

Reading Hebrews

Dwayne Phillips 2023



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Purpose

This study leads the reader through a reading of the letter to the Hebrews.

Translations

Various English translation use various words. This study will quote from:

CSB: The Christian Standard Bible, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers.

<https://csbible.com/>

NET: The New English Translation, Copyright © 1996 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C.,

<https://netbible.org/>

The Writer

The book of Hebrews does not have a statement like, “I, my-name, address the reader.”

Different sources credit the Apostle Paul as the writer. Other sources disagree. My comments on the book will not join in this discussion. I will refer to the author of this book simply as “the writer.”

The Beginning

Chapter 1

The writer is addressing fellow Hebrews. The book begins with, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets...” (CSB) “Our ancestors” were the Hebrews of the Old Testament who descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the past, God spoke to us Hebrews through prophets. Recently, God spoke to us, those who are reading this fresh book, through the Son—Jesus Christ. Jesus’ accomplishment was purifying our sins. Jesus’ position is at the right hand of God. That position is superior to the position of the angels.

Note: The Family

Notice the words in the book about family. The first sentence mentions “ancestors.” Jesus is repeatedly called “the Son” as God is repeatedly called “Father.” The following chapters include “brothers and sisters” and “sons and daughters.” A Hebrew wrote to other Hebrews, and everyone is part of the family of Hebrews. They were all descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were all cousins.

Superior to the Angels

Jesus is superior to the angels. The Hebrew people were in awe of the angels. They angels were heavenly creatures sent from God on special missions. God, however, never called an angel “my son.” God commanded the angels to worship the Son, not the other way around.

Angels are servants, exalted servants, but servants. Jesus has a throne. Jesus was, “anointed ... with the oil of joy beyond your companions.” (CSB). God never told an angel to sit at the right hand of God.

Instead, the angels, “sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation.” (CSB)

Pay Attention: Do Not Drift Away

Chapter 2

Since Jesus is superior to the angels, so the Hebrews must pay attention to what Jesus said. The Hebrews’ ancestors did not listen to the prophets and the angels. The result was punishment. The results of drifting away from the words are Jesus are sure — punishment.

The Pioneer of Salvation

Jesus became the pioneer or first person of salvation or eternal life once and for all. God made Jesus lower than angels for a short time. The Son became human flesh and lived on earth. Only by becoming human could Jesus experience death. Angels couldn’t experience that. Jesus was made “perfect” or complete through the suffering as a man.

Jesus died as a man. Jesus rose from the dead to show that there is a life after death.

The ultimate enemy of man on earth is death. The devil held that power. Jesus’ life and death on earth took that power away from the devil. Mankind is no longer enslaved by the fear of death. Just as a high priest would make sacrifices to atone for the sins of the Hebrews, Jesus did the same for the Hebrews and the rest of mankind as well.

Jesus, Moses, and Entering the Rest

Chapter 3

Recall the Hebrews' ancestors and how they behaved in the time of Moses. First, Jesus is superior to Moses. While Moses was a servant in God's household, Jesus is a Son over the household. The Son is an heir; the servant is hired for a while and moves on.

Don't be like the contemporaries of Moses. They rebelled after their liberation from Egypt. Those who disobeyed were not able to enter the rest of the land promised to them. Instead, they died in the desert.

The warning is to avoid sin's deception, which hardens the heart, as was the case in the rebellion in the desert.

The Greater Rest

Chapter 4

Instead of rebelling like the ancestors in the time of Moses, participate in Christ. As Christ is superior to Moses (the Son, not the servant), so is the rest promised in Christ superior to the rest promised in the time of Moses. "For we who have believed enter the rest." (CSB)

"Entering the rest" to the rest of the Sabbath. God rested on the seventh day of creation. If God rested, so should we, and the rest offered by Jesus is much greater than the seventh-day rest.

Notice how many times "enter the rest" and "rest" are mentioned. The ultimate rest is the blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ. Disobedience voids the promise of rest.

The Word of God

There is a brief side note about the Word of God. Look back at the text in chapters 3 and 4. God speaks many times through the writer. Those occasions are the words of God. Pay attention to those words. God's promises are powerful. God's warnings are powerful. God,

"...is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account."—CSB

The Greater High Priest

Chapter 5

The traditional Hebrew high priests, those men of the tribe of Levi, had weaknesses. They were also able to "deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray." (CSB) The high priest offered sacrifices for himself and for the people. God appointed the high priests just as God appointed the Son to become a high priest.

