways," meaning in different kinds of communication - different kinds of speech, writing and illustrations. Here the differences between the earlier message and the later message aren't so clear. There are clear grammatical parallels between other attributes of the two messages, but there is seemingly no link for the "many portions and many ways" of the earlier message. This would have to be an intentional omission on the part of the writer, inasmuch as he was so careful to make the other links. His silence, though, speaks volumes.

The earlier message required a multitude of prophets. It required them to speak in bits and pieces and in many different ways. In other words, their message was incomplete.

That pretty much defines the message of the Old Testament, doesn't it? It's incomplete. It's a story without a conclusion. It leaves us wanting for more.

When I was a boy, our family car was a Chrysler. My brothers and I would pile into it for our summer vacations. Doing so would always build a sense of anticipation. Invariably, whenever the Chrysler had to gain altitude, it broke down. It never seemed to get us there. We called this phenomenon "The Chrysler Curse." It built anticipation for a wonderful vacation, but it never got us there.

The Chrysler always left us wanting, just like the Old Testament, delivered through the prophets, leaves us wanting for God's later message, his final word.

The later message didn't require such a multitudinous effort. It didn't come incrementally; it came entirely. It didn't come in a variety of ways; it came in one way. And it "came" (past tense). It is a current message, but it

has already come, implying finality.

What is this final word that is clear, relevant and important? What is it that completes the story of the Old Testament? What about it is so great that God doesn't need to say anything else?

What does the writer say? He doesn't tell us directly, but again, his silence speaks volumes. For instead of proceeding to describe the message, he proceeds to describe the messenger. In fact, that's what he does throughout the entire book: He describes Jesus Christ. He doesn't tell us about the message of Jesus; he tells us about Jesus. He shows us the Son. That's because the Son is the message. God's final word to us is his Son, whom the Apostle John calls "the Word" (John 1:1, 1 John 1:1). He is the one of whom the prophets spoke (Mark 1:2). God is saying: "Here is my Son. Follow him."

Some of us may say, "That's it? That's all? This is God's final word to me? What about all the questions I have? What about all the decisions I have to make? What about the difficulties I face? God, what do you have to say?"

A few weeks ago I watched a much-decorated movie that won the Oscar for best picture many years ago. Somehow, I had never seen it, though I had always heard people talk of it. When I finally watched it, I was disappointed. I said, "That's it? That's all?"

We're left with the uneasy sense that God's message of "Jesus" just isn't enough. But perhaps we're not hearing the message clearly. Perhaps we're disappointed in the finality of the message because we don't appreciate the greatness of the message. The writer helps us out. He describes the greatness of God's final word. He shows us that God spoke a mouthful!

God's greatest word (1:2b-4)

Who is this messenger who himself embodies the message? He is described as fulfilling Israel's three covenant offices: prophet, priest and king. He is a prophet, speaking for God (1:2). He is a priest, having made purification for sins (1:3). He is a king, being God's Son (1:2). In order to illustrate the kingship of Jesus, the writer later quotes Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14, which both refer to a king as a son of God (1:5). So the concept of sonship emphasizes the concept of kingship for the writer.

The structure of the first four verses emphasizes the prophetic office of Christ. Most of the descriptions of Christ in these verses emphasize his kingship. Only one little line refers to his priestly work, yet the overall picture that the writer presents for us in the book of Hebrews is that of Jesus as priest. He's not giving his main theme short shrift in the introduction; he's showing that Jesus is an entirely different kind of priest - a priest who is also a prophet and a king. The fact that he is also a whole different kind of prophet and a whole different kind of king only further enhances his priesthood.

In verses 2 through 4, the Son is described in ways that emphasize his transcendent greatness. It's easy for us to read right past them and barely give them a thought. Appreciating his attributes, which leads us to an appreciation of him, takes time. It requires us to dwell on them, to apply the mental energy necessary to connect the attributes with Jesus, and to mediate on the fact that it is this Jesus, with these attributes, who deserves our worship.

God appointed the Son heir of all things. The idea here is that of a royal heir. A son inherited possessions from his father, and the son of a king inherited vast possessions. Psalm 2, which is prophetic and refers to Christ, and which is invoked by the writer in 1:5, speaks of God's giving to his king, ultimately Christ, the nations and the earth as an inheritance (Psalm 2:8). Not only that, the writer of Hebrews says, the Son inherits "all things," meaning all creation. All creation belongs to Jesus. Everyone we know, every place we visit, every thing we

see is under the dominion of Jesus, God's Son.

If this is the case, we can let go of those people, places and things that we hold onto so tightly. It means we can let go of all our misplaced obsessions. It's all returning to Jesus anyway. He inherits all things. Creation belongs to him, not us.

God made the world through the Son. The word translated "world" implies more than the world, actually, and extends to the universe. Jesus was involved in the creation of the universe; at the very least he was the agent of creation, the instrument that God used to create the world. Other biblical writers affirm this (John 1:3, 10; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16). Jesus not only inherits all things, he created all things.

So what does Christ's creative power mean to us? If Jesus has this kind of creative power, the ability to create everything we see, and things too small to see and too distant to see, what does that say about his creative power in your life? Can he create life out of death? Joy out of sorrow? Vision out of purposelessness? Healing out of festering wounds? Hope out of despair?

Excitement out of boredom? Order out of chaos? Fulness out of emptiness? He can do all these things and more! He has the power to create something out of nothing in your life!

