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Lesson 1
Introduction to Hebrews

Today we begin a study in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and this is one of the most exciting, challenging and convicting books in the Bible. The two most important books in the New Testament are Romans and Hebrews. Romans is a book of deep theology and keen logic that tells us about the work of Jesus Christ. Hebrews is a book that tells us about the person of Jesus Christ.

“The great object of Hebrews, then, is to set before these believers’ eyes, Christ, the Son of God; the Son of Man; the Great High Priest in Heaven; and to cause them constantly to occupy their thought and worship with God, into Whose presence Christ by His blood has brought them.” (William R. Newell, *Hebrews*).

Hebrews, too, is a book of great logic and beauty with a high literary style. This book was written by someone with a very alert mind. It is a very polished letter with an argument that is irrefutable. Hebrews is definitely an epistle of doctrine, and all the teachings of this book are designed to cause the Christian to push on into spiritual maturity. The goal of all the doctrine of this book is to teach people to love Jesus Christ and acknowledge His Lordship over their lives. The true believer in Christ is constantly exhorted to push on in Christian maturity by laying hold of Christ, the great High Priest, for salvation and sanctification.

This epistle contains deep spiritual truth and to abide in this truth will lead a person from immaturity to maturity in spiritual things. The individual Christian needs to ponder and meditate upon Hebrews with reverent attention if he is going to understand correctly how all the Scriptures focus upon the person of Jesus Christ. The Hebrew Epistle is not light and easy reading. He who would understand it must apply himself diligently, depending upon the Holy Spirit to open up its vast spiritual treasures.

As no other book in the Bible, Hebrews pulls together the teachings of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Hebrews demonstrates the underlying unity of the sixty-six books of the Bible as proceeding ultimately from the one and the same author, the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews shows us that the truths of the New Testament are hidden in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is made plain in the New Testament.

Augustine said, “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.”

Hebrews is a key book and without an understanding of it we will never have a full grasp of true Christianity.

John Calvin said,

There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which He offered by His

death, which so abundantly deals with the use of ceremonies as well as their abrogation, and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law. Let us therefore not allow the Church of God or ourselves to be deprived of so great a benefit, but firmly defend the possession of it. (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*)

THE AUTHOR

Nowhere in Hebrews are we told who wrote this book. Scholars have disagreed as to who the author really is. Some say it was the Apostle Paul; others have attributed it to Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Aquilla, Silas and Timothy. No one can be dogmatic on the authorship of Hebrews, and it is said, “But who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews God only knows certainly.” Whoever the human author was, we do know that the divine author was the Holy Spirit.

My own personal conviction is that the Apostle Paul wrote this book for much of the theology and logic is Pauline in concept, but it is not Paul’s style of writing. Perhaps Paul gave a rough draft of this letter to someone like Luke or Timothy and they penned this letter as his secretary. It would be like a ghostwriter who writes speeches for the President of the United States.

It was by divine design that the author of Hebrews left off his name. This epistle was designed to exalt the glorious Christ, and the author wanted men to see Christ and not him.

The author constantly refers to the Old Testament. The Law, the Psalms and the Prophets are quoted more in Hebrews than any other New Testament book. Whoever the author was, his name must go down in history as one of the great expositors of Holy Scriptures.

THE DATE

The date of this book can be fixed sometime before 70 A.D. because the Temple was still standing and sacrifices were being made. These were destroyed in 70 A.D. by Titus and the Roman legions. Also, Christ is said to be ascended at the right hand of the Father, so the date would have to be sometime between 33 A.D. and 70 A.D.

Most scholars place the date of Hebrews around 65 A.D.

THE THEME

The underlying theme of Hebrews is the exalted Christ. This one who is the God-Man has been exalted through resurrection and sits at the Father’s right hand as our great High Priest and He is constantly interceding for us. Four times Christ is mentioned as sitting upon His throne in heaven (1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

As we read this book, our thoughts are turned towards Jesus Christ and when we are finished we can say as the author, “*But we see Jesus...*” (2:9). God has spoken through Christ; therefore, real Christianity is a relationship with a person and not a works religion.

We are told in this epistle that because Christ is exalted, He is superior to the Old Testament

prophets (1:1-3), superior over the angels (1:4-2:18), superior over Moses (3:1-19), superior over Joshua (4:1-13), superior over Aaron (5:14—7:18), superior over the whole of Judaism (7:19-10:39), and superior over each and all of the Old Testament saints (11:1—12:3).

THE ADDRESSEES

The book of Hebrews was written to a specific group of Jewish-Christians who had placed their faith in Jesus as Messiah and had come out of Judaism. This group lived either in Jerusalem or in the general Palestine area close to Jerusalem. They were obviously well acquainted with the Jewish priesthood, rituals and sacrifices that were being practiced in the Temple in Jerusalem.

It seems as though the author had a personal acquaintance with most of these Hebrew-Christians for he calls them “brethren” (3:1) and “beloved” (6:9). The author expected to see his friends in Christ soon (13:23).

The book of Hebrews is written to a local church which is made up of professing Christians. The great majority of these people were true believers in Christ (3:1; 4:14; 10:23). They were probably second generation Christians (2:3; 5:12; 13:7). Their original leaders were gone. As second generation Christians, they had lost some of the initial zeal of Christianity which their parents experienced. In fact, most of these believers were immature Christians. They were stagnating spiritually and not pushing on in the Christian Faith (5:12). These Hebrew-Christians were retrogressing in the Christian Faith rather than progressing.

