

Hebrews

# Introduction to Hebrews

Hebrews was written between 60 and 90 AD. Although some have claimed the author was Paul, others have suggested Barnabas or Apollos. This is simply unknown. It is also uncertain to whom the letter was written although the most likely audience seems the Christians in Rome perhaps between 60 and 65 AD.

What we learn from the book itself is that the letter was written to a community that was under severe pressure as Christians and people could easily give up on their faith under threat of banishment, loss of property or death. They clearly knew their Old Testament Scripture particularly well, given the writer’s constant use of these. In fact the letter describes itself as a “word of exhortation,” and is clearly meant to encourage listeners not to turn back from Christ, to former ways of worship that did not have the same risks of persecution.

In exhorting the believer’s the letter emphasises what God has spoken to us in his word. While in the Old Testament this was a diversified word coming through many channels, in Christ this became a personified word. The writer of Hebrews takes the words of Christ about the Old Testament seriously. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he demonstrates the words of Christ about the Old Testament.

"Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:26-27)

Now he said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day.” (Luke 24:44-46)

He demonstrates the Old Testament speaks of Christ, his coming, his death for our sins, his resurrection and ascension. This revelation of God is the crucial and decisive word. It is both an appealing word and a word of judgment revealing men’s hearts.

The letter also focuses on Christ’s work of redemption. Man is guilty and can only be saved by Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Christ sitting enthroned at God’s right hand portrays that his saving work is complete and effective. These twin themes of revelation and redemption are used to encourage and exhort the recipients to stay true to God in the midst of persecution.

*Note on how to use the Studies*:

These are written to enable people to both read and apply the text. The first question is often simply asking what stands out from the passage. Different people will notice different things and there is no right answer. However, it is there to encourage everyone to contribute to the group and some of the points raised may shape the subsequent discussions.

It is envisaged that looking at God’s word will raise areas where the Gospel should impact how we live. Some of the questions directly deal with our lives in the light of what the passage says. These should help lead into a prayer time at the end of the studies. Some suggested topics of prayer are provided, but others may arise out of the conversations in the group.

# Study 1:  Hebrews 1 – 2:4

Emperor Arcadius threatened Chrysostom with banishment if he did not cease his uncompromising preaching. His response was, “Sire, you cannot banish me, for the world is my Father’s house.” Next Arcadius said, “Then I will slay you.” “Nay, but you cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God, came the answer.” “Your treasures will be confiscated was the Emperor’s next threat.” John replied, “Sire, that cannot be, either. My treasures are in heaven, where none can break through and steal.” Finally a frustrated Arcadius came full circle and said, “Then I will drive you from man, and you will have no friends left!” This final, desperate warning did not bother Chrysostom. He said, simply, “That you cannot do, either, for I have a Friend in heaven who has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.'”

What finally happened? Chrysostom was banished, first to Armenia and then farther to Pityus on the Black Sea, to which he never arrived because he died on the way. But neither his banishment nor his death disproved or diminished his claims. The things that a Christian values most not even an emperor can take away.

*Group Discussion*: How does our knowledge of Christ change our reaction when we face problems?

*Read Hebrews 1:1-3*

What strikes you from these verses?

What do these verses reveal about Jesus?

How has Jesus coming changed how we relate to God?

What assurance do we get from Jesus being seated at the right hand of God?

*Read Hebrews 1:4-13*

What strikes you from these verses?

What does this passage say about how the author sees the Old Testament?

How does this passage contrast Jesus with the angels?

What is it trying to show about Jesus?

*Read Hebrews 1:14 – 2:4*

What strikes you from these verses?

How does v14 say angels relate to us? Is that how we think of them?

 What does the passage say about our salvation?

What difference does our salvation being an inheritance make to our lives? Should it make more?

What confirms or guarantees our salvation? How assured do these make us of our salvation?

What does this passage warn against?

How should our salvation affect our lives today? Does it?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God that he has spoken to us through his Son and provided our salvation as an inheritance
* Ask that the Spirit would be working in our hearts confirming our salvation and granting greater assurance of this.
* Ask that the salvation that God provides would impact on how we live so that we would live in greater obedience to him

# Study 2 Hebrews 2:5 – 3:6

*Read Hebrews 2:5 -13*

What strikes you from these verses?

What do they say about Jesus?

