



An Introduction to Hebrews

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Selected Scriptures

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Whenever we start a new sermon series, I always experience two emotions. First, I get excited and filled with anticipation, a little giddy like the kid who finds out that he is going to Disneyworld or the excitement of setting out on an adventure, or like you feel when you get your first car or truck. I love starting new sermon series and getting into books which we have never studied through together. I get doubly excited when it is a book, as in this case, that I have never preached through before. I'm eager about the journey, about what God is going to show us, how He is going to use this book in the life of our church, about the conversations that this sermon series will spark. I just get excited.

But, to be honest, I also feel a great deal of holy anxiety that Paul speaks of 2 Corinthians 11:28. And here is the reason why. I long for this sermon series to be a blessing to you, to nourish your faith, to strengthen your resolve to follow Christ, to embolden your witness, to refresh your spirits, to inspire more vibrant worship, to stir you up to good works and spiritual service, to fortify our unity in Christ, to encourage you to hold fast to the confession of your hope in Jesus Christ, and to sanctify you and exhort you, in the words of Hebrews 12:1-2, to ***“lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and (to) run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...”*** (Hebrews 12:1-2, ESV) I want to preach this book rightly, in a way that honors Christ and that blesses you. Those are some pretty lofty goals, for sure, but that is the way, that together, we should always be approaching the Word of God, right? Because we know that ***“the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*** (Hebrews 4:12, ESV) The Word of God does eternally significant work. So, I have a proposition for your. I want to ask you to make those things that I just mentioned a matter of earnest prayer, not just for a little while, but for the whole time that we are in this series in the book of Hebrews. For this sermon series to affect our hearts and souls like this, we need to be praying and we need much grace and I desperately the unction and the

leading of the Holy Spirit. So let's make a pact, you and I, you pray earnestly and I will too and I'll promise to do the work necessary, and let's see what God has for us in this incredible book. Are you with me? OK.

My goal today is really simple -- to introduce this book and try to give to you an overview of where we are going to be travelling over the next several months. So let's deal with some of the basic things and then we'll look at the themes and the structure of Hebrews. The first thing that we need to ask is

Who Wrote Hebrews? Asking that question is incredibly simple. Getting an answer, not so much. We know that, ultimately, the Holy Spirit inspired and wrote the book of Hebrews or it wouldn't be in the canon of Holy Scripture, but as far as the human hand that was used to put pen to paper -- we really don't know. The author never identifies himself, but the way it is written suggests that the Hebrews, Jewish Christians who rec'd this letter, knew the person who wrote it pretty well. For instance, at the end of the letter, we read, ***"I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you."*** (Hebrews 13:22-25, ESV) Those are personal words. Moreover, as you read through the text, the writer speaks in personal terms and demonstrates intimate personal knowledge of the situations of those to whom he is writing. Because this book isn't arranged in a typical letter format -- and I'll say more about that in a moment -- most likely the author of the letter wrote his name on the outside of the scroll and as it was handled, over time, that name wore off or was smudged beyond recognition. So we simply don't know who wrote this. But being the curious beings that we are, that hasn't stopped us from trying to figure it out.

A number of ideas have been put forth and supported over the years -- Paul, Barnabus, Luke, Philip the Evangelist. If I were hard pressed and someone made me venture a guess, I am in the camp with Martin Luther who thinks that the writer of Hebrews was Apollos. Here's why. The writer of Hebrews shows a mastery of the OT and also an excellent grasp of how all the types and pictures of Christ in the OT come to fruition in Him alone, along with a great deal of understanding of the doctrine that Paul preached. In Acts 18, we read these words about Apollos: ***"Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord."***

And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.” (Acts 18:24–28, ESV) We know, too, that he participated with Paul in his ministry and he was intimately familiar with what Paul preached. So that’s my guess. I think it was Apollos, though no one knows for sure. If, later in the sermon series, when I’m all lathered up and preaching I attribute something in Hebrews to Paul, like I seem to do at one point or another with every book in the Bible, it’s just a slip of the tongue. You should be used to it be now. So I think Apollos wrote this, but I can’t be dogmatic. Then next thing we need to think about is to whom is the letter written and when and why? What are the circumstances behind this letter? The answers to those questions are connected with one another.

