

Hebrews



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

Hebrews

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

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Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Hebrews

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G

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To the memory of

*James Montgomery Boice,
with thanks to God for his love of Christ
and his example as a faithful expositor
of God's mighty Word,*

and to

*the apostle and high priest
of our confession, Jesus Christ*

Hebrews 3:1–3

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Con-

Series Introduction

fession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastors-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the

best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

One of the glories of the Bible is the way God takes a particular situation involving a particular group of people and uses it to speak with the greatest of relevance to people of all kinds, in all times, and in all places. The Book of Hebrews provides a great example of this principle. Written by an unknown apostolic leader to a group of Jewish Christians facing persecution in the mid-first century A.D., the words of this book speak to Christians everywhere about standing firm in Jesus Christ. Is there a message more relevant and necessary to the times in which we live?

Few studies can be more profitable to Christians today than that of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In this letter, God exhorts us to persevere in the faith, even in the face of trials. Hebrews tells us *why* we must press on—because of the surpassing supremacy of Jesus Christ—and *how* we must press on—through faith in Christ, like the faith of those who went before us. Hebrews warns us of the pitfalls common to every age and through which many make a shipwreck of their souls, reminding us as well of the many resources available to us in our pilgrimage through this life.

Most valuable of all, the Book of Hebrews offers a singular and matchless presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Showing forth Jesus' supremacy to the angels, to Moses, to Joshua, and to Aaron, the author of Hebrews brings out features of Jesus' portrait that are found nowhere else in the New Testament. Especially in his detailed description of Jesus as our perfect high priest—the most pointed presentation of this office found in all of sacred Scripture—we learn how and why Jesus “is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (Heb. 7:25).

The student of Hebrews will gain detailed knowledge of Old Testament Israel and biblical insight regarding God's intention in the old covenant. Here we see covenant theology laid bare as it is biblically centered on Christ

Preface

and his work. In Hebrews we gain superior insight into God's own view of sacred Scripture; Hebrews consists largely of expositions of Old Testament passages, and in these expositions we survey the contours of how inspiration and inerrancy work out in practice. Furthermore, since Hebrews is not so much a treatise as a sermon—the writer describes it as “my word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22)—pastors and other leaders in Christ's flock receive a helpful model of biblical exhortation and encouragement.

My goal in writing these studies is the same expressed so well by the writer of Hebrews himself: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:23–24). May God bless these studies to all who read them—that you may trust firmly in Jesus Christ until the end, giving glory to his blessed name.

These messages were first preached in the early morning services of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from September 1999 to July 2001. Most of them were preached during our weekly communion service, and I will always be grateful to God that my first pulpit ministry involved the regular communing with God's people in the presence of Christ. Perhaps my fondest memory from that time was administering the sacrament weekly to James Montgomery Boice, then my senior pastor. His humble godliness and love for our Savior made an indelible impact on my heart. These studies are lovingly dedicated to his memory, with praise to God and with thanks for the example Dr. Boice set as a Christian, a pastor, and an expositor of Scripture.

Such is my esteem for the Book of Hebrews that I preached these messages again in the evening services of First Presbyterian Church of Coral Springs/Margate, Florida. To all the faithful and beloved brothers and sisters in this great church, I offer my heartfelt thanks for their constant love and support. I am thankful, as well, for the careful editing of my colleagues Phil Ryken and Dan Doriani, and for the many fine labors of my friends at P&R Publishing. I thank with special gratitude my wife Sharon, whose devotion to Christ and ministry to me make my service to God possible, and our five children, Hannah, Matthew, Jonathan, Ellie, and Lydia. Finally, I give thanks to God for the wonderful gift of his only Son to be the Lamb and the Priest who offered the sacrifice for the forgiveness of my sins, and on whose present intercession I wholly rely. To him be glory forever.



Hebrews

STANDING FIRM IN CHRIST

PART 1



The Supremacy of Christ

1

GOD'S FINAL WORD

Hebrews 1:1–2

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. (Heb. 1:1–2)



scene from Jesus' life and ministry wonderfully depicts what the Book of Hebrews is all about. Matthew 17 tells us that Jesus took his three closest disciples up onto the mount, where they saw him transfigured in glory, speaking with Moses and Elijah. Peter proposed building a tabernacle for the veneration of these three spiritual giants. But just then the Shekinah glory cloud enveloped them in brightness and the voice of God said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matt. 17:5). When the disciples rose from their terror, they did not see either Moses or Elijah, but they saw Jesus alone. A. W. Pink comments: "The glory associated with Moses and Elijah was so eclipsed by the infinitely greater glory connected with Christ, that they faded from view."¹

1. A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 29.

This is what the Book of Hebrews is about—the supremacy of Christ, along with the sufficiency of his work and the necessity of faith in him for salvation.

