

The Prologue to the New Covenant

Hebrews 1:1-4¹

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“Fourscore and seven years ago, Clearcreek Chapel was... “ What came to mind when I began this sermon with this phrase. Were you thinking I was going to progress to discuss some connection to a famous speech, or to a famous American president, or perhaps some general allusion to some noteworthy event in the history of The Chapel? When we engage in any reading or hearing, whether it be a novel, textbook, historical essay, newspaper or magazine article, or comic we bring a sizeable amount of “pre-information” to this event. What we recognize, learn, enjoy and use from what we have read or hear from that text is to a large part dependent upon what we *already* think and know about what we are reading. I recently was reading a monograph by an Australian national. He made a comment that while he was studying in the United States he frequently heard “fourscore and seven years ago” used as a lead-in or somehow as shorthand for some “special” information. Most of his classmates seemed to nod in understanding but he just seemed to miss the point. It was not until he learned that this is a quote from the opening of Abraham Lincoln’s address at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery following that noteworthy battle in the American Civil War that he then “got it.” But he goes on to say that that full understanding of meaning of those five words requires more. It is only when we recognize that Lincoln was grounding his words and basing the rest of the American Civil War effort on the continuity of the nation with the founding fathers’ ideals. To understand Lincoln’s words fully, one needs to recall Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Franklin. Lincoln connected the “now” of his day with the then of “four score and seven year ago, our forefathers...” So as a contemporary user I would be quoting an old text with an old meaning that references an even older context that ...I think you get my point. Reading the Bible is no different. We come to the Bible with pre-knowledge that affects our hearing and response. But even the Biblical authors bring their messages in the course of historical events and previous texts. They make allusions and even quote older texts that cause the reader/hearer to remember events, challenges and commands and to respond in fresh and perhaps unexpected ways.

Now there is a renewed emphasis, even in “unbelieving” scholarly circles, that recognizes the literary unity of the Bible and is applying this significance to the Bible’s overall meaning. For the next several weeks from the Sunday morning pulpit ministry, an approach to this organization of the Bible will be highlighted. This is the default approach to the Bible that has been used for many years here, but it is important to see from the *Biblical text itself* that this is the method used by the Biblical authors themselves and should be the model for our reading as well.

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Labels are often given to complex concepts to summarize them. This is an attempt to make it easier to reference what are often complicated and detailed issues. The United States military even shortens them to acronyms, a set of letters that represent words that summarize a directive or plan. Labels have been given to several ways of reading the Bible's organizational structure. What follows is a quick survey to give you a feel for some of these labels. Remember the label is not the end point but a tool for communicating the ideas behind the label.

In reading the Bible, there are some who deny any plan or structure, whether between individual books or even within individual texts. This has its roots in unbelieving, liberal scholarship that minimizes the supernatural nature of revelation and at best wants to find an ethical and "spiritual" benefit to what is otherwise an ancient and outdated text. There is actually a conservative version of this that is subtle and pervasive in Christian circles that tends to read the Bible in a fragmented fashion. By emphasizing words, phrases, individual verses or stories without attempting to read them in context or without connections, this approach disconnects the words from their meaning. At its worse it is looking only for "application". This way of thinking of the Bible focuses on asking, "What does it mean to me now?" In essence this view often finds itself telling the Biblical authors (and even worse, God), "Get on with the important stuff!"

Another approach with a label is known as "Dispensationalism". Do not sweat the details here and worry whether you know these big words, just follow along! This system of reading the Bible emphasizes the distinction and sometimes the actual separation of the parts of the Bible we call the Old Testament and the New Testament. One of its clear emphases is to distinguish the identity of Israel and Church. In some forms of this system there is even taught to be two distinct divine "plans" for the two. Some version of this system is the prevailing approach among independent churches, Baptist, Brethren, Bible churches and most Pentecostal/charismatic groups.

The other prominent system found in those churches known as Reformed that includes Presbyterian, Anglican/Episcopalian and Reformed Baptists. It is known as Covenant Theology. This, in a nutshell, minimizes the differences in the two "Testaments". It is referred to as "Covenant" theology because it sees the unity of God's plan in redemptive history and "identifies" the unifying concept as an entity referred to as the "covenant of grace." Concerns made clear in the New Testament are then seen as having their roots in the Old Testament not merely figuratively or typologically but in actuality. One of its more extreme forms insists that the Old Testament law codes should be the actual basis for law in this era and has sought to create government as "Christian".

