

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Chapter 34

Hebrews - Overview

The older I get, the more I treasure each day. Certainly some days are better than others, and occasionally there's a day I really don't want to repeat. But each day is a gift, and I see that more now.

Bono, the gifted lyricist and front man for the band U2 wrote, "Baby slow down. The end is not as far as the start."¹ I can do the math and know that to be true for me. Many reading this may feel the same. Knowing this truth may be part of the reason each day seems to grow in value to me. I want the most of the days I have left. They are precious.

The night before I typed this, I was trying to get some exercise jogging the Katy Trail near downtown Dallas. I was listening to a playlist of Hillsong worship favorites that my daughters introduced me to. The songs move me spiritually as my feet move me physically. Somewhere in the midst of my run/listen, the thoughts of the worship converged with my thoughts of each day's value. It left me thankful and a bit amazed.

Here was the root thought that prompted the amazement. I am 55, and I wholeheartedly believe in a faith that has been a part of me since I was old enough to make my own decisions regarding such things. I well remember high school with songs that moved my heart in devotion and trust for God. I remember sermons from early teenage years that still direct my life.

One might think I would outgrow this. One might think that the faith of a young teenager has no more room in the life of a grown man who has accumulated five decades of knowledge and experience, who has found a place in the professional world that *could* be all-consuming, if allowed. One might think that I would outgrow the faith of a child.

Yet here I was, in trial in Dallas, Texas, running for exercise, listening and worshipping the God of my youth. I was reminded of a parable told by Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago. In Matthew 13, Jesus told of a sower who spread seed for his crop. Some of the seeds fell along a path, and birds quickly ate those. Some of the seeds fell into shallow soil that covered rock, and though the seed sprouted, it quickly wilted once the sun came out. Some fell among some thorns that sprouted among

¹ Admittedly most think he is singing, "Baby slow down, the end is not as fun as the start," but I'm sticking with the way I hear the lyrics! See for yourself listening to "*The Original of the Species*" on the *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* project.

the seeds and choked out the crop. A fourth group of the seeds fell in good soil, grew, and produced a bountiful crop.

I don't want to be in the first three groups. I don't want a faith that fades away under the "education" of the world, under the "opportunities" of the world. I want to grow and bear fruit. Each day is valuable, and I know that. I want to live that way to the very end, and that involves walking with the same God that took my hand so many decades ago.

This occurs to me in this first of four lessons in Hebrews. Hebrews is a New Testament book² that was targeting those who were thinking of leaving their faith in Jesus as Messiah in favor of returning to the Judaism of their youth. This is understandable if we remember certain things apparent from other scriptures. First, many believers thought Jesus would return soon, but as days, weeks, months, and years passed with no second coming, second guessing must have occurred. Similarly, Jesus clearly taught that the Temple itself would be destroyed and that had not happened as of the writing of Hebrews (though it would happen soon in 70 A.D.). These events must have caused ridicule among the Jewish believers as well as questioning about the truth of their faith.

Hebrews is written to reaffirm to Jewish doubters the central truths about the doctrine of Christ, the truth of his kingdom and ministry, and the need to hold fast in faith. The writer does this by demonstrating that the change from the Levitical system to the Christian system was predicted in Scripture itself, both as to the priesthood and sacrifices as well as the sanctuary and covenant itself. The book is a wakeup call to understand exactly who Jesus is and why there is no turning back.

In this first overview lesson, we will look at the book as a whole, using the follow-up lessons to consider some more subtle lessons of the book. One logical way to divide Hebrews is:

- Christ is superior to Angels (1:1 - 2:18).
- Christ is superior to Moses (3:1 – 4:13).
- Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14 – 7:28).
- Christ's covenant is superior (8).
- Christ's sanctuary is superior (9:1 – 12).
- Christ's sacrifice is superior (9:13 – 10:18).
- Therefore, persevere and live right (10:19 – 13:25).

