

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

Getting a Handle on the Letter to the Hebrews

So What Has It Got To Do With Us?

This is one of the great letters of the New Testament. Its teaching about Jesus is profound and inspiring. We cannot study it seriously without understanding our salvation better and appreciating the magnificence of God's unfolding plan to save mankind. But it was written to people whose situation seems very different from ours. So, we may well ask: "What's it got to do with us?" As we study the letter, we'll discover how relevant its message really is. You see . . .

❖ **THE PARTICULARS MAY BE DIFFERENT BUT THE ESSENTIALS ARE THE SAME.**

We are *not* first century Jews facing ostracism and persecution from our families and compatriots. But we *are* Christian believers attempting to live lives of faithfulness in a world that sometimes opposes us and sometimes entices us. We may not at first understand all the Old Testament allusions, but Jesus is our great High Priest as he was theirs. We share in the same salvation, face similar pressures, and need to exercise faith in order to inherit the many blessings of the Christian life. Think for a minute . . .

The world *around* us

Living the Christian life is not always easy! We often face pressure from the world *around* us. We cannot live in this world without being bombarded by countless messages, some blatant and others almost subliminal. Most of these reflect a value system that runs counter to the will of God. They "indoctrinate" us more than we realize. In addition, well-meaning relatives, colleagues, and friends sometimes urge us to follow a path that conflicts with the values of God's kingdom.

The world *within* us

We also face pressure from the world *within* us. Although we have placed our faith in Jesus and experience God's goodness, we still have some unhealthy inclinations. Our passions can get the better of us and sometimes our egos get in the way of our progress as Christians.

Setbacks

We are probably most vulnerable when things don't work out the way we expected they would. Yes, we know that the Christian life is not a bed of roses, but we believe that God is with us and that placing our trust in him is the best thing we ever did. Then a circumstance arises that causes us to wonder whether we were mistaken. Why did God allow that tragedy? We believe we are "more than conquerors through him who loved us," but it doesn't always seem that we are on the winning side (Rom 8:37).

Opposition

We don't serve God simply because it pays to serve him, but surely we should be better off for doing so. Often openly godless people prosper while Christians are abused. Yes, we have seen Christians advance in the business world, but there is also corporate skulduggery as believers are sometimes maligned and worked out of key positions despite their competence. There is no place for a "persecution complex," but persecution happens! There are times when, despite the schemes of those who oppose us, God overrules. Enoch and Peter could tell us inspiring stories of deliverance. But Abel and James would have to tell us that things didn't work out so well for them (Acts 12:1-11; Heb 11:4-5). Or perhaps they did (in terms of God's value system)?

Compromise

When we are under pressure or feel that things are not working out as we expected, compromise comes so easily. But it has disastrous consequences. We may even be tempted to throw in the towel. Seldom will this mean that we openly turn our backs on God, but we can retreat mentally to a place of compromise and indifference. *That's where the Hebrew Christians were.* Sure, the details of their particular circumstances were different from ours. But, in a sense, they were facing a mega-version of the same battle we face. Hebrews was written as a "word of encouragement" to them, and if it could encourage them, it most certainly can encourage us.

❖ THE MAJOR VALUE OF THE BOOK

Nothing helps us more in our Christian lives than understanding who Jesus is and what he does. The Writer knew what he was doing when he encouraged us to "fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2). So, in the first place, this book helps us to understand Jesus better. When we see him in his majesty and his humility, as God and as man, this in itself helps to place everything else in perspective. It's hard to live the Christian life if you have a defective view of Jesus. What a glorious picture the Writer paints for us.

To appreciate this picture, you need to know some things about the Old Testament. These will be explained as we travel through the book, so there's no need to take fright the moment you meet an unfamiliar concept.

❖ UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION

No, we don't have to do a full background study. The following facts are enough to get us started:

We can't be absolutely sure who the author was. There are some interesting theories, ranging from Apollos to the Virgin Mary. We can say with certainty that he or she (it may have been Priscilla) was a well-educated Jewish Christian, thoroughly acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures and the details of the ceremonial law. Barnabas is as good a choice as any, but we simply cannot be sure. (I have some more detailed notes for any who might be interested). F. F. Bruce tells us what we need to know:

The author was a second generation Christian, well versed in the study of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), which he interpreted according to a creative exegetical principle. He had a copious vocabulary and was master of a fine rhetorical style, completely different from Paul's; we might well describe him as a learned man . . . mighty in the Scriptures. He was a Hellenist (a Jew with a Greek background) who inherited the outlook of those Hellenists described in Acts 6-8; 11:19 ff., the associates of Stephen and Philip, pioneers in the Gentile mission.¹

We don't know exactly who the first readers were, but we do know they were Jewish Christians who were feeling the pressure to compromise. Some were having second thoughts about their faith. That's all we really *need* to know. Some think that the letter was first addressed to the Jewish believers in the church at Rome, and others believe that it was addressed to Jewish Christians in Judea. There are some other theories as well. (Notes are available for those interested).²

¹F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964).

