

## **Fix Your Eyes On Jesus** An Introduction To Hebrews

In his biography of General Douglas MacArthur, *Rendezvous with History*, Major Courtney Whitney recounts an incident that occurred during the Korean war on the night preceding the Inchon landing. General MacArthur planned to encircle the North Korean forces that had driven south to Seoul and cut off their supply lines from the north. If successful, this stratagem might not only accelerate a drive toward victory, but more important, save the lives of some 100,000 U.N. troops.

It was a daring scheme. While encircling an enemy force was not a new strategy, it had never before been accomplished by way of the sea. Furthermore, the peculiar tides and unfavorable terrain at Inchon militated against an amphibious landing of troops. Yet that also contributed to MacArthur's decision to proceed; because of these impediments, the North Koreans would be caught unprepared for such a maneuver.

On the night before the landing, Courtney Whitney, who was aboard the flagship *Mount McKinley* with General MacArthur, retired early in anticipation of the action at dawn. He'd been asleep only a short time when he was summoned to MacArthur's cabin. He found the General in bathrobe and slippers, pacing the floor. Whitney was told to be seated. MacArthur in a kind of self-debate talked as he walked the cabin, reviewing one by one the arguments against the proposed landing in the morning. MacArthur then countered with the reasons for the surprise assault.

Finally at about 2:30 a.m., he concluded that his decision was a sound one. "Thanks, Court," the General said to Whitney. "Thanks for listening to me. Now let's get some sleep."

Then Courtney Whitney added these words: *[General MacArthur] threw off his robe, climbed into his bed and reached to the table alongside to pick up his Bible.*

Why the Bible? Why not Virgil or Shakespeare or Bunyan or Keats or Tennyson or Hemingway?

Can anyone live day-by-day, year-after-year, by Virgil? Is there life and power and comfort of temporal or eternal value in *The Divine Comedy*? What poetry or novel, however great, will hold its freshness when read again and again or committed to memory?

The Bible, on the other hand, possesses the power of life. It gives us teaching for conviction, for restoration, and for education in righteousness. It reveals God in His fullness through Jesus Christ. It strengthens; it encourages; it comforts; it challenges. It's a lamp to the feet, a light on our pathway. Not only day-by-day, but year-by-year, decade after decade, it can be read over and over again until its words become a part of life itself. Yet it never grows old or out of date.

The Bible is the masterpiece of all masterpieces. It is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. It is the work of God's Spirit; and a critical and beautiful portion of this masterwork of God's Spirit is the book of Hebrews.

I want to give an overview of this marvelous book tonight. We will be sort of flying at 20,000 feet and looking down upon it from the heights this evening, gaining a broad perspective, a big picture; and then next week we will get down to ground level and begin looking at the details, starting with chapter 1, verse 1.

Now first things first, let me put this book in its proper context.

## **Context**

Imagine that you are a part of a little house church; and the situation has become ... serious. We live here in a Roman province. The majority of us used to be faithful Jews attending the Synagogue every Sabbath. We were, that is, until a fellow Jew came from Rome, visiting us and calling himself a Christian. He told us that the Messiah had come, that He had done many great and wonderful things, that He had been crucified as the lamb of God for our sins, that He rose again the third day, and that His name is Jesus. We believed. It was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets; and we also became Christians. It is now in the early to mid sixties of the first century; and our situation has become serious. A new round of persecution has broken out against Christians in the empire and it is evident that we are going to be living on the front lines of this wave of hatred.

Now we haven't experienced it yet, but it is coming; and moreover, we know what this kind of persecution is like. It was just a little over ten years ago when the last wave of persecution against Christians came; and many of us remember it well. Some of us were publically humiliated for Jesus' sake. We were reproached and insulted. Some from our own church, right here, were thrown into prison and torn away from family and friends, their only crime being, following and worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ, devotion to Him from the heart. Others, when they went to visit those in prison had their property plundered. Homes were ransacked, their personal property stolen. There was no one we could turn to for help. The authorities were at the forefront of the persecution. It was a hard time for our church, but we stuck together. We made it through. We endured.

But now, now with this next wave coming, several in our midst, both new converts and old, are wavering. A few good friends have already left. They've stopped coming to the meetings here; and they've stopped even openly acknowledging Jesus. And to be honest, the rest of us are wondering if that isn't smart, if we shouldn't do the same. It was a lot easier, you remember, when we expressed our Jewishness without reference to Jesus. Life was a lot simpler and a lot easier. Judaism is a tolerated religion in the Roman empire. Christianity is not. It is illegal. So maybe that's the answer. Maybe we should just go back to the way things were. I mean, does Jesus really make that much of a difference? Can't we just go back to the way things were?