What does Jesus achieve for us? How does he achieve this?

What are the benefits for us now?

How does being made holy (“sanctified”) help us now?

Do we think of ourselves as Jesus’ brothers and sisters?

What difference does being Jesus’ brothers and sisters make to how we live our lives today?

*Read Hebrews 2:14 – 3:6*

What strikes you from these verses?

How does the passage say Jesus is like us? How does being like us let him help us?

What should we do when we are tempted ((see 3:1, 3:6)?

Why is Jesus greater than Moses?

What difference does this make to our hope?

Where do we struggle with temptation?

How can we learn to fix our eyes on Jesus, when we are affected by trials?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God that his son Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters
* Pray for the areas that people struggle with temptation
* Ask that when we face trials, we would fix our eyes on Jesus and this would shape how we act

# Study 3 Hebrews 3:7 – 4:13

*Group Discussion*: Why do some Christians miss out on the opportunity to receive God’s richest blessings?

The following verses refer to the Israelites rebelling against God in the desert and refusing to enter the Promised Land. They were therefore made to wander the desert for forty years until all of that generation died, when a new generation came into the land. (See Numbers 14)

*Read Hebrews 3:7-19*

What strikes you from these verses?

How did God see this generation of Israel?

What does the passage warn against?

How do people behave who have turned away from God?

How did God judge the Israelites?

Do we need to take disobedience and unbelief more seriously?

In what ways do we test and try God?

*Read Hebrews 4:1-13*

What strikes you from these verses?

The passage speaks of the hope of entering God’s rest (4:1, 3, 5-6, 9-11), a hope that God withheld from the disobedient Israelites. How do you picture God’s rest?

What does it mean that the Israelites had the Gospel (good news) preached to them given Jesus had not at that stage come?

Why did the Israelites end up falling short of entering that rest?

From reading Hebrews, how would you describe the faith necessary to enter God’s rest?

How does the passage suggest we should experience God’s rest today?

What does God use to judge the thoughts and attitudes of our heart?

The word of God in 4:12 is generally taken today to refer to Scripture (cf. 13:7), however the church fathers took it to refer to Jesus and Augustine used it for both. Given that Scripture is God’s spoken word, taking this as Jesus broadens the ways in which we can experience God’s judgment.

How do we feel about giving account to God for the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts? Why?

How should we seek to deepen our relationship with God given this?

What would experiencing God’s rest now mean to your life?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God that we have the certain hope of entering into his rest
* Ask that God would help us make every effort to enter that rest
* Ask that God would change the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts where they need changing

# Study 4 Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10

*Group Discussion*: How does our culture isolate us from the weaknesses of those around us?

*Read Hebrews 4:14-16*

What strikes you from these verses?

What commands are given in these verses?

When are these difficult for us to do?

Why can we approach Jesus’ throne confidently?

How do Jesus’ grace and sympathy with our weaknesses impact our lives, when we are tempted?

The following verses contrast Jesus’ role as high priest with the high priest in the temple that was supposed to come from Aaron’s line. Melchizedek was a priest king in the Old Testament who blessed Abraham, but is a priest because God appointed him as such and not because of recorded lineage or where he comes from. Jesus is compared to Melchizedek, because Jesus is directly appointed by God as priest. (Gen. 14:18-20) (See later studies).

Read Hebrews 5:1 – 5:10

What strikes you from these verses?

What was the high priest like (v1-4)?

How is the priesthood of Jesus different (v5-6)?

What were the results of Christ’s suffering (v7-10)?

What difference does Jesus’ example make for us in our trials and temptations?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God that we have a high priest that both sympathises with our weaknesses
* Thank God that Jesus suffered for us and ask we would know him more and more as the source of our eternal slavation
* Thank God that we can approach the throne of his grace with confidence and ask for the mercy and grace he promises for those who do

# Study 5: Hebrews 5:11-6:20

Amy Williams won the Gold Medal in the Skeleton at the 2010 Winter Olympics. She said about her preparation, "For me, every decision, every single day was, 'Will this help me win gold, yes or no?' Is this ice cream going to help me? No? Then don't eat it. It was as brutal as that.”

Group Discussion: How does our faith impact our decisions? Where does it not impact them?

*Read Hebrews 5:11 – 6:3*

What strikes you from these verses?

