

Introduction to Hebrews

This morning we begin a new series of studies in the New Testament book of Hebrews. If you're not sure *where* Hebrews is, go to the end of the Bible - to the book of Revelation - and go left, about 7-8 books, and you'll run into it.

Now, if you are like the majority of Christians these days, then this particular book of the Bible will be relatively, if not completely, unfamiliar to you. In my own experience, being a Christian for about 25 years now, I can count on one hand the number of times I have heard someone teaching on any passage, from within this book.

Why this has been the case for me, and I suspect for many of you, I cannot say for certain. But if I had to guess, it would be related to the fact that this book, perhaps more extensively than most, leans heavily upon the OT, quoting from it and alluding to it frequently from the very beginning. As a result, reading it and making good sense of it requires one to think about the OT, and to have a knowledge of the OT that most contemporary believers don't have since, in their evangelical church experience, the first two-thirds of the Bible has remained a closed book, or at best, a seldom consulted or used book. Ultimately, although not exclusively, then, the fault for this woeful lack of interest and instruction in Hebrews - and in the OT - lies not at the feet of the congregation, but with the pastors and teachers who should have done a better job of teaching it.

So, we are plunging headlong into the uncharted waters of this fascinatingly unfamiliar book. And the question that immediately will rise, at least for some of you, is "Why?" Why *this* book? Why *now*? A few quick responses to that:

- 1) One reason for studying this book is precisely the fact that it IS so obscure. We are told in Paul's letters to Timothy that all of God's word is profitable for the church and, therefore, this being part of God's word, we need to pay attention to it, and profit from it.
- 2) Another reason to study this book is because it does, as we've seen, work very hard to weave the Old Testament and New Testament together and therefore helps us to understand not only *this* part of Scripture, but the larger horizon of the entire Bible.
- 3) Another reason for studying this book, or at least for *starting* our study of this book, is because its central message is important for us to hear, especially in relation to our study of 1st Corinthians which, as most of you will know, we have been working our way through for some time now. In the Corinthian study we have reached something of a stopping point, at the beginning of chapter 11. Beyond that point we will be looking at a number of crucial as well as some controversial matters on a number of different subjects. One of those matters has to do with the current status of things like *revelation* and *prophecy* in the life of the church. Hebrews will, hopefully, help us to think better about these things, or at least help *set us up* to think better about these things.

With those introductory remarks, we will devote the remainder of our time to making some initial observations about the book of Hebrews itself, thinking about its challenging/promising nature, looking at some of the characteristics of the “letter”, taking note of some of its background dynamics, and thinking briefly about its overall purpose, message and structure. Hopefully, that will help prepare us for a study of chapter 1, verses 1-4 in more detail next week. But before we go any further, let’s pray together.....

Father in heaven, we thank you that in your wisdom you DID speak through your prophets and you DID speak through your Son. Assist us now as we think about this portion of your word known as the Letter to the Hebrews. Please lead us, through our time in this book, into a greater knowledge of you, and therefore a deeper love and appreciation of you, and then, consequently, into a fuller and more whole-hearted pursuit of you in faithful Gospel-obedience. We ask these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

Firstly, then, let’s make some preliminary observations about this book, starting with highlighting what has already been hinted at - the challenging, and yet promising, nature of this letter.

The challenging nature of this letter stems from some of its peculiarities *as a letter*. For instance, unlike other letters in the New Testament, such as Corinthians or Galatians, the “letter” to the Hebrews does not start out with *any* indication of who wrote it. Nor does it tell us *to whom* it was written, where it was written *from* or where it was going *to*.

And so, because of the lack of explicit information of this sort, we are missing some of the basic data which we typically find in Paul’s letters and which assists us in our interpretation and application of those texts. Without such clear indicators we are required, then, to work that much harder to understand the original context of this letter.

Further, because Hebrews is something like a cross between a letter and a theological treatise, then one of its features is that it has a sustained argument within it - an argument about the supremacy of Christ. And the actual approach and structure of this argument is somewhat unique and so also presents something of an interpretive challenge for us, both in terms of its *length* and its *complexity*.

However, all of these things notwithstanding, the challenge of Hebrews is certainly worth taking up because the promise of Hebrews is so great. As one writer, Peter Adam, explains,

Hebrews is a great book to read, because it tackles an issue which is important for all Christians. It was written to those who had been active as Christians for a while, but who had begun to slip away from their original commitment and practice. They were beginning to drift away, perhaps unaware of what was really happening.

