



Hebrews and God “Speaking” By Bob DeWaay

A short time ago I published an article that defended the principle of *scripture alone* from the claim that one can hear a “voice of God” through mystical means (that is, the “word of God” beyond Scripture). Several people objected to my claim, pointing out that the book of Hebrews says that God is still speaking. I understand how they can read it that way, but theirs is not a correct reading of Hebrews. In this paper I will defend this thesis: The book of Hebrews teaches that God has spoken once for all through Scripture.

Those who believe that God is speaking today beyond Scripture cite this passage: “*Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear His voice,*” (**Hebrews 3:7**). Here is how they reason: It must be possible to hear God speak to us today because this passage raises that possibility. They interpret that conclusion to mean that God is directly conveying new information—information that lies beyond what the Scripture teaches—to the mind of the individual.

Before we examine this passage more thoroughly, let’s see what else Hebrews says about “speaking.” Consider this passage: “*and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel*” (**Hebrews 12:24**). Does the “speaking” of Jesus’ blood and Abel’s blood mean that new information is conveyed directly to the minds of believers through personal revelation? Clearly it does not, since blood itself does not literally “speak.” The message conveyed to us by the blood of Jesus is that God’s mercy provides propitiation for sins. The source of that message is Scripture, which tells us of the meaning of Christ’s once-for-all shed blood.

Consider this passage as well: “*By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks*” (**Hebrews 11:4**). The irony about Abel still “speaking” is that in the Genesis narrative, Scripture records not a single word from Abel. What speaks is his faith in God as expressed through the sacrifice he offered. He “still speaks” through the Biblical record. Therefore, Abel’s “speaking” in Hebrews cannot be literal because necromancy is forbidden in the Bible. So we have two instances of “speaking” in the present tense (blood and Abel) where the speaking is literally through Scripture and cannot be interpreted as some metaphysical voice communicating directly to human minds.

God Has Spoken

Hebrews 1:1, 2 lays the foundation in Hebrews for the voice of God that must be heard (meaning “listened to”; i.e., believed and obeyed): “*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.*” This points us to Scripture, Old and New Testament. We know this because in the next chapter we find out that Christ’s apostles conveyed His word to the church: “*How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit*

according to His own will” (**Hebrews 2:3, 4**). The topic was “salvation” and it was not only spoken by the Lord, but conveyed to authoritative apostles who were eyewitnesses who conveyed Christ’s words to the church. The special signs God did through the apostles were “God testifying” that they indeed spoke for Christ.

So God has spoken through His Son and also conveyed Christ’s word to the church through authoritative apostles. This is the faith that was “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). What we are exhorted to do in Hebrews is “pay attention to what we have heard” (Hebrews 2:1), not look for some further word that has never before been spoken. This is in keeping with the Old Testament idea that “to hear” (“hear O Israel”: the *Shemah*) is “to listen to God in faith and obedience.” As the author of Hebrews warns, if we do not listen, we may drift away.

So in this context, let us return to the supposed proof text for new revelations: “*Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear His voice,*” (**Hebrews 3:7**). First of all, notice that the author of Hebrews introduces a passage of Scripture by the phrase “just as the Holy Spirit says.” In the passage, “says” is in the present active tense in the Greek. The Holy Spirit continues to speak through inspired Scripture. The passage cited in Hebrews 3:7-11 is Psalm 95:7b-11 (94:7b-11 LXX). The passage from Psalm 95 reminds the Hebrew Christians about what happened to their forefathers (the wilderness wanderers) as told in Numbers 14.

The background of the warning issued in Psalm 95 is based on the experience of the Exodus generation who heard God speak—audibly and tangibly. When Yahweh brought the people out of Egypt through the Red Sea and to Himself at Sinai He spoke directly to them (Exodus 20:1-18). This resulted in such terror that the people asked that God speak only to Moses and they, in turn, would hear God’s words through him. God approved and spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11). God speaking in these cases was tangible; not mystical. The Numbers 14 rebellion was prompted when the spies came back with a report about the land of Canaan. The author of Hebrews cited Psalm 95 to warn the Hebrew Christians that if they refused to listen to God’s promises given to them by Christ they would perish just as surely as their fathers did, who refused to listen to God’s promises given to them through Moses and the Patriarchs.

In this context, to “hear God’s voice” and “listen” is to be the recipients of the promise of salvation. Those who hear the promise of Messianic salvation either listen to God and believe, or rebel against God and perish. This is the eschatological crisis that faced the early Hebrew Christians who were tempted to apostatize. The term “today” in Hebrews 3:7 is a reference to the limited time in which the offer of salvation is available. This is seen by the author of Hebrews’ commentary on it right after the citation from Psalm 95: “*Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*” (**Hebrews 3:12, 13**). The offer of salvation stands. “Today” will not last forever. Will we “hear” and respond in faith and obedience? Or will we harden our hearts?

In no sense does this passage exhort people to “listen” to personal revelations beyond Scripture. It does not say that God might speak; it says that God has spoken. The issue is whether we will listen or rebel.

Later in the book of Hebrews the writer returns to the concept of “speaking”: “*See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven*” (**Hebrews 12:25**). Here again, “speaking” is in the present active tense in the Greek. This is a reiteration of the theme of Hebrews. It is a warning against apostasy. It is a warning against failing to heed the call to believe God’s promises in Christ. It is a warning against going back, just as the wilderness wanderers rebelled and wanted to go back. The warning that Jesus is “speaking” from heaven is a warning against a failure to listen that will lead to unbelief and apostasy. The Holy Spirit’s task is not to directly convey new words to us. His task is to convict us of the veracity of the message of the gospel of Christ already spoken—a message that will lead us to repentance if we listen.

If we take these Hebrews passages to mean that we ought to develop the habit of listening to inner voices that may or may not be God’s, we will utterly fail to listen to what God has said, once for all, through the Scriptures. We are warned not to listen to other voices (Deuteronomy 18). Will we believe the gospel promises through Christ? Or will we return to our old ways? That is what God is saying. If we hear today, we must surely “listen” lest we perish. If we choose to listen to inner voices that originate in uncertain sources in the spirit world, we commit the very sin that Hebrews rebukes: the failure to listen and to obey what God has said through Christ and His apostles.

Published by Twin City Fellowship

Critical Issues Commentary

PO BOX 26127

St Louis Park MN 55426

952-935-3100

www.cicministry.org

©2009

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation.