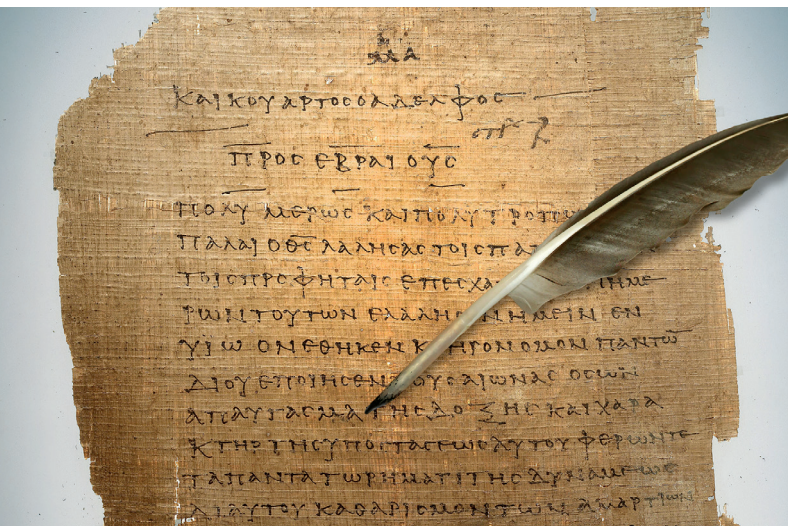
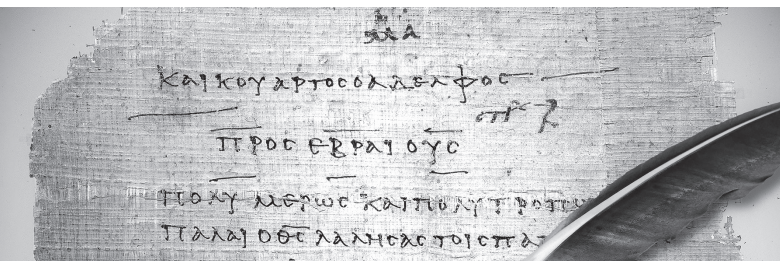


# THE LETTER *to the* HEBREWS



Mark L. Strauss



## *introduction*

# UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE: **The Letter to the Hebrews**

**H**ebrews is one of the most read books of the Bible. With chapters like “The Hall of Faith” and encouraging verses like “Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16) it’s not hard to understand why. The letter to the Hebrews contains some of the most beautiful

theology in the Bible, as well as some of the most difficult to understand statements.

In the following pages, Mark Strauss helps us walk through this encouraging and sometimes difficult book of the Bible. It is our prayer that through these pages you will gain a better understanding of how to read Hebrews, but more importantly, gain a deeper knowledge of who Jesus is, what he has done for us, and what that means for us now.

*Our Daily Bread Ministries*

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*one*

## Introducing the Letter to the Hebrews

**O**ur good friends had a heart for missions and for reaching the lost for Christ. Even before they were married, they had talked about serving overseas as missionaries. Once they finished their college education, they began to consider mission agencies where God might want them. Their church decided it was time for them to adopt an unreached people group. This was a major movement in the 1980s and '90s, when churches picked up the call to reach every people group in the world with the good news of salvation available through Jesus the Messiah.

After some investigation and fact-finding trips, the church decided to invest significant resources

in reaching a particular group for Christ. This segment of the population had tens of thousands of immigrants living as “guest workers” in central Europe. There were several good reasons for choosing them. First, as refugees and immigrants, they needed the kind of friendship and help our friends could offer. A strong anti-immigrant sentiment existed in Europe at the time and so it was unusual for these immigrants to be greeted with a warm smile and a helping hand. In addition, this group had been intensely persecuted for political reasons by others of their own religious tradition. This made them open to hearing about the good news of salvation that came through Jesus.

Our friends were excited about this prospect and so, after raising support and getting appropriate training, they moved to Europe. In cafes, parks, and shopping centers, they came into contact with members of this group and befriended them. In time they launched a low-key Bible study in their home. These relationships grew until several people responded and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. We received an exciting letter from our friends, who were thrilled. A baptism had been planned for that Sunday.

