

April 12, 2015

The Final Word

This week we are beginning a new series in the book of Hebrews we are calling God's People in the Wilderness. If you are an email subscriber to our weekly news and announcements, you might have seen Pastor Ben's 7 minute video outlining the series for you. If you haven't seen it, you can go to the Summit website and find it. I think you'll find it a very helpful overview of this book.

Although we don't know the author of this book, we do know to whom it was written. It was written to 1st century Christians, most likely predominantly Jewish converts, because the author is constantly making references to Jewish history without a lot of explanation which gentile believers would have needed to understand what the writer was trying to say. Most commentators believe that it was also written to a Christian urban population due to the many, many references to **city** and that means they were a very pluralistic society, much like ours today. In the great urban centers of that world, hundreds of religions, philosophies, political views and cultures were thrown together.

And because they lived in a pluralistic society, becoming a Christian many times meant that you would encounter hostility and marginalization. Christianity was seen as treasonous to the ruling Romans, and way too exclusive by other religions, and hopelessly fanatical to many of the leading philosophies of the day. And it is clear that this was going on because the writer is encouraging his readers to persevere in trials, to endure under suffering, not to shrink back. Hebrews was written to encourage and strengthen what was, at least by the writer, perceived as a faith that was possibly on the skids. The big question, the unasked but overshadowing problem the writer addresses in this book is: ***If God really loves us, if we are the people of God, if He is truly committed to His glory and our good, why are we suffering? Why is our life so hard?***

And the writer answers that question by reminding them of one simple fact – life is a journey through the wilderness. It's a journey from weariness into rest. It's a journey from alienation into the presence of God. It's a journey from isolation into the city of God. It's a journey through a wilderness where all your props are exposed and destroyed, and the only way you're going to get home is by fixing your eyes on Jesus. The writer is constantly making reference to the wilderness experience of Israel in the Old Testament and telling his audience: ***'Don't shrink back like they did – don't harden your hearts like they did – don't let unbelief take root in you like they did – look to Jesus'***. Just like the Old Testament Israelites, who had been rescued from slavery and death, kept wanting to return to Egypt when life got hard; there was this tendency among these Jewish Christians to want a return to the old religious observances because trusting Christ came with such a high price.

So the writer tells them, 'The way through this wilderness is to keep looking at Jesus – keep your eyes fixed on Him. Stop looking at your circumstances and look away to Jesus'. From chapter one to chapter 10, the writer gives his readers a view of Jesus that is better. He's better than the angels; He's better than Moses and Melchizedek; He's better than all the sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood; He's enacted a better covenant – Jesus is better. Look away to Him. These guys were struggling because they hadn't really taken to heart the idea that Jesus was the answer to all their problems.

In Matthew 22:41, Jesus asks His accusers one big question that silences them for good - ***'What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?'*** He had just finished being interrogated by the teachers of the Law, both Pharisees and Sadducees, who questioned His authority, allegiance, ability and authenticity. Now He turns the tables on them and asks the one question which must be answered by everyone – ***'What do you think about the Christ?'*** You see, it is what you think about Jesus that is crucial. What you think about Jesus will determine whether you thrive or whether you wilt under trial. Your view of who Jesus is and what He can do will determine whether you blossom and flourish or you wither and shrink back when troubles come. These guys were tempted to shrink back, to retreat into Judaism, to get back under the Law, to get back into the sacrifices for sin, and back to a works-based salvation. And the antidote to that creeping retreat was to see who Jesus Christ really is; to see Him as supreme over everything. That is what the author was aiming at.

And when you think about it, that is the antidote to most of our life issues. Most of our problems come because we don't keep our eyes on Jesus. Christ does not reign supreme in our lives. Unlike those 1st century Jewish believers, we are mostly not tempted to return to Judaism as the basis of our salvation; but we are too often satisfied with a casual Christian experience that is not too demanding, or uncomfortable; an experience where Christ is more of a mascot than a monarch; a 'Huggy Jesus.' Our experience of Christ, of His grace and His mercy, His love and compassion, His discipline and correction, is far too shallow and often self-serving. We mouth religious platitudes and then act any way we want. Jesus Christ is just not that real to most of us. He might be a warm feeling on Sunday morning; or a sense of relief when our plans come together like we wanted; or a moment's rejoicing when we find those keys we prayed for; but He is not the touchstone of our existence; He is not first in our hearts and in our allegiance; He does not reign supreme in every part of our lives.

