



## Overview of Hebrews

### Key Words

The key to understanding a book is sometimes found in key words. This is true of the book of Hebrews. The author uses *better* thirteen times, *perfect* fifteen times, and *O let us* thirteen times. Each of these defines a major theme of Hebrews.

*Better* expresses the author's comparison of Christ to Old Testament people and events, such as the Covenant. George Williams says, "The First Covenant was indeed divine but was only a shadow of the promised Second Covenant", the covenant which Christ instituted (8:6) (The Student's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures). Hebrews compares Christ to prophets (1:1-2), angels (1:4), Moses (3:3), Joshua (4:8), and Aaron (7:11). In every case, He is better. They were excellent, but He is more so. He brought a better hope (7:19), a better testament (7:22), and better promises (8:6). He offered a better sacrifice (9:23) and gives us better possessions than any we lose from being identified with Him (10:34). Because of Jesus Christ, God has provided better things for us than those enjoyed by Old Testament saints. Is the Lord Jesus Christ the best thing in your life?

*Perfect* translates "teleios", a word which means "fully formed" and "developed or mature", "consummated, fulfilled" and "complete". It is used to describe Jesus Christ as a result of His suffering (2:10) and as *author of eternal salvation* (5:9). It describes the standard or goal which neither the law nor the Levitical priesthood could attain (7:19, 9:9), but a state which we can reach through Christ (11:40; 12:23). Do you know that if you are *in Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:17) God sees you as perfect now? This is your self-image by faith in His Word. It is also the prayer of the author of Hebrews for the readers including you and me. *Now may the God of peace...make you complete in every good work to do His will...* (13:21). Nothing in this world is perfect, as it was meant to be. Only Christ is perfect.

*Let us* is the exhortation repeated throughout Hebrews. *Let us fear coming short of His promise* (4:1)...*Let us be diligent to enter that* (His) *rest* (4:11)...*Let us go on to perfection* (6:1)...*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith* (10:22)...*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope* (10:23)...*Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works* (10:24)...*Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which dogs us and entangles our feet* (12:1, Phillips and Amplified)...*Let us have grace by which we may serve God acceptably* (12:28)...*Let us go forth to Him outside the camp* (13:13), and *Let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God* (13:15). Which of these exhortations do you need today?

### OUTLINE OF HEBREWS

The Outline of Hebrews is another key to understanding the book. The following may help us to grasp the book as a whole:

#### I. The Pre-eminence and Priesthood of Christ - Hebrews 1-10

- A. Pre-Eminence of Christ - Hebrews 1-6
- B. High Priesthood of Christ - Hebrews 7 - 10

#### II. The Practice of Living by Faith - Hebrews 11-13

- A. Past Heroes of Faith - Hebrews 11
- B. Peaks, Points, and Pitfalls of Faith - Hebrews 12 - 13

#### I. The Pre-eminence and Priesthood of Christ - Hebrews 1 - 10

- A. Pre-Eminence of Christ - Hebrews 1 - 6

This lofty theme is God's view of His Son which He intends for us to have. Twice during Christ's earthly life God was heard to say, *This is My Beloved Son* - once at Jesus' baptism and again at His transfiguration (Matthew 3:17, 17:5). Paul extols Christ to the Colossians saying, *That in all things He might have the pre-eminence* (Colossians 1:18).

The pre-eminence of Christ is foretold in the Old Testament by prophecy and picture, from the promise of a Redeemer to restore what was lost at the Fall of Man (Genesis 3:15), and God's replacement skins of a sacrificed innocent lamb in place of Adam and Eve's pitifully inadequate fig leaves, to the promise of One who would sit as a Refiner and Purifier of Levi, the failed priesthood (Malachi 3:3). A perfect One needed to come. The best that man could do, both on his own and even in obedience to God, fell short of righteousness. Wycliffe's Bible Commentary says, "Hebrews binds together Old Testament and New Testament in the person and work of Jesus Christ....It is help for today. No other work so clearly answers the 'why' of Christ's sacrifice." Does He have the pre-eminence in your life?

"There was no other was good enough to take away our sin; He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in." Author - Cecil Frances Alexander.

## B. The High Priesthood of Christ - Hebrews 7 - 10

One of the unique contributions of Hebrews is the description of Jesus Christ as our High Priest. The Levitical priesthood was fatally flawed from the first with Aaron's defection into idolatry (Exodus 32:1-4). Few of his descendant priests or high priests measured up to their calling. Earlier, the mysterious Melchizedek provided a model of a high priest (Genesis 14:18-20) and then disappeared except for one prophecy in Psalm 110:4, a Messianic Psalm quoted by Jesus.

In Hebrews we find that Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek rather than the Aaronic order. This will be explained when we study chapter five.

