

A Better Way

A Better Way, Learning to Endure

Hebrews

This inductive Bible study is designed for individual, small group, or classroom use. A leader's guide with full lesson plans and the answers to the Bible study questions is available from Regular Baptist Press. Order RBP0011 online at www.regularbaptistpress.org, e-mail orders@rbpstore.org, call toll-free 1-800-727-4440, or contact your distributor.

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

A BETTER WAY, LEARNING TO ENDURE: HEBREWS

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Preface

Hebrews is one of the most crucial books in the Bible for Christians who face the challenges of today. The writer of Hebrews was addressing a group of Jewish Christians in the first century who were struggling with persecution. They were becoming weary as they faced criticism and hostility. Some of them were in danger of turning back to Judaism rather than persevering in their professed faith in Christ.

In this extended sermon, the writer demonstrated how Christianity is the climax of God's program of salvation. Christ is better than the most revered figures of the Old Testament. He is also the reality Who was prefigured in the Old Testament shadows. As these Christians faced the prospect of even greater suffering for Christ, they needed to remember that He understood their pain, He was committed to them as their priest, and He would help them to endure.

For many people today Hebrews is hard to understand because it refers so frequently to the Old Testament. The first recipients of the book were Jewish, so they would have been very familiar with the Old Testament laws, customs, and texts that the author used. Christians in the present time typically do not have a thorough background in the Old Testament, so for many of them, Hebrews seems like it was written in a strange dialect.

Rather than getting confused with the difficult details of Hebrews, what we need to keep clearly in mind is the overall purpose of this great sermon. The writer was challenging his readers, people like us, to stay committed to Christ instead of drifting away from courageous faith in Him. Though most Christians in the western world today do not face the same kinds of persecution that threatened the first-century Christians, we do find ourselves confronted with increasing opposition from the culture. If we keep looking unto Jesus, Who is the author and finisher of our faith, then we will be able to run with endurance the race that is set before us. Hebrews urges us to recognize that Christ is supreme and to live our lives with that truth clearly in view.

Lesson 1

Continuing with Christ

To keep your faith strong you must keep your focus on Christ.

Hebrews Overview

“Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

Focus is important! Have you tried to read something that is out of focus or to fix something that you can't quite focus on? It's frustrating! But it's not just the focus that's important. The object of the focus is vital. A NASCAR driver told an interviewer, “We arrive at the race track each weekend focused on trying to win, not catching or passing people on a list. Our real motivation is winning the championship, and we hope we can win races as we work toward that goal.”

Getting Started

1. The theme of Hebrews is “keeping your faith strong by focusing on Christ.” What does it mean to “focus” on Christ?

2. What kinds of distractions or obstacles do we encounter in our spiritual lives that urge us to take our focus off Christ?

Searching the Scriptures

The book of Hebrews is a book of some mystery. Who wrote it and to whom? When was it written? But one part is no mystery: the book of Hebrews is as much for us today as it was for its original recipients. It presents the preeminence of Jesus Christ and tells us how and why we should keep looking to Him.

Who Wrote It?

Unlike most of the New Testament epistles, the book of Hebrews does not directly identify its writer. From the earliest years of Christianity numerous possible human writers have been suggested.

Several of the early Christian scholars held that Paul wrote the book, and a few scholars and theologians agreed. On the other hand, consider these three longstanding and significant objections to Paul as the writer of Hebrews: One, the book was not included in the earliest lists of Paul's epistles. Two, the language differs from Paul's writing style. Three, in Hebrews 2:3 the writer implied that he had received the message of salvation through those who were eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry; but Paul said in Galatians 1:12 that he had received the gospel through the direct revelation of Jesus Christ, not through men.

So, who could have written the book? Martin Luther argued that Apollos is a likely choice. Others have suggested Silas or other minor New Testament figures. There is not enough evidence to prove or disprove any of these suggestions.

While we do not know the writer's name, we can discern a few facts about him. He was a second-generation Christian who had mastered both the Old Testament Scriptures and Greek rhetoric. His combination of careful explanation and fervent exhortation shows that he was

a pastor-theologian, whose keen mind was matched by his compassionate heart. In this he is an excellent model for godly leaders of every age.

