

Unit 1 Introduction

To The Hebrews: Hope for a Church that Is Worn Out and Worn Down

Introduction

When surveying the New Testament, the letter “To The Hebrews” (an early title attached to the book) is “superlative” in many respects. It presents the greatest and deepest exposition of the person and work of Christ in the Scriptures, is written in the finest and most complex koine Greek in the Scriptures, uses a beautiful and illustrious Christian vocabulary with over 150 words found nowhere else in the New Testament, represents the peak of theological reasoning for living the Christian life, and calls believers to no less than total devotion to Christ. While all of this would rank it as among the most impressive books in the New Testament, perhaps what makes Hebrews so interesting is that it brings the unique and unsurpassed message of Christian hope to a church that is worn out and worn down.

Setting, Context, Structure

The setting and context of Hebrews is a “letter” that reads more as an early Christian sermon, written by an unnamed, caring pastor who knew the circle of the apostles and had received their instruction. The preacher writes to an unnamed church (the Hebrews) that knows Christ well and finds itself mired in the intense difficulty of keeping their faith in Christ through the trials of the days in which they were living. The preacher of Hebrews hopes to inspire a revival, to renew their hope in Christ so that they will “fix their eyes on Jesus” and “run the race with perseverance” and “not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3).

The structure of Hebrews is a classic three-point sermon centered on Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory and the Son of God, that utilizes classic rhetorical techniques of comparison (Christ is much superior to..., Christ is better than...) and exhortation (Therefore..., Let us..., Keep on...) to inspire and empower the hearers to endure their difficulties and overcome their weariness. The sermon is conversant throughout with the history of the Hebrews as God’s chosen people, a people who endured many trials and challenges, and uses language and metaphors that the Hebrews would be well-versed with as it compares faith in Christ to that history.

After a brief, but inspiring prologue in Hebrews 1:1-4 that begins the sermon with a grand sweep of Christ’s person and the salvation

He offers, the sermon is divided into three parts. Part one (1:5—4:13) presents Christ as superior in who He is. Christ is superior to the prophets of old, the angels in heaven, the great leader Moses, the restorative power of keeping the Sabbath rest of God, and the other priests who have offered a sacrifice for sins. The point of the first section is to remember to remain fixed on Jesus so that they do not drift away from the true faith.

The second and longest section (4:14—10:18) illustrates Christ as our Superior High Priest who represents us to the Father. Christ is all-sufficient to forgive our sins and is better than the forgiveness of God found in the Old Testament alone. Christ is better than the earthly priesthood, the Mosaic system of the old covenant, and both animal sacrifice and daily offerings for sin. Pardon for sins is only to be found in and through the work of Christ. The worship of Christ is unreservedly connected to the worship of the church. In order to understand the fullness of Christ, Christians must train the eyes, ears, and body to see, believe, and worship Christ in all things—even in times of trial. There is a deepening of the faith here that connects part one of the sermon to part two that must not be missed. Christ is the superior one, and believing that requires the constant attention to Him first in worship and then into all of life.

The third portion of the sermon of Hebrews (10:19—13:25) is to remind the believers of superiority of Christian living, the necessity of uniting faith in Christ to living the Christian life. Using the language of imagining a faithful future, the sermon addresses its hearers with words of exhortation and expectation. The beginning of the third section (10:19-22) ties all that is mentioned in the book to the great act of God’s grace in Christ. “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us...” summarizes the previous chapters and then connects them to revival, a renewed sense of joy and purpose in living for Christ because He is faithful (10:23). The grace that forgives sins (salvation) is the grace that sanctifies and gives renewed life. Because we have Christ, let us strengthen our weak knees and failing arms (12:12) and turn faith into action and holy living. Let us, who are Christians, find the joy of our salvation again renewed to love and do

good deeds (10:24), attend church services (10:25), remember our past days of enduring trial and the great history of the saints of old who did the same (10:35-39, 11), and keep on loving one another and others—even strangers and those who are prisoners (13:1-3). Doing good and sharing with others ties the “sacrifice of praise,” or confession of Christ, appropriately to Christian living (13:15-16). Like every good sermon, Hebrews ties our faith and doctrine to a call to action and revival.

