

## **The Epistle to the Hebrews**

February 21, 2021

Hebrews: Introduction

**Reading:** Hebrews 1:1-14

Let me pray for our time this morning as we begin with an overview of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

### **Understanding Hebrews**

It is my hope that by presenting an overview of the Epistle to the Hebrews it will help give us foundation to better understand the message from God as we travel through this letter. Hebrews is clear from beginning to end in pointing out the unique revelation of Christ. Through this revelation of Christ, God leads every believer to a unique responsibility to follow Jesus' teachings found in the Bible. Believers are called to live out their faith by living the precepts of the Bible. One of the common misconceptions of our day is the belief that the Old Testament is dominated by the theme of the judgement of God and the New Testament's theme is the love of God. In fact, both themes run together in both Testaments and reach their highest fulfilment in the New. The fullest understand of God comes through His Son. That fits with verse 2 of Hebrews chapter 1 and its reference to God speaking by his Son "[in these last days](#)". That phrase "[in these last days](#)" is shorthand for the whole era of grace in which we live, between the first and second comings of Christ, often referred to as the "Church Age". All roads in the Bible lead to Jesus and the revelation of God is complete in Him. Today the church's task is to interpret these truths within the context of Scripture and apply them to our time and our lives, and share God's Word with the lost. But, to be clear, there is no further new revelation from God. He has spoken finally and completely in Jesus Christ, His Son and in His Word; the Bible.

## The Preeminence of Christ

The overarching theme of Hebrews is that Jesus is superior to everyone and everything that exists. Everything within Hebrews is built upon the foundation that Jesus is perfect, complete and is God the Son who brought a New Covenant.

The opening verse of Hebrews tells how God spoke “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” God, since the beginning, has revealed Himself and spoken to people through His prophets, but also in many ways that goes beyond the prophets. As Psalm 19 tells us God has spoken through the created world, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1) Job says creation speaks of God both in whispers and thunder. “Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” (Job 26:14) So, as Paul wrote, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.<sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:19-20) So, even when there was no prophet all people have been made aware of God. A clearer view of God’s character and His precepts is given as He speaks through the law, prophets, poetry and history in the pages of the Old Testament. The Jewish nations should have been prepared and ready for the coming of the Messiah and the fact that they were not condemns them.

There is always unfinished business in those Scriptures of the Old Testament, however, we do not move from the less true to the more true - when we pass Malachi; rather, we move from promise to fulfilment. In this letter to the Hebrews, we will see promise fulfilled supremely in the themes of temple,

priesthood, sacrifice and covenant. In chapter 11 we are instructed, that the Old Testament Hebrews “though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,<sup>40</sup> since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” (11:39-40) It is also difficult to understand Hebrews without a working knowledge of the Book of Leviticus because Hebrews throughout deals with the Levitical priesthood. So, here is your 1<sup>st</sup> homework assignment – read through the Book of Leviticus; read it and do not worry about studying it in detail to understand everything within it because by the time we finish with Hebrews you will have a pretty good grasp of Leviticus. Hebrews takes the ceremonial symbols of Leviticus and presents the reality of Jesus fulfilling them and that they are no longer needed because Jesus is perfect, preeminent and complete.

### **Audience**

We do not know for certain who the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is. There are many guesses, but God knows and God inspired this letter to help believers of this early church that was populated mainly by Jews, but this letter is also for believers of all ages. To better understand the purpose the Holy Spirit inspired the author of Hebrews to write this letter we need to understand who it was written to. There is no reference to Gentiles in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It appears the congregation was Jewish. To these suffering Jewish believers and some unbelievers, the writer reveals the glory of Jesus as the New Covenant in contrast with the Old Covenant which they had so long lived under and used as the foundation of their worship.

The content of the letter indicates that it was written prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. as chapter 10 and 13 of Hebrews reveals. The greeting at

the end of Hebrews indicates the letter came from Italy; possibly Rome. Reading from Hebrews chapter 13 beginning at verse 22, “I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. <sup>23</sup> You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. <sup>24</sup> Greet all your leaders and all the saints. **Those who come from Italy send you greetings.** <sup>25</sup> Grace be with all of you.” We do not know the location of the congregation, but we do know that this community had been evangelized by apostles and prophets as we see in Hebrews chapter 2, “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? **It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,** <sup>4</sup> while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” (V. 2-4) When the writer of Hebrews refers to prophets; they are speaking of New Testament prophets that are defined as those who are completely consistent with Jesus’ teachings and the breath of the Bible.

