

Got to admit, it's getting better...

Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

Leaders' notes and sample studies

Bill Salier

Draft edition

Background notes

- We do not know who wrote Hebrews. Early on it was thought that Paul wrote it but this view was questioned. Other candidates have included Barnabas and Apollos.
- Hebrews was probably written before AD 70 (Heb 10.2 is the major clue) and was possibly written to a group in Rome, though this is very uncertain
- Hebrews is an unusual letter and describes itself as a 'word of exhortation' (Heb 13.22)
- The writer to the Hebrews uses a lot of Old testament quotes and ideas in his presentation
- There is a pattern throughout Hebrews of information followed by exhortation
- One of the writers favourite words is a word translated 'better' or 'superior' (13x used)

For Your Information will provide a little background to some verses with some additional references to look up from time to time. There will also occasionally be a section called **Did You Notice?** which will also make some comments on various verses and themes.

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1. Hebrews 1.1-2.4: Pay even more attention

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 1.1-2.4

Two questions to consider

Is Christian teaching in church too repetitive?

Can we talk too much about Jesus...his person and work?

As you read through the passage jot down any questions that occur to you

Any insights that occur to you

Any thoughts about how this passage might apply to you...

Some notes on Hebrews 1.1-2.4

- The two words describing the previous revelation of God in verse 1 have the sense of fragmentary and diverse
- Angels were known as God's messengers in the Old Testament. They gave messages directly (Exod 3.2), they were involved in saving people (Isa 63.9), the law was believed to have been given through angels (Acts 7.37-38; Gal 3.19, Heb 2.2)
- The OT verses quoted in vss 5-13 are Ps 2.7 and 2 Sam 7.14/1 Chron 17.13 (v 5); Ps 97.7 (v 6); Ps 104.4 (v 7); Ps 45.6-7 (v 8-9); Ps 102.25-27 (vss 10-12); Ps 110.1 (v 13)
- The word translated 'drift away' in 2.1 is used of a boat that has slipped its mooring

Questions

1. The exhortation in 2.1-4 is to pay greater attention. According to 1.1-14 why should listen to Jesus?
2. In vss 1-4 what are we told about Jesus? Which of these points is most striking to you?
3. In vss 5-13, why do you think the writer makes the extended comparison between angels and Jesus?
4. Reading 2.1-4 how does the writer urge his readers/listeners to pay greater attention?
5. What 'have we heard' (2.1)?
6. What does the exhortation in 2.1-4 suggest as the possible purpose of Hebrews? What circumstances can you imagine might lie in the background of the audience, which would mean that the writer thinks this exhortation is necessary?

They say that familiarity breeds contempt...is this a danger with Christian teaching? How can we avoid this happening when we are continually reminded of the person and work of Christ?

2. Hebrews 2.1-18: 'A little lower than the angels'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 2.1-18

Two questions to consider: *What is mankind's destiny? How important is it that Jesus became truly human?*

As you read through the passage jot down any questions that occur to you

Any insights that occur to you

Any thoughts about how this passage might apply to you...

Some notes on Hebrews 2.5-18

- The writer moves from considering Jesus as greater than the angels to his time on earth being made a little lower than the angels.
- In this passage the writer seems to be addressing the implied question: if Jesus is so great then why is this not obvious to everybody? And if he suffered and died then doesn't this make him inferior to angels?
- Psalm 8 is very important background to this section of the letter and if you have time it would be worth reading in full.
- In Psalm 8 the author uses the title 'son of man' to refer to humankind. The writer to the Hebrews and his readers would have been well aware that Jesus used the title to refer to himself
- In verse 10 Jesus is described as the pioneer or the forerunner, the originator, initiator of salvation
- There is also a reference to Jesus being made perfect through suffering: this most likely has a vocational sense whereby Jesus is equipped or made complete for his office or job as pioneer of our salvation
- The reference to shame in v 11 is an important one in a society where honour and shame are very important values
- The High Priest was appointed for a year at a time and one of their main duties was to offer the sacrifice of atonement for the people of God once a year in the Holy of Holies. The image of High Priest will dominate a lot of the rest of the letter
- The sacrifice that Jesus makes both covers sin, cleansing worshippers, and averts the divine wrath of God: Christ's death sets aside sin and purifies his people and also delivers them from God's wrath.

Questions

1. According to verses 5-9 how do we see Psalm 8 being fulfilled?
2. Why is it fitting that Jesus suffers according to verses 10-13?
3. What evidence would you point to in the world around us of the truth of verse 15?
4. What does it mean to you to count Jesus as a brother (v 12, 17)?
5. Why is it important according to this passage that Jesus shared in our 'flesh and blood'?
6. What is the use of the teaching of this passage in pastoral and personal situations? Can you think of a circumstance in your life when knowing something or other of what is said about Jesus here has been helpful, even essential?

