

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

59. THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Reading: Hebrews 1:1-14

I suppose among us all there would be a division when it comes of the Book of Hebrews. Some Christians find it one of the most *difficult* books of the Bible. Hebrews is a tremendous book but it is difficult to understand. This is partly due to the fact that to Gentile eyes it's a very Jewish letter describing sacrifices, altars, and priests. To get a proper understanding of the Book of Hebrews we need to be familiar with the Old Testament especially the Book of Leviticus. Dr. Charles L. Feinberg said that you cannot understand the book of Hebrews unless you understand the Book of Leviticus, because Hebrews is based on the principles of the Levitical priesthood. Of course there are others who find the Book of Hebrews *delightful*. They like it because of the magnificent chapter on faith, or because of the light it throws on the person, work and present ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. So some think this book is difficult, others think its delightful.

Perhaps we should ask several questions as we come to this book. *Why was this letter written ? Who was its author ? To whom was this letter sent ? When was it sent ?* Now those are straightforward questions but the answers are not. Let's think for a moment about,

1. The Diverse People:

For the Hebrews or Jews were and are a people like no other people. The oldest and most reliable manuscripts refer to this book simply as “ *to the Hebrews.*” Do you recall what Paul said when speaking of Israel ? “ *To whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants and the giving of the law, and the service of God and the promises, whose are the fathers.*”

(Rom 9:4-5) I mean these people the Hebrews were inheritors of a wonderful past, and of a God given revelation. They had the Law, the Covenants, the Tabernacle, the Temple and the Sacrifices. And they had Abraham and Moses and Samuel and David and a long line of prophets, priests and kings. But now some of these Jews had embraced Christianity and were being taunted by the Jews as apostates from Jehovah, as renegades from Moses, as abandoning their Law, and as forfeiting all the blessings and promises of the Old Covenant to become the followers of a crucified malefactor.

You see, this book was probably written to Jewish believers before the destruction of the Temple by Titus in A.D. 70 (Heb 10:11) Some scholars think it was written about A.D. 64 for the Temple is referred to as still standing. But where was this letter sent to ? I mean the only address on it is “ *to the Hebrews.*” Well, take your pick. Some say it was sent to Alexandria, or Ephesus or Antioch or Jerusalem. Where-ever here was a letter addressed to Hebrew Christians, to some particular Jewish group or church who were long established (5:12) and who were well acquainted with the Old Testament

Scriptures. Jewish believers, who were now under intense pressure to *repudiate Christ* and to *return* to the Temple and all the ritual of Judaism. (10:32-34) You see, Nero was now on the imperial throne, and Nero's reign was a time of great persecution for the church. These Jewish Christians had steadfastly endured such persecution but now they were in danger of drifting from their Christian faith back to the ritual of Judaism. You see, the Jews had a way of escape from suffering that was not open to Gentile believers. The Jewish believers could get out of persecution by going back to the synagogue. As David Pawson points out “ *at this time Christianity was illegal, but Judaism was still legal,*” (Unlocking the Bible, David Pawson p, 1117) So there was a way out of persecution. They could go back to the Jewish ritual, they could return to the synagogue but they would have to say “ *I deny that Jesus Christ is the Messiah.*” So can you see now,

2. The Definite Purpose:

Of the book. Indeed the writer calls this epistle “ *the word of exhortation.*” (13:22) The Greek word translated “ *exhortation,*” simply means “ *encouragement.*”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word “ *exhort,*” means “ *to admonish urgently, to urge someone to a course of action.*” The writer of Hebrews says (6:1) “ *Let us go on unto perfection that is spiritual maturity.*” The appeal is “ *Please don't go back but do go on.*” There's a true story of someone who died in the potholes of Yorkshire. This is what the coroner said at the inquest, “ *If he had just kept moving he would be alive today.*” Instead he sat down and stayed in one place and

