

SOMETHING BETTER

Hebrews—An Introduction

Study 1

The book of Hebrews is Paul's masterpiece of Christian apologetics.¹ Each chapter directs us to a relational God who invites us into an intimate relationship with Him. The message of Hebrews presents a personal God who has entered into the experience of the human race, both emotionally and physically. In fact, this epistle is so charged with the current of emotional language, so unique in its picture of God when compared with many of Paul's more theologically doctrinal epistles, many scholars have doubted whether Paul was the author.

The Writer of Hebrews

While there are some differences in emphasis and overall writing style between Hebrews and Paul's other epistles, there is still good reason to believe that Paul, not Timothy, is the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 13:23). One of the clearest reasons is that his undying love for his fellow Hebrew "kinsmen" led him to write this personal appeal to the Hebrews. This love motivated Paul to risk all, despite intense persecution, to reach the Jews (Romans 9:1-3; 2 Corinthians 11:24-25). Another likely reason why Paul was the author is Paul's Hebrew education, something the writer of Hebrews would need to possess (Philippians 3:1-7). Both of these factors play a huge part in the content, presentation, and overall message of Hebrews. This book is an appeal to the Jews based on resounding Old Testament truth to recognize Christ as the Messiah and Savior of the world.

In addition, it seems more than a coincidence that in a number of occasions the book of Hebrews uses the same illustrations, terminology and reasoning found in Paul's other writings. For example, in his letter to the Romans he recounts the history of the Jews, which was filled with "unbelief" and then calls the Gentiles to stand by "faith" and to "fear" rather than being high-minded (Romans 11:20). This same approach and terminology is found in Hebrews 4:1-6. Another example is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he recounts the history of Israel in their wilderness wanderings. The history and terminology is almost identical to what is written in Hebrew 3:15-19. Again in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, Paul refers to the believers as "babes" who are in need of the "milk" and not the "meat" of the Word. Once again we find this same illustration and terminology in Hebrews 5:12-14.

One final example of Paul's is seen when we compare 1 Corinthians 9 with Hebrews 12. In both of these instances Paul used the intense physical challenge of a race to illustrate the Christian's experience and to urge us on in the battle against sin (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Hebrews 12:1).

God Longs For a Relationship With You

Hebrews is a relational book. A relationship can be defined as a specific connection between objects, entities or concepts. A typical form of relationship is the social relationships between people usually made through some form of introduction. Hebrews is written to initiate such a relationship between us and God. It introduces us to God as the One who created us in His image, the image of love (1 John 4:8). Our encounter with God begins in Hebrews 1 as God first reminds us of His ongoing pursuit of us through the prophets. He then initiates communication with us Himself, personally through the Son (Hebrews 1:3). God describes Himself as the divine, infinite Being who has come to us as a human being so we can personally know Him (Hebrews 2:14). God longs for a close, intimate, loving, interpersonal relationship with each and every one of us.

This theme continues throughout the book of Hebrews by the use of rela-

NOTES

¹A branch of theology that is concerned with proving the truth of Christianity (takes a singular verb)

"God having provided something better for us." —Hebrews 11:40

All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

tional language, consistently directing us into a personal relationship with God and people. This emphasis directs our intellectual and theological understanding of truth into personal love relationships:

- Hebrews 2—Pay attention to Me. Don't let Me slip. Don't drift away from Me. Don't neglect Me (Hebrews 2:1, 3).
- Hebrews 3—Consider Me. Don't depart or turn away from Me (Hebrews 3:1, 12).
- Hebrews 4—Labor to be with Me. Hold fast to Me. Come boldly to Me (Hebrews 4:11, 14, 16).
- Hebrews 6—Move on with Me. Be diligent towards Me (Hebrews 6:1, 11).
- Hebrews 7—Come to Me. I live for you (Hebrews 7:25).
- Hebrews 8—I am yours and you are mine. Know Me (Hebrews 8:10-11).
- Hebrews 10—Draw near to Me. Hold fast to Me. Consider each other. Don't forsake one another. And fellowship even more with one another (Hebrews 10:22-25).
- Hebrews 12—Run with Me. Run to Me. Look to Me. Consider Me. Look diligently to Me (Hebrews 12:1-3, 15). Don't refuse Me. Don't turn away from Me (Hebrew 12:25).
- Hebrews 13—I will never leave you or forsake you, but will help you so completely that you will lose all fear of man (Hebrews 13:5-6).