Mining the Depths

The entirety of the sermon presents its case with theology and examples that sprinkle the main points and divisions of the sermon with illustrations and examples designed to deepen faith and inspire action. While these examples are each considerable and worth intense study, they can be summarized in five categories: *Christology and the Work of Christ*, *The Importance of the Old Testament*, *Warnings Against Falling Away*, *Inspiration for the Future*, and *The Pathway of Discipleship*.

The presentation of Christ’s person and work in the book of Hebrews is without parallel. This is a “high” Christology that both mines the depths of Christ’s person from His pre-existence to His coming again in glory and extensively presents the intricate theological points of Christ’s priestly sacrifice for sins. There is much here that supports the Christian proclamation of Christ’s complete and perfect sacrifice for our salvation. The themes of Christ’s Sonship and atonement shine throughout.¹

Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament is both a delight and the highest example of Christian preaching interpreting the salvation of Christ through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christ is the perfect sacrifice and the author of Hebrews probes the Old Testament in presenting Christ as the Savior. He is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God. He is the Superior High Priest, greater than Moses and Melchizedek, His work of sacrifice greater than animals or daily rituals, greater than keeping the law. Christ is the only way to salvation offered by God. Using the language of the book of Exodus and a variety of illustrations from the Old Testament, Christ and His salvation is shown as absolutely superior and the definitive revelation of God.²

Within its presentation of Christ, Hebrews mixes five warnings against falling away from faith. Warnings against falling away (2:1-4), unbelief and disobedience (3:7—4:13), repudiating the Son of God, deliberate desecration of the Christ and the Spirit (10:19-39), and preference for earthly realities like comfort and acceptance to the kingdom of God (12:14-29), focus the Hebrews on Christ and warn against returning to their pre-Christian faith and practices.³

The preacher of Hebrews also takes care to provide inspiration for the future. Combining a fascinating arrangement of eschatolog-

ical (the study of last or ultimate things) hope, the promise of rest for the weary, and illustrations from the past Hebrews emphasizes that God’s revelation and salvation in Christ inspire us to hope from the past, for today, and for the future. The rest that believers seek comes by assurance: trusting the purpose of the perfect and complete salvation from sin offered in Christ to provide strength for every trial (4:3-11). The past lives of believers when they were strong to endure and the examples of those in the “Hall of Faith” from Abraham to the unnamed believers who endured public humiliation and painful torture all provide hope for the future (10:19—11:39).

The promise of rest is an assurance for all believers from Christ. It provides inspiration for the future, a faithful pathway of discipleship for all believers. This pathway is to trust Christ in all things and walk the way of Christ and His apostles in present reality. The preacher urges his hearers to maintain their loyalty to Christ by being fervent in worship, sharing common virtues and values, and equipping the saints to do God’s will in suffering and in working to transform the social and political structures within which they live for Christ.

Conclusion

The book of Hebrews speaks to a church that is tired and weary. The days are trying and people are falling away. Church attendance is down. Morality seems loose. The answer to these problems is what makes Hebrews so interesting and that answer is revival in Christ. Christ is our Savior. Christ’s sacrifice for sin is the answer. Christ’s faithfulness is our inspiration.

The writer of Hebrews preaches a sermon filled with the “superlative Christ” that takes on the challenge of being worn out and worn down. Remain faithful. Take inspiration from Christ and His witnesses. Run the race with perseverance and do not lose heart. Love others despite the cost.

The book of Hebrews is a sermon meant to inspire a revival, a renewal of faith in Christ, and hope for the future.

1. For an excellent presentation on the theology of the book of Hebrews, see Kevin Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, *New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013), pp. 48-55.

2. An excellent devotional to read for mining the depths of the “Superior Christ” of Hebrews can be found in H. Ray Dunning’s *Superlative Christ: Devotional Studies in Hebrews* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2001).

3. For a chart of these warnings and excellent commentary on their meaning, see Kevin Anderson’s commentary mentioned above, pp. 46-48.

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