They were, in fact, turning away from the living God! So it is essential for us to read Hebrews today, because it is just as easy to slip, to drift, to turn away from the living God.

Many have already drifted far outside the church of God, ranging in mood from pensive nostalgia for what they have lost, to aggressive demolition of the faith of those who remain Christians. Others are still members of churches, but are only too well aware that their lives have become a sham and that they have lost the heart of the matter. Some slip away through the enticements of a secular society, some through frustration with their churches, others through busyness or apathy.

But Hebrews was written to stop the drift....its pastoral aim is to encourage people to stop moving away from Christian faith and practice. It does this by warning them of the dangers of rejecting God and by urging them to hold fast to Christ, God's Son and (our) priest.

So, encouragement in Hebrews is not just soft sympathy and understanding – it is encouragement which derives its strength and vibrancy from the character of the true and living God and from his Son Jesus Christ as our priest and Saviour.....It is interesting, then, to compare Hebrews with the sort of encouragement that we give to each other today, which is more likely to be strong on sympathetic understanding but weak on criticism, avoiding direct instructions. Hebrews [by contrast] gives us solid teaching about God, Christ and the atonement, and is clear in its warnings and instructions....

In addition to noting the challenge/promise of Hebrews it is also worth pointing out something of the background to Hebrews, if only briefly. And, in this regard, we are better served in this opening decade of the 21st century than Christians were less than a hundred years ago. This is due to the discovery and subsequent study of something called the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), near the Sea of Galilee.

The value of these ancient documents which were discovered in the late 1940's is the additional insight that they provide on the culture and beliefs of at least some within the Jewish community in and around the time that Jesus was here. As scholars have studied these manuscripts they have seen very clear connections and parallels between them and some of the writings of the New Testament, most especially the Letter to the Hebrews.

As you work through Hebrews, and as you compare its contents with the contents of some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, you find the source or at least the probable source of some of the beliefs and practices at which Hebrews seems to be taking aim. For example, some of the beliefs outlined in the scrolls, were as follows:

* The people who composed these scrolls, and who had formed a community that was committed to the teachings held within them - they appear to have been very much rooted in the Old Testament in their lifestyle and practices and, in particular, seemed to identify most closely with the people of Israel in the days of Moses - i.e., the time of the exodus from Egypt, the wanderings in the wilderness – all those sorts of things.

* In their understanding of the OT, and in their reading of the prophets, the people described in these scrolls had concluded that at some point in the future there would arise three different, prominent figures - a kingly figure, a priestly figure, and a prophetic figure.

*The prophetic figure was one who would be like Moses and who would return present day Judaism to the days of old - fully reviving the Old Testament system which had been somewhat altered and neglected in their day.

* They also believed that along with the coming of the kingly, priestly, and prophetic figures, a fourth figure would arise who would not be human but would, in fact, be the archangel, Michael, who would rule over the 3 human figures and/or through them. So, not only humans, but *angels* figured prominently in their belief system - more prominently than even the humans - functioning in a superior relationship to them.

* Finally, there were, in some of the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts, references to the mysterious figure of *Melchizedek* who makes a brief, but important, appearance in the book of Genesis - only to disappear afterward, never to be seen or heard from again.

Now, there was, of course, a lot more to the beliefs and practices outlined in these amazing scrolls than just that. But I have highlighted the aforementioned beliefs because, if you have any acquaintance with the Letter to the Hebrews, then you will recognize some similar themes and language. Hebrews talks about the prophetic, kingly, and priestly roles with regard to Christ, but in contrast to the teachings found in the Scrolls, Hebrews sees all of these offices coming in and through *one person - Jesus* - and not through three separate people. Hebrews also talks about Jesus and his relationship to the angels in a way which counters the beliefs described in the Scrolls. Still further, Hebrews will talk about the figure of Melchizedek and the Old Testament sacrificial system - both of which figured prominently in the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts.

Now, to be sure, we don't want to *over-emphasize* these things. These are certainly not the only realities that lie in the background to this letter. However, they do, I believe, form *part* of the background and help us to understand something of the particular form and content of Hebrews. Whoever the *precise* recipients of this letter were, they were people who either came *out* of one of these Dead Sea Scroll communities - like Qumran - or they were at least *familiar* with some of the teaching contained within the Dead Sea Scrolls, and which was widespread in Judea of that day.