The Languages of Love

The book of Hebrews is all about how to experience, keep, or recover a relationship with God. The foundation of this relationship is love. This love is primarily God's love toward us, but it also includes our love response to Him, which spills over to others. The book of Hebrews introduces a relational God who speaks to us in the languages of love. There are seven basic love languages that define our relationships with people. They are gifts, physical touch and acts of service, quality time and words of affirmation, correction and commitment. Each one of these love languages is clearly emphasized in the relational language of Hebrews. Let's briefly consider all seven:

- 1) In Hebrews 1 we find God's greatest gift of love. God has given us the gift of Himself in the person of His Son to cleanse our sins (Hebrews 1:3; John 3:16).
- 2) In Hebrews 2 we find the love gift of physical touch. When the leper asked Jesus if He was willing to heal him, Jesus "put out his hand and *touched him*, saying, I am willing; be cleansed" (Matthew 8:2-3, NKJV). Back in Christ's time, the Jews believed lepers received their illness because of their sinful lives. They were considered to be unclean and it was unthinkable to touch them. Notice, before Jesus healed him, He first touched him. Jesus came to the earth to touch people (Matthew 14:36; Mark 10:13; Luke 6:19). As heart-warming as Jesus' encounter with the leper is, there is an even greater truth here. Through becoming a man, God the Son became one with humanity. By doing this He physically connected Himself with the human race forever (Hebrews 2:9).
- 3) Hebrews 3 ties these truths together as God's loving acts of service. In His death and incarnation God has built us a house (Hebrew 3:6). That house, of course, represents us. He built it by love so we may have union with Him forever.
- 4) Quality time is the theme of Hebrews 4. God has given us the gift of quality time with Him (Hebrews 4:10). He loves us and therefore longs to spend time with us.
- 5) Another love language is words of affirmation. In spite of all our failures and mistakes, God speaks words of approbation to us. Hebrews 11 recounts the history of God's faithful without ever mentioning their many failures. God looks past our mistakes and views the history of our faith relationship with Him in the most positive light (see 1 John 3:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).
- 6) The next love language is one of the more challenging because correction does not always feel like love. Jesus identifies rebuke as a language of love when He says, "as many as I love I rebuke and chasten" (Revelation 3:19). This is also the major theme of Hebrews 12 where Paul indicates that chastening is evidence that we are sons of God and not bastards. Studies have shown that children who grow up with this vital language of love are mentally healthier and more secure.

7) The final love language is commitment. This, too, is found in Hebrews, right among Paul's closing words. He directs us to the words of Christ, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). God is committed to us forever. And even those who finally choose to perish will leave an empty place in God's heart of love for all eternity (see Revelation 22:12).

The Quality of our Relationship

We begin the book of Hebrews by laying the foundation for a deep and committed relationship with God. The Bible and life's own experiences tell us that relationships can take on many forms. Some can be lasting and fulfilling while others are short or empty. It is not necessary to have deep lasting relationships in all areas of our lives. Yet, when we see God as our Creator and Redeemer, it will call forth from our being a relationship of the highest quality possible for each of us individually. Communication is the key principle to consider in any relationship (Hebrews 1:1-2). Through communication with God and His Word, we begin a journey that will bring forth a relationship experience that will surpass anything we can imagine.

This is why the Bible compares our relationship with God to the deepest bond between two people, the union of a man and a woman in marriage. Throughout the Bible God has communicated His desire to have a close, interpersonal, loving relationship with each one of us.

Characteristics of a Marriage Commitment

Union—"Thy Words were found and I did eat them," says Jeremiah the prophet. "And Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart; for I am called by Thy name, oh Lord God of hosts" (Jeremiah 15:16).

When a woman is married to a man she typically takes the name of her husband. Even if she keeps all of her given names, she adds to them this new name. Likewise, the Word of God unites us with Christ so that we can take the name of Christ (Christian), indicating that we have become one with Him.

Provision—"But He answered and said, 'It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4, NKJV). In a marriage bread, or sustenance, is earned and prepared by both the husband and wife. In our relationship with Christ, the Bible provides the bread that sustains our spiritual lives. We then prepare the bread of life to share with others.

