

Introducing the Letter to the Hebrews

Author: unknown, yet clearly a close associate with Paul's ministry team (serves with Timothy – 13:23). Some common suggestions include the Apostle Paul, Barnabas, Priscilla or Aquila (Acts 18:2). But ultimately we don't know.

Date: sometime before 70AD (before Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, which we spoken of as present day realities in the Letter to the Hebrews))

Purpose:

The Letter to the Hebrews was written to Christians under pressure (10:32-35). The author is delivering a written sermon (13:22) to his Christian family - throughout the Letter the author avoids any reference to reading or writing. Instead all the verbs refer to speaking and hearing. Thus, according to this Letter, the most important thing that we can do it to hear what God is saying to us.

The main concern in the Letter is the cost of Christian discipleship. It is written to Christians whose lives are falling apart and their faith seems to bring them no advantage, but only suffering. The cost of following Christ led to the loss of their property or even their lives (not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood - 10:32-35).

But they had become weary, showing signs of indifference and apathy, some even had stopped meeting together. They most likely lived in Rome or near Rome. In 49AD Claudius expelled Jews (including Jewish Christians). In 64 AD Nero the Emperor's hostility was clear for all to see. Christians were called to say that the emperor is the Son of God and refusing to say this could cost their lives. Some began to withdraw from contact with outsiders, even fellowship with the church. They would have been thinking 'not again. We suffered 15 years ago - we should be done with this'.

The language is that of "we" and "us". This is no ivory tower letter written from a place of safety. The author is in the midst of the same struggle, and is writing to people he knows and wishes to visit (13:23-25).

The Letter is a call to remember the character of Jesus, the pioneer of their faith, who identified with them and released them from the fear of death. They were to see the supremacy of Jesus in and over all things. Jesus, the final revelation from God, God the Son, the fulfilment of all God's promises. Jesus, the true King of Kings.

NOTE: The following studies are an edited version of the Study & Discussion Questions in Nancy Guthrie, Hoping for Something Better (Tyndale Momentum)

Sermon One: What is God saying to you? Hebrews 1:1-4

Study One: What is God saying to you? Hebrews 1:1-4

Big idea: Jesus is everything God wants to say to us.

Intro: In what areas of your life have you felt a nagging sense of disappointment? At this point, what are your thoughts about the suggestion that upping your amazement and affection for Jesus could make any difference?

Read Hebrews 1:1-4

List at least six things we are told about Jesus in verses 1-4.

1. God's Son whom God speaks through – the revelation of Jesus is superior to all other revelations from God.
2. The heir of all things – all things will be placed under His feet; all things were made by Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16)
3. Through whom God made the world – see also John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16.
4. The radiance of God's glory / the exact imprint of His nature – to see Jesus is to see God in all His glory.
5. Who upholds the universe by His word of power – Jesus brought all creation into existence and preserves it.
6. Made purification for sins – here is Jesus' priestly act on the cross that cleansed His people from sin and made us able to worship in God's presence.

Which one of these aspects of who Jesus is do you find especially meaningful, and why?

What do you think it means that God “has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” (1:2)?

The Son of God is the great and final Prophet whose revelation completes that of the Old Testament prophets, through whom God also spoke. The Old Testament revelation was always pointing forward to a time called the last days (Jeremiah 23:20, Micah 4:1, 1 Corinthians 10:11) where there would come a greater prophet than Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15 and Acts 3:22), God in the flesh (Isaiah 7:14, John 14:9), and all His promises fulfilled (Luke 24:44 and 2 Corinthians 1:20).

God’s final word through the Son makes the words of the biblical prophets come alive! This is what unifies chapter one of Hebrews, for the Scriptures quoted in verses 5–13 are seven prime examples of precisely how “God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets,” testifying to the supremacy of his Son.

Some say that Hebrews 1:1-4 expresses the most important idea of history. How would you express this idea in your own words?

- Jesus is supreme as God’s Prophet – reveals God perfectly in word and as well as His being (you see Jesus, you see God!)
- Jesus is supreme as God’s King – He rules over all the world as its Creator and Sustainer
- Jesus is supreme as God’s Priest – the one and only mediator between God and sinful humanity, who by Him sacrificing Himself on the cross has brought reconciliation between God and humanity.

Looking back, what are the primary influences that have shaped your understanding and expectations of Jesus?

**How satisfied are you now in terms of closeness to and intimacy with God?
In what ways would you like that relationship to change?**

Sermon Two: Who do you rely upon? Hebrews 1:5-14

Study Two: Who do you rely upon? Hebrews 1:5-14

Big idea: There is no person, office, authority, law or teaching (on earth or under earth or in heaven) that even begins to rival the supremacy of Jesus.

