

IX 9Marks

preach

[Theology Meets
Practice]

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God Speaks

I haven't read many twenty-three-volume novels. In fact, I haven't read *any* twenty-three-volume novels. But if I did, I'd expect to find an author who had a lot to say. I'd expect insight or at least an ambition to insight. I'd expect character development and an exquisite plot, surprises, tragedies, and hilarity. In short, I'd expect to find *meaning* somewhere in the course of reading a twenty-three-volume novel.

If that's your assumption, too, then you've probably never read and enjoyed anything by Nigel Tomm. In 2008, Tomm managed to convince a publisher to print his twenty-three-volume novel, *The Blah Story*.¹ It's a work of magnificent ambition and sweeping aspiration—that aspiration being to write an 11.3-million-word story *without saying anything at all*. Don't believe it? Here's an excerpt from volume 16 of Tomm's work:

As no one was blah any blah to blah, and no one blah needed blah, blah quietly blah blah away into the little blah where the blah were, and again blah a great blah of blah

when blah saw the blah, the little old blah pressed blah to blah something, and blah agreed; after blah a blah with blah and talking to the blah of their blah, blah, not blah to blah back to the blah, where it blah all so blah to blah, proceeded to blah through the blah, the blah were blah of blah blah blah, blah over the blah and blah not to blah a blah word of what blah being said blah with the blah were blah and blah smart blah, high blah in blah, and blah.

The publisher made a sporting attempt to get people to buy the books, touting them like this:

Overwhelmingly creative, Nigel Tomm demolishes the barrier of words and meaning, giving vitality and expressive strength to the pattern of his most exclusive novel—*The Blah Story*. It is a new way of conceiving text that frees the imagination, allowing you to personalize each and every word by your own creativity.

Allowing me to personalize each word . . . well, yes, that's one way to put it! Apparently the publisher's gamble didn't pay off too well, and readers weren't overly excited about having to write the whole story for themselves. All volumes are currently out of print!

God Speaks, and That Sets Him Apart

Nigel Tomm is not the only person to poke fun in recent decades at the idea of words and speech having meaning. In fact, entire world-views claim that language—our communication with one another—is really not much more than a game and that each person invests whatever meaning he desires into the words he reads or hears. It's all a bunch of “blah blah blah,” and we fill in the “blahs” with whatever best suits us, our needs, and our wants.

That's not how the Bible approaches words. Not even close.

From the first page of the Bible, words are enormously important to the God who made the universe. In fact, one of the most interesting themes of the Bible, as you read through it, is the argument it makes over and over again that it is precisely God's *words*—His power to speak, to command, to be heard and understood—that sets Him apart from the false gods His people are always tempted to worship. The God of the Bible is utterly unique, utterly singular, and utterly worthy of our worship; and one of the most important evidences for that is the fact that *God speaks*.

We Christians tend to take that fact for granted today. It's no big deal, really, for us to affirm that God speaks because we are so used to it. "Of course God speaks!" we say. "What kind of God would He be that couldn't speak?" So we read our Bibles, which we understand to be the *Word of God*; we read the stories of God speaking to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. We quote the prophets with their ringing cry, "Thus *says* the Lord," and we blithely affirm with John that Jesus was "the *Word* made flesh." And it all washes over us without ever our giving it a second thought.

It wasn't always that way. For the Israelites the fact that their God spoke to them—actually talked and communicated with them—wasn't so easy to take for granted. "Gods" were common in the Ancient Near East; every tribe and nation that surrounded Israel had their own gods and their own ways of worship, and all of them believed that their gods were real and that they acted. But one way those pagan gods never acted was in *speech*. They never talked. Only one God talked, and that was Yahweh, the God of Israel.

One of the most sarcastic, cutting passages in the entire Bible comes in the book of Isaiah where God unleashes a withering denunciation of the false gods His people have begun to worship. Instead of loving Him and trusting Him, the Israelites have turned to the idols of their pagan neighbors, and God makes a case over four chapters that they have made a monumentally foolish decision. Only He has the power to save them.

