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Lesson 1

Background and Survey

Hebrews, an anonymous book, is as a rare gem among a king's treasures; Christ's glory shines from its pages. Its vocabulary, style, and composition are bright and colorful so as to deserve the highest of accolades given it. The epistle is the best commentary on the Old Testament—interpreting its history, explaining the fulfillment of its prophecy, and revealing the ultimate purpose of all its institutions of worship.

Hebrews is the Holy Spirit's grand portrait of Christ with the Old Testament as its background. "Consider Jesus" is the urgent appeal of the epistle. Christians today in danger of backsliding, looking with wistful eye back to the things of the world from which they have been delivered, have God's clear warning and exhortation in Hebrews. No Christian is immune to the threat of lukewarmness and apathy, and Hebrews speaks about these. The book is contemporary.

In this opening lesson we will study the background of Hebrews and then make an overall survey of the epistle itself. The lesson closes with a brief consideration of the practical application of Hebrews to the present day.

I. BACKGROUND

A. Place in the Bible

The book of Hebrews occupies an important place in the Scriptures. It is the Holy Spirit's commentary on the Pentateuch, especially the book of Leviticus. Hebrews explains the meaning and significance of the whole Jewish ritual. It makes clear that all the ceremonial law as given in the Old Testament, such as the offerings and the ministrations of the priests, were but types pointing forward to Christ, the *great* sacrifice for sin, the *true* Priest, the

one Mediator between God and man. In Hebrews we are taught that we have passed from the realm of shadows into that of reality, that in Christ we have the fulfillment of all the earlier types.

No other book in the New Testament helps us to understand the *present* ministry of Christ as does the book of Hebrews. Some Christians know little about Christ's present work for His people. Hebrews shows us that just as God led the Israelites from Egypt through the barren wilderness, protecting them from danger, supplying all their needs, teaching them, training them, and eventually bringing them into the rich land of Canaan, so Christ is at this present time helping His children, by intercession, inspiration, instruction, and indwelling, to enter into the spiritual rest land of abundant living, a taste of the heavenly glories to come.

If Paul wrote Hebrews, we have in this book the substance and form of the apostle's "reasonings" with the Jews in his synagogue addresses and as he talked with them in the marketplaces (see Acts 17:1-2, 16-17; 18:1, 4).

B. Title

The earliest manuscripts have the simple title *pros Hebraiouis* ("to Hebrews"). The title was probably not a part of the original epistle and no doubt was added later by the church.

C. Date Written

The interval between A.D. 65 and 70 may be accepted as the time when Hebrews was written. A date before A.D. 70 is based on the fact that in A.D. 70 Jerusalem with its Temple was destroyed by Titus. Hebrews gives the clear impression that the Temple was still standing when the epistle was written (cf. 8:4-5; 10:11), and indeed there is the hint that the removal of the Temple services was not too far distant (read 12:27). If the Temple had already been destroyed, some mention of it would surely have been made by the writer, since one of its main points was that the Jewish institutions were intended to be superseded by a more perfect system.

That the epistle was written as late as A.D. 65 is supported by the observation that the readers were second generation Christians (2:1-4; cf. 5:12), whose leaders had passed away (13:7, ASV*).

**American Standard Version.*

D. Author

The conclusion of Origen on this subject is the classic statement “Who wrote the epistle in truth God alone knows.”

Various authors have been suggested. The following list shows some of the possibilities:

1. *Paul*. Based on (1) affinities in language and concepts between Hebrews and other Pauline epistles; (2) centrality of the Person and work of Christ in Hebrews, as in other Pauline epistles; (3) Paul’s association with Timothy (cf. 13:23); (4) the “Pauline” salutation: “Grace be with you all” (13:25).

2. *A co-worker of Paul*. This view accounts for both Pauline and non-Pauline traits of the epistle. Apollos, Luke, and Barnabas are names suggested, most of the evidence pointing to Apollos. Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew (Acts 18:24); worked closely with Paul toward the end of Paul’s ministry (Titus 3:13); was well grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures; and was an enthusiastic teacher-preacher (read Acts 18:24-26).

3. *Others*. Least likely authors, but suggested for various reasons, include Aquila, Silas, Philip the deacon, and Clement of Rome.

