



*Are you struggling to hold on to your faith? Are you losing heart in the face of hardship? The author of Hebrews powerfully addresses these issues as he places before his readers the superiority of Christ and the new covenant blessings that come through Him. This book supplies powerful encouragement for believers to press on to the end, “looking unto Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith.”*

# AN INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

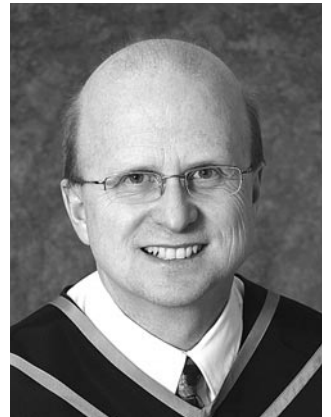
**W**hile the book of Hebrews is not always easy to understand, it richly repays careful study in many different ways. Hebrews, like the gospel of Matthew, presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures in unique ways that add colour, dimension, and texture to the biblical testimony of His life and work. The book also provides a window in time that lets us see how early Christians read their Bibles and how they understood the new covenant inaugurated by the Lord Jesus. Hebrews presents Jesus as the One who has entered heaven itself as our great High Priest where He lives and reigns until His enemies are completely overcome.

## AUTHORSHIP, AUDIENCE AND DATE

Although majestic and eloquent in both language and theological conception, Hebrews has not been without controversy. The fact that the writer is anonymous has led to an ongoing debate about who wrote it. But even though the human author is unknown, the book of Hebrews has always been a blessing to God’s people and to this day they profess to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in and through

the text. There is no reason to doubt its full authority, nor its place in the biblical canon. Whoever wrote the book of Hebrews was a highly skilled communicator as well as a devout Christian theologian and pastor that God used to give to His people many wonderful insights into the new age inaugurated by the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to questions about authorship, there is also some uncertainty with regard to the intended audience. The very title of the book, which has been long associated with it (“To The Hebrews”), has been rightly taken to mean that the book was written to Christians from a Jewish background. The most likely explanation is that it was written to Jewish Christians living in Rome. This takes the phrase, “those from Italy send you



**BY KIRK M. WELLUM**

their greetings” (13:24) to refer to those from Italy who were living in other places (cf. Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18:2). As far as the actual date when Hebrews was written, evidence gleaned from within the book points to a time before the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70. Enough time had to pass for the recipients to be in danger of falling away from the faith, and yet not so much time that the temple, which was theologically obsolete, had been destroyed. If the temple was no longer standing when Hebrews was written, it is almost impossible to imagine that the writer would not refer to its destruction, given the nature of his argument concerning the inferiority of the Old Covenant. Today, many scholars feel that a time in the A.D. 60s best suits the internal data and correlates with what we know about the external circumstances.

## A CALL TO HOLD FIRM TO THE FAITH

With all the unanswered questions associated with Hebrews, we might wonder what we do know! Thankfully, there are many things that we can learn from the book! For instance, we know that the unnamed Jewish Christians were struggling to hold on to Jesus. In the early days of their relationship with the Lord, they had been tested and had stood their ground. This is indicated by a key passage in chapter 10: “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and

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joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions” (10:32-34). Now they are not as steadfast. They appear to be wavering in their confession. At key points the author warns them to carefully consider their actions. In 2:1-3 he says that they must “pay the most careful attention to what they have heard, so that they do not drift away”... and he asks them, “How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?” He goes on to say that they are part of God’s house *if* they hold firmly to their confidence and the hope in which they glory (3:6), and he challenges them to obey the word of the Holy Spirit who continues to speak through the Scriptures, calling them to enter God’s rest

(3:7-4:13). Although they had been believers for some time, they had not made sufficient progress in their understanding and application of God’s truth (5:11-6:3). Hebrews is well known for two particularly chilling passages in which the writer indicates how far one can go in professing faith only to prove false in the end (6:4-8; 10:26-31). Convinced of better things with regard to them, the writer nonetheless strives to impress on them the importance of remaining true to the end.

The sustained exhortation found near the end of the book also indicates some of the problems that existed in the congregation. They are exhorted to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and to run with perseverance the race marked out for them, fixing their eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:1-2). They must not lose heart (12:5), but instead endure hardship as discipline (12:7), strengthening their feeble arms and weak knees (12:12), while they make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy (12:14).

There are frequent warnings about falling short of the grace of God and about the avoidance of immorality and godlessness (12:15-16), because they are called to enter into all that God has prepared for them in Christ. On two occasions in the last chapter (13:7, 17) they are told to remember their leaders. This may indicate the presence of false teachers who were trying to lead them away from the truth they have been faithfully taught about Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever when it comes to the gospel which is centred in Him (13:8). Even this superficial survey is enough to indicate that these early Christians were struggling with things that believers continue to struggle with to this day. This makes Hebrews a valuable resource in today’s world, where faithfulness and endurance are rare graces indeed. Christians, too often, want everything now and without effort or struggle. But this is not the way of faith, in the past or in the present. We will overcome in the end, but in the meantime, life is hard and following after Christ requires our full attention, dedication and exertion. Anything less is insufficient and fails to see the superlative glory of what we have been called to in Christ.

