

“Listening to God’s Voice”
Hebrews 1:1-14
April 25, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

We’re beginning today a study of one of the more neglected books of the New Testament. More sermon than letter in its form, Hebrews is a bit strange to modern readers. Much of it is based on a New Testament perspective of an Old Testament book. But that book, Leviticus, is probably one of the least read books of the Old Testament. So at one level, Hebrews is a little-read commentary on a little-read Old Testament book. It speaks at length about such unfamiliar things as the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the order of Melchizedek. In addition, it contains some of the strongest warnings of the Bible, which also happen to be some of the most difficult to understand passages of the book (Hebrews 6, for example).

In spite of all these difficulties, Hebrews is a book designed to bring comfort to God’s people as they endure severe suffering. We don’t know the exact nature of the suffering being endured by the recipients of this sermon, but it was definitely severe. It included the plundering of their property (10:34) and public shaming (10:33). Some commentators believe that the suffering addressed here is located in Nero’s persecution of Christians after the great fire in Rome in 64 AD. That fire burned for three weeks before it was finally extinguished, burning ten of the fourteen districts of the city. It was rumored that the emperor, Nero, was responsible for the fire. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote how Nero dealt with these rumors. “To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats, and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians.” Christians were arrested and tortured to name the identity of other Christians, who were then cruelly executed. In response, they fled to the catacombs, which were the underground tunnels used as burial tombs. They were safe from arrest there because the Roman police would not pursue them in those tunnels. In the face of this cruel persecution, some were tempted to embrace Judaism, since the Jews at this time were more easily tolerated. Others simply stopped going to public worship gatherings, which were conducted as house churches. So the author will have to tell them later not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (10:25). Still others were tempted to accept the Roman terms of release—a public denial of Christ.

The author of Hebrews lifts up Jesus as the answer to these temptations. They need to fix their eyes on Jesus (12:2). In a word, this is the theme of this book. The great need of suffering Christians is to fix their eyes on Jesus. To help us do that, the entire book describes Jesus in such a way that we will want to look to him as our great God. I remember once reading something C. S. Lewis said about good writing. He said that good writers don’t just tell people what they

should feel, but describe things in such a way that they actually feel that. Good writers don't just tell their readers, "It was scary." They describe the scene in such a way that the reader can feel the fear. Our author doesn't just tell us to look to Jesus as the one who stabilizes our lives in the face of severe suffering; he describes Jesus in such a way that the reader wants to trust him. Chapter one begins with the most basic of concepts for the Christian, our need to listen to God. The author doesn't just tell us to listen to Jesus. In this first chapter, he describes Jesus in such a way that we want to listen to him.

I. Listening to God's Voice – vs. 1-4

Our author begins with the idea of a God who speaks. The first recorded words of Satan in the Bible report that he challenged the integrity of God's words. **"Did God actually say...?"** (Genesis 3:1) he asked Eve as he tempted her. Our enemy knows that the key to the success of his efforts to destroy humanity is to convince us that God's word cannot be trusted. Our friend, the author of this book, knows that the key to our survival is to receive God's communication to us. So he begins right here with the idea of God's speaking. He spoke not just once, but repeatedly to Israel through the prophets. Communication is an essential part of any relationship, and God wants a relationship with humanity. Even after the fall of the human race into sin, God doesn't break off communication. He spoke to Adam and Eve, even giving them the promise of a Deliverer, one who would crush the head of the serpent. He spoke to Abraham a word to the effect that he would bless the entire world through his offspring, which we know now to be a reference to Jesus. He spoke to Moses as a friend speaks to his friend. Through dreams and visions and various other means, God revealed his word to the prophets of the Old Testament, who then brought it to God's people.

The first word of verse two announces a change in God's communication to us. Now, in these last days, which refers to this entire age, God has spoken to us by his Son. The prophetic office as it existed in the Old Testament no longer exists because God has spoken in a final way through a greater prophet, his Son, Jesus. It's not the case that God's previous revelation through the Old Testament prophets needed correction. It was not inaccurate; it was just incomplete. If parents tell their three-year old that Mommy has a baby in her tummy and their three-year old will be getting a new brother or sister, they've simply spoken in a way appropriate to a three-year old. Years later, it would be appropriate to supply fuller information about female reproductive anatomy and the details of how pregnancies happen. God told Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, but it wasn't until Jesus that we really understood the full meaning of that.

