

Hebrews: A Chapter by Chapter Study

Introduction

Who wrote the letter to the Hebrews?

Although there are some that believe that Paul is the author of this letter as he is so many others, most evidence points away from Paul. Unlike Paul, the author does not identify himself. Unlike Paul, the author refers to himself as a second-hand hearer of the gospel of salvation (see 2:3).

Most scholars believe that this letter was penned by Barnabas. He would have been an intellectual, a master of the Greek language, he would have had authority in the church, and he would have been well versed in the Old Testament. Still others believe that this could have been written by Apollos, the young scholar introduced in the book of Acts by Luke and a student of Paul in Corinth. Another school thought is that this could be a letter from Priscilla and Aquilla.

Most scholars also believe that this letter was written before 70 A.D., most likely around 67-69, but no date is certain.

What is obvious about this letter is its purpose. This was written primarily to converted Jews to stay the course and not be swayed back into the familiar Jewish traditions or to fall back into the Jewish religion. This letter dictates the royalty and supremacy of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Chapter 1

In the first chapter, the author looks to establish the deity of Christ.

V1-4

The author begins by acknowledging the accuracy and relevancy of the Old Testament, a tactic which would put the target audience at ease. But he immediately connects the Old Testament to the Messiah as to not allow any allusions as to what his intent is.

What does it mean in verse 2 by 'these last days'?

This is a reference to the Age of the Messiah, the long but last period.

The author describes succinctly Jesus as the Son of God:

- Heir of all things
- Creator of the worlds
- The brightness of God's glory
- The image of God
- Upholder (or maintainer) of all things
- The One who purged our sins
- The Majesty on high sitting at the right hand of God

What is the significance of verse 4?

The Old Testament gave a sense of hierarchy of God, His angels, His prophets and priests, and His people. This inserts Jesus higher in the hierarchy than anyone as Jesus is God Himself, submitting only to the 'Father' of the trinity.

V5-7

These verses continue to exalt Jesus above the angels. Verse 5 quotes Psalm 2:7 and Samuel 7:14. Verses 6 and 7 quote Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 104:4.

V8-14

Verses 8-12 call the Son the equivalent of God from Psalm 45:6-7 and 102:25-27. These speak of how even though They can be described as separate entities that They are all still One. Even the Old Testament understands the concept of the trinity even if there wasn't a word to describe it yet.

Verses 13-14 say that the work of God is complete, and Jesus now rests at the throne of His Father. Angels continue to work, further showing the separation between angels and Jesus.

Chapter 2

In the second chapter, the author wants to establish the humanity of Christ.

V1-4

These verses warn the new believers of turning away from their faith. Salvation is through Jesus only and is for eternity.

What does phrase 'the word spoken through angels' mean?

This is a traditional way of referencing the Mosaic Law. This same reference can be found in Deuteronomy, Acts and Galatians.

What is the point of these verses?

If we take the law given to us by angels seriously then the word given to us by the Son of God should be taken all the more seriously.

V5-8

Verses 6-8 quote from Psalm 8:4-6. The author is saying that God never gave angels dominion over the earth, but He gave dominion to man. Jesus as a man would have that same dominion that is offered to us. The author is making the point that Jesus is both fully man and fully God.

V9-18

This section is a great rendition of why the death of Jesus is our salvation. God, becoming human, so that we may relate to Him in our own terms, lives a Godly, perfect life and sacrificed Himself in our place.

God humbled Himself to become one of us so that the relationship between God and man may be solidified.

What is meant in verse 10 to 'perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings'?

To the best of our human knowledge, God never suffered until this point. God allowed Himself to become one of us to show us He cares and that He knows what we go through.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 focuses on setting Jesus as the high priest.

V1-6

The author is making a case for why Christianity is above the Jewish religious system by comparing Christ to Moses, who is considered to be one of the greatest of God's chosen people.