God's assault on the idols comes from a few different directions. He ridicules them first for being pieces of metal or wood or stone that had to be carved by craftsmen. Isaiah 41:7, for instance, has the amusing picture of one craftsman complimenting the work of another who has just made a god and then the even more hilarious image of the two of them working together to nail the god to the table so it doesn't topple over! In chapter 44, God invites His people to consider—in detail—exactly where their “gods” come from. First someone plants a tree, then he waits for the rain to nourish it, and eventually the tree is big enough to be cut down. “Then it becomes fuel for a man,” God says (v. 15). “He takes part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread.” And then He comes to the punch line, its abruptness only adding to the ridiculousness of the scene: “Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes an idol and falls down before it.”

You can almost hear the incredulity in God's voice there: “Seriously? You're going to cut down a tree, saw it in half, grill a steak over half of it, and then bow down and worship the other half?” The ridicule continues over the next couple of verses:

Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” (vv. 16–17)

For all the obvious stupidity of it all, though, the worship of idols points to a deeper and sadder problem. Those who worship these false gods are not just ridiculous; they are blind and ignorant and dark hearted. Here's how God ends the passage, not so much with ridicule as with a lament for His people's deluded hearts:

They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they

cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?” (vv. 18–20)

All by itself the argument against the idols as being nothing but “blocks of wood” was devastating. But there was more to be said. It wasn’t just that the idols had a humiliating origin; it was that they couldn’t *do* anything. More specifically—and here we come to the most important point—the idols were unlike the God of Israel precisely because they couldn’t *speak*.

Look at how God addresses the idols in Isaiah 41:21–24. He calls them, as a judge would call a defendant, to present proof of their reality, evidence of their power. But notice specifically what He asks them to do:

Set forth your case, says the LORD;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us
what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are,
that we may consider them,
that we may know their outcome;
or declare to us the things to come.
Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm,
that we may be dismayed and terrified.
Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is less than nothing;
an abomination is he who chooses you.

God challenges the idols to speak. “Tell us!” He demands. Say something! Tell us what has happened in the past or what is to happen in the future. Do *something* so we can know that you’re really gods and therefore worthy of our fear. But what does He get from them? Nothing. Just silence. So He hands down His judgment on them: “Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing.”

The God of Israel, though, is the God who speaks, and that sets Him utterly apart from the idols:

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:

“I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.

Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and set it before me,
since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any.” (Isa. 44:6–8)

There is no other god besides the God of Israel, and do you see what proves it? It is that He and He alone has spoken. He has told His people from old what is to come, and if anyone else would claim to be god, he too must *speak*.

The Primacy of God’s Word

God’s polemic against the idols in Isaiah 41–44 is not the only place in the Bible where God’s *speaking* has priority. Over and over, the Bible’s story holds out God’s Word as that which sets Him apart and that to which human beings ought to give special attention.

In Genesis 1:1, God creates the heavens and the earth. And how does He do it? By speaking. In Genesis 2, He gives life to the lifeless body He's created from the dust. Again, how does He do it? By the breath of His mouth. When He reveals Himself to His people after rescuing them from slavery to Egypt, what does He give them? A picture of Himself? A terrifying *look* at His face? No, He gives them the Law; He *speaks* to His people and *tells* them who He is and who, therefore, they are to be.

Even in the way God commanded His people to design and build His temple, the primary way His people were to know Him was through His word, and that was utterly different from the pagan gods around them. Do you remember what was at the center of the temple, inside the holy of holies? In a typical pagan temple, at the center of the temple, in the most holy place where people came to worship, stood an image of the god. That's what people expected to see when they made their way into the presence of the god. They expected to *see* him. But that's not what the God of Israel told His people to put at the center of His temple. Instead, when a person walked into the holy of holies of Yahweh's temple, what he saw was not an image at all but rather a golden box. And inside that box were the tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. You see? The God of the Bible would be known by His people not primarily by *sight* but by *sound*. They would hear His Word, not see His face. They would know Him as the God who speaks.