## CHRISTOLOGICAL AND REDEMPTIVE THEMES

However, as important as all of this is, what makes the book of Hebrews a real treasure is the way that the writer approaches these practical problems. It is much more than just a call to “smarten up” or “shape up.” The pastor-author-speaker deals with these practical problems in terms of a stunning Christological reading of the Old Testament Scriptures. He shows us how practical the gospel of the

Lord Jesus Christ is and how it can be applied in profound ways to our spiritual ailments, if we read the Bible carefully.

Hebrews begins with an exordium (1:1-4) that magnifies the Lord Jesus Christ as the exalted Son of God by alluding

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to Psalms 2 and 110. There is no one like the Son and creation, revelation and salvation are tied to Him. The Son's supreme glory is seen when He is contrasted with the angels. As intelligent and powerful as they are, He is infinitely superior and in a class all by Himself (1:5-14). His message is so much greater than that delivered by angels in the Old Covenant (2:1-4) and the restoration of human beings to the glory that God had originally intended for them, is only found in Him (2:5-9). As the Pioneer of their salvation, He was made perfect through what He suffered (2:10). This does not mean that He transitioned from a sinful state to perfection, but it speaks of His suffering as part of His ordination as our Pioneer and merciful and faithful High Priest (2:10-18). As great as Moses was, Jesus is greater (3:1-6). This is why we must see to it that none of us has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God (3:7-15). If the children of Israel did not enter that which merely symbolized something far greater than the rest of Canaan, there is no hope for anyone who turns away from the greater Joshua in whom rest is ultimately found (3:16-4:11).

God's Word is alive and active and searches our hearts (4:12-13). We can neither run, nor hide, nor deceive the Lord. In fact, rather than running from God we should draw near to Him. This is possible because we have a great High Priest who has ascended into heaven (4:14-16). He is a great High Priest who has been appointed by God and declared to be the Son of the Father and the Priest forever in the order of Melchizedek by virtue of His glorious work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead (5:1-10). There is no High Priest like Him, to whom God swore an oath qualifying Him to go behind the curtain in the heavenly Most Holy Place in a definitive way that forever changed the way we come to God (6:13-20). His greatness is seen in the way that He fulfills all that Melchizedek typified in the Old Testament Scriptures (7:1-28; cf. Genesis 14:18-20). Jesus is the promised eternal Priest who inaugurates the new and better covenant prophesied about in

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Hebrews 8:1-13).

Not only does He live forever, but He also offers Himself as a sacrifice that is effectual in the removal of sins and the cleansing of the conscience (9:1-28). He does not have to offer Himself again and again, unlike the Levitical priests of the old covenant who had to offer the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer. Once was enough! By one great act of obedience Jesus has perfected forever those who are being made holy (10:1-14). His work is so powerful that He writes His laws on the hearts and minds of His people, in combination with remembering their sins and lawless deeds no more. Full forgiveness is found in Him and nothing can ever be added to His work (10:15-18).

## **EXHORTATIONS AND ENCOURAGEMENTS**

It is this fullness of redemptive accomplishment that drives the exhortations and encouragements of the book of Hebrews and not the other way around. This is why those who name the name of Christ must press on, whether they live in the first or the twenty-first centuries. There is no going back (2:1-3; 6:4-8; 10:19-31). We, like those who were first addressed, must persevere and go forward by faith (10:36-39). Faith in the sense of "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" is the only way to live (11:1). This has always been true no matter what covenant the faithful have lived under (11:1-40). The finished work of Jesus which guarantees all the promises of God demands the response of faith. No matter what the obstacle or the opposition, whether we subdue all our foes or are called to lay down our lives, we must run after Jesus as the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith who has entered into what was promised and has opened up for all His people the

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new age of faith (12:1-3). This does not mean that we have experienced all that God has for us in Christ. The fullness of salvation is reserved for glory itself—for that time in salvation history when the kingdom that cannot be shaken will be revealed (12:4-27). Until that time comes, we are called to be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God, who shook Sinai and set it ablaze

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in the time of Moses, is still a consuming fire (12:18-29).

It is the glorious wonder of what God has done in Christ which transforms our personal lives and relationships. God's revelation in His Son changes everything. No one is

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the same. Everyone will either find refuge and rest in Him or they will be refused and rejected. He transforms worship into something that encompasses all of life. As William L. Lane has suggested, Hebrews 13:15-16 in many ways summarizes the whole book: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess His name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."<sup>2</sup> In the end, for the writer of Hebrews, it all comes down to living lives that are being transformed by God's grace so extravagantly displayed in the obedient life and sacrificial death of His Son.

### VALUE OF HEBREWS

So despite the conceptual and interpretive challenges of Hebrews, it is a book that we need to become more familiar with in our day. It has much to say both theologically and practically to the present generation of Christians. In the face of constant pressure to push our faith to the periphery of life, Hebrews encourages us to run after Jesus. When confronted with trials and persecution we must not give up but we must press on, knowing that He who has called us is faithful and He will be with us to the very end. When salvation-history has run its course, Jesus will make all things new and we will share in His eternal kingdom. Consequently, there is no reason to fear the past, the present or the future. Instead, we are called to live by faith in the God who is and who rewards those who earnestly seek Him (11:6). **EW**

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on these and other background issues see D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, eds., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 391-407.

<sup>2</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment*, Vol. 2 (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 573.