

The Grammar of God

Hebrews

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Bible Text: Hebrews 1:1-3; 1 Peter 1:10-12
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Hebrews 1, we read at verse 1.

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 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.

We have spent some time looking at these opening words of this letter to the Hebrews and we have noted that the writer is introducing us to the speaking subject not only of his book but of the whole book we call the Bible. God is the speaking subject who is heard speaking in all of Scripture. Wherever we look, he is addressing human beings, he is addressing his creatures. They are his words that are captured, caught, and communicated to us. And as we listen to the voice of God here in Hebrews, we immediately are led forward to distinguish between two great epochs of God's speaking activity. We distinguish right at the very beginning the "long ago" of verse 1 and the "these last days" of verse 2, these two great epochs of history. And though they are distinguished here, there are elements that continue through both of them. In both of them, there is but one divine voice to be heard. God speaks and God's word does not change. Even though the mode or instruments of revelation may change, God's word does not change. And in both epochs, those who are on the receiving end of this revelation don't change. There is but one people of God, one people who are addressed by the word of God. God's people do not change, although under the old covenant most of them belonged to Israel, though not exclusively so, and under the new covenant, the people of God comprised both the elect of Israel and the elect among the Gentiles as one people of God. Nonetheless, in both epochs, the receivers, those being addressed, are God's people, hence you notice that the reference is to our fathers, "God spoken to our fathers." Our fathers. And now he has spoken to us, and it's that connection that binds these two people. Israel and the church are the addressees of this revelation. And introducing these two epochs, what the writer is doing is this and this is the focus of our study this morning: he is dividing time into two parts. He is describing prophetic time on the one hand, and messianic time on the other. And the feature of both these eras are that the one God who speaks has spoken to our fathers and to us. The one God who has revealed himself has spoken in the prophetic period as well as in this messianic period.

Now he is also going to stress, as we shall see when the time is right, that in this present era, these last days, is superior to the former time. But even in saying that it is superior, we must say that in the former time what God said lays the foundation upon which we build our understanding of God. It is filled out, it is expanded, it is fulfilled, it is clarified, it reaches its perfection but nonetheless, the revelation to our fathers is the foundation on which we stand and which enables us to understand more clearly the second revelation about which he is speaking. The first era is characterized by preparation. The second is characterized by perfection of revelation. The new corresponds to the old but it surpasses the old and it does so absolutely by providing the perfection of the true spiritual order.

So what is being described here in the opening passage and so far this is as far as we've gotten, is the great drama in the history of revelation. There are two dramas, if you will, or two parts to one drama that are going on simultaneously in the Bible. There is the unfolding story of the history of revelation in which God is communicating with us, and the unfolding story of the history of redemption whereby God is acting for us to deal with the sin problem in our lives. Both of those are captured in this opening exordium to the book of Hebrews. And both these, and we're looking this morning especially still at the revelation aspect, both of these, in both of these God is himself the enduring subject. As someone has written: the simple absolute noun theos, God, unadorned by epithet or appositional phrase, not only holds together the participle statement and the main clause, it announces to us, this language announces to us absolutely clearly the foundational, fundamental reality which is the ground and basis and substance of what is happening in this book as well as in all Scripture. God is that foundational, fundamental, substantial reality behind everything else.

And if that is true, this is also true: that God in his revelation, as in his redemption, has as the goal of his communication, has as the climax, has as the epitome of his revelation, the Son. If you will, in the structure of this opening gambit in this book, two Greek words stand together: theos and huios, God and Son. They cannot be separated, though they may be distinguished and differentiated because God and the Son are together in this revelation that is going on in Scripture.

So let's break this down for our subject this morning. Let's look, first of all, at what the writer has to say about prophetic time. He begins, again as I've said, with God and we began in our studies here on this passage by looking at what we mean by God. We began by thinking of the ineffable and incomprehensible God, a God that we cannot comprehend with our minds which are fallen, with our intelligence which is inadequate, a God whose being is past finding out. The writer here comes out of the blue, as it were. Having used this word "God" that refers to this being that is wrapped in mystery, who is an enigma to us, who is a God beyond all telling, a God beyond all conceiving, he nonetheless says about this God that this God has done something in relation to us. This God has spoken. He has spoken. In enormous kindness, the blessed Trinity has determined to share with creatures such as we are his life of communication and communion. This unfathomable God has undertaken to reveal himself to finite humanity in such a way as to create and sustain and perfect an intelligent, saving, loving

relationship with himself. I want to break that down and put it in simple terms. The purpose of God's self-revelation, the purpose of God's self-expression, the purpose of God's self-communication is so that he can make friends with you. He has spoken. God has spoken.