V7-11

Here the author quotes from Psalm 95 to compare the Jewish Exodus under Moses to those that turn away from Christ now. God's wrath against that generation meant that they would not enter the Promised Land.

V12-19

How much more will be God's wrath if we turn away from Christ who is above Moses and is God himself? The author is making sure that his audience is aware that the Old Testament wrath of God is still applicable in the present age.

Chapter 4

V1-13

Chapter 4 is a continuation of the sentiment in the previous chapter that enduring the turmoil of this earth means eternal rest in Heaven.

What does the word 'rest' mean here?

There are several takeaways from the word in this verse. It means peace with God, freedom from the bondage of sin, freedom from the Mosaic law, freedom to worship God, and finally, the rest that God himself enjoys.

Verse 3 begins another quote from Psalm 95 and also from Genesis 2 to let God's people know that rest is yet to come. Our earthly life will be filled with work, turmoil, futility, and many other trials. Our joy comes not in this life but in knowing that God has given us eternal life without these things.

V14-16

The author comes full circle in again calling Jesus the high priest, but a priest that everyone can relate to and has suffered the same as us.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 continues with the idea of Jesus as high priest, but takes it even further saying that there is no need for a high priest after Jesus.

V1-10

This section describes what the duties of the high priest are and how Jesus has fulfilled all of these requirements. The author again refers to the Psalms in verses 5 (Psalm 2) and 6 (Psalm 110) to identify Jesus as the high priest. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, even though they are Jewish, they no longer need to adhere to the Jewish traditions.

What is the 'Order of Melchizedek' mentioned in this section?

Melchizedek is considered to be the first priest of God and is the first priest ever mentioned in the bible. He appears in Genesis chapter 14 and blesses Abram, soon to be Abraham. Here in Hebrews, the author is saying that Jesus is the first and only priest that anyone need have.

V11-14

The author changes his tone here to a heavy rebuke to the recipients of this letter. In v11, 'you are no longer trying'. In v12, they are still students when they should be teachers. In vv13 and 14, they are immature who do not know good from evil. This is because the converted Jews keep returning to ways that they need not seek any more.

Chapter 6

V1-8

The opening of chapter 6 is the continuation of the closing thought of chapter 5 where the author is urging his audience to "grow" in their faith and in Christ. There are many misconceptions about this particular passage that one must examine to understand completely and even then there remains some confusion.

Starting in verse 1, does your translation say, "let us press on to maturity" or does it say, "let us go on to perfection"?

The Greek word is best translated as 'maturity' but that does not dismiss the idea behind the translations that say 'perfection'. The idea is that we should grow and mature in our faith toward Christ, who is perfection.

Verse 2 begins by bringing on a different set of misunderstandings. This opens what many consider to be a list of fundamental doctrines for Christian living. However, the literal translations from the Greek reveal a different story. This list is that of Jewish practices that many of the converted Jews were hung up on in their Christian faith. This is revealed most prevalently in the word "baptism" or "washings". The Greek word is that of 'baptismos' which refers to the Jewish practice of washing. The Greek word 'baptizo' is the translation for the Christian practice of baptism. All of these things mentioned here in verse 2 were traditions that many of the converted Jews thought necessary in their Christian life but had very little meaning for a Christian in reality. Although these things are useful and can still be practiced as a Christian, they are meaningless without faith in Christ.

Verses 4-6 is one of the most hotly debated passages in all of scripture. Does this mean that if someone believed and then falls away that they cannot return? Or does this imply that they were never truly Christian to begin with? The biggest takeaway from this passage is that only God knows the true heart of a man no matter what the human perceptions may be.

Verses 7 and 8 discuss how those that only act like Christians but do not truly believe are worthless and lack the salvation promised by Jesus.

V9-20

The author switches from rebuke to encouragement here. Even in trying times, God keeps His promises. Abraham had to wait decades for his promised offspring, but God did not fail him. The picture offered here by the author is that God cannot swear to keep His promises because there is no one greater than God to swear by. His promises are truth.

