

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 8 January 2017

No. T0971

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The Greatness of Christ: Christ greater than the Prophets (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Have you ever thought, "It would be wonderful if God would speak directly to me". But He has! We can see that in the Hebrews 1:1-2: "*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.*" In fact, God has always spoken to men and women in various ways, and this culminated in God coming to our world in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and speaking to us directly.

Actually, right at the start of man's history, we see that God spoke. In Genesis 3:8-9, we read that Adam and Eve "*heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'*" It seems as if it was God's custom to join Adam and Eve in the evening, and He called out for them. But Adam and Eve no longer felt comfortable in God's presence, because they had listened to His enemy and disobeyed His command.

It wasn't just that they had disobeyed, bad as that was. Their disobedience stemmed from a disbelief of God's words. God had said **not** to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He had said to Adam, "*in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). The serpent contradicted God's word when he spoke to Eve: "*You will not surely die*" (Genesis 3:4). The serpent also maligned God's character, making out that God was selfishly keeping them back from something to be desired: "*For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*" (Genesis 3:5). So as a result of the serpent's lie, Eve no longer believed God, nor trusted His character.

All this led to a separation between God and Adam and Eve. They had to leave the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24), and did not often speak face to face with God as before. But God still spoke to them and to their descendants, as we read in Hebrews 1:1 just earlier: "*God spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets.*" However, we notice a difference from speaking face to face - God now tended to use prophets as an intermediary.

What exactly is a prophet? Basically, a prophet is a spokesperson for God. They were used to proclaim a message directly from God, whether by speech or in writing. Our subject today is "Christ greater than the prophets", and so it is interesting to consider some of the characteristics of the prophets.

One thing to note is that the prophets knew when they were being inspired by God to give out His word. The prophetic word as recorded in the Bible is often prefaced by a definite time at which that word came. Listen for example to the first three verses of the prophet Ezekiel, and note the times and places specified: "*Now it came to pass **in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month**, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. **On the fifth day of the month, which was in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity**, the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the River Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was upon him there.*" (Ezekiel 1:1-3, **bold type** added for emphasis). Ezekiel knew exactly where he was, and what day it was, when the word of God came to him.

That meant that the prophets were not *always* giving out God's word. When they were not inspired with a message from Him, they could make mistakes just like we can. Last summer I gave a talk about King David wanting to build God's temple in Jerusalem. He told the prophet Nathan about his idea, and Nathan responded enthusiastically, "*Do all that is in your heart, for God is with you*" (1 Chronicles 17:2). However, if we read the next two verses in 1 Chronicles 17, we see this: "*But it happened that night that the word of God came to Nathan, saying, 'Go and tell My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: 'You shall not build Me a house to dwell in'''" (1 Chronicles 17:3-4). That must have been rather awkward for Nathan! He now had to go back on what he said and tell David that God was saying "No". It's a good lesson for us, not to be too hasty with giving advice or an opinion! But it does show that Nathan knew the difference between when he had received a word from God, and when he was just giving out his personal opinion.*

This is very different to the Lord Jesus. I remember being struck with a comment that I read in a book called *The Incomparable Christ*, by J Oswald Sanders, that the Lord Jesus never apologised for anything He said. He never had

to take back a word, or change His opinion. In fact, the Lord Jesus made far-reaching claims for His words. In Matthew 24:35, He said that, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.”* Back in Matthew 7, when He gave the parable about the house built on the sand and the house built on the rock (see Matthew 7:24-27), He concluded Matthew 7 by saying, *“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock”* (Matthew 7:24). We would never be able to make such claims for our words!

Another thing to note about the prophets is that although most were good, a few were bad. That may sound surprising, but there are a few people who are recorded in the Bible as either having prophesied against their will, or without them really knowing that they were prophesying. Samuel is a good example of a good prophet. Many of you will be familiar with the story of Samuel in the Old Testament, of how he was sent as a young boy to assist Eli the High Priest, and how the boy Samuel heard God speaking to him at night. You can read about it in 1 Samuel 3:1-21. The last three verses of that chapter tell us something about Samuel: *“So Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD. Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD”* (1 Samuel 3:19-21).

Balaam, by contrast, was a bad prophet. He did not have faith in God. You can read about him in Numbers 22-24. There you will see that Balak, the King of Moab, tried to hire Balaam the prophet to curse the Israelites. Balaam would have liked to do so, because Balak had promised him plenty of riches as a reward. But God intervened and prevented Balaam from cursing them. He was obliged to bless them instead!