God in the Bible relates to his creatures at a variety of levels. He is the Maker and Ruler of all things. He is the only object of worship for all his creatures. So we read in Chronicles, "Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you're exalted over all." Or as Paul says in 1 Timothy 6: the Triune God is the blessed and only sovereign. So we can say about God in himself that he is, in himself, the repository of the fullness of divine perfection. All divine perfections and perfection dwell in him. From him come, therefore, every good and perfect gift to us. He works out all things according to his divine will and in his dealings with humanity, he delights to point us always to the Son. Theos is always directing us to huioi. God is always directing us, pointing us to Son, his Son. By the work of the Holy Spirit, the Triune God overcomes the effects of sin that have infected our reason so that we cannot think his thoughts after him, that have affected our way of thinking because in our minds we are rebellious against him, God has overcome this and revealed to us that which would have been undiscoverable by any other means.

Let me illustrate what I've just said by referring to a text that is helpful here in 1 Corinthians 2 where the Apostle Paul is describing the foolishness of the wisdom of the world that would never have come up with the answer of the cross as the means by which God might be reconciled to his creatures. And he reflects that and he goes on then to reflect about the incomprehensible, the indescribable, the ineffable God and he says this, "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, nor the heart of a man has imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." Do you see what he's saying? We could never come up with this. We could never understand it. We could never penetrate it. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," says the Lord. "My ways are not your ways," says the Lord. His ways are unknowable. How perfect are his ways?

Paul goes on to say what is unknowable, undiscoverable, incomprehensible, unattainable, ineffable, God has revealed to us, that is, to the apostles, through his Spirit because the Spirit of God like the heart of a man, the mind of a man, knows what is in the soul of a man. A man knows what he's thinking. The Spirit of God knows the deep things of God and the Spirit of God communicates these to us, and he does so, first of all, through the prophets, to our fathers, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets."

And what do we learn through the prophets? We learn, for example, that the world was created by an act of the Triune God. In Psalm 33, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the," spirit or, "breath of his mouth all their host." He spoke and it came to be. He commanded and it stood firm.

In the Genesis account, we find that God says and calls and names and blesses. He constructs a cosmos as a holy habitation. He commissions human beings, men and women, to their royal vocation. They are kings and they are priests and he gives them

commands regarding their priestly duties in the Eden temple. And he binds himself, according to Jeremiah. He binds himself to his creation by a covenant. In the aftermath of Adam's revolt against God and his disobedience, standing outside the garden with a broken covenant at his feet, a broken creation all around him, with a curse of death pronounced and about to kick in, God begins to proclaim, to preach the Gospel to Adam and progressively from Adam over succeeding generations. And from the beginning of time, from the beginning of Adam's fall right through to Malachi, over that great long period, God is preaching the Gospel progressively, filling it out as he goes along, preparing the way.

Now, why is that? Why is it that it is at many times and in many ways? It is, first of all, because God is infinite and we are finite. We can only take in so much at a time. It's because God is talking to bronze age and iron age men in the process of speaking his word to people and it takes them time to absorb it, to understand it. In the history of humanity and particularly in the history of Israel, we are gradually learning about who God is and what God is about.

And the second reason it takes time is that God's mysterious plan that we know about but they didn't, God's mysterious plan to sum up everything in Christ requires a long historical process in order for it to be realized. Scott Swain who teaches in RTS Orlando, translates Ephesians 1:10 like this regarding this period of the prophets, he says that back then it was an economy for or toward the fullness of time. These latter days are the fullness of time. When the days had fully come, God sent his Son. We are living in the last days, this period of fullness of revelation, and the period before that was an economy in which God was acting, working, speaking, doing in preparation for this point in which you and I find ourselves today.

So in the aftermath of the fall, Adam hears the first intimation of the Gospel. As God speaks concerning the woman, her singular seed will bruise Satan's head, that is, crush Satan's head. And Adam sees immediately the promise of God and he seizes the promise of God and he renames his wife Eve, the mother of the living, because he sees in the promise of God about the crushing of the serpent that there is a prospect of life ahead instead of a sentence of death. Death would not have the last word.

And he understood, too, as God explained, that not only would there be the crushing of Satan but it would come at some cost to the seed of the woman. His heel would be bruised, though the serpent would be crushed. Something of the curse which the serpent had brought into the world would impact the seed of the woman in accomplishing his great work. And in the rest of the Bible we're taught, of course, that Messiah would bear the divine curse in order to bestow the divine blessing on men and women.