Sunday came and went without word. A week later we received a note from our friends. Sadly, all of the new believers had pulled out at the last minute. They had decided a public baptism was just too much at this time. They feared they would be ostracized, persecuted, and even disowned by their family and friends. In time a number of them became followers

of Jesus and were baptized, yet their initial hesitation reminds us of the challenges people face when confronted with the high cost of following Jesus. In many places around the world, Christians are experiencing persecution because of their faith. In some, they are suffering and even dying.

## **Hebrews: *Stand Firm in the Faith***

The situation our friends faced in Europe was not so different from the situation that produced the New Testament letter we call Hebrews. The letter was written to a group of Jewish Christians who were experiencing severe challenges to their faith. They had acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah and expressed their faith in him, and now they faced increasing persecution and suffering (HEBREWS 10:23, 32–39). There was a great deal of pressure to abandon their faith in Jesus and return to the relative safety and security of their old Jewish faith. Judaism was a respected and protected religion in the Roman Empire and as long as Christianity was viewed as a sect within Judaism, Christians had a measure of protection. But as Christianity began to be viewed as a new religion, Christians were increasingly singled out for persecution. In this context, those believers who had come from Jewish ancestry were tempted to return to those roots.

This is what is happening in the letter to the Hebrews. The author writes out of concern that the readers are in danger of rejecting Christianity and returning to Judaism. He warns them of the devastating consequences of such a move. God's

plan to bring salvation to all the world finds its culmination in Christ. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension are the most important events in human history, providing forgiveness of sins and a restored relationship with God. To turn away from this is to lose any hope of salvation.

## **The Structure of Hebrews**

To prove his case, the author builds an argument for the superiority and completeness of Christ and the new covenant in contrast to the preparatory nature and incompleteness of the old. The old covenant's purpose was to prepare the way for the new, which now supersedes and replaces it.

Interspersed throughout these theological themes are a series of urgent, practical, and passionate calls for the readers to persevere. There are five major warning passages describing the dangerous consequences of abandoning the faith (2:1–4; 3:7–4:14; 5:11–6:20; 10:19–39; 12:25–29). Apart from Christ, there is no salvation and no relationship with God. It is of critical importance, therefore, for them to hold on to their faith and persevere to the end.

## **Central Theological Theme: *Christ Superior to All***

Theologically, the author produces a logical and systematic case for the superiority of Christianity to Judaism. Though the Old Testament (OT) was an authentic revelation from God, its purpose all along was to point forward to the coming of Jesus the Messiah. The central theological theme of the letter



is the superiority of Christ and the new covenant to all that came before. The letter begins with this statement: “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . .” (1:1–2). Jesus is God’s greatest and final revelation, the One who has accomplished once-for-all salvation for all who believe in him. The old covenant was incomplete; the revelation through Jesus is perfect and complete, providing true forgiveness of sins and an eternal relationship with God.

The author frequently uses the word “better” to describe the new revelation given through Jesus. As the mediator of God’s final salvation, Jesus is better than the angels, who mediated the first covenant. While angels are only ministering servants of God, created to do God’s bidding, Jesus is the Son of God and heir of all things (1:4–14).

**Jesus is a better priest.** Instead of the priesthood passed down through Aaron and his sons, Jesus is an eternal high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (7:1–10) [see chapter 3 of this booklet for additional treatment of Melchizedek]. While Israel’s high priest was a sinner and so had to offer sacrifices first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people, Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. As the perfect representative for humanity, he could offer himself once-for-all for the sins of humanity (2:14–18; 4:14–5:10; 7:11–8:6).

**Jesus establishes a better covenant.** Israel failed to keep the covenant given through Moses at Mount Sinai and so failed to enter into God’s

salvation rest (3:7–19). Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus came as mediator of the new and better covenant promised in Jeremiah 31.■ This new covenant, which is written on our hearts instead of on tablets of stone, provides true forgiveness of sins and authentic knowledge of God (8:1–13).

■ In **Jeremiah 31**, God promises his people that despite their coming judgment he will never abandon them. “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” he assures them (v. 3). “Virgin Israel will be rebuilt” (v. 4).

