

## STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 1

### “Introduction”

April 14, 2002

We begin this evening a new series of Lord’s Day evening studies in the Letter to the Hebrews. I’m looking forward to this for several reasons. First, Hebrews is a special book to me. I spent almost a year of my life, during the years of my graduate study in Scotland, working on the interpretation of this book. Second, strange to say, I’ve never preached through Hebrews before. Third, I think most people misunderstand Hebrews in some significant ways and, in my judgment, the book opens up its treasures in new ways to those who shed those misunderstandings. Fourth, Hebrews is a book of special relevance to Christians in middle age, such as I am and many of you are. It is relevant, of course, to Christians of every age, but it has special application to those in the middle of life. So, let us begin.

Tonight I want to introduce the letter to you and help you feel more familiar with it as a whole before we begin to consider it paragraph by paragraph.

And that is rather easy to do for Hebrews is about one thing and one thing only. It may bring into its argument many things, but its point and purpose is the same from the beginning to the end.

1. *First, we would do well to notice that Hebrews is really a sermon, not a letter.* It is a letter only in the sense that it was written down and sent from one place to another and has a few greetings stuck on the end. But in every other way and in its fundamental nature Hebrews is a sermon. The author even calls his letter a “word of exhortation” in 13:22. In Acts 13:15 that same phrase is used to describe what is there unmistakably what we would call a “sermon.” You can read Hebrews aloud in less than an hour. In other words it is a sermon of no great length, such a sermon, in length, as might be preached in many churches today.

You will notice as we move through the letter that over and again the author refers to his “speech” not his “writing.” For example, in 2:5 we read, “It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, *about which we are speaking.*” In 5:11 we read, “We have much *to say* about this...” and so on. The author thinks of himself as speaking to his audience, not writing to them.

But Hebrews is also a sermon because of the nature of it. Hebrews is an argument based on the exposition of the Bible. As you move through the book you will find what you find in any good sermon: the citation, the exposition, and the application of Holy Scripture. That is what a sermon is.

2. *Second, like any good sermon, Hebrews has a single theme.* You don’t have to figure out what this author is talking about because he talks about one thing and one thing only from the beginning of his sermon to the end. Hebrews is a discourse on the absolute necessity of a persevering faith. That is what Hebrews is about. This preacher is telling this congregation that it is not enough to begin the Christian pilgrimage, one must continue it and conclude it as a faithful Christian. You must go on in your faith, you must continue.

Hebrews competes only with Galatians for being the most single-minded book in the New Testament. The author makes many arguments along the way, to be sure, but they are all made in the service of this single point: the absolute necessity of persevering in Christian faith. Unless we hold fast firmly to the end, we will not receive what is promised to us in the gospel of Christ. That is his message and his exhortation and he makes it over and over again. Let me just give you a sampling of this recurring exhortation so that you can see for yourself what the book is about.

- a. 2:3, 18 (the temptation he is referring to is that to apostasy)
- b. 3:6, 12-15
- c. 4:1, 11, 14
- d. 6:4-6, 9-12
- e. *passim*

You will more easily find your bearings in any part of the argument of this sermon if you remember what point the author is making and why he wrote this sermon: viz. to persuade these Christians that they must not flag, must not wander from the faith, but must remain faithful to the end.

In fact, as you read through the letter you will notice that, like any good preacher, this author never loses sight of his readers' pressing need or his own purpose. He doesn't leave all his exhortation to the very end. It is scattered throughout his sermon. In fact, what we will find in Hebrews is a repeated alternation between scriptural or doctrinal exposition on the one hand and its application to the great question of his readers' perseverance on the other. Notice, for example, how often the word "therefore" appears. 2:1; 3:1; 4:1, 11, 14; 6:1; etc.

3. *Third, this sermon is not an exercise in the hypothetical, it is preached white hot to a community of Jewish Christians who are in real danger of flagging in their faith and, in particular, of apostasy.*

The original recipients of this letter, as the title indicates, were *Jewish* Christians. They had become Christians in the midst of a community that was hostile to Christianity. They had suffered persecution for their new faith at the outset and had stood firm. But now, as time had passed, they were finding difficult the pioneering their new faith required of them, the constant opposition from the Jewish community was wearing on them, and they were being tempted to return to the comfortable security of the old ways. Here is how one commentator describes their situation.

