

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 tarnish and drift away from all that they gained in Christ. Or, to get over the “blues,” look up to what Christ in His love provided for you!! The Old Testament saint had to long from a shadowed distance and wait for what you and I have been given.

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

Admonition 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

Admonition II: Warning against Doubting, 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

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

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

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

4. Superior because of a better covenant, 8:1-13

5. Superior because of a better sanctuary, 9:1-28

6. Superior because of a better sacrifice, 10:1-18

Admonition IV: The Warning against Rejection, 10:19-39

(The path to reward is the way of endurance)

II. The Application: The Implication of the Pre-eminence of Christ, 11:1-13:19

A. Exhortations to Faith, 11:1-40

B. Exhortations to Endurance, 12:1-24

Admonition V: The Warning against the Peril of Refusal vv. 25-29

(The path to holiness is the way of discipline)

C. Exhortations to Walk Honorably, 13:1-17

The writer draws some general applications and implications from the argument of the superiority of Jesus to the lives of His children. The range of instruction is broad covering aspects of social, cultural and religious life.

1. Regarding one another, vv. 1-3

a. Love, v. 1

The greatest of the Christian virtues is love; it was characteristic of the readers in the past (present imperative, “Let love continue”). Love seeks the benefit of others. Love is the fruit of faith in that it arises from a greater object than ourselves that motivates us to move outside of ourselves in caring for others. Two examples of love follow.

b. Hospitality, v. 2

Hosting and caring for visitors were important activities in the early church as traveling prophets or teachers depended upon it to sustain themselves in their financially unrequited work. Inns in those days were not considered safe. The stranger might be God’s messenger in their midst. The reference to angels would remind the Jewish reader of Abraham’s encounter with three angels (Gen. 18), two passing their way to Sodom, as well the experience of Gideon (Judges 6) and Manoah (Judges 13). In Abraham’s case, the visit on the angels brought the announcement of a son.

c. Prisoners, v. 3

There is to be sympathy for those who suffer for the cause of Jesus. The ability to empathize is part of the Christian virtue of charity (“our brother Timothy has been released,” 13:23).

“Since you yourselves are in the body” may either refer to the physical body, being susceptible to persecution, or to the church, the body of Christ.

2. Regarding marital integrity, v. 4

a. The command, v. 4a

Sexual promiscuity is forbidden in the Christian community, though it was rampant in Roman culture. Adultery is the breaking of marital vows; “sexual immorality” suggests a wide range of sexual misconduct (pornography, homosexuality, bestiality).

The marriage vow is a sacred covenant made by a couple that is of the deepest and most profound kind. It is the foundation of society as well as the means of its preservation and extension.

b. The reason, v.4b

Those who peruse such activities incur the judgment of God. Fornication refers to sexual union between two who are unmarried; adultery refers to at least one in an illicit union who is married.

3. Regarding finances, vv. 5-6

It could have been that material privation had affected their liberality.

a. The commands, v. 5

1) Love of money (silver): avoid, v. 5a

Our values are revealed in our affections; they are what we think about, fear the loss of foremost, and where we find our significance and security.

2) Contentment without the priority, v. 5b

Our contentment should be rooted in the promises of God (Deut. 6:6,8), not in the collection of wealth. We will leave the things to which we cling, but we will never be separated from the one who clings to us.

Trust in Him is the ground of contentment.

b. The reason, v. 6

God has promised to care for us (Deut. 6:8); His character is the guarantee of His words; we should be content with them.

1) The proper attitude, v. 6a

Greed is one of the great vices that plagues societies. It is rooted in human insecurity and insignificance. We seek security in material things (remember James 2:1-7).

2) The insight, v.6 b

4. Regarding leaders, vv. 7-8

The remedy for greed is contentment; contentment is a learned virtue. Jesus must become more important to us than what we see and possess (Ps. 118:6).

a. Imitate their faith, v. 7

The writer commands his readers to imitate the character of their leaders (i.e., their faith), not their function. God's method for safeguarding His flock is to provide shepherds. It may have been that this flock had lost its leaders ("the outcome of their lives").

b. Trust the object of their faith, v. 8

Apparently, those who lived their lives before the flock as leaders had died ("spoke"). Now they are exhorted to imitate the faith of their former leaders, a faith in the Lord Jesus who will never change or fail His people. While the office of elders was that of shepherding the flock, the emphasis here is upon preaching /teaching (a function).