Who, When, and Why? Now obviously, we can read the name of this book and it is pretty obvious that recipients of this letter are Hebrews, Jewish Christians, right? But the question is, “What kind of Hebrews?” What do we know about them? There are two kinds of Jewish Christians that we see in the Word of God. The first ones are the Jewish Christians that came out of a fundamentally Jewish background, like the ones that we read about in Jerusalem, for instance, in the book of Acts. Their religious background and scope of religious instruction was the OT only. Many of them came from strict Jewish backgrounds and only knew the Jewish religion, their worldview and philosophy of life -- strictly Jewish. But then we read of what are called, Hellenistic Jews, those Jews who lived scattered all throughout the Roman Empire at that time. And these guys, though they had a strong grasp of the OT and were raised with the Jewish traditions, had also been exposed to Greek culture, and Roman culture and to other religions, philosophies and worldviews. They had a much broader background. They were called Hellenistic Jews and it is to these guys that the book of Hebrews is written. It is written to Jewish Christians who not only knew the OT and could understand the way that Christ was the fulfillment of the all of the promises of the OT, but who also had been exposed to Greek philosophy and Greek and Roman religions.

Why do I say that? Well, I cannot go into all of the study that I have done for this and to be honest, if I did, some of you would fall asleep. But let me kind of condense my study and give you my conclusions. You remember that on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples and Peter preached the gospel in Jerusalem, there were a

bunch of Jews who were raised in other places, who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the culmination of the Feast of Pentecost, or First Fruits, and among them were some Jews from Rome. Peter, you remember preached the gospel – Acts 2 – and we read that **“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41, ESV)** Some of the Hebrews that were saved that day went back to Rome and took their new faith in Christ with them, and planted a church that started to grow.

By the time this letter is written, the church in Rome had a group of second and third generation Jewish Christians in it. After their forefathers had heard the gospel in Jerusalem, this new generation had also come to faith in Christ, through their witness. Like their fathers before them, they had left behind the rituals and practices of the Jewish faith believing that Jesus was the Messiah and the fulfillment of all of the promises of the OT through the new covenant in His blood. But this faith in Christ brought trouble on two fronts.

First, it brought persecution from the Roman government. Persecution of Christians in Rome and in Italy was not a new thing. At first, Rome was fine with Christianity, treating it as a sect of Judaism, but that didn't last long. Christians kept insisting that Jesus is the One True God and allowing for no other Lord. Faithfulness to Christ caused issues. During the reign of Claudius, in AD 49, because of the fierce theological disagreement between Jewish Christians and Orthodox Jews in the synagogues, the Jewish Christians had been exposed to suffering and reproach, had their possession taken away, even thrown in prison. The writer of Hebrews, in fact, talks about the early days, saying: **“But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.” (Hebrews 10:32–35, ESV)** Eventually, they got kicked out of Rome.

That was then, but now, by the time that this letter is being written, it's about 15 years later and Nero is the emperor in Rome, around AD 64. Many of these Jewish Christians had returned to Rome but greater persecution was on the way. It wouldn't be long until Christian blood flowed freely in Rome and simply for no other reason but that they were Christians. For some of them, the choice of remaining faithful to Christ and dying or

publically denying Christ and being allowed to live was on the very near horizon. Government persecution, greater than the last, was on the way.

But the second kind of persecution they endured was from family and neighbors. Daily they were being harassed and rejected by those Orthodox Jews who mocked their faith in Christ. “How could you turn your back on 1500 years of our religion – the Law of Moses, the sacrifices in the Temple --- to follow some man who was condemned as a blasphemer by our spiritual leaders and executed as a criminal by Rome?” But it wasn’t only that. They heard the jeers and the mocking of their Greek friends and their Jewish friends who loved all the human philosophies and human wisdom of their age, who thought them foolish to believe in the God who became flesh. There was no place for them to turn but to one another. They were being excluded from the community.