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

We should begin studying a book with a consideration of its background. Who wrote the Book of Hebrews? To whom was it written and when? What prompted the writing of the letter, what is its literary genre, and on what basis is it included in the biblical canon?

When we consider the authorship of Hebrews, we must first observe that the answer is not stated in the letter itself. There is no opening greeting, nor do the closing remarks identify the writer. There is, however, no shortage of candidates for the honor of authorship.

Throughout church history there has been a strong impulse to name the apostle Paul as the author of Hebrews. There seem to be two main reasons for this, the first of which is that much of the letter's content sounds Pauline. Hebrews 13:23 refers to Timothy, one of Paul's protégés, and chapter 10's theme of joy amidst suffering strongly reminds us of Paul. Therefore, it is argued, the author of Hebrews must at least have been a member of the Pauline circle. The second reason to support Paul has to do with the canonicity of the book. The inclusion of Hebrews in the Bible was not without controversy, and arguments for Paul's authorship naturally strengthened its case dramatically.

Nonetheless, there are many indications that Paul almost certainly did not write Hebrews. First, in all of Paul's other letters he identifies himself, blatantly asserting his apostolic authority. The writer of Hebrews does not identify himself, although some speculate that because of Jewish hostility Paul may have wanted to remain anonymous. More telling is the nature of the Greek in Hebrews, which is of a high literary style in striking contrast to Paul's more common Greek. The structure of Hebrews, with its interspersed exhortations, contrasts with Paul's tendency to save practical applications for the letter's end. Most conclusive is the statement of Hebrews 2:3, which says the author's message "was attested to us by those who heard." In other words, the writer received his message from those who heard it firsthand from Jesus. This is the very thing

Paul always denies in his letters, insisting that he received his revelation directly from the Lord and not from the other apostles (see Gal. 1:12).

With Paul ruled out, other candidates are drawn from his circle and include Luke, Silas, and Priscilla. Most persuasive are the arguments in favor of Barnabas and Apollos. Hebrews 13:22 describes the letter as a “word of exhortation,” and Barnabas’s name means “son of exhortation.” Not only was Barnabas a close associate of Paul, but as a Levite he would likely have had the kind of interest in the Jewish priesthood that shows up in Hebrews. An even more intriguing suggestion was made by Martin Luther in favor of Paul’s sometime associate Apollos. Acts 18:24 identifies him as “an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures,” which qualifies him to write such an extraordinary epistle. Furthermore, Apollos hailed from Alexandria, and Hebrews shows an interest in theological themes known to have been popular there.

So who wrote Hebrews? In the end, we must agree with the ancient scholar Origen, who concluded, “Who wrote the epistle is known to God alone.”² All we can say with confidence is that it came from an apostolic figure who was likely a colleague of the apostle Paul. It did not please the Holy Spirit to have us know the human author’s identity, so we must content ourselves with knowing that the letter is the Word of God.

Also important is the identity of the recipients. The title “To the Hebrews” is not in the text, although it is found in all the earliest manuscripts. This, along with the letter’s content, argues persuasively that these were Jewish Christians who were under pressure to renounce the faith and return to Judaism.

As to their location, the two main options are Palestine and Rome. Those who argue for a Palestinian audience point out that Christians are known to have suffered at the hands of their fellow Jews, and also point to the detailed references to the Jewish temple ritual. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some have tried to show similarities to the writings of the Essene community in the Judean desert. Opposing this theory is the fact that all of the Old Testament citations in Hebrews are from the Septuagint, the Greek version common in that time, which was not used in Palestine as much as elsewhere. Also opposing a Palestinian background is the statement that the recipients of the letter had only heard of Jesus secondhand (see Heb. 2:3).

2. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1965), 6.25.

God's Final Word

Furthermore, Hebrews 12:4 states that earlier persecutions did not involve the shedding of blood, whereas those in Palestine certainly did from the very beginning.

