

Hebrews 1:1-4 // To Whom Are You Listening?

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1 to 4, which is on page 1201 in your Bibles in front of you. I'll give you a wee moment to find it, and then we'll read through that.

So, Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1. 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. Thanks, Joe, for reading. And let me add my welcome. I'm Jonathan Middleton, if we've not met before. And if you're new to St. Silas, or if you're just here visiting, we're absolutely delighted that you're here with us this evening.

[1 : 19] Do stay on afterwards if you're at all able. We'd love to get to know you just a little bit better. And we are starting a new series in Hebrews this evening.

It's a great book. And we're going to ask now for God's help as we come to it and study it together. So, let's bow our heads and pray. Speak, O Lord, we pray.

Speak into our lives. Speak into our hearts and minds. And would you help us by your spirit to respond to your word by giving the worship due to your son.

For it is in his precious name that we pray. Amen. Well, imagine this. You're in the cinema and the lights go dark and on the screen, big yellow letters scrolling into the distance.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Well, this summer, while I was on holiday, I was reading through Hebrews, admittedly, in a slightly different translation.

[2 : 24] And it hit me. It almost reads like the start of a movie. Long ago, 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. I have expected the Star Wars theme tune to start blasting out in the background because this is an epic beginning.

It's setting the stage for something really big. But here's the difference. Hebrews isn't fantasy. It isn't a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

It's reality. God has spoken. Not just once. Not just to one person. But across the centuries. Culminating in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, I get it. Hebrews can feel intimidating. There's a lot going on. It's full of Old Testament references, big ideas, and some, let's face it, some pretty scary warnings along the way.

[3 : 30] Now, of course, there's depth and there's complexity to it. But at its heart, Hebrews is actually really simple. It's all about Jesus.

It's not an overstatement to say that the entire book of Hebrews, right from the very first verse to the very last, it's all about the glory and the greatness of God's son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that means that if you're here tonight for Tri-Church, if you're here looking in on the Christian faith, Hebrews is a brilliant place for you to explore.

It shows you who Jesus really is and why he matters to you. And if you're here, on the other hand, and you are already a Christian, then Hebrews was written especially for you too.

It's a word of encouragement to help you to keep going and to keep growing in the faith so that you don't drift away. So if you just scan across the page to chapter 2, verse 1, we're told we must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we've heard.

[4 : 40] So that we do not drift away. That's the big purpose of the book of Hebrews in a nutshell. It keeps our eyes on Jesus to help us keep going with Jesus.

And what about these opening verses that Joe just read for us? Why does the author start in this way? Because the author knows, the writer knows, that before he can warn us and encourage us and challenge us, he needs to lift our eyes.

He needs to lift our eyes to Jesus. He wants us to see who Jesus is in all his glory so that we're not going to be tempted to drift away. Not tempted to look anywhere else other than Jesus.

And the way he does that is stunning. It's like he takes us to the foot of a mountain and step by step takes us up to the summit.

Leads us up to the top, showing us the greatness of the sun. So tonight we start at base camp where we see that Jesus is God's final word.

[5 : 54] Why would we search for truth elsewhere? And then we'll climb towards the peak where we see that Jesus is God's fullest glory.

Why would we settle for anything else? So firstly then, Jesus is God's final word. So don't look elsewhere. There is a God.

That there is a God is not in question. At least not so far as the author of Hebrews is concerned. But what kind of God? He is a God who speaks.

Look at verse 1. In the past, God spoke. And in verse 2, the God who spoke is still speaking. In fact, in these last days in which we are now living, he has spoken to us definitively in his son.

So there is continuity and there is discontinuity. There is continuity. God spoke. God is still speaking.

[6 : 59] And there is discontinuity. God now speaks through his son, the Lord Jesus. Now we will come on to this big contrast here in these first two verses. We will come on to them in just a second.

But first, I think it is worth us just reflecting for a moment on the fact that God is a God who speaks to us. Do you see what that means for us?

Because he has spoken. We don't have to guess what he is like. We don't have to go on some long journey of self-discovery or enlightenment, hoping that one day we might just stumble across the truth.

We don't need to find just the right lifestyle guru or self-help books to get us on the right track, the right podcast, whatever it is. The truth is that God himself has come down and revealed who he is in a way that we can understand.

He has spoken. That means you don't need to create your own truth. You don't need to invent your own God. You don't need to invent your own spirituality.

[8 : 05] The real God has already made himself known. And so, if that is true, our job is not to speculate, not to wonder, not to philosophize, not to second guess.

If God has spoken, our job is simple. It's to listen to him. Which means the key question for us is not what do I think God is like, but rather what has God actually said he is like.

Now, here's the thing. In the first couple of verses of Hebrews, we're given this really striking contrast between how God spoke back then and how God speaks now.

And this contrast, I think, helps us to see just how amazing it is that he has spoken in and through his son. So, here's how he puts it in verse 1.