3. Read 2 Timothy 3:16. Although we cannot be definite about the human writer of Hebrews, what can we know for certain about its authorship?

4. According to 2 Peter 1:21, how was God able to use fallible humans to write His Word and, in spite of that, have the written Word be without error?

Who Was It Written to?

Just as the writer of Hebrews is unnamed, so the intended, original recipients are unnamed. From at least AD 175 onward, the title “To the Hebrews” has been attached to this book. So from an early date many Christians have believed that the first recipients of Hebrews were Jewish Christians.

The content of Hebrews supports that conclusion. The book is full of quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament. The many mentions of the Old Testament sacrificial system would have been difficult for a Gentile audience to understand, but people reared in Judaism would comprehend the argument immediately.

5. Read Romans 1:16. What is God’s vehicle for saving Jews in this dispensation?

6. How can a Jewish person be saved, according to Romans 10:1–6 and 10–13?

7. According to these verses, why aren't more Jews saved?

8. Should believers today share Paul's attitude about the salvation of Jewish people? Explain your answer.

The recipients of Hebrews likely belonged to a house church and had a good record of Christian commitment and service (Hebrews 6:10) even in the heat of suffering (10:32–34). But some had become discouraged by pressures and weary in their spiritual struggles; they were focusing on the present rather than on their future glory in Christ. The book of Hebrews challenged them to renew their wholehearted commitment to Christ.

9. In Hebrews 5:12–14 how did the writer describe the spiritual condition of the recipients?

10. What descriptive title did Paul use of the believers at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3:1–3?

11. What behaviors revealed their immature condition?

Like the believers in Corinth and many Christians today, the original recipients of Hebrews were living well below their capacity. This regrettable condition needed to be changed.

12. What steps can a distracted believer take to get his or her focus back on Christ?

While the writer was convinced that most of his readers were genuine believers (Hebrews 6:9), he feared that some might not have truly trusted Christ. So he gave strong warnings about turning away from the Lord.

Before or after Rome Burned?

Since we can only speculate about the writer and the recipients of Hebrews, the date is also a matter of debate. However, several pieces of evidence in the text can help suggest a reasonable date for the book.

Hebrews 2:3 describes the recipients as second-generation Christians who heard the gospel from the apostles or others, who themselves were eyewitnesses of Christ. The original leaders of the church apparently had died, for the readers were exhorted to remember their words and imitate their faith (13:7). In addition, there had been a significant period of time since the recipients were saved, certainly long enough that they should have grown to spiritual maturity (5:12). These references seem to indicate that perhaps twenty or thirty years had elapsed since the beginning of Christianity. That would set a probable earliest date for Hebrews at around AD 60.

Around AD 96 a Christian leader named Clement quoted the book of Hebrews, so the book must have been both written and in circulation prior to that time. Also, statements like Hebrews 10:11 indicate that Levitical sacrifices were still being offered in the temple at Jerusalem—before it was destroyed in 70 AD by Roman armies. In addition, it is clear that the readers had recently experienced suffering and that worse persecution was on the way. It may well be, then, that Hebrews was written between the fire of Rome (AD 64), which Nero blamed on the Christians, and his death in 68. Around that same time, in 67, the Jewish rebellion against Rome began in Jerusalem. It is quite likely, then, that Hebrews was written between 64 and 67 AD.

13. According to Galatians 4:4, when did Christ come into the world?

14. In light of this, when could we say Hebrews was written?

What's It All about?

The book of Hebrews develops several key themes. Because the recipients were Christians who had grown fearful and hesitant to stand for Christ—and perhaps included some who were not yet truly saved—Hebrews emphasizes the need to listen to and live by God's truth in Christ. Throughout the entire book the readers were reminded that God has spoken in Christ and that His Word must be obeyed.

15. In Matthew 7:24–27, what did Jesus teach about obedience to His Word?

Who Is Supreme?