I most sincerely do not want to come to the end of all things and find myself stymied by the question. I don't want to find out that all I knew were some songs about Him; that I had a little Bible knowledge about Him; that I was mostly a good person who went to church most Sundays, and caught a couple prayer meetings that didn't conflict with my social life or the big game, and was content with a kind of casual friendship with Jesus. But I want to know Jesus Christ and experience all that He is to me, for me, and through me. I want to be able to say with complete and utter conviction the words of Psalm 42: *'Just like the deer pants for streams of water, so I long for you, O Christ! I thirst for You, the living God. When, O when can I come and stand before You?'* And the prayer of Psalm 63: *'O God, You are my God! I earnestly search for You. My soul thirsts for You; my whole body longs for You in this parched and weary land where there is no water. ..Your unfailing love is better to me than life itself... 'You satisfy me more than the richest of foods...I lie awake thinking of You, meditating on You through the night...I sing for joy in the shadow of Your protecting wings!'*

So let's get into the text. *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,* Do you want to hear God speak? Not everyone wants to hear Him. Paul tells us in Romans, the evil that is in men's hearts leads them to reject anything that sounds like God – in fact the word says that they would rather believe lies than risk hearing God. That is the foundational idea behind the theory of evolution that has permeated our present cultural psyche. Dr. George Wald, Nobel Prize winner and professor emeritus of biology at Harvard University has said, **"I do not want to believe in God. Therefore I choose to believe in that which I know is scientifically impossible, spontaneous generation arising through evolution."**

But in spite of our rebellion, God still speaks. Before Christ, Hebrews says that He spoke many times and in many ways. The word for many times is ***polylogia*** which means wordiness, much speaking, verbosity. Simply put, it means that God speaks a lot. The problem is never with God's speaking, it is always with our hearing. He speaks – we just don't hear so good. Have you every prayed, 'O Lord, if You would only speak! If I could just hear Your voice! Don't be silent, I really need to hear You.' We pray sometimes as though God were reluctant to say anything to us. But the reality is that He is always speaking. By God's speaking the universe leapt into existence. By His speaking the earth was formed and the dry ground appeared and all the plants and animals and people were created. By His speaking. And it wasn't as though when He was finished He just shut up and didn't speak anymore. God is the God of the word, written and spoken. One of His names is the Living Word. **So we shouldn't pray so much for His speaking, but rather for our hearing.**

The Old Testament is full of God's speaking much through the prophets; and speaking through them in many ways. Sometimes a dream or vision, sometimes angels were sent, sometimes it was adverse circumstances, sometimes an audible voice or miraculous signs, and even creation itself was a means for God to speak to His people. The issue is never with God's speaking, it is always with our hearing. For example in Isaiah, as in many other prophetic writings, Israel refused to listen to the direct speaking of God through Isaiah, so he told them – *'Since they refuse to listen God will speak to them through foreign oppressors who speak an unknown language!'* Isaiah 28:11 When we will not listen any other way, God will send foreign oppressors, or other things to grab our attention to hear what He is speaking to us.

Nearly at the end of this letter the writer says, *'See to it that you obey God, the One who is speaking to you. For if the people of Israel did not escape when they refuse to listen to Moses, the earthly messenger, how terrible our danger if we reject the One who speaks to us from heaven. When God spoke from Mount Sinai, His voice shook the earth...'* Hebrews 12:25-26

When God spoke at Mount Sinai, it says there was thunder and lightening and smoke billowing up obscuring the mountain, and God descended on the mountain in the form of fire, and the whole mountain shook with an earthquake. God was speaking. When God wanted to get Job's undivided attention, He spoke to him out of a tornado. When Jonah refused to listen and ran away to sea, "*The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.*" And Isaiah tells us that "*the LORD Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.*" So when you hear of earthquakes, or tsunamis, or hurricanes, don't just think – 'Natural phenomena' – think rather, 'God is speaking.' Because we are so prone to deafness, sometimes God has to use more violent means of getting our attention.

But the writer goes on to say that God is still speaking to us in these last days through His Son. This tells us that the 1st century saints were living in expectation of Christ's imminent return. They considered they were living in the last days. **Last days** means the entire period from when the author was writing to the end of time. So what is he saying? He's saying from now until the end of time there is no fuller, no more final expression of God than Jesus. Period. No further revelation. Nothing further. This is it. **Jesus is the final word.** What he is saying is that Jesus is the full revelation of who God is and what He is about. Anything that contradicts that revelation is false.

And the clearest revelation we have of who God is and what He is about is in His Word. '*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.*' That is why it is so vital that we are people of the Word. That we get His Word embedded in our minds and inscribed on our hearts. If you want to hear God speaking today get into His Word. If we refuse, He uses other means to get us to listen. Christ is the supreme Word today, He is the first word, the last word and every word in between. Do not refuse Him who is speaking. Do not be casual about His Word. One of the testimonies of the preciousness and power of the Word of God comes from China during the turbulent period of the cultural revolution there.