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets many times and in various ways. So, this is a summary of what we call the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible.

[9 : 19] And the book of Genesis, right at the beginning, begins with God speaking. Let there be light. And then the Old Testament describes God speaking, especially through the prophets from Moses to Malachi.

But this God was how God was speaking in the past to his people. But now, in verse 2, in these last days, he has spoken to who?

He's spoken to us, friends, by his son. And we can see the contrast there in the table and the screen. The big idea is simple, but it's massive.

There's a radical difference in how God has now revealed who he is and what he's like through his son, the Lord Jesus.

So, if you look at the table on the screen, if we get that up there again, David, thank you. The one phrase on the left-hand side with no corresponding phrase on the right-hand side is, many times and in many ways.

[10 : 28] But he also expects us, his heroes, to fill in the blanks. What God revealed back then through the prophets, it was real but partial, fragmentary.

It's like having pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You could see some of the picture, but not the whole thing. So, in Jesus, God gives us the whole picture.

Now, this doesn't mean that we chuck the Old Testament in the bin. Far from it. When God spoke through the prophets, it was no less his word, no less true, no less authoritative.

But it was partial, deliberately incomplete, awaiting fulfillment. It's like a sketch waiting to be finished.

The sketch is real, it's accurate, but it's not the final thing. You're meant to look at the sketch and expect the artist to finish the painting. And when the painting's complete, you see the fullness of what the sketch always pointed to.

[11 : 33] I think that's a little bit like how the Old Testament works. It gives us the outlines, it gives us the contours, the patterns, and the promises. And Jesus is the finished painting, the fulfillment, the complete portrait of God, the exact representation of his being, as verse 3 puts it.

And do notice, the author of Hebrews doesn't bin the Old Testament himself. He quotes it again and again throughout this letter. We'll come on to some of those quotes next week. Because those earlier words that God spoke through the prophets are the very ones that help us understand just how brilliant Jesus is.

The Old Testament gives the outline. And Jesus is the finished work, the final word. Before, God gave his people messages through the prophets.

Now, he has given us his son. Not just a message, but a person. Not just words about God, but the word made flesh. So what do we do with all this?

Well, if God's final, definitive word has come to us in Jesus, then we don't need to be looking about anywhere else for spiritual truth.

[12 : 57] We don't need new revelations. We don't need fresh voices or some secret insight in Jesus. We already have the fullest self-revelation of God that there is.

Do you see what that means? It means his is the voice we need to listen to. His is the voice. Not just once on a Sunday, but day after day to keep going in the Christian life, to keep growing in the Christian faith.

We need to keep on listening to Jesus. Keep on investing in our relationship with him. And why listen to him?

Because of who he is and what he's done. The writer doesn't just tell us that Jesus is God's final word. He goes on to show us that Jesus is God's fullest glory.

So don't settle for less. So let's look at that in the second half of verse 2 through to verse 4. And the writer of Hebrews here gives us surely one of the most breathtaking descriptions of Jesus in the whole Bible.

[14 : 05] Who he is and what he's done. So just read it again with me from verse 2. In these days he's 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 words.

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.

So this is deep. We're only just going to scratch the surface of it this evening. But it might help us to realize that the writer builds it a little bit like a mountain climb.

You go up. You reach the summit. And then you come back down the other side. And the key thing for us to realize is that at each stage, one side of a mountain mirrors the other.

[15 : 18] So we're going to start right at the top, right at the summit. Here it is in verse 3. The sun is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

That's the top. That's the pinnacle. And here we are thinking about who Jesus is, who Christ is eternally, before anything else existed, who Jesus is.

We'll think of the moon. The moon is bright, but only because it reflects the sun. It has no light of its own.

Jesus isn't like the moon. He's much more like the sun, radiating God's glory, blazing out God's light, irradiating God's brightness.

And he's not just a sketch or a shadow of God's being. He is the exact representation, the perfect imprint of God's nature.

[16:22] And when I was younger, people used to say, you're the spitting image of your dad. In fact, they usually used to speak in the third person to my mom. Oh, isn't he the spitting image of his dad?

Isn't that sweet? It's quite annoying, actually. But that language isn't strong enough here. Jesus doesn't just bear a passing resemblance to his father.

He is the visible expression of God's invisible nature. Jesus is the glory of God made visible. So if you're here and you want to know what God is really like, you look to Jesus. We're going through Luke's gospel in the morning.

We're exploring the life and ministry and especially the death and resurrection of Jesus. You want to know what God's like? You look to Jesus. Now, if you've ever watched a documentary about Mount Everest or climbing Cato, you know that climbers only have a few minutes to spend on the summit before heading back down.

[17:31] The air's too thin. It's dizzying up there. That's a bit like what this verse feels. I think we could spend a lifetime here, but it's tri-church and we need to keep moving.

We need to move down the mountain and see how this incredible truth about who Jesus is flows out into what Jesus has done. So taking a step down, we see what Jesus' relationship is to the universe.

