

# Hebrews

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- Introduction** Hebrews is quite different from the other New Testament books. No-one knows who wrote it; or where or when it was written. It doesn't have the typical structure of a letter, yet it finishes like a letter. The author says it is a *word of exhortation* (13:22) but at times it seems like an essay or a sermon, and it contains a mixture of doctrine, theology, practical instruction and pastoral care. What it does do perhaps better than any other New Testament book is make a compelling case for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism.
- Author** We don't know who wrote Hebrews. For 1200 years it was known as "the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews" but since the Reformation there has been widespread agreement that Paul could not have been the author. That's because Paul always identified himself in his letters and the style and language in Hebrews is quite different from that in all of his letters. Others who have been considered as writers for Hebrews include Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Clement of Rome, and Silas. The author was probably a converted Jew with an excellent knowledge of classical Greek, but as Origen said in the third century: "as to who actually wrote the letter, God alone knows". Some early manuscripts indicate that Hebrews was written in Rome.
- Purpose** Hebrews was addressed primarily to Jewish Christians who were familiar with the Old Testament and who were being tempted to revert back to Judaism or to include aspects of Judaism into their Christianity. The writer warns them of the consequences of renouncing Jesus as the Son of God and convincingly shows why His new covenant in Christ is better. He strongly urges them to renew their commitment to Christ, who is God's perfect, full and final revelation.
- Date** The book indicates that sacrifices were still being made in the temple in Jerusalem so it was probably written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It may have been written just after Paul's death in AD 67.
- Key themes** Jesus is God's full and final revelation. He is the mediator of a new and better covenant far superior to the revelation given in the Old Testament. Unlike the sacrifices of Judaism which are only partially effective and need to be repeated, the sacrifice that Jesus made was perfect bringing full and eternal salvation for all who believe. Jesus provides a better revelation of God, a better priesthood, a new and better covenant, and a perfect sacrifice. (The Greek words for *better* and *superior* are used 15 times throughout Hebrews).
- Jesus was the forerunner of our faith. He patiently endured suffering in anticipation of gaining an eternal reward. In the same way Christians must stand firm in their faith, knowing that they will be inheriting an eternal kingdom that can never be destroyed. We cannot afford to be indifferent towards the great salvation that Jesus offers.
- Key verses** *Therefore since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* 4:14.
- Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.* 11:1.
- Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.* 7:22
- Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself.* 9:26.

## Jesus is superior to the angels. 1:1-2:4.

In the past God revealed Himself in many ways but *in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*. God's revelation through Jesus is superior to past revelations because Jesus:

- was appointed by God as heir of all things
- made the universe
- is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being
- sustains all things by his powerful word
- Is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Angels had great status in Judaism. They were considered to be superior to people because they praised God continually around His throne, protected and supported people, and helped reveal God's will. But Jesus is superior to the angels! *He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs*. The writer of Hebrews shows this by quoting a number of well-known Old Testament texts arguing that none of them could apply to angels, but all apply to Jesus, God's Son.

- Jesus is God's Son and has God as His Father. Psalm 2:7, 2 Samuel 7:14, 1 Chronicles 17:13.
- Angels were told to worship Jesus when He came into the world. Deuteronomy 32:43 (in the Septuagint).
- Angels are just servants and rank well below Jesus who sits with God on a throne that will last forever. Psalm 104:4, Psalm 45:6,7. Psalm 102:25-27, Psalm 110:1.

God has set Jesus above all, including the angels. Angels are just *ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation*.

The writer then gives his first warning. If disobedience to the law which was mediated by angels resulted in great punishment, how much more severe will God's judgment be on those who ignore His revelation to us in Christ. *How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?* This salvation was announced by the Lord, confirmed by those who heard Him and was validated when God sent signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

### For a time Jesus was a man like us. (2:5-18)

The writer now quotes from Psalm 8 to show that in coming to earth as a man Jesus was *made a little lower than the angels*. God crowned His Son with *glory and honour* and placed everything *under His feet*. At present, though, *we do not see everything subject to Him*. What we see is Jesus, *who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour, because He suffered death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone*.

Jesus came to bring salvation so it was fitting that He should be made just like us. *We are made of flesh and blood so He shared our humanity*. He is of the same human family as us and is *not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters*. Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17, 18. He came to make us holy and as the *author of our salvation was made perfect through suffering*.

Jesus suffered as a man on the cross

- to *taste death for everyone*
- to *bring many sons to glory*
- to make us *holy*
- to destroy the devil, the one who *holds the power of death*
- to free his people *who for all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death*
- to *make atonement for the sins of the people*.



