

"Introduction to Hebrews"

Introduction: Tonight we shall begin an adventure which will take us into the depths of God's Word. It will be a study that will enrich each of us as we gather together to learn about the book of Hebrews. Now before we get to Hebrews chapter 1 we need to establish a foundation in order to understand this letter in the context which it was written.

1. **Who** was the letter addressed to and **when** was the letter written?

The first thing that I want to look at is the WHO and the WHEN of this letter because these two points will really help us to understand this letter as we study our way through it.

The letter was written to a group of Jewish believers who had been reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When this letter was written the Temple and the sacrificial system still existed in Jerusalem. This means that the letter had to be written before the destruction of the Temple and that was in AD 70. Now as we work our way through the letter we will also be able to detect that these believers had not met Jesus while He walked on the earth. Now the date of Jesus death was somewhere around AD 32 so therefore the letter had to have been written between AD 32 and AD 70. But I believe we can get even closer to the date by considering a few other thoughts. If these people never met Jesus while He walked on the earth then that means they had to have heard through missionaries or others from Jerusalem who were sharing the Gospel. Most likely they heard the Gospel from people who were scattered when the persecution came upon the early church. One thing we do know is that they had been saved for a while when this letter was written.

Hebrews 5:12

¹² For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

Here in this verse we see that they had been saved long enough that they should have been teaching others but they were still in need of milk and were not able to handle the meat of God's Word. Therefore the letter was probably written a few years before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Most Bible scholars believe the letter was written between 60 and 70 AD. **But what I want us to hold onto is that fact that the Temple is still standing and the sacrificial system is still in practice.**

2. **What was happening in the lives of those the letter is addressed to?**

It is very difficult for us to really grasp onto what these Jewish believers were going through at the time this letter was written but we will do our best to understand what they were feeling. The Jews were not like the Gentiles in that the Jews had a Divine given worship system and Divine given place to worship. Now that this certain group of people were believers they were being called upon to walk away from the old worship system and the ceremonies which were conducted at the Temple. They were being called upon to forsake that which their fathers had practiced for thousands of years. They were now taught there was no need for the sacrifices to be offered at the Temple, they were no longer under the ceremonial Law and all of this had been a part of their lives since they were born.

Also on top of the traditional struggles there was the pressure from the Jewish community around them. In Acts 8 we are told that there was persecution that came upon the church and it scattered the believers to different areas.

Acts 8:1

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Now I want you to notice the words of the Jewish scholar Adolf Saphir:

"Then arose another persecution of the believers, especially directed against the apostle Paul. Festus died about the year 63, and under the high priest Ananias, who favored the Sadducees, the Christian Hebrews were persecuted as transgressors of the law. Some of them were stoned to death; and though this extreme punishment could not be frequently inflicted by the Sanhedrim, they were able to subject their brethren to sufferings and reproaches which were felt most keenly. It was a small thing that they confiscated their goods; but they banished them from the holy places. Hitherto they had enjoyed the privileges of devout Israelites; they could take part in the beautiful and God-appointed services of the sanctuary; but now they were treated as unclean and apostates. Unless they gave up faith in Jesus, and forsook the assembling of themselves together, they were not allowed to enter the temple; they were banished from the altar, the sacrifice, the high priest, the house of Jehovah.

We can scarcely realize the piercing sword which thus wounded their inmost heart. That by clinging to the Messiah they were to be severed from Messiah's people was indeed a great and perplexing trial ; that

for the hope of Israel's glory they were banished from the place which God had chosen, and where the divine Presence was revealed, and the symbols and ordinances of His grace had been the joy and strength of their fathers ; that they were to be no longer children of the covenant and of the house, but worse than Gentiles, excluded from the outer court, cut off from the commonwealth of Israel,—this was indeed a sore and mysterious trial. Cleaving to the promises made unto their fathers, cherishing the hope in constant prayer that their nation would yet accept the Messiah, it was the severest test to which their faith could be put, when their loyalty to Jesus involved separation from all the sacred rights and privileges of Jerusalem.”

Now in the midst of this persecution they were still trying to hold on to the ceremonies and the rituals associated with the Temple worship. The persecution was causing them to hold tightly to the old way and at the same time live in the new life in Christ. There was the temptation to marry their Christian faith with Judaism. Now there was a great danger in doing this and that danger was legalism.

3. **Why was the letter written?**

Now we come to where we can better understand why the letter was written. It was written to encourage these Jewish believers to press on in their faith. Let me explain something then share with you some verses from the book of Hebrews.