**Jesus enters a better tabernacle.** While the earthly tabernacle was a mere symbol and shadow of God’s presence, at Jesus’s resurrection and ascension he passed through the true heavenly tabernacle and so opened the way into the presence of God (9:1–28).

**Jesus offers a better sacrifice.** The OT sacrifices had to be made day after day and ultimately did not even take away sins. Jesus’s once-for-all sacrifice on the cross was truly effective and paid the penalty for all sins for all time (10:1–18).

## **Central Practical Theme:** ***A Call to Mature and to Persevere***

In light of the superiority of Christ and the new covenant, the author calls on his readers to persevere in the face of persecution and to move on to maturity (10:19–39). There is no salvation outside of Christ and his sacrifice on the cross, so to abandon Christianity is to give up any hope of salvation. The key, then, is to keep their eyes on Christ, who, as the

pioneer of their faith, has run the race before them and set an example that they should follow.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (HEBREWS 12:1–3).

## The Genre of Hebrews

Although Hebrews is referred to as an “epistle” (or letter) in many ways it reads more like an essay. Most letters from the first century began with an identification of the author and the recipients, followed by a greeting (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, ROMANS 1:1, 7; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–3, ETC.). Hebrews starts instead with an introductory statement of its central theme, and no identification of its author or recipients (HEBREWS 1:1–3). Yet it is clearly a letter in the sense that it is a personal message written to a specific group of people in a particular time and place (SEE THE PERSONAL REFERENCES IN HEBREWS 13:18–25). Some have referred to Hebrews as a sermon in letter form. The author himself refers to it as a “word of exhortation” (13:22), that is, a message meant to encourage, instruct, and call to action.



two

## The Author and Recipients of Hebrews

### Who Wrote Hebrews?

#### *The Perplexing Question of Authorship*

**T**he letter to the Hebrews is anonymous in that the author doesn't identify himself. Yet it is only anonymous to us. The author addresses the readers personally, making it clear that they were acquainted with each other. The early church, however, was uncertain about authorship. Some in the Eastern part of the church considered the apostle Paul to be the author. Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150–215) cites his teacher Pantaenus as maintaining Pauline authorship. In one of our earliest manuscripts, the Chester Beatty papyri, Hebrews follows Romans,

indicating the book was viewed as part of the Pauline collection. In the King James Version of the Bible (1611), the book was given the title, “The Epistle of Paul<sup>1</sup> the Apostle to the Hebrews.”

➤ Knowing that **Paul** had been killing followers of Christ, Ananias didn't want to go heal him as God had instructed (ACTS 9:11–14). The Lord assured Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (V. 15). God gave Paul a broader commission than just reaching his Jewish countrymen.

### **Was Paul the author?**

There are certainly some similarities between Paul's theology and the theology of Hebrews. Both have a very high Christology, presenting Jesus as supreme over all, the creator and sustainer of all things (HEBREWS 1:2–3; COLOSSIANS 1:16). There are close conceptual parallels between Hebrews 1:3, where the Son is described as “the exact representation of [God's] being,” and Colossians 1:15, where he is identified as “the image of the invisible God.” Both Hebrews and Paul speak of the superiority of the new covenant to the old (HEBREWS 8:6; 2 CORINTHIANS 3:6) and describe Israel's failure in the wilderness as a warning against believers (HEBREWS 3:7–9; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1–5). Both speak of the need for spiritual maturity and use the analogy of eating solid spiritual food instead of baby food (HEBREWS 5:12–14; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:2). Both cite Habakkuk 2:4 to emphasize the need

for faith (HEBREWS 10:38; ROMANS 1:17). There are other bits of circumstantial evidence, such as the fact that the author of Hebrews, like Paul, was an associate of Timothy (HEBREWS 13:23).

Yet despite these similarities, there is evidence against Paul as the author. The Greek writing style of Hebrews is very different from Paul's other letters. Hebrews has some of the finest and most polished Greek in the New Testament. Paul's style in the letters definitely written by him is much rougher, less refined, and more informal. The early church father Origen wrote: "The diction in Hebrews does not have the rough quality [of Paul], and its syntax is better Greek." Origen suggested that while the thoughts could be Paul's, the actual author was someone else, "who recalled the apostle's teaching and interpreted them" (cited in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.25.11). The vocabulary of Hebrews is also very different from Paul's, including 169 words not found elsewhere in the New Testament (NT).