He could only do this if He was *made like His brothers and sisters in every way*. And because Jesus was truly human He could then *become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God*. Because *He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted*.

How wonderful that Jesus who was the Son of God (and thus worthy of glory and honour) willingly became a man and earned our glory and honour by going through the suffering of the Cross! And how wonderful that, because He was fully human, Jesus understands all that we go through and continually prays for us!

## Jesus is superior to Moses. 3:1-4:13.

Within Judaism Moses is seen as the greatest and most holy person in Israel's history. He is still honoured as such. The writer of Hebrews now argues that Jesus is much superior to Moses.

Moses was *faithful in all God's house*, but Jesus was faithful in all that God appointed Him to do. *Jesus is worthy of greater honour than Moses* in the same way that a *builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself*. Moses, though faithful to his calling, was only a servant in the house of God, but Jesus was the Son of God and faithful as the *builder* of the house of God. And what is the house of God? *We are His house, if we hold on to our courage and hope*. So Moses was faithful in his role of leading the Children of Israel into the Promised Land and establishing a new nation. But Jesus achieved far more! He established the Church, the Body of Christ, which affects everybody on the earth.

Under Moses the people of Israel hardened their hearts, rebelled against God, and tested and tried Him. Psalm 95:7-11. As a result God declared on oath in anger *'They shall never enter my rest'*. Ultimately all of the Israelites who left Egypt perished in the wilderness except for Joshua and Caleb. Numbers 14:29,30. Their lack of faith and disobedience meant they didn't enter into the rest of the Promised Land.

This has practical implications for us. *See to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart and turns away from the living God*. We are to encourage each other daily so that we too are *not hardened by sin's deceitfulness because we will only continue to share in Christ if we hold the confidence we have in Him firmly till the end*. Psalm 95:7,8. The ones who missed out on entering the Promised Land under Moses all heard the truth and believed it, but in the wilderness they rebelled and ultimately were not able to enter *because of their unbelief*.

The promise of entering God's rest *still stands*. *We who have believed in Christ* must make sure we don't miss out on entering into it. We have heard the gospel, and combined this with faith so the opportunity is ours to enter God's rest, unlike the Israelites who *did not go in because of their disobedience*. *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also rest from their own work, just as God did from His*. This rest is not about keeping a particular Sabbath day. Rather it is all about ceasing from our own labours *as God did from His*. We are to *make every effort to enter that rest* and not be like the Israelites who missed out due to their *disobedience*.

So rest is all about ceasing from our own works and doing the things that God wants us to do. But we can only do this if we know what God wants us to do!

God reveals His will to us through His word:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

When the living and powerful word of God penetrates the innermost parts of our lives He reveals us for who we are; empowers us to be what He wants us to be, (like Jesus), and reveals His will so we know what He wants us to do.



Jesus is *the Apostle and High Priest of our confession*. 3:1. The Greek word for confession is *homologia*. It is translated as 'profession' or 'confession'. Literally it means 'saying the same as the word of God'. As an Apostle Jesus came as the revelation of the word of God. John 1:14. As a High Priest He now makes God's Word available to us. In Jesus is revealed the purpose, heart, mind and intelligence of God!

The Greek word for 'word' in Hebrews 4:11 is *logos*. It *means utterance; cause; intent; work; reason; intelligence; wisdom*. John 1:14 tells us that in Jesus the word became flesh. So in Jesus we see the full revelation of the reasoning, intelligent, guiding, correcting, controlling mind and wisdom of God.

The two main ways that the word of God (Jesus) is revealed to us are through the Bible, and by the Holy Spirit. When God reveals His word to us it penetrates deep into our lives. Nothing can be hidden. We are laid bare before the Lord. And then when Jesus is fully Lord of our lives we can know what God wants us to do. And in doing God's will we cease from our own labours and find His rest! Isn't the word of God wonderful!

## **Sabbath rest for the people of God**

*There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also rest from their own work, just as God did from His.* Hebrews 4:10,11

Often God's people are busy, tired, worn out, frustrated, over-committed, burdened..... Sound familiar? This is not how it should be! God rested from His labours when He finished creating the world. Genesis 2:2. Under the Jewish law a special day of rest – the Sabbath – was included in the 10 commandments so everyone would cease from their work for a period of time, in the same way that God did. And here in Hebrews God tells us that nowadays there is a *Sabbath-rest* for the people of God.