Well, in wake of the accelerating evil and its fruition, the great flood, God saved Noah and his family. He renewed his covenant with them. He established a church in their family and that church sustained believers up until about the time of Melchizedek who was a contemporary of Abraham. But with the coming of Abraham, a huge step forward in revelation occurred. There was a promise of blessing to all the families of the earth,

picking up the first promise to Adam. By this time, it would not simply come through a seed of the woman or the seed of the woman considered generally of humanity, this time the focus is narrowed down. The seed of the woman would be the seed of Abraham and God promises to make the seed of Abraham a blessing to all the families of the earth and God solemnly commits himself to that promise. He swears an oath to Abraham. He promises ultimate at rest, not just to Abraham but to his descendants, even though he warns as a kind of penultimate promise that could be verified in time, he promises Abraham that before that ultimate promise is fulfilled, his family, his descendants, would spend a period of time, a sojourn in a foreign land, which we later discover is their time in Egypt.

And then before the patriarchs, before the families, the fathers of Israel have passed their days, Jacob the last of them is giving his blessing and it's there that he points to the fact that the promises of God concerning the seed of the woman and the seed of Abraham are going to be narrowed down and they're going to come through the seed of Judah, that is, through the Jewish tribe, the tribe of Judah. And under Moses' leadership, the law is given. Israel is formed into an assembly, a church, gathered around the tabernacle and the temple. And the glory cloud that we learned about a few weeks ago, rested over the Holy of Holies in the center of the camp and it taught the people, "Whenever you are gathered together as my people, assembled together, I am there with you. And it's Moses who promises that in the future time God will raise up a prophet, a mighty prophet like him with this distinction, "You will listen to him. You will listen to him."

Well, as Israel developed into a nation state, it soon wandered from God and gradually descended into chaos. To correct that, God sent Samuel to reignite the prophetic ministry in Israel and the prophets followed. Samuel was followed by David who was both a king, the royal cure for the chaos of the world, and a prophet who in his Psalms speaks often of the promises of a future and a hope. And God made an unconditional promise or a covenant with David, promising him a future king who would bring blessing to the nations. Later prophets, God revealed to them his purpose to establish a new covenant where there would be a new David, a new temple, a new people comprising Jews and Gentiles, a new creation. A period when the year of the Lord's favor would be extended in its latter day fullness and would be forever.

These were the promises that God made to his people and these are the principle parts of the revelation of the will of God given from the foundation of the word up until the time of Malachi. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways." And with Malachi, revelation ceased. With Malachi, God stopped speaking. With Malachi, the curtain is drawn and we are left in the waiting room anticipating, expecting, hoping, wishing, looking forward. Many of the people decided they would simply cling to the past but there were those believing people within Israel, we find them in Luke 1, believing people in Israel who were waiting for the redemption of Israel. They were waiting for God to act as he had promised.

These Old Testament prophets were very conscious that their work was a provisional and preparatory work. Moses, I've already said, looked for another prophet to come. David

spoke of another king. He wrote Psalms about this divine king who was begotten by the Father who inherits the nations and before whom all the nations bow in worship as well as with respect.

Daniel had a vision of an established timeline that God had for the future that had been, as Daniel says in Daniel 9, "decreed for your people and your city," to do these things, "to finish transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up the vision and prophecy," in other words, to bring an end to all revelation and prophecy, "and anointing the Holy One." And he records God's words to him in the very end of his book. "Daniel, your words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end, until the end comes, until the last days come."

Zechariah, he too looked forward. He writes in Zechariah 14, "Behold, a day is coming for the LORD. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. It will be a unique day, known only to the LORD, and on that day the LORD will be one and his name one." Malachi ends by saying, "Here is the next item on the calendar. Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, who comes before the great and awesome day of the Lord."

Now, reflecting on what these old prophets thought, you know, there's a way of teaching the Bible that says you can only teach the Bible assuming that when the people wrote, they were only writing for the people sitting in front of them, to their time, their space, their thoughts, their agenda, their ideas, and everything that you said had to be understandable by the people in their generation. Here's what Peter thinks about that way of approaching the Old Testament in 1 Peter 1, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours." Do you see what he's saying? The prophets prophesied about something that wasn't theirs, it was yours. It was revealed to them, he goes on to say, "It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through the apostles who preached the good news to you."

So they understood, they understood only too well that many of the things they saw and heard didn't make sense to them but were going to make sense one day. They were always looking forward.