² Scholars are uncertain about the precise nature of Hebrews as a document. I agree with those who see it as an early church sermon, of sorts, that was put into written form as a testimony to Christ as well as an admonition to his followers to hold to their faith. The nature of the book, its authorship, and its place in the canon will be dealt with in a later lesson.

TEXT

Christ is Superior to Angels (1:1 – 2:18)

Hebrews begins by setting out Jesus as God's final word to mankind. Previously, God spoke through prophets in various ways, but in the "last days."³ God spoke through Jesus, his son. Jesus is the exact radiance and representation of God himself. Jesus provided for the purification of sins and then sat at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. Sitting indicates that the work of Jesus is completed. There is nothing left to do to provide forgiveness of sins (1:1-4).

This is the Jesus that is superior to angels, in name and deed. Lest there be any doubt, the readers are reminded that God never called angels his "son." The angels themselves worshipped Jesus and were servants to Jesus. Jesus has the throne that endures forever. Jesus, from the foundations of the world, is the one who will never change, who will outlast all of creation. God never speaks of the angels as he does of Jesus. Angels are not Messiah. They are creatures that minister to the children of God through Jesus, to those who inherit salvation (1:5-14).

The readers are urged to pay careful attention. We have in Jesus a salvation announced by the Lord, a salvation necessary as the scriptures and angels themselves bear witness. For no one is in a position to approach God on his or her own merit. Not only do we have the witness of salvation in Christ from those who saw it firsthand, but we also have confirmation by the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit as well (2:1-4).

There is no dispute that for a time, Jesus was by all appearances made lower than angels. Jesus suffered a death (which angels do not suffer), but this lowering of Jesus, this taste of death on our behalf, is actually the proof that he is greater than the angels. It is the victorious crown of glory and honor that he wears. He is not only a hero who gave his life for others, but he is also a conquering hero, who lives with everything now under his feet, even death itself (2:5- 9).

Here, we see Jesus as not only the great ruling king of glory and salvation, but also as our leader. He brings us before God just as he bore our sin unto death. This means that through Jesus, we are now children of God, freed from the devil and his power, free from the fear of death itself. Jesus, who suffered and atoned for our sins, is our help in ways no other could help us. Name an angel of whom those truths can be said! There is none, for Jesus is greater than all the angels (2:10-18).

³ Biblically speaking, the days after Christ's resurrection are the "last days" whether in 60AD or 2016.

At this point, one must ask the doubting Hebrew Christians the question: Why would you want to turn from this Jesus and return to Judaism and the Old Covenant?

Christ is superior to Moses (3:1- 4:13)

The Jews should take note: Jesus is not only greater than the angels, but he is also greater than Moses himself. Moses, the great lawgiver, the redeemer of Israel from slavery to Pharaoh, the man who saw the trail of God's glory, is less than Jesus. Certainly Moses, like Jesus, was faithful in his mission and purpose to God. However, Moses was a faithful servant. Jesus was a faithful son. Moses served in God's house; Jesus rules and presides over God's house (3:1-6).

So, the Jews should remember the experience of the followers of Moses. As the people hardened their hearts and rebelled against Moses' leadership, they lost their chance to live in the Promised Land. How much worse off would we be if we failed to follow and honor the leadership of Jesus? Before any Jew would abandon their Christian faith and return to Judaism, they would well heed the experience of their forefathers who wanted to abandon Moses and return to Egypt! (3:7-19).

Quoting scripture, the writer explains that God has a rest – a time – when labor and working DOES NOT OCCUR, and this rest is for Christians. Christ has done the work; Christ is seated; the time of rest before God is here. Those who hear and come before God in faith enter that rest. We no longer work for salvation. We no longer work to please God or merit his favor. We have rest before him. Such is the promise of the word of God.

This word of God is true and accurate. It is sharper than even a sword, able to penetrate and pierce the deepest things, able to judge even the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Nothing hides from God or his word. He sees and knows all. There should be no turning back! Jesus is greater than Moses and worthy of our loyalty and allegiance without wavering or faulting (4:1-13).