- This rest does not mean keeping of a Sabbath day every week. The Sabbath law (Exodus 20:8-11, Exodus 31:12-18, Ezekiel 20:12,20) is not relevant for Christians. The Jewish Sabbath goes from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday and rest during this period is required under the Law. But this was directed to the people of Israel as a sign of the special relationship between God and Israel. There is no New Testament mandate for Sunday being a special day (or for any particular day being more special than any other. Romans 14:5, says: *Some consider one day more sacred than another; others consider every day alike. Everyone should be fully convinced in their own mind.* Colossians 2:6,7 says that that *no-one is to judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* The Emperor Constantine set aside Sunday as a Christian day of rest early in the 4th century AD so that is why we traditionally meet on Sundays, but this doesn't have anything much to do with rest!
- The Sabbath-rest for the people of God is to rest from their own work. v10. To rest means to lay down your will, and do what God wants you to do, not what you want to do. It means to let Him be your Lord, and live under His Kingship. When He is Lord and you follow His leading you experience His strength; His power; His enabling. You don't have to struggle and strive. When you commit every situation to Him and trust in Him any inner turmoil ceases. You have a confidence in Him and a certainty that He knows what is best. You experience the peace of God. You rest! See Philippians 4:6,7; Proverbs 3:5,6; Isaiah 30:15,18.
- The alternative to rest is *religion* where you do what is expected (or required). You work, push, strive and manipulate to try and gain God's favour. You end up doing things that God has not initiated and so is not interested in! How much better to let the Lord lead! Let Him be Lord and He will then work everything out in your life, in accordance with His will.

Even though you have no requirement to keep the Sabbath this doesn't mean you should be worn out all the time! You can find rest by being in the centre of God's will. This does not mean passivity or inaction (doing nothing!). Rather, it means you cease from your own labours and allow God to do His perfect work in and through your life. This kind of rest could involve:

- finding what God wants you to do, and doing it. *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.* John 15:16.
- obeying God when He asks you do something. *Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.* Luke 11:28.
- maintaining your relationship with God *My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have neglected.* Song of Solomon 1:6.
- saying 'no' to things which might be good or right. A 'need' doesn't constitute a call. If you say 'yes' to every need you will quickly get over-worked, exhausted and frustrated.
- accepting that rest is OK. This may take a renewal of the mind for many Christians in our over-busy world. There is no need for guilt or condemnation if you are resting in the centre of God's will or engaging in restful activities that refresh you or that you enjoy (and not doing things that others may expect of you).
- repenting of over-activity and selfish desires. *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the presences of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus.* Acts 3:19,20.
- Committing every situation to the Lord and trusting Him, rather than striving in your own strength.

That's why we are to *make every effort to enter that rest.* v11. Only when rest and refreshment in God's presence are a natural part of our daily lives will we know the central satisfaction of knowing that we are pleasing God, and fulfilling His purposes for our lives. Rather than struggling, striving, hassling and manipulating we can rest in Him; trust in Him, believe in Him. When you do this you will be certain that He knows what is best, and that you are in the centre of His will.

*In Him we were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.* Ephesians 1:11,12.

Jesus said *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”*. Matthew 11:28-30

So, come to Jesus. Get in under His yoke and let Him take all of your burdens. He is strong and can cope with everything that you are going through! Then He can make you strong to do His will and really make a difference in this hurting world. Trust in Him in every aspect of your life. And in fulfilling God’s purposes you will be really fruitful in your Christian life. That’s when you will truly glorify God.

And that’s when you will find rest for your soul!



## Jesus provides a superior priesthood. 4:14-7:28.

Jesus is a *merciful and faithful high priest* who came to *make atonement for the sins of the people*. 2:17.

Almost half of Hebrews is about the priesthood of Jesus Christ. The writer carefully explains how the old Jewish priesthood has been fulfilled and is now superseded by Jesus, our *great high priest*. He is able to *sympathize with our weaknesses* because He has *been tempted in every way, as we have, yet without sin*. We must *hold firmly* to this and can *approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*.

The writer now contrasts the human priesthood that was descended from Aaron, and the high priesthood of Jesus:

- Aaronic priests are *selected from among men* and represent us *in matters related to God*. They offer gifts and sacrifices for sins and are able to do this with empathy because they are subject to the same weaknesses as those they represent. They even have to *offer sacrifices for their own sins, as well as for the sins of the people*. They don’t take *this honour upon themselves* but must be *specially called of God, as Aaron was*.
- Jesus also didn’t take the honour of being high priest upon Himself. God placed Him in this position:
  - as He was His *Son*. Psalm 2:7
  - as a *priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek* Psalm 110:4. (This is explained further in Chapter 7).
  - because Jesus *offered up prayers and petitions* during His time on earth and was *heard because of His reverent submission*.
  - because He *learned obedience from what He suffered*.
  - because He was *made perfect* and became the sacrifice that was *the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him*.
  - because God *designated* Him to be High Priest, in the same way that Melchizedek had been. See Genesis 14:18-20.



