

Hebrews - A Letter Addressed to Modern-Day Christians

Part 1

An Introduction and Guide to Method of Study

What led the writer of Hebrews to take up their pen?

The epistle itself gives us the answer to this question.

The religious state of those to whom it was addressed was far from right or satisfactory.

Some had become lazy.

Hebrews 6:12 [NIV] *“We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”*

Some were indifferent to their spiritual condition.

Hebrews 2:1 [NIV] *“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.”*

Some were indifferent to the salvation being offered to them.

Hebrews 2:3 [NIV] *“how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.”*

Some were neglecting the constant confirming of their beliefs and hopes.

Hebrews 4:14 [NIV] *“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”*

Hebrews 10:23 [NIV] *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”*

Some were not holding fast to their beliefs.

Hebrews 3:6 [NIV] *“But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.”*

Some were giving up and going back to their former life.

Hebrews 10:35-39 [NIV] *“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.”*

All these quotations add up to A CHURCH THAT NEEDED HELP TO BE AN EFFECTIVE WITNESS FOR CHRIST or even a group who would inherit the Kingdom of God.

The writer hoped that his fellow Jews would speedily accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah, but he had in many cases been disappointed, **they still clung to the Old Testament worship and life.** Jesus Christ was not reigning in their lives as God, Saviour and High Priest in heaven.

To meet these difficulties the epistle seeks to open up the true and glorious religion in Jesus Christ and **show how that all that they need to leave behind was superseded by something that was a hundredfold better.**

The main difficulty lay in the lack of conviction, dedication and earnestness in the individuals that made up the Church.

This situation has marked many eras of the Church and describes a major part of Christendom in this present age.

It was to meet this spirit of backsliding to warn against this disease and its danger and to make all aware of the infallible cure that the author took up his pen.

The cure was and is today the same, to understand and have faith in Christ and His Salvation.

The author does this by setting out to show how wonderfully, how divinely, all the prophecies and types of the Old Testament have their fulfilment in the Salvation that the Son of God has accomplished for us.

The author starts by comparing the two revelations of God to man.

The first was from angels through men, the second directly from the Son of God.

The author then deals with the problem that besets many in today's Church as it did in his time.

The problem that after our conversion and profession of faith in Christ we come to a standstill and do not mature but remain "*babies in Christ.*"

So many rest contented with their thoughts that their sins are pardoned and that they are in the path to eternal life, but know nothing of a personal attachment to Jesus Christ as their leader and future husband.

Nor do many experience a walk with God in a life that is very real yet invisible to the human eye.

As a result of this sterile spiritual state, hopelessness from the failure of their utmost efforts sets in and they give up the personal struggle, unaware of the unlimited power available to them in an intimate union with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit sent to be our guide, support and constant companion.

Instead the influence of this world, the spirit of its literature, the temptations of business and pleasure, all unite to make up a religion that is a combination of comfortable hope for the future with the least amount of discomfort or sacrifice in this present life.

What the Hebrews needed we need also.

It is Jesus Christ we need to know better.

It is Jesus Christ who now lives in heaven as our High Priest who can lead us into the very presence of God in the Holy of Holies.

This knowledge of Jesus Christ in His heavenly glory and His saving power, is exactly what is needed in our churches and individual Christians right now.

It is in this epistle, if we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us by yielding to Him, we will find the solution to this life-destroying disease.

This is to be a systematic verse by verse study of this vital, revelatory letter written to Christians.

The aim is for us to be able to use what God has revealed to us through this letter as a stimulus to make life-giving changes in the way we conduct our lives on a day-to-day basis.

Conversion and empowerment are the goals that we are seeking as a result of this letter's revealed knowledge and course correction.

General Introduction

What is explained in this section is vital for us to reap the benefits that God desires we should harvest and to plumb the depths of this difficult to understand and often misunderstood letter.

The translation of the text that will be used will mainly be the N.I.V. but references will be made to other translations.

Method of Study

This will be mainly analytical. In my own experience this is a very practical and helpful way to approach God's Word, for the Bible is a very logical collection of writings.

How will we do this?

1. We will read through the text to find out:-

a) **What does it actually say?** Checking certain words that may have several usages, to see which is most appropriate to the context in which we find it.

b) **Ask the question: How does this apply practically to us in our approach to life today?**

I believe that the Bible should **not** be the object of abstract intellectual study but a study of practical use.

We need to seek from God's Word the changes and right motivations that are needed to be a living, walking reflection of Jesus Christ; to allow Christ to live His Life on Earth again in us.

We all need this course correction for we are still clay on the potter's wheel being moulded into a finished product by God the Master Potter.

Romans 9:20-25 [NIV] *"But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath, prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one,"*

Isaiah 64:8 [NIV] *"Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand."*

2. **We will refer often to related or parallel scriptures from the Old Testament** (of which we will find numerous in Hebrews). We will analyse these related Old Testament in two ways:-

a) **Prophetical predictions:** Old Testament passages that predict things that were in the future at the time they were written.

b) **Types or shadows:** Truth in the Old Testament contained in the form of pictures or symbols. For example, the Old Testament description of the high priest's garments; for until we know something about the Old Testament high priest we cannot fully appreciate Christ as our High Priest.

3. **We will pick out key words** that are often repeated, that are significant related themes expounded in this letter. When we analyse the occurrence and grouping of these key words it will reveal much about the structure and thrust of the letter.

We will analyse these key words as found in the original text, as some of them are translated by two or even three different words in the English.

This can be done without the ability to read Greek or Hebrew by using the two concordances that make the original words available to us – Young's and Strong's.

What is expected of us that we may maximise the benefit that God is making available to us through this letter?

I wish to answer this question from Scripture.