While noting the portion of chapter 4 that finishes up the author's comparison of Christ to Moses, we have yet to emphasize a subset of the comparison. Moses took the people into the Promised Land. Moses did so also taking the commandments from Sinai, including the commandment to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest and holy to God.

From this story, the writer of Hebrews makes two points we should emphasize. First, as we noted last week, those who have the Promise Land need faith to enter that land. Just as for Moses where the unbelievers never entered the Promised Land, so it is with faith in Christ. Believing and trusting Christ bring us before God and into the promise. So, no believer should ever contemplate leaving Jesus. Second, the

walk we have with God in Jesus is one of rest. This point deserves a little extra attention.

In Jesus, we have entered into God's rest. The rest reminds us of the original Sabbath found in creation itself. In the creation account, we read "on the seventh day God rested from all his work" (Heb. 4:4, Gen 2:2). The work was done. God could have ended the week, but God chose to add a seventh day to signify rest and emphasize that work was over. From these actions, we see God forecasting not only a lifestyle we should adopt in our world system (work? yes, but rest also), but also a foreshadowing of God's work with us.

For God did not leave us alone after creation. He has worked throughout history on our behalf in many ways -- most notably as our Savior redeemer. In Moses, God brought about this redemption from slavery in Egypt, taking people to a promised land that is symbolized by the Sabbath rest itself. But in Jesus, look how much greater the redemption, the Promised Land, and the rest.

In Jesus, we have redemption from Satan and sin itself. We are redeemed from sin and death (sin's curse). The salvation we have is one of rest. We do not work to merit it, nor do we work to keep it. Through our faith in Jesus, we have a rest in our salvation efforts. We have entered into the eternal land of promise.

Even Jesus himself was pictured at the beginning of Hebrews as sitting at God's right hand. Jesus has finished his work on our behalf and rests before God. SO, here we have a rest that exceeds that of the Jewish faith -- again, another reason not to leave Jesus for mainline Judaism.

Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14-7:28)

The writer of Hebrews compares and contrasts the role of the Jewish High Priest to that of Christ in several different ways. The Jewish High Priest was the one person in the entire world who was allowed to go before God in the Holy of Holies and offer a sacrifice for the people's sins. The High Priest was allowed to do this only once a year and with very strict requirements. Most notably, the High Priest had to first offer a sacrifice for himself and his own sins. Without first himself being purified, he could never offer purification for the sins of the people. In a way, this was actually a positive, for it showed that the High Priest had a certain level of sympathy for the people for he in fact was as sinful as they!

In Christ, we have a High Priest that exceeds those on earth. Christ became a man and knows temptation, he is able to understand and relate to us, but Christ was never a sinner. Therefore, he doesn't approach God having to first purify himself. Christ is already pure. So, Christ doesn't merely go to the Holy of Holies once a year. Christ ascended into the very real heavenly presence of God to deal with our sin.

This should give us great confidence when we approach God.

The Christian Jews did not miss out on anything when their relatives were celebrating the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Christians did not need to feel anxiety or worry as the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies for the annual sacrifice for the nation. The Christians could rejoice knowing their High Priest never went into a symbolic room in an earthly temple that symbolized heaven and God's throne. Jesus went into the very real throne room of God and straight before God in all his glory. There, Jesus laid our sacrifice – his own body as the slain lamb – and there our atonement was made.

In this way, Jesus became the source of real atonement and real salvation. This is a priestly role that exceeded those of the Jews. The writer compares it to the priestly role of Melchizedek who was not Jewish. Melchizedek is the priest before whom Abraham, and through Abraham all Jews, bowed and worshipped. That is our Jesus and High Priest.