What kinds of hope does this passage offer? How does what is said here about Jesus and the angels relate to the first study and what was said there about Jesus and the angels? What implications are there in all this for the way that we might talk to others about the person and work of Jesus?

3. Hebrews 3.1-4.13: 'the promise of entering his rest'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 4.1-4.13

Two questions to consider: *What keeps you going in the Christian life? How are you best motivated: carrot or stick?*

As you read through the passage jot down any questions that occur to you

Any insights that occur to you

Any thoughts about how this passage might apply to you...

Some notes on Hebrews 3.1-4.13

- The passage this week has 4 main sections (3.1-6; 3.7-11; 4.1-11; 4.12-13)
- In the first section the writer compares Jesus and Moses with respect to their faithfulness, and ends with an exhortation to the readers to hold on to their hope so as to be the household of God
- The next two sections (3.7-19; 4.1-11) both work from Psalm 95. If you have time read Psalm 95 and see that it consists of a call to worship God (Ps 95.1-7) and then a warning against disobeying him (Ps 95.7-11).
- In the first section the Psalm is used negatively as a warning, while in the second section the Psalm is positively as an encouragement.
- At the heart of both warning and encouragement is the promise of entering God's rest. The writer plays with the idea that God has rested from his work of creation (see Gen 2.2) and the promise is held out to his people that they can enter his rest. This was fulfilled historically when Israel entered the promised land (see Deut 12.10; 1 Kings 8.56; Ps 132.8, 13-14)
- Even though there was a historical fulfillment the writer's point is that Psalm 95, which is written a long time after Israel entered the land still promises a future rest, which remains to be entered and can be lost through faithlessness and disobedience
- In 4.9 the idea of rest is connected to the idea of Sabbath celebration.
- The promise of rest remains for those who hear God's word; but so does the threat of not entering through faithlessness and disobedience: and both threat and promise are used to exhort the Hebrews to persevere in their Christian faith
- The final section (4.12-13) reminds the of the power of God's word and the judgment of God

Questions

1. According to 3.1-6, how do Jesus and Moses compare and contrast? What is the point of this section?
2. In 3.7-11, how does the writer read Psalm 95 so that it applies to his readers?
3. In the light of vss 18-19 how is unbelief to be understood...what do you think of this equation?
4. According to 4.1 when is the gospel message useful?
5. What do you think is meant by 'rest' in verses 3-11: when do we enter God's rest?
6. What is said about God's word in verses 12-13? Why do you think the writer added this statement in this place? How do you feel about the word of God described this way?

One of the key words introduced in this passage is 'promise'. What lies at the essence of the idea of promise? When is it easy is to to trust promises? When is it hard? Is there anything happening in our cultural circumstances that makes it easier or harder to trust promises? What circumstances conspire to cause you to doubt the promises of God?

4. Hebrews 5.1-7.28: 'a priest in the order of Melchizedek'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 5.1-7.28

Three questions to consider: *How significant for you is the teaching that Jesus is our great high priest? What would you say to someone who you think is in danger of falling away from the Christian faith? What would indicate to you that they might be falling away?*

Jot down any thoughts, insights or questions you might have...

Some notes on Hebrews 5.1-7.28

- A long passage this week which breaks down into three main sections (5.1-10, 5.11-6.20; 7.1-7.28). The writer starts and ends with the idea that Jesus is the great high priest and interrupts the flow with a strong warning to his readers
- In the first section the writer introduces the idea of Jesus as a high priest and also introduces the idea that Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek.
- Priests generally in Israel are traced back to Aaron, the brother of Moses (see Exod 28.1-5; 29.4-5; Lev 6.15). Priests offered sacrifices and were responsible to teach the people of God his will.
- The High Priest was especially responsible for offering the sacrifice of atonement of the people on the special day of atonement (*yom kippur*). You can read some of the details in Lev 16.
- The writer compares Jesus to the OT figure of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is an enigmatic figure to say the least. To read some of the background on Melchizedek in the Old Testament, see Genesis 14.17-20 and Psalm 110.4. The fact that Abraham paid Melchizedek tithes and Melchizedek blessed Abraham shows Melchizedek's superiority. Melchizedek is described also as King of Salem and this is usually identified with Jerusalem (Ps 76.2).
- In one Jewish text Melchizedek is portrayed as a heavenly being who will bring salvation and judgement in the end time. In other documents he is seen as the one who gathers and emits light and is a prominent heavenly priest and warrior.
- The passage ends with a picture of Jesus as the kind of high priest we really need (7.26). See how the writer returns again to the idea of Jesus as a Son as he continues this section about Jesus as High Priest.

