

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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God's help for Christians today: The greatness of our Saviour

"You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is risen. He is not here." These are the words that the angel spoke to the women who visited the tomb where Jesus had been buried. They are recorded in Mark 16:6. If you think about it, they are really quite staggering words. Could they really be true? Could Jesus really have risen from the dead? These women had seen Him die just days before. What had happened?

This wasn't the end of Mark's description of the events that took place after the crucifixion. In Mark 16:19 he writes that Jesus was *"received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God."*

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most crucial teachings in the whole of the Bible. So much stands and falls on the truth of it. The Apostle Paul acknowledges this when he writes in 1 Corinthians 15:14: *"If Christ is not risen then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty."*

It's not my intention to speak to you about whether or not the resurrection is true as a historical fact. There are many good books that make a coherent logical case for the historical truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But for our broadcast this morning I'm going to assume it is true. Everything I say will be based on the assumption that Jesus did rise from the dead. He is alive and He is now in heaven.

If you're a Christian then you will have no difficulty with that assumption. You will gladly accept that it is true. But if you're not a Christian, then that's a question you'll have to get sorted in your own mind. Is it really true that Jesus did rise from the dead? Is it a historical fact? What do you think?

This morning we start a series that tries to answer the question "Why does it matter that Jesus is alive and in heaven?" Is this all just theoretical fancy or does the fact that Jesus is alive really matter to me? What's the significance of the resurrection? Why do the writers of the Bible bother to record the fact that Jesus is alive?

Over the four weeks we are going to consider four passages in the book of Hebrews. The writer of the book of Hebrews felt it necessary to remind his readers four times that Jesus is alive and seated at the right hand of God in heaven. Each week we're going to take one of those sections of Hebrews in turn and try to see what the consequences are of Jesus Christ being alive and sat down at God's right hand. I hope we'll see that it's not just a matter of nice thoughts but, in fact, a source of real hope for each of us.

For today then, we'll consider a section at the very beginning of the book of Hebrews. Let's read together Hebrews 1:1-4. *"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; 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, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they."*

I want us to see from this passage that Jesus being alive in heaven reminds us of how great He is. If you're a believer, then the passage that we've read reminds us that we've not entrusted our future to just anyone. We've entrusted it to Jesus, God's Son who is sat down in a position of great glory and power at the right hand of God.

So many things we "rely" on today are insecure, even things we think are sure:

- Banks fail;
- Pension schemes change their terms and conditions;
- Family members may let us down;
- Friends may come and go;
- Even good relationships can be affected by illness or death.

Things we once thought so certain can suddenly become insecure and changing.

But Jesus is not like that. Our future is secure because it is based on Jesus, the Son of God. He is sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. The verses we've read together this morning, Hebrews 1:1-4, remind us of how great Jesus is. When we think about the Lord Jesus, alive and sat down in heaven we can remember how glorious He is and we can be filled with admiration for our great Saviour.

For the rest of our time this morning let's consider Hebrews 1:1-4 and think about what they teach us about our great God.

Have you ever found yourself asking God why He doesn't speak to you? I suppose this kind of question can come from a variety of different situations. Perhaps you are a Christian and you find yourself asking why God hasn't said something to you to help in your daily circumstances. Or perhaps you are not a Christian yet and you've said, "If there is a God, why doesn't He say something to us to prove it?" I've come across both questions in the past. I've even found myself asking why God seems so far off and distant sometimes. Has He nothing to say to me?

The passage we've read together is a gentle rebuke to us if we've ever found ourselves asking why God isn't speaking to us. You see, we've read that in fact God has spoken. In fact He has spoken at lots of times and in lots of ways (Hebrews 1:1). But most particularly He has spoken to us through His Son (Hebrews 1:2). Do you see that God isn't distant from us? He isn't remote and unwilling to communicate with us. In fact He has spoken in the best possible way. He has spoken to us through a remarkable person, the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. This is such a remarkable fact and one that is worth all of our consideration.

The book of Hebrews starts in such a remarkable way. God spoke. Did you notice in Hebrews 1:1-4 the fact that God spoke often? He spoke at various times and in various ways to the fathers by the prophets. I think a really important point to learn here then is that God wants to speak to us. He is not distant and unwilling to speak to us. Rather He is so ready to speak to us that He spoke at lots of times and in lots of ways.

Perhaps some of you know some of the Old Testament stories. You might be able to think of some of the many ways in which God spoke to His people. Sometimes He spoke through dreams (see Genesis 37:1-11, 40:1-23). Once He spoke in a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-22). He spoke through signs and even once spoke through a donkey (see Numbers 22:1-33:30). There was no doubt that God wanted to communicate with His people. So if we ever find ourselves asking whether God speaks to us then perhaps we need to remember this passage. It's not like God not to want to speak to us. In fact these verses clearly tell us that He has. Maybe the problem is that we are not listening!