In the Old Testament God had chosen to make a covenant with the nation of Israel so that they could have a relationship with Him. Israel was required to walk in obedience to God's Law and when they did not do so it was sin and sin interrupted their fellowship with God.

Therefore God had established a sacrificial system with them so that their sin could be atoned for and their access to God restored. With the old covenant under the Levitical priesthood there was a constant

need to offer sacrifices for sin. The priests would offer sacrifices day after day. It was a constant offering of sacrifices so that the people could have access to God. So Israel was constantly bringing sacrifices to the high priest so they could be offered for their sins. Then we must remember that the high priest was also a sinner so he himself had to go through a cleaning in order to be able to enter the Holy of Holies to offer the sacrifices.

This is the very system these Jewish believers were tempted to go back into.

But the writer of Hebrews points them to something far better than the Old Covenant for he points them to the New Covenant and to the Perfect Priest and the Perfect sacrifice. In this letter we are about to study the writer is explaining to the Jewish believers that there is something much better than the old system. He will tell them that Jesus is the Perfect High Priest and He offered the Perfect sacrifice.

Hebrews 10:6-14

⁶ *In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure.*

⁷ *Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God.*

⁸ *Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law;*

⁹ *Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.*

¹⁰ *By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**.*

¹¹ *And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins:*

¹² *But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;*

¹³ *From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.*

¹⁴ *For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.*

They were tempted to go back to the old system but here the writer tells them that the blood of the animal sacrifices could never take away sin but the sacrifice of Jesus Christ satisfied the demands of the Father and with one sacrifice Jesus has perfected FOREVER those who are sanctified. The question to these Jewish believers would be, "Why go back to the sacrificial system when Jesus the Perfect High Priest, offered the Perfect sacrifice ONCE for ALL?"

Now I just need to point out one of the dangers which faced the Jewish believers if they were to go back and marry their new life in Christ with Judaism. I believe it is seen in a passage which may people struggle with. We will look quickly at it and then we get to this passage we will study it in more detail.

Hebrews 6:1-8

Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,

² *Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.*

³ *And this will we do, if God permit.*

⁴ *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,*

⁵ *And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,*

⁶ *If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.*

⁷ *For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God:*

⁸ *But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.*

I believe verses 7 and 8 give us the key to understanding this passage. In verse 7 the writer paints the picture of the earth and how it receives the blessings of God when it receives the rain. In verse 8 he paints the picture of the ground that receives the blessings but only produces thorns and briers. This parcel of land is therefore worthless. Now in verse 7 the first word connects this illustration to the previous statements. I believe what the writer is saying here is that if the Jewish believers were to go back to Judaism they would be like the ground that received the rain and produced the thorns and the thistles and would therefore be worthless in the sense that they would be in danger of being disqualified for service. They would not lose their salvation but they would be disqualified.

Let me show you a parallel verse that has the same meaning.

Matthew 5:13

¹³ Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

We are the salt of the earth but if salt lose its savour it is good for nothing. Salt in Jesus day was not as refined as our day and if it were mixed with dirt it would lose its savour and be good for nothing. The Jewish believers were tempted to go back to the old life and if they did they would be disqualified from service. That would be like mixing dirt with salt. They would have no testimony. That is why the writer of Hebrews calls them to press on in their Christian faith.

4. **The theme of the letter.**

We will look at this a little more next week but I do want to explain that the theme is "Jesus Christ is better". The writer will show that Jesus is better than the prophets, He is better than the angels, He is better than Moses, He is better than Joshua, He is better than Aaron, He is better than Judaism, He is better than anything of the Old Covenant.

Conclusion:

We must stop here for tonight but I need to give you something that you carry home tonight.

These Jewish believers were trying to hold on to the old life they had and mix it right in with their new life in Christ but that would be very costly for it could cause them to be disqualified.

There may be a temptation in our lives at times to go back to something which used to be in our past or it may be the temptation to

carry something from the past into our new life in Christ and somehow marry the two together. This is very dangerous. That is exactly what we saw in our study on Sunday night. In that study we went back to Exodus 32 where Aaron made the golden calf. The golden calf was a false god which was from Egypt. Israel was falling back into the idolatry of the old life and for that reason many were disqualified.

Remember that Jesus Christ is better than anything this old world has to offer. Let us keep our focus upon Him and press on in our spiritual walk. There will be pressure from people around us and there will be the temptation to compromise but we must remain true to our Lord.

Luke 14:24-35

²⁵ And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them,

²⁶ If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

²⁷ And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

²⁹ Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him,

³⁰ Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.

³¹ Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?

³² Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.

³³ *So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.*

³⁴ *Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned?*

³⁵ *It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*