"Once, at the outset of their Christian career, they had been exposed to mob-rioting (10:32f.), when they had suffered losses of property, for the sake of the gospel, and also the loud jeers and sneers which pagans and Jews alike heaped sometimes upon the disciples. This they had borne manfully, in the first glow of their enthusiasm. Now, the more violent forms of persecution had apparently passed; what was left was the dragging experience of contempt at the hand of outsiders, the social ostracism and shame, which were threatening to take the heart out of them." [Moffatt, xxii]

What made matters worse, apparently, was the fact that some of these Jewish Christians had already gone back, left the Christian faith and returned to their former Judaism.

In 6:4-6 and again in 10:26-31 **[read]** we hear the overtones of actual apostasy. The point is made so solemnly because this is a reality that these Christians are actually facing. The situation is very much like that addressed in 1 John, called forth by the actual apostasy of some of the members of that community. John also speaks about the “sin unto death” by which he also means apostasy, the conscious, intentional forsaking of the faith, the rejection of the gospel of Christ, by one who had claimed to believe it and was taken to be a member of the Christian church.

In any case, it is clear that Hebrews was written to address a spiritual crisis in a Jewish Christian community. It is not a theological discourse, it is a desperate appeal.

However, that is all we can say about this community to which the letter was written. We don't know where they lived and we don't know precisely when the letter was written.

4. *We really do not know who wrote Hebrews.*

Many have claimed that Paul was the author, have even suggested that denying Pauline authorship is tantamount to a weak view of the authority of Scripture, but that seems very unlikely to me. The letter doesn't sound like Paul. All of Paul's other letters clearly identify him as the author but this letter is formally anonymous. No author's name is provided. What is more, in 2:3 the author says

“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.”

It is very difficult to imagine Paul ever saying such a thing. He made a great point elsewhere in those letters we know are from him of saying that he got his knowledge of the gospel directly from the Lord and did not depend on others for it. He got the gospel and his commission directly from the Lord on the Damascus road. Remember, this is how he put that in Galatians 1:12:

“I did not receive [the gospel I preached] from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”

Obviously, that was a matter of some real importance to Paul, an apostle as he was though not one of the 12 disciples who had been present with the Lord during his public ministry and who had not been an eyewitness of his crucifixion and resurrection. It is virtually inconceivable that Paul would then have said that he received the gospel second hand from the eyewitnesses themselves.

The early fathers clearly were not of the same mind about the authorship of Hebrews and some of them openly expressed their uncertainty. The first citation of Hebrews outside of the

NT is in the Letter of Clement dated about A.D. 95. Clement does not mention any author, but does make explicit mention of Paul as the author of 1 Corinthians so that may indicate Clement did not know who the author was, just 30 years after the letter was written. Origen, more than a century later, argued that though the thoughts were Paul's the Greek was not and, in a famous sentence, said that as to who wrote the letter, "God alone knows." Tertullian says that Barnabas wrote Hebrews as if that piece of knowledge were not controversial. Others thought Luke wrote it, as a disciple of Paul, just as Mark wrote his Gospel as a disciple of Peter. Scholars have pointed out some similarities stylistically between Luke's writings and Hebrews and, as you know, Luke and Acts are also formally anonymous writings.

The mention of Timothy's name in 13:23 suggests that the author, whoever he was, was at least a member of the apostolic circle and, in particular, of the Pauline circle. Apollos was capable of writing the cultured Greek of this letter and was an expert in OT lore which forms so much of the argument of the letter. Barnabas was a Hellenistic Jew so was both Jewish and a Greek speaker and writer. Fact is, we do not know who wrote the letter.

But that in itself is no obstacle to its place in the canon of Holy Scripture. No doubt the author had apostolic authority behind him, as Mark did when he wrote his Gospel or Luke when he wrote the Gospel and the book of Acts. But, then, we don't know who wrote Judges or Samuel or Kings or Chronicles or a number of the psalms.

5. *The last thing we can say about Hebrews, by way of introduction, is that whenever it was written, it was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70*

You'll have to take my word on this at this point, but as we make our way through the argument it will become clear that it is absolutely inconceivable that *this* author, making *this* argument, would not mention the destruction of the city and its temple if, in fact, that destruction had already taken place.

What is more, 2:3 clearly implies that we are only into the second generation of Christians when Hebrews was written. These folk had learned the gospel from eyewitnesses of the Lord's ministry. So sometime in the 60s of the first century makes very good sense.

All of that by way of introduction. I want to give you a sense of the letter as a whole before we begin taking the parts, part by part. It is a great letter with many interesting features. And it brings a perennially important message to us with great power: it is not enough to have once believed. True faith, saving faith is precisely a faith that perseveres.

You and I in this sanctuary tonight – we do not have an unconditional promise of salvation. We will be saved if *and only if* we persevere in the faith of Jesus Christ, if we keep on following him to the end of our days.