So Jesus was not a human High Priest like all of the priests that had descended from Aaron. No, He was fully human, yet fully God, and as God’s Son provided the one perfect sacrifice that brought salvation to all who believe. His High Priesthood was (and is) much superior, and He doesn’t need to make sacrifices over and over again. He has made atonement for sins once for all, and is now and always our great High Priest.

In introducing Jesus as a high priest after *the order of Melchizedek* the writer acknowledges that it is *hard to explain* because his readers are slow to learn. They *ought to be teachers*, but now *need someone to teach them the elementary truths of God’s word all over again*.

They *need milk, not solid food*! Milk is for *infants, not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness*, while *solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil*.

### The milk and the meat of the word

Milk is food that has been pre-digested by a cow. When we drink milk it is easy to get its nourishment because it is already in a digested state. Meat is not like that. We have to digest it ourselves to get nourishment.

The milk of the word, then, relates to any aspects of God's word which someone else has studied, understood, learned and shared with us. Examples of the *milk of the word* include sermons, studies, commentaries, articles, books, websites etc. The *meat of the word* is what we have learned as we studied the Word of God for ourselves. Most Christians get plenty of milk, but few seriously study God's Word for themselves. Perhaps that's why so many are still immature in their faith?



The writer wants us to *leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity*. He lists some of the basic doctrines that all Christians should know and understand. These doctrines are the basic foundations of our faith:

- **Repentance from acts that lead to death.**

The Greek word for "repentance" is *metanoia*. It means "to change the mind, or purpose, for the better", so repentance is concerned with our attitude to and involvement in sin. We turn our back on sin, never willingly indulging in it again. We must also ask God to forgive us, 1John 1:9; ask forgiveness of those we have hurt, and make restitution as required. Matthew 4:1; Acts 2:37,38; 2 Corinthians 7:10.

- **Faith in God**

The Greek word for "faith" is *pistis*. It means "having a firm persuasion or conviction based on hearing". Faith is simply hearing God speak, believing what He says, and then acting in obedience to it. Faith is always imparted by the quickened, spoken Word of God. (rhema) Romans 10:17. It is not something that can be 'worked up'. All Christians have a 'seed' of faith in them. Romans 12:3, Luke 17:5,6 which can grow if planted in good soil. Our spiritual lives need to be cultivated by spending time in the Word of God, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Luke 6:38,8:5-8.

- **Instructions about baptisms**

The Greek word for baptize is *baptizo*. It means "dip, sink, immerse or plunge in". So to baptize simply means to immerse in. In the New Testament there are a few different baptisms mentioned. Baptism in Christ takes place at salvation when we repent, receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and are immersed by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ, the Church. Galatians 3:26,27, 1 Corinthians 12:13,14. Baptism in water occurs when we are immersed in water to declare publicly that we are Christians and that we want to live for Christ. Matthew 3:15. In water baptism we die to sin; the power of sin from our old life is broken; and we rise to a new life of righteousness. Romans 6:3,4. Baptism in the Holy Spirit takes place when we are filled with the Holy Spirit for the first time. Matthew 3:11, Acts 1:8, 2:1-4, Luke 11:13. John 7: 37-39. The Holy Spirit comes upon us and typically we begin to worship God "with our spirit" i.e. speak in tongues. 1 Corinthians 14:14, John 7:37-39. The baptism in the Holy Spirit gives power to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ. Acts 1:8.

- **The laying on of hands**

God can impart His blessing through laying on of hands. e.g. for receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:14-20; 9:17-19; 19:6; healing the sick Mark 16:18; James 5:14,15; Luke 8:44-46; Acts 3:6,7; Acts 19:11,12; commissioning for the work of the Lord Acts 13:1-4, and ordination of deacons Acts 6:1-7. Laying on of hands is not to be taken lightly or done in haste. It should always be done under the clear guidance of the Holy Spirit. 1 Timothy 5:22. That's because when it happens there is some impartation. e.g. of power, blessing or authority.