The writer uses this as a time to really encourage the readers not to leave their faith. In the sixth chapter, the writer puts this thought into strong language that challenges many who hold the doctrine that once you are saved, your salvation cannot be lost. In Heb. 6:4-6, the writer notes,

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

This passage poses several avenues of interpretation. One option is that Christians can actually reach a decision to turn their back on God and lose their salvation. A second option is that the passage is referencing people who came under the “Christian influence” but never really became Christians, losing what (I guess) they never really had! A third option, which certainly seems to fit the context, is that the writer was not actually writing about the doctrine of “once saved, always saved.”

Instead, the writer was telling those considering abdicating the Christian fellowship for mainline Judaism that doing so is wrong. It is an immature response that has no future. Faith is not something to move back or forth on. Christ died once and that was enough. The Christians need to press on to maturity in Jesus, not return to Judaism for a season and then return back to Jesus. Christianity is not a revolving door where you may enter and leave as you like. It is a new state of being in which you remain.

In this sense, the writer urges the Christian Jews to continue in faith “and patience” (6:12). Patience was key for them. The promises of God were not void. The failure of them to see fruition of much of what God spoke through Jesus was a question of timing, not mistake. Time would show God faithful on all accounts. “It is impossible for God to lie” (6:18). Just as Jesus entered into the sanctuary itself, into the real Holy of Holies, we have actual promises of blessing and redemption from God himself.

This is a covenant relationship that is deeper than anything the Jews could have or understand, just as the priestly relationship between Jesus and God exceeds that of the Jewish High Priest and God. Hence, Jesus only needed one sacrifice to offer God, as opposed to the sacrifices the human High Priests had to offer year in and year out (7:26-27).

Christ's Covenant is Superior (8)

At the start of chapter eight, the writer draws a big conclusion to what he has thus far said before going any further:

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man” (8:1- 2).

You won't see Jesus serving as high priest on earth. Others did that inferior function. We do not physically see Jesus for he functions before the very throne room of God. The readers are reminded that the earthly temple “is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (8:5). In fact, that is why Moses was given such exacting instructions on how to build the tabernacle. No changes were to be made. The earthly tabernacle had elements and parts that held eternal symbols and significance.

The covenant being administered under the earthly system is similarly an inferior copy of the covenant we enjoy in Christ. Prophets told this truth long ago. The writer quotes Jeremiah 31:31- 34 where God declared that a time would come when God would “make a new covenant with the house of Israel.” The covenant was different. “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them” (Heb. 8:8-9).

So, what is the difference in the covenant? The difference is night and day. The difference is between being a nation for God and being the children of God. The

difference is between seeing God outside and having God inside. Hebrews quotes Jeremiah:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Heb. 8:10-12; Jer. 31:33-34).

Which should the Jewish Christians embrace? Which covenant is superior? Lest there be any doubt, the writer adds that the new covenant makes the old one "obsolete!" The old covenant was obsolete and aging and will one day disappear. The new covenant is everlasting.

Christ's Sanctuary is Superior (9:1-9:12).

In the previous part of the writing, Christ was shown to be bringing a superior covenant to that of historical Judaism. This promised new and better covenant was one that Jeremiah had clearly foretold. This covenant was a permanent and everlasting covenant. Now starting in Chapter 9, we read about how the worship and sacrifice of the new covenant greatly exceeds the efficacy and quality of the old. Moses originally laid out the old covenant worship in a moving tabernacle. We remember that the temple as the locus of worship did not come into Judaism until much later. But much like the temple, which the readers would have known, the Tabernacle was set out with a holy place and a holier place within the holy place. The holy place had its adornments and items for use. The holier place, called the "Holy of Holies," contained the Ark of the Covenant along with a jar of manna, Aaron's staff, the Ten Commandments, and an altar of incense. The priest would come into the Holy of Holies and approach the Ark of the Covenant once a year, only after offering blood sacrificed for himself and the people.

