

#18. THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

1. **Hebrews** is a letter whose recipients are not identified. The subject matter, the heavy use of several elements of Hebrew worship, and the theological arguments themselves indicate clearly the audience is Jewish. The context points to a fatigued, discouraged congregation that is seriously considering a defection from true Christianity in favor of Judaism.

2. **Author and date** - the author is unknown.
 - Author: Many names have been suggested as possible authors for the book of Hebrews.
 - It seems that Hebrews 2:3 indicates the author was not one of the apostles, and possibly not a first-generation witness to the life of Christ.

 - Since Paul usually associates himself with the first generation because of Christ's appearance to him on the Damascus Road, that verse may eliminate him as a possibility as well. It was also Paul's custom to identify himself as the author of all his letters (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

 - Apollos, Barnabas, and Silas are among the other leading suggestions.

 - The text indicates the author preferred using the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) instead of the Hebrew text.

 - Perhaps the best solution was offered by a third-century Christian leader named Origen - "God (is the only One) who knows who wrote Hebrews".
 - Date: We are uncertain of the date, but it appears to have been written before the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. There is an assumption that sacrifices and offerings are continuing, and no mention of the siege of Jerusalem is found in the text. Increasing persecution, and the inference that folks were becoming disillusioned with the passing of time points to a date between 64-69AD.

3. **The author's emphasis** is the sufficiency and superiority of Jesus and the New Covenant over the Old Testament. It appears the author is targeting second-generation Hebrew Christians who were considering a return to Judaism. The reasons for such a return seem to be an inadequate understanding of New Testament doctrine coupled with increasing persecution from both religious (Jewish) and secular (Roman) forces. Martin Lloyd-Jones

once commented that when the church is suffering, she doesn't need relief as much as she needs doctrine. The writer of Hebrews offers great encouragement, but not before presenting an intense lesson on the doctrines of Soteriology and Christology.

4. Key Verses

- **Hebrews 1:1-3a** “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”
- **Hebrews 4:1, 2 ESV** “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.”
- **Hebrews 4:14-16 ESV** “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”
- **Hebrews 8:13 ESV** “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”
- **Hebrews 11:1 ESV** “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the people of old received their commendation.”
- **Hebrews 12:1, 2 ESV** “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

4. Key People

- **Moses, Angels, Melchizedek, and the Old Testament Priesthood** - are considered paradigms of spiritual excellence and virtue, all of whom are surpassed by the greatness of Christ.

- **Faith's Hall of Fame** - is found in Hebrews 11, and is cited as encouraging examples of persistence to those Hebrews who were struggling in their faith.

7. Key Themes

- **Superiority and Sufficiency** - Christ is presented not only as the one who is sufficient to meet our needs on every level, He is presented as superior to every other alternative. He is better than even the very best of the old system.
- **Persistence** - The Hebrews have a difficult, exhausting race before them. This is not the time to look back, but to press forward in full assurance of victory in Christ's sufficiency and superiority.
- **Reward** - Those who endure challenges and correction will be vindicated and blessed beyond imagination.

8. The Contents of Hebrews

- Jesus is Superior in regard to His Position. (1:1-4:13)
 - A better name and revelation (1:1-3)
 - He is better than the angels. (1:4-2:18)
 - He is better than Moses. (3:1-19)
 - He offers a better rest. (4:1-13)
- Jesus is Superior in regard to His Priesthood. (4:14-7:28)
 - He is our all-sufficient High Priest. (4:14-5:10)
 - He is a High Priest who can be trusted. (5:11-6:20)
 - He is like Melchizedek. (7:1-28)
- Jesus is Superior in regard to His Ministry. (8:1-10:18)

- He operates within a better covenant. (8:1-13)
- He operates within a better sanctuary. (9:1-12)
- He operates by a greater sacrifice. (9:13-10:18)
- Jesus is Superior in regard to Faith. (10:19-12:29)
 - He is the author of saving faith. (10:19-25)
 - He rejects false faith. (10:26-39)
 - He explains genuine faith. (11:1-3)
 - He shows examples of true faith. (11:4-40)
 - He encourages overcoming faith. (12:1-29)
- Press on! (13:1-21)
- Farewell (13:22-25)

Worth noting about the Hebrews Epistle

- While we acknowledge the legitimacy of Messianic Jewish congregations, we caution Believers to avoid the trip of *becoming Jewish in order to become Christian*. This clash between the Old and the New Covenants was the focal point of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Galatians, Hebrews, and Colossians. We honor, study, and learn from the principles of the Old Testament, but we must not make the mistake of detracting from the finished work of Christ by reverting to an inferior system.
- Timothy has recently been released from prison (13:23), and the persecution was becoming severe (10:32-39; 12:4; 13:3).
- Hebrews points out the superiority of Christ over angels (chapters 1 and 2), Moses (chapter 3), Joshua (chapter 4) and Aaron (chapters 4-7).

- Because of the work of Christ, we enjoy a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22), better promises (8:6), a better sacrifice (9:23), a better security (10:34), a better citizenship (11:16), a better resurrection (11:35), and a better life (11:40).

- There are five *Warning Signs* in the Book of Hebrews.

- The Danger of Neglect

Hebrews 2:2-3 NIV 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.

- The Danger of Insensitivity

Hebrews 3:12-13 NIV See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

- The Danger of an Undisciplined Life

Hebrews 5:12 NIV In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

- The Danger of Withdrawal

Hebrews 10:23-25 NIV Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

- The Danger of Apostasy

Hebrews 10:26-31 NIV If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

When reading Hebrews:

- Remember that reading Hebrews can be frustrating for several reasons. Unlike most other books of the Bible, Hebrews is a lengthy, sustained argument with one central point. Furthermore, it is not written within the framework of a western world-view. The target is clearly a Jewish audience. A thorough familiarity with the Old Testament is taken for granted by the author. The writing style is that of Rabbinical debate and persuasion, therefore Hebrews may be best understood in a cyclical rather than linear mindset.
- Remember the book is written to a congregation that has sustained prolonged persecution. They are exhausted and near the brink of quitting. During such times, we face the temptation of returning to what has been familiar and comfortable, like our favorite pair of slippers.