Scholarly consensus has recently shifted in the direction of Rome. Clement of Rome, writing around A.D. 95, shows close familiarity with Hebrews, and the books of Acts and Romans speak of a large Jewish church in Rome from early on. The Jewish Christians there were persecuted in A.D. 49 under the emperor Claudius, and then again in the 60s under Nero. What we know of the former of these persecutions seems to fit the description of 10:32–34 and 12:4 (in that Claudius's persecution involved loss of property and imprisonment, but not bloodshed), and the anticipation of violence fits the latter, with Nero's notorious violence against Christians. Finally, there is the statement of Hebrews 13:24, "Those who come from Italy send you greetings." It could be that a pastor now in Rome was writing to Jewish believers in Palestine. But the more natural reason for Italian Christians to send their greetings is that the readers were themselves from Italy.

If Rome was the location of the audience, then the letter would have been written shortly before A.D. 64, when Nero's persecution broke out. Under almost all theories, Hebrews was written prior to A.D. 70, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans. Not only does Hebrews speak of the temple rituals as a present reality, but it is hard to imagine its writer passing up such an opportunity as the fall of Jerusalem to prove the passing away of the old covenant religion.

The purpose of Hebrews is made clear by its content. The writer warns Christians not to fall back from faith in Christ in the midst of trials and exhorts them instead to press on to full maturity. The letter should not be thought of as a theological treatise, but as a sermon written by a pastor to a congregation from which he is separated. The writer describes it as "my word of exhortation" (13:22). His method is to point out the supremacy of Christ over everything to which the readers might be tempted to turn; he is superior to angels, to Moses and the prophets, to Aaron and the Levitical priests, to the blood sacrifices of the old covenant, and to the tabernacle and temple themselves. Since Jesus is the true messenger, the true prophet, the true priest, and the true sacrifice, to renounce him is to lose salvation altogether. Therefore, the readers must hold fast to Jesus Christ.

The author’s plea is summed up in Hebrews 10:23: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

The final matter of background to consider is the place of Hebrews in the New Testament canon. The early church’s basic test of canonicity was proof of apostolicity. This did not mean that a book had to be written by an apostle, as is shown by the ready inclusion of Mark, Luke, Acts, and other books. It was sufficient for the author to be an associate of an apostle, so long as the teaching was apostolic in character. We should not think, however, that it was the church that created the canon, since really it was exactly the opposite. The canon—that is, the apostolic teaching of the New Testament writings—created the church. Hywel Jones aptly summarizes, “The canon was drawn up . . . by way of response to the effect which sacred literature had on those who heard it. The church’s formal acknowledgement of a piece of literature was an ‘Amen’ to the Holy Spirit’s testimony in it, and not a bestowing of its own *imprimatur*.”³

Any introduction to Hebrews ought to conclude with an appreciation of its outstanding excellence. Here the last word is best given to John Calvin, who wrote in the dedication of his commentary: “Since the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews contains a full discussion of the eternal divinity of Christ, His supreme government, and only priesthood (which are the main points of heavenly wisdom), and as these things are so explained in it, that the whole power and work of Christ are set forth in the most graphic way, it rightly deserves to have the place and honor of an invaluable treasure in the Church.”⁴

GOD HAS SPOKEN

As soon as we begin the Book of Hebrews, we encounter what is perhaps the single most important statement that could be made in our time: “God spoke” (Heb. 1:1). This is one of the most vital things people today need to know. Ours is a relativistic age; as many as 70 percent of Americans insist that there are no absolutes, whether in matters of truth or morality. Secular society having removed God, there no longer is a heavenly voice to speak

3. Hywel R. Jones, *Let’s Study Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), xiii.

4. John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12:ix.

God's Final Word

with clarity and authority. The price we have paid is the loss of truth, and with truth, hope. Even when it comes to those things we think we know, we now consider them mere constructs of thought amidst the constant flux of uncertain knowledge and belief. Really, we are told, we don't know anything for sure, nor can we.

All this is especially the case when it comes to our knowledge of God himself. Can we know our Creator, if there is one? Is there a Savior to help us? Unless God has spoken, we cannot even be sure he is there; unless God is there, there is no ultimate hope for us as individuals, and no answer for the ultimate problem of death. Job asks, "Can you find out the deep things of God?" (11:7) and answers No. By definition, God is beyond the realm of our senses, from which all our self-gained knowledge has to come. Therefore, if God is there and wants us to know him—if he has an answer, a plan, or a salvation—he is going to have to speak to us. And he must speak in a way we can understand. Therefore, there is nothing more important, nothing more essential, than what Hebrews says in its very first verse: "God has spoken."