Hebrews addresses Jewish believers and how they should live to glorify Christ and it gives foundational evidence of Christ to unbelievers, who were part of this Jewish community. It also speaks to those Jews who had intellectual knowledge but lacked spiritual wisdom. Therefore, Hebrews addresses 3 groups; (1) Hebrews Christians, (2) Hebrew non-Christians who were not convinced and (3) Hebrew non-Christians who were intellectually convinced but were holding onto the Old Covenant. Today the church is also made of believing Christians, non-Christians who are in church for various reasons, but hearing the preaching of the Word of God has not brought them to belief, and non-Christians who intellectually affirm God and Christ but are holding onto the world, but as

Scripture teaches no one can serve two masters rightly. As Jesus taught, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Luke 16:13)

We need to remember when we became believers, if - we had little or no support from family and friends it would have made it very difficult to make a clean break from our past and the world we have known. This was true for the Hebrews; they had lives generationally lived in a system of works – not grace. Most who converted to Christ would have been rejected by family, friends, employers, customers and village society. Because of all this pressure they were in danger of mixing the New Covenant with the Old in an effort to keep one foot in each. The writer calls believers to Jesus’ fulfillment of the Old Covenant and the teachings of Jesus in the New. This is now to be their guide to living. The same is true today; we are to leave the world behind and follow Jesus.

The problem facing this church community is it had these 3 groups of Hebrews exerting pressure for their approach to life and faith. The Book of Hebrews gives hope for those who embrace Christ and the New Covenant. It also warns those who are exposed to the Gospel of Christ and the proofs that Christ is exactly who He claimed to be; the Son of God and finally it addresses those who refuse to believe. For those who are exposed to the Gospel of Christ and reject it, they are without hope. Even those who are convinced of its truth intellectually but will not trust and believe in Christ with their souls, they too are lost. There is NO hope outside of surrendering to and complete belief in Christ as one’s Savior. Can you think of a greater sin that a person can commit than rejecting Jesus? The most horrible sin is for one to reject Jesus as the Christ. The angels who rejected Christ are forever condemned along with their false and evil lord, the devil. However, for the people living on planet earth they have hope until they take their final breath or

Jesus returns. Time is racing and this should give us urgency to live the Gospel and share the Gospel of Christ with the lost.

I also want us to remember for Jews it had always been a dangerous thing to approach God! In Exodus chapter 33, <sup>18</sup>“Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory.’ <sup>19</sup> And God said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name “The LORD.”’ ... <sup>20</sup> But, God said, ‘you cannot see my face, for **man shall not see me and live.**” So, if was a fearful thing for a Jew to approach God and now Jesus brings the New Covenant were several things change drastically; first Jesus is the Messiah or God incarnate. So those who are witnesses to Jesus being God, saw God and lived. Second, by Jesus’ resurrection a person is reconciled back to God and can have a personal and intimate relationship with a God. This went against what they had been told all their life “**man shall not see me and live**” and in the Old Covenant their only approach to God was through priests and sacrifices; they had no direct relationship with God. This is true of the many false religions today; Christianity is the only belief that bring people into relationship directly with God.

The New Covenant of Jesus Christ teaches He is the better priest and He is a better sacrifice than anything that has ever existed – Jesus is perfect. This is the central message of the Letter to the Hebrews. To the believing Jew the Spirit says, “Have confidence in this Priest and this sacrifice for Jesus is perfect and is God!” To the intellectual Jew the writer of Hebrews says, “Receive this perfect Priest Jesus and accept the sacrifice He made so you can be saved and have a relationship with God. Failure to move forward in faith will mean failure to believe and failure to believe means damnation.” To the unbelieving Jew, the writer says, “Look at Jesus Christ. See how much better He is than the Levitical priests and how much better His one sacrifice is than all of their innumerable sacrifices that do not save.

See how Jesus fulfilled God's covenant promises and through His perfection brings a new covenant - receive Jesus, believe in Jesus as the Christ and live eternally!"