hypothermia set in. Is this not one of the main themes of the Book of Hebrews ? “ *Keep moving.*” Go through the Book of Hebrews and discover how many times that little phrase “ *Let us,*” appears. Indeed there are many key expressions which run throughout this epistle that bring out the letter's main purpose. One such key word is perfection or perfect used fourteen times. It is not the idea of “ *sinlessness,*” rather it is contrasting the mature Christian experience with the immature one. (2:10 5:9) The word “ *eternal,*” or “ *forever,*” is used fifteen times to show that Christianity is a permanent reality, in contrast with Judaism which was temporary and passing. (1:8 5:6 5:9 6:2 9:12) A most important words is the word “ *better,*” used thirteen times in the book as the writer shows the superiority of Jesus Christ and His salvation over the Hebrew system of religion. We have a better persuasion (6:9) a better priesthood (7:7) a better hope (7:19) a better covenant (7:22) better promises (8:6) better sacrifices (9:23) a better reward (10:35) a better country (11:16) and a better resurrection (11:35)

Do you see what the writer to the Hebrews wants his readers to grasp ? He wants his fellow Jewish believers to see that in Christ they gained much more than they renounced in Judaism. Christianity is not supplementary to Judaism but it completely substitutes it having in every way superseded it. 1:2: Consider for a moment,

3. The Difficult Passages:

For there are five warning passages in the Book of Hebrews, and much of the controversy which surrounds

this letter is centred in them. Each of these passages encourages us to heed God's Word by pointing out the sad spiritual consequences that result if we do not. Harold Willmington sets them out like this.

First Warning: 2:1-4 Disregarding God's Word:

Second Warning: 3:7-19 Doubting God's Word:

Third Warning: 5:11-6:20 Departing from God's Word:

Fourth Warning: 10:26-31 Despising God's Word:

Fifth Warning: 12:25 Disagreeing with God's Word:

It's in the third warning that we have a difficult passage that has upset many Christians especially those who feel they have failed the Lord. Look at (6:4-8 10:26) This much debated passage has been understood in various ways. Some hold that the people described in these verses are Christians who actually lose their salvation. Some hold that these were Jewish unbelievers convinced of the truth but still uncommitted. People who came into contact with the gospel but were spiritually unchanged by it. But look at the passage again and notice the words " *they*," and " *them*." Dr. S. Baxter says " *The words refer exclusively to a special class, in special circumstances at a special historical crisis point which has forever passed away.*" The tenth chapter of this book throws some light on the problem. Look for a moment at (10:38-39)

Notice the word " *we*," for it is emphatic and differentiates between true believers and empty professors. Here is something true Christians cannot do.

" *If any man draw back*," that is, if any man will give up Christ and return to the Old Testament ritual " *my soul*

shall have no pleasure in him." Empty professors may draw back but says Paul " *we are not of them who draw back unto perdition but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.*" Alan Cairns says " *Now that is the key to understanding the warning of chapter 6 and 10. Remember that it was written to Jews who were tempted to give up Christ. The sin that Paul is constantly dealing with in the book of Hebrews is not just any sin. It is the sin of repudiating Christ. That is the sin of the Book of Hebrews.*" (A Sure Foundation Alan Cairns p,242) A true believer will never give up on Christ but empty professors will. Let no sincere Christian ever think for one moment that anything in the Hebrew letter contradicts that glorious guarantee of eternal security in (Rom Ch 8) Those who make this passage mean that a believer can lose his salvation will have to admit that it would then also make the point that they could never get it back again. But there is no possibility of a true Christian losing salvation. You see, our salvation is an eternal salvation.

Christ says " *And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.*" (Jn 10:28 Rom 8:35-39 Phil 1:6 1 Pet 1:4-5)

***Once in Christ, in Christ forever,
Nothing from His love can sever***

4. The Different Penmen:

I mean who wrote this letter to these Jewish believers ? Well, there have been all sorts of guesses. Tertullian of Carthage in the 3rd century declared that Barnabas wrote

it. Barnabas was a Levite and the Book of Hebrews may have been written by a Levite. Others think that Apollos wrote it, some think that Luke was the author. I am inclined to believe that it was Paul. You see, Peter states that Paul wrote to the same people Peter wrote to, that is Jews of the dispersion, and Peter call's Paul's letter Scripture. (2 Pet 3:15-16) My the only writing in Scripture that is addressed to Jews and is not credited to another author is Hebrews. Would that not make you think that Paul wrote this book ? 1:2:3:4: but what about,

5. The Divine Person:

For its this letter that exalts the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The Book of Hebrews has been called the fifth gospel. The first four describe what Christ did on earth, while Hebrews describes what He is now doing in heaven. I want us to consider this book in three ways.

