



St. Mark's Sunday School  
Years 11 & 12  
April 2009

# THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS INTRODUCTION & THEMES – JESUS IS GREATER



## **Aim**

Our Lord Jesus Christ is and was the greatest to have ever lived on earth. The aim of the lesson is to understand why this letter had to be written and gain a better understanding of the content of this letter, by learning a little about the background.

## **Resources**

- Ilumina
- Life Application Study Bible
- The Orthodox Study Bible

## **Servant preparation**

Read Hebrews

## **Key Verses**

Hebrews 1:1-3

*“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person,*

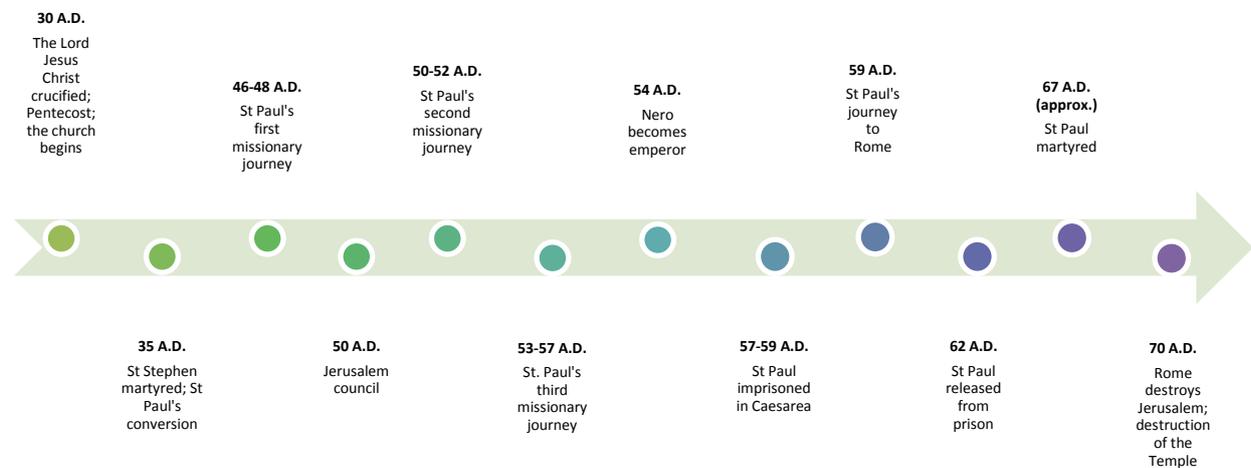
*and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,"*

**Introduction**

Our church and the early church fathers (including St. Athanasius, St. John Chrysostom and Eusebius) ascribe the epistle to St. Paul. As the name of the author is not given in the text, some have suggested it may have been Barnabas, Priscilla or others. This is not the view of the Orthodox Church. Whoever the author is, they speak of Timothy as “brother”.

It was probably written before 70 A.D., as religious sacrifices and ceremonies are referred to in this epistle, but there is no mention of the destruction of the temple (refer to timeline on page 2).

The epistle is written to Hebrew Christians (possibly second generation Christians – see Chapter 2:3), who may have been considering returning to Judaism, perhaps from immaturity stemming from a lack of understanding of biblical truths; and all believers in Christ. The Jewish Christians were probably undergoing fierce persecution, socially & physically, both from Jews and from Romans. Christ had not returned to establish His kingdom & the people needed to be reassured that Christianity was true and that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.



The purpose of the epistle was to present the sufficiency and superiority of Christ.

CONSCIENTIOUS consumers shop for value, the best products for the money. Wise parents desire only the best for their children, nourishing their growing bodies, minds, and spirits. Individuals with integrity seek the best investment of time, talents, and treasures. In every area, to settle for less would be wasteful, foolish, and irresponsible. Yet it is a natural pull to move toward what is convenient and comfortable.

Judaism was not second-rate or easy. Divinely designed, it was the best religion, expressing true worship and devotion to God. The commandments, the rituals, and the prophets described God's

promises and revealed the way to forgiveness and salvation. But Christ came, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, conquering sin, shattering all barriers to God, freely providing eternal life.

