

The Book to the Hebrews

Remember:

The purpose of the book is to encourage despondent, weak believers suffering ostracism and denunciation from the Jewish communities, not to drift away from all that they gained in Christ.

I. The Argument of the Book: The Pre-eminence of Christ in His Person and Work, 1:1-10:18

A. The Superiority of Son to the Angels. 1:1-14, 2:5-18

Parenthesis I: Warning against drifting, 2:1-4

(The path to glory is the way of suffering.)

B. The Superiority of Christ to Moses, 3:1-6

Parenthesis II: Warning against Drifting, 3:7-4:13

(The path to rest is the way of trusting.)

C. The Superiority of Christ to the Aaronic Priesthood, 4:14-10:18

1. Superior because of a better position, vv. 14-16

2. Superior because of better qualifications, 5:1-10

Parenthesis III: Warning against immaturity, 5:11-6:20

(The path to growth is the way of obedience.)

1. The fact of stagnation, 5:11-14

2. The need for progress: Christ has brought us a salvation that the truths of biblical Judaism only foreshadowed, 6:1-20

a. The exhortation, vv. 1-3

b. The reminder, vv. 4-6

c. The necessity of progress illustrated, vv. 7-8

d. A concluding exhortation to perseverance, vv. 9-20

1) The exhortation explained, vv. 9-12

a) A fact recognized, v. 9

Despite a foreboding warning, the writer is assured that these are believers, even though his language is harsh (see James 5:1-3, 5-6).

This is the only place in the letter that the writer calls his readers "beloved;" he is anxious to make the point that what he has said does not discourage them.

b) An encouragement needed, v. 10

The evidence that the harsh language of vv.7-8 is an illustration, a remedial exhortation, not a condemnation, is the change that faith has brought in their lives evidenced in their care for others. We are not saved by the benevolent things we do; the things we do is evidence that God has indeed brought an invisible change in our values and affections which are the result of His grace in redemption.

The author reminds his readers that God is not forgetful; these saints have much to commend them. Faith is revealed as genuine only as it is producing consequences. Wrote Paul, "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produce by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thess. 1:3)." Here is a great trilogy: work rooted in faith, labor in love, and endurance in hope.

c) The desire explained, vv. 11-12

The point is that the writer desires them to go on as they had begun.

(1) Stated, v. 11

Faith, obedience, and assurance are inseparably linked together.

Faith has as its object the promises of God; hope is the expectation that God's promises are true and what He has promised us will surely be ours someday. Faith is connected to promise; hope is connected to expectancy of the thing promised.

(2) Defined, v. 12a

The issue is retrogression, not a loss of salvation. The issue here has to do with zeal in the new life, not life itself.

(3) An allusion, v. 12b

The writer will explain this more fully in ch.11, though it does lead logically to the illustration of Abraham and endurance in faith that follows. These people need to follow good examples.

2) The ground of the exhortation: Illustrated, the steadfastness of God vv. 13-20

In Abraham you have the greatest example of endurance in faith when evidence was lacking. Abraham waited twenty-five years for the promise of a son to be fulfilled. As each year passed, he and Sarah grew older. He did not waver in trust, nor dim of hope that someday he would have a son (and on another day an even greater son, Jesus!). See Rom. 4:16-14. We need to learn why Abraham did not

falter when for years the promise remained unfulfilled.

1) The promise of God to Abraham, vv. 13-14

Abraham is the writer's supreme example of a man who received promises from God and persevered to the end in faith and hope.

a) Stated, v. 13

The promise to Abraham concerns the promise of a seed, a promised son (Gal. 3:16) through whom the nations would be blessed, and his children would become a multitude. While the promise can be found in several passages (Gen. 12:1-7, 15:5, 17:5-8), the writer has reference to Gen. 22:16-17 (and partially quoted here) because only in that text is promise and oath combined.

b) Confirmed, v. 14

The event of adding the oath to the promise is the episode on Mount Moriah and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Abraham's obedience to what God commanded rose above understanding how the promise would be kept (he simply believed God without understanding it rationally). To comfort Abraham, God added an oath to the promise, giving him a larger basis for trust, though not required since one promise from a truth-teller should be enough. This is called "GRACE!"