These are the thoughts; and these are the difficulties facing our church, when one day we receive a letter, not so much a letter as a traveling, circulating sermon, a word of exhortation it calls itself; and the addressee is quite obviously us because it is entitled simply “To The Hebrews.”

This brings us now to the purpose of the book of Hebrews. Why was it written? What is its purpose?

### **Purpose Of The Book**

The purpose of the book of Hebrews is that we might fix our eyes on Jesus - that we might fix our eyes on Jesus by seeing His greatness and then run with endurance the race that is set before us, holding fast, without wavering.

The purpose of the book of Hebrews is that we as believers might strengthen our grip, if you will, on Jesus! And the specific method which the Spirit chooses to strengthen our grip and to set our eyes upon the Lord is to show us the incredible superiority, supremacy and transcendent excellency of Christ to all things. That is the purpose of Hebrews.

Now to accomplish this purpose the Holy Spirit sends to us a “word of exhortation”, that is what the book calls itself in 13:22

### **Literary Form:**

What is a “word of exhortation”? A “word of exhortation” was a sermon, a message that was normally delivered during a worship service in the local synagogue after the reading of the public reading of the Scripture. An example of this practice and how these terms were used can be seen in Acts 13:15.

Now we normally call Hebrews an epistle, a letter. But it is obvious from just a cursory reading that several important features of a letter are lacking from this book. The author pays no attention to the usual conventional niceties associated with letters and the style is quite obviously homiletical. Thus it is not surprising that many commentators and scholars have considered the book to be an actual sermon, one that was preached earlier, perhaps even regularly, and was now written out and circulated for the benefit of the preacher’s friends and the churches.

And yet, it is also obvious that this message was delivered and intended for those with whom the author was very familiar. They are people that he knows ought to be teachers (5:12). He knows them and looks forward to visiting them (13:19, 23). He has a good opinion and confidence in them (6:9). He feels free in asking for their prayers (13:18), and readily gives them news of their mutual friend Timothy (13:23). The speaker recalls their “earlier days” (10:32) and remembers persecutions that his friends had endured (10:32; 12:4). He recalls their generosity to other believers (6:10) and cheerful attitude in the face of persecution. He even knows their present attitude toward their church leaders (13:17). In light of such statements it is clear that the

speaker is addressing a definite known group of fellow Christians; and it is equally clear that they know perfectly well who he is.

This raises the question of who authored the book of Hebrews.

### **Author:**

The authorship of Hebrews is an interesting question in church history and it has resulted in a lot of discussion and speculation. Perhaps more ink than should have been spilled has been poured out on this subject.

The earliest statement regarding authorship comes from Clement of Alexandria, who lived from c. 150 - 215 A.D. Clement says that source of the message was Paul, who originally delivered the sermon in the Hebrew language, but that Luke was the one who actually wrote it out in Greek, which was more familiar to the diaspora.

Examining what Clement of Alexandria says, the similarities between Hebrews and Paul's other letters are certainly very striking in places. For example:

1. The work of Christ in creation (Heb. 1:2; Col. 1:16).
2. The humiliation of Christ in the Incarnation and Crucifixion (Heb. 2:14-17; Phil. 2:5-8).
3. The place of the new covenant (Heb. 8:6; 2 Cor. 3:4-11).
4. The work of the Holy Spirit in distributing gifts (Heb. 2:4; 1 Cor. 12:11).
5. The negative example of Israel's conduct during the wilderness wanderings (Heb. 3:7-11; 4:4-11; 1 Cor. 10:1-11).

Moreover, there is the reference to Timothy in 13:23; and the obvious familiarity with the situations of the Jewish church scattered throughout the Roman empire. Certainly no one knew the circumstances of these Jews better than Paul. Most of them were his personal converts. Furthermore, the arguments and flow of thought in Hebrews is exactly what is described as doing when he went into their synagogues and preached Christ (e.g. Acts 13:5; 17:10-11).

In addition, the original Greek in which Hebrews is written is clearly not Paul's. The Greek of the letters that Paul dictated is very forceful, vigorous and almost rugged compared to the writing of Hebrews, which tends to be very elegant and classical in its phraseology. And if we compare the Greek of Hebrews to that of Luke and Acts, we find that there are some rather interesting and intense similarities between the language, diction and phraseology of the works. This also explains such statements as we find in 2:3, which are very easy to understand as coming from Luke

Thus, if we take these things together, then there is very strong evidence that the book of Hebrews was given to us in exactly the way that Clement of Alexandria describes.

