

A little background on the epistles... An epistle was a letter dictated to a scribe who would write the words on a scroll. Then the author would sign the letters as a way to verify authenticity before the letter would be delivered to the intended audience and read aloud a multitude of times to the whole church. Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 are epistles. They didn't actually have titles but they had to be called something so we could refer to them. So the titles given came from their destination (Galatians), the sender (James), or the recipient (Timothy). The epistles were written by apostles who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, to instruct us how to live, think, and behave like a follower of Christ. Some were written to churches in specific cities, such as Ephesus and Corinth. Others are written to the whole church. They are sort of a moral essay, with a standard format – a greeting at the start with the name of the sender and recipient, the main content, and a closing with blessings and well wishes.

Actually, the Roman Empire did have a postal service but it was only for government use. To send a letter, you had to give it to someone going in the general direction of the destination. The letter got handed off repeatedly until it reached the recipient. Letters could arrive quickly if the traveler was going directly to the destination city. Otherwise it could take a while for them to get there. However, the Biblical epistles were given to a trusted messenger who would deliver it directly.

Hebrews was written to believers at a strategic time in history. The temple was still standing and the sacrifices were still being offered. But in just a few years, both the city and the temple would be totally destroyed. The Jewish nation, including Jewish believers in Jesus, would be scattered. God was shaking up the order of things. He wanted his followers to have their feet firmly planted on the solid foundation of faith; He did not want them to put their trust in things that would vanish.

Sounds a lot like today, doesn't it? Everything around us is shaking and changing. People are finding themselves on not so a firm foundation. Even Christians have gotten so caught up in the world system that their confidence is not in the Lord, but rather in money, a job, themselves, and other passing material things. God is shaking us today so we can see where our confidence is: in the world or in the Word of God. Hebrews will definitely be as relevant to us today as it was to the believers in the first century.

The Author

Unlike all of the other epistles in the Bible, this one does not identify who was writing but many attribute it to Paul. They cite this evidence for their case:

1. the writer had been in bonds (Heb. 10:34)
2. he wrote from Italy (Heb. 13:24)
3. his companion was Timothy (Heb. 13:23)
4. it sounds like his writing
5. possibly he omitted his name so the Hebrews would take the letter to heart since Paul was not always well received by the Jews, some even considered him a traitor
6. some think Peter named Paul as the author when he referred to Paul's having written to them (II Pt.3:15)

Others believe it was someone else like Luke, Apollos, Barnabas, Silas, Philip, or Aquila & Priscilla. Their reasons for denying Paul as the author include:

1. there was no salutation like Paul always used
2. the writer said the gospel was revealed to him by those that heard Jesus Himself (Heb. 2:3) Paul claimed the gospel was revealed to him directly by the Lord (I Cor. 15:8, Gal. 1:12)
3. the author knew Timothy and referred to him as a “brother” (13:23) rather than as “a true son in the faith” like Paul usually referred to him (I Tim. 1:2)

Regardless of who the author is, we know God inspired him just as He did all other writers of the Bible.

The Date & Location

Hebrews was probably written somewhere around 65 to 69 A.D. In 64 A.D. a massive fire, lasting 7 days, burned down 70% of Rome. The Romans blamed the fire on the emperor Nero. Looking for a scapegoat, he blamed the Christians for the fire and began to devise horrendous ways to persecute them, culminating with the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. We know the people being written to had faced persecution in the past, some were suffering in the present, and some would suffer in the future.

It is written like no other book in the New Testament; it begins like an essay, that turns into a sermon, and ends like a letter. Hebrews is a book deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It shows that because the old covenant from Leviticus has been fulfilled in the new covenant (JESUS), the new covenant is actually “better.”

We do not know the exact location of these Hebrews because a place is never named. We do know it was a community that consisted of three groups: 1) Hebrew Christians - Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah, 2) Hebrew non-Christians who had a knowledge of Christ - convinced but not committed, and 3) Hebrew non-Christians who were not convinced at all and rejected Christ. This letter was written to the Jews who had accepted Jesus as their Messiah. However, it is an exhortation to Christians across all time.

The Purpose

Dr. Walter Martin quipped that the book of Hebrews was written by a Hebrew, to other Hebrews, telling the Hebrews to stop acting like Hebrews. The Hebrews were going through difficult times and were in danger of turning away from Christ and going back to the Jewish ways and laws. They were “second-generation believers,” having been won to Christ by those who had actually known Jesus during His ministry on earth. They were true believers and not mere professors of faith and they were being persecuted for that faith. How easy it would be to escape persecution by going back to the old ways they had known before. The Hebrews’ teachers were gone so they were easily seduced by teachers of false doctrines. Sadly these believers were at a standstill spiritually - they were not growing and were in danger of going backward. Just like Pastor Charles said Sunday, they were stuck in a rut, going nowhere and they began to rot. When you get stuck in a rut, you don’t grow, you rot. Some had already forsaken regular worship services.

The author had three goals in writing to them: 1) to combat any possibility of apostasy, as Barney Fife would say “nip it in the bud”, 2) to encourage them to press on to spiritual maturity, and 3) to comfort them in their persecutions. He did this by emphasizing the superiority of Jesus to the angels, prophets, Moses, and

the Levitical priesthood where they put their faith. These were the foundation in the Old Testament but the author shows that there is a “better” way now: Jesus is “superior” to the old teachings. There are 82 references to the Old Testament in Hebrews. “Better” is used 13 times and “perfect” is used 15 times. Jesus is the better way and His sacrifice was perfect. Jesus is more “excellent” than anyone.

Five Major Warnings in Hebrews

- The Danger of Drifting Hebrews 2:1-4
- The Danger of Disobedience Hebrews 3:7 - 4:13
- Need to Progress Towards Maturity Hebrews 5:11 - 6:20
- The Danger of Willful Sin Hebrews 10:26-39
- Warning Against Indifference Hebrews 12 :25-29

These warnings were not given because the Hebrews were in danger of losing their salvation but because there was a real possibility of losing the rewards offered to the believer at the Judgement Seat of Christ. He wanted to encourage believers to press on and obtain all God has promised to the faithful overcomer.

The focus of Hebrews is ultimately the future. The writer informs us he is speaking about “the world to come” (Heb.2:5), a time when believers will reign with Christ and share the “promise of eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15). You and I, as children of God, have been promised a future reward. Like the patriarchs commended in Hebrews 11, the decisions we make today will determine our rewards tomorrow. They “lived in the future tense”, for what lay ahead, and were able to overcome the temptations of the world and the flesh. It was this same attitude of faith that carried Jesus through the agony of the cross: “Jesus, ...for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Heb. 12:2) We need to look beyond and see what the Lord has set before us and remember this world is not our home.

As we study the book of Hebrews may we come to know Christ better, exalt Him more, and keep our eyes on the prize that awaits us. Believe His promises and walk by faith, not by sight!

*Now faith is the substance
of things hoped for,
the evidence
of things not seen.*
Hebrews 11