The ark itself had the earthly accoutrements of God and his people enclosed. These were the commandments, manna, and staff referenced earlier. These were contained within the ark below the "atonement cover" or "mercy seat." Then, above the mercy seat were the angels (cherubim) and beyond that the dwelling of God. While the writer does not dwell on the significance of this layout, he does emphasize that it was significant. For this layout was one of a covenant. As the Ark of the Covenant, this layout set up a working relationship between God and his people rooted in the covenant entered into on Mount Sinai.

For example, the atonement cover was a slab of pure gold which covered the items

of the people (staff, manna, tablets) from the holy presence of God and his angels. This cover was where the priest would annually sprinkle blood for a sacrifice for the sins of the people. From the inception of the covenant, the teaching was clear that a blood sacrifice was required to cover the sins of the people.

Christ's Sacrifice is Superior (9:13 – 10:18)

Because these sacrifices were annual, and because the priest (and only the High Priest) could enter the Holy of Holies only once a year, the readers should recognize that the sacrifices themselves were never really adequate for covering the sins of the people. If they had been sufficient, then the people could enjoy the presence of God themselves. But, all did not enjoy the presence. A year later, the High Priest would need to go through the ritual again.

In this light, we are to consider the sacrifice of Christ. Christ never had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins before entering before God. Christ himself was as pure as God and living before him righteously before Calvary. And so, Christ brought a sacrifice for the people that was pure and appropriate – a sacrifice that truly was justice for the sins of the people. Christ brought himself as the pure slab of gold that lay between the people and the holy presence of God. The blood of Christ brought forth a new covenant. A physical ark in a man-built temple or tabernacle did not show the new covenant. The new covenant was a true and everlasting sacrifice that was laid between man and the real throne room of the Almighty. It brought a salvation once and for all to God's people (Chapter 9:1-28).

In the first 18 verses of chapter 10, the writer lays additional emphasis on the fact that old sacrifices obviously were not what God ultimately wanted or needed to satisfy eternal justice. If the old sacrifices had been enough, then the sacrifices would not have had to be repeated. In fact, you would not have seen the priests standing daily performing their ritual sacrifices for the people. These were sacrifices that were beyond the annual sacrifice in the Holy of Holies mentioned in chapter 9. The mere fact that the priest had daily duties offering sacrifices shows that the sacrifices themselves were of little use beyond symbolism and obedience.

Christ, on the other hand, was the real meaning of the symbolism behind daily sacrifices as well. As a priest, Christ offered a real sacrifice that lasts forever. Christ doesn't rise each day to perform duties of sacrifice like the Jewish priests. Christ did his work, sacrificed once for all, and then sat down at the right hand of God. This was the promise given by the prophets all along.

Therefore Persevere and Live Right (10:19-13:25)

What does this mean for us? Several things:

- We ourselves can draw near to God with clean consciences and souls, washed in the purist sacrifice possible.
- We should never consider abdicating Jesus and our faith for any other life.
- We should spend our energies with each other helping each other grow in a lifestyle consistent with our faith and covenant. This includes meeting together at church and at other times.
- We should shun sin and try to live holy lives, recognizing our sin was the reason we lived separated from God destined for eternal death absent the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf.

The readers were reminded how resolute they were in the earlier days of their Christian walk. In the midst of ridicule, insult, and persecution, they held onto Jesus as Messiah. Just because the promised second coming had not yet occurred was no cause to return to their Pre-Christ religious practices. They should recognize the faithfulness and patience of God and persevere.

Hebrews 11 is a chapter famous for its recounting of the pillars of Judaism as models of living by faith. It starts with a call to a life of faith. In a famous passage, it begins, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (11:1). This passage is used so often that we almost fail to remember the flow of thought that produced it!

The writer spent many chapters (and certainly the last concluding verses) exhorting the readers to understand that God’s failure to return, yet His failure to destroy the temple (if written before 70AD), his failure to do many things promised, was NOT a real failure. It was merely a matter of timing. God would not and could not lie. His promises were absolute. The occurrences were awaiting his time for fulfillment. They had not yet happened; but they would in time. This is the vein in which we read that faith is being sure of what we do not yet see. It applies to those promises mentioned earlier, but it applies also in the much bigger picture of life. It is here the writer pushes us to understand with repeated biblical examples.