1. A SUPERIOR PERSON 1:1-4:16

Christ. Now keep in mind Paul is pleading with these Jewish believers not to go back to the past. His argument is very simple. You are riding in a Rolls-Royce now do you want to go back to driving an old banger ? A photo of a person can be helpful but its unnecessary when the person is present himself. So with the Lord Jesus. Old Testament “ shadow,” is replaced by New Testament “ substance,” “ type,” is replaced by “ antitype,” the Jewish faith has been superseded by the Christian faith. So Paul argues that having the Son of God is so many times better than having the Servants of God. You see,

(a) *Christ is Superior to the Prophets: 1:1-3*

These men who were held in the highest esteem by the Jewish people were called to be servants but Jesus Christ is the Son of God. They were spokesmen for God, but He is God speaking. You see,

Jesus Christ is God's Final Revelation:

Do you see how the letter opens ? “ *God who*,” in the past God had given His Word to the prophets in many instalments and by various methods. These revelations pointed to Christ and He is the final revelation from God. Christ is God's “ *last Word*,” to the world, for through Christ the heart, mind and will of God was made known.

“ *This is my beloved Son hear ye him.*” (Matt 17:5) Do you know folk today who boast of having “ *a new revelation*,” from God ? They are deceived, for God is not giving new revelations today, He is illuminating His once for all revelation in Christ.

Jesus Christ is God's Full Revelation:

Can you see here **His Person:** “ *His Son*,” implying sameness of essence with the Father. (Jn 10:30) “ *And the express image of his person*,” (1:3) literally “ Jesus Christ is the “ *exact representation of the very substance of God*.” Only He could honestly say, “ *he that hath seen me hath seen the Father*.” (Jn 14:9) Can you see **His Power:** do you see how Christ stands in relation to the universe ? He is its Creator: (1:2) He is its Sustainer: (1:3) He is it's Possessor: for he is “ *heir of all things*.”

(1:3) The reason the universe is a cosmos and not chaos is because of the upholding power of Christ. Are you doubting the ability of Christ to keep you ? He is able to keep you from falling. (Jude 24) Are you doubting the ability of Christ to strengthen you ? My He is able to make all grace abound toward you. Are you doubting the ability of Christ to answer your prayer ? He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. Can you see **His Passion:** “ *when he had purged our sins,*” do you see the contrast ? His person, His power our sins. It was His cross, it was my sin, it was my sin it was His cross. (a)

(b) Christ is Superior to the Angels: 1:4-2:18

Angels played a vital role in the Jewish religion. Did you know that the Law was given through the ministry of angels ? (Acts 7:53 Gal 3:19) But Jesus Christ is far above angels. He is the Son, they are but servants (1:5-9) He is the Sovereign they are but subjects (1:13-14) Christ is superior to angels in Sonship: (1:2) in Worship (1:6) in Heirship: (1:2) in Kingship: (1:3) and in Rulership: (1:13) Our trust then is not in angels but in Christ “ who displays superior power and guardian grace.”

(c) Christ is Superior to Moses: 3:1-19

Now Moses was generally regarded by the Jews as one of their greatest leaders but Jesus Christ is even greater. Do you recall on the mount of Transfiguration that Christ meets with Moses and Elijah but Jesus Christ is clearly

the superior one. For the Father says “ *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him.*”

(Matt 17:5) Moses was a servant, Christ is the Son, Moses served in the house, while Christ is Lord over the house. Moses ministered using symbols while Christ is the fulfilment of those symbols. How could these people go back to Judaism when what Christ offered was so much greater than what Moses could offer ?