Now, I might add that alongside this likely "target audience", a number of scholars have conjectured that this letter was also addressed to a group of not only former Jewish *people* but also a group in which there were a number of former Jewish *priests* who, apparently, had accepted Jesus as the true Messiah. This, if it is correct, would help account for the complexity and detail of some of the OT references within the letter.

One final, and further, background issue worth noting is that, given the time frame when this letter was likely written - roughly from 16-36 years after Christ's resurrection - but given that time frame, the Christian recipients of this letter would have been under a great deal of persecution.

In the early days of the church, Judaism was a tolerated religion allowed to operate in Palestine, even though the Romans had complete control of the region. And, at first, the Romans simply regarded Christians as just another "sect" within Judaism. However, over time, and with the assistance of Jewish enthusiasts, this confusion did not remain for long.

You see, the Jews regarded Christians, essentially, as *traitors* and as blasphemers who considered a mere man - Jesus - to be divine. Many Jews felt quite strongly about this and the more zealous ones among them took to persecuting the Christians. One such persecutor was the Apostle Paul himself - prior to his conversion. These persecutions were often quite severe and were carried out with the increasing complicity of the Roman government. And so, given that sort of environment, it is not too difficult to see how the temptation to revert back to Judaism would have been great, especially for those who had been raised as Jews. Because of this temptation to return to Judaism, the writer of Hebrews spends a great deal of time showing how Christ is superior to everything in the OT - making it clear that "going back" was also "going backward".

And one factor in relation to all this is that you have to keep in mind was that all this was happening at a time *before* most of the New Testament was written, much less organized into an existing canon. Thus, the only "Bible" they had was the Old Testament, plus a few letters from Paul, maybe one of the Gospels, and possibly one or two other letters. But that was it.

So, here were these former Jews, newly converted to Christianity, under tremendous pressure, having been influenced all their life by Rabbis and communities such as described in the Dead Sea Scrolls. And under their tutelage, they had been taught to read and understand the Old Testament one way - but now they are being urged to read that same Old Testament in an entirely *different way* - in the light of Christ and the Gospel. And in taking up this project, all they had to work with was the historically undeniable fact of Jesus' resurrection, the word of some apostolic eyewitnesses, the example of some 1st generation disciples, and, as we've seen, a handful of New Testament writings floating around.

This reality, then, of a persecuted church and a church with an incomplete, still-being-written New Testament is also part of the background against which Hebrews was *written* and *received* by the people of God.

Well, having looked at the challenge and promise of Hebrews, and some of the background and context of Hebrews - such as we have - let's look very quickly at the overall purpose, message and structure of the letter. This is intended as a help to you because, at the end of our time today, your homework assignment, if we can call it that, will be to sit down this week and try to read the entire letter to the Hebrews in one sitting. Hopefully, as you do, some of the things that have been highlighted this morning will come to mind, and will help you grasp something of the overall flow and sweep of the letter.

Very quickly then, the purpose of the letter, as we've already seen, was to warn and call back Christians who had begun to, or were in danger of drifting away from their original beliefs about Christ and their original lifestyle in *pursuit* of Christ. Again, and to echo the words of Peter Adam earlier, the purpose of the letter is *drift prevention*.

Dick Lucas tells the story of how, when he was much younger, he served in the Royal British Navy, as an officer on a mining ship which had the nerve-wracking task of patrolling the shipping lanes in the Mediterranean Sea and clearing away the hundreds of mines that were constantly being deployed and which were responsible for the sinking of so many ships.

On a mining ship, perhaps the most important job is that of the navigator. He has to guide the ship with pinpoint accuracy so that they stay within the lines as they moved back and forth through a particular section of the ocean, clearing away the explosives. If they did not do their job properly, and strayed outside the lines thinking they were in a lane that had already been cleared, disaster could result. In fact, as Lucas tells the story, disaster DID result for a number of them because of *drift*. A strong mid-ocean current would sometimes carry them, imperceptibly, off course when they thought they were going alright. In the mine-clearing business, drifting off course can get you killed. In the Christian life, drifting off course is a similarly dangerous proposition. Hebrews is trying to prevent the drift. That's the purpose of the letter. That is what the letter is trying to DO.