What are the recipients of the letter criticised for? Why is infant an apt description for them?

What are the elementary teachings listed? Do we think of them as elementary?

What distinguishes the mature? Why?

How can we seek to become more mature in our lives?

It is easy to get caught up in the following verses in disputes around whether someone can become a Christian and then fall away from the faith. Perhaps the best answer to this is that Hebrews is written to a community that knows Christ, yet while some have experienced the Good News and tasted it, they have not fully committed themselves to Christ. For those who fall away, “this is a kind of transitory faith, a form of conversion which like the seed sown on rocky places [in the parable of the soils, Mark 4], has all the signs of life but does not persevere.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We have already seen in Hebrews, the author effectively define true faith, as that which holds to the end. (Heb. 3:6, 14)

However the passage is not a philosophical discussion concerning the possibility of falling away. It is written to encourage Christians to continue and grow in their walk in Christ. The writer says that, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation” (Heb. 6:9) and asks his readers, “to bear with my word of exhortation.” The point here is, if they reject God’s one chosen method of salvation through Christ on the cross, they cannot be saved by other means. To turn your back on Christ for some other supposed means of salvation is “crucifying Christ again and subjecting him to public disgrace.” (Heb. 6:9)

The writer aims to prevent people from drifting from Christ by warnings he gives them.In the same way signs may be used to keep people on the path through a forest with quicksand surrounding the path. It is possible to leave the path and be caught in the quicksand, but the very signs which warn of the danger of doing so are used to keep you on the path.

*Read 6:4 – 6:12*

What strikes you from these verses?

What experiences do the people who fall away have?

Do we have the same experiences?

Why are the acts described in this passage of those who falling away, so detestable to God?

How do the two types of land production (v7-8) describe the possible ways people react to God’s spirit?

How do we find God working in our lives to produce a crop?

Why is the author “sure of better things” for the Hebrews than for those who have fallen away?

What does it mean for a Christian to be diligent (v11-12)?

How can we improve in being diligent as Christians?

*Read 6:13 – 6:20*

What strikes you from these verses?

What guarantee did God give Abraham? What guarantee has God given us?

The inner sanctuary in the temple was the place in the Jewish temple where God dwelled. Only the high priest would go in and that was once a year with a rope tied around his foot in case he did not come out. Therefore the picture of the inner sanctuary in v19 is one of our hope being firm because Jesus has already entered on our behalf.

How should Jesus having already gone ahead of us transform our hope today?

How is the hope that we have in Christ transforming our lives? Where do we need it to transform our lives more?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God for certainty of his promise to us in Jesus Christ
* Ask that the Spirit would continue producing fruit in our lives
* Pray that we would we be diligent in following Christ to the end
* Pray for the particular areas raised where we need God to transform our lives more

# Study 6 Hebrews 7:1-28

In the following passage, Melchizedek is contrasted with the Jewish priests that were descended from Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. Melchizedek was a priest king in the Old Testament that blessed Abraham. (Gen. 14:18-20)

*Read 7:1 – 19*

What strikes you from these verses?

Why is Melchizedek so great (v1-4)?

How does Melchizedek compare with the Levitical priesthood (v5-10)?

Why is there a need for a new priesthood (v11-14)?

How does Jesus’ priesthood bring a better hope (v15-19)?

How does this “better hope” affect our lives?

*Read 7:20-28*

What strikes you from these verses?

How does Jesus guarantee the new covenant (v20-22)?

What does the permanence of Jesus’ priesthood mean for us (v23-25)?

How does Jesus continually interceding for us (v25) affect how we see God working in our lives now?

How does Jesus meet our needs (v26-28)?

How do we draw near to God (v19, 25) in our lives today?

Do we experience the assurance that the permanence of Jesus’ priesthood can bring to our faith? In what ways do we want to experience it more?

**Prayer points:**

* Thank God that Jesus’s priesthood lasts forever, guaranteeing the promises God has made to us.
* Pray that we would notice when God acts in our lives today and trust him more and more with them
* Ask that in that the Spirit would apply the assurance that Jesus’s priesthood gives to our faith to our hearts

# Study 7 Hebrews 8:1 to 9:22

*Read 8:1-13*

What strikes you from these verses?

What do we learn of Jesus (v1-2)?