c) The trust of Abraham in God, v. 15

Abraham took the promise of God and waited patiently despite adversity (the aging process, infertility, his personal defects) for twenty-five years for Isaac (Abraham was then 99 and Sarah 90!). The promise was made when Abraham had no child, but he did have a promise (Gen. 12). Later God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15) and sealed the covenant with the sign of circumcision (Gen. 17). In Gen. 22, God sealed the promise, the covenant, and signed with an oath. How is this text understood considering 11:13, that Abraham and Sarah died in faith not as yet obtaining the promise? They saw Isaac as a son whose greater son someday would fulfill the promises made in Gen. 12, 15, 17. Isaac was seen by Abraham as a shadow of a great fulfillment in a greater descendent. In the near sense, the fact that God spared Isaac, giving him back to Abraham through a substitute sacrifice, was a fulfillment of the promise of blessing through his son ("he obtained the promise").

d) The ground of God's promise to Abraham, vv. 16-20

1) The normal actions of promise-making, v. 16

In the matter of legal binding of one party to another a promise is validated by the taking of an oath. Usually the

highest authority is invoked, namely God. An oath in a court of law makes the promise legally binding. It is a sworn statement of intent in a court.

2) The action of God in promise-making, v. 17

To the promise, God added an oath to grant Abraham a greater basis for confidence as he waited the promise to be fulfilled.

With God, the oath is as sure as the promise. When God speaks, He does not have to repeat Himself. It is not truer because He promises twice; it is stated twice to remove our doubts. God condescends to our level to give us assurance! God gave a second promise to strengthen our faith and, therefore, deepen our experience of hope (“to show more convincingly”).

3) The consequence of God’s promise-making, vv. 18-20

(a) The basis stated, v. 18a

God’s promises and oaths are unalterable because they are expressions of His unchanging character. God is incapable of disseminating error!

(b) The consequence stated, v. 18b

The concept of a refuge to a Jewish readership would cause them to think of the six cities of refuge where a person could go to escape wrongful vengeance and obtain a fair hearing of grievances. If the person stayed in the city of refuge, he was safe (Num. 35:9-32). Remember there was no police force in ancient Israel and no jails. Crime was a matter of family adjudication. Christ is our city of refuge! He is our hope!

How does hope (used here and in v.19) differ from faith? Hope suggests a confident expectation: faith suggests trust in a person. Faith in the Christ should lead us to hope, a confident expectation. Hope is the consequence of faith. We who have come to faith in Jesus will not have our hopes crushed!

(c) The consequence reiterated, v. 19

The writer uses a second figure, shifting from the city of refuge to an anchor. An anchor is used to secure a boat in times of storm. Our anchor is Jesus, the one who protects us in the storms of life. We have been moored to an immovable object, the throne of God, through Jesus!

The reason that we have such hope is because of the superiority

of the person and the superiority of His place of ministry. He alone brings us into the presence of God (“behind the veil” would cause the reader to think of the Holy of Holies in the temple; it is an image of the very throne room of God).

(d) The reason affirmed, v. 20

A third image emerges, that of a forerunner. Jesus has gone into the presence of God for us, “on our behalf,” and ministers there for us forever! A forerunner suggests that others will follow and we will also!

The mention of Melchizedek brings the writer back to the argument that he left in 5:10. The excursus (5:11-6:21) was to help his readers embrace the implications of the truth that Jesus is our great high priest, one far superior in person and accomplishments than Levitical priests.

The point should not be missed that God made a promise, sealing it with an oath, that Jesus would be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). Jesus is a superior priest to all Levitical priests; he is of a superior order; and we should follow Him!

D. The Superiority of Christ to the Aaronic Priest Continued, 7:1-10:18

1. Superior because of a better order, 7:1-28

The point that the writer is making generally is that the priesthood of the Greek Scriptures (Jesus) is superior to the priesthood in the Hebrew Scriptures. The New is superior to the Old because Jesus is superior in his person (better than angels), position (better than Moses), and in his work (a superior priest).