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his nature, or his reality. These are parallel concepts that concern God's being and the revelation thereof. As the radiance of God's glory, Christ embodies what God is, in all his holy magnificence. And he does so exactly. All that God is Christ is - exactly. He is an exact expression of the holy, magnificent reality of God.

This answers some of our deepest questions, such as, "Does God exist?" and, "If he exists, what is he like?" Yes, God exists, because Jesus exists, and we know even from historical accounts apart from the scriptures that Jesus, at the very least, existed. What is God like? Well, he's like Jesus. We have four books in the New Testament that show us the living, breathing Jesus, the God who became man: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In those books, more than anywhere else, we find out what God is like. Our problems in life are essentially theological - believing wrong things about God, even though we may intellectually assent to the right doctrines. Jesus, if we would let him, addresses these problems, for he shows us God, to the extent of showing us what God is like as a man, making right belief accessible.

The Son upholds all things by the word of his power. Jesus not only inherits all things, he has not only created all things, but he sustains all things; the universe continues because of him. The very next moment of the universe is dependent on Jesus Christ. Apart from him, everything would collapse this instant. But he upholds all things. Such is the nature of his power that all it takes for him to do this is a word!

If all it takes from Jesus is a simple word to sustain the universe, what does that say about his ability to sustain you? Can he sustain you in your time of need? Can he sustain you in your weakness, in your loneliness, in your fears? If he speaks a word and the entire universe continues according to purpose and doesn't spin out of control, can he speak such a word into your life? Can he keep your life from spinning out of control and sustain you according to God's purpose? Indeed he can.

Antecedent to his sitting at the right hand of the Majesty, the Son made purification of sins. This aspect of the Son is not emphasized in the text but sets the stage for the rest of the book, which speaks of Christ's priesthood. The Son had to become a priest, he had to offer up the perfect atoning sacrifice, himself, in order to ascend to the right hand of the Father as both God and man.

The Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. "Right hand" speaks of power. God is depicted as acting in power with his right hand (Exodus 15:6). Being seated at the right hand is a position of power and

authority. He is seated next to "the Majesty," meaning God the Father. It means Jesus is seated on a throne "on high," reigning from heaven. The Son, after he accomplished the Father's work on earth, ascended to heaven, where he reigns over all creation.

This depiction of the Son on his throne calls for worship. When the Apostle John in a vision saw Jesus on his throne, he describes this scene: "And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.' And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, 'To him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.' And the four living creatures kept saying, 'Amen.' And the elders fell down and worshiped" (Revelation 5:11-14). Shall we do the same?

In returning to the Father to reign at his right hand, the Son became much better than the angels. It's not that he was ever not better than the angels, inasmuch as he inherited a more excellent name, which implies that he was always better. In what sense did he "become" better than the angels? The word for "angel" can equally be translated "messenger." Angels, among other things, are messengers. Jesus' name, Son, which implies kingship, is better than the angels' name, which implies message conveyance. But it is the Son who carries and embodies God's final, greatest message. Therefore Jesus, just as he is a better messenger than the prophets, became a better messenger than the angels, having become human, having offered himself up as an atoning sacrifice for sins and having returned to heaven as something he wasn't before - God and man. The angels' message, just like that of the prophets, also concerns Christ, as evidenced by all the angelic activity surrounding his birth (Luke 1:8-17, 26-38, 2:8-15).

So the Word Jesus comes to us as God's greatest word. Perhaps you've had the experience, like me, of trying to sum up a particular experience or feeling and been unable to find the words. Then the person you're talking with says one simple word, and you say, "That's it! That's the word!" So it is with God's greatest word to us, when we understand something of its greatness. Jesus - simply Jesus, in all his greatness - resonates with us. And we realize that God doesn't need to say anything more.

Therefore, when we look for messages, when we look for signs, when we look for circumstances through which God may be leading us, let us first and foremost allow ourselves to be led to Jesus. The message we want to look for first is the one that tells us about Jesus.

Michael Card has given us such a message, based on these verses in Hebrews. In his song "The Final Word" he sings this about the Son:

*You and me we use so very many clumsy words
The noise of what we often say
Is not worth being heard
When the Father's Wisdom
Wanted to communicate His love
He spoke it in one final perfect Word*

*He spoke the Incarnation
And then so was born the Son
His Final Word was Jesus
He needed no other one
Spoke flesh and blood so He could bleed
And make a way divine
And so was born the baby
Who would die to make it mine*

*And so the Father's fondest thought
Took on flesh and bone
He spoke the living luminous Word
At once His will was done
And so the transformation
That in man had been unheard
Took place in God the Father
As He spoke that final Word*

So, is the message good enough? Is the Son good enough? The writer answers with an emphatic yes. The greatness of God's Word confirms the finality of it. That's it? That's all? What more do we want?!

Our word

What is God's word to us? Simply this: "Jesus." What about all the questions we have? What about all the decisions we have to make? What about the difficulties we face? What does God have to say? Whatever he says, and however he says it, it leads us back to a simple, one-word answer: "Jesus."

God's final, greatest word to us is personified in his Son, Jesus Christ. So what is our word in response to his word to us? What is our response to his speaking Jesus to us? How about something along the lines of, "Yes, God; I'll follow your Son"?

Billy Graham is even more succinct. In a recent interview with David Frost that was broadcast on PBS, he said he hoped the last word he uttered before dying was simply this: "Jesus."
Can't do any better than that.

- SCG, 6-8-97

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