- **The resurrection of the dead**

The Greek word for resurrect is *egeirontai*. It means “to waken, raise up, arouse”. The word for resurrection is *anastasis*. It means “a raising up, a causing to be made alive from a state of death”. We have a spiritual resurrection when we receive Jesus as Saviour. 1 Corinthians 15:21-23. We pass from spiritual death because of our sin, Romans 6:23, into eternal life - relationship to God. Because Jesus lives we do too. John 5:21-26; Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 2:12,13; 1 John 3:14. Our bodies will be resurrected when Jesus returns so we will have a new body in heaven. 1 Corinthians 15:20-23; Philippians 3:20,21. Our resurrection body will not be a natural body with all of its limitations. It will be heavenly, immortal and incorruptible. 1 Corinthians 15:44-50. We will be able to stand before the Lord complete and whole in every way! Those who die outside of Christ will also be raised from the dead. At the Second Resurrection they will be raised and will face God’s judgment be for the Great White Throne. Their judgment will be to spend eternity in hell. Revelation 20:11-15.

- **Eternal judgment.**

The Greek words for judgment are *krisis* and *krima*. *Krisis* is “the process of separating, sifting or distinguishing evidence” while *krima* is “the decision, condemnation, or verdict resulting from such an investigation”. In the Bible judgment is often made by appointed Judges, but ‘eternal judgment’ is only made by God Himself. God is righteous and all-knowing so His judgments are perfect and just. Psalm 7:1-17. He has committed all judgment to Jesus, John 5:22,23, and judgment is made on the basis of our response to the word of God. John 12:46-48. When we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ it will not be for a judgment of our sins. (That judgment has already been poured out on Jesus at the cross). Rather, it will be a judgment of our works to determine our rewards in heaven. 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:13-15.; Matthew 25:21. We will receive crowns as our rewards. 1 Corinthians 9:25; 1 Thessalonians 2:19,20; 1 Peter 5:2-4; 2 Timothy 4:8.

These *elementary teachings about Christ* are the foundations that we build on as we grow towards Christian maturity. But not everyone was growing like this. Some had even become apostate and actively turned away from the Lord by falling into sin or reverting to their Judaism. They had been *enlightened; tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of the word of God*. Even after experiencing all this they have fallen away, and not repented, thus *crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace*. They are like land that has had lots of rain and been farmed successfully but has become worthless producing only thorns and thistles. *In the end it will be burned*.

The writer is confident his readers are not like that. And that they will produce fruits of their salvation. *God is not unjust* and won’t forget their work and the love they shown to His people. He wants them to show the *same diligence to the end and make their hope sure*. They are not to become lazy. Rather they are to imitate *those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised*.

The writer then re-emphasizes the certainty that we have in Christ. God made a promise to Abraham that He would surely bless him and give him *many descendants*. *After waiting patiently Abraham received what was promised*. God confirmed this promise with an oath and because it is *impossible for God to lie* we now *have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure*.

God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and He has now fulfilled His promise to us in the Lord Jesus Christ!

He has done this by making Jesus as *a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek*.

Hebrews 7 shows Jesus as having a superior priesthood to that of the old Levitical system. Melchizedek was the King and High priest of Salem ((Jerusalem). *His name means “king of righteousness” and “king of Salem” means “King of peace.” He was without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life. Like the Son of God he remains a priest forever*. Genesis 14:18-20 describes how Melchizedek met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of the spoils of war. Melchizedek is thus an early type of Christ, not having a typical human life. Melchizedek is shown to be superior to Abraham in three ways: he blessed Abraham, and *the lesser person is blessed by the greater*; he

Hebrews 6:4-8 shows that Christians can fall away from the Lord, and implies that they can lose their salvation.

These verses form a very useful balance to other verses that show that once we are saved we are always saved and that we can’t lose our salvation. e.g. Matthew 16:18; John 10:28, 29.

To our modern way of thinking these verses contradict each other, but in the Jewish thinking of the day they just presented two sides of the same truth. To know that you can fall away gives motivation to carry on; while knowing you can’t fall away gives assurance of salvation. Both are needed for a full Christian life!

accepted tithes from Abraham; and he lives on because nowhere is it recorded that he died. It follows that since Levi was in the loins of Abraham as seed, Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priests that came from him. Because Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek, His priesthood is superior to the old legal priesthood. *If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people) why was there still a need for another priest to come?* It wasn't just the priesthood that needed to be changed: there must also *be a change of the law*. So the old Levitical priesthood has been superseded by the priesthood of Christ (and Jesus has also fulfilled the law. Matthew 5:17, John 13:34). The demise of the sacrificial system and the law was inevitable because it had to continually repeat sacrifices and could never bring about spiritual perfection.