Intro: What is the common concept of angels today?

Read Hebrews 1:5-14.

Compare your answer above with what the writer says about the duties and position of angels in 1:4-7, 14.

Angels worship Jesus (v.6, Luke 2:13), and they are sent by God to serve Christians (v.14). They are constantly present and active in this world.

What does each of the following passages add to your understanding of the role of angels?

1 Kings 19:5-7 – Elijah is woken and then fed by an angel

Psalm 34:7 – surround God's people to protect / deliver them

Luke 1:13, 30 – speak directly to people God's messages

Acts 12:23 – strike people dead

Revelation 5:11-12 – worship God around His throne, lead the call to worship

As you follow the line of argument in 1:5-14, what does the writer intend to prove about Jesus Christ's position in relation to angels?

Absolute supremacy in relation to God the Father, in history, in power and in role

What responsibilities and authority does the Son have according to 1:8-9?

His major role and authority is that of a King. Jesus inherits the name of divine Son (King) when he sits at God's right hand (vv. 3–5). In this way he surpasses the angels who, as creatures and servants of God, worship the Son. His throne lasts forever and his rule is righteous. This means that he has the right to command and the power to rescue.

The writer has shown Jesus as superior in rank and in power to the prophets and to angels. What is Jesus shown to be superior to in 1:10-12?

All of creation - for all of time.

According to 1:13-14, where is the Son? Where are the angels? How might the knowledge of this make a difference in your day to day life?

Jesus is at God's right hand with total authority, sending angels to serve His people (angels serve us!). We have God the Father as our Father, God the Son interceding for us, God the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, and angels serving us – at all times, in all places...

Sermon Three: Are you drifting? Hebrews 2:1-4

Study Three: Are you drifting? Hebrews 2:1-4

Big idea: Hold onto Jesus and His saving grace or face the consequences.

Intro: Have you ever lost control of where your body was going? Slipping on ice? Falling off something? A car accident? How did it happen? What did it feel like?

Read Hebrews 10:32-35.

What was life like for the people this letter was originally written for? What was the message for them?

Public insult, imprisonment and the seizure of property were among the forms of persecution they'd received. But they responded joyfully and went through it all together! The message they needed to hear was not to throw away their confidence and ensuing great reward.

Read Hebrews 2:1-4

Put into your own words the warning in Hebrews 2:1-4.

Because Jesus has saved us (from everything that threatens us), we'd be utter fools to put Him aside as if He's useless and irrelevant.

How do these words connect with what's been written in:

Hebrews 10:32-35 – do not throw away what you have

Hebrews 1:1-14 - Jesus was favourably compared with prophets (1:1–2) and angels (1:4–14). The message declared by angels is the Mosaic law, which was given by angels (deduced in Jewish tradition from Deut. 33:2; see Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). Because Jesus is supreme

over both angels and OT prophets, we “must pay much closer attention” (Heb. 2:1) to his message than theirs.

How does the culture we live in entice us to drift away from what God has said? What difference does an understanding of who Jesus is make in our tendency to drift?

Materialism, consumerism, self-ism, post-modernism/pluralism...

Do you see yourself as paying careful attention to Jesus or drifting away? What changes can you make in your life and what divine promises can you cling to in fuelling these changes to guard against drifting away?

What was the reason for signs, wonders, and miracles of Jesus according to verses 2:3-4? (See also John 10:38 and Acts 2:22).

Special miracles that God used to demonstrate the authority of Jesus as well as to prove the ministries of the apostles.

Do you see yourself as drifting in regard to your connection to Jesus, or would you say that you have tethered yourself firmly to him? Prove it!

Sermon Four: What are you afraid of? Hebrews 2:5-18

Study Four: What are you afraid of? Hebrews 2:5-18

Big idea: Jesus frees us from the slavery of being scared to death of death

Intro: When you think about death, does it inspire fear or hope or some other emotion? What belief about death shapes your emotional response?

Read Hebrews 2:5-18

What point do you think the writer was trying to make to his readers by quoting Psalm 8 in 2:6-8?

The glorious status of people as the head of all creation. But we have messed up this role. Jesus is human, and fulfils the role of ruler/steward of creation. Jesus has the crown of glory and honour. Jesus received this honour and glory as a human.

Hebrews 2:8 says that “we do not see everything subject to him” (referring to both humanity and the ultimate man, Jesus)? What are evidences of this you observe in the world and in your own life?

Some examples - this world still exists – He is still preserving life; He is at work in people – every good and perfect gift comes from God; He has saved us – actively intervening when we were dead in transgressions and sins, giving us the Holy Spirit and applying all His gracious benefits to us.