One problem we have to keep in mind as we share the gospel of Christ with others who believe in a fractured or false system it is the same problem as the early church ran into with Jews. One might say when witnessing to a non-believing Mormon and Muslim, "Here is the truth that you need." Their response will be similar to the Jew at the time this book was written. The early believer one might approach a Jew and say, "Here is the truth." The Jew would respond, "I already have the truth." When the proclaimer of the Gospel replied, "But this truth is from the One true God." The Jew would respond, "So is the truth I have." It was not easy for Jew to forsake their heritage. It is not easy for a Catholic or Mormon or Muslim or Jehovah Witness to forsake their heritage and what they have come to believe as true and even though what they believe is false. This is the case even though evidence shows what they believe to be fractured and false. To tell someone they must let go of all they have known and believe in Christ is not easy. This is one reason we know it is all about Jesus as God and we are being used as His ambassadors to share the gospel is the real power comes from the Holy Spirit to convict and regenerate a spiritually dead person's soul and open them to the truth of the gospel. Only when this is done will all the evidence speak the truth of Scripture to their hearts and minds.

To give you an idea of how hard it was for those Jews of the first century, the high priest Ananias declared all Jewish Christians banished from holy places; they could not go the synagogue or the temple. At the beginning of the church many Christians met in the synagogues and the temple, but the Jewish leaders would not allow this to continue. These new Christians were to be cut off from all Jewish society. When a Jew accepted Christ, the family would have a funeral

because the convert was considered dead to them. This was difficult even though in God's eyes **Jews who accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior were the only true Jews.** Reading from Romans, <sup>28</sup>“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” (Romans 2:28-29) Yet for Jews like Ananias, leaders concerned with power and position - Jews that converted to Christianity were unclean, traitors and worse than Gentiles.

### **The Best Of Everything**

In this letter, contrasts are made clear between the Old and the New. Everything presented about the New Covenant through Jesus is presented as better; mercy, hope, promise, sacrifice, resurrection and Jesus' better testament. Hebrews presents Jesus as the supreme best of everything for He is perfect, He is God the Creator. This New Covenant of Jesus is clear and it is simple, He said, <sup>6</sup>“**I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**” <sup>7</sup> If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6-7) The Old is to be set aside for Jesus for He is the fulfillment of the Old and Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God, He is the only eternal truth and only by believing in Jesus as one's Lord and Savior does anyone find eternal life. The Letter to the Hebrews makes clear one is to let go of their traditions, man-made laws, family, community and anything else that prevents them from surrendering to Christ and living out the New Covenant of the New Testament.

With the New Covenant comes God's gift of the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is presented throughout Hebrews. In Chapter 2 the Holy Spirit



empowers ministry, <sup>4</sup> “while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by **gifts of the Holy Spirit** distributed according to his will.” The Holy Spirit bears witness to the inspiration of the Old Testament and Christ is its fulfillment. In chapter 10 we read, <sup>15</sup> “**the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us;** for after saying, <sup>16</sup> ‘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,’ <sup>17</sup> then he adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’ <sup>18</sup> Where there is forgiveness of these, **there is no longer any offering for sin.**” (v. 15-18) The Holy Spirit is an integral part of every true believer’s ability to live the Word of God as seen in chapter 6, <sup>4</sup> “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,** <sup>5</sup> and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, <sup>6</sup> and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance.” It is the Holy Spirit that gives believers spiritual wisdom to understand the scriptures, “By this **the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing** <sup>9</sup> (which is symbolic for the present age). (9:8-9) Jesus gave believers the gift of the Holy Spirit to assist them in carrying out the ministry of Jesus, “how much more will the blood of Christ, **who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.**” (9:14) The Holy Spirit of God is insulted by those who teach apostasy, “How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and **has outraged the Spirit of grace?**” (10:29)

The New Covenant of Jesus is better than the Old and Jesus fulfilled the Old – the Gospel of Jesus is the pattern for living out lives and sharing the truth of

Christ with the lost. So, although Hebrews specifically addresses a Jewish church community, its teachings are completely applicable to Gentile Christians as well. This letter gives great instruction and hope for today's churches. As the Apostle Paul made clear, to Jews and to every believer, "you have put off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. <sup>11</sup> Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but **Christ is all, and in all.**" (Colossians 3:9-11)

My beloved, we are entering a wonderful journey as we begin studying God's inspired Word by traveling through The Epistle to the Hebrews over the next several months. I am greatly looking forward to this journey and all God will reveal to us and I hope you are also filled with anticipation.

Let me Close in prayer.