The prophet Ezekiel learned this same lesson when he encountered the Lord on the banks of the Chebar canal in Babylon. The people of Israel had been carried off into exile, defeated in battle, and taken in chains across the desert to a land they had never known. It was a shocking turn of events. How could God allow His chosen people to be treated this way? How could He allow His holy city, Jerusalem, to be sacked and destroyed by the pagan Babylonians? The Bible doesn't say specifically, but you have to wonder if those

were the kinds of questions Ezekiel was asking as he sat on the banks of the Chebar that day. If so, God answered him in a dramatic way—in a way, in fact, that still fascinates us and leads us to marvel and wonder at what Ezekiel must have seen that day.

Entire books have been written on the vision God gave to Ezekiel that day. Some scholars, trying to visualize for themselves what Ezekiel saw, have declared the whole thing to be nonsensical and Ezekiel himself to be clinically insane. One commentator went so far as to call him “a true psychotic, capable of great religious insight but exhibiting a series of diagnostic characteristics: catatonia, narcissistic-masochistic conflict, schizophrenic withdrawal, delusions of grandeur and of persecution. In short, he suffered from a paranoid condition common in many great spiritual leaders.”²

But of course that misses the point entirely. Ezekiel wasn’t a psychotic, and his visions weren’t meant to be drawn or built. The “wheels within wheels” he saw weren’t supposed to be taken as blueprints for construction. No, the vision Ezekiel saw was rich in symbolism, and it also—even in its resistance to being clearly pictured in our imaginations—communicates that God transcends us. He is greater than we are and more glorious than we could ever imagine.

We could say much about what Ezekiel saw, but one detail in particular stands out as peculiarly counter to the way we would probably have written the story. Do you remember the climax of Ezekiel’s vision? After all the glorious images—the flashing storm, the creatures, the wheel, the eyes, the sapphire throne, the blazing figure of a man—do you remember what it all leads to? Here’s how Ezekiel described it: “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking” (Ezek. 1:28).

The last phrase of that verse is stunning in its simplicity, isn’t it? All the grandeur of the vision, all the glory of what Ezekiel saw led finally to this one, last, greatest thing: “I *heard* the voice of One *speaking*.”

It's interesting how much weight the Bible puts on the words of God, isn't it? Most of us, when we imagine what an encounter with God might be like, tend to major on the visual. If we were guessing, without knowing in advance, what Ezekiel might have experienced in his encounter with God, our guess at how it all unfolded probably would have *started* with a voice and ended with a glorious, mind-blowingly beautiful vision. So it's interesting and challenging to us that the reality goes in exactly the opposite direction. First Ezekiel sees, and then he hears. And that *hearing* forms the basis of his relationship with God.

God's Speaking Is the Basis of our Relationship with Him

That simple truth is taught throughout the Bible. The fundamental basis of any person's relationship with God is that we hear His Word and respond to it. Think, for example, about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The striking thing about the intimacy of their relationship with God is not so much that they saw Him but that they heard Him and conversed with Him. He spoke to them, and they heard what He said and responded to it. When Satan moves to disrupt their relationship with God, he makes his attack directly on what they have heard from God: "Did God really say . . . ?" In the end Adam and Eve's rejection of God's Word defined their rebellion against Him because their hearing and obeying of His Word had defined their relationship with Him.

It was the same for Abraham. The beginning and foundation of his relationship with God was God's grace in speaking to him and calling him to leave his country and go to Canaan. The whole story of Israel begins with the words, "Now the Lord said to Abram" (Gen. 12). Think, too, of how God's covenant relationship with the newly redeemed, newly constituted nation of Israel began: it began with

God speaking His law to them. Thus Moses said to them after he had given them the Law:

Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life. (Deut. 32:46–47)

If the people of Israel would enjoy a relationship with God, it would be through hearing, meditating on, remembering, and obeying His Word. The prophet Samuel's relationship with God, too, began by hearing His voice. First Samuel 3:7 is interesting: "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him." Do you see how "knowing the Lord" and "hearing the word of the Lord" are brought together here? Despite all his time serving in the temple, Samuel did not truly know the Lord until His Word was revealed to him.