Chapter 7

V1-10

The author used Melchizedek as an example of how Christ can be the High Priest without being a Levitical priest. Some of the converted Jews were hung up on the fact the Jesus wasn't a Levite so how could He be a high priest? Melchizedek was a high priest before there was a Levitical priest and is recognized as such by Abraham and David.

V11-28

The author continues his use of Melchizedek in his argument for Jesus not only being greater than a high priest, but He is the only and final high priest.

- The Levitical priesthood is not perfect
- The Levitical priesthood is human and can die
- David, in Psalm 110, described the order of Melchizedek as a better priesthood
- Even some of the laws established by the priesthood changed over time
- Jesus defeated death and lives forever and therefore fulfills the declaration in Psalm 110

Read Galatians 3:19-25

In Galatians, Paul talks about the law in the same way the author of Hebrews does here in chapter 7. The law is a guideline to show us the perfection of God, but in and of itself is not perfect nor does it lead to perfection. The law points the direction to God but is not God. In the same way, the high priests lead the way to God, but they are not God.

Chapter 8

V1-6

This is a summary of the argument in chapters 6 and 7.

- Jesus is the perfect high priest
- Jesus is seated at the right hand of God and also is God
- Jesus is a minister of the true tabernacle, not an earthly temple
- Jesus offered a perfect sacrifice and does not require another sacrifice
- The promises that Jesus made are better and more fulfilling than those of the old law

V7-13

Here the author quotes from Jeremiah 31:31-34 to show that God Himself meant to replace the old covenant with a new covenant. Some commentators also point to Ezekiel 11:17-20 as a confirmation of this argument.

Chapter 9

V1-10

The old testament tabernacle, sanctuary and sacrifices are described in this section showing the futility of not having personal access to God, having to 'wash, rinse, repeat' and how these are only material representations to be in place until the new order.

V11-28

The author shows how Jesus replaced all of the symbols of a high priest and the old covenant with a new and perfect covenant. Instead of entering the Holy of Holies once a year, Jesus died and entered Heaven as a sacrifice. The blood of animals, although innocent, is imperfect. Jesus' blood replaced that of any sacrificial animal. Jesus replaces the high priest as an eternal mediator. A testament or covenant in some translations requires blood or death. Jesus fulfilled this requirement and then rose again.

Chapter 10

V1-18

This is a continuation of the comparison of Jewish High Priests and Christ as the High Priest.

What does it mean in verse 1 that the law is a 'shadow'?

The Old Covenant, although a legitimate contract with God, is not the be-all-and-end-all of promises. The Old Covenant was a foreshadow of what was to follow. Although the animal sacrifices performed by the Jews could cover sin, they could never remove soon like the blood of Jesus.

In verse 5-7, the author quotes Psalm 40:6-7

Note in verse 12 that one of the characteristics of Christ is that once His sacrifice was made, He sat at the right hand of God.

See Jeremiah 31:33-34; this is a letter that Jeremiah wrote to the Jews who were in exile describing how this earth and this law are temporary, but God is forever.

V19-25

What does the phrase 'a new and living way' mean in verse 20?

For the high priest to enter the Holy of Holies, a cleansing ritual and a blood sacrifice would have to take place. As Christians, Jesus has provided us a cleansing with His own sacrifice. All who believe can now enter into the presence of God.

In verses 24 and 25 the author reminds us not to let loneliness lead us into discouragement or depression. Fellowship is important for many reasons including the worshipping of God in numbers and the encouragement that we can offer one another.

V26-39

What is the author trying to convey here about 'willfully sinning'?

Every sin is a willful sin by definition. The true meaning of this passage lies in the context and the intended audience. The Jews that this letter addresses were doubtful, discouraged Christians. He wants them to remain faithful and not turn away from truth as this would be an insult to God. This passage is not meant to say that we will never sin again and, if we do, our salvation is nullified. It is meant to be an encouragement to keep believing and keep the faith.