Origen, c. 185-254, was a student of Clement of Alexandria. He writes this concerning the authorship of Hebrews, "If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of some one who remembered the apostolic teachings, and wrote down at his leisure what had been said by his teacher. Therefore if any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let it be commended for this. For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul's. But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows. The statement of some who have gone before us is that Clement, bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, and of others that Luke, the author of the Gospel and the Acts wrote it. But let this suffice on these matters."

So we see here that Origen accepts Paul as the source of Hebrews and even "commends" churches that hold this view. What Origen doubts is who actually wrote out the message of the apostle, whether it was Luke or Clement, who is mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3 as one of his fellow workers, and was appointed as a pastor over the church in Rome by Peter. But regardless of which of these men actually captured Paul's message in print, Origen is perfectly satisfied of its Apostolic origin.

And thus matters stood in the early church. Western Christendom, being less familiar with Paul, occasionally struggled with whether Paul was the source of Hebrews, but later church leaders, Jerome and Augustine, eventually put these doubts to rest. The Council of Hippo (AD. 393) and the Third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) listed thirteen epistles authored by Paul and added: "Of the same to the Hebrews, one." In this way, they put Hebrews in a different category acknowledging Paul as the source of its message, but recognizing that it was mediated through another writer. Then after the Sixth Council of Carthage (A.D. 419), it became routine to accept fourteen letters as Pauline without separating Hebrews for any special recognition.

The question of the books authorship did not come up again until the Protestant Reformation. During the Reformation, Calvin argued that Clement of Rome or Luke wrote Hebrews, following Origen. Luther proposed something entirely new, however. He thought the author might have been Apollos. What was striking about Luther's proposition, though, was that he did not simply propose Apollos as the penman who recorded Paul's message, but he proposed him as the source; and then Luther took a partial quote from Origen - guess which sentence - as support for his view.

Now don't get me wrong. I admire Luther for many things, but this was an instance of rather poor scholarship on his part, and it has turned into an excuse for every Tom, Dick and Harry ever since to question the authorship of Hebrews and then shrug his shoulders and give a partial quote Origen as support. Virtually no liberal New Testament scholar supports Pauline authorship of Hebrews today, and even the majority of conservative ones will happily misquote Origen and then wipe away hundreds of years of church history with a shrug of their shoulders.

But I would not have you ignorant. There is no valid reason for misquoting Origen or intentionally mistaking his own question as to who recorded the Apostles message and served as a faithful amanuensis, whether Luke or Clement. This is simply unacceptable. Neither is there

any valid reason to question the testimony of Clement of Alexandria and the other “ancients.” The message of Hebrews is undoubtedly Paul’s. It is an example of one of his messages or “words of exhortation” that he delivered in the synagogues as he traveled on his missionary journeys. He is the source. It is possible that the text was recorded for us by the Clement mentioned in Philippians. As Origen tells us, “some” of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church fathers said this. But the majority state that it was Luke, and the original language is consistent with his other writings. Regardless, we know that it was done under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

With that said, what are the principle themes and applications of this great message:

### **Main Themes and Applications:**

1. All believers now have direct access to God under the New Covenant; and therefore, may approach the throne of grace with confidence (e.g. 4:16; 10:22).

And so by way of application, you may have confidence to draw near to God by the great sacrifice of Christ (e.g. 10:19).

What is the basis of your confidence to draw near and relate to God? Is it something in yourself, or is your confidence based upon what he has done? If you are a child of God by faith, then one of the great effects of this book upon your soul should be confidence.

2. Our great hope as believers is to be in God’s presence (e.g. 6:19-20).

This is our hope not only in this life but in the next as well, as we rely upon Christ as an ever present help in times of trouble, and as we look to a new country and a new city. We follow Christ into the Holy of Holies.

3. Be careful to heed the warnings of God.

God gives us several warnings throughout the book of Hebrews, that are designed to stir and move us into faith and action. Here are some of the warnings He gives:

1. Warning against drifting from “the things we have heard” (2:1-4).
2. Warning against hardening your heart to the “voice” of God (3:7-14).
3. Warning against apostasy (5:11-6:10).
4. Warning against living a life of habitual sin (10:26-39).
5. Warning against despising “the grace of God” (12:15-17).