This verse is interesting because there is no verb in the statement. It literally reads "Jesus Christ yesterday and today the same, and for the ages (forever)." "Yesterday" refers to the life and atoning death of Christ, "today" to His advocacy for us in heaven, and forever. Here we have a clear statement of three great truths about Jesus (His deity, immutability, and constant faithfulness).

The verse seems disconnected from its context. It is the ground for the challenge to follow the teachings of their former leaders (v. 7), not be succumb to false teaching (v. 9), or both.

5. Regarding false doctrine, vv. 9-14

a. The warning, v. 9a

In contrast to the unchangeable, ever-faithful Christ, these readers were subject to strange teachings. In this instance, it is the errors of contemporary Judaism that could never fulfill the promises of intimacy with God.

b. The reason, v. 9b

The Day of Atonement offering (sin offering) by the high priest was a unique sacrifice because the blood was poured on the mercy seat (not the Altar of Burnt Offerings) and the priest did not share in the meat, as a symbol of resultant fellowship, as would have been the case with daily sin offerings. The animal was burned completely outside the camp. It merely anticipated a future event by one who would go outside the camp also and be consumed. The saint had to live in faith and hope, not having a cleansed conscience. What the Old covenant foreshadowed, the New Covenant provided.

c. The explanation, vv. 10-11

We have a place of fellowship, but not in ritual sacrifice. There is a clue, however. The sacrificed animal's carcass was destroyed outside the camp. This prefigured one who would step outside the shadows of Judaism and accomplish what those sacrifices anticipated.

There is now one sacrifice, the cross, and one food, Jesus. The priests could not eat of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (because there was no ultimate cleansing), but we can (figuratively, meaning faith participation). Thus, we have a higher privilege than the most privileged OT saint! Grace has replaced the meat of sacrifice!

d. The implication, v. 12

The old order was merely transitory. Jesus became the discarded animal in Jewish ritual sacrifice; he went outside the camp (outside Judaism).

e. The conclusion, vv. 13-14

1) The fact, v. 13

To find true forgiveness, these readers must step outside Judaism since the one who brought actual forgiveness went outside biblical Judaism.

2) The reason, v. 14

Judaism deals with only earthly issues; the type of city we seek is a heavenly one. We have the assurance of a better "city," an abiding one.

6. Regarding praise and thanksgiving, v. 15

Following the sin offerings on the Day of Atonement, there were burnt offerings, sacrifices indicating dedication to God. Since what was hinted in the Old Testament sacrifices the sacrificial system having fulfilled its purpose, our sacrifices are to be praise and adoration for the one who ended them forever.

7. Regarding good works, v. 16

I found an old Christian poem that seeks illustrates this text well.

‘Tis in the daily toil and stress
we best can preach His loveliness,
It’s Mrs. Johnston’s shining face proclaims
That she is saved by grace,
While Mrs. Smith by kindly deeds
shows how from sin her soul is freed
And in the busy common round
reveals the Saviour she has found.
And Ann by polishing the floors
Tells forth the master she adores.
“Oh, Lord!” I pray on bended knee, “make me like these, thy
children, please.”

8. Regarding obedience to leaders, v. 17

a. The command, v. 17a

We are to accept the wisdom of our leaders, those who have a call from God to shepherd His flock.

b. The reason, v. 17b

Leadership is a stewardship granted by God, not because of intrinsic worth, but by divine calling.

c. The manner, v. 17c

We are to allow them to exercise their authority with delight and joy.

D. Regarding the writer’s prayer-needs, vv. 13:18-19

a. For the writer’s request for himself and other leaders, v. 18

b. For the writer’s release, v. 19

Added to the struggles of this flock is that they are a people whose previous leaders have died and their current leaders have been separated from them.

IV. Conclusion, 13:20-25

A. A benediction, vv. 20-21

1. The writer’s prayer for his audience, v. 20a

To troubled saints, the writer speaks of God as “the God of peace.” The OT concept of peace is “wellbeing;” the Greek concept is social unity.