By contrast, Jesus brings in a priesthood that:

- is based on *the power of an indestructible life*
- is *forever*
- sets aside the former ways because they were *weak and useless, and couldn't make anything perfect*
- introduces a *better hope by which we can draw near to God*
- was supported by God's oath in saying He would *be a priest for ever*
- guarantees a *better covenant*
- is permanent because He *lives forever*
- can *save completely all those who come to Him*
- is supported by Jesus continually interceding for us
- is provided by a High Priest who *fully meets our need* because He is *holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners and exalted above the heavens*.
- doesn't need to repeat sacrifices because *He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He sacrificed Himself*
- is provided by God's appointed High Priest. Jesus was appointed by God *after the law*, and *has been made perfect forever*.



Now the Lord Jesus provides a priesthood that is indestructible, eternal, uninterrupted, effective, final, and perfect. Salvation, forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God is possible only through Jesus Christ, our great High Priest.

### **Jesus brings in a superior New Covenant. 8:1-10:39.**

Jesus is superior as a High Priest because He sits at the right hand of God in *the true tabernacle* in heaven, *set up by the Lord, not by man*. Priests on earth offer gifts and sacrifices in a sanctuary that is *a copy and a shadow of what is in heaven*. (That's why Moses was told to build the Tabernacle according to the pattern shown to Him by God. Exodus 25:40.) But Jesus ministry is *superior to theirs* just as He is the mediator of a *new covenant* which is superior to the old one because it is *founded on better promises*.

If there had been nothing wrong with the Old Covenant there would have been no need for a new one. The people were unfaithful to Old Covenant so God *turned away* from them and promised to bring in a new one. In the New Covenant God would put His *laws in their minds and write them on their hearts*. This is not a legal system like the Old Covenant with its countless laws and regulations. Rather, God says *I will be their God and they will be my people. All will know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*. Jeremiah 31:31-34.

The old covenant established by God with Israel's fathers was not to be despised; but it had become ineffectual. By bringing in a new covenant God had made the *first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear*.

So the New Covenant brought in by the Lord Jesus Christ is not just for Israel alone. Forgiveness for sin, salvation, and the right to become God's people are all now available to all peoples – in Christ. Hallelujah!

And this also meant that the original promise made to Abraham would finally be fulfilled. God promised to bless the nation of Israel so that *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*. See Genesis 12:2,3.

Chapters 9 and 10 give a detailed comparison of the effectiveness of the priesthood under the Old and New Covenants.

*The first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly tabernacle. All the parts of the tabernacle were set up but only the high priest could enter the inner room once a year to sacrifice blood for his own sins and for sins the people had committed in ignorance. This shows that while the first tabernacle was standing the way into the Most Holy Place (God's presence) had not yet been opened up. The gifts and sacrifices offered could not clear the conscience of the worshipper (because they had to be continually repeated). They were just external regulations relevant only till the coming of the new order.*



When Christ came He went through a *perfect tabernacle* that was *not man-made*. He entered the Most Holy Place not by the blood of animals but *once for all by His own blood having obtained eternal redemption*. The blood of animals could only make people outwardly clean, but the *blood of Christ cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God*. The shedding of His blood was an *unblemished sacrifice* so He is the *mediator of a new covenant*. He died to set us free from sins so we could *receive our promised inheritance* – unhindered relationship with God.



Under the old covenant nearly everything was cleansed by the shedding of blood. *Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*. That's because to establish a covenant (like a will) it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it. (A covenant is set up to provide for future descendants). So, under the first covenant everything was put into effect through the shedding of blood. For example, when Moses gave the commandments to the people he shed the blood of animals. Exodus 24:6-8.

If it was necessary to shed blood under the temporary, ineffective system then the perfect system instituted by Christ required a sacrifice that was *once for all* in which Jesus would *do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself*. This was a perfect sacrifice! *Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people, and He will appear a second time not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him*. Praise God!! We know that we are all *destined to die* and after that to *face judgment*. But now we can know that in Christ our sins are forgiven and we can stand before God unashamed and without fear at the judgment. Jesus has won for us our full, complete and perfect salvation!

The law was *only a shadow of the good things to come. It could never by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship*. It was just an *annual reminder of sins!* In fact *it is impossible for the blood of animals to take away sins*. So Christ came willingly to be the perfect sacrifice. Psalm 40:6-8. He came in obedience to God's will and as a result *we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*. He is the great High Priest who offered for *all time one sacrifice for sins* and by this sacrifice has *made perfect for ever those who are being made holy*. The Holy Spirit had already foreshadowed this in Jeremiah 31:33,34 by indicating that in the New Covenant God would put His laws in our hearts and would remember our sins no more.