Faith gives us understanding that the universe itself was a creation of God. Abel offered a better sacrifice by faith. Enoch left earth for God because of a deep faith that set him right before God. Noah had faith or never would have built the ark and survived the flood. Without his faith, Abraham never would have left Ur for the Promised Land. Similarly, it was faith that caused Abraham and Sarah to conceive and bear the father of the Jewish race at an impossibly late age. This same faith brought Abraham to a point where he even was willing to sacrifice Isaac, trusting

that God would raise Isaac from the dead before God would lie about a promise. Jacob lived and died by faith as well. Joseph and Moses, these famous stalwarts of Judaism, performed their history-making deeds by faith in God. It was faith that divided the Red Sea and faith that brought down the walls of Jericho. Faith brought salvation to the spies in Rahab's house. And, the stories go on and on: Gideon, Samson, David, and others are famous and remembered for deeds done out of their faith in God.

Yet, the readers are admonished with a major point for understanding here. All these great names and peoples of Jewish history were never blessed with the truth of Jesus Christ and his atoning work. Their faith had working merit before God only because of the real sacrifice of Jesus that we now see with our eyes as a performed deed in history. Only together with us in Jesus are these Old Testament stalwarts "made perfect" (11:40).

We should understand that with this great cloud of witnesses, Abraham, Moses and others, comes a response on our part. As a runner in a race, we should take off and set aside anything that would hinder us from living/running a race as champions. We do not stop in the race and return to the starting line! We see Jesus at the end of the race and we fix our eyes on him. We live for him. We run to him. We do not get hindered and weary; we stay focused and finish what we have begun.

We see sin for what it is and we try to avoid it. We accept the discipline of children as we try to understand the ways of God and live accordingly. We try to live right before non-believers. We seek God's grace rather than the bitterness of human sulking and revenge. We live for more than physical pleasure, whether in food or sensuality.

Unlike the Jews with Moses at the inception of the Sinai covenant, we approach God himself. For the Jews, they could not set foot on the mountain where Moses ascended. The mountain trembled. There was smoke and fire. Moses himself trembled with fear. We have the mountain of God, Mt. Zion, which we now approach with joy. It is not a mountain of fear and gloom. It is a mountain of joyful assembly, a mountain where we join with thousands of angels in praise to our God. On this mountain, we rejoice and live by faith awaiting the finalization of God's history (12:1-28).

Here, we see why we live as we do: why we are to love each other as family; why we are to treat strangers well (some may be entertaining angels without knowing it!); why we feel the suffering ourselves when our Christian brothers and sisters suffer; why we live faithfully with our spouses; why our pursuit is not for money, but contentment; why we pray for our leaders.

Our hearts should get strength from our faith in the sense that our body is strengthened by food. Jesus is unchanging; our lives should show consistency as well. We should always confess the name of Jesus as Messiah and praise God with our lips. We should live right, well equipped by the God who offered himself in sacrifice and resurrection power.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son” (3:6).*

It is an amazing thought that Christ presides over God’s house. He is not a servant; he is a Son. We should be both inspired by his faithfulness, and should seek him as Lord of the house.

2. *“You need milk, not solid food, ... solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” (5:12-14).*

No one wants to live on baby food. Baby food is for babies. The key here is the marker of maturity. Maturity is found in those who constantly practice distinguishing good from evil. That trains powers of discernment. That is what I want in my life! So here is my personal game plan. Care about good and evil, and seek good over the evil. Make these daily choices, even in the small things, a constant priority.

3. *“Since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” (10:19-22).*

I love this verse. It is my constant reminder that I can approach God in confidence, not because of my own merit or worthiness, but because of the work of Jesus the Son, in whom I trust for my rightness before God Almighty! Thank you Lord Jesus!