This revelation through the prophets came by dreams, visions, voices, angels, always with evidence that it was from God. They expressed the truth by way of promises, warnings, prophecies, public sermons. Their words were authenticated by signs and wonders, by fulfillments, by partial fulfillments, by accurate predictions, by the eminence of the matter that they were speaking about.

At many times and in many ways, it was revealed to our fathers by the prophets that the God of Israel is the sole Creator, Ruler and object of worship who alone sits on his throne and to whom alone belongs worship. As the Creator of heaven and earth, he is manifested to our fathers as God, as the Word of God, and as the Spirit of God. He is both indivisibly one and irreducibly three. He is the one who said, "Let us make man in our image." And at the heart of this Triune identity is this promise, to redeem his people from their sins.

The one who is to accomplish this is variously described as the Lord and as the one who is sent by the Lord. He is described, as we saw I think last week, he is described as being the angel, the glory, the name, the word, the Elohim of Israel, the Adonai of Israel, Yahweh, the Lord Sabaoth, the Son of God, the Son of Man, David's Lord and David's son, Shiloh of Judah to whom the nations will come, the servant of the Lord, the commander of the armies of the Lord, a refuge and our rock and our fortress and our strong tower and our shield and our hiding place and our strength. He is the King. He is the Shepherd. He is the Messiah. He is the Holy One. He is the Savior of his people. He will be high and lifted up. The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him in all its fullness and power. He preach good news to the poor. He will bind up the broken-hearted. He will comfort those who mourn. He will proclaim liberty to the captives, opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf and the tongue of the dumb. He'll be born in Bethlehem. He'll ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. He will both a priest who offers the sacrifice and he will be the Passover Lamb who bears away sin. He will be wounded for our transgressions. He will be bruised for our iniquity. The punishment that brings us peace will be placed upon him and with his stripes we will be healed. He will justify many. He will bring in everlasting peace. He will send salvation to the ends of the earth. He is the Redeemer who ever lives and who raises others to share his everlasting life and all peoples of the earth shall serve him, trust him, fear him, hope in him, worship him, call upon him. This is the revelation that God spoke to our fathers in so many ways and spoke without fail about the one who is to come. Prophetic time is always time on the move, always time flowing forward, all the time directing us towards this great end.

So in the language of Hebrews, prophetic time gives way to messianic time, "but in these last days he has spoken," and stopped speaking, "he has spoken to us by a Son." One scholar has written that by the time of Jesus, this history of Israel is a story in search of a conclusion and there is a sense, of course, superficially that is the case. Israel had returned from exile several hundred years before Jesus, but it was returning from exile to live in exile. They lived in their own property but it wasn't their property. The Persians were there ruling and then it was the Greeks who were ruling and now it was the Romans that were ruling. They were still in exile, only exile at home. They had a Jewish puppet king but he was no David. They had a temple but it was nothing like the temple of Solomon, and even less like the prophetic temple of Ezekiel's vision. They had priests and sacrifices but all they could do was go repetitively over and over and over again, offering the sacrifices without ever achieving total pardon for the sins of the people. Everything. Everything was incomplete, unsettled, unresolved, not whole yet.

But Jesus is more than simply the conclusion to a story. Jesus, the Son, is much more than the fulfillment of that which had long been anticipated. His excellence is surpassing. It is incommensurate with what had gone before. His is an effulgent glory. His is an ineffable majesty. And whereas God in the past spoke to our fathers, in Christ God has spoken in and as Son. He has spoken directly. He has spoken without an intermediary. Jesus comes and he says not what every other teacher in Israel says, "Thus says the Lord," Jesus says, "I say to you."

Here's how the Apostle John explains it to us in 1 John 1:18, "No one has ever seen God." There is an absolute. "The only begotten God." I know that many translations, the word "only" stands alone but that is towards a translation. One of the few benefits that I know of in my life is having to endure learning classical Greek before I went to seminary to learn New Testament Greek. It was a bit of a nightmare. Classical Greek was really a nightmare since it came out of the blue, but one of the helpful things I learned from classical Greek is that the word "monogenes" is understood by those who spoke Greek to mean "only begotten." "The only begotten God who is at Father's side, he has made him known." In other words, in the Son God came and God spoke his last full and final word. It will not be added to. Anybody that comes after Jesus, Jesus says is a false Christ or a false prophet or a false apostle. It ends here.

What is coming came. What was expected arrived. His coming is the fruition and perfection of God's self-expression, self-revelation, self-communication. With his coming. Do you understand as Paul says it in Colossians, "With his coming, the fullness of the Godhead, the deity, with him in bodily form. All of God came in Christ. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

We used to sing a hymn when I was a boy that sent the hairs on the back of my head standing straight because it overwhelmed me as a little boy.