How is the ministry of Jesus superior to the Levitical priesthood in the temple in Jerusalem (v3-6)?

Why is the new covenant (agreement) better than the old (v7-12)?

What is the difference between the old covenant being “obsolete” (v13) and being irrelevant?

What are the marks of the new covenant?

We are told that under the new covenant all of God’s people will know the Lord. How do we experience that in our lives? What difference does it make?

*Read 9:1 – 15*

What strikes you from these verses?

When did the priests enter the rooms in the temple (v6-7)? Why?

How do we commit sins in ignorance? Are they the only sins we commit?

What was the Holy Spirit showing by this (v8-10)?

How does what Christ does contrast with the priestly offerings (v11-14)

What does the blood of Christ achieve for us (v14-15)?

How do we serve God?

Do we feel free because of Christ’s ransom?

*Read 9:16 – 22*

What strikes you from these verses?

The Greek word for will is the same as that for covenant. What point is the author making by using this?

Why is blood so important to the covenant?

How does the forgiveness the blood of Christ brings change our lives today?

Do we live as forgiven, free people or as a people still bound by sin?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God for the forgiveness that Jesus brings through his sacrifice
* Pray that the Spirit would apply the truth of this sacrifice to our hearts so that we would live as free people, not bound by sin
* Pray for those that struggle with guilt that God would let them know his forgiveness in their lives

# Study 8 Hebrews 9:23 – 10:18

*Read 9:23-28*

What strikes you from these verses?

What are the differences between Christ’s sacrifice and those in the temple?

What is humanity’s destiny? How does Christ change this?

Do we have an expectation of Christ returning? Are we living our lives accordingly?

*Read 10:1-14*

What strikes you from these verses?

What was the function of the Law?

How does Jesus’ sacrifice compare with the Law (v5-9)?

What is the difference in the results of Jesus’ sacrifice (v11-13)?

How are we “made holy” (v10)?

Jesus came not just to justify us but also to sanctify us. He is twice quoted as saying to God, “I have come to do your will.” In the Garden of Gethsemane when faced with the prospect of his death, Jesus prayed “Not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36) In doing God’s will, he not only justifies us ransoming us and freeing us from our sins. His sacrifice also sanctifies us, making us holy and able to approach God - this is portrayed as on-going as we are not sinless.

Do we feel we are holy and can therefore approach God with confidence?

Do we feel we have to earn being holy and show we are worthy of it or are we confident that we have already received and go on receiving it?

Jesus on the cross has already completed the work of making us perfect, even though we are being made holy. Do we know the assurance that Jesus sacrifice being once for all gives us in our daily lives?

*Read 10:15-18*

What strikes you from these verses?

What does the Spirit testify?

Are we more comfortable with laws written on our hearts by the Spirit or the process of obeying rules?

How do we respond to the assurance of our sins being forgiven?

How do we cope when we do not feel holy?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God for the hope that Jesus gives us.
* Pray that we would live our lives with the eager expectation of Jesus’ return.
* Ask that the Spirit would continue in its work of strengthening our faith.

# Study 9 Hebrews 10:19 – 10:39

*Read 10:19-25*

What strikes you from these verses?

What has Jesus done for us (v19-21)?

What do these verses command us to do (v22-25)?

How do we experience drawing near to God and having our hearts cleansed?

What role do others play in helping us hold to our faith?

*Read 10:26-31*

What strikes you from these verses?

Who should expect judgment?

Why is it likely to be more severe for those rejecting Christ, than those rejecting the Law of Moses?

When is it a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God?

*Read 10:32-39*

What strikes you from these verses?

What had the recipients of the letter suffered?

What was their response?

Do we experience persecution in any form?

How do we respond to suffering and/or persecution?

What are the recipients of the letter told not to do?

How do we hold on to our confidence and believe when things are tough?

Do we struggle when it is difficult being a Christian?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God for those that have encouraged us in our faith
* Pray for the areas where we find it difficult living as a Christian
* Especially pray for anyone in the group going through tough times

# Study 10 Hebrews 11:1-40

Many people have something that can be loosely called faith. One of my neighbours says he feels he has someone looking after him, seeing him through all the difficult times in his life. Yet is this faith?

Group Discussion: What is faith? What difference does this make to our daily lives?

*Read 11:1-16*

What strikes you from these verses?

How does Scripture define faith?

