



### SESSION OBJECTIVE: INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

To understand the themes and theology of the Book of Hebrews.

## The Book of Hebrews

Hebrews is one of the most beautiful and yet challenging studies in the New Testament. It is laced with imagery from the Old Testament. In fact, much of the goal of Hebrews is to demonstrate how Jesus Christ is the final or better fulfillment of so much of what the Old Testament contains. He is greater than the prophets (Heb. 1:1-2). He is the very radiance of God (Heb. 1:3). He is superior to the angels (Heb. 1:4-7). He is the One whom God calls “God” (Heb. 1:8). Hebrews has so much to say concerning the supremacy of Christ. Oh, that’s *just chapter one*. Understand that you are embarking on a deeply challenging study, one that will require you to look up a lot of passages in the Old Testament in order to understand what is being said. However, you will be greatly rewarded if you choose to do so. Below is a breakdown of some of the basic information

### AUTHORSHIP

Who wrote the Book of Hebrews? In truth, the Bible does not tell us. The theology of Hebrews is deeply Jewish and requires a strong command of the Old Testament. For this reason, some have surmised that Paul authored it, while others have suggested that Clement of Rome wrote it. The earliest extant text of Hebrews dates to the early third century and places it immediately after Romans, firmly within the Pauline corpus (i.e., the works of the apostle Paul). Carson and Moo write: “This undoubtedly reflects the conviction of the Eastern church, itself dependent on the more cautious assessment of several notable Alexandrian scholars, whose opinions are largely preserved by Eusebius.”<sup>1</sup> Both Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150–215) and Origen (185–253) hold this view, though they both acknowledge that this position is not without problems. The main issue is linguistic; the Greek is more advanced than what Paul typically writes. Accordingly, Clement has argued that

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 600.

Paul wrote the work originally in Hebrew and that Luke, Paul's traveling companion (2 Tim. 4:11), translated it into Greek. Others, such as Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus, were familiar with the letter but did not believe Paul wrote it. Still others, such as Origen, have refused to speculate. Ultimately, the author's human identity is unimportant. This work, as with the rest of Scripture, was written by the superintending of the Holy Spirit. My conviction is that of Clement's: I believe Paul wrote it, and Luke translated it. However, because the identity is uncertain, I will use the term "author" rather than a given name to reflect this uncertainty.

### **LOCATION**

Because we cannot be certain of the authorship of this letter, the location in which it is written is also difficult to ascertain. Only one textual clue is given, in Hebrews 13:24: "Those who come from Italy send you greetings." The text literally says: "Greetings to you from those from Italy." But the wording is ambiguous. It could be referring to believers who are from Italy but are living elsewhere (presumably in the same place as the author), in which case, we have no idea where the intended location is, or it could mean believers in Italy, in which case, it might be that the intended area is somewhere near Italy. However, even that is not a guarantee, especially if the author was Paul, who traveled constantly.

### **DATE**

Given the difficulty of confirming the authorship and location of this letter, it should come as no surprise that the date of this letter is also difficult to confirm. However, there are several key arguments for narrowing the date to between A.D. 60 and 70.

#### **1. The author seems to be a second-generation Christian**

Hebrews 2:3 suggests that the author was not a first-generation Christian but rather a second-generation Christian. It reads: "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard." The author indicates that the message of salvation was first proclaimed by Christ to His original audience and then to the author's audience, presumably the next generation of believers. The author may have been a child of adult believers who were first-generation Christians. Either way, he seems to be very close to the advent of the Lord.

#### **2. Clement quotes it**

1 Clement, particularly 1 Clement 36:1–6, seems to very clearly quote the Book of Hebrews. The majority of scholarship dates 1 Clement to A.D. 96, implying that the Book of Hebrews was written before then and early enough for it to have been disseminated, read, and memorized.

#### **3. Timothy is mentioned**

There is a strong consensus that Timothy, mentioned in Hebrews 13:23, is the same young man who traveled with Paul and was mentored by him. We believe Paul would have taken Timothy on as a disciple somewhere around A.D. 50.

#### **4. A connection to Nero**

Some have contended that Hebrews 12:4 alludes to a specific and intense period of persecution under the Emperor Nero. It reads: "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." Some have argued that the "shedding of your blood" is not figurative, and is a direct acknowledgment of the many Christians who *did* have their blood shed.

There are also some arguments that have been made centered on language that seems to indicate that Jewish sacrificial ritual was still continuing at the point when Hebrews was written. Given that the Temple was

destroyed in A.D. 70 and could therefore no longer uphold sacrificial ritual, it follows that Hebrews had to have been written prior to A.D. 70, which brings us back to the dates between A.D. 60 and 70. This is most likely when it was written, in our estimation.

### THEMES

As mentioned above, the theme of Hebrews is the supremacy of Christ. The work signals this in several ways. Hebrews 1:1-4:16 captures the superiority of Christ as Mediator. Hebrews 5:1-7:28 speaks of Christ as the superior and true High Priest, albeit from a different line (I'm looking at *you*, Melchizedek). Hebrews 8:1-10:18 unveils the superiority of the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ. The remainder of Hebrews focuses on applications grounded in Christ's superiority, as well as concluding remarks that appear to be specific to the writer's context. In all of these sections, the author incorporates numerous Old Testament quotations and allusions. Readers need to be aware of this and prepared to do some personal digging as they study.

## The Goal

There are perhaps several goals one could set as they embark on a study of Hebrews, but my chief concern is that this study would deepen your love for Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews declares that Jesus is superior in every way. This should engender deeper affection for the Lord and more substantive appreciation for the work He has done on our behalf. Be ready to be amazed. He is truly worthy of everything we have.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Hebrews 1:4; 7:19, 22; 8:6. What things are described as “better,” and what does that tell us about the purpose of the book?

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2. Read Hebrews 9:23; 10:34; 11:40; 12:24. What things are described as “better,” and what does that tell us about the purpose of the book?

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### Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 2:1-4. What does it look like to “drift,” and what reasons does Hebrews give for paying careful attention?

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2. Read Hebrews 3:7-19; 4:1-11. What kept Israel out of God's rest, and what warnings does Hebrews draw for believers today?

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### Day Three

1. Read Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-10. What makes Jesus a sympathetic High Priest, and what confidence should that give us in prayer?

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2. Read Hebrews 10:32-39; 12:1-11. According to these passages, what is God doing in hardship, and what does endurance prove?

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### Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 8:6-13; 10:11-18. What is “new” about the New Covenant, and how does Jesus accomplish what the old system could not?

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2. Read Hebrews 11:1-2, 6; 12:1-3. How does Hebrews define faith, and why does the author point us to so many examples?

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### Discuss the Text!

## Introduction Discussion: Commit to Finish

One of the themes of Hebrews is the importance of running the race of faith and finishing well (Heb. 12:1-3). You are about to embark on a deep study of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Make a commitment to complete this study well, and discuss as a group what you’ll have to do to ensure your success.

1. Icebreaker: What was the last “big thing” you started? Did you finish it well? Or did you stop halfway through?
2. Are you someone who finishes what you start? Or do you often start things and move on to new things before finishing them?
3. What changes do you need to make to better set yourself up for success for this study?
4. What is the biggest challenge for you in being consistently in Bible study every week?
5. Why does consistency in study matter?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Start a puzzle with your kids, and finish it before moving on to games or other fun activities. Discuss with them the importance of finishing what you start.

## Takeaways:

1. The Epistle to the Hebrews is all about the supremacy of Jesus Christ.
2. This is a study that will be demanding but worthwhile.