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons that will focus on various Biblical texts to define and defend a different "system." It is currently given the label of "New Covenant Theology." This is because of its emphasis on the newness and distinctiveness of being in this "new covenant" era of redemptive history. In some circles it will sound like a version of Dispensationalism because it sees discontinuity and newness in the New Covenant. Others will think of it as a version of Covenant Theology, because it sees real but "typical" or "figurative" connections to the Old Covenant. Historically it is not old as a labeled approach. But we could take time to show it as apostolic with its thread in the history of hermeneutics extending into the Reformation with names like Hubmeier and Marpeck. Instead, we want to focus on Scriptural texts that unfold this thought. This will aid our Bible

reading, interpretation and application in a profound way and build consistency in our thinking and ministry.

Today we begin with the Book of Hebrews. Take your copy of Scripture and turn to the first four verses of the first chapter.

Text:

The entire book "To the Hebrews" is in a sense a call to see the radical newness in Jesus of Nazareth's gospel ministry. The book masterfully shows how the ministry of the Son is the fulfillment of all that has come before in particular its connection to the temple ministry of sacrifice and priesthood. The author of this treatise (a sermon sent in the mail to be read publically in many congregations) opens his discourse with a beautiful sentence that we read as the first four verses. Let's read them now.

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 radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and 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.

In most English translations this is broken into two or three sentences. In the ESV we see three, with the new sentences in verse three and then in verse four. This is all one sentence with dependent phrases and clauses building on the main subject-verb unit in verse one. The main thought is "he has spoken". The main thoughts of verse one set the context and intention of why the author is asserting the "he has spoken" and the remaining parts of the extended sentence gives a foreshadowing of what he will expound on in the body of this presentation.

I want to focus on the content of this passage that modifies the idea of the main subject-verb unit this morning, but the majority of the content elaborates on the nature of the concept of "son." As Christians we see the passage from the end of verse two extending to verse four as speaking of Jesus as God's Son. The text however does not say this immediately, in fact, Jesus' name is not mentioned until verse nine of chapter two. Even though the man, Jesus, is whom this is about, it is his role, position and status as "son" that is the focus of the text. Our discussion will begin where the text lists a set of comments that about the exalted nature of this "son".

First, we are told he has been "appointed heir of all things." It is for this "son" that all things are purposed and now belong. "All things" are to be his inheritance and his heritage. This is not foreign to our reading of the Bible and I am sure many of you can think of a number of companion texts and phrases that affirm this same concept.

Next, we are told it is the "son" who is the agent "through whom also he created the world." The word "world" here involves the ideas of both space and time. The intention is to consider all of creation in time and space. It includes the things and the events, the material stuff and the unfolding of history. The "son" is the maker of all that we understand to be reality. And it is interesting to note that his role as heir came before the mention of his role as creator, could it be because the one is dependent upon the other? He is likely the heir because he is the mediator of its creation and sustenance. Reality is by him and also for him.

This mediatorial role is not due to some secondary or inferior status. This “son” is indeed described as the “radiance of the glory of God” and demonstrates “the exact imprint of his nature.” This “son” is the visible expression, the perfect image of the invisible God. His essence and nature are exactly what God is and yet is its concrete presence. To see the “son” is to see and know God. I hope you are adding to this idea with companion texts as well.

The author goes on to tell us the son “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” His word ensures “creation’s” completion and accomplishment. His plans and purposes are confidently and completely guaranteed. This will be important as we see some contrasts latter this morning. Do not see “change” as somehow implying a mistake, or change in purpose.

But involved in this glorious plan and purpose of God is an ethical intention as well. This “son” actually was involved in the “making purification for sins.” God has an ethical holiness that the created order has not upheld and the remedy for this involved a work of the “son” to accomplish this task. We now read this as being necessarily involved in the plan and purposes from the beginning and is somehow involved in the goal and intentions of this creation.

