

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
God's Final Word
Hebrews 1:1-4

Communication can be clear or sometimes not so clear. We've all experienced that. Sometimes, communication doesn't pass because of the hearer. For example, my wife will remind me, "David, you've listened to my words, but you didn't really hear what I said." I'm sure none of you husbands have ever been told that!

Sometimes poor communication is the fault of the speaker, like these communication gaffes that have been made publicly:

In the 1994 Miss America contest, the former Miss Alabama was asked, "If you could lie forever, would you and why?" She answered: "I would not live forever, because we should not live forever, because if we were supposed to live forever, then we would live forever, but we cannot live forever, which is why I would not live forever."

Former Mayor Marion Barry of Washington, DC said, "Outside of killings, Washington has one of the lowest crime rates in the country."

Okay, in light of all the political talk these days, here's one. During her husband's presidency, when Hilary Clinton commented on the release of subpoenaed documents she said, "I'm not going to have some reporters going through our papers. *We* are the president."ⁱ

Needless to say, communication can be confusing. But when we come to God's communication to us, it is clear and definitive. Listen to these words from the opening verses of this letter to the Hebrews.

1:1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. 3 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. 4 So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. Hebrews 1:1-4

We've already pointed out that this entire letter is in reality a sermon. It is a piece of inspired oratory that reflects the eloquence and beauty of pure Greco-Roman style. It was common in that culture to begin a sermon with an introduction known as an *exordium* or *proem*. In this type of introduction, the speaker would give a tightly woven overview of the main subjects to be addressed in the rest of the message.ⁱⁱ This was often presented in a way that would grab the attention of the audience, all the while presenting the main ideas to be developed. That's exactly what the speaker does in these first four verses, which, in the Greek text, form one continuous sentence.

GOD HAS SPOKEN

That's the big idea of these introductory verses. In fact, this idea is so important that the author mentions it twice, once in verse 1 and then again in verse 2: "In the past God *spoke* to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has *spoken* to us by his Son." These verses, then, are about God's communication to you and me. Our God is not silent. We have a God who speaks. And he does not stutter. If we are not hearing, it's *not* because God has not spoken. It's because we are not listening!

God's communication is all around us. Psalm 19 says, "The heavens tell of the glory of God..." That's *general revelation*. God has spoken through what he has created. But God didn't leave it at that. He has also given us *specific revelation*. And it's this specific communication that the author is speaking of in these verses.

I want you to notice that in verse 1-2 there is an intentional contrast between the specific ways in which God has spoken in the past and the way God has now spoken in the present. We'll call this the "older communication" and the "newer communication."

God's Communication

	Older Communication Hebrews 1:1	Newer Communication Hebrews 1:2
Time Period	in the past	in these last days
Audience	to our forefathers	to us
Means	in various ways (through the prophets)	on one way ⁱⁱⁱ (in the Son)

I want you to notice first the contrast of *time periods*. The older communication, part of which we find recorded in the Old Testament, took place "in the past." This means *before Christ's first coming*. But now "in these last days" God has given us a newer communication.

By the way, did you know that we live "in these last days" right now? I often hear people ask, "Do you think we are living in the last days?" My answer is always the same, "Yes!" We have been living in the "last days" since the time of Christ's first coming.^{iv} The period called the "last days" extends from Christ's first coming up to and including the establishment of his earthly kingdom.

But not only does the author contrast time periods in these verses. He also contrasts the *audience*, those who received this revelation. The older communication was given to "our fathers." Remember, the speaker is speaking (writing) to *Hebrew* Christians. So when he says, "our fathers," he is thinking of the Jewish nation, the privileged, chosen people of the Old Testament who received God's communication. In contrast, God's communication now is "to us," in fact to all who receive it, irregardless of background or nationality.

One of the key themes of this letter is “hearing” what God has to say. Three times in chapters 4 and 5 we read, “Today, if you *hear* his voice, do not harden your hearts...” These Hebrew Christians were in danger of stopping up their ears and hardening their hearts to the point where they could no longer hear. One of the first steps in moving on to maturity in the Christian life is learning to listen. James says: “...be quick to listen, slow to speak...” (James 1:19). The first step towards maturity is listening to God’s Word, not the abundance of our words. Too many of us reverse the order. We are slow to listen and quick to speak. This is really a “biggy” for you and me in our activist culture. To what degree did you prepare yourself to come to this service and *listen* to God? Did you take time to pray before you came? Did you come with an expectant attitude?