E. Group Addressed

Whatever is known today of the original readers is derived from the epistle itself. They were from a single congregation of Hebrew Christians, living somewhere in the Roman world (e.g., 2:3; 5:11-12; 6:9-10; cf. 13:23-24). Some think Jerusalem was where the church was located because of the emphasis on the Temple and its institutions. This view is not without problems, however. Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch in Syria, and Ephesus are also suggested as the home of these Hebrew Christians. There is strong support for the view that Rome was the home of this congregation. That there was an influential group of Jewish Christians in Rome is confirmed by the Romans epistle (e.g., Rom. 9-11), and by Acts’ record of Paul’s contacts when in prison at Rome (see Acts 28:17-31). The salutation of Hebrews 13:24 could be of Christians originally from Italy sending back greetings to their friends.

More important than knowing where the readers lived *geographically* is knowing how they fared *spiritually*. The many strong warnings of the epistle indicate that these Hebrew Christians were in a backslidden condition, in danger of apostasy from Christ back to the former ways of their allegiance to Judaism. Faith, conviction, and enthusiasm were waning (3:6, 9, 12, 14); and prayer, public worship, and the Scriptures were being neglected

(12:12; 10:25; 2:1). The Christians by now should have been teachers of others but were still in need of being taught the ABCs of the gospel (5:12).

One circumstance had much to do with the Hebrew Christians' turning back in their Christian walk. That was the threat of persecution from without, with its intimidation to surrender. Earlier these Christians had withstood persecution (10:32-34). But now they were beginning to weaken. Of this, R.C.H. Lenski writes:

The Jewish Christians stood unshaken during the terror of 64 [year of Nero's burning of Rome]. . . . But now, since Peter was dead, since even Paul, their spiritual father, had been removed, since Christianity was permanently branded as criminal, since there was no other apostle to stiffen their courage, some of these Jewish Christians began to weaken. Voices were raised which advocated a return to Jewry. If their synagogues became Jewish as they had been a few years ago they would be safe like the other Jewish synagogues, for Judaism continued to remain a religion that was legally approved in Rome and in the empire.¹

F. Purposes

Someone has said that Hebrews was written to “rekindle a dampened fire.” A fainting spirit, dying enthusiasm, and dullness of hearing were the emergency of the hour. The letter of Hebrews was the response, sounding forth in this double chord: (1) teaching and (2) warning and exhortation.

1. *Teaching*. The best antidote for the poison of falsehood and unbelief is the positive declaration of revealed truth. The opening verses of Hebrews disclose that the epistle's main teaching is about three vital subjects:

a. *Revelation* (“*God . . . hath . . . spoken*”²). The written revelation of God over the centuries has come in two groups: Old Testament and New Testament. Hebrews shows the relationships between these two testaments, or covenants. And beyond the written Word is the living Word.

b. *A person* (“*by his Son*”). Hebrews is the most comprehensive New Testament book portraying Christ as Son of God and Son of Man. “Consider . . . Jesus” (3:1) is a key phrase in the epistle. How would a better knowledge of who Jesus was help the Hebrew Christians in their spiritual plight? Andrew Murray answers: “He [the author] unceasingly places their weakness and Christ's

1. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James*, p. 21.

2. See Heb. 1:1-4.

person side by side: he is sure that, if they but know Christ, all will be well.”³

c. A *work* (“*who sat down*”). Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, and the continuing ministries as Priest and King, pervade the book. Concerning sacrifice, one has written of Hebrews, “Tear a page and it will bleed.”

2. *Warning and exhortation*. Warning and exhortation appear throughout the epistle, aimed at the spiritual condition of the readers. The warnings concern just recompense for sinning against God. The exhortations are positive appeals and encouragements to appropriate the power and privileges of God’s children, and incentives to press on to fuller stature as Christians.

There are five main warning sections in Hebrews:

- a. Take heed (2:1-4).
- b. Don’t miss the rest (3:7–4:13).
- c. Beware sloth and apostasy (5:11–6:20).
- d. Beware willful sinning (10:26-31).
- e. Beware disobeying Christ (12:25-29).

Exhortations appear throughout the epistle (e.g., 4:1, 11, 14, 16), but the main hortatory section begins at 10:19. Observe, for example, the phrase “Let us” at 10:22, 23, 24; 12:1, 28; 13:13, 15.