We are told, “he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” This involves the sense of coronation and an affirmation of authority and rule. This “son” is the one who deserves our obedience and worship. And since we see this authority shared with the “Majesty on high” we should recognize a complexity in the Godhead that from other texts we elaborate as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And lastly our author affirms that this “son” is “become as much superior to angels.” This is a somewhat odd statement in our Christian thinking, but it is important both in terms of role and being to affirm the distinction of the “son” from other spiritual agents. The role and person of “son” is unique, in fact divine. Therefore his status as a man is affirmed, not a mere phantom or theophany but as God himself.

With all of that then as backdrop, what does the author of this text say about “God’s speaking?”

We read:

...Long ago...

This single word in the original indicates that God had communicated both in reality and effectively but in some time past. The last writing and editing of the Scriptures was likely complete some four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. God had been active in “speaking” to his people for several thousands of years even before we have the record of this in the Books of Moses, but some time had passed before the time of this writing.

...at many times and in many ways...

These thoughts express two words in the original that are to cause us to think of this speaking as occurring in parts and pieces and physically in many different ways. This implies some sense of progression in God’s speaking, not a “progression from the less true to the more true” but a progression in fullness and completeness.

...to our fathers...

This speech was directed to our ancestors in the faith. It was addressed to those who would hear, believe and obey and to those who would reject and ignore.

...by the prophets...

The instrument of the spread of God's speech was the persons of the prophets. Think broadly here, as anyone who communicated God's words to the people, not just those we know of as designated a "prophet." This includes Moses, David, Isaiah and those named and unnamed authors of the Biblical text. We should likely include the writings that the prophets left as well.

These four assertions are then balanced by:

...in these last days...

The author of this text is convinced he is living in the final age of God's redemptive history. The former revelation is loaded with references to the future when God will bring the world under his subjection and speaks of it as the last days. The same word is used here, suggesting the author and all his subsequent readers are indeed present in these last days.

...to us...

He spoke formerly to our fathers, but this end of the ages communication is directed to us, those first century reader/hearers of this proclamation as well as those of us still present to read it today.

...(in a better way-implied)...

And what is implied is that this "speech" is somehow better. It is final, decisive and complete. It is not piecemeal or partial. The progression has found its end and fulfillment at these last days to us in this communication that is in...

...by "Son"...

This phrase is much more complex than comes across in English, especially to anyone who has some additional familiarity with the Bible. We immediately hear "his son" and think of Jesus (and this is not wrong). The word "son" does not have a modifier. It is not "his" or "the". It is simple "a son." This should cause us to pause and consider this one who embodies all it is be called "son" is the full and final speech of God. Do not restrict this speech to merely what this person has said, but in all he is and has done.

When we get down to chapter two verse seven we find this individual named for the first time as Jesus, but here we need to understand this one as more than just another of the aforementioned prophets. That would be the context if the phrase read "he has spoken to us by Jesus." It is far more full and glorious.

Which is why the passage goes on to identifying this "son" as embodying the fullness and actions of divinity. The works and intentions attributed to God in his former speech are now finding its completeness and fulfillment in the words and work of this "son."

So what we want to see this morning is a sense of both continuity and contrast in God's speech. The former communication is expressed in the Scriptures we know as the Old Testament. The author of Hebrews is now offering this "son" as the fulfillment and perfection of this communication. Note, it is the same God who speaks in both and the same message of salvation that he offers. But what we have here is in the words of one scholar, "what God has done in Christ is the climax of what he had begun to do in earlier times."

Reflect and Respond:

This new, last days speech is better because it brings to a close the divine drama that began in the beginning. And yet, we are still in this closing scene, living out the intentions of God's purposes in this Son. So how should this effect our reading, understanding and application of the Bible?

1. We should approach the Bible as having a distinct and identifiable story or purpose. The Gospel, the good news brought in the life, message and cross-work of the Son is the intention and framework for all of God's words.
2. We should read the Bible from the back to the front. By this I mean we should allow the New Testament inform us and guide us in our understanding and application of the Old Testament. Yes the Old Testament provides us with many framework principles but they have no power without understanding them in light of the Gospel.
3. We should not radically or completely separate the two Testaments. God spoke all and he did not suspend or supersede his earlier speech. Do not view God as fickle or indecisive. Nor should we see two distinct plans and purposes. His "last days" work is found in this "Son."
4. And lastly, we should all the more spend time reading, hearing, studying, thinking, meditating and obeying this glorious Word, after all the God of creation, the Majesty on high is speaking to us. Oh the sorrow that will befall those who fail to hear and love this Word!