But here’s the key point the author wants to make. He really focuses in these verses upon the *means* of this communication. While not as apparent in our English versions, the writer places the words “at many times and in various ways” right at the beginning of the verse. He does this to place the emphasis on the contrast of *ways* (or means) in which God has spoken.

In the older communication, God spoke “in many portions and in various ways.” Now I know the NIV says, “In many *times*...” True, it was given at different times. But the emphasis of the word is on the idea of many *portions*. The older revelation was somewhat piece-meal. One prophet spoke one aspect of truth. And then another prophet spoke another aspect of truth. It was given in portions and it was given progressively. It was not given all at once. And more than that, the means of revelation was quite varied. The various ways include dreams, visions, miracles, stories, angels, and even a still, small voice.

In stark contrast to such “piece-meal” and progressive revelation in the past, in these last times God has spoken completely and definitively. In other words, in the past before Christ’s first coming, God spoke variously and progressively. But now in these last days, God has spoken completely and definitively. And that complete and definitive revelation is in God’s Son.

GOD HAS SPOKEN IN HIS SON

And this is the second main truth that the speaker wants to get across to you and me. Not only has God spoken, but he has spoken finally and definitively in His Son. What the speaker has said up to this point emphasizes the *finality* of God’s communication: God has spoken. What he is going to say now emphasizes the *quality* of God’s communication: God has spoken in His Son.

You see, it is not only in the *words* and *works* of Jesus that God has spoken. It is particularly in his *person* that God has spoken. That is why the written Word of God is never to be an end in itself. It is always intended to point you and me to the living Word of God, the Son. The works of Jesus and the words of Jesus are only intended to point us to the person of Jesus.^v

Remember what we said last week? The main idea of this book is: Consider Jesus, our Great High Priest. Are you stuck at a point in your journey with Jesus and find that you aren’t progressing? Then consider Jesus. Are you struggling with an area of temptation where you’ve given in time and time again? Then consider Jesus. And from the very outset, the author helps us do that. He gives us here seven statements which focus on the *nature*, *work* and *status* of the Son.

First, the Son is *inheritor*: “whom he appointed *heir* of all things.” This is probably an allusion to Psalm 2:8 (a passage which he also quotes again in verse 5) which says this: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.” It is the Son, in the line of David, who has been appointed heir of all things.

The idea of being an “heir” is extremely important in this letter. For example, Hebrews 6:12 says, “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience *inherit* what has been promised.” We’ll discover that as we persevere, we share in the inheritance with the Son. This idea will also be helpful in understanding the five warning passages in this letter.

Not only is the Son inheritor, he is *creator*. Hebrews 1:2 says: “through whom he made the universe.” The fact that he is inheritor or heir points us to the end of all things when he will reign. The fact that he is creator points us to the beginning of all things when he made the universe.^{vi} Everything has been *created* by the Son. And one day everything will be *subjected* to the Son.

The Son is inheritor and creator, but he is also *revealer*. In verse 3 the speaker says: “he is the *radiance* of God’s *glory* and the exact *representation* of his being.” The glory of God speaks of the display of the sum total of God’s attributes. When you take all of God’s attributes, his holiness, his mercy, his righteousness, his grace, his all-powerful nature, the fact that he is all-knowing, etc. and put all of this together, what you have is “glory.” Radiance speaks of splendor or intense brightness.

The Son is also the exact “representation of his person.” In the speaker’s language, this word – similar to our word “character” – originally referred to an instrument used for engraving a letter or image, and later to the letter or image itself. And so we speak of a *character* of our alphabet. Jesus Christ is God spelling himself out in language that you and I can understand.

He is revealer, but he is also *sustainer*: “sustaining all things by his powerful word.” Jesus Christ not only created all things; he sustains all things. Jesus is not to be compared to a mighty “atlas” of Greek mythology who carries the world on his shoulders! All that we see in the universe was created by the word of the Son and it is sustained by the word of the Son. And if he can sustain the universe by his powerful word, don’t you think that he can sustain you in what you are going through right now?