Perhaps most significantly, the author of Hebrews claims to be a second generation Christian who received his gospel from those who came before him (HEBREWS 2:3). By contrast, Paul insists that his gospel came directly from Jesus Christ, not from any human authority (GALATIANS 1:11–12).

Although there are no contradictions of theology, there are major differences in emphasis. For example, the contrast in Hebrews between the OT sacrificial system and Christ's high priestly office is not found elsewhere in the writings of Paul. Nor is the connection of Christ with the OT figure of

Melchizedek. Because of these and many other differences, during the Reformation Martin Luther rejected Pauline authorship. The Roman Catholic Church responded by affirming Paul as the author at the Council of Trent. Very few scholars today, however, consider Paul to be the author.

### ***Other suggested authors***

If Paul did not write this work, who did? There have been many suggestions but few certainties. Three proposals come from the early church. Origen reports that in his day some claimed that Clement, the bishop of the Roman church (CA. AD 35–99), wrote the book. Yet while Clement appears to be the first to quote from Hebrews, his theological skills do not match those of our author. Origen also mentions Luke as a possibility, perhaps writing for Paul. This makes some sense since Luke, like the author of Hebrews, writes in a refined literary style. Yet Luke was a Gentile, while the author of Hebrews appears to be Jewish. The early church father Tertullian, writing near the end of the second century, suggested Barnabas. As Barnabas was a Levite (ACTS 4:36), he would have had a good knowledge of the OT sacrificial system.

During the Reformation period, Martin Luther suggested Apollos, the Hellenistic Jewish-Christian apologist from Alexandria (ACTS 18:24–19:1). This proposal has found favor with many modern scholars, since Apollos is described in Acts as “a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” who effectively refutes his Jewish

opponents. Perhaps the most interesting modern proposal is that of Adolf von Harnack, who suggested that Priscilla wrote Hebrews. The anonymity, he claimed, was meant to protect those who would not accept a book written by a woman. In the end, all of these are little more than guesses. As Origen pointed out: “But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows” (cited by Eusebius, *Church History* 6.25.14).

Does this unknown authorship affect the inspiration and authority of the letter? The answer is an emphatic “no.” The authority of the Bible lies in its inspiration by the Holy Spirit (2 TIMOTHY 3:16), not in the identity of its human authors. A number of OT books do not name their author (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Esther, Job, etc.). In the NT, the Gospels and Acts are, strictly speaking, anonymous, since the texts themselves do not name their authors. Nevertheless, they remain the inspired and authoritative Word of God.

### ***About the Author***

So what do we know about the author from the text itself? His fluency in Greek and his knowledge of both the OT and Jewish tradition suggests he is a Hellenistic (GREEK-SPEAKING) Jewish Christian. He is clearly intelligent and educated. In a letter comprised of only about five thousand words, he uses a rich and varied vocabulary of over one thousand different Greek words. As noted above, he excels in rhetoric, writing in a polished literary style. He is a creative theologian, adapting Christian tradition to the rapidly changing needs of the church. Finally,



he has a pastor's heart and is deeply concerned about the readers. He admonishes them in order to correct them, but expresses confidence that they will persevere (HEBREWS 6:9).

## The Recipients

As noted in the previous chapter, there are strong indications that the readers are Jewish Christians. The traditional title "To the Hebrews" is very old. Clement of Rome seems to know the letter by this title late in the first century. The writer assumes his readers are familiar with OT stories, referring to them without elaboration with statements like, "as you know . . ." (12:17). The author presupposes knowledge of Jewish ritual, including the layout of the Jewish tabernacle and the functions of the sacrificial system. The recipients also seem to be aware of extra-biblical Jewish traditions, such as the role of angels in mediating the OT law (2:2; CF. ACTS 7:38; GALATIANS 3:19; JOSEPHUS, *ANTIQUITIES* 15:136). Finally, throughout the book the author speaks of the superiority of the new covenant to the old and warns believers not to go back. The implication is that they are in danger of returning to their former faith, that is, to Judaism.

