

Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

Today, we begin a new book of the Bible, the Letter to the Hebrews. And I believe the main purpose of the letter is to instruct Jewish Christians that Christ is the fulfillment of all the Scriptures. It was written to instruct Jewish believers that Judaism had been superceded by Christianity. In this letter, the writer shows that the New Covenant is superior and in every way fulfills the Old Covenant. Even as we take the Lord's Supper this morning, Jesus says, "This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood . . ." This letter will help us in many ways see the beauty of Christ! I so look forward to our time (as God gives) we will spend here in the coming days. With that in mind, I want to give a brief introduction this morning.

1. Recipients. This letter was written to Christians, but I believe the emphasis was Jewish Christians. Look at vv. 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 spoke to us in his Son . . .**" As he refers to "our fathers," I believe the writer is clearly Jewish and is referring to the nation of Israel. Look also at 3:1: "**Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.**" In my opinion it was probably written to the Church in Jerusalem, or churches in Judea, where the majority would have been of Jewish origin. They were not young in the faith as the writer says in 5:12: "**For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.**" In other words, "*you've been Christians for some time now, it is time to move on to maturity.*" These recipients were also heavily persecuted as we read in 10:32: "**But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings . . .**" They were a fairly large groups as 13:24 says: "**Greet all your leaders and all the saints . . .**"

2. Author and Date. The author of this letter is anonymous. I think the majority think the author is Paul. Others believe it was one of Paul's associates such as Luke, Clement of Rome, Apollos, Barnabas, or another. At the end of the day, we don't know (I lean toward Paul). But, here is what we do know. Christians from a very early period all accepted this letter as Scripture. And the writer was a very capable and creative theologian, an accomplished preacher of the Gospel, a pastor who understood their situation, and had an intimate knowledge of their needs. As far as the date, I favor an early date, sometime before the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. I think we can be pretty sure of this because the author mentions the sacrificial system in Jerusalem as if it were still in place (7:27-28; 8:3-5; 10:1-3).

3. Purpose. As I stated earlier, this letter was written to instruct Jewish believers that Judaism had been superceded by Christianity. In other words, All the OT promises are fulfilled in Christ. We must remember that in the beginning an overwhelming majority of converts were JEWISH. Christianity first came to the Jews. Unlike the Gentile nations who worshipped idols, they were the chosen people of God, to whom God gave his Word, his law, the sacrificial system, the temple, everything they needed to know Him and worship Him in the right way. And so, to be called upon to forsake those things, which had been followed by their fathers for more than a thousand years, was to make a huge demand on them. Also, it is human nature not to like change! (Who does?) It was natural that even those among them who had believed on Jesus and been saved should want to hold on to the ceremonies and the forms and the rituals and the ways

in which they were brought up from infancy. And, at that time, the Temple was still standing, the Levitical priesthood still functioned. They were zealous for the Law of Moses. And NOW, since their conversion, they were reading words from the Apostle Paul that **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Gal. 3:28). And if we read the Book of Galatians, we see that many Jews were “falling from grace” as they were trusting in the works of the Law of Moses, instead of faith in Jesus.

Also, consider that they were being persecuted for converting to Christianity. Unless they denounced Christianity, they were not allowed to enter the Temple, they were banished from the altar, the sacrifice, the high priest, the house of Jehovah. (Just this week we spoke with an Iranian Christian family who fled from their country and their families with the same issue.) Even the Gentile converts could enter the outer court of the temple, but not apostate Jews who converted to Christianity. I believe Satan did not miss the opportunity to convince the Jews that their faith in Jesus was a mistake. This is the context of the writing of Hebrews. Right from the start the author writes this letter to encourage these Christians as they set their hope on Christ as the fulfillment of all the OT.

4. Theme. As I stated earlier, in different words, the theme of this book is the super abounding excellence of Christianity over Judaism. A.W. Pink says it is: **“the sum and substance, the centre and circumference, the light and life of Christianity, is Christ.”** Therefore, through the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the theme of the letter is to show the immeasurable superiority of Christ over all that had gone before. Let’s consider some examples.

i. Christ is superior to the prophets. 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, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”**

ii. Christ is superior to the angels. 1:4-8: **“having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.” Of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.” But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.”**

iii. Christ is superior to Moses. 3:1-3: **“Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself.”** (cp. 3 continues with this theme)

iv. Christ is superior to Joshua. In cp. 4 the author speaks of Joshua leading the people into the Land of Canaan, the “Land of rest.” But Joshua never gave them true rest. In 4:8 we read: **“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.** He was saying, that was just a picture of the true rest to come in Christ. In this way, He is superior to Joshua.

v. Christ is superior to Aaron. In cps. 5-7 the author spends a great amount of time in explanation of the priestly office in Judaism, particularly the high priest. As Aaron was the high priest, ministering over earthly things, so Christ is the high priest as minister of heavenly things. In 8:1 we read: **“Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.”**

vi. Christ is superior to the entire ritualistic system of Judaism. We see this in cps 7-10 as the author shows the excellency of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant. In 10:14-18: **“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,’ then he adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.”**

vii. Christ is superior to ALL the OT saints. We see this in cps. 11-12.