The *message* of the letter, in pursuit of that purpose, is the supremacy and superiority of Christ and so is one which says to us, "*Hold on to Jesus, God's Supreme Word, God's only Son, and our High Priest.*"

And the structure of the letter, in making clear that message, and in pursuing its purposes can be summarized in three main sections. Admittedly, this is an over-simplified outline which will be expanded and supplemented as we go along. But a big-picture outline of the letter can be set out something like this:

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| 1) Hebrews 1:1-4:13 | Christ, the Word of God and the Son of God, is superior to the prophets, to angels, even to Moses himself. |
| 2) Hebrews 4:14-10:18 | Christ, God's mediator and our High Priest, is superior to Aaron's priesthood, and is the fulfillment of every aspect of the OT sacrificial system. |
| 3) Hebrews 10:19-End | Warnings and Encouragements. Now, in fact, there are warnings and encouragements all throughout the letter, in small doses, but there's a great big pile of them at the end of the letter. |

That, in an extremely summarized form, is the basic structure of the letter.

I'm not an expert, or anything like it, on statistics. I have some sympathy for Benjamin D'Israeli's offhanded remark one time that there were three kinds of lies - and statistics was one of them. They *can* be, of course, helpful things, particularly in technical fields. The more technical the field, the more helpful they generally are. But in social and psychological fields they are less trustworthy, in my judgment. They can be highly subjective, easily manipulated, incorrectly obtained and wrongly assessed.

However, even the most cautious approach to statistics would still cause alarm when you look at the results of those who survey Americans - and professing Christians in particular - on a variety of issues related to God, the Bible, the Church, etc. For instance, on a regular basis, an overwhelming number of Americans will claim belief in God - even the God of Christianity - and yet a much lower percentage of those same people believe in the concept of absolute truth. A high percentage will claim a belief in the value of something like the 10 commandments, but a much lower percentage will agree that sex outside of marriage is wrong, or that abortion is evil.

In other words, there is a huge - and growing - gap between various "poles" of evangelical belief in America. There is a slow, but perceptible erosion of conviction among professing believers that is increasingly indistinguishable from the professed convictions of unbelievers in our country. The colors are all running together. In short, the church in America would appear to be very much *adrift* from its alleged moorings and historical anchor points.

This has been demonstrated rather sadly in recent weeks in the comments of various church leaders around the world who were approached by different newspapers to reflect on how the Tsunami Disaster squares with the notion of God. And, of course, it has been a terrible tragedy, and there is much that is mysterious about the providences of God. But the shameful, disgraceful responses given by so many churchmen in prominent positions around the world is both disappointing, and further evidence that much of the church is, in fact, *adrift*. And because it is - and because we personally are affected by these things - the letter to the Hebrews is a relevant book for us.

Another point of contact with this letter, and its recipients, comes at the point of persecution. To be sure, we have no idea what the early church went through - and what many Christians around the world still go through today. We've had a good run here in America. We've been in a safe harbor for a good long time.

But the winds are changing. The number of stories that are popping up here and there are increasing daily. The erosion of religious freedoms and expressions is an undeniable fact. Recent developments in Canada, in Europe, and, in all places, Philadelphia this past week - the home of freedom - but all these things and more signal a change in the winds. And it is my own personal opinion - and I may be wrong - I hope I am - but it is my own personal opinion that *the free ride is just about over in America*. The erosion is going to continue. The marginalization of Christian belief is going to continue. And the cost of being a Christian - in this country - is going to go up. And to the degree that this continues, to that same degree we can identify with the recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews - in an increasing fashion - and should therefore pay that much more attention to what it says.

Finally, as the writer to the Hebrews had to deal with the fact that many people were buying into, or had already bought into, variant theologies and readings of the Scriptures - readings which left Christ out of the picture - which placed other things at the center - so to does this problem and temptation continue in our own day.

It is all too easy to elevate something else as the heart and soul of what we are about as the people of God. It is all too easy to grab onto alternative visions of Jesus, and to replace the message of God's kingdom come in Jesus with a cheap substitute. In the face of these realities, the letter to the Hebrews, remains a vital and necessary anchor point for us - and will help to clear our heads from so many fuzzy theologies about Jesus - as we take in the clean, fresh, clear air of these God-breathed words.....