As we move into Hebrews 1:2, we learn that God has a different way of speaking to us today. In the past He spoke to the fathers by prophets but in these last days (i.e. all the time from the time this was written until today) God has spoken to us through His Son. As we look at Hebrews 1:3-4 we'll see why it is so remarkable that God speaks to us through His Son, but I want us to notice first something simple about this fact. This section of Hebrews 1:2, "*has in these last days spoken to us by His Son*" tells me that I don't have to be in doubt as to whether God is speaking to me. He is! Through Jesus. But more than that! God speaks clearly to us. I don't need to wake up after every dream and try to see if I can figure out whether God was speaking to me in it! I don't need to try to interpret circumstances in life to see if God has some secret message for me. Instead I can be confident that God has said everything I need to know through Jesus. By listening more to what God has revealed to us in Jesus, both in His own specific words in the Gospels and the explanations of His actions in the epistles, I can learn what God has to say to me!

Next then, we want to see why it is so good for us that God speaks to us through His Son. This is not to knock the ways in which God spoke in the Old Testament to the fathers by the prophets, but it is to point out that for us today God has spoken in a special way. So why does it matter that God spoke to us through His Son? Why does that make any difference for you when you go about your business later today?

I'm told that the way this sentence is constructed makes the verse run something like "*His Son ... sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.*" That's the main thrust of Hebrews 1:1-4 and all the other clauses are just descriptions that remind us why Jesus could sit down at God's right hand. The writer really wants to draw our attention to this fact and uses all the other clauses in this long sentence to describe ways in which Jesus is worthy to sit at God's right hand.

- He is the heir of all things;
- He made the worlds;
- He displays God's glory (or His excellence);
- He's the image of God, showing us what God is like;
- He upholds all things by His power; and
- He purged our sins.

Surely we get a sense from this sentence of how uniquely great Jesus is. No one else could be substituted into this sentence and it still be true. Only Jesus could be described in this way. Thinking about Jesus in heaven can't help but remind us of the fact that He deserves to be there. If we think about that, we realise how different to us He is. Truly, God has spoken to us in a remarkable way. So we could read this section as

- “Jesus, the appointed heir of all things, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high”; or
- “Jesus, through whom He made the worlds, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high”; or
- “Jesus, being the brightness of His glory, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high” or
- “Jesus, the express image of His person, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high”; or
- “Jesus, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high” and so on.

When we see the verses like this we're suddenly aware that we're being spoken to by someone very special. He is sat at God's right hand in heaven! We're not being spoken to by a prophet or a preacher or a dream, but by someone who is able to sit at God's right hand! We need to sit up and take note of that. It's important to us today because we can be in no doubt as to the fact that God Himself has something to say to you and to me!

Why then is Jesus worthy to sit at God's right hand in heaven in such a glorious position? We'll look at the seven other clauses in these verses that describe to us the greatness of Jesus.

“Appointed heir of all things”

The first is that He is the *“appointed heir of all things”* (Hebrews 1:2) Why is this important? It's because it reminds us that the One who is speaking to us has the power to do something for us. Jesus is the heir of all things. One day He will inherit everything. You or I might be heirs of our parents' estate and that may or may not be worth very much. But Jesus is heir of all things. He will inherit everything. It is rightfully His. I want you to realise how significant this is. If I were to stand and say to you, “God has in these last days spoken to you through David” and I said, “If you believe in me I can forgive your sins and make you right with God” it would be meaningless. Why? Because I can't do anything to help you. I have no authority! But Jesus does because He is the heir of all things. All things belong to Him. So when Jesus speaks to us and offers forgiveness of sins and a new relationship with God, He can do so with authority. The person who is speaking to us has authority. As you think about Jesus sat down in heaven, be encouraged that your salvation depends on someone who has authority to forgive sins.

“Through whom also He made the worlds”

The second clause says *“through whom also He made the worlds”* (Hebrews 1:2). This reminds us of the power Jesus has. I couldn't make the worlds so I would have no power to put right its wrongs. But Jesus does! He made them. The One who is speaking to us is the One who made the worlds. This reminds me that our Saviour not only has the right or authority to reveal God's plans to us by speaking to us, He also has the power to bring them about. He is the one who made the worlds, such is His great power. We can trust then that He is able to bring about our salvation. As we think about Jesus in heaven, be encouraged to think that our Saviour is mighty and powerful.

“The brightness of God's glory”

Jesus is then described as *“the brightness of God's glory”* (Hebrews 1:3). He is inseparable from God. Just like the rays of the sun are indistinguishable from the sun itself, Jesus is the shining out of God's glory and the demonstration of His greatness. So when we learn that God is speaking through His Son, the brightness of God's glory, we are really learning that God Himself is speaking to us. No longer a prophet or a preacher, but God Himself. Think about that. God speaks directly to us through Jesus!

“The express image of His person”

Jesus is also *“the express image of His person”* (Hebrews 1:3) If you ever find yourself asking “If there is a God, why doesn't He show Himself to us?” the answer is “He has”. God has shown us exactly what He is like. We only have to look at Jesus. So if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus, God's exact image. So if you want to know what God thinks about sin, look at Jesus. You'll see someone who never takes sin lightly, and ultimately gave His own life to take the judgement for our sin. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. You'll see that Jesus was filled with compassion and so learn that God is compassionate. You'll see that Jesus showed love and so learn that God is loving. You'll see that Jesus was powerful and performed miracles and so learn that God is powerful and mighty. I could go on but I want you to be clear this morning, we are being spoken to by someone special - God Himself! Will you listen to what He has to say?