This is the uniform testimony of the Bible about itself, that it is God's very Word. The Bible's books were written by human authors, who spoke and wrote in human language. But the Bible insists that through them God himself spoke and speaks to us still. Peter explained, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). This is what we refer to as the Bible's *inspiration*. God has communicated to us through the Holy Spirit's leading of its human authors. The point is not that these books contain the inspired insights of men; the point is exactly the opposite. Indeed, we might better speak of the Bible not as being *inspired* but as being *expired*. It is God's Word as from his very mouth, given through the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of human servants. This is what Paul emphasizes in 2 Timothy 3:16, where he says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God."

The divine authorship of Holy Scripture needs to be emphasized today, especially since contemporary scholarship tends to focus on the human authors. It is right, of course, to realize the human contours God used to give different shape to different Bible books. Moses had his own experience and calling and personality and gifts, and God used them to craft a particular message in the books that Moses wrote. The same is true of Paul and

John and all the other biblical writers. But while the Bible itself affirms this, its own emphasis is on divine authorship. Hebrews 1:1 says that God spoke “at many times and in many ways,” and that God employed “the prophets” to do this. But in all of this it was still God who spoke. It is not Moses who spoke in Genesis, nor David who spoke in the Psalms, nor Paul who spoke in Romans. God spoke in the Bible, and we must regard all Scripture as his holy Word.

The Book of Hebrews gives the Bible’s own slant on the process of revelation. Whenever the writer cites Scripture, it is never the human author whom he credits but the divine Author. In Hebrews 2:12 he cites Psalm 22:22 and ascribes it to Jesus Christ speaking in the Old Testament. Hebrews 3:7–11 cites Psalm 95, but prefaces it not by saying “as David said,” but “as the Holy Spirit says.” So it goes all through Hebrews. The point is not to deny the significance of the Bible’s human authors, but to show that our emphasis, following the Bible’s own emphasis, must always be on God speaking in his Word.

This has several important implications. First, if God speaks in the Bible, then the Bible carries divine *authority*. Today, many want to set aside the Bible’s teachings when they collide with current cultural standards. But just as God commands our obedience, so he also demands that we humbly obey his Word. There is nothing so important for Christians to recover today as the awe and respect that Scripture deserves as God’s own revelation to us.

Second, if God wrote the Bible, then it is enduringly *relevant*. After all, if God does not change—and by nature he cannot—then his Word does not change either. It is true that some things said in the Bible were intended only for its original recipients. God told Moses, not us, to “Go down to Egypt.” But the teaching given all through the Bible—on God’s character, on sin and on his moral standards, on the good news of salvation and how it comes to us—abides forever for the simple reason that God abides forever. The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 13 that Christian standards of conduct remain the same because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).

God not only spoke in the Bible to those who first received it, but he speaks as well to those who read it today. This is emphasized in Hebrews. In Hebrews 3:7, for instance, the writer cites Psalm 95, written a thou-

God's Final Word

sand years before, and writes, “as the Holy Spirit *says*.” He uses the present tense. It is not merely what the Holy Spirit *said* back when David wrote it, but what the Holy Spirit says now as God speaks to those who read it. This is why the Bible is fully relevant to all our needs today.

Third, since God has spoken in the Bible, even though he did so with great diversity—“at many times and in many ways”—we also hold to the *unity* of the Bible. The Bible consists of sixty-six books written over at least thirteen hundred years by over forty different people. And yet it is one book with one unified message. James Boice explains:

These people were not alike. Some were kings. Others were statesmen, priests, prophets, a tax collector, a physician, a tentmaker, fishermen. . . . Yet together they produced a volume that is a marvelous unity in its doctrine, historical viewpoints, ethics and expectations. It is, in short, a single story of divine redemption begun in Israel, centered in Jesus Christ and culminating at the end of history. . . . Behind the efforts of the more than forty human authors is the one perfect, sovereign and guiding mind of God.⁵

This provides us with an important interpretive principle, namely, that Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture itself. Since the Bible is one message spoken by God, we should understand the teaching in one passage in light of the way that teaching is given elsewhere in Scripture. To be sure, the Bible’s message is progressively revealed, so that the gospel appears in bud in the Old Testament and in bloom only in the New Testament. Many doctrines are therefore progressively revealed. Nonetheless, the clear teaching God gives in one place constrains our interpretation of the same subject elsewhere in the Bible. This is most relevant to our study of Hebrews, where the author not only finds numerous Old Testament passages to be relevant to his readers, but under the Holy Spirit’s control also gives us an authoritative guide as to how we should understand them (as well as the whole Old Testament).

5. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 58–59.