Passion—"Is not My Word like a fire?" says the Lord, 'And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?' (Jeremiah 23:29). A relationship needs something that ignites it and takes it beyond the ordinary. The Word of God is the spark that fires up a passionate relationship with Christ.

Treasure—"I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12). Every relationship produces memories and words of love and devotion that are cherished like treasure. God also wants to speak words to us and to give us experiences that we will treasure.

Family—"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:23). In a union between two people something new is born, something that never would have existed if they had not joined together. Likewise, in our union with God something new is born, creating a relationship that is exclusive and unique, unlike any other. It is a marvelous truth that every one of us who joins together with God becomes a part of His family.

Commitment—"Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits (dedicated to God) of his creatures" (James 1:18). In a marriage relationship the husband and wife dedicate their lives to each other for all time. Similarly, Jesus has dedicated Himself to us for all eternity, becoming one with the human race forever.

Dear friend, God loves us so much that He wants to marry us. He wants a relationship with us based on communication. He desires to enter into union with us and provide for us. Through His Word He wants to create in us a hot, passionate love for Him, such as He already has for us. He plans to give us wonderful moments we will treasure. He wants to enter into a family relationship with us. What a joy it is to know that God has dedicated Himself to us forever.

Something Better

The book of Hebrews dispels a lot of religious confusion about God. In an approach somewhat unique when compared to his other writings, Paul again writes about a personal God who gives of Himself selflessly in an effort to win our hearts. This world has reason to question God because sin and evil have darkened our understanding of who He is and how He operates. We need to see God in a better light if we are to respond positively to His grace and love. This better picture is seen in Hebrews.

There are 13 places in the book of Hebrews where the word “better” is used. “Something better” is the major theme of Paul’s letter. The word “better” means “stronger” or “nobler.” Let’s briefly examine 13 better things in Hebrews:

- 1) Hebrews 1 reveals a picture of a God who does not require sacrifice from us, but One who makes the sacrifice for us—a *better God* (Hebrews 1:3).
- 2) This is a God who takes the nature of humanity upon Himself in order to legally and righteously take personal responsibility for the sins of humanity—a *better man* (Hebrews 2:9).
- 3) In doing this, God has built us a better home (family) free from guilt and condemnation—a *better house* (Hebrews 3:6).
- 4) A home free from guilt leads us to—a *better rest*—a salvation rest of grace in Christ (Hebrews 4:10).
- 5) Salvation rest in Christ provides us with—a *better obedience*—in Christ as the Author of our salvation (Hebrews 5:9).
- 6) In Hebrews 6 we find—*better promises*—made by God to us and fulfilled by God in spite of us (Hebrews 6:18).
- 7) Our attention is then directed to—a *better priest*—Jesus, always working on our behalf with full ability to completely save us from sin (Hebrews 7:25).
- 8) The next chapter naturally flows from these better promises to—the *better covenant*—based upon God’s power rather than man’s faulty promises (Hebrews 8:6).
- 9) Then we are directed to—a *better sanctuary*—in the heavens where Christ stands in the presence of God for us (Hebrews 9:11).
- 10) Hebrews 10 follows by pointing us to—a *better sacrifice*—than that of animals, the sacrifice of God Himself, in the person of Christ whose life alone can forgive all sin (Hebrews 10:10).
- 11) This gives way to a faith picture of the history of God’s people that excludes all their failures and sins and reveals—a *better experience* (Hebrews 11:40).
- 12) And this faith picture points us to place our complete trust and focus on Jesus as the Author and Finisher of our salvation—the *better way*—of salvation from sin (Hebrews 12:1-2).
- 13) And finally we complete this picture of God by experiencing a relationship with Him that brings forth—a *better praise*—a sacrificial praise that is heard continually (Hebrews 13:15).

Summary

In summary we find relationship to be the major theme of Paul’s letter to the Hebrews. The language of the book, as well as the key achievements of Christ, point us to a God who loves us on a personal, individual level. This God, who loves us more than life itself, invites us to experience that love as something better, stronger, and nobler than anything we will find outside of knowing Him. He has shared 13 “better things” with us and almost every one of them relates in some way to Jesus Christ. Hebrews teaches us that the word “better,” and the name, “Jesus Christ,” go together.