What else can we surmise about the readers? Here are a few things: (1) They are second generation Christians, who heard the good news from the first generation eyewitnesses (HEBREWS 2:3). (2) They are a specific church or group of churches. This is clear from the fact that the author hopes to come and visit them soon (13:19) and refers to Timothy as

though they know him (13:23). (3) They have been persecuted in the past during a great test of their faith, but stood firm (10:32–34). (4) They had recently experienced defections from the faith (10:25).

Where do they live? Perhaps the strongest clue to a specific location is 13:24, where the author says, “Those from Italy send you their greetings.” This, however, could mean either: (1) the author is in Italy (or more specifically in Rome) and is sending greetings to this church from there, or (2) the recipients are in Italy or Rome and the author is with Christians who are sending their greetings back home. Like the question of authorship, the precise identification of the readers remains a mystery.

Despite these uncertainties, the message and purpose of Hebrews remains clear and unambiguous, as we shall see in the next chapter.



three

## The Theological Argument: Christ Superior to All

**Y**ears ago during my seminary studies I worked for a laboratory. One of my coworkers was a member of a group we commonly refer to as a “cult.”<sup>2</sup> This sect held many beliefs contrary to traditional Christianity. Most significantly, they believed that Jesus was not truly God. My coworker and I would often have long discussions as we

➤ **Cults** usually claim that they possess the whole truth, in exclusion to the beliefs of all others. This stands in sharp contrast to Paul’s counsel in Romans 14. But most importantly, they deny that Jesus is fully God and fully human. The deity of Christ is at the heart of Christianity.

worked together. I would show him Bible verses that described the greatness of Jesus and that he was truly God. His response was always trying to show me that Jesus wasn't as great as I thought he was!

The writer to the Hebrews would be dismayed by this approach. Throughout the New Testament the focus is always on the greatness of Jesus. The idea that anyone would try to make him less important is contrary to everything we read in Scripture.

## **God's Final Revelation through the Son**

Hebrews begins by identifying Jesus as the full and final revelation of God. Under the old covenant God spoke to his people through the prophets at various times and in various ways, but “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (1:2). What follows is an extraordinary statement about the supremacy of Christ. This passage represents one of the most exalted Christological statements in the Bible (COMPARE JOHN 1:1–18; COLOSSIANS 1:15–20). The Son is the Creator, sustainer, and heir of all things. He is fully divine—the “radiance” or reflection of God’s glory and the “exact representation of his being” (HEBREWS 1:2–3). After accomplishing our salvation, he took his place at the highest position in the universe, the right hand of God the Father (1:4).

### **Chapter 1: Superior to Angels**

This means, the author says, that Christ is superior to the angels (1:3–4), citing a series of OT quotations to demonstrate this (1:5–14). While angels are merely

ministering servants (1:14), Jesus is God's Son, who will reign on God's throne forever (1:5–6, 8–13). Angels are created beings; he is the Creator (1:10). While the heavens and the earth are finite, he is eternal: "They will perish, but you remain . . . your years will never end" (1:11–12). Hence, the angels are called to worship him (1:6).

Why this discussion about Jesus's superiority to angels? The author points out that if disobedience to the old covenant, which was delivered by angels, resulted in severe judgment, how much greater will the judgment be for those who reject God's final revelation through the Son: "How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?" (2:3).

### **Chapters 3-4:** **Superior to Moses and Joshua**

*(An exposition of Psalm 95)*

Just as Jesus is superior to the angels, so he is superior to Moses, God's mediator for the first covenant. While Moses was faithful as a "servant" in God's house (3:5), Jesus was faithful as the builder of the house and as the Son who rules over the house (3:1–6).

Similarly, Joshua, who assumed Israel's leadership after Moses, was a great leader who led God's people into the promised land. But because the people hardened their hearts, Joshua did not in the end provide them with a true "Sabbath rest" (4:8–9; PSALM 95:7–11).

