



Hebrews

Hebrews is designed to act as encouragement to a group of Christians who had stood firm through persecution but who, over time, had become discouraged and whose faith had begun to be shaky. The author of the book held up Jesus as an example to follow who, himself, had gone through great suffering into glory, making a way for others to follow. The author depicts Jesus both as a high priest enacting a sacrifice and as the sacrifice itself, which brings people into relationship with the God who is always faithful.

Although it is often called an epistle, Hebrews reads much more like a sermon than a letter.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 45 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.9; 12.28-13.25.



Genre

A sermon



Anything tricky?

The trickiest part of the book of Hebrews is that it assumes that you know and understand how sacrifice in the temple worked. Without this knowledge it can be really quite difficult to understand what was going on. You might like to read Leviticus to help you with this.



Inspiring quotes

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

(Hebrews 4.12)

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul

(Hebrews 6.19)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

(Hebrews 11.1)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

(Hebrews 13.2)



About the Author

Traditionally the author of Hebrews was thought to be the apostle Paul, largely because of the reference to Timothy in 13.23. Scholars are now largely agreed that the language, style and theology is so very different from the rest of the Pauline letters, that it is highly unlikely to have been written by Paul.

There are no other clues to the identity of the writer and so the author of Hebrews remains unknown.



About the times

Hebrews is thought to have been written between about ad 60 and 80, shortly after the community had experienced a time of persecution and suffering. The key question for dating the book is whether you think the Jerusalem temple still existed or not. If the temple was still there (i.e. before ad 70) then Hebrews is laying out a claim about worship that competed with that of the temple. If it had been destroyed by the time Hebrews was written then the author, like many Jews of his day, were trying to make sense of their faith in God without a place to worship him.

Hebrews reads very differently depending on the date you think it was written.

What were people feeling?

Whatever the date, the recipients of Hebrews were clearly discouraged and disheartened in their faith and needed the message of encouragement that you can find in the book.



What kind of Book is it?

Although often called an epistle it is more like a sermon, designed to encourage its hearers to continued faithfulness.

You will notice that it does not open as most New Testament letters do with any introduction or reference to personal connection with the audience and its greetings at the end are cursory in the extreme. But, at the end (13.22), the author does say 'I have written to you briefly'. This implies a letter – maybe it is halfway between a sermon and a letter?



How is it structured?

Because of the complex nature of the book, there are many different structures offered for it.

One possible one is to focus entirely on Christ like this:

1.1-2.18	Christ is superior to the angels
3.1-4.16	Christ is superior to Moses
5.1-7.28	Christ is superior to Aaron
8.1-10.39	Christ is superior to the old covenant
11.1-12.29	Christ is superior to old covenant believers
13.1-25	Some final encouragements



Look out for...

One of the key strands that runs all the way through this book is the theme of atonement (see especially 2.17-18; 4.14-5.10; 9.1-10.1). Notice the language that is used throughout the book and what the author thinks atonement achieved.

Notice how the language of the temple is used (sacrifice, atonement, high priest etc...) to describe Jesus and what he has done. How does this language make you feel?

Also trace the theme of hope that runs through the book.



What could this mean for me?

The key message of Hebrews is that, although it may not feel as though the world is different so that suffering still happens, Jesus' sacrifice has changed the world for ever. Think about this as you read.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Some people love Hebrews; others find it impenetrable. What about you? Discuss how you felt about it as you read?
- What kind of book do you think Hebrews is? A letter? A sermon? Something else?
- Hebrews talks about sacrifices a lot – does this language make any sense today? If we were to translate its message into modern ideas, what words might we use?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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