The first seven chapters of Hebrews stress the supremacy of Christ. Old Testament references in chapter 1 demonstrate that Christ is superior to the angels. Chapter 3 shows that Christ is superior to Moses, the great leader of Israel; and 4:1–13, that Christ is superior to Joshua, who led Israel in the conquest of Canaan. Hebrews 4:14–16, chapter 5, and chapter 7 show that Christ is superior to Aaron, the priest. By proving the supremacy of Christ over each of these key Old Testament figures whom the Jews venerated, the writer established the superiority of New Testament Christianity.

16. How does Colossians 1:15–19 demonstrate that Christ deserves preeminence?

Hebrews 8:1—10:18 focuses on the relationship of Christianity to the Old Covenant (Testament) system of worship. The Old Testament system is not viewed as bad, but as inferior to the better approach to God in the New Covenant. The sacrifices and priesthood of the Old Testament were God's provision for the time before the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. Even though God gave the Old Testament system, it is not binding on Christians today, for it was merely a shadow that pointed ahead to the better reality of Christ. Christianity is part of the New Covenant, the internal spiritual worship of God, which was prophesied in the Old Testament.

The final chapters of the book (10:19—13:25) teach that faith in Christ gives hope in the face of suffering. To those tempted to shrink back in fear, Hebrews gives a challenge to be committed to Christ. Since Christianity is God's best, it demands our best.

Why Was Hebrews Written?

As the writer composed Hebrews, he had several main purposes in mind. He knew that his readers were weary from suffering, so he endeavored to encourage them. Hebrews is full of challenges to steadfast endurance in faith (12:3).

In addition, the writer wanted to counteract the recipients' tendency toward apostasy (10:29). He warned them against the dreadful consequences of slipping away from Christ. Instead of forsaking their distinctive Christian position, they needed to maintain their loyalty to Christ.

17. How does Hebrews 10:29 describe the actions of apostates?

As a practical help, the writer also encouraged the Christians to support one another in the face of persecution. The Body of Christ is a crucial part of God's resource for equipping Christians. Some of the readers were neglecting the rest of the congregation. By renewing their commitment to one another, they could encourage one another.

18. How have you seen the exhortations in Hebrews 10:24 and 25 carried out in your church?

The major purpose of Hebrews was to use the facts of Christ to cure the fear of Christians. By discussing at length how the Lord is superior to all rivals for human worship, the writer revealed that Christ is the focus of God's program. Only Christ is worthy of worship, for He is supreme even over all of the Old Testament worship system. Though the Christians would have to face renewed suffering in the future, they could stand in faith if they kept looking to Jesus (12:1–4).

19. Read Hebrews 12:1–3. How do you think the recipients responded when they read these words from Paul about Christ?

20. How can focusing on Christ cure fear?

Hebrews contains a lot of theology, especially about Christ, and it has an intensely practical purpose. It endeavors to motivate struggling Christians to become stable Christians. If they can understand the incredible preeminence of Christ, then they should cling to Christ rather than slipping away in fear. Hebrews counteracts their fear by reinforcing their faith.

Is It a Letter, or Something Else?

In many Bibles, Hebrews is called an epistle (letter). But it is unlike typical New Testament letters in that it does not contain a greeting identifying the writer and the recipients, words of prayer and thanksgiving, or personal references. In fact, Hebrews is more than a letter; it is a word of exhortation, or a sermon (13:22). Its introduction (1:1–4) is

much more appropriate as the formal opening sentence of a sermon than it is of a letter. The writer skillfully used language so the hearers would receive the full impact of his message. He frequently used the sounds of words and unusual word order to make the message more powerful.

When Hebrews is compared with Paul's letters, another difference becomes apparent. Paul typically taught doctrine first and then the duty that should result. But Hebrews mingles application throughout the message, rather than leaving it all for the end.

As a sermon, Hebrews endeavors to persuade the hearers in two ways: reinforcing the beliefs that the hearers already had, and describing the future benefits of following the exhortations. By combining these strategies, Hebrews provides a potent message designed to build up the Christian faith of the readers.

Making It Personal

21. Write down two areas in your spiritual life in which you need to focus on Christ. Keep this record close at hand as a reminder throughout this study of Hebrews.

22. Memorize Hebrews 12:2.