How did the writer of Hebrews know all of this? Well, as we said, he knew these Hebrews personally and most likely, he had heard of their struggles firsthand from the Christians who were with him that had come from Italy, from Rome. That’s why the writer of Hebrews tags the words: **“Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.” (Hebrews 13:24, ESV)** at the end of the letter. Those words would only have meaning if he were writing to those in Italy, in Rome.

So here were these Hebrew Christians, in what we would call a seemingly impossible situation – facing persecution, mockery and exclusion from society. How could they endure? How long could they stay the course? It’s a legitimate question. Think about it, how long could you endure? How long would you stay the course and follow Christ if you couldn’t keep a job, if you couldn’t provide for your family, if you were undergoing this continual ostracism and shunning, marginalized and treated as foolish, simply because you believed the words and the promises of Christ? How long could you endure if you faced hostility from the government and from your neighbors because you worshiped a Jewish preacher who claimed to be the Son of God? How long could you stand strong in the face of imprisonment or the loss of your home and your possessions? Could you endure physical and emotional attacks because you refused to deny your faith in Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the dead?

This world and this life are hard and it was especially for these guys. Every day these Hebrews woke up to the questions, “What are you willing to endure for Jesus Christ? What are you willing to trade for Christ? How far are you willing to take this faith in Christ?” On the surface, in the face of such challenges, it would seem so simple to go back to the way thing used to be. For some of them to go back to the old religion, for others to go back to the old worldviews, the old ways of living, the old philosophies that they once followed was very tempting. It would solve so much.

In fact, it isn't much different from the temptations we face -- not really. When it gets hard to follow Christ, there is always the attraction of our former Christ-less life, that we remember much more fondly than we really should. Maybe it would be easier to just forget all this “Jesus stuff” and go back to just some vague belief in a higher power, some vague spirituality. Nobody has much problem with that. It's when you mention Jesus and take seriously the call to follow Him that all the problems start. Maybe it would be better for your social life, for your family life, for your friendships if you just stopped taking Christ so seriously. No more church to interfere with the weekend. No more being different from other people. No more swimming against the current of society. No more dealing with sin and pursuing a life that looks like Jesus. It seems so inviting sometimes.

Beloved, let me ask you, what did they, what do we, need to hear when we are faced with that temptation to pitch in the towel, to coast, or to lighten up? What will make the difference for us? Catchy slogans, spiritual platitudes, human ideas and philosophies, an admonishment to just “hang in there?” Is that what we need? No way. That's not what we need and that's not what they needed. They needed a sermon. They needed a Christ-exalting, truth-speaking, reality defining, soul-stirring, spirit- reviving sermon and that is just what they God in this letter to the Hebrews. The reason that this letter doesn't sound like one is because it isn't. It's a sermon.

This Letter is a Sermon and It's All About Jesus This letter is really a sermon, that's why it doesn't look like the other letters in the NT. It's a sermon, a Christ-exalting, truth telling, reality defining, soul-stirring, and spirit-reviving sermon. What they needed was not some spiritual pabulum, not some empty clichés. They needed truth, life-giving truth, and that is what they got.

From the very beginning, the preacher of Hebrews makes his intention clear – it’s to lift their eyes from themselves and from everything going on in their lives and around them and to focus their attention on the one who rules everything and who is the answer to the deepest needs of their souls. The answer for them and or us, when the temptation to fall away is at its strongest, is not to look within ourselves, or to find a compromise, or to wish it all away. It is not to look to ourselves at all. The answer is to be reminded afresh and anew whom this Jesus is that we have staked our present lives and our eternity upon. We need a fresh view of Jesus. He writes in chapter 1: **“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”** (Hebrews 1:1–4, ESV)

It’s pretty simple. What you need, he says, is to hear the voice of God, the voice of reality, the voice of truth, and He has spoken to you with finality and with fullness in Jesus Christ. How could you abandon Him? You need to know the One who holds all things in His hands, who has power over even your situation, who is greater in power than any emperor and greater in wisdom than any philosopher, who can reveal God to you in all of His glory and you have Him in Jesus Christ. Where else could you go? You need someone who can purify you from your sins, rescue you from the judgment you deserve, give you eternal life, and open the way to God the Father that your sins have closed and you have Him in Jesus Christ? To whom else could you turn? You need a Shepherd, a Lord, a King, who is greater than all others, who will love you and care for you, who will command you and sustain you, who will be your God and will not be ashamed to call you His brothers and sisters, children of the Living God and you have Him in Christ. What more could you desire? Don’t give up what is priceless for what is passing.