God appointed Jesus to become a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. This is the first of about ten mentions of Melchizedek. That man was not a Levite priest. He and his role in the story of Jesus and priests is discussed further in the coming chapters.

While human, Jesus did things similar to what priests would do. Jesus prayed with tears in reverence to God the Father. When Jesus' earthly mission was complete (perfected), Jesus became, "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, and he was declared by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." (CSB)

Immaturity

By this time, the Hebrews should be “trained to distinguish between good and evil.” (CSB) Instead, they are “inexperienced with the message about righteousness.” (CSB)

Failing to Enter the Rest

Chapter 6

Since we have these blessings in Jesus and can enter the rest, let’s move on to those things that are “difficult to explain.” (CSB) The failure to enter the rest of God is like falling away. Those who fall away are like “the ground that drinks the rain” but “produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and about to be cursed, and at the end will be burned.” (CSB)

Salvation is described in familiar terms: work, serve, diligence, perseverance, etc. and punctuated with “so that you won’t become lazy.” (CSB) Laziness was despised by Godly Hebrews. Instead, we should “be imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and perseverance.” (CSB)

This is a true and dependable promise. There is the example of Abraham, the great patriarch of the Hebrews, who first heard this promise.

God made this promise “through two unchangeable things” (CSB) These are (1) God made an oath and (2) God cannot lie.

The anchor for our souls is the hope for refuge in God, i.e., in God’s rest. Jesus brings us this hope because Jesus did everything a high priest would do, just like Melchizedek.

According to the Order of Melchizedek

Chapter 7

Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek and unlike the priests from the tribe of Judah. At the end of this section, are the words that are often used:

“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” —CSB

Melchizedek, whose name literally means “king of righteousness,” was the King of Salem (Salem translates to “peace”).

“Now consider how great this man was: even Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the plunder to him.” —CSB

Abraham, the great patriarch of the Hebrews, gave a tenth of his plunder to Melchizedek. The Hebrew ancestors gave a tenth of their earnings to the Levitical priests. Melchizedek, however, was not a descendant of Abraham. Still, he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed Abraham.

These two things imply that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham. That is a life-changing statement to the Hebrews. Following the logic of family lineage, the Levites descended from Abraham. Therefore, Abraham was greater than the Levites. Combining these two statements about Abraham, Melchizedek, and the Levites, Melchizedek is greater than the Levites.

One more step: since Jesus is a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, Jesus is also greater than the Levites.

The foundation of the Hebrews receiving the law from God was the Levitical priests. Consider, “For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must be a change of law as well.” (CSB)

Jesus is from the tribe of Judah—not Levi. This is a change in the priesthood, so here comes a change in the law. Again, this shook the foundation of the Hebrews’ religion.

Jesus “did not become a priest based on a legal regulation about physical descent but based on the power of an indestructible life.” (CSB) Since Jesus has an indestructible life, Jesus is a priest forever.

Therefore, we have a new priest, a new law, and a better hope. This better hope comes with an oath from God.

“Because of this oath, Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.”—CSB

There have been many Levitical priests through the centuries. They are human, so they are born, live, and die. Jesus, however, is permanent because, as mentioned earlier, Jesus conquered death. Jesus permanently intercedes for us.

“For this is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.”—CSB

With Jesus, the daily sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests are not needed. Jesus sacrificed once for all time. By the oath of God the Father, Jesus the Son is the perfect eternal priest.

Better Promises

Chapter 8

God has a sanctuary or tabernacle in heaven. Jesus, the new high priest, is there. This heavenly throne is new and different. It is established on better promises.

“But Jesus has now obtained a superior ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been established on better promises.”—CSB

God spoke of this new covenant or new situation. Note the combination of what Moses told the Hebrews’ ancestors at Mt Sinai with a description of the new covenant.

“...the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors... because they did not continue in my covenant”—CSB

The Old and New Covenant Ministries

Chapter 9

Contrast the old and new covenants by focusing on the persons who conducted the ministries under these covenants. In the old sanctuary, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year to sacrifice blood for the sins of the people and his own sins.