This message was difficult for Jews to accept. Although they had sought the Messiah for centuries, they were entrenched in thinking and worshiping in traditional forms. Following Jesus seemed to repudiate their marvellous heritage and Scriptures. With caution and questions they listened to the gospel, but many rejected it and sought to eliminate this "heresy." Those who did accept Jesus as the Messiah often found themselves slipping back into familiar routines, trying to live a hybrid faith. Hebrews is a masterful document written to Jews who were evaluating Jesus or struggling with this new faith. The message of Hebrews is that Jesus is better, Christianity is superior, Christ is supreme and completely sufficient for salvation.

Hebrews begins by emphasizing that the old (Judaism) and the new (Christianity) are both religions revealed by God (1:1-3). In the doctrinal section that follows (1:4-10:18), the writer shows how Jesus is superior to angels (1:4-2:18), superior to their leaders (3:1-4:13), and superior to their priests (4:14-7:28). Christianity surpasses Judaism because it has a better covenant (8:1-13), a better sanctuary (9:1-10), and a more sufficient sacrifice for sins (9:11-10:18).

Having established the superiority of Christianity, the writer moves on to the practical implications of following Christ. The readers are exhorted to hold on to their new faith, encourage each other, and look forward to Christ's return (10:19-25). They are warned about the consequences of rejecting Christ's sacrifice (10:26-31) and reminded of the rewards for faithfulness (10:32-39). Then St Paul explains how to live by faith, giving illustrations of the faithful men and women in Israel's history (11:1-40) and giving encouragement and exhortation for daily living (12:1-17). This section ends by comparing the old covenant with the new (12:18-29). The writer concludes with moral exhortations (13:1-17), a request for prayer (13:18-19), and a benediction and greetings (13:20-25).

Whatever you are considering as the focus of life, Christ is better. He is the perfect revelation of God, the final and complete sacrifice for sin, the compassionate and understanding mediator, and the only way to eternal life. Read Hebrews and begin to see history and life from God's perspective. Then give yourself unreservedly and completely to Christ.

## Outline

The epistle can be broken down as follows:

1. The Superiority of Christ (1:1-10:18)
  - a. Introduction: The supreme revelation (1:1-4)
  - b. Christ's authority is superior to the angels' (1:5-2:18)
  - c. Christ's rest is superior to Moses' (3:1-4:13)
  - d. Christ's priesthood is superior to Aaron's (4:14-7:28)
  - e. Christ's worship is superior to Moses' (8:1-10:18)
2. Persevering towards the Entrance & Rest (10:19-13:19)
  - a. Persevering in worship (10:19-39)
  - b. Persevering in faith (11:1-40)
  - c. Persevering in discipline (12:1-29)

- d. Persevering in holiness (13:1-19)
- 3. Conclusion (13:20-25)

**The supreme revelation (1:1-4)**

These few verses give an introductory summary of the topics covered in the next ten chapters. The new covenant is superior to the old, as the old is incomplete and preparatory, whereas the new is complete and final. In this new covenant, man enters into the heavenly realm through Christ and is glorified.

**Christ's authority is superior to the angels' (1:5-2:18)**

Christ is the SON of God. This was evident at His Baptism & Transfiguration, but His enthronement in heaven is what settles the matter. The Nicene Creed states that He is "the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages... begotten not made". The angels were created, but there was never a time when God the Son did not exist.

<i>Hebrews passage</i>	<i>Old Testament passage</i>	<i>How Christ is superior to angels</i>
1:5-6	Psalm 2:7	Christ is called "Son" of God, a title never given to angels.
1:7,14	Psalm 104:4	Angels are important, but are still only servants under God.
1:8-9	Psalm 45:6	Christ's Kingdom is forever
1:10	Psalm 102:25	Christ is the Creator of the world
1:13	Psalm 110:1	Christ is given unique honour by God.

**Christ's rest is superior to Moses' (3:1-4:13)**

To the Jews there were three types of God's rest:

- I) The Sabbath rest, the day on which God rested from His works (Gen. 2:2-3)
- II) The rest from Egyptian bondage, which the Israelites coming out of Egypt experienced in Canaan
- III) The rest in the kingdom, the ultimate Sabbath rest in heaven established by the Messiah.

The last type of rest mentioned above, is far better than the rest that Moses had given to the people after they had been freed from bondage.

As Moses had led the people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, so Christ leads us out of sin's slavery. The writer asks: Why settle for Moses, when you can have Jesus Christ (who appointed Moses)?