According to 2:11-18, in what ways does Jesus identify with human beings? How does this help you appreciate Jesus more?

Jesus became one of us - flesh and blood. He lived on this earth, with a human body, with human emotions, with human relationships, with human suffering, experiencing human death. This is the Jesus of Hebrews 1:1-4.

In what way was the devil destroyed by Christ's death (2:14)?

The devil tempts people to sin, and when we sin, he then accuses us (Satan means "the accuser") and condemns us. But when Jesus bore our sin on the cross He took away any weapon Satan has to seek our condemnation (our sin has been dealt with, we are forgiven, known, loved and accepted – Romans 8:1, Colossians 2:13-15).

Satan's power is not absolute, but is under the control of God, who ultimately rules over life and death

According to 2:18, what are two specific experiences that Jesus has shared with us? What difference does it make in your life that he has shared these things with you?

1. Jesus has been tempted – see Matthew 4:1-11)
2. Jesus has suffered – see most of His adult life

Jesus knows exactly what it's like to face trials that seem overwhelming, as well as face pain that seems crushing. As our Mediator, He's walked in our shoes and can minister very knowingly to our situation/s.

Thinking back to our intro question, reflect on the words" "but we do see Jesus" (v.9). What difference does it make to see who Jesus is and what he has done as we face the reality of death?

Every difference in the world – Jesus is amazing! It's easy to forget how awesome He is. Read Hebrews 1:1-4 again.

And in thinking of the reality of death - maybe read 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.

What truth in this chapter has the power to free you from the fear of death?

Sermon Five: What are you thinking? Hebrews 3:1-6

Study Five: What are you thinking? Hebrews 3:1-6

Big idea: When we fix our thoughts on Jesus we hold firm to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Intro: What takes up most of your thoughts? Daydreams? Nightmares?

Read Hebrews 3:1-6

How would you summarize what the transition (“therefore” or “and so”) in verse 3:1 refers back to?

Therefore holy brothers and sisters – Jesus has become human, suffered and died to make us His children (we who share in a heavenly calling). The therefore in verse 1 ties together the way Jesus made us His children (freed us from death and gave us an unbreakable hope) and then what it means to walk with this Jesus (in 3:1-6).

Based on the instruction in 3:1, in what practical ways can you “fix your thoughts on,” “consider,” or “think carefully about” Jesus?

Constantly be reading one of the Gospel’s alongside our other Bible readings...

In what ways is Jesus similar to and superior to Moses according to 3:1-6?

Similar	Superior

Why was Moses so esteemed by the Hebrew people? Why was it important for the Hebrews to see that Jesus is greater than Moses? (see John 1:17 for insight)

Moses talked with God face-to-face and saw His form. Moses was given great dignity in being God's Mediator between God and His people. Moses was unique in the giving of the law.

But Jesus is greater and this is important because Moses' ministry pointed forward to Jesus, as did the law and the tabernacle and the Passover.

Who or what do you tend to esteem too highly—someone or something that threatens to take priority over the authority and influence of Jesus in your life?

What do you think it means to “hold fast our confidence” or “hold on to our courage and the hope in which we boast” (3:6)?

We know we belong to God by this – those who trust Jesus persevere in trusting, hoping, boasting in the work of Christ and nothing else before God. We don't just look back to when we became Christians; we focus on Jesus each day in active trust and obedience.

Describe what a person is like who fails to hold on to the courage and hope provided for us in Christ. How can you hold on to the courage and hope provided for you in Christ?

Distracted by problems and situations; overwhelmed with life; entitled people who demand rights and needs; cynical people; disappointed people whose lives are marked by complaining, being bitter and resentful.

Sermon Six: Have you heard? Hebrews 3:7-19

Study Six: Have you heard? Hebrews 3:7-19

Big idea: We must take upon ourselves the responsibility to persevere by listening to God and encouraging one another.

Intro: When was the last time you were warned about something? What was it? Why the warning? How did you respond?

Hebrews 3:7-19

Read Hebrews 3:7-14, along with Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13, which describe the two events referred to in Psalm 95 quoted in Hebrews 3.

What did the people in the wilderness do wrong?

A significant time of testing occurred at Rephidim (Exodus 17:1-7) where the people grumbled and Moses struck the rock.

What was the result for them?

God's promise not to allow them into the Promised Land; 40 years of disobedience and wilderness wandering,

What is the warning in this passage? Who is it for? What are the results of not heeding this warning?

Hebrews 3:1-6 contrasts Jesus and Moses (3:1-6). Now there's a transition to a comparison of their followers' responses. The followers of Moses failed to enter God's promised rest due to their disobedience and unbelief. So the author exhorts the followers of the superior Son of God to be careful not to repeat this pattern by failing to enter even now, as a foretaste, into God's future, end-time rest.

The issue is: falling away from the living God; deceitfulness of sin, hardened heart, wilderness (hopelessness without end) and missing out on God's rest.

In the series of questions found in 3:16-18, we discover that the people rebelled, sinned, and disobeyed. How are these attitudes and actions related to unbelief (3:19)?

In their failure to cling permanently to God's promises. Promises are important in Hebrews, especially those made and secured by God himself. Unbelief is not trusting God or His Word. The people of the Exodus generation had witnessed God's salvation in the exodus; in fact, they had left Egypt led by Moses, which means that they had personally witnessed many of God's mighty miracles. Yet in spite of this, they had responded in disobedience and unbelief. The result was their death and consequent inability to enter into the rest of the Promised Land. That disobedience flows from unbelief.

Or in other words, the people described in 3:16-18 once believed in God, but they had lost relationship with Him, doubting His goodness and provision, and gave themselves over to trying to create safety for the present and hope for the future. God's promises meant nothing practically and relationally.

While we don't like to label ourselves as "rebellious" against God, are there areas in which you would have to admit you have rebelled against God?

What do you need according to Hebrews 3:7-19?

Hebrews warns against allowing the unbelief of a hardened, sinful heart to cause one to fall away ("turn away from, forsake, apostatize from"; cf. Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1). His counter to this danger is

1. to encourage personal commitment (take care)

2. and to call on the church to walk together in mutual encouragement (exhort one another). as long as it is called “today.”

From the perspective of God’s saving plans for world history, the church lives in a special moment in which the Lord has come, spoken, and gone, and believers await his return—faith is called for in this hour, and mutual exhortation sustains and strengthens faith.

To be warned. Are there areas where sin has taken hold in your life and your heart has been hardened? Are you actively listening to God in His Word? Are you confessing personal sin, seeking forgiveness, listening to who God says you are, meditating on His promises, shaping our lives by them? Do you come to Life Group for mutual accountability and daily encouragement of one another? This is what we need according to this passage.

Sermon Seven: Where are you going? Hebrews 4:1-13

Study Seven: Where are you going? Hebrews 4:1-13

Big idea: Jesus leads us away from meaningless ritual toward meaningful rest.

Intro: If someone were to ask you what it takes to have real rest in this life, how would you answer?

Read Hebrews 4:1-13

From reading through Hebrews 3 and 4, what was the “rest” God offered to the Israelites?

The main picture of rest the Israelites were given was the Promised Land. But rest was so much more than just living in a place with no conflict.

The promise of entering now into this rest means ceasing from the spiritual strivings that reflect uncertainty about one’s final destiny; it means enjoyment of being established in the presence of God, to share in the everlasting joy that God entered when he rested on the seventh day (v. 10).

What rest is offered to us as believers to experience here and now?

Same as above. Christians enter into his rest through recognizing that Christ’s work of redeeming them from sin has also been completed.

The rest of Jesus - see Matthew 11:28-30. It’s a personal, relationally given rest that rearranges one’s emotional, spiritual and situational well-being.

What rest is still ahead for believers?

The new heavens and new earth, where peace and joy reign.

What is the implied warning of 4:2?

Both the exodus generation and the church received the divine proclamation of deliverance (good news) and both were called to respond in faith.

However, the exodus generation did not receive the promised benefit since they failed to respond in faith. Their failure serves to caution the Christian community against unbelief.

Can Christians fall away? The answer is DON'T!!!

According to 4:2-3, how does a person enter God's rest?

Faith in God's good news is necessary to enter God's rest (cf. 3:12, 19; 4:2; and more positively, see 6:12; 10:22, 37–39; 11:1–39; 13:7).

How do you reconcile the offer of rest with the command in 4:11 to "make every effort" to enter that rest? How are both true in the life of a Christian?

Christians persevere (cf. 2:1; 3:14; 4:14). We persevere by actively and continually trusting in Jesus' sacrifice, while knowing that anything we can do to please God comes from His working in us (13:20–21).

Read 4:12 in two or three different translations (if you have them). What are at least four things you learn about God's Word from this verse?

1. God uses his Word to reveal unbelief and disobedience lurking in our hearts.
2. All things are transparent to God; no one can hide from him (v. 13).
3. He uses his living and piercing Word to search us deep within, and
4. to show us "thoughts and intentions" that are displeasing to him.

When you think about the promise of rest that God offers, what appeals to you about it?

In what way have you experienced personally that the Bible is living and active? What can you do to put your life under the authority of God's Word?