"Thou art the everlasting Word,
The Father's only Son;
God manifestly seen and heard,
And Heaven's beloved one:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow."

The revelation of God in the Son surpasses all other revelation. And do you see that the church, let's look again at these words, "in these last days he has spoken to us," there's where we locate ourselves this morning. In the last days, having been addressed by God through the Son, that's where we are. The church is the assembly of those who live in these last days. That is, we live today in messianic time. We live after, post, the Son's intervention to utter that final word of God. He has already brought us into an era that is marked by, one scholar puts it like this, a plenitude of divine revelation. The perfection of revelation. The only thing that we have ahead of us is to see what we know in all the splendor and glory. In fact, that demonstrative pronoun there, "these," emphasizes this is really these last days. And those of us who live in these last days, we claim to have a part in that knowledge that they had in the past but also that knowledge they promises, that knowledge that was unclear to them, the things they heard from the Holy Spirit that made them wonder and that they wrote down and they looked at and read and read again and read again and could make no sense of. Here we are today and we go back to those bits and they make sense to us.

When it says, when we say the church lives in these last days, we are making an absolute statement about our place in the history of revelation and redemption. The full and final

word has been spoken. The full and final sacrifice has been made. To live in these last days indicates the church has a unique knowledge. We have an anointing of the Holy One and we understand all things, John says. The age to come has come upon us. We have felt the powers of the age to come. What is the age to come about? It's about new creation. New creation one day will affect your body and it will be a new creation when Jesus returns, but it's already begun. And where has it already begun? It has already begun with regeneration, with the new birth. It has already begun by intruding into our lives and by renewing our minds so that we have a regenerate intelligence and understanding with which to understand the things that are written in Scripture.

We have this unique knowledge. The word that has been spoken to us means that we have been caught up into the final stage of God's self-expression, self-revelation, and self-communication. They are building on the borders of 676. It's an atrocious monument to a false prophet who has deceived millions of Americans, the Mormons. There are no prophets after Jesus. It's his final word. That means the church, therefore, is the pillar and ground of truth. This message we've been given is not interim or transitional. It can neither be supplemented nor superseded.

What we've been given in Christ is the full, final and perfect revelation of God and the writer to the Hebrews understood this. Chapter 11, verse 40, he puts it like this as he's referring back to our fathers in Israel, as he's referring back to what we'd call the Old Testament period, he says this of them, "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us." Something better for us, "so that apart from us they cannot be made perfect." That's what he said. No wonder he says in chapter 2, "This is why we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard." Greater obligation to listen because of the period in which we live.

So this messianic or final time has been brought into being by a singular, unsurpassable, divine act. God has spoken. Period. Understand that the word "Son" there is a function of God. It has come once and for all in Son. One who stands in the closest relation of nature to God. He shares the nature of God which means he is God. And we are moving in our journey towards understanding a bit more of Christ.

So here's the difference: when you live in prophetic time, you are on a journey, you are moving, you are proceeding, you are hurrying towards a destination. Those people in Luke 1 were waiting for the consolation of Israel. They were waiting and anticipating. When you come to messianic time, the command is not, "Proceed," the command is, "Halt. Stop." Here's how John Calvin puts it, "If God has now spoken his last word, it is right to advance this far," in other words, to come to where we are in Christ, "just as we must halt our steps when we arrive at him." What we're saying to our fellow creatures who are Jews is, "You need to advance beyond where you are to the fruition of what you believe in Christ, but once you come to Christ, here is where we end, here is where we stop, here is where we halt."

The life of the church is not open-ended. We look back to a final revelation and to a finished sacrifice, therefore, the business of the church is not speculation or reinvention or innovation, but humble listening. This is the work of a theologian, this is the work of a pastor, this is the work of a church member, this is the work of all of us as believers: humble listening to God's final word. One day the apostles were given a vision of the transcendent, effulgent glory of the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and they heard a voice from the Majesty speak and the voice said, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him. Listen to him. Listen to him."

Men and women, brothers and sisters, in Christ and outside of Christ, that's the message of God's unspeakable revelation to us in Christ. He's the only one. You must listen to him. He's the only one worth listening to and his voice, his voice makes the dead live.

Father, we pray that you would take your word this morning, that you would thrill us with the scope and scale of your movement in the past to bring us to where we are now and that you would feed us, we pray, with Christ and his promises and enable us, Lord, to listen to him, to be humble listeners to Jesus' word. Let it dwell richly within us. We pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.