**Christ's priesthood is superior to Aaron's (4:14-7:28)**

A major theme of the book of Hebrews is the contrast between the earthly, or Levitical priesthood, and the eternal priesthood of Melchizedek, which is fulfilled in Christ. The Levitical priesthood,

established by Aaron of the tribe of Levi, is limited simply because those who fill it are ordinary human beings. The Levitical priests carry out God's instructions and assist the people in their worship, but they cannot ultimately reconcile the people to God.

The mysterious figure of Melchizedek, on the other hand, represents an entirely different kind of priesthood. Melchizedek appears in Genesis 14:18-20, long before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood. He is given no genealogy, and nothing is said of his death. He receives tithes from Abraham, implying he is superior to Abraham in rank – and by extension superior to Abraham's descendants, the Levites. Melchizedek is not only a priest but a king as well. In this dual office he is able to reconcile the justice of God (the business of a king) with his mercy (the business of a priest). His name means "King of Righteousness" and his title "King of Salem" means "King of Peace". He may be a Theophany (a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ); at the very least he is a type of Christ, as St Paul explains in detail.

There are several points of contrast between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Melchizedek, which is fulfilled in Christ.

	<i><b>The Priesthood of Levi</b></i>	<i><b>The Priesthood of Melchizedek</b></i>
<b>Genealogical Requirement</b>	Limited to one tribe. It cannot transform mortal & corrupt humanity because it consists of mere men.	As Melchizedek was without earthly genealogy, so is Christ by virtue of His virgin birth. He is God incarnate, immortal and sinless, and therefore His priesthood is able to transform humanity.
<b>Ordination</b>	The power given at ordination is incomplete. The Levitical priesthood is weak, its sacrifices have to be repeated, and it cannot perfect the worshippers. It cannot reconcile people to God, nor give them the inner power to obey. The ordination is without direct confirmation from God.	The power of Christ's priesthood is perfect, strong and effective, and draws us near to God. His sacrifice is offered once, for all. The Father Himself ordains the Son.
<b>Term of Office</b>	The Levitical priesthood is temporary. Since it is composed of mortal men, it requires many members	Since Christ is immortal, the priesthood of Melchizedek needs only one, eternal priest.
<b>Moral &amp; Spiritual Requirements</b>	These must be less than perfection, for the Levitical priests are all created beings subject to sin.	The requirement of perfect holiness is met in Christ, the only sinless One. He is more than mere man – He is the Son of God.

**Christ's worship is superior to Moses' (8:1-10:18)**

The writer of Hebrews compares the old Mosaic covenant with the new Messianic covenant showing that the old is just a shadow of the new – please refer to the table below for a comparison.

The old covenant was the covenant of law between God and Israel. The new and better way is the covenant of grace – Christ's offer to forgive our sins and bring us to God through His sacrificial death. This covenant is new in extent – it goes beyond Israel & Judah to include all Gentile nations. It is new in application as it is written in our hearts and minds. It offers a new way to forgiveness, not through animal sacrifice, but through faith.

If our hearts are not changed, following God's rules will be unpleasant and difficult. We will rebel against being told how to live. The Holy Spirit, however, gives us new desires, helping us want to obey God. With new hearts we find that serving God is our greatest joy.

<b><i>The Old Covenant under Moses</i></b>	<b><i>The New Covenant in Christ</i></b>	<b><i>Application</i></b>
Gifts and sacrifices by those guilty of sin	Self-sacrifice by the guiltless Christ	Christ died for you
Focussed on a physical building where one goes to worship	Focuses on the reign of Christ in the hearts of believers	God is directly involved in your life
A shadow	A reality	Not temporal, but eternal
Limited promises	Limitless promises	We can trust God's promises to us
Failed agreement by people	Faithful agreement by Christ	Christ has kept the agreement when people couldn't
External standards and rules	Internal standards – a new heart	God sees both actions and motives – we are accountable to God not rules
Limited access to God	Unlimited access to God	God is personally available
Based on fear	Based on love and forgiveness	Forgiveness keeps our failures from destroying the agreement
Legal cleansing	Personal cleansing	God's cleansing is complete
Continual sacrifice	Conclusive sacrifice	Christ's sacrifice was perfect and final
Obey the rules	Serve the living God	We have a relationship not regulations
Forgiveness earned	Forgiveness freely given	We have true and complete forgiveness
Repeated yearly	Completed by Christ's death	Christ's death can be applied to your sin
Human effort	God's grace	Initiated by God's love for you
Available to some	Available to all	Available to you