The writer then gives another call for the Christians to persevere and *hold unswervingly to the hope we profess because He who promised is faithful*. We have *confidence to enter the Most Holy Place* (i.e. into the very presence of God) *by the blood of Jesus*. He has opened up for us a *new and living way* so we can *draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith* because we have been cleansed from all our sins. We are *spur one another on to good deeds* and *not give up on meeting together* as some had been doing. Rather we are to *encourage one another* and all the more as the Day when Jesus returns approaches. If we *deliberately keep on sinning* after we have received the truth *no sacrifice for sins is left* – just a fearful expectation of judgment. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses *died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses* so how much more will we deserve punishment if we trample underfoot the Son of God and all of His wonderful work on our behalf. We will be treating as unholy the blood that was shed and *insulting the Spirit of grace*. It is God who will avenge and judge His people. *It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*.

We are to remember the days when we first *received the light* and stand our ground even in the face of *great suffering, persecution, insult and confiscation of property*. We must not throw away our confidence because if we persevere in doing the will of God we will receive what He has promised. Jesus is coming soon and we are to live by faith. God will not be pleased if we shrink back and are destroyed. Let's make sure we persevere and are of those who *believe and are saved*.

The only way people can fellowship with God is by being righteous. *We have no righteousness of our own.* Isaiah 64:6, so nothing we can do will make us acceptable to God. Not keeping the Law; not making sacrifices; not following the dictates of the Church; not trying to be righteous, not by works... nothing. Ephesians 2:4-10.

But all who have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ have been declared righteous in God's sight: we are righteous in Christ! This is called justification. God is able to declare us righteous in Christ because one perfect sacrifice was made for the sin of all! We all deserved death but Jesus, God's Son, died on the cross in our place! This totally satisfied God's righteous anger toward sin. (*The wages of sin is death.* Romans 6:23). Jesus took our sin upon Himself and became sin for us. 2 Corinthians 5:21. The punishment that our sin deserved was poured upon Him. Jesus' blood was shed. Sacrifice for sins was made, once for all.

Because we are righteous in Christ we are saved and can have unhindered fellowship with God. What a wonderful thing Jesus did for us at the cross! Hallelujah!

### **Faith provides a superior way of life. 11:1-12:29.**

The writer has now shown that Jesus provides a better priesthood and that the New Covenant leads to full, complete and eternal salvation for those put their faith in Jesus. He now describes what faith is and how it provides a superior way of life to that of the Old Covenant.

Faith is a central concept in Hebrews (being mentioned 35 times) but it has a slightly different meaning to the "justification by faith that leads to salvation" emphasis in Paul's letters (particularly Romans). In Hebrews, faith is broader than this. It is *being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*. It enables us to understand God and His ways, and to live in relationship with Him in our day to day lives. *Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him*. By faith we can come to God with confidence and gain all we need to walk victoriously through life.

The victory that faith brings has been demonstrated by many "heroes of the faith" including Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the children of Israel, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. They heard God's voice, believed Him and obeyed and so were able to achieve wonderful things throughout their lives. Sometimes their faith enabled them to overcome by conquering kingdoms, administering justice, and gaining what God had promised. At other times faith enabled them to overcome in quite awful or difficult situations, and *they were all commended for their faith*. Yet none of these heroes of the faith fully *received what God had promised*. *God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect*. That better way is the way that Jesus provided! God had something better in store for his people: the reality of the living Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the *author and perfecter of our faith*. Because His way is better we are *to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and run with perseverance the race marked out for us*. We must *fix our eyes on Jesus* who has given us a wonderful example of perseverance in the Cross and in His *opposition from sinful people*. He endured the shame and overcome, and is now seated at *the right hand of the throne of God*.

In our struggle against sin we have not yet got to the point of shedding our blood, so we must *endure hardship* because through it God is disciplining us and treating us as His sons. Proverbs 3:11,12. We submitted to the discipline of our human parents and respected them for it so *how much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live*. God disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness. Discipline is not pleasant but it *produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*. So Christian, be strong in Christ!

These verses are talking about God's discipline, through the various sufferings that we may have to endure as Christians. This discipline is a blessing in disguise because it leads to spiritual growth and greater maturity in Christ. See James 1:2-12.

Some have seen God's discipline as punishment, but this is not so. God loves us and always wants the best for us. When you realise this you will see difficult times as opportunities to become more like Jesus, not as punishments from God.

The writer now gives a strong warning against refusing God (and, by inference, refusing to accept what he has been writing about). We are to *make every effort to live in peace* with others and to *be holy, for without holiness no-one will see the Lord*.