II. SURVEY

Having learned something of the occasion and purpose of Hebrews, we now come to that phase of study that involves a general overview of the book. It is important to see the writing first in its broad and large movements before analyzing each small part. Such a procedure produces benefits later by giving direction, context, balance, color, emphasis, and encouragement for the analytical studies of the individual parts.

Before reading the following pages and studying survey Chart A, make an independent survey study of your own. Here are some suggestions:

1. Make a cursory reading of Hebrews, in one sitting if possible, to get main impressions and the “feel” of the book. Record your impressions.
2. What words and phrases stand out after this reading?
3. What appears to be the main theme of the book? What are some of the subjects discussed to support the theme?
4. Compare the beginning and end of the book.

3. Andrew Murray, *The Holiest of All*, p. 23.

5. Where in the book does doctrine give place to the practical? (Practical sections are recognized by the prominence of commands and exhortations.)

6. Secure a title from the Bible text for each segment shown on survey Chart A, and record these on the chart. (A segment is a unit of study, often the length of a chapter, composed of a group of paragraphs. A segment title is a word or short phrase taken from the Bible text, which is a clue to the main content of that segment.)

7. Look for groupings of segments according to similar subject, and try making a simple outline of the epistle.

8. Assign a title to the book of Hebrews that accords with the theme determined above.

After you have completed the above exercises, study the remaining parts of this lesson.

A. Main Theme of Hebrews

The main theme of Hebrews may be stated thus: Knowing how great our High Priest Jesus is should lift us from spiritual lethargy to vital Christian maturity. Stated another way: The antidote for backsliding is a growing personal knowledge of Jesus.

The main Person of Hebrews is Jesus. The author of the epistle is convinced that all that is necessary to restrain from apostasy is to hold up Christ in all the dignity and beauty of His person and the importance of His work. It might be said that Hebrews consists of a series of pictures of our Lord. We behold Him in His deity, His humanity, His sacrificial work, His priestly office, and His kingly glory. After a careful study of Hebrews, one must feel better acquainted with Christ than ever before.

B. Subjects Treated

Various subjects are discussed in the epistle in support of the author's main theme. Some of these are listed below. Examine the list, and keep the subjects in mind as you study Hebrews. At a later time you may want to make special studies of these topics:

Person of Christ—His humanity and deity

Work of Christ—for example, atonement and intercession

Old and new covenants—the relation between the two

Sin—especially the sins of unbelief and disobedience

Word of God—written (Bible) and living (Christ)

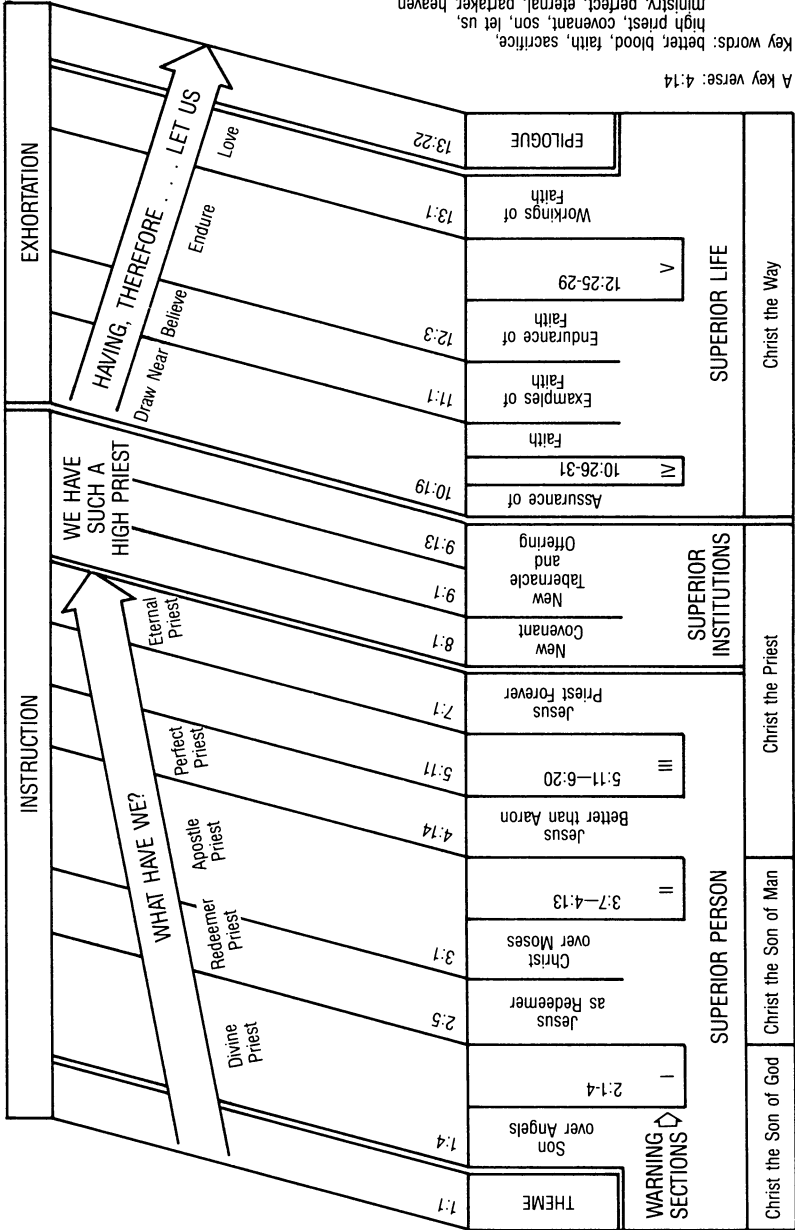
Faith—for salvation and for Christian living