Of course, all this comes to its pinnacle in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. You see, it is in Jesus that God is most fully and most perfectly revealed. It is in Him that we come to know God and that our relationship with God is established. The apostle John writes about this in the first chapter of his Gospel. "The Word became flesh," he says, "and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:14, 18). John's language is dense and packed with meaning, but the essential point is clear. If we as sinful human beings would know God the Father, it will only be through the Son who knows Him perfectly, who is at His side, and who makes Him known to us. As the author of the book of Hebrews says: "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).

God Speaks, and Therefore We Preach

As preachers of God's Word, we should understand how important and amazing it is that our God is a speaking God. He didn't have to speak, at least not to us. When Adam and Eve sinned against Him in the Garden, He could have let His last words to them—for all eternity—be the curse He pronounced against them. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return," He could have said (Gen. 3:19). And then silence. God could have left us in darkness and ignorance to live out our days as rebels and to die under His wrath, without ever knowing Him. Understanding that, it is a mark of the most amazing mercy and love that God continued to care for human beings after we rebelled against Him, that He continued to speak to us and to reveal Himself to us, especially in the person of His Son, Jesus.

All this helps us understand some of the poignant symbolism at work when one man stands before a congregation to proclaim God's Word. Some church leaders recently have argued for a modification of our idea of preaching. For one person to address a host of others in a long monologue, they argue, is simply wrong. It is tyrannizing, depersonalizing, and dehumanizing, a vestige of the Enlightenment or of Hellenistic thinking that we have long since gotten past.

We think that's wrong. In fact, we think the sermon as monologue—one person speaking while others listen—is both an accurate and a powerful symbol of our spiritual state and God's grace. For one person to speak God's Word while others listen is a depiction of God's gracious self-disclosure and of our salvation being a gift. Anytime God speaks in love to human beings it is an act of grace. We do not deserve it, and we contribute nothing to it. The act of preaching is a powerful symbol of that reality.

The picture of the first recorded sermon in the book of Acts is an arresting illustration of this. It was not a humanly planned meeting that brought these people together. God had poured out His Spirit, according to His own purposes, and then it fell to Peter to address

the crowd and explain what was happening. He quoted God's Word to them from Psalm 16, Psalm 110, and the prophet Joel, and then he spoke to them. He told them what this meant and how it was relevant to them. Even their question, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37) points to their ignorance and need to hear. Peter preached to them a message they would not otherwise have known. It wasn't a dialogue or a discussion. It was a heralding of news previously unknown. Peter himself had not understood Jesus' identity apart from the divine and supernatural light God Himself had given him, and the people in Jerusalem would not understand it either unless God revealed it to them.

This is always the way it is with Christian preaching. The empty pulpit in many of our church buildings well displays the spiritual reality. We run around seeking life for our churches and life for ourselves through a million different methods, and the one means God has given for bringing people into a relationship with Himself stands neglected and disdained. In the act of preaching—a congregation hearing the voice of one man who stands behind the Scriptures—God has given us an important symbol of the fact that we come into relationship with Him by His Word. Just as surely as Abram was called to God by the word of promise addressing him, so we as Christians are made God's people by believing God and trusting His promises. In a word, we come into relationship with God through faith, and "faith comes," Paul tells us in Romans 10, "from *hearing*, and hearing through the word of Christ."

There is only one God, and He is a relational and communicating, personal being who speaks to us and initiates relationship with us. Those powerful, life-giving truths are not only proclaimed but also powerfully symbolized by the preaching of God's Word. He speaks, and therefore we preach.