We can miss out on the grace of God if we allow *bitterness* to grow in our hearts; if we are *sexually immoral*, or if we are *godless* (like Esau who sold his inheritance and couldn't get it back when he later changed his mind. Genesis 25:29-34, 27:30-40). We have not come to a physical mountain like Moses did, but *to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God*. Along with the angels, we have come to God as part of His church and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. *We must not refuse him who speaks*. God has promised to shake the earth and the heavens once more. The physical created things of this earth will pass away and only the spiritual things that can't be shaken will remain. *We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken so let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire"*.

### **Final exhortations and benediction. 13:1-25.**

The writer closes his letter with a series of exhortations. He encourages his readers (and us) to demonstrate their faith in the Lord in a number of practical ways:

- Love each other as brothers and sisters.
- Show hospitality to strangers (for in doing so you may *entertain angels without knowing it*).
- Remember those in prison and those who are being ill-treated.
- Honour marriage (because God will judge those who are sexually immoral).
- Stay free from the love of money.
- Be content with what you have (because God has promised to be with you. Deuteronomy 31:6,8; Psalm 118:6,7).
- Remember and imitate your leaders and those who shared Christ with you.
- Don't be carried away by strange teachings for *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*.
- Be strengthened by grace not by Jewish ceremonial foods and practices.
- Rely on Jesus, who suffered to make you holy.
- Stay focused on your eternal goal: the New Jerusalem, an enduring city that is yet to come.
- Continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God.
- Always do good and sacrificially share with others.
- Obey your leaders and others in authority. (They must give an account for their actions so help them rather than being a burden to them).

The writer then asks his readers to pray for him, especially that he may be restored to them soon. He has a *clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way*.

The letter closes with a glorious benediction:

*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

What a wonderful prayer! It encapsulates so much of what the writer has said throughout his letter. The only way that we can know the God of peace is through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' blood was shed, and He rose from the dead to bring us into a new covenant whereby we can have an intimate and personal relationship with God. Within this relationship we are to live lives that fulfill God's will and that are continually pleasing to Him. That way we will give glory to God for ever and ever!

The writer says he has only written a *short letter* and tells his readers that Timothy has been released and that he hopes to come with him to see them soon.

He greets all of the church leaders and all of God's people, and sends greetings from the Christians in Italy, then concludes with *Grace be with you all*.

## Significance

Hebrews is one of the most important books in the New Testament. It adds to the teaching in the Gospels and to the teachings of Paul, Peter and John in significant ways:

- It tells us a lot about the historical, person of Jesus.
- It explains the meaning of the atonement and of the work of Jesus Christ as our great High Priest.
- It expands on other parts of the New Testament to help us understand the big words of salvation: repentance, justification, sanctification, faith, judgment, and perseverance.
- It shows how Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Old Covenant that God made with the Jewish people, and how He has brought in a New Covenant in which all who call on the name of the Lord can be saved.
- It highlights the world to come and shows how it is the culmination of God's purposes for His people.

## Discussion questions

Who do you think wrote Hebrews? Does it matter who the author was?

What were the situations that the early Church was facing that led to the writing of Hebrews? What are the key messages that the book brings out to address these situations? Are these messages relevant for us today? How?

Identify each time that the words 'better' or 'superior' are used in Hebrews? What do you learn from this about the New Covenant brought in by Jesus as compared to the Old Covenant?

*There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.* 4:9. What is this Sabbath rest? How does a Christian enter into it? Why is rest so important?

What were the functions of the High Priest and other priests in the Jewish temple? How has Jesus fulfilled these roles? What does Jesus do for us now in His role as great High Priest?

Jesus is *the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.* John 1:29. Why was Jesus' blood shed at the Cross? How did this take away our sins? Why is a sacrificial system no longer needed? What do we have to do to have our sins taken away? What privileges do we enjoy once our sins are taken away?

Hebrews 6:1-3 describes some elementary teachings that form the basic doctrines of Christianity. Describe each of these doctrines and its importance in our Christian lives.

What is faith? How did the 'heroes of the faith' listed in Hebrews 11 demonstrate their faith? How is this different from the way 'faith' is used elsewhere in the New Testament? What can you do to demonstrate your faith in Jesus Christ?

An ongoing theme throughout Hebrews is perseverance. What were the situations that the early Christians had to persevere under? Why was it so important that they persevere? What happened if they didn't persevere? What can we learn from this that is relevant for our Christian lives today?

What have you learned from your study of the Hebrews? How will you apply this in your life in future?