How was the universe formed?

What were the marks of Abel’s, Enoch’s, Noah’s, and Abraham’s faith?

How did Abraham being very old affect his trust of God’s promises?

Why is it impossible to please God without faith (v6)?

What did all these people long for (v13-16)?

Do we long for heaven or do we simply seek to live for the pleasures of this earth today?

*Read 11:17-31*

What strikes you from these verses?

How did Abraham’s faith come to the fore when he was asked to give up his son?

How do we see people looking ahead in the stories of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses?

How could Moses be living for Christ, when Christ had not yet become incarnate (v26)?

Does living by faith imply that we have total confidence that God will act? (Look at some of the examples of the Israelites – v29 to 31. They were known for rejecting God and wanting to return to Egypt.)

Moses faced a choice between having money and honour in Egypt or facing disgrace for the sake of Christ. How would we feel about a similar choice? What does our faith enable us to give up?

*Read 11:32-40*

What strikes you from these verses?

What did people achieve through faith?

What did people suffer for their faith?

Did they receive what was promised (v39-40)?

Given God planned something better for us. What are we prepared to give up for our faith?

Do we live as aliens and strangers on this earth?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God for the certain hope of heaven that he gives us.
* Thank God for the examples of faith of those who have gone before us
* Ask God to help us to have the confidence in our faith to live it out even when it is difficult

# Study 11 Hebrews 12:1-29

*Read 12:1-11.*

What strikes you from these verses?

The passage describes the Old Testament examples, listed in the previous chapter as a great cloud of witnesses. How does it suggest we should respond to this witness?

Why did Jesus endure the cross?

How should that encourage us?

Do we at times feel discouraged in following Christ?

How does God’s discipline express His love for us?

What does this discipline produce?

Have you ever grown as a Christian through suffering?

*Read 12:12-17.*

What strikes you from these verses?

What instructions are the recipients of the letter given?

What are they told to make sure does not happen?

How much responsibility do we have for one another? How should this be exercised?

Esau came in extremely hungry from hunting and his brother Jacob would only give Esau food, if Esau promised him his birthright. Esau said, “Look I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?” (Gen 25:32) and swore an oath selling his birthright to Jacob.

Why was Esau godless?

Are we ever tempted to live for what we can get now?

What warning does this passage hold?

*Read 12:18-29.*

What strikes you from these verses?

The first mountain, Mount Sinai, is where God appeared to Moses and gave the law for the Israelites. The second mountain, Mount Zion, is the heavenly Jerusalem and represents our hope.

How does the contrast between the descriptions of these two mountains emphasise the differences between the Old Covenant of the Law and the New Covenant? How should these differences encourage us?

What are these verses warning us about?

What cannot be shaken?

How thankful are we of the certainty of our receiving God’s kingdom?

In what ways does our worship of God reflect that he “is a consuming fire”?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God that he welcomes us into his family as his sons and daughters
* Thank God for the certainty of receiving God’s kingdom and ask that we would live for that rather than temporal things
* Pray that we would trust him and persevere and suffering through difficulties and suffering. In particular pray for any members of the group that are experiencing difficult times.

# Study 12  Hebrews 13:1-25

Group discussion: Chapter 13 applies much of what the author has written previously in Hebrews. What stands out to you from looking at Hebrews?

*Read 13:1-6.*

What strikes you from these verses?

What actions are described here?

Which of these commands is the most difficult for you?

How do we account for sexual impurity among professing Christians?

How does God affect our attitude towards money?

*Read 13:7-17.*

What strikes you from these verses?

How do these verses suggest we should relate to our leaders?

What should our leaders do?

Do we need to change the way in which we see our leaders?

Do we sometimes face strange teachings?

How does the passage suggest we can avoid following such strange teachings?

What do we learn about Jesus’ sacrifice for us (v11-14)?

What are we commanded to do as a response (v15-16))

How can we do these things more in our lives?

*Read 13:18-25.*

What strikes you from these verses?

What do these verses show about the author?

What does the final prayer reveal about God and his purposes for us?

Having studied the whole book, how do you think you ought to be asking God to work in your life?

**Prayer Points:**

* Thank God that in him bringing back Jesus from the dead we have the promise of eternal life
* Pray for the areas raised where you need God to work in your lives

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1. D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Assurance” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)