(d) Christ is Superior to Joshua: 4:1-13

For Joshua brought the children of Israel into a temporal rest but Christ brings us into an eternal rest. The word “ *rest,*” is used twelve times in (Ch 4) but not always with the same meaning. There is Creation Rest: (Gen 2:2 4:4) There is Canaan Rest: (3:11 4:6) There is Calvary Rest: (4:3, 10) There is Conquering Rest: (4:11) the overcomers present rest of victory. (4:11) There is Complete Rest: the future eternal rest in heaven. (4:9) This chapter also records the first of thirteen “ *Let us,*” admonitions to be found in the Book of Hebrews. Do you see them “ *Let us therefore fear,*” (4:1) “ *Let us labour therefore,*” (4:11) “ *Let us hold fast our profession,*” (4:14) “ *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace.*” (4:16 6:1 10:22 10:23 10:24 12:1 12:1 12:28 13:13 13:15) But the point is this, Christ is Superior to Joshua.

(e) Christ is Superior to Aaron: 4:14-16

Aaron, ministered in an earthly tabernacle but Christ our great high priest has passed into the heavens (4:14)

Aaron served for a few years but the Lord Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec (5:6) The Aaronic priesthood was subject to death but Christ ever liveth to make intercession. (7:23,25) The sacrifices of the old order were offered up continuously, but Christ offered up Himself once for all. Now don't forget Paul's objective ? It's to show us the superiority of Jesus Christ. He is superior to the prophets, to the angels, to Moses, to Joshua and to Aaron. There were many stars of great magnitude in the Hebrew sky but the Lord Jesus outshines them all. So why go back to the inferior ? A Superior Person. I mean we can search literature and lexicons, histories and homilies, dictionaries and declarations only to discover

*No mortal can with Him compare
Among the sons of men
Fairer is He than all the fair
That fill the heavenly train*

(2) A SUPERIOR PRIESTHOOD 5:1-10:39

Christ and Melchizedek. You all know about Daddy Long Legs don't you ? Well, our kids and grandchildren know. Well, Daddy Long Legs was originally a book by Jean Webster it's now a film. It is the story of a little girl in an orphanage and she knows that there is a wealthy man who provides for the orphanage. One day she sees his shadow on a wall and because it's an elongated shadow with tremendously long legs due to the position of the light she calls the shadow “ *Daddy long legs.*” For years she dreams of this shadow. But one day she meets him, and falls in love with him. He also falls for her and their

relationship blossoms. Now what do you think happened when she got him ? Well, she stopped thinking about the shadow because she had got the substance. (Unlocking the Bible David Pawson p, 1120) In the Old Testament there are many “ *shadows,*” or “ *types,*” of the Lord Jesus. In this letter there are twenty nine quotations from the Old Testament and fifty three direct allusions to the Old Testament. You see, the purpose of this letter is to show that the Old Testament revelation is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Here Paul is telling us that substance is better than shadows. And he does that by introducing us to the priesthood. Now priests had great value in the Hebrew culture. We might ask, “ *well what was a priest ?*” When we were studying the Book of Leviticus we discovered that the term priest means “ *one who officiates.*” A prophet was someone who represented God to the people, a priest was someone who represented the people to God.

Leviticus means “ *pertaining to the Levites the priests.*” You see, if you were going to function in the priestly office you had to be a Levite (Ex 28:1 Num 3:7) But now the writer to the Hebrews introduces a superior priesthood. He says we have

(a) A BETTER SAVIOUR: 5:1-6:20

Look at (5:5) Christ was not appointed by man, he was appointed by God, Aaron was from the tribe of Levi, Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Aaron had compassion but Christ had greater sympathy. Aaron offered animal sacrifices, the Lord Jesus offered Himself. Aaron had to

offer sacrifices for himself and his family. Not so with Jesus Christ. Being the sinless Lamb of God He needed no sacrifices for sin. A Better Saviour. A great high priest who knows your trials: (5:7-8) feels your heartaches: (4:15) and strengthens your soul (4:16) “ *Grace to help in the nick of time.*”