“Upholding all things by His power”

The next clause says *“upholding all things by His power”* (Hebrews 1:3). This is another important characteristic of God's Son. He upholds even the air you breathe. The world is only the way it is because Jesus controls it. He sustains it. Maybe you think that you woke up this morning because it was something you felt like doing. In a sense that's true but this little phrase is a striking reminder that the One who is speaking to us upholds our lives. We're only alive at this point because He has kept us. You might not realise that. It's easy not to. But the truth is Jesus upholds our lives. It's worth listening to what He has to say.

“When He had by Himself purged our sins”

Another fantastic reason why Jesus is worthy to sit at God's right hand is in the next clause. Look at it again, *“when He had by Himself purged our sins”* (Hebrews 1:3). Purged is an old word that means to clean deeply, or to rid of whatever is impure. If you had a t-shirt with a big mud stain on it, you might purge it by washing it in hot soapy water. The writer wants us to see that although our sins are like impurities that stain us and tarnish us, Jesus has deeply cleansed us and made us pure.

The One who speaks to us is the same One who has purged or made clean this stain of sin and can make us right with God. We are not being spoken to by someone who is just a prophet and could do nothing about our sin. Instead we are being spoken to by the Son of God who gave Himself to take away our sin and purge away its defiling stain to make us clean and suitable for God's presence.

Have you ever realised that? Have you ever realised that God wants to speak to you and say, “I've made provision for the cleansing of your sin. I've made a way for you to be forgiven. I've made a way to put right what you have done wrong. I've made a way to make you new and clean.” That way was through the death of God's Son. So when I tell you today that God wants to speak to us, it's not by someone who is indifferent to our condition and situation. It's by someone who cares so much for us that He would give Himself in our place to make us right with God. Surely that's worth listening to?

I wondered for a while about why the writer describes God's dealing with our sin in this way. If we had been reading John's writing, we might have expected to read something like “when He had forgiven our sins”. If we'd been reading Paul's writing, we might have expected “when He had paid the penalty for our sins”. It struck me that sin is described in lots of ways in the Bible and that's helpful because it gives us a better idea of what God really means when He talks about sin. Sometimes the picture is of a crime we've committed that requires punishment. Sometimes it's a debt that we owe but can't pay. Sometimes it's an idol that needs tearing down. But the writer here describes it as a messy stain that needs cleansing and purifying.

Maybe that was a helpful way to speak to Hebrew people. After all, the whole of the Old Testament describes ways in which the people could be unclean and the steps they were to go to, to avoid defiling themselves.

I wonder if the writer uses this picture of sin to remind them of a promise in Isaiah 1:18, that the readers would have been familiar with then. There, God says to the people *“though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”* I wonder if the believing Israelites ever wondered how that could truly be so? Well, the writer to the Hebrews seems to almost say here, “Well, this is how it can be. Your sins can be purged. They can be made white as snow. By Jesus.”

If it comes into your mind this week that Jesus is alive in heaven pause for a moment. Don't let the thought pass you by without reminding yourself that the fact He is in heaven tells you He has purged your sin.

I suspect we all have actions that we regret, some perhaps deeply. There are lots of things that we would do differently if we had our time again. That's not necessarily bad, as it's good to be aware of our sinfulness and failings. But the reminder in this passage of Hebrews is that Jesus has purged our sins. If you're a believer you've been thoroughly cleansed. That means we don't need to live with the shame of past actions because God sees us as made new. What a remarkable act of grace and kindness to us on God's part! As you think of Jesus in heaven, remember with thankfulness that Jesus has purged your sins.

There is one final clause in Hebrews 1:4. *“Jesus is better than the angels and has a better name than they do.”* Once again, we're reminded that we are being spoken to by someone special. No prophet has ever given his life for the whole world! Not even any angel has. But Jesus, the Son of God has, and is the one speaking to us today.

So then, how do we respond to the things we've considered together this morning? How will it change us this week? Is it just an interesting fact? Let's read together Hebrews 2:1-3: *“We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and*

every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him."

Did you see what the writer says? Pay even more attention. "*Give the more earnest heed...*" (Hebrews 2:1) Since God has spoken to us through such a remarkable Person, make even more effort to listen. The words through prophets and angels were important; how much more the words of God Himself? Consequently, how much more serious the result of ignoring God's word. "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? It was spoken to us by the Lord Himself*" (Hebrews 2:3). Let's pay attention to what He says.

As we finish off this morning, let's return to the question behind this new series. Why does it matter that Jesus is alive and in heaven? I hope we've seen this morning that this is a crucial truth in the Bible. Jesus alive in heaven reminds me that my sin has been purged. Is that something you can say with confidence? This truth helps us in a daily fight against guilt and shame. I've been cleansed and made new because Jesus has died in my place. What encouragement as we go about our lives! No need for excessive guilt. Jesus has purged my sin. If nothing else, let that be an encouragement to you this morning.

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