Testing and discipline—their purposes and rewards

Christian growth—the marks of spiritual maturity

Chart A

HEBREWS CONSIDER JESUS, OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST



Old Testament types fulfilled in New Testament antitypes Purposes of the Levitical ritual law

C. Key Verse and Key Words

Various verses in Hebrews could be cited as key verses representing the epistle's main theme. One such verse is 4:14: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession."

Hebrews also has many key words. The word "better" is one of the more prominent ones, for the epistle presents a series of contrasts between the *good* things of Judaism and the *better* things of Christ. The key word "better" suggests the approach of the writer of Hebrews. In seeking to restrain the Jewish Christians from apostasy, he demonstrates step by step that Christ is superior to the prophets through whom God had spoken in times past; superior to angels, through whom their law had been administered; superior to Moses, their great leader; superior to Joshua, who led them into Canaan; and superior to Aaron, their high priest. Throughout the book the writer's plan is to introduce, one after the other, Old Testament characters and institutions and then to present Christ and show how far superior He is to any of those.

Other key words are: perfect, eternal, partaker, heaven(ly), blood, faith, sacrifice, covenant, Son, high priest, let us, ministry, love. Refer to an exhaustive concordance to see the appearances of these words in the epistle.

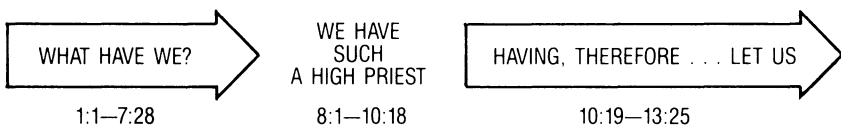
D. Structure of the Epistle

When various topical studies are outlined on a survey chart, the structure of a book's composition becomes evident. Survey Chart A of Hebrews shows something of the organization of the epistle. Study the chart carefully, then read the following observations:

1. There are thirteen chapters in Hebrews. This survey chart shows thirteen segments (not all beginning at the first verse of a chapter) plus an introduction (theme, 1:1-3) and epilogue (13:22-25).

2. Basically, the epistle has two main divisions: Instruction (1:1-10:18) and Exhortation (10:19-13:25).

3. Study the key outline:



a. *What have we?* (1:1–7:28). The suggestion for this question really comes from 8:1a: “Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have . . .” In other words, the author is adding up, as it were, in chapters 1-7, that which the believer has, in answer to a question, “What have we?” One can visualize the Hebrew Christians saying, “Why shouldn’t we go back to Judaism—what do we have for being Christians?” The author of Hebrews responds, “You ask, ‘What have we?’ Let me show you what we have!”

b. *We have such a high priest* (8:1–10:18). The phrase “We have such a high priest” comes from 8:1. Read the verse again. The author is saying that we have in Jesus a *High Priest*. But the emphasis is on the word “such.” (In the original Greek the word appears first, for emphasis.) The author has shown this superiority in the previous section, chapters 1-7. Observe the outline on Chart A showing Jesus the divine Priest, Redeemer Priest, Apostle Priest, perfect Priest, eternal Priest. All this adds up to the sum “We have *such* a high priest.”