*Is there anyone can help us
One who understands our hearts
When the thorns of life have pierced them till they bleed
One who sympathizes with us
Who in wondrous love imparts
Just the very, very blessing that we need*

*Yes, there's One only One
The blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus He's the One
When afflictions press the soul
When waves of trouble roll
And you need a friend to help you
He's the One*

(b) A BETTER SOURCE: 7:1-28

From Aaron to Melchisedec. Now who was this mysterious Melchisedec ? Well, he is a type of Christ in His Office: for He was both king and priest. (7:3, 15) He is a type of Christ in His Origin: for the Bible contains no record of his birth or death. (7:3) You see Melchisedec was a royal priest whose order took precedence over that of Aaron. (7:1-16) Do you what that means ? Its means Christ's priesthood is timeless: (7:3) Aaron and his sons died but Christ lives forever. (7:23-24) His is an

everlasting, (7:17) *unchanging* (7:24) and *holy* priesthood. (7:26) My is this not the High Priest we need ? Listen, there is no need to look beyond Jesus Christ He is all that we need. (a) (b)

(c) A BETTER SCRIPT: 8:1-13

Why go back to the Old Covenant now that you are in the New ? The Old Covenant was mediated by Moses (Ex 19:1) the New Covenant is mediated by Christ (9:15) The Old Covenant was conditional. (Deut 28:1) The New Covenant is unconditional. (8:9) The Old Covenant could not produce the necessary righteousness (8:8) The New Covenant can produce the necessary righteousness (8:11) The Old Covenant was written on dead stones (Ex 32:15) The New Covenant is written on living hearts. (8:10) When did this New Covenant come into being ? When Christ shed His blood on the cross. (Lk 22:20 1 Cor 11:23-26) “ *Christ*,” says our author “ *is the mediator of a better covenant established upon better promises.*” (8:6)

But didn't Jeremiah say that God promised this New Covenant to the Jews ? (Jer 31:31) What right do we have to apply it to the church ? Well, there are prophetic elements in this covenant which will be fulfilled with Israel and there are salvation clauses in this covenant into which the church enters today. (a) (b) (c)

(d) A BETTER SANCTUARY: 9:1-12

From the earthly to the heavenly. There was a sanctuary in the Old Testament indeed there were two of them. First the tabernacle and then the temple but both were inaccessible to the people (9:6-7) and both were temporary (9:8) But how different is this better sanctuary. Do you see how the writer describes it in (9:11-12) ? And through Christ we have access to that true tabernacle in heaven ? (a) (b) (c) (d) and

(e) A BETTER SACRIFICE: 9:13-10:39

Hundreds of thousands of animals were sacrificed in Old Testament times. Jewish altars ran with rivers of blood. But it was not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin. Those sacrifices could cover sin but they could never cleanse sin. But Christ's sacrifice takes away sin. (10:1-10) “ *Not all the blood of beasts*,” Moreover, Christ's sacrifice never needs to be repeated. “ *But this man after He had offered*,” (10:12) My Calvary covers it all. So why go back to dead ritual ?

(3) A SUPERIOR PRINCIPLE 11:1-13:25

Faith. The fact that Christ is a superior person and that He exercises a superior priesthood ought to encourage us to put our trust in Him. Indeed almost the last verse of (Ch 10) says “ *the just shall live by faith.*” But what is faith ? Well, (11:1) tells us what faith is like. The word “ *faith*,” is the Greek word *pistis* which means “ *belief, trust, confidence.*” The word “ *substance*,” means “ *assurance*,” and “ *evidence*,” means “ *proof.*” So when the Holy Spirit gives us faith through the Word the very

presence of faith in our hearts is all the assurance and evidence we need. J. Oswald Sanders says “ *faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.*” Now all of us enjoy things by faith. Have you ever enjoyed a holiday in January even though you didn't leave until July ? You pictured yourself by the pool soaking up the sun. Have you ever done that ? By faith we enjoy in the present what is a future reality. Well, that what's the writer is saying. Faith is making a present substance out of a future reality. Warren Wiersbe says “ *True Bible faith is confident obedience to God's Word in spite of circumstances and consequences.*” Martin Luther said, “ *Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible. Then, it accepts the impossible, does without the indispensable and bears the intolerable.*” Now the best way to grow in faith is to feed on the Word and walk with the faithful, for here we notice,