He is also *redeemer*. Verse 3 goes on to say: “after having made purification for sins.” To create, God had only to speak. But to redeem, he had to sacrifice. In this statement the speaker introduces one of the primary concerns of the letter. In chapters 9 and 10 he will spend much time demonstrating the superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in comparison to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.^{vii}

He is also *ruler*. In verse 3 we read that he “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” We hear a lot about what Christ has done in the past for us while on earth: his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, his sacrifice for our sins. But we hear very little about what he does for us in the present in heaven: his ongoing ministry as High Priest for each of us. This is one of

the main themes of this letter. Part of moving on to maturity is growing in our understanding of what Jesus Christ, as our High Priest, makes available to us in the present *from heaven*.^{viii}

Because the Son is inheritor, creator, revealer, sustainer, redeemer and ruler, he is also *superior*. He “became as much *superior* to the *angels* as the *name* he inherited is superior to theirs” (verse 4). We’ll say more in the next message about the emphasis on angels in this passage. What I want you to notice this morning is that here the author introduces the final theme that he’s going to develop in this letter, that of the superiority of Christ. Throughout this letter we discover that Christ is a superior priest (7:7) with a superior covenant (7:22; 8:6) which is based on superior promises (8:6) and a superior sacrifice (9:23; 12:24).

What God is saying is this: All of the things that were of such importance to these Hebrews (angels, prophets, covenants, sacrifices) are actually *inferior* in comparison to the *superior* quality of what God has now given us in Jesus Christ.

In these verses we see Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king. He is prophet, for through him and in him God has spoken his final word. He is also priest, for he made purification for our sins on the cross. And he is king, having sat down at the right hand of God on high.

WE MUST PAY *MORE CAREFUL ATTENTION!*

We must pay *more careful attention*, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. Hebrews 2:1

I want you to notice that the speaker does not say that we must pay careful attention. What does he say? He says that we must pay *more* careful attention. These believers, and maybe you and I included, were paying attention to a certain degree. The very fact that they, and we, are believers indicates that we’ve given some attention to the importance of Jesus Christ in our lives. The problem is *not* that they weren’t paying any attention at all. The problem is that they needed to pay *more* attention.

I would dare say that this is the problem that you and I have. The very fact that we are here this morning says that we give some attention to the priority that Jesus Christ should have in our lives. The real question for most of us is not “Do we pay attention?” The pressing question is “Do we pay *enough* attention?”

The opposite of paying attention as we should is to “drift away.” This same idea is used in Proverbs 4:20 –

Son, pay attention to what I say. Listen to my words. Never let them *get away* from you.
Proverbs 4:20-21 TEV

In the days of the author, the word was used of a ring that “slips off” a finger. Now I wouldn’t have that problem. The other day I tried to get my wedding ring off, and nearly had to bring in a chain saw! But have you ever lost a ring because it slipped off your finger unnoticeably? Then only later you suddenly realize what has happened. This word was also used to describe a boat that drifts away in a strong current. I remember when this happened to me and my oldest boy.

We were rafting down white water in some of the roughest gorges of central France. Everything was going fine until we hit a protruding rock. Our raft capsized in the strong current. I tied to grab a hold of Jonathan, because he was only 13 at the time. But before I knew it, the rapid current had taken him downstream. He “slipped away” from me.

There are many “currents” that you and I face as we live each day that can easily lead us away from Christ and his Church. Let me mention two that we share in common with these Hebrew believers.

First, we can slip away from God’s Word. There is so much in our society to draw our attention away from the Son and from His Word to us. God has spoken and His Word is final. In what ways do you need to pay more careful attention to His Word?

We can also slip away from God’s people. There is reason to believe that some of these believers were starting to miss out on the weekly gathering of the church. That’s why the author says: “And let us not forsake the gathering of ourselves together, as is the practice of some.” We also have the tendency to forsake the gathering of God’s people. We can all too easily allow a sporting event, an activity for our children, fatigue, or even personal preferences about music and worship to keep us away from the weekly gathering of the church.

God has spoken. God has spoken in His Son. We must pay *even more careful* attention to God’s communication to us. What about you? Where in *your* life do you need to listen more attentively? Think about it.

ⁱ Clipped from teacher’s notes, *Fresh Start with God* copyrighted 2000 Gerald Sharon and Brad Johnson.

ⁱⁱ *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 46.

^{iv} In fact, the word here translated “last” is the word from which we get the English expression “eschaton” or the theological word “eschatology.” That’s simply a fancy word for “final time” referring to the period from Christ’s death, burial and resurrection up until and including his return to establish his kingdom.

^v We see this emphasis on the Son throughout this letter. There are seven specific references to Christ as the Son in this letter (1:2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:8; 6:6; 7:28; 10:29).

^{vi} Cf. John 1:3; Col 1:16. 1 Cor. 8:6 “yet for us there is but one God, the Father, *from whom all things came* and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom all things came* and through whom we live.”

^{vii} Heb 9:12 “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.” Heb 9:26 “But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Heb 10:12 “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

^{viii} Already, the author alludes to Psalm 110 which is mentioned four times in this letter: 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2.