²If we take both internal and external evidence into account, it seems most likely that the initial addressees were a mainly Jewish house church which was part of the church at Rome. The nature of the letter (it is more like a treatise than a letter) leads us to believe that although the letter was written to a particular community, the Writer had a wider audience in view.

One way or another, the readers felt the tension between their national identity and their spiritual commitment. For most of them this was the most powerful point of conflict. And for each of us there is something that tugs away at our Christian commitment, inclining us to compromise or even to throw in the towel completely.

The letter should probably be dated somewhere between AD 60 and 65. It cannot have been written later than AD 96 (Clement of Rome alludes to it at that date). The first readers had heard the gospel from people who themselves had listened to the teaching of Jesus (2:3). Timothy is mentioned (13:23). The author writes as if the ritual of the temple is still going on (Heb 9:6-9; 10:11-14; 13:11-14). This could be a literary present, but it is far more likely that it describes the situation as it was prior to the destruction of the temple. If the letter was written to Jewish Christians in Rome, it was probably written shortly before AD 64. The loss experienced by Christians could have referred to the events of AD 49 (10:32-34), but after Nero's persecution of AD 64, the Writer could not have said, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4).³ If the letter was written to Christians in Judea, it would have been written before the outbreak of the war in AD 66.

❖ **HERE'S WHAT THE BOOK IS ALL ABOUT**

If the Writer is going to help his compatriots to continue in the Christian lives, he needs to reinforce their faith by showing them just how much better off they are by following Jesus than they were under the Old Testament order. Yes, they may have to suffer in the short term, but their present benefits and their future inheritance far outweigh even the most severe opposition. Indeed they are in good company (consider the list in chapter 11).

It helps us to get a grasp on the letter if we understand how he goes about achieving his objective. He systematically presents us with clear teaching on the person and work of Jesus, quoting from the Old Testament and showing how Jesus fulfils not only specific promises but significant offices (prophet, priest, and king). He intersperses his teaching with passionate exhortations and severe warnings in the light of God's ultimate revelation through him. These exhortations are not parenthetical; they flow directly from the teaching passages. It's as though the Writer says, "Before I continue with my explanation, let's pause and consider the implications of what I've said so far."

³The historian Suetonius tells us that in AD 49, the Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome on account of conflict caused by Chrestus (sic), probably a reference to conflict between Jews and Jewish Christians in the capital (Acts 18:1-2).

Seeing Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King

In the first place, he portrays Jesus in all his magnificence, as one who shares the nature of God, but became fully human and lived among us. . As the promised Prophet, he is God's ultimate word to us (Deut 18:14-15). As the one who became genuinely human and identified with us completely, he is the priest par excellence. He is therefore able to represent us with empathy as the high priest who "truly meets our need." In fact, although there are parallels, his high priesthood far exceeds the imperfect high priesthood of the old order. For that reason he inaugurated the new covenant and became the author of eternal salvation. Not only does he perform the role of the high priest in mediating between God and us; he is himself the sacrifice. He is also clearly the promised Messiah-King of Psalms 2 and 110. He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven and is already "crowned with glory" (1:3; 2:9). As his followers, "we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28).

The Writer quotes passage after passage from the Old Testament to show that Jesus is superior to the prophets, the angels, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua. So convinced is he that Jesus is the point to which all of God's past revelation pointed that he can see a fuller meaning in many an Old Testament passage.

Under the heading of Christology, theologians speak of the Person and Work of Christ. Who he was (and is), and what he did (and does) are actually inseparable. And Hebrews magnificently links these two inter-dependent aspects of Christology. We cannot but be spiritually enriched as we study the book.

❖ HERE'S HOW HE GOES ABOUT IT

Certain words and phrases recur throughout the book.