(a) THE PEOPLE OF FAITH: 11:1-40

Here is the writer presenting the roll call of faith. And as you read this wonderful chapter that lists the heroes of faith, you discover that faith anticipates the future, acts in the present, evaluates the past dares to move out and persists to the end When Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary, first went to China, it was in a sailing vessel. Very close to the shore of cannibal islands the ship was caught in a windless calm, and was slowly drifting toward the shore and the savages were eagerly anticipating a feast. The captain came to Mr. Taylor and asked him to pray for the help of God. ‘ *I will,*’ said Taylor, ‘ *provided*

you set your sails to catch the breeze.' The Captain declined to make himself a laughing stock by unfurling the sails in a dead calm. Taylor said, *'I will not undertake to pray for the vessel unless you will prepare the sails to catch the wind when God sends it.'* The captain set the sails. While Taylor was engaged in prayer, there was a knock at the door of his stateroom *'Who is there ?'* Taylor asked. The captain's voice responded, *'Are you still praying for the wind ?'* *'Yes,'* replied Hudson Taylor. *'Well,'* said the captain *'you better stop praying for we have more wind than we can manage.'"*

***"Faith mighty faith: The promise sees:
Laughs at impossibilities: And cries it shall be done***

(b) THE PATTERN OF FAITH 12:1-29

Look to the Son of God (12:1-3) and Submit to the Discipline of God. (12:4-11) *"Looking unto Jesus,"* the phrase here speaks of a steadfast, intent and continuous gaze. In the Greek it literally reads *"Look away to Jesus,"* When I am teaching my grandchildren how to kick a football I constantly say to them *"Keep your eye on the ball."* How easy it is to get our eyes off Christ and onto others. My keep your eyes on Christ. Why ? Because He is the perfect model, the perfect example and the perfect pattern. Someone has said that if you look outward you will be distressed, if you look inward you will be depressed but if you look upward you will be blessed.

(c) THE PERFORMANCE OF FAITH: 13:1-15

In relation to Love: (13:1-6) in relation to Leadership: 13:7, 17-19, 22-25) in relation to Legalism: (13:9-11) and in relation to Lordship: (13:8, 12-16, 20-21) Now remember in turning to Christ these Hebrews lost the temple and its priesthood and sacrifices but they gained in Christ far more than they lost. They were being tempted to go back to Judaism and Paul cries *"No," "instead of going back, go outside the camp and bear reproach and rejection with Christ."* (Lev 16:27) *"Why stay in Jerusalem when it not your city ? Jerusalem is doomed. Get out of the Jewish religious system and identify with the Saviour who died for you."* There can be no room for compromise. Is this not what Polycarp (70- 155 A.D.) did ? See him in the coliseum of Rome with the voice of the Emperor ringing out *"Polycarp, renounce your Christ, or you shall die."* Hear him respond *"Caesar accept my Christ and you shall live."*

See Martin Luther at the Council of Worms standing before the most powerful force of his day, the Roman Catholic Church refusing to deny his faith. *"Here I stand I can do no other. God help me."* See John Bunyan in a loathsome prison declaring *"I am determined, God being my helper and shield to stay here until the moss grows over my eyebrows rather than surrender my faith."* Is this not exactly what these Jewish Christians were being tempted to do ? To give up Christ and return to the Jewish ritual. Could it be that you are drifting spiritually ? Do you need to be reminded this ! ***There is a Superior Person: Adore Him. A Superior Priesthood: Approach Him. A Superior Principle: Emulate Him.***