The situation is completely different with the Lord Jesus. In John 8:29, we read that He said, *“The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.”* In Acts 10, when Peter was preaching to the Roman centurion Cornelius, he said in Acts 10:38, *“how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”* There was never anything faulty with Him. He never said things under duress or against His will. Indeed, He often pointed out that the words He spoke were the words of His Father. For example, let’s read John 12:49-50: *“For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.”*

Another difference between Christ and the prophets is that the words of the prophets were partial and fragmentary revelations of the whole of God’s truth and His plan. Hebrews 1:1 again: *“God, who at **various times** and in **various ways** spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets...”* No single prophet had the totality of God’s revelation. But when we come to the *“last days”* (Hebrews 1:2), then we do have God’s final word. Let’s listen again to Hebrews 1:2 *“[God] has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.”*

Summing up so far then, we can say that God has chosen to speak to us directly in the last days through His Son. The Son of God is carefully distinguished from the prophets, as we have been thinking about. Let’s recap, and let’s also consider some of these thoughts in the light of Hebrews 1:1-3:

1. The prophets were servants of God (sometimes unwilling servants, like Balaam), but the Lord Jesus is the heir of all things;
2. The prophets were God’s creatures, who were given the privilege of speaking His word, but the Son is the Creator - as it says in Hebrews 1:2, *“through whom also He made the worlds”*;
3. The prophets were sinful human beings, just like the rest of us, and so were liable to fail. Hebrews 1:3, by contrast, tells us that Jesus is the exact representation of God: *“the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.”*

Why should God choose to speak to us in this way, and what difference does it make? At one level, the prophetic words of the prophets were no less the words of God, although of course as we have seen, **all** of the words that the prophets spoke during **all** of their lifetimes were not necessarily the Word of God. I think we get a clue as to why God speaks to us through His Son at the end of Hebrews 1:3. Hebrews 1:3 says, *“who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”* It’s the part about Him purging our sins that I am thinking about. That is what we needed if we were ever to have direct fellowship with God like Adam and Eve did in the beginning.

The holiness of God brings our unworthiness sharply into relief! You can read about that in the Old Testament, for example in Isaiah 6. When Isaiah had a vision of the LORD, he cried out, *“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts”* (Isaiah 6:5).

Similarly, in the New Testament, when the Apostle John saw the Lord Jesus in His glory in Revelation 1, we read, *“And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last’”* (Revelation 1:17). A vision of God’s holiness always leads us to realise our unholiness.

But God has found a way to restore fellowship between Him and ourselves, without compromising His holiness. Adam and Eve broke the fellowship by their rebellion, but it was God who took the initiative in restoring the fellowship. This adds a beauty to the knowledge that God has spoken to us in His Son. His Son is the One who *“purged our sins”*, and He is the One who speaks to us!

There is one more point to consider when we think about God speaking to us in Christ. It is a **final** revelation.

We have the words of the Lord Jesus, and the record of His life, in the four Gospels. Then in Acts 1:1, we read, *“The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.”* Thus the rest of the New Testament is the completion of what the Lord Jesus *began* to teach. In Colossians 1:25, the Apostle Paul says that part of the stewardship from God that was given to him was *“to fulfill the word of God”*.

The final pieces are given by the Apostle John in the book of Revelation. The Revelation is in fact *the revelation of Jesus Christ*, as we read in the very first verse: *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants - things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John...”* (Revelation 1:1).

Right at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 22:18-19, we see that the words of God are closed off, with a warning from the Lord Jesus Himself about anyone trying to add any more to the Word of God: *“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”*

Actually, the Old Testament prophets knew that they only had a partial and fragmentary revelation from God. They wanted to know how it all fitted together. We are told about this in 1 Peter 1:10-12: *“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven - things which angels desire to look into.”*

What 1 Peter 1:10-12 tell us is that the prophets were keen to know what their prophecies meant, and how they fitted in to God’s overall plan. This itself is also evidence that they knew when they were being inspired and that they had been given a word from God, because otherwise they would not have needed to carefully study and inquire about what the message meant. We normally know what we mean when we decide to say something, or at least it’s generally a good deal better if we do!

However, the prophets were given the understanding that their prophecies were for future generations. The angels themselves are most interested in these things and are keen to look into them (1 Peter 1:12). How much more interested we should be, we who have the great privilege of having the complete Word of God.

We’ve covered a lot of ground in the last fifteen to twenty minutes. Let’s spend a bit of time recapping what we have considered. We thought about how God used to speak to Adam and Eve, but that direct fellowship between God and them was broken after they listened to the serpent and disobeyed God. After that, God principally spoke to men and women through prophets. We then considered what a prophet was - someone who was a spokesperson for God. While most of the prophets were good, like Samuel, some were bad and unwilling, like Balaam. We could also have thought about Jonah, who was man of faith, but who was a reluctant and disobedient prophet. The Lord Jesus, by contrast, always did the things that pleased the Father.

We also thought about how the prophets knew when they were being inspired, and that, when they just spoke on their own authority, they could be mistaken. Nathan the prophet gave hasty advice to King David about building the temple, and he had to go back on what he said! The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, never had to take a word back, and claimed that His words would last for all eternity. His words have permanent authority.

As we’ve just discussed, the prophets gave out a partial and fragmentary revelation of God and His plans, but the Lord Jesus and His servants the apostles were used to complete the Word of God. God has spoken to us *“in these last days”* and we now have a final revelation.

Finally, let's remember that the Lord Jesus is not just a creature and a servant as the prophets were, but He is the Son, the Heir, and the Creator of all things. Furthermore, He is the One who "*by Himself purged our sins*", so that we could have fellowship with God restored. That is the reason, more than any other, why we should be most interested in this revelation from God, and be so thankful that we have His word! For all these reasons, then, the Lord Jesus stands out as greater than the prophets.

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