The only other previous hint at His present role is in John 17. On the night before His death by crucifixion, Jesus prayed the prayer that has become known as His "high priestly prayer" because in it He prays for His own. "His own" refers to His followers then and includes His future followers, you and me. Prayer for God's people was one of the high priest's main responsibilities.

The high priest represented the people to God. He was the highest representative of the people, existing long before there was a king. Prophets, on the other hand, such as Moses, represented God to the people. Moses was the archetypal prophet and Aaron was the archetypal high priest. Jesus combined both offices in His person. While on earth He was God's ultimate Prophet. The prophet's office culminated in Him. Ascended, He is the ultimate High Priest. None other is necessary. When He returns as reigning King, He will complete His roles of leadership. Together David and Solomon give the picture of the ultimate King, one who is both victorious and peaceful.

The high priest ministered to God's people as prayer warrior, offerer of the necessary sacrifices, and compassionate counselor. Jesus is all of this to us, *A merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people; For in that He Himself has suffered being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted* (Hebrews 2:17-18).

You and I need our High Priest more than we know, but God knew and provided His Son. Because we often do not go to our High Priest, we may suffer needlessly. People need help for life's stresses and crises. If they do not go to Jesus whom God has provided, they will go to someone whose help is temporary and fallible. Will you go to your High Priest today, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7)?

## C. Difficulties in Hebrews 1 - 10

There are two major sections in chapters 1 - 10 which

pose ongoing difficulties. People stumble over these verses and scholars disagree on them. One is Hebrews 6:4-6. The other is Hebrews 10:26-31. We will examine the various explanations when we get there. Some people are not satisfied by any explanation but seem to feel that the Scriptures would be better off without these thorny passages! However, it is good to remember that *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be complete...* (2 Timothy 3:16). We will see later what these passages teach us.

## II. The Practice of Living by Faith - Hebrews 11 - 13

In the last three chapters of Hebrews, the author follows Paul's habit of applying the theological and doctrinal to practical everyday living.

The purpose of knowing is doing. Christ's superiority and High Priesthood are for the purpose of enabling you and me to fulfill God's will for our lives in daily practice. Someone has pointed out that chapter 11 teaches us how to live in faith, chapter 12 teaches us how to live in hope, and chapter 13 teaches us how to live in love.

## A. Faith Hall of Fame - Hebrews 11

According to Confucius, a picture is worth a thousand words, and the author begins this section by providing many portraits of men and women, saints of the Old Testament, who lived lives of faith in God. Their circumstances may have been much worse than those faced by the Jewish believers, or by us.

Whatever we are facing, or whatever our circumstances, Hebrews gives us a pattern for suffering triumphantly. Others have suffered and glorified God by faith because Christ suffered and glorified God by faith.

## B. Peaks, Points, and Pitfalls of Faith - Hebrews 12 - 13

## 1. Peaks

As wonderful as these "witnesses" are, we must look beyond them to Jesus if we are to run our race successfully. Their faith was also in Him, in a most remarkable way, *for all these... did not receive the promise...that they should not be made perfect apart from us* (Hebrews 11:39, 40).

Jesus is a better example, for He endured the Cross, looking beyond it to His resurrection and ascension (Hebrews 12:2). Our identification with Him here and in the future is the peak of our faith. This is good news.

## 2. Pitfalls

"The bad news" is that until we are actually perfected we need discipline. As children of God's kingdom, we are being molded and shaped for glory and greatness. How and why God disciplines us is a major theme of chapter 12. Whatever form the chastisement takes, we can be sure that God loves us and does only what is best for us.

We are told to beware of bitterness (12:15) which we think is hidden from view, but which actually corrupts many. Is bitterness corrupting you and therefore those around you? If you confess it, and acknowledge that you are bitter, God will cleanse you and free you from the bitterness and guilt (1 John 1:9).

Warren Wiersbe in Be Confident mentions five dangers Hebrews addresses, the last being in chapter 12:

- Drifting from the word - 2:1-4
- Doubting the word - 3:7 - 4:13
- Dullness toward the word - 5:11 - 6:20
- Despising the word - 10:26-39
- Defying the word - 12:14-29

If any of these are true of you, it is not too late as you read this to turn to God and become actively involved in the daily excitement of obeying His word.

## 3. Points

No less than thirteen points of Christian living are given in chapter 13 which, if we do them, will bring us fulfillment and fruitfulness. Peter says, *If these things are yours and abound you will be neither barren nor unfruitful* (2 Peter 1:8).

Hebrews 13:13 reminds us that our walk with the Lord is always *outside the camp, bearing His reproach*, for a life of faith is not the way of the world which crucified Jesus. But it is the way of *The Great Shepherd of the Sheep....*, Who can *make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well-pleasing in His sight* (13:20-21).

**Applications**

1. Will you choose to live daily by faith in Jesus, beginning today?
2. Will you submit today to God's discipline and thank Him that you are His own child?
3. Will you promise God that you will live by His Word as He reveals that Word to you?