“They are physical regulations and only deal with food, drink, and various washings imposed until the time of the new order.”—CSB

This situation, however, changed. Jesus is the high priest of a tabernacle that is spiritual, not physical. The key concept is,

“...he (Jesus) entered the most holy place once for all time, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”—CSB

The old sacrifices cleansed the flesh for a year. The new sacrifice cleaned the conscience of mankind once and for all time.

Death and Covenant

Consider the relationship of death to a covenant or agreement. First, a will is a legal document that takes effect when a person dies. The will is valid only after a person dies or the blood of a person is shed.

The old and new covenants are similar to a will. They are valid only with death and the shedding of blood. Moses performed ceremonies that involved blood. That shed blood brought forgiveness of sins for a while.

“According to the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”—CSB

Because of the relationship of a covenant to death, the better sanctuary in heaven needed to be purified with a better sacrifice. Jesus was this better sacrifice. Jesus was offered one time for the removal of sin from mankind.

“For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us.”—CSB

One Death for the New Covenant

Chapter 10

The discussion of the better sacrifice continues: the priests repeatedly offered sacrifices as part of the old covenant. Jesus sacrificed His life one time for all forever. “For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified.” (CSB)

Per the prophet Jeremiah, God would put the laws in mankind’s hearts and minds. Their sins would be forgotten. Understand that part—forgotten forever due to one offering for sin.

“Now where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.”—CSB

Draw Near

Given (1) a “boldness to enter the sanctuary” and (2) “a great high priest over the house of God” (both CSB), we should do three things:

- (1) Draw near to God with a true heart and washed bodies (the spiritual and the physical),
- (2) Hold onto hope for the future that was not yet seen, and
- (3) Provoke love and good works (again, the spiritual and the physical) fueled by the gathering together in Christ.

In light of the perfect or complete sacrifice of Jesus, do not return to the old ways and ignore of what is known. That would bring, “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries.” (CSB)

There were harsh consequences for disregarding an old and incomplete covenant. There will be worse punishments for “trampling on the Son of God.” (CSB)

Remember the punishments the brothers and sisters suffered. The perfect sacrifice of Jesus has now enlightened everyone. We are to keep the bold confidence that comes with this sacrifice. There is a reward now and more reward coming.

The Faith Hall of Fame

Chapter 11

There is faith and there are enduring possessions. Faith looks forward to possessions and events not yet owned and experienced. What follows is often called “the faith hall of fame” or “the hall of faith.” This recalls persons from history who suffered as the contemporary readers were suffering. Historical figures kept bold confidence in the future; we are to do the same.

Historical figures mentioned by name include: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel.

“These all died in faith, although they had not received the things that were promised. But they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth.”—CSB

There are more mentioned, but not by name. All these,
 “...were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us.”—CSB

Run With Endurance

Chapter 12

“Therefore, strengthen your tired hands and weakened knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated[cv] but healed instead.”—CSB

All these persons from history endured difficult times. The discipline or training, though not often pleasant, provided the means to press onward to unseen rewards. What they could not see was a place where they would be healed.

God disciplined or trained those persons just as God continues to train and discipline. This is what a loving father does—provide the training needed to reach a destination that a child cannot see. Such provides the endurance a child needs.

“Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness...” (CSB) Avoid things that may lead to troubles among believers.

Remember Mt Sinai and Mt Zion. These represent earth and heaven and the choice that presents. Mt Sinai, the place where the first covenant was given, is described as “darkness, gloom, and storm.” Mt Zion, the place of the temple and closeness to God, is “a festive

gathering.” This is where Jesus, “the mediator of the new covenant” (these three quotes from CSB), lives. At this place, Jesus makes righteous people perfect or complete.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”—CSB

The Final Exhortations

Chapter 13

Finally, there is a collection of exhortations. These include: love one another, be hospitable to strangers, remember those unjustly imprisoned, honor marriage, and be content with the money you have. These everyday things are important to God, and they should be important to a righteous person.

Be assured of Jesus—an unchanging savior. Jesus is not just a physical sacrifice but is a spiritual sacrifice that brings the grace of God. Just as in the faith hall of fame, believe in a city yet to be seen. Worship and sacrifice giving up the material and thereby praising Jesus.

Our sacrifices in the new covenant are not sheep, goats, and other animals. Our sacrifices are to be righteous, good, and to share our blessings.

Pray for the writer with the same words the writer prays for the Hebrews

“Now may the God of peace... equip[di] you with everything good to do his will, working in us what is pleasing in his sight.”—CSB

Amen.

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