Chapter 11

V1-40

The author begins this chapter by defining what faith is to a Christian. Having faith in God means trusting Him when there's no reason to trust Him. As Christians, we trust that whatever happens to us here on Earth, the sacrifice of Jesus is what gets us into Heaven.

The author then goes on to list numerous examples of Jews who kept their faith in God throughout the Old Testament.

4: Abel

5: Enoch

7: Noah

8-10: Abraham

11: Sarah

20: Isaac

21: Jacob

22: Joseph

23-29: Moses

31: Rahab

32: This list goes on...Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets.

In verse 35, the author mentions not just the faith of those previously mentioned, but the hardships that they and many others had to endure. Both Isaac and Samson were mocked, Joseph and Micaiah were imprisoned, Zechariah and Naboth were stoned to death, and Isaiah was sawn in two as his form of execution.

The author finishes this chapter by saying that these people who had faith never got to see the promise of that faith come to fruition in this lifetime. As Christians, this promise has already happened! All we have to do is accept the salvation offered to us by Christ!

Chapter 12

V1-3

This section closes the train of thought on faith from chapter 11. Our focus should be on Jesus, just as those heroes of faith in the Old Testament looked to the coming Messiah.

What does the term 'despising the shame' mean in verse 2?

One of the most encompassing aspects of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus was the shame that came with it. Crucifixion is a shameful execution, being mocked, being found guilty at a trial...all of these were a shame that Jesus had to endure.

Whatever persecution we may face, those before us have endured so much more. Even God Himself endured the pain and shame of the cross.

V4-17

What is the purpose of bringing up discipline at this juncture?

The author shifts gears here ever so slightly. Many of the converted Jews felt like they were being punished by God for their conversion! If Christ is really the Son of God, why would all of this persecution fall on them? The author quotes from Proverbs 3:11-12 to remind them that discipline is also a form of preparation. Much like the strong of faith in chapter 11, persecution is not new, nor should it be thought of as a confirmation of doing wrong. Instead, we are to look at God as our father just as the Jews still do. We may not know why things are happening, but we know that God is doing what is best for all of His children.

In verses 14-17, the author tells his audience to use these bad experiences to teach others how to be joyful in bad times knowing that our reward is Heaven and not here on Earth.

V18-24

What are the differences between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion?

One commentator goes into great detail on what the significance of these two mountains are. Mount Sinai was where God talked to Moses. While God was present on the mountain, no one was to go near for fear of being killed. It was an experience the Jews witnessed and were terrified of. Mount Zion is the hill where Jerusalem sits.

- Mount Zion is marked by fear and terror, Mount Zion is a place of love and forgiveness.
- Mount Sinai is in the desert, Mount Zion is in the Land of Milk and Honey.
- On Mount Sinai, only Moses was allowed to enter. On Mount Zion, a general assembly is invited to draw close to God.
- Moses is the mediator of Mount Sinai. Jesus is the mediator of Mount Zion.
- Sinai is all about the law. Zion is about grace.

V25-29

This last paragraph in the chapter is a stark reminder of who God is. He is our Father, but He is our Perfect Father, not an earthly father figure. He is still the Creator of the Universe and our respect is owed Him.

Chapter 13

V1-17

The final teaching of this letter gives a list of virtues that Christians should display. This is by no means a comprehensive or exclusive list but perhaps some of these were issues that the audience was struggling with.

- Love one another (v1)
- Show hospitality (v2)
- Bring peace and comfort to prisoners and those who are mistreated (v3)
- Honor marriage and keep it pure (v4)

- Don't be greedy (v5)
- Be content with what you have (v5,6)
- Follow the church leaders (v7)
- Study what is taught (v9)
- Praise God in all things (v15)
- Do good and share with others (v16)
- Submit to authority (v17)

Does the modern church struggle with any of these virtues? Do you personally struggle with any?

V18-25

The author concludes his letter with a request for prayer, an offer of blessing and providing news of Timothy and an impending visit.

References

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