One of the theological implications of this passage is that we believe that God no longer reveals himself to us through new prophets or new revelation. You can't improve upon perfection, and God's communication through Jesus is both clear

and complete. He is the perfect expression of God's nature because he is God. It has been pointed out by many that Jesus is revealed here in the Old Testament terms of prophet, priest and king. God supplied to Israel leaders who served in all three of these offices, and Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of them all.

Prophets speak God's word to us. They represent God among men. Priests do just the opposite. They represent men in the presence of God, providing sacrifice for purification and forgiveness. Kings govern and rule our lives. The point is that we need all three of these, and Jesus is the perfect provision of all three. We need a prophet, so Jesus is the final prophet God provides. God **"has spoken to us by his Son"** (v. 2). The prophets of the Old Testament often brought disruption. Do you remember how King Ahab referred to the prophet Elijah? He called him a "troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18:17). There was some truth to that, but not in the way Ahab meant it. As God's prophet, Elijah had challenged their worship of Baal. He was a troubler of Israel's sin because that's what a prophet is supposed to do. Part of Jesus' prophetic work is to disrupt what needs disrupting in our lives. He does so by challenging our idolatry and sin. Part of listening to Jesus is to give him permission to disrupt our lives by disagreeing with us.

Jesus is also a priest, **"making purification for sins"** (v. 3). He represents our needs in the presence of God, and we have no greater need than that of forgiveness and purification. The purification the author speaks of here is something that happens in the great courtroom of heaven. We have no standing in that courtroom, nor anything that could atone for our sins. But Jesus does have standing, and his offering is an adequate payment for our guilt. Much of this book is going to be devoted to speaking of Jesus as our priest. Suffering Christians need to know that God is for them. They are not suffering as punishment for their sin because Jesus has fully taken that punishment for them. God is for them. Sin has been paid for and fully forgiven through the blood of Jesus. Guilty consciences are cleansed as we listen to Jesus our priest.

Jesus is also our King. **"He upholds the universe by the word of his power"** (v. 3). He is now seated in the place of all authority, **"at the right hand of the Majesty on high"** (v. 3). Jesus governs all things in this world. If prophets disrupt our lives, kings give stability to our lives. The rule of the king provides us with justice. He rules not just in the big areas of the universe, but in the small details of each of our lives. This brings great comfort to suffering Christians. It brings great comfort to Christians living in troubling times. Imagine the comfort coming to a Christian standing before Nero's court and hearing a sentence of death passed upon him. His eyes are fixed on Jesus and he remembers that Jesus is the ultimate King and Judge. Even if he dies at the hands of an unjust earthly tribunal, God's good purposes for him will prevail.

II. Listening to God's Voice Alone – vs. 5-14

After describing Jesus as God's final revelation to us, and introducing him as our ultimate prophet, priest and king, the rest of the chapter takes a bit of a curious direction. Multiple Old Testament passages are utilized to support the point that Jesus is greater than angels. What I find curious about that, especially in our day, is that it seems like he's preaching to the choir. Have you ever met a Christian attempting to make the opposite point, that Jesus is inferior to angels? I'm sure there are non-Christians who would believe that, but how could any Christian think that? So why does he go to such lengths to demonstrate a point few, if any, would dispute?

Sometimes the theology of the heart doesn't match the theology of the head. It may be that our head theology regards as indisputable that Jesus is superior to all the angels, while our heart theology is prone to give greater attention to something like angels. It is likely that the reason the author mentions angels is something that Paul says in Galatians 3:19. He points out how the Law of Moses was put in place through angels. That does serve to emphasize the importance of the Law. It wasn't just a product of human ingenuity, but was delivered from heaven by angels. But as much of the rest of this book will show, the law only pointed to Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the Law. As authoritative as God's law is, Jesus is more authoritative because Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law.