He, as priest, serves in a better place and with better qualifications. In our passage, he is of a priestly order superior to the Aaronic order (the Kohath Levites).

a. Christ is superior to Aaron’s priesthood because he comes from a superior order, vv.1-10

The use of Melchizedek is very interesting as a lens into the way Jewish writers used the Hebrew Scriptures. We know little of Melchizedek; he only appears in Gen.14:18-20 and in Ps 110:4. The writer takes a relatively small incident, and an unknown person, and uses him to make a comparison between two priesthoods.

Melchizedek anticipates or prefigures the priesthood of Jesus as a type. The way Jesus is the fulfillment of Melchizedek is the point of the writer.

- 1) The recognition by Abraham of Melchizedek's superiority, vv. 1-3
When Abraham returned from defeating a coalition of four kings who had looted Sodom and its neighboring cities, taking many hostages (Lot among them), Melchizedek met him and blessed him. In return for his blessing, Abraham recognized his superiority by giving a tenth of the spoils of victory (the greater blesses, the lesser gives offerings).

There are certain features in Melchizedek that the writer sees as prefiguring in an inferior way someone to come who is far greater. Melchizedek is a type or figure; Jesus is the fulfillment.

He combined the offices of king (Zedek is likely an indication of a royal line, such as Adoni-zedek [Judges 10:1]) and priest.

He was king and priest in Jerusalem (Ps. 76:2).

He offered refreshment and a blessing to Abraham.

He possessed kingly righteousness and peace.

He has no known beginning or end. As such, he was a priest forever.

Being such, as stated above, he is like a divine being (v.3).

Melchizedek must have been a godly man who followed the faith handed down from Noah.

- 2) The superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham's descendent Levi, the Aaronic priesthood vv. 4-10

- a) The recognition of Melchizedek's superiority, v. 4

In returning from the defeat of the kings, Abraham recognized the greatness of Melchizedek by giving the best of the spoils in return for refreshment and blessing. The writer's point is a lesser receives a blessing from one greater. Abraham and Levi are inferior to Melchizedek and Jesus!

- b) Abraham's descendent, Levi, was commanded to collect tithes from Abraham's descendants, v. 5

Here is proof of Melchizedek's superiority; Levitical priests tithed their brethren, but Melchizedek their father. The point is that the one who collects tithes is greater than the one who gives them (Num. 18:21). Kohaths, sons of Aaron, in collecting tithes are greater than their countrymen, but Melchizedek is greater than the Kohaths because he collected tithes from Abraham, the

“father” of Levi, Aaron, and Kohath.

- c) Melchizedek obtained a tithe from Abraham in recognition of his superiority, the mortal is less than the immortal, vv. 6-8
- d) Consequently, Levites, the Aaronic priesthood, is inferior to Melchizedek’s priesthood, vv. 9-10

Here is a case of ancestral unity that is strange to the western mindset. The actions of an ancestor are viewed as theirs as well (“In Adam ... all sinned,” Rom. 5:12); this is ancestral solidarity. When Abraham acted his great-great grandson (Levi) is seen as recognizing the same inferior status. Therefore, the Levitical priesthood is less than the one that blessed Abraham. Jesus is a Melchizedekian priest!

Thoughts

1. In Jesus, Abraham’s true seed, the one who would bless the nations, two offices are combined, that of royalty or kingship and priest. As king, He is all-powerful and sovereign; as priest He is all-caring and compassionate. We never need to feel alone and forsaken because we have an invisible friend who is more real than those, we see! If you feel abandoned, think about you priest and king!
2. The relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament is important to grasp. The purpose of the Old Covenant was to point to the New Covenant. It seems best not to think of the Old Covenant as an inferior covenant because its purpose was not to accomplish the perfection of status inherent in the New Covenant, but to point to it. In this sense, the Old Covenant accomplished its purpose.
3. The provisions of the New Covenant are based upon God’s promises to His people. He promises us a profound intimacy with Himself through the Spirit. God’s law is now an inward reality written on the flesh of our hearts (an abiding principle within us), not in hard stone.
4. The law has not been abolished; it has been fulfilled. The function of the law was to prepare us for the redeemer by painfully providing evidence through our moral ineptitude that we needed Him. The law fulfilled that purpose. The means that God used to show our need of a true redeemer, the law of God, has not been abolished. It is a timeless disclosure of the holiness of God; it is a true and valid revelation of His demands which have been met in the Christ.