Proverbs 2:1-6 [NIV] *“My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”*

Here we find eight requirements of a student and these are followed by two results of applying the eight suggested requirements of good studying.

“IF” – this shows that it is conditional but also **not** forced on us; we have a choice to accept the conditions, but we will only receive the benefits stated in verse five if we apply all conditions in verses one to four.

a) **“Accept my words”** – take hold of, seize, infold. A very positive and active response.

James 1:21 [NIV] *“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and **humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.**”*

God's Word will save us **if** we receive it humbly, **not** in a judgmental attitude.

We can hear or read God's Word acting like a bottle with a cork in it and however much of the “*Water of God's Word*” is poured over us none of it will end up in us.

The cork we have that prevents us from storing up God's Word within us could be prejudice, pre-conception, cynicism.

Psalms 1:1 [NIV] *“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.”*

All too easily we can drift into such an attitude.

It is very dangerous to “*sit in the seat of the mockers* [scornful].”

We may have been let down by a fellow Christian whom we trusted or soured by some experience we have lived through.

What we are actually doing is gradually tuning God out of our lives.

Don't just look for what we find agreeable in God's Word but accept and act on those parts which may hurt us, that we find painful to hear or read because it means moving out of our “*comfort zone*”.

Psalms 1:2 [NIV] “*But his delight is in the law [word] of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*”

We are in an age when the majority of people resent being told what to do.

God's Commandments are **not** given just to make life difficult, but for our benefit because of the Great Love He has for us.

If we resent God telling us how to conduct our lives then we will have to humbly change and “*store up*” God's Word as something of eminent value.

b) **Proverbs 2:1** [NIV] “*Store up my commands within you*”. Reserve, protect as something valuable.

John 6:63 [NIV] “*The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.*”

“*Spirit*” – God Breathed.

Hence they are “*life*”.

Greek word “*zoe*” always related to God-given eternal life, the life that God has.

Not “*bios*” a physical life as found in all animals and plants.

c) **Proverbs 2:2** [NIV] “*Turning your ear to wisdom*”.

This is something that is difficult in today's western society.

Very few people are really used to giving full attention to anything.

We are inflicted with background music when we wish to concentrate on conversation with a friend.

Young students try to do homework with one eye on the television, or while being plugged into a Walkman.

This type of listening!! is not what is referred to here when it comes to God's Word.

The Hebrew word means to prick up your ears – give heed – mark well – attend – all indicating total concentration to what is being given to us.

d) **Proverbs 2:2** [NIV] “*Applying your heart*”. Stretch out to - bend towards - turn aside to.

“*Your heart*”. Feeling – intellect – our will – the very centre of our whole being.

e) **Proverbs 2:3** [NIV] “*Call out for insight*”. Addressing a person by name – with idea of accosting them.

“Insight”. Perfect understanding of meaning – separate mentally.

f) **Proverbs 2:3** [NIV] **“Cry aloud for understanding”**. Lift up – a committed upward direction, earnest, heartfelt prayer.

“Understanding”. Discretion – skilfulness – willingness to change.

g) **Proverbs 2:4** [NIV] **“Search for”**. Search out – strive after.

“Search”. Diligently seek for.

h) **Proverbs 2:4** [NIV] **“Hidden treasure”**. Hidden riches – buried treasure – something greatly valued.

Matthew 13:44 [NIV] *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”*

Seeking buried treasure involves a lot of hard work digging here and there until we find it – searching diligently for the original usage of words in concordances is likened to digging for treasure in a field.

The best way to train our mind is to apply ourselves to the study of God’s Word in a systematical, orderly, prayerful, dedicated way, for the Bible is the most logical and practical book in the world.

Such study will make us **“sharp of mind”**, for this is what God promises us.

Proverbs 2:5-6 [NIV] *“then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”*

“wisdom” – the ability to separate mentally, distinguishing between different things if they are good or bad.

“knowledge” – awareness, asserting by seeing clearly.

“understanding” – intelligence and skilfulness of mind.

Introduction to Letter

A key to the date is in the grammatical tense in which sacrifices are referred to, always in present future tense, therefore it must have been before AD70 when sacrifices stopped the temple being destroyed.

The letter assumes the reader has a good understanding of the Old Testament and Jewish life under Old Covenant so we can safely say it was directed to Jewish Christians.

The Jews were at that time in history the ones who had far greater spiritual privileges than any other peoples who did not have access to God’s Word, who then had to find out who were Moses, David, Joshua, etc. and the Jews also knew what was required of them by God and what were His Principles for right living.

Romans 9:4-5 [NIV] *“the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.”*

List of things that were available only to Israelites.

1) Adoption as sons; 2) Divine glory; 3) the Covenants; 4) receiving the Law; 5) Temple worship; 6) the Promises; 7) the Patriarchs; 8) from among them came Messiah

Note: 7 + Jesus Christ

Today these privileges belong to Christians.

We are those who have all the background of the Old Covenant, as do the Jews, **but** we accept Christ to whom all the Old Covenant pointed as shadows of the reality which is Christ.

Colossians 2:17 [NIV] *“These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”*

1 Corinthians 10:6,11 [NIV] *“Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.” ... “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.”*

Given and lived out by our Israelite forefathers so to help us avoid the same mistakes.

Therefore I look on Hebrews as a letter written to modern-day Christians.

The human author of the letter is unknown.

Names that have been put forward are Barnabas, Paul, Apollos, Luke, Barnabas and Philip.

What is very clear is the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, revealing the present position and work of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The main purpose of the letter is summed up in one short passage.

Hebrews 10:19-23 [NIV] *“Therefore, brothers, 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 draw near to God** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled. To cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”*

If the writer of Hebrews had one desire it was just this, *“let us draw near to God”*.

Our study of Hebrews will enable us to do just this, with full confidence in our living high priest, Jesus Christ.