2. The writer’s focus for his readers, v. 20b

The focus is upon the Lord Jesus and His accomplishments. He is the God of Peace to us because He accepted the sacrifice of the great shepherd on our behalf, raising Him to life demonstrating that Jesus alone brought us into the presence of God. This is the only reference in the book to Jesus as the shepherd. It is likely a reference drawn from Is. 63:11 and Ps. 77:20. Jesus is the greater shepherd that led His people out of a greater exodus from bondage than Moses.

3. The petition requested, v. 21a

“Equip” alludes to what we find elsewhere. It has been given to the rank and file of God’s people. The author urges the recipients to do the work of the ministry. The task of leadership falls to God’s agents to help the Lord’s people to do so.

4. The purpose achieved, v. 21b

B. A final exhortation, v. 22

The word “exhortation” means a homily or sermon; it is the theme of the book (the need for endurance).

C. A gratifying news item, v. 23

We have no record in Holy Scripture that Timothy was imprisoned, but the Bible is selective in the presentation of historic details. We do know, however, that Timothy was with Paul during the time of his first imprisonments in Rome, the early 60s, under house arrest (Philemon, v.1). If so, it would help us in dating the book.

D. Greetings, v. 24

E. A benediction, v. 25

The benediction is identical with that in Titus 3:15. Grace and grace alone is what causes us to persevere

Thoughts:

1. Love is the greatest of all Christian virtues; it is the wellspring of all the others. Without love our lives are hollow and unproductive from a divine perspective. This is because the redemption of God consists of the infusion of the life of God (God is love) into us as a governing, abiding principle. The absence of love is the absence of the Spirit, which means the absence of the life of God. How can we, who see each other in a more-or-less- formal setting, cultivate and express love for each other?
2. Have we turned our lives and homes into hospitality centers, caring for the needs of others? Such is love manifested. The expression of this virtue differs relative to the stages of life (young families are busier and more financially limited than empty nesters, for example). Are you at a stage of life when you can enjoy company in non-chaotic contexts? It should be one of our goals, as we grow older, to extend an open-door policy.

3. In the prosperous West, it is a truism that the quest for the advantages of wealth has led to greater debt, longer working hours, and less sleep and rest with a consequence of more dysfunction in our families as the virtues of the interpersonal has been sequestered under greater individualism and isolation. We are social creatures, but the quest for security through wealth-accumulation has come with great sacrifice. The Bible warns us of the dangers of poverty and wealth. Poverty causes us not to be able to help others; wealth causes enormous effort to acquire it and hard work to keep it. We must reject both extremes and the values of our godless culture, replacing them with trust in God and care for family and friends. Let our wealth be in our relationships!
4. Our culture is decimated by brokenness in the family. Marriage is a holy ordinance and must be preserved in fidelity. Marriage is not about sexual gratification (that is a secondary and important component). Our culture values self above promise keeping. Inordinate preoccupation with sexual gratification is like wealth; it is a form of greed. We must learn that contentment is more to be valued than physical gratification. Marriage is about mutual love and respect to live as one and, if God allows, to raise a godly heritage. Self-gratification destroys what is right and good; commitment with contentment preserves the good.
5. The key to contentment is to fill our minds with proper values (values lead to consequent actions consistent with our values). The way to have balanced values is to fill our minds with the great book. God is wiser than we, so logic says we should listen to Him, not ourselves or our debased culture.
6. Unbelief in this life causes the loss of the experience of blessings that will be ours in the next. Unbelief is a real danger, perhaps life's greatest for us. We should heed the measured example of Esau. However, there is one important contrast to grasp in that story. Esau, being an unbeliever, lost temporal and eternal blessings because he was godless. We can only lose temporal blessings because we have the life of God in our very beings by the Holy Spirit. Esau is a warning of temporal loss through unbelief. We should use the illustration as the writer does. It is not about the state of Esau's soul. We, however, should not miss the lesson. Unbelief forfeits the temporal experience of blessing.
7. While the Lord is a God of grace and benevolence, the judgment of God for disobedience is real and should be recognized as a possibility for all of us. God expects of His children's obedience and will curb our appetites and foolishness; it is an act of kindness on His part to do so. The fact is that God will not allow us to harm ourselves beyond limits is evidence of divine affection.