HEBREWS



Date of composition: A.D. 70s.

The newly converted Jewish Christians of Jerusalem had become spiritually dull and slow to grasp the full significance of what Christ had done as Savior (2:1-4). Believers were at the point of giving up their Christian faith and returning to their former Jewish beliefs and practices. This attitude was worsened by the marginalization they suffered as a result of being publicly harassed, imprisoned, and having their property confiscated. Their anxiety was further heightened by their disappointment that Christ had not yet returned (1:14; 10:36-39).

To regain their confidence in the Christian faith, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote the longest sustained argument of any book in the Bible. While the author remains unknown, he had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. Confidently and step-by-step the author shows the excellence of Christianity over Judaism and how Jesus, as Savior and High Priest, fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Chapter 1

The author begins by recalling the earlier wilderness generation of Israelites, whom Moses led during their 40-year journey in the desert after their exodus from Egypt. During their long sojourn the Israelites often experienced God's saving power, but they repeatedly refused to trust and obey the Lord. Now the first-century Jewish Christians risk joining that infamous generation in rebellion. Indeed, their accountability is greater now because God has since spoken through his Son, Jesus.

In verse 1:3, the author alludes to Christ's death as the cause of his glorification: "**by making purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**." In fact, everything had been moving toward his suffering and death. The author's premise is that God's self-disclosure in his Son is the fulfillment of all previous revelation. This fullness will become evident at his Second Coming, when **"thy enemies are a footstool for thy feet . . . for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation"** (1:13-14).

Chapter 2

The author calls the Jewish Christians to give greater attention to their faith, or else they may "**drift away from it**" (2:1). Beginning with Psalm 8:4-6, he expounds eloquently on both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Through Christ's obedient suffering, Jesus fulfilled his Sonship by becoming the High Priest, who delivered mankind from sin and the fear of death (2:14-18).

The author speaks not only of Jesus' death, but also of his perfect continual obedience in the face of opposition (2:10, 18; 5:8; 9:14; 10:5-10). At the heart of the author's message is the powerful example of Jesus' endurance unto the Cross for the beleaguered people of God. Thus, the sons and daughters of God must not be ashamed of their faith.

Chapter 3

In general, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was believed to remove outward ritual impurity or uncleanness. However, Christ removes the inward impurity of the *heart*. Thus, the work of Christ transforms the rebellious heart of the wilderness generation (3:12) into a heart of the New Covenant, characterized by a joyous acceptance of God's will.

Given that the vision of the wilderness generation was also limited, they saw only the things of this world. For example, at the very threshold of their entrance into Canaan (the Promised Land), the Jews were intimidated by the Canaanites. They therefore thought Egyptian slavery to be better than the promises of God. Because they would not believe in God's power to overcome their enemies, they refused to enter the Promised Land. By doing so, they denied the efficacy of God's power and the certainty of his promises. In their refusal, they acted as if he were not "**living**" (3:12).

Chapter 4

The promise of entering God's rest, forfeited by the wilderness generation, is the promise of a heavenly homeland. To this end, the author urges his hearers to maintain their enduring identification with the great company of the faithful, despite the ridicule of and exclusion by an unbelieving society.

In the Greek Old Testament, the *great priest* is the same as the *high priest*. Therefore, the title given to Jesus in Hebrews as "great high priest" (4:14) translates as, "great, great priest" or "high, high priest." Such a distinction underscores Jesus' superiority over the Levitical priests because he has entered heaven and sat down at the right hand of God the Father. In contrast, the priesthood of the Old Testament was only able to "facilitate" sinners who came to them, because the temple priests themselves were subject to weakness and sin.

Chapter 5

"**Every high priest**" (5:1) refers to the priests descended from Moses' brother, Aaron. While the Old Testament tradition stressed the dignity of the high priest and his *relationship to God*, Hebrews focuses on Christ the High Priest and his *identification with humanity.*

"**Prayers and supplications" . . . "loud cries and tears . . .** " express the cost of the Son's faithful obedience (5:7). Jesus did not "learn" obedience as human beings learn it. Rather, Jesus experienced what it was like to be perfectly obedient and to suffer the unrelenting antagonism from the unbelieving world.

"**Dull(ness) of hearing"** is the inexcusable regression to spiritual immaturity (5:11). This "dullness" is what led to the hardness of heart of the wilderness generation and to their ultimate loss. The author wants his listeners to leave behind their immaturity and their fixation on what is elementary, and advance to the spiritual maturity and perfection that is brought about by Christ's priestly ministry.

Chapter 6

The faithful who come after Christ will reach their final goal through Jesus. So to reject Christ is to reject the whole history of God's relationship with his people. This rejection is the unbelief or "**dead works**" that lead to eternal loss (6:1). The author warns: embrace the teaching of Christ's high priesthood and abandon shameful spiritual regression, or suffer God's final judgment.

Chapter 7

When Abraham returned victorious from battle, Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, came to meet him. Melchizedek brought out bread and wine and blessed Abraham in the name of God. Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of his spoils (Gen 14:18–20).

The Letter to the Hebrews sees in this encounter a profound indication of Melchizedek's superiority. Melchizedek blesses Abraham, while Abraham gives him a tenth; consequently, the one

who blesses is greater than the one who is blessed. Although Genesis 14 does not explicitly state that Melchizedek offered the bread and wine as a sacrificial offering to God, Scripture scholars see this gesture as the prefiguration of the Church's Eucharistic offering.