THE FINAL REVELATION IN GOD’S SON

These opening verses tell us not merely that God has spoken, but that his final and definitive revelation is in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. The writer makes this point through three contrasts in Hebrews 1:1–2. First, there is the *when* of revelation: “long ago,” in contrast to “in these last days.” Second, there is the *to whom* of revelation, “to our fathers,” versus “to us.” Third, there is the *how* of revelation, namely, “at many times and in many ways . . . by the prophets,” versus “by his Son.”

The author’s point, which is the burden of the entire Book of Hebrews, is to show the superiority of Christianity to the old covenant religion. He wastes no time getting to this point, arguing the supremacy of Christ over the prophets. This supremacy does not in any way malign the Old Testament faith. Unlike pagan religions, it was a legitimate revelation and a true faith. In the Old Testament “God spoke,” and it was God-given religion. Nonetheless, Christ is superior and with his coming there is now no excuse for reverting back to Judaism.

The author describes former revelation as coming “at many times and in many ways.” His point is not merely the diversity of revelation in the Old Testament, but its fragmentary, incomplete, and gradual character. Take any one book of the Old Testament—perhaps Genesis, with its rich scenes of creation, fall, and redemption; or Esther, with her courageous faith in an unseen God; or Psalms, with its heart-lifting poetry—and you will read true divine revelation, even necessary revelation. But each book is fragmentary and incomplete. The Old Testament is unfulfilled. It expectantly longs for the answer that comes in Jesus Christ. By contrast, God’s revelation in Christ is not partial or incomplete. This is why the Christian era is described as “these last days.” The point is not that Jesus is about to come back any minute, as many take this to mean (though other New Testament passages tell us to have this perspective), but that this is the age of fulfillment when God’s revelation has been made complete. This is what makes the *when* of Christian revelation so much better. Calvin comments, “It was not a part of the Word that Christ brought, but the last closing Word.”⁶

6. Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 12:6.

God's Final Word

Another reason for the superiority of the Christian faith is the contrast in the channel of its revelation, that is, the *how*. In the Old Testament, God spoke by the prophets, but in the New he speaks by his own Son. One could hardly find a greater group of spiritual giants than the prophets of the Old Testament. Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah—these were outstanding bearers of divine truth. Yet how they pale compared to the very Son of God come to earth. As Jesus put it, “He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all” (John 3:31).

The revelation in Christ, then, given not merely to our forefathers but preserved for us in Scripture, is superior to that given formerly through the prophets. Martin Luther concludes: “If the word of the prophets is accepted, how much more ought we to seize the gospel of Christ, since it is not a prophet speaking to us but the Lord of the prophets, not a servant but a son, not an angel but God.”⁷

JESUS THE TRUTH

Whenever we think of Jesus as the ultimate, final truth, we may remember the confrontation at his trial before Pontius Pilate. The Roman governor had demanded to know if Jesus really thought himself a king. Jesus replied that his kingdom was not of this world. When Pilate responded doubtfully, Jesus related his kingship to the revelation of God's truth in the world. He said, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). Christ reigns through God's Word, because in Christ God has fully and ultimately revealed himself.

What a confrontation that was! Pilate represented the philosophy and wisdom of the world, with its relativism and cruel utilitarianism. Pilate was not able to accept that there could be truth at all. Looking into the very face of God's Son, through whom God has revealed the ultimate truth, Pilate replied, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). This not only shows that what we call postmodernity, with its denial of truth, is really nothing new, but it also

7. Martin Luther, cited in Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 37.

dramatizes the tragedy of our unbelieving world. Jesus put it this way: “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). There before Pilate stood the very Truth of God, and there was Pilate denying even the possibility of truth.

Pilate thought he was judging Jesus, but with the Truth before him it was the governor who really was on trial. The same is true today. When you read or hear God’s message through his Son Jesus Christ, you stand before the Truth. If you reject him, God’s final Word, you consign yourself to darkness—the darkness of spiritual blindness now and the eternal darkness that comes in God’s final judgment.

But if you look to Jesus Christ, and if in him you see and believe the very Truth of God, then God’s redemptive work of the ages will be fulfilled in you. “At many times and in many ways,” God began preparing the world through the prophets for the coming of his Son. Why? So that in these last days—these days of God’s redemptive fulfillment in Jesus Christ—we might enter into the fullness of salvation. This is what Jesus said to the disciples as they struggled to know the truth on the night of his arrest. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” he told them (John 14:6). And so he is for us. When we receive Jesus as the Truth, then he becomes the Way for us to enter into Life everlasting. This is why Jesus is God’s final Word, and why even if all else in this world is lost we must hold fast to him in faith.