The preacher of Hebrews is making clear from the very beginning that everything that he is going to say to them is rooted in this unalterable fact of reality – the absolute supremacy and sufficiency and glory of Jesus Christ as the revealer of all truth, the definer of reality, and the mediator of God’s saving and preserving grace. He is going to hold up Jesus before their eyes and our eyes as greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than the high priests, the greatest sacrifice, the reigning Lord, God’s Son and the Savior of Sinners. All kinds of pictures, most of them drawn from the OT, that shows us just how great and awesome

Jesus really is – that he is the greatest treasure of all. That’s what the writer of Hebrews is doing here.

It is with absolute confidence that he is speaking with the very voice of God, as he expounds the Scripture – and Hebrews is full of OT Scripture – that he presents the glory and supremacy, the worth and beauty of Christ, and then calls the Hebrews to respond to that voice of God saying things like:

“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Hebrews 2:1–3, ESV) Don’t turn back; don’t treat as worthless what you have heard. Christ is the only hope for salvation. Don’t let Him go.

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”” (Hebrews 3:12–15, ESV) Don’t fall away. The temptation to do that is nothing more than evil unbelief. Encourage one another – today; hold fast to what you have in Jesus. Hear what God is saying to you!

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14–16, ESV) When it gets hard, remember that you have a high priest, who has endured much more than you are enduring now in order to save you. He knows what you are going through and He promises to you mercy and grace –everything you need – not simply to survive, but to thrive. Look to Him and draw near to Him.

“We have this (the saving work of Christ) as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul...”

(Hebrews 6:19, ESV) Anchored in Jesus Christ – in His love, in what He has done to save us, in His faithfulness to us – we are immovable.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:19–25, ESV) Don’t give up; don’t quit; but draw near with a heart that is true to Christ; fully confident that He receives you by faith. Don’t waver but immerse yourself in the people of God, in the church, and find strength there to endure.

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6, ESV) God rewards faith so trust Him, place your allegiance and trust unwaveringly in Christ and believe that the reward of that faith is far greater than any loss you may feel in this world.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1–2, ESV) Don’t limp – run the race before you, just like Jesus did. He blazed the trail for you – follow it.

“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28–29, ESV) Remember what you are running for and for whom you are running. Kingdoms crumble overnight, but in Christ we are invincible, part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken; with the God who is a consuming fire.

All of these exhortations and encouragements, and so many more, are rooted in Jesus Christ. Oh beloved, this whole letter is about Jesus – the glory of Jesus, the greatness of Jesus, the joy of fellowship with Jesus, the promise of grace in Jesus, the matchless love of Jesus, the eternal faithfulness of Jesus, the reward of faith in Jesus, the kindness and compassion of Jesus, the hope of glory in heaven with Jesus, the unparalleled majesty of Jesus. There is no one like our God, no one like our Savior. He is our only hop in life and in death and He is worthy of our highest love and devotion. And in Him we find the greatest encouragement to faithfully press on, to stay the course and give our lives to Him completely.

This sermon is all about Jesus and it is a gift to us. A gift of God's grace. It is exactly what we need to hear. So I am asking you again to pray – pray that it this sermon will be a blessing to you, will nourish your faith, will strengthen your resolve to follow Christ, will embolden your witness, will refresh your spirits, will inspire more vibrant worship, will stir you up to good works and spiritual service, will fortify our unity in Christ, will encourage you to hold fast to the confession of your hope in Jesus Christ, and will sanctify you and make you more into the image of the character of our Lord. I'm so longing for that and I hope and trust you are as well.

You may need to know and trust Christ as your Savior today... that invitation is before you today. You may need to start afresh and anew with Christ... that offer is before you today. You may realize that you know Him but not nearly as you should... that opportunity is before you today. You may be struggling right now under a load of care or sin... grace is offered to you today. You may need to simply ask God to prepare your heart to receive everything you can... you can do that today.

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