Going along with this theme of superiority, notice how many times we see the word “better” in this letter. In Heb. 1:4, Christ is “better” than the angels. In 7:19 the author mentions a “better” hope. In 7:22, we have a “better” covenant. In 8:6 we read that our hope is based on “better” promises. In 9:23 we read of “better” sacrifices. In 10:34 we read of a “better” possession. In 11:16 we have a “better” country. In 11:35 we have a “better” life or “resurrection.” In 11:40 we read that in Christ, God has something “better” for us.

Also showing the superiority of Christ we see the use of the word “GREAT” 7 different times. We see a “great salvation” (2:3), a “great high priest” (4:14), the “great tabernacle” (9:11), the “great struggle with sufferings” (KJV “great flight of afflictions”) (10:32), the “great reward” (10:35), the “great cloud of witnesses” (12:1), and finally the we see that Jesus is the “great shepherd of his sheep” (13:20).

In this letter, the author urges these Jewish Christians not to focus on the things they have given up, but to consider what they have gained. We see the phrase “we have” a number of times. For example, We have a “great high priest” (4:14). We have an anchor of the soul (6:19), we have a better and enduring possession (10:34). We have an altar (13:10). We also see the words “look forward.” As Christians we look forward to a new world, or new “earth” to come (2:5). We are looking forward to a “new age to come” (6:5). He speaks of “good things to come” (9:11; 10:1). In 9:28 he speaks of a “salvation” to be revealed; in 10:37 he speaks of the coming Redeemer. And finally, he speaks of a city (11:14; 13:14).

In all of these things, those Jewish Christians were greatly encouraged that though they were “deprived of the temple, with its priesthood and altar and sacrifice,” in Christ they have access to heaven. For He is superior to those things. In fact, those outward signs and symbols and types serve the purpose of point to Christ, who is the fulfillment of all these things.

5. Characteristics and Value.

i. This book explains the promises of the OT. This will be clear throughout. There are so many types found in the OT that will be explained here. Therefore, it will be of great value to us to help us understand what is written in the OT. It is also valuable to us as we will see the unity of the Bible in a greater light. So far, Isaiah has been my favorite book to preach. I love the OT. So, I cannot wait to examine and dive into the Book of Hebrews.

ii. This book speaks of heavenly things, as opposed to that which is earthly. In 1:3 Christ is seated where? “At the right hand of God . . . in heaven.” In 1:13 he says, “To which of the angels did he ever say, ‘sit at my right hand.’” In 8:1: “**Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent, that the Lord set up, not man.**” In 3:1 we see a “heavenly calling.” In 6:4 we have a “heavenly gift.” In 8:5 we see “heavenly things.” In 11:16 we wait for a “heavenly country.” In 12:22 there is a “heavenly Jerusalem.” Think about it. This emphasis is easily understood when we think of “physical” Israel. Their inheritance was physical (the Land of Canaan). Their religious system was rooted in the physical so many physical ceremonies. Their hopes were set upon the physical Temple. Their sacrifices were the continual death of animals that never ceased. But in 10:12 we read: “In 10:12: “**But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God . . .**” Brothers and sisters, true religion is a heavenly religion, and it based upon heavenly things. And as we study this book, these “heavenly” things will be clear and so helpful as we look unto Christ. This will be so valuable to us as Christians.

iii. This book urges its readers to be steadfast. It was written by a pastor who knew the sufferings and persecutions of his readers. And in many ways, Hebrews is a sermon urging and exhorting its readers to persevere, to press on. This is why we emphasizes all the promises of God on the OT as fulfilled in Christ. He is saying, “*Press on Brother. Press on Sister. What we have in this world is fleeting and perishing. But, we look to something much better than cannot really be compared to what is happening now.*” In this way, this book will be valuable to us.

iv. This book shows us what a life of faith looks like. As Habakkuk says, “The just shall live by faith,” so the writer of Hebrews says to us, “This is what faith looks like.” (Consider cp. 11) In this way, the book will be valuable to us.

v. This book contains great warnings against apostasy. Here, we find the most solemn and serious exhortations for us not to fall away. In 2:1: “**Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.**” In 6:4-6: “**For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt . . .**”

And in 10:26-27: “**For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries . . .**” Therefore, it will be of great value to us as we consider our own sufferings and persecutions in these days and those to come.