4. Become skillful in understanding and handling the word of God (5:13).

One of the main thrusts of the book is that we as believers would leave behind the elementary things of the faith and would move on to maturity, no longer babes feeding on milk, but eating

solid food and becoming skillful handlers of the word of God. The book not only exhorts us in this but gives us wonderful examples through the faithful exposition of various Old Testament texts:

1:1-2:4	-	Exposition of verses from Pss.; 2 Sam. 7; Deut. 32
2:5-18	-	Exposition of Ps. 8
3:1-4:13	-	Exposition of Ps. 95:7-11
4:14-7:28	-	Exposition of Ps. 110:4
8:1-10:14	-	Exposition of Jer. 31:31-34
10:32-12:3	-	Exposition of Hab. 2:3-4
12:4-13	-	Exposition of Prov. 3:11-12
12:18-29	-	Exposition of Ex. 19 & 20

5. Developing a forward looking ever enduring faith (e.g. 11:27).

In chapter 11 we are confronted with the faith hall of fame. We see the testimony of those who rejected the world and fixed their eyes upon that which was invisible, who treasured Christ and His kingdom above all things, who lived for another heavenly country, who considered the unseen promises of God greater than all the world had to offer, who lived in hope, of whom the world was not worthy. These men and women endured all manner of hardship and suffering and gave us an example to live by.

The great allegory of the Christian life is Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan. It depicts Christian, the main character, fleeing from the City of Destruction and heading to the heavenly city that he had read about in his book. He has a massive burden of sin and guilt on his back, but early on he encounters the cross. He kneels before it and the weight of his burden and guilt falls off his back and tumbles down into an empty tomb. Christian leaps for joy.

But little did he know it, that was only the beginning of his challenges in life. He leaves there wonderfully saved and immediately has to ascend the hill of difficulty. He barely survives his battle with Apollyon, the devil. He is arrested and persecuted in Vanity Fair. He tries an easier route than the King's highway and ends up in doubting castle with giant Despair. He gets back on the path and has to pass through the valley of the shadow and finally encounters the river of death. All of this he does on his journey to the heavenly city.

And so Martyn-Lloyd Jones comments, "The great truth in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress is not that Christian endured great hardships on his way to the eternal city, but that Christian thought it to be worth his while to endure those hardships." Do you hear that? He thought it worth his while in light of where he was going. He was looking to the reward. And we must do the same. This is what the faith hall of fame is all about.

And this brings us back again to the main purpose of the book of Hebrews and to the principle theme and application to your life and mine:

6. Fix your eyes on Jesus by seeing that He is greater than all things.

You can see His superiority to all things by looking for a moment at the outline I have provided for you of the book:

### An Outline of Hebrews

- I. The Superiority of Christ's Person (1:1-4:13)
  - A. The superiority of Christ to the prophets (1:1-3)
  - B. The superiority of Christ to angels (1:4-2:18)
    - 1. The superiority of Christ's nature (1:4-14)
    - 2. A warning against neglecting Christ (2:1-4)
    - 3. The value of Christ's incarnation (2:5-18)
  - C. The superiority of Christ to Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13)
    - 1. The superiority of Christ to Moses (3:1-6)
    - 2. The failure of God's people under Moses (3:7-19)
    - 3. The superiority of Christ to Joshua (4:1-8)
    - 4. The urgency of seeking God's rest (4:9-13)
- II. The Superiority of Christ's Work (4:14-10:18)
  - A. The superior priesthood demonstrated in Christ (4:14-7:28)
    - 1. The value of Christ's high priesthood (4:14-16)
    - 2. The comparison of Christ and Aaron (5:1-10)
    - 3. The warning against falling away (5:11-6:20)
    - 4. The Melchizekek order of Christ's priesthood (7:1-28)
  - B. The superior covenant introduced by Christ (8:1-13)
  - C. The superior sacrifice offered by Christ (9:1-10:18)
    - 1. A sacrifice that cleanses conscience (9:1-14)
    - 2. A sacrifice that removes sin (9:15-22)
    - 3. A sacrifice that affects heavenly realities (9:23-28)
    - 4. A voluntary sacrifice (10:1-10)
    - 5. An unrepeatable sacrifice (10:11-18)
- III. The Superiority of the Christ Life (10:19-13:25)
  - A. An appeal for endurance (10:19-39)
    - 1. By approaching God through Christ (10:19-25)
    - 2. By fearing the living God (10:26-31)
    - 3. By considering past experiences (10:32-39)
  - B. The experience of true faith (11:1-40)
    - 1. The nature of faith (11:1-3)
    - 2. Examples of the faithful (11:4-40)
  - C. The experience of discipline (12:1-13)
    - 1. The example of Christ (12:1-3)
    - 2. The purpose of God (12:4-13)
  - D. Warning against rejecting God (12:14-29)

- E. Final exhortations to living for Christ (13:1-25)
  - 1. Exhortations for social life (13:1-3)
  - 2. Exhortations for home life (13:4-6)
  - 3. Exhortations for religious life (13:7-9)
  - 4. Sacrifices that please God (13:10-16)
  - 5. Obedience to pastors (13:17)
  - 6. Blessing and conclusion (13:18-25)