This idea of "rest" is linked both to God's rest on the seventh day of creation (GENESIS 2:2) and Israel's rest in the promised land (PSALM 95:11). For the writer

of Hebrews, rest becomes a metaphor for God's final salvation. Since the people of Israel failed to enter that rest, "there remains . . . a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (HEBREWS 4:9). Only Jesus, through his once-for-all sacrifice for sins, can provide this true Sabbath rest. The readers are therefore called to be faithful, unlike the wilderness generation, and so to enter that rest (4:11).

## **Chapter 7: Superior to the Old Testament Priesthood**

*(An exposition of Psalm 110:4)*

Under the old covenant, priests in Israel were members of the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron. Jesus, however, was from the tribe of Judah and the family of David. How, then, can he serve as a legitimate high priest? In chapter 7 the author explains that Jesus is a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, an even greater priesthood than that of Levi and Aaron.

The mysterious figure of Melchizedek appears in two places in the Bible, Genesis 14:18–20 and Psalm 110:4. In Genesis 14, when Abraham is returning from defeating the five kings who kidnapped his nephew Lot, Melchizedek, king of Salem, comes out to provide the returning army with a meal and supplies. Melchizedek, whose name means "king of righteousness," is identified as the king of Salem (Jerusalem), which means "king of peace." He is also identified as "priest of the Most High God," confirming that there is an order of priesthood distinct from the line of Aaron.

The author points to remarkable parallels between Jesus and Melchizedek:

(1) Jesus is king of righteousness and king of peace, since he brings reconciliation between God and humanity through his righteous life and sacrificial death. Both of these may be seen as titles of the Messiah. In Isaiah 9:6–7 the Messiah is said to be “Prince of Peace”; and in Jeremiah 23:5–6; 33:15–16 his title is “The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

(2) Just as Melchizedek has no genealogy in Genesis and so no record of his beginning or end, so Jesus is eternal with no beginning or end.

(3) The author then demonstrates that the Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to the Aaronic, by showing how Abraham gave a tithe (TENTH) of the spoils of war to Melchizedek. Since the lesser individual always gives tithes to the greater, Abraham acknowledges that Melchizedek is greater than himself, and so implicitly the priestly order of Melchizedek is greater than the priestly order of Abraham’s descendent Levi.

Some have wondered if Melchizedek was in fact Jesus, appearing on earth in a pre-incarnate form. ■ While this is possible, more likely Melchizedek was an actual earthly king, and the author is drawing an analogy or typology between the two. The author says that Melchizedek is “like” or “resembling” the Son of God (7:3), not that he *is* the Son of God. Melchizedek is a preview of what the Messiah would be.

➤ *The appearance of the second person of the Trinity (God the Son) in human form is also called a **Christophany**. For example, Christophanies may be what occurred in Genesis 12:7–9; 18:1–33; in Exodus 3:2ff in God’s appearance to Moses; Job 38–42; and other passages.*

## Superior to the Old Testament Tabernacle and Sacrifices

Jesus’s superior priesthood means that he offers a better sacrifice than the OT priests. The OT priesthood was transitory, passed down from generation to generation when the high priest died. But Jesus’s priesthood is eternal, as it says in Psalm 110:4: “You are a priest forever . . .” (HEBREWS 7:8, 15–17, 23–25). As a result, “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (7:25).

While the sacrifices of the OT priests had to be repeated “day after day,” Christ’s sacrifice was “once for all” (HEBREWS 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:2, 10)—one sacrifice that paid for all sins for all time. The OT priests’ sacrifices were ultimately ineffective. They offered up only animals, which could never truly take away sins (10:4). Since human beings had sinned, a human being had to pay the penalty for their sins. “For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (2:17). As the perfect representative of humanity, Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for their sins (5:3; 7:27).



In the OT, the high priest was a sinner and so had to first offer sacrifices for himself before he could offer them for the people. Since Jesus was perfect and sinless, he did not have to offer sacrifices for his own sins but could through one sacrifice pay the penalty for the sins of others (7:26–27; 9:14, 28). The OT priests operated in an earthly tabernacle, a mere “shadow” of the true heavenly tabernacle. Jesus entered the heavenly tabernacle (the presence of God) and so offered a once-for-all sacrifice for sins (9:1–14).