How might we apply this to ourselves? We do so by inquiring about the degree to which we tend to give other voices precedence over the voice of Jesus in our lives, especially during challenging times. Back in the 1970s in America, prophecy conferences were all the rage. Multiple Bible teachers claimed to have unlocked the key to the Bible's statements about the future. The first sermon Wendy and I heard preached after our marriage in 1980 was given the title, "What the Bible says about Russia in the 1980s". People flocked to attend these conferences, buying the books authored by the conference speakers, studying prophecy charts and generally giving a great deal of energy to this. Since almost everything these teachers and conferences predicted turned out not to happen, we can safely say now that these speakers had in fact not unlocked the key to the Bible's statements about the future. But the popularity of those conferences does help us see how we all so easily divert our attention from Jesus and give it to other voices that seem at the moment more compelling and useful to us.

I looked up this week the top ten selling books on Amazon in their category of religion and spirituality. There were none on the Bible and the future, but there were also none about Jesus. Most were concerned with practical issues of living, such topics as a practical guide to freedom or how to use our words to the greatest benefit. I haven't read any of those books, so I'm not qualified to evaluate them one way or the other. My point is simply that our hearts naturally go to places other than Jesus to deal with the brokenness and challenges of life. There was no title among these top sellers that made me think the book had anything to do with Jesus. You may remember me reporting several years ago of a story I read about a young Hindu man who began to have questions about Jesus. He decided

to attend a large church near his home. But after attending every Sunday for a couple of months, he still heard nothing about Jesus. He heard plenty of sermons about successful living, but he wanted to hear about Jesus. He concluded that the church must offer some special class to learn about Jesus, so he asked the pastor where he might go to hear about Jesus.

We have a saying that the good is the enemy of the best. There is a certain alluring quality to practical steps. And practical steps for successful living are a good thing if the advice is sound. But that is not best. The voice of Jesus is best. Communication from angels is good, but it is not best. The key is to keep these things in their proper places. The author tells us what the proper place is for angels. They are beneath the Son. The Son rules and the angels serve. The last verse of the chapter describes well the service of the angels. **“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”** This verse is the basis of our understanding of what are commonly referred to as guardian angels. It teaches that these powerful creatures serve us, even before a person comes to faith in Jesus. I would imagine that there are countless times when we’ve been in danger and didn’t even know it. But God did and sent his angels to serve us by protecting us. But the point is that the angels of heaven take direction from the Lord of heaven, our Lord Jesus. He is the ruler of the entire universe, and our need is to listen first to him.

CONCLUSION:

The way this book starts is important. The Christians addressed here are experiencing a world that seems to be falling apart. The author’s prescription for them is to remind them that our God is a speaking God, who has spoken his best word to us in Jesus. He speaks because he wants a relationship with us, and relationships require communication. It is because of the importance of this that truth is under assault in our day. It’s never been otherwise. This is the reason Satan’s first words called into question the truth of God’s word. He knows that if we lose our center in God’s reliable words, we lose everything. Life falls apart.

I wonder if this lies at the root of the problems we are seeing in our world today. If we lose our center in God’s truth, then morality becomes what those in power say it is. Pragmatism and experience win out over truth. If it works or if it makes me feel good, then it must be true. If we lose the truth of God’s voice speaking to us through Jesus, we’ve lost everything. So the lesson is clear. Listen to Jesus through his word. Let him disagree with you and disrupt you. Remember that he is your prophet, priest and king.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 1:1-14

1. What has been your experience with the book of Hebrews? Has it comforted you? Troubled you? Puzzled you? Do you have a favorite passage from the book?
2. The recipients of Hebrews were experiencing some severe temptation, to the point that they were in danger of falling away. Have you ever experienced the danger of falling away in your own life? What circumstances might be most conducive to your falling away?
3. Have you ever known someone who renounced God and the church due to a difficult circumstance in their own life? Can you describe that?
4. The author's prescription for Christians who are suffering to the point that they are in danger of falling away is to point them to Jesus, and he begins with the need to listen to Jesus. Do verses 1-2 teach us not to expect any further revelation from God? How so?
5. What do you think it means to listen to Jesus?
6. The author says that we should listen to Jesus because he is the perfect prophet, priest and king. Prophets speak God's word to us, which is often disruptive. Has God ever disrupted you with his word?
7. Jesus is also a priest and a king. How does Jesus as priest and king help suffering people remain faithful?
8. The section about angels teaches us to listen to Jesus over all other voices, no matter how compelling those alternate voices may be. What are the most compelling voices for you outside of Jesus?