On one side, we're told, end of verse 2, that Jesus made it. Every star, every galaxy, every planet came into being through him.

And not only did he create it, we see over on the other side in verse 3 that he is sustaining all things by his powerful words.

You ever wondered what holds everything together? Why doesn't it all collapse into chaos?

Hebrews says, it's not chance.

[18:33] It's Christ and his powerful words. By the way, that's not to contradict what science tells us about how the universe works. Science describes the mechanics and Hebrews describes the deeper reality.

Behind it all, Jesus holds it together moment by moment. Science explains the how and Hebrews explains the who.

Jesus is the who behind it all. The same word that spoke the universe into being. The word of God the Father sustains it right now.

So taking another step down the mountain, verse 2 says, He is appointed heir of all things. So here we could imagine a very wealthy father with one son.

When the father dies, all the riches and titles and privileges pass to the son. That's how inheritance works, notwithstanding the current UK government's interventions.

[19:38] But that's how inheritance works here in Hebrews. Of course, God the Father doesn't die. But what this picture does is it shows us that everything that belongs to God also belongs to Jesus.

And so how does he take up that inheritance? Well, over on the other side, verse 3 tells us that after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

So first, the cross, the once for all sacrifice to wash us clean from sin. Much more than that in Hebrews to come. First, the cross, then the throne.

Sitting at God's right hand, the place of power and honour. To sit there is to share God's rule. That's where Jesus is right now.

He sat down because he's finished what he came to do. His rescue mission is complete. So the son inherits all things and reigns over all things.

[20:52] The heir and the king. So let's come back down to the base of the mountain. And notice how the author ties it all together. On the one side, he said, God used to speak through the prophets.

These are the human messengers. On the other side, he says, verse 4, he became superior to the angels, the spiritual messengers.

The prophets or angels, however impressive they may be, are still merely messengers. Jesus isn't just a messenger. He's a son. Now, verse 4 does raise a question for us.

How could the eternal son of God become greater than angels? Wasn't he already infinitely greater than angels?

Well, here's the key. The son is the author of Hebrews' favourite title for Jesus. But he uses it in two different ways. So first, Jesus is the eternal son.

[22 : 00] And that's what we saw at the summit. Sharing the divine nature with the father. Always has. Always will. He didn't become that.

He simply is that. The eternal son. But second, he's also the appointed son. The long-promised king descended from David, but greater than David.

Enthroned at God's right hand. And he became that when he took on human flesh and completed his mission. He died, rose, ascended, and was crowned in heaven.

Maybe an illustration might help. Well, here's a photo of me and my son. He's my son because we share the same nature. He's human like I am.

He's got my genes. That's one kind of sonship. But then there are family businesses like Jay Middleton and Sons. A removal company in Yorkshire.

[23 : 06] Apparently nothing to do with me. I've not got a side hustle in the removal business. Although it might be not a bad idea with the amount of students moving in and out of this city.

But these sons don't necessarily share the same DNA. They might, but they needn't. They might marry into it. They might just carry on the name. But they do share the family business.

They're appointed to carry on the father's work. Jesus is the son in both senses. The eternal son who shares the father's nature.

And the appointed son who now reigns at his right hand. Which makes him far greater than angels and prophets. With a name far more superior than theirs.

So what now do we do with all this? Well, remember where we started. God has spoken through his son.

[24 : 04] We've just seen how glorious the son is. We've got a glimpse of that at least. Which means the call for us is simple but profound.

We're to listen to Jesus. Now what does that look like in practice for us? If you're here exploring the Christian faith, let me recommend that you ask for a Bible.

And start with one of the Gospels. That's how you begin to hear Jesus. Or grab someone here and talk it through. Ask questions. We'd be glad to try and help you like that.

Keep coming back on Sundays. Or come along to our Christianity Explored course when it starts up later in the term. What does it look like if you're here and you're a Christian?

We need to make time for Jesus. We need to open our Bibles and listen to him prayerfully. Pray through your day. Cultivate a relationship with Jesus like you would with a close friend.

[25 : 17] Listen to Jesus means giving him your time and attention. It means keeping on going and keeping on growing in him. Jesus is God's last word.

Jesus is God's fullest glory. So don't settle for less than Jesus. Let's pray before responding to God's words in song.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we're amazed that you are a God who speaks. We're amazed that you are a God who speaks in a way that we can begin to understand truth about you.

That you have revealed to us through your word the saving work of your son. We thank you for Jesus, therefore, who left his throne in heaven to come and wash us clean from sin and guilt.

This week, would you help us by the Holy Spirit to give time and space to our relationship with Jesus. Lord, if there's people here among us who need a reset like that, Lord, would you grant that to them.

[26 : 31] And as we draw close to you, as we seek to draw close to you, Lord God, through Jesus, would you draw near to us. For we ask in your son's name.

Amen. Please.