**Persevering in worship (10:19-39)**

St Paul instructs the Hebrews to continue assembling in worship. Corporate worship with other believers on a daily and weekly basis increases our expectation of the coming of the Kingdom. We also gather together to share our faith and to strengthen one another in the Lord. As we approach the Day when Christ returns, we will face many spiritual struggles and even persecution. Difficulties

should never be excuses for missing church services. Rather, as difficulties arise, we should make an even greater effort to be faithful in attendance.

### **Persevering in faith (11:1-40)**

This is a description of how faith works. The Jewish Christians needed encouragement as they had been so discouraged by persecution. Faith here, is the essence of things hoped for and not seen, a vision of the future. This was a great encouragement to the people of God throughout history: the invisible is often more real than the visible.

Many examples of those who have demonstrated faith throughout history are given here. Let's take the example of Abraham & Sarah. Their faith was simple, and was evidenced through their works:

- i) Bold and adventurous action (v. 8)
- ii) obedience (v. 8)
- iii) patience (v. 9, 10)
- iv) trust (v. 11)
- v) confidence (v.11)

In the past mighty works of faith were done by those whose faith was unfulfilled. How much more should we persevere, who have inherited the promise, knowing God under the new covenant?

### **Persevering in discipline (12:1-29)**

The Christian life involves hard work. It requires us to give up whatever endangers our relationship with God, to run patiently and to struggle against sin with the power of the Holy Spirit. To live effectively we must keep our eyes on Jesus. We will stumble if we look away from Him to stare at ourselves or at the circumstances surrounding us. We should be running for Christ, not ourselves and we must always keep Him in sight.

This whole section (beginning from 10:19) progressively implores us to seek God's kingdom first. Under the new covenant we can ascend to this heavenly place in worship and prayer. This is experienced by us in the Divine Liturgy – we ascend to that place where we are surrounded by a "great... cloud of witness". This is not a physical place, but a spiritual one, where the communion of saints is established.

In Christ, we have come to the greater and more perfect tabernacle, where we obtain eternal redemption. This tabernacle (mentioned in 12:22) is that same spiritual place where we enter the holy place with Christ by virtue of our union with Him.

### **Persevering in holiness (13:1-19)**

We experience the heavenly city and the heavenly most holy place when we sacrifice our whole being, body and soul in the Divine Liturgy – a mystery in which our part is that of praise consistent with true doctrine. Good works and life in community must be united with worship. Priests and

spiritual leaders must be respected and obeyed (a reference to the "spiritual fatherhood" in the Church).

Practical brotherly love is to be shown to all, but especially for the lowly, the powerless and the victims of injustice. Strangers are travellers in need of hospitality. Prisoners are to be prayed for and aided where possible. For all are in the Body of Christ, the Church, and are members of one another.

### **Conclusion**

The epistle to the Hebrews is a call to Christian maturity addressed to the first century Jewish Christians, but it applies to Christians of any age & background. Christian maturity is making Christ the beginning and end of our faith. To grow in maturity, we must centre our lives on Him, not falling back into sin, not trusting ourselves and not letting anything come between us and Christ.

The sufficiency of the blood of Christ is realised in His resurrection, as Christ offers His blood in the eternal sanctuary and thereby instituting a new everlasting covenant. The everlasting covenant makes us complete as we co-operate with God in all things and progress towards sainthood. Christ is sufficient and superior.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- 1) What is it about the Son of God that makes Him greater than the angels?
- 2) What did God do for His human creation? (2:8)
- 3) How does Moses' position in God's family compare with Christ's position? (3:5-6)
- 4) Why are believers able to approach God's throne with confidence? (4:15-16)
- 5) How is Jesus' priesthood similar to Melchizedek's? (5:7)
- 6) How do we know that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham? (7:6-7)
- 7) What was the primary weakness of the law of Moses? (7:19)
- 8) What were the sacrifices of the old agreement, or old covenant, unable to do? (9:9)
- 9) What sacrifice did Jesus offer instead of the blood of goats and calves? (9:12)
- 10) If Christ's sacrifice makes us perfect in God's eyes, what should we do when we sin?