One Chinese saint, imprisoned for his faith during that time, shared just how the Word of God was to them. '*There were twenty-two people in our cell. We had 12 minutes to go to the bathroom. Anything not done in those few minutes had to be done in the cell. Some were 'reeducated' but none were released until all were 'reeducated'. To be the last to betray our Lord Jesus made life very difficult. We would pray, sing to ourselves, and write sermons in our minds to keep our minds clear. Those who could not repeat Scripture back to the Lord often either betrayed the Master and us, went insane, or committed suicide. It was the Word of God that kept us from doing any of the three.*'

If I say that I don't hear from God, that He doesn't speak to me like He did to the prophets of old, or to everyone else but me, what am I really saying? Am I saying that I have spent hours in His Word, fully exhausting every nuance, every possible meaning? Have I allowed it to soak into my mind and heart? Has this word become so much a part of me that everything I do is shaped and directed by it? Does the Word of God guide me in everything? Or have I merely skimmed it like a magazine or dipped my toes in the ocean of God's Word, satisfied to find that emergency verse for my predicament, but otherwise content to lie on the beach? The writer says that this is His final Word – if you don't get it now, forget about it later. O may His Word be precious to us; let us linger over His Word, soak in the Word until it saturates our thinking and our living.

The writer goes on to say that this word, Jesus, is the one "*whom He [God] appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world.*" Why does the writer here dwell on the fact that Jesus Christ is the heir of all things? Why is that important. I think it is important because he wants us to meditate on the fact that the one who does the speaking, the initiator and sustainer of all the promises of God, can make good on all that He promises. Because God has promised everything to the Son, the Son has under His complete ownership and control everything necessary to carry out His word. If He says, '*Not a hair on your head shall perish*' He is able to make that happen because He is in control of all the outside forces on your life. If He says '*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*' He can come through on His promise because heaven is His to give. When He says '*Nothing in all creation shall ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*' He can be counted on to make sure nothing does because He owns all creation and nothing happens without His say so.

Secondly, why is it important that we understand that God made the universe and everything in it through the Son? If Jesus was just a man, then there is no reason to follow Him unless we agree with His philosophy. In fact, as a man, He didn't have a really spectacular career – 12 unsteady guys, one of whom betrayed Him; the rest deserted Him in the end when it was over in 3 ½ years on a criminal's cross outside of Jerusalem. But if He made the universe, **then He owns you**, and you absolutely have to reckon with Him and with His speaking.

The writer here also destroys the notion of worshipping the creation rather than the creator. Doesn't it make sense to give glory and honor and worship to the eternal one who made it all, rather than to the temporal, impermanent things He made? You see, if you look at the first chapter of Romans, Paul paints this picture of the descent into hell. It all begins with a refusal to acknowledge and thank God. It begins with a denial of God. It begins with a refusal to worship God as God. And because we were built to worship and now we don't have anything greater than ourselves to worship, we turn to nature and ultimately to ourselves. Paul says that we exchange the worship of God for the worship of ourselves and nature. Eventually he says, God gives us over to our lusts. Which means, we can't hear Him speaking anymore. It's as if God stops speaking.

And the writer here is saying, 'Look at Jesus. Look at who He is. Listen to Him. He's the final word. Stop looking at the creation – don't look at your circumstances – look at your Creator – look at Jesus'. *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.* First of all, the writer of Hebrews is telling us that the God who dwells in unapproachable light has come near in the person of His Son. He makes reference to the radiance of the glory of God which takes us back to Exodus and the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. It's called the fiery cloud and in appeared in the form of a pillar which vaguely resembles a person. But this fiery cloud is awesome and terrifying. The Israelites could see it but no one wanted to get near it. When they were caught between Pharaoh and the deep blue sea, this fiery pillar stood between them and the Egyptians and stopped Pharaoh in his tracks. Later on this fiery glory cloud appears on the mountain, and thunders and earthquakes come out of it and the people tell Moses, 'You go up there and speak to God. We'll just stay here'. When the temple is dedicated under King Solomon, down comes the glory cloud. It comes into the temple, and no one can even stand on their feet. They fall to the ground. They can't get up because of the cloud.

And this writer is telling his readers, 'Jesus is that glory cloud – He's the radiance of God. The glory of God that had everyone terrified, has come to dwell in human form and you can get next to Him'. But not only that. This Jesus is the exact imprint of God's nature. The word is actually one we transliterate into English as character. He is the exact representation of God's character. If you take the way the rays of sunlight relate to the sun you might begin to get some idea, however imperfect, of what the writer is saying. First of all the rays of the sun are co-existent with the sun. You have the sun, you have the rays. You cannot have one without the other. The sun radiates the rays. And the rays are the sun; separate but not **essentially** different; just as Jesus is God, separate but not **essentially** different from the Father. So you could say that the rays are begotten of the sun, not created. So Christ is begotten of the Father, not created. Finally, we see the sun by means of its rays. When we look in the sky, we see an image of the sun, because it takes 8 seconds for the rays to reach us. So we are seeing the exact representation of the sun in its rays. We see God the Father by seeing Jesus His Son. He is the reflection of God's own glory and everything about Him represents God exactly.