## **Chapter 8:** **Superior to the Old Covenant**

Just as Jesus offered a superior sacrifice, so also he established a new and superior covenant (8:6–13). Although God had made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, Israel had repeatedly broken it. But God in his grace had promised through Jeremiah the prophet that one day he would establish a “new covenant.” This covenant would provide full and complete forgiveness of sins, personal and authentic knowledge of God, and the law would be written on peoples’ hearts (JEREMIAH 31:31–34). Hebrews announces that this new covenant has been inaugurated through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, superseding the old (HEBREWS 8:13).



*four*

## **The Practical Argument: Perseverance**

**A**s we have seen, throughout Hebrews the author systematically defends the supremacy of the person and work of Christ. Interspersed throughout this theological material are a series of appeals to persevere in faith. In five key warning passages the author calls his audience to endurance and spiritual maturity and speaks of the severe consequences of falling away (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:25–29). We will summarize these passages and then seek to work through their significance.

### **The Five Warning Passages**

**(1) Warning against drifting away** (2:1–4). In this first warning the author cautions against “drifting away”

from the message spoken through God's Son. A lesser-to-greater argument is used: If disobedience to God's first revelation which was delivered by angels incurred severe punishment, how much greater the judgment against those who ignore God's final revelation through the Son!

**(2) Warning against a hard heart** (3:7–4:13). In the second warning passage, the author uses an exposition of Psalm 95 to warn against falling into the same sin as Israel in the wilderness, when they hardened their hearts and rebelled against God. The result was that a whole generation failed to enter God's rest—the promised land. “Don't let the same thing happened to you!” the author warns.

**(3) Warning against falling away** (5:11–6:12). The third warning section calls the readers to move beyond basic teachings to spiritual maturity, since immaturity can lead to apostasy. What follows is the most severe warning up to this point:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

(HEBREWS 6:4–6)

To reject the message after experiencing its goodness and power is like crucifying Jesus all over again. It is impossible, the author says, for those who have

reached this advanced state of apostasy to be brought back to repentance. The author quickly adds that he has confidence in his readers: “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation” (6:9).

**(4) The danger of rejecting God’s truth and God’s Son** (10:19–39). Having described in detail Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice for sins, which enables us to enter into God’s very presence, in the fourth warning the author cautions against deliberately rejecting the truth they have received: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:26–27). Since Christ’s sacrificial death is our only means of salvation, to reject it means that “no sacrifice for sins is left”; there is only the fearful specter of coming judgment.

**(5) The danger of rejecting God’s Word** (12:25–29). The final warning picks up the author’s comparison between the old covenant, symbolized by Mount Sinai, and the new covenant, symbolized by Mount Zion.▀ The author again uses a lesser-to-greater argument. As God spoke to the Israelites from Mount Sinai at the establishment of the first covenant, so now he speaks to us from the heavenly mountain—Mount Zion (symbolic of God’s presence)—through his Son. To reject the one who speaks from heaven is even more dangerous than rejecting the one who spoke from the mountain.

➤ **Zion** was originally the name of the fortress in Jerusalem that David captured. Zion can mean “the city of David,” but it also represents “the city of God.”

These five passages raise the difficult question of whether believers can lose their salvation.

## Can Christians Lose Their Salvation?

Most of us have probably known people who at one time claimed to be a Christian but later turned away from the faith. I had a good friend in high school who one summer attended a Christian camp with our youth group. The speaker was a gifted and passionate teacher and my friend was deeply moved by his teaching. When on Friday night the speaker called for people to come forward and accept Jesus as their Savior, my friend went forward. I was so excited! My friends and I were patting him on the back and saying, “Welcome to the family!”

Later, however, this friend became disenchanted with his Christian faith. He drifted away and stopped coming to church. We had long discussions where he would say he just didn’t believe any longer. To this day he remains an unbeliever. Was my friend ever saved in the first place? This is the question that is raised by the warning passages of Hebrews. There are three main views:

### *1. Loss of rewards, not loss of salvation.*

One possible solution is that the author of Hebrews is not speaking about loss of salvation, but about a believer’s *loss of rewards* at the “judgment seat of

Christ,” where believers will “receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 CORINTHIANS 5:10; CF. ROMANS 14:10). In 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 Paul speaks of some believers whose spiritual works are like “wood, hay or straw” (v. 12) which will be burned up in the refining fire of judgment day. “If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames” (v. 15).