They were not growing spiritually because they were not leaving the types and shadows of the Old Testament for the reality of Christ of the New Testament. Even though they were converted to Christ, they had deep attachments to Mosaic institutions. For a Jew to leave the Jewish religion, which was held for a thousand years by his forefathers, was a giant step of faith. It was only natural that they wanted to retain the form and the ceremonies in which they had been raised. Even more so since the Temple still stood and the Levitical priesthood still functioned.

These Christian-Jews were experiencing some difficult social persecution from the religious world of unsaved Judaism, but none had yet been put to death for the Faith (12:3-4). However, some of them were in chains because of their faith (13:3). Persecution from the unsaved Jews made life very difficult for these Christian-Hebrews and they were seriously considering going back into Judaism, after having professed Christ and broken with the synagogue and traditional Judaism (2:1; 3:6; 4:1).

These Christians, undoubtedly, had been told by their parents of Christ’s return, at which time they would experience the fulfillment of hopes and see Christ establish His kingdom on the earth. Over thirty years had passed and Christ still had not returned, so they became discouraged, despondent and depressed, and were not growing in grace. Out of fellowship with their Lord, the leeks, onions and garlic of Judaism looked attractive to them and they wanted to go back.

Some had already abandoned the group and made moves back to the synagogue (10:25).

The author is constantly exhorting these Christians to push on in faith towards the Messiah, the great High Priest.

Whoever the initial recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews were, the message is not totally limited to them. God ultimately intended this epistle for the whole Church.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect (mature), thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2Tim 3:16-17).

Copies would be made of this epistle and sent to churches everywhere. This book has been of inestimable value to Jewish Christians as well as Gentile Christians.

While the great majority of the addressees were genuinely saved, the author seriously questioned the reality of true saving faith in some, especially those who had already left the Christian assembly for the synagogue. Just as there was a mixed multitude in the Old Testament which came out of Egypt, so the author is convinced that some in this particular assembly were not true believers. Some were actually apostates (3:12). The word “departing” actually is “apostatizing”. An apostate is one who has been given much light concerning Christ. He has at one time professed the Faith and then turned from it, denying the whole of Christianity.

In the book of Hebrews, the author puts the emphasis upon man’s human response to Christ, and divine sovereignty is only in the background. The author looks at salvation and Christian growth from man’s standpoint and not God’s.

THE PURPOSES FOR WRITING

To Show that Christianity is Better than Judaism

Christianity is not a substitution for Judaism but a fulfillment of Old Testament Judaism. The Old Testament deals with types and shadows, but in the New Testament, the reality Christ has come and types and shadows are to be eliminated (10:1). The word “better” appears over and over again. Christ is “better than the angels” (1:4); Christ brings a “better hope” (7:19); Christ made a “better testament or covenant” (7:22); Christ offers “better promises” (8:6); Christ makes “better sacrifices” (9:23); Christ is a “better substance” (10:34); Christ guarantees a “better country” (11:16); Christ gives a “better resurrection” (11:35); and Christ grants a “better thing” to Christians (11:40).

Christianity is vastly superior to Judaism because it is mediated through a vastly superior person, Jesus Christ.

To Show that the New Covenant Is Superior to the Old Covenant

Moses brought the Old Covenant, which is the Mosaic Law, but Christ superseded the Old Covenant with the New Covenant (7:22; 8:7-8; 10:9). The Old-Covenant condemns a man because it shows him he is a sinner, but the New Covenant saves a man because it is based on

Christ's death for sin and sinners. Christ shed His own blood to establish the New Covenant and this is far superior to any animal sacrifices of the Mosaic Law (9:15).

The book of Hebrews shows the Christian that he should no longer be under the Mosaic Law as a way of life because Christ is the fulfillment of the Law.

To Bring Christians to Maturity (6:1)

Hebrews is filled with doctrine and exhortations to bring a Christian to adulthood in his Christian experience.

To Keep Professing Christians from Apostatizing (3:12)

Apostasy for a professing Christian has eternal consequences, for once a person truly apostatizes, it is impossible to renew him again to repentance (6:4-6). It is impossible for this person to be saved. Therefore, the author of Hebrews gives five warnings to professing Christians to sober them to the consequences of leaving the Christian Faith. He warns them of the danger of drifting (2:1-4), the danger of disobedience (3:7—4:13), the danger of degeneration (5:11—6:20), the danger of despise (10:26-31), and the danger of departing (12:16-29).

To Prepare the Hebrew-Christians for Persecution (12:1b-3)

To Warn Against False Teachers (13:9)

CONCLUSION

The message of salvation comes through loud and clear in the book of Hebrews. It tells us that Christ, the God-Man, died on the cross to make a perfect sacrifice for sin and sinners. Christ “made purification for sins” (1:3). He is “able to save forever and completely” (7:25), through His death, those He “perfected for all time” (10:14). By his blood, He has opened “a new and living way” for His people (Heb. 10:20).

“Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh...” (Heb. 10:19-20).

Through His death, Christ has provided an “eternal salvation” (5:9), and an “eternal redemption” (9:12), and guaranteed men an “eternal inheritance” (9:15).

Does Christ save all? No! Did Christ die for all? No! Who, then, will Christ save from sin and eternal judgment? Anyone who will come by faith to God through Christ. ***“Hence also He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them”*** (Heb. 7:25).