

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 19 – Hebrews

We do not know who the writer to the Hebrews was, and whatever the reason for keeping it a secret we are not told that either. Many people think as I do that it was the apostle Paul who wrote it, and yet, even if it was not, it must have been someone close to him, someone who was very familiar with his teaching – perhaps Barnabas or Apollos – because it bears many striking resemblances to Paul’s deep analysis and expression of thought. But as one commentator put it, “If the authorship of this epistle is uncertain, its inspiration is indisputable.”

While we may be curious to know the human author, it might actually be more helpful to us to know for whom it was written and why. Those who received the letter were Jewish converts, people who had been raised on the Old Testament Scriptures but have since come to Christ, and, not surprisingly, have been sorely persecuted by their fellow countrymen for their faith in Him. By now, however, even after all these years of fighting the good fight, their faith is beginning to wane. We might well wonder why that is. The fact of the matter is that they have become discouraged by their circumstances, disillusioned by what they see all around them, and very anxious about the future.

If we recognize ourselves in any of that – a people who have had a good, religious upbringing, perhaps, may even have confessed faith in Christ, but have become downcast and fearful, and as a result have lost something of our first love and longing for the Lord – this letter is a must-read for us. Beyond question, I cannot think of any better or more urgent counsel for any of us than to submit ourselves to a careful and prayerful study of this letter to the Hebrews!

Hebrews was written sometime in the late sixties A.D., not long before the Roman invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. These Jewish converts had been Christians a long time. They had experienced considerable persecution, even the loss of their personal property, as a result of their witness for Christ. They had already been through a lot of pain and verbal abuse – especially, as I say, at the hands of their unbelieving kinsmen – but they were now losing their enthusiasm for the gospel and were drifting away. They had come to a crossroads in their life and wondered if they could take anymore.

What was the problem? They knew that things were going to get far worse than what they had seen until now, that Jerusalem was to be crushed (Matthew 23:37-24:3), that the enmity of Rome was building and it would only be a matter of time before it was unleashed in all its fury. What, then, should they do? Should they on national grounds stand with their fellow Jews and fight the Romans? Or, should they stand with Gentile Christians, since the city is to be destroyed anyway, and endure the wrath of both the Romans and their own countrymen? They were in a most unenviable position. It was not that they wanted to abandon the faith, but they had grown weary, were unable to think clearly, and needed to re-focus their attention on what they had and could never lose in Christ.

The purpose of the author is to set before them the unsearchable riches of Christ, the superiority of His finished work over anything and everything else that could ever be done, and the call of Psalm 27:14 in the full light of this new covenant message. The operative word in all this is "better." The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the appointed heir of all things, is better than the angels who, without being God and man, cannot secure the reconciliation with God that man so desperately needs (1:4-2:18). Jesus is better than Moses who was faithful in his testimony but less glorious in his person and work than this coming One, and Jesus is better than Joshua who led God's people into the promised land but could not secure the rest they needed (3:1-4:13).

The Lord Jesus, who is the brightness of His Father's glory and the express image of His person, is better than Aaron and the Levitical priesthood who offered sacrifices both for themselves and for the people. Jesus, on the other hand, being without sin offered just one sacrifice, and not as a shadow of something better yet ahead but as the substance of what was needed, what had been promised and confirmed by an oath, namely, His own body on the cross as a ransom for many. Jesus is better, too, than Melchizedek who, though he represented another order of priests that was specially appointed, and though the mediatorial offices of priest and king were combined in him in a way that was never allowed for the Levitical priesthood, he could still not fulfill the ultimate purpose of either office. Christ has fulfilled these offices, however, and is therefore able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him. He is the surety of a better covenant, is a better sanctuary, and has offered a better sacrifice (4:14-10:18).

The fact that the new covenant is so much better than the old, however, does not mean that we may dismiss the Old Testament Scriptures or neglect to study them. The new covenant is built on the foundation of the old, on the revelation of God's grace and glory going right back to Genesis 1, and so for one to ignore any part of it is to open himself up to every kind of error of an unrestrained imagination. The purpose of this writer to the Hebrews is to show how all the types and symbols of ancient Judaism have been fulfilled in Christ. Indeed, apart from these figures, these pictures so graphically displayed from Old Testament times, the meaning of Christ's atoning work can never be fully understood or appreciated.

How appropriate, therefore, that in admonishing these Jewish converts the writer should do so by calling his readers to consider these Old Testament symbols again, but now more than ever to do that in the light of prophetic fulfillment, in the light of Christ's victory and how His people are made more than conquerors in Him (10:19-25). Not only are they to hold fast their confession, then, as they will surely do if they re-focus their attention on Christ, but they are also to stir up one another to a greater and growing commitment, to love and good works.

Some have seen in this letter the possibility of a Christian losing his salvation (see 6:4-8), but what we actually find here is the absurdity of such a notion, whether one could actually fall from grace or should ever contemplate it as an option (10:26-39). No, those who fall away are simply demonstrating that they were never converted in the first place, and that may well have been the case for some in their number who had previously forsaken their regular assemblies.

Chapter 11 begins with its famous description of saving faith and how this faith gives us to understand that the universe was created by the Word of God. God simply spoke and everything came into being. Apart from such faith, believing what God Himself has revealed about these things that we could never learn by scientific observation – and we cannot learn it by such observation because we were not there – man is left to his own resources. (Read Job 38.) Apart from such God-honouring faith, believing every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, man foolishly resorts to vain and impossible notions of evolution, as if after billions of years, by time and chance, maybe something could just appear out of nothing after all. Like Abraham, dear reader, do you believe God? Consider this blind and hopeless alternative; it is the only other thing for one to cling to.

The rest of the chapter, a kind of rogues' gallery, is filled with examples of sinners from Old Testament times who were saved by grace alone, saved by faith alone, and – note especially – saved by this peculiar faith in Christ alone. That is right, salvation from the very beginning has been by a living faith in Jesus Christ (see 11:13,26), and now, receiving the testimony of so many who have come before us, the seed of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (see Galatians 3:26-29) are instructed in chapter 12 to lay aside every sin and to keep focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of the believer's faith (vv.1,2).

Let us consider the role model of Jesus, the Suffering Servant, and remember the exhortation to the children of God that, however harsh chastening may seem at the time, such loving discipline is what yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness (12:3-11). We need to build up our faith, and to be there in the assemblies of God's people to encourage one another. At the same time, we need to dig up any root of bitterness – that is, we need to deal decisively with anyone in the congregation who is breeding trouble and taking others down (12:12-17).

New covenant worship is not portrayed by Mt. Sinai, but by Mt. Zion – not by God coming to His people to instill terror in our hearts, but by our going to Him (where Christ Himself now is, at the right hand of the Father), by our gathering with the whole assembly of heaven – that we may begin even now to celebrate His saving grace and sing His everlasting praises (12:18-24). In light of all that we now have and may yet hope for, believer, how vital it is that we hear and obey the Word of God, and how fitting it is as well that we should thank the Lord and serve Him with reverence and godly fear (12:25-29)!

The letter ends in chapter 13 with a series of practical duties which were meant for these Jewish converts, particularly, but should, clearly, be taken up and faithfully applied by us all (vv.1-17). It includes a special and very personal call for prayer (vv.18,19), and a closing benediction (vv.20,21).

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