While 8:1 refers back to the “arithmetic” exercise of chapters 1-7, it also introduces this middle section 8:1–10:18. In this section the author continues to show the superior priestly ministry of Jesus (e.g., 8:6; 9:11), and he also shows in detail the workings of that ministry.

c. *Having therefore . . . let us* (10:19–13:25). Read 10:19-21 for the source of this phrase. Observe the phrase “let us” in 10:22-24. The practical, hortatory division of Hebrews thus begins at 10:19. The exhortations to Christians are all based on the blessed truth that “we have *such* a high priest.”

4. Observe the other outlines on the chart that divide Hebrews into three main parts. Keep these also in mind as you proceed with analysis later on.

5. Note where the five warning sections appear on Chart A. The boxes are left blank on the chart in order for you to record the content in your own words.

6. The outline shown at the bottom of the chart could be worded as follows:

Christ, the Son of God—His deity (1:1–2:4)

Christ, the Son of Man—His humanity (2:5–4:13)

Christ, the Priest—His work (4:14–10:18)

Christ, the way—His leadership (10:19–13:25)

7. Observe on Chart A the title “Consider Jesus, Our Great High Priest.” In the course of your study in Hebrews try to arrive at a title of your own.

E. Other Characteristics of Hebrews

Hebrews has been referred to as the Fifth Gospel because it tells of Jesus' finished work on earth and His continuing work in heaven. The writer uses the Old Testament Scriptures throughout, making at least eighty-six direct references, traceable to at least one hundred Old Testament passages. In referring to its style, T. Rees says, "Hebrews begins like an essay, proceeds like a sermon, and ends as a letter."⁴

The epistle abounds in contrasts. Here are some of them:

Son and angels (1:4-2:4)

Son and Moses (3:1-6)

Canaan rest and God's rest (3:12-4:13)

Christ and Aaron (4:14-5:10)

Spiritual infancy and maturity (5:11-14)

Apostasy and faithfulness (5:11-6:20)

Old and new covenants (8:1-13)

Offerings of the law and offering of Christ (9:1-10:18)

Faith and sight (11:1-40)

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion (12:18-29)

Hebrews is often compared with Romans. Hebrews presents the Person of salvation; Romans presents the way of salvation. Hebrews focuses on the ceremonial law of the Old Testament; Romans, on the moral law of all time. "Romans moves from law to grace, and Hebrews, from shadow to substance."⁵

III. APPLYING HEBREWS TO TODAY

The application of Scripture is universal and timeless. Hebrews was written originally to correct a spiritual condition of backsliding in a congregation of believers living in the first century. But God caused this epistle to be included in the New Testament canon so that its message could be profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and edification of believers for all the centuries to come. The truths that it presents apply not to one age only, but to all ages; not to one community only, but to the universal church. The same warnings and exhortations that Christians needed in the first century are needed by Christians in this generation.

Now, as then, there are in the visible church those who are professors and yet not possessors. Among those who are believers, some are out of fellowship with Christ and in a backslidden

4. T. Rees, "Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, vol. 2, p. 1355.

5. John Phillips, *Exploring the Scriptures*, p. 262.

condition. Today, as in the first century, Satan is tempting Christians to turn away from simple faith in Christ, to depreciate the glory of the Person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, to compare favorably other religions with Christianity. This great epistle to the Hebrews is the answer to all such errors. Hebrews proves that Christianity is incomparably superior to Judaism. The epistle shows that it is folly for a Christian to go back to the former ways of his life or religion, because the immeasurable satisfaction and blessing of living in fellowship with such a Person as Jesus *cannot be found at any other source*. “Consider Jesus!” is the appeal of the book of Hebrews to all Christians.

Beginning with the next lesson, you will be analyzing each smaller part of Hebrews. As you study, be alert to any practical lesson—big or small—that you can apply to your own life to help you grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ your Lord.