While this interpretation is possible, the passages in Hebrews seem to speak with much greater severity, using language like “never enter his rest” (HEBREWS 3:11, 18; 4:3, 5), “crucifying the Son of God all over again” (6:6), “in danger of being cursed” (6:8), “raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:27), and “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). While Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:15 speaks about worthless “works” being consumed by fire, in Hebrews it is the “enemies of God” who will be consumed. It does not seem likely that this refers to believers. Furthermore, because of this apostasy, “no sacrifice for sins is left” (10:26). How could one be saved without Christ’s sacrifice?

## *2. Loss of salvation*

As we have seen, salvation at times seems to be dependent on continuing faith and church members are apparently warned not to fall away, lest they be lost (HEBREWS 6:4–6; 10:23–27). John says that if “what you heard from the beginning remains in you . . . you also will remain in the Son and in the Father” (1 JOHN 2:24). In Galatians 5:4 Paul warns the Galatians that by

seeking to be justified by the works of the law, some in Galatia “have fallen away from grace” (CF. JAMES 5:19; 2 PETER 2:20).

The problem with this view, however, is that many other passages suggest that once believers have been saved by the grace of God, they can never lose that salvation. Philippians 1:6 says that the One who began a good work in us “will carry it on to completion.” God started our salvation and he will finish it. Ephesians 4:30 says that when we were saved, we were “sealed for the day of redemption” by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, in a sequence of God’s actions in our salvation, Paul says that “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.... And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (ROMANS 8:29–30). If everyone God saves will ultimately be glorified, then our salvation is assured (CF. JOHN 10:27–30; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17).

### *3. Professing believers, who were never truly saved.*

The best solution may be that these different passages are viewing salvation from different vantage points—either from the church’s view or from God’s view. On the one hand, Scripture strongly teaches that salvation is an *internal transformation accomplished by God*. The language of salvation bears this out. We are “born again” (JOHN 3:3); we become a new creation in Christ (2 CORINTHIANS 5:17); we are adopted as children of God (ROMANS 8:15). Since salvation is God’s doing, not ours, then it is irreversible.

However, only God knows who is truly saved, because only God can see the human heart. The Church must *accept as genuine any credible profession of faith*. Consider when someone comes forward at an evangelistic service to accept Jesus as their Savior. We don't say, "We'll wait and see if this is genuine." No, we say, "Welcome to the family!" We accept as genuine any credible profession of faith. Yet that person may later "fall away" and reject Christ. From a human perspective, believers seem to gain and lose their salvation. Like the writer to the Hebrews, we might say something like, "You better come back, lest you lose out on the salvation you had."

From *God's vantage point*, then, when a believer is once saved (truly saved), that person is always saved. From *a human vantage point*, however, believers appear to gain and lose their salvation. The difference is much like the difference in perspectives between Paul and James. Paul says faith alone is necessary for salvation (EPHESIANS 2:8–9). James says faith without works is dead (JAMES 2:14–26). Paul seems to be looking at things from God's perspective, who sees peoples' hearts and so knows if they have authentic faith. James is looking at it from a human perspective: we must see actions in order to know that faith is real.

## **Conclusion: Our Great Salvation**

While Hebrews presents some honest challenges, we must not let those difficulties distract us from the author's central message: All of human history has come to its climax in Jesus, our great high priest. His life, death, and resurrection provide the evidence



of God's overwhelming love and his master plan to reconcile us to himself. To take this for granted or turn away from so great a salvation would be the height of human folly. Stand firm, the author encourages, and keep your eyes on Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (HEBREWS 12:2). He expresses confidence that his readers will persevere to the end. Like Paul, he is certain that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (PHILIPPIANS 1:6). The challenge remains the same for us today. Our circumstances may or may not be as difficult as those faced by the recipients of this letter, but the call to hold on to faith in Christ whatever our circumstances rings clearly from its pages.



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