But I know you want to ask, 'Why is this important? Why does the writer stress this point? How will that help me in my trouble and suffering?' It is important because we're being told God is speaking to us through Jesus, not just to give us information in general but to let us know who He is. He is actually communicating Himself. He wants a relationship. He doesn't just want us to know certain things. He wants us to know Him. He's communicating Himself. God is not just a force in the universe that you tap into with your emotions, or a presence that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. **This a personal God who speaks.** When we communicate with each other, it means we want relationship. That can be as shallow as a casual encounter with a stranger, or as deep as the relationship with your loved ones. Words engage every part of you, and they express your essence to whomever you are speaking.

This speaking God wants to get close to us. And if this God, who made everything and holds everything together, wants to get close to me, that means He's interested in me. He cares what happens to me. He knows my tragedies and He knows my triumphs. He knows the good stuff and bad stuff about me and still He pursues me. That means that none of my trials go unnoticed. He is not unaware of my suffering and troubles. He cares for me and He cares what happens to me. God speaks to us because we matter to Him. He speaks to us because He is for us and not against us. He loves us with a Father's love that is everlasting and He communicates that love to us best through His Son. It's the people you don't love that you leave out in the cold and refuse to talk to.

And it is this God, who wants to have relationship with us, that holds everything together. *and He upholds the universe by the word of His power.* Every moment of your existence and mine is upheld by the power of the Word of Christ. This word is the underpinning of the universe. Without God's speaking the whole cosmos winks out of existence. From Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 God has been and will be speaking. If He ever stops, everything collapses. I was reading in the book of the Revelation years ago and came to that part in the book where it says, 'And there was silence in heaven for about a half hour' and my first thought was, 'Wow – things are about to get really bad!' And then I read on and they did! Hail and fire and blood fell from heaven; a third of the earth was burned up; a mountain got thrown into the sea and a third of the sea turned to blood and a third of the sea population died; stars were falling out of the sky and a third of the rivers were turned to wormwood. Things were a mess. Everything in the universe depends upon this speaking God.

Again, why is this important to know? Why do we need to have an appreciation for a God that upholds the universe by the word of His power? Barbara Boyd of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship once put it this way: ***"Think about this. If the distance between the earth and the sun, 93 million miles, was the thickness of a sheet of paper, then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a stack of paper 70 feet high. The distance across the galaxy, the diameter of our galaxy, would be a stack of paper 310 miles high. Our galaxy is just one little speck of dust in the universe as it is. If there is a person who holds all that together with the word of his power, his pinky, as it were, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your personal assistant?"***

No, this is a God to whom you must bow down and submit in wonder and awe and amazement. If He stops speaking, you're toast. But He doesn't. He's been speaking from the beginning and He doesn't stop. More than that He's given us His eternal word in the person of Jesus Christ. You see the writer adds another phrase: *After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.* The writer makes reference to this again in Hebrews 10:12-14: *But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet. For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.* That means that this Jesus, the very glory of God, the exact representation of God, who upholds the universe with a word, came and died for us. And in dying for us Christ covered our sin so completely that it can be said that we are perfected before God. When the Father looks at His redeemed people, what He sees is the perfected work the blood of His Son accomplished. Only in Christ can we be forgiven and reckoned righteous forever.

What does this mean for us? This means we have a God who is not some far-off deity in the heavens, unconcerned with our struggles, our troubles, our lives. He is an omnipotent God who has come down to us personally. He's involved – He intervenes in your life – He is looking out for your best interests. Because Jesus is the final word, you can trust Him to carry you all the way through this wilderness journey.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

Let Your Word in these final days, lead us to Christ. Let it be a great searchlight into our hearts to expose and to clothe; to wound and to heal; to chastise and encourage. Let Your Word pierce our hearts, and penetrate our minds, and impact our living. O living Word, be sharp and thorough. Ravish our hearts and capture our affections. Break through all our defenses erected against You. We do confess that our passion for You has been diminished by other things; that our love for You has been usurped by other affections; that our desire for You is not all what You deserve. We long to love You more – more purely, more intensely, more consistently, more joyfully, more passionately. Forgive us for cold hearts and indifferent attitudes. Cleanse us from impure motives and casual affections. Deliver us from the sweeping apathy of this age to the things of God and His Christ. O Father, captivate us with the love of Christ; kindle afresh the fire in our spirits, and open the eyes of our hearts to ponder, and meditate, enjoy and savor His glory and His goodness and His supremacy. And when You have captivated our hearts, lead us, we pray, to labor and even suffer to lead others into this all-satisfying passion. For Your own sake, Father, and the glory of Your dear Son Jesus. Amen.