"Superior" (or "greater" or "better") e.g. 1:4; 3:3; 7:4, 22; 8:6; 9:11, 23; 10:1; 11:40; 12:24.

"Therefore" e.g. 2:1; 3:1; 4:1, 11; 6:1; 10:19; 12:1, 12; 13:1.

The word almost always marks the intention of the Writer to spell out the practical implications of the truth he has been explaining.

"Let us" e.g. 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:22-25; 12:1.

In the original text these words are incorporated in the verb, thereby forming an even more powerful exhortation.

The alternation between teaching and application is particularly effective. If we joined all the "teaching" passages, we would have a step by step development of the theme of the great high priesthood of Jesus. At appropriate points the Writer,

pauses, suspends his argument for a moment, and applies the truth he has expounded. He delays for just long enough to make his point and then proceeds to develop his theme.

Sometimes warning and encouragement overlap a little. Teaching can also be an encouragement in itself, and sometimes an exhortation contains teaching (e.g. Chapter 11 on faith). It is, however, possible to see the movement from one to the other. The Writer's thinking flows beautifully so that the changes are never abrupt and there is a constructive development throughout the letter. As a matter of interest, there are approximately 130 verses of teaching, 100 of encouragement and 60 of warning.

Teaching and Application

The table below depicts the arrangement of the letter, showing how the writer alternates between teaching and application (warning and encouragement).

DOCTRINAL	PRACTICAL	
Teaching about the Person and Work of Christ	Application	
	Warning	Encouragement
1:1-14	2:1-4	
2:5-3:6	3:7-4:13	4:14-16
5:1-10	5:11-6:8	6:9-20
7:1-10:18		10:19-25
	10:26-31	10:32-12:11
	12:12-21	12:22-24
	12:25-29	
		13:1-17

Aim and Method

We may summarize the Writer's aim and method as follows:

Aim
<p>To establish Jewish Christians in the faith, weaning them away from the subtle but understandable temptation to return to Judaism, thus forsaking Christianity.</p>
Method
<p>On this basis, the readers are encouraged to "go on" in the faith "scorning the shame" which they experience on account of their stand.</p> <p>This is accomplished by teaching them about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, showing that he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. Not only is he superior to the great Old Testament figures; his work brings to completion the pictures of the Old Testament, providing "something better" for us.</p> <p>They are to "look forward", as their Savior did, to "the joy set before them".</p> <p>In view of the greatness of this salvation, the Writer warns them that disobedience and apostasy would be disastrous. He emphasizes that they have "better and lasting possessions." No matter how difficult their present position becomes, they must remember that faith, without which it is impossible to please God, "is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see". Instead of turning aside like their fathers in the wilderness through unbelief, they must align themselves with the great men and women of faith mentioned in chapter 11.</p> <p>They must remember that Jesus "suffered outside the city gate." We must therefore be prepared to "go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here, we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come."</p>

Schedule of Sermons/Studies

07/09/08	Heb 1:1-4; 7:23-28; 13:11-14	So What? (How this ancient letter can help you today)
14/09/08	Heb 1:1-2:4	What More Can God Say?
21/09/08	Heb 2:5-18	A Man on the Throne of the Universe
28/10/08	Heb 3:1-4:13	"Carpe Diem"
05/10/08	Heb 4:14-5:10	The Throne of Grace
12/10/08	Heb 5:11-6:12	Get Out of the Danger Zone
19/10/08	Heb 6:13-20	Just How Sure Can We Be?
26/10/08	Heb 7:1-28	The Permanent Priesthood
02/11/08	Heb 8:1-13	What's So New about the New Covenant?
09/11/08	Heb 9:1-28	The Supreme Sacrifice
09/11p.m.	Heb 10:1-18	Shadows
16/11p.m.	Heb 10:19-25	Full Assurance of Faith
23/11p.m.	Heb 10:26-39	Taking Heart from a Solemn Warning!
11/01/09	Heb 11:1-6	Faith: Not <i>Irrational</i> but <i>Supra-rational</i> ?
18/01/09	Heb 11:7-22	Doing the Ridiculous (?)
25/01/09	Heb 11:23-31	Risking it. Really?
08/02/09	Heb 11:32-12:3	Victory, No Matter What
15/02/pm	Heb 12:4-13	Loving Discipline: The Insignia of Legitimacy
22/01/pm	Heb 12:14-29	Higher Privileges--Greater Responsibility
01/03/pm	Heb 13:1-25	Attuned to the Coming City