The author's use of Psalm 110:4 highlights Melchizedek's eternity as a reflection of the eternity of the Son, Jesus. The Jewish priesthood has been abolished as the means of approaching God, and is now replaced by Jesus the High Priest. This is a radical alteration in the relationship between the law and the people of God. It reveals what the law was always intended to be—not a means of approaching God but a foreshadowing of the atonement that would one day be given by Christ.

Indeed, that the Levitical priests were "**many in number**" attests to their ineffectiveness, for their great number was necessary because of their mortality (7:23). Multiplicity meant that their priesthood was founded on human weakness. Now all God's people have the privilege of entering—not the Holy of Holies that was reserved for the high priest once a year—but the heavenly realm through Christ the High Priest.

Chapter 8

The author next turns to the time when Moses was instructed by God to construct the Tent of Meeting in Exodus 25:40. In the Old Testament the outer sections of the Tent of Meeting represented the earth and sky, while the Holy of Holies within represented God's heavenly dwelling. However, the Son is superior to the tent erected by Moses. This does not mean that the Tent of Meeting was false, but that it was temporary—to prepare the people of God to appreciate the heavenly reality to come.

Since the prophecy of the new covenant means that the old covenant is obsolete, when sin is removed, there is no hindrance to approaching God: forgiveness and obedience promised by the new covenant become a reality.

Chapter 9

Within the Holy Place of the Tent of Meeting the Jewish priests continuously performed rituals that were never enough to move them beyond the "first Tent." The constant offering of gifts and sacrifices and washings did not accomplish the purpose of sacrifice: the cleansing the worshiper's conscience of sin. Since the high priest was to make two sacrifices, one for himself and one for the people, these repeated sacrifices revealed their ultimate inadequacy. However, Jesus offered one sacrifice "**once for all**" (9:28). The blood of Christ is the offering of his life unto death on the Cross. Instead of sprinkling blood on the mercy seat of the Ark (representing God's throne), Jesus took his seat at the right hand of the heavenly throne.

Chapter 10

The author strengthens the all-encompassing nature of Christ's sacrifice by placing the Old Testament sacrifices in the plural. In contrast, the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus provided a final salvation for God's people. The author could not be more emphatic: the law "**can never**" provide such perfection, no matter how many sacrifices were offered (10:1).

For the many sacrifices were no more than a *memorial* to sin because the sacrifices consisted merely of the blood of bulls and goats. However, the Blood of Christ cleanses the conscience of sin—sin that is no longer remembered (10:17). While the old sacrifices were a "reminder" of sin's dominance, the Lord's Supper is a reminder of its defeat and its definitive removal. Thus, the ineffective old anticipated the effective new. With the words of Psalm 40:6-8, Christ makes it clear that God has rejected the whole system of sacrificial offerings because it was fundamentally unable to remove sin.

In addition, the ineffectiveness of the old covenant sacrifices is exposed by the priest who "**stands daily at his service**" (10:11). The temple priests can never sit because their tasks are never done. Conversely, Christ, who is High Priest, is permanently *seated* at God's right hand (10:12-14). Having offered one sacrifice for sins, Christ's sacrifice is finished. The "**curtain**" or "**veil**" (10:20) of Christ's flesh refers to the curtain before the Most Holy Place in the Mosaic Tent. Due to the death and Resurrection of Christ, the flesh is no longer the barrier that kept mankind from approaching God (10:20-21).

With "**the Day drawing near**," the author warns against the willful disobedience of those who have received the truth (10:25). In fact, by focusing on the history of this faithful people, the author encourages his hearers not to shy away from suffering by disassociating themselves from the persecuted. Rather, they should "**have faith and keep their souls**" (10:39).

Chapter 11

"**Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**" (Hebrews 11:1). The author reminds the Israelites that their ancestors persevered in their faith. That from the time of Abel, the life of faith has always been mixed with suffering and triumph. Noah's faith led to an inner recognition of God and a complete surrender to Him. Abraham lived as an alien in the Promised Land but also experienced God's power in the birth of his son, Isaac. As Abraham and his descendants confessed that the world was not their home, so also the author's hearers admitted the same. Moreover, they should not be surprised when persecuted; for Moses and the Israelites also experienced the lash under Egypt's Pharaoh until God delivered them.

In all, the author recounts the faith of their ancestors from the time of the Judges until just before the time of Christ. Therefore, the faithful should rest assured that God will not break faith with his obedient people.

Chapter 12

The author urges the faithful to run the race with endurance, keeping their eyes on Jesus. They are also to reach out to this great "**cloud of witnesses**," who are the heroes (chap. 11) who lived by faith (12:1). To suffer shame from a sinful world is a great honor, like a prize won by an athlete in pursuit of victory. To this end, they are to dispense with absolutely anything—'**every burden and sin'—** that will distract them from successfully running the race of faith (12:1).

Using the ultimate example of Jesus' sufferings, the author wants his hearers to look forward to their final destination, which is the presence of God. Unlike Esau, they have not come into a state of judgment; rather, through Christ they have come into a state of bliss that anticipates their eternal destiny.

Chapter 13

With a final appeal that they minister to their brothers and sisters with the sympathy of those who share their experiences, the letter concludes by addressing several personal issues, revealing the intimate relationship between the sender and the recipients. The author prays that God will enable his hearers to do all that he has urged them to do through Jesus, who is sovereign over them and to whom they belong.

The Letter to the Hebrews is not simply a letter about Jesus' death on the Cross. It proclaims that the crucified and risen Jesus has entered God's heavenly presence, accomplishing once and for all what the repeated sacrifices of the Old Covenant could not accomplish.