Questions

1. According to 5.1-10, what does a high priest do, what qualifies a person to be a high priest and how was Jesus qualified to be a high priest?
2. What problem does the writer see in his readers in 5.11-6.3?
3. What is the nature of the writer's warning in 6.1-8?
4. What is the basis of the writer's confidence in 6.9-20?
5. What points does the writer make about Melchizedek in 7.1-10?
6. What is the point of the comparison of Jesus with Melchizedek? Why does the writer make this comparison?

There are strange and troubling elements in this passage...the historically curious role of the High Priest, the idea of sacrifice, the figure of Melchizedek and the writer's warning about going on to maturity and their warning about the danger of falling away.

Do you worry about falling away from the Christian faith? How do we respond to warnings like these? How does knowing about Jesus' high priesthood help us (not to fall away; and more generally in our Christian life and experience)?

5. Hebrews 8.1-10.25: 'better in every way'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 8.1-10.25

Some questions to consider: *Can you think of examples in our world of needing a mediator to approach someone? How do you respond to the Christian talk of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin? Is it all a bit much, a bit pagan, primitive? Can we answer the question as to why God did it this way?*

Jot down any thoughts, insights or questions you might have...

As you read through

What stood out for you as something you just did not get?

What was your emotional reaction at various points?

How would you explain these ideas to a non-Christian friend or relative?

Some notes on Hebrews 8.1-10.25

- A very long passage this week which breaks down into five main sections (8.1-13; 9.1-10, 9.11-28; 10.1-18; 10.19-25). The writer continues to talk about Jesus as the high priest but now says that he brings in a better covenant and offers a better sacrifice.
- In 8.1-13 the writer quotes Jeremiah 31.31-34 and says that Jesus is bringing in a better covenant. A covenant is an agreement or state of affairs between God and people. Jeremiah 31.31-34 speaks of time when God will establish a new covenant with his people.
- In 9.1-10 the writer introduces the idea of the sanctuary. This is like a portable temple that the Israelites transported around the desert while they were wandering. It was where sacrifices were offered and the priests officiated. The sanctuary consisted of an outer court and an inner tabernacle or tent where only the High priest could enter to do business with God on behalf of the people.
- The old sanctuary and the system it represented shows up two problems: extremely restricted access to God and sacrifices that didn't permanently 'work'
- In 9.11-28 the writer focuses on showing Jesus' sacrifice is better because he offers his own blood and not the blood of animals. This guarantees forgiveness of sins once and for all.
- This section depends a lot on understanding the sacrifice made on the Day of Atonement. You can read the background to the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.
- 10.1-18 brings together finally the themes of the new covenant and Christ's sacrifice. In this section we will see repeated and reinforced a number of points made and themes that have occurred through Hebrews so far.
- Finally, 10.19-25 applies what has been said to the readers.

Questions

Read 8.1-10

1. The main point of 8.1-6 is that Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant. What do you think is the point of the shadow/copy language of verse 5?
2. What is better about the new covenant according to the long passage quoted in 8.8-12?

Read 9.1-10

3. What are the two problems with the old system represented by the writer's description of the earthly tabernacle/sanctuary?

Read 9.11-28

4. How is Jesus' sacrifice as High Priest better, more effective than what went before? Think about the place where it was offered, what sacrifice was offered, how many times the sacrifice had to be offered...

Read 10.1-18

5. If repetition tells us what someone thinks is important, what is repeated here from what has been said earlier in Hebrews?

Read 10.19-25

6. How does this exhortation flow from what has just been said?

6. Hebrews 11.1-22: 'faithful examples'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 11.1-22

Some questions to consider: *If someone asked what it means to have faith, what would you say? If they said that they wished that had your faith what would you say? How would you define faith?*

What 'feeds', what strengthens your faith? What does it mean to grow in faith?

Jot down any thoughts, insights or questions you might have...

As you read through

What stood out for you as something you just did not get?

What was your emotional reaction at various points?

How would you explain these ideas to a non-Christian friend or relative?

Some notes on Hebrews 11.1-22

- This is a famous and well-loved chapter that takes us through the sweep of Old Testament history. The writer refers to significant figures from the history of God's people as he continues to encourage his readers to persevere in their faith in the face of the trials and persecutions they are facing.
- The writer has already urged that his listeners imitate others ...see 6.12; Abraham has been presented as an example (6.13-15).
- In ancient writings occasionally an example list would be presented...a list of examples produced to motivate an audience concerning the point the speaker is making. This list not only focuses on people but also ties them into the larger story of God and his purposes...the examples are listed in historical sequence so that a sense of progress is given towards the climax of God's purposes in the person of Jesus Christ...so the sequence of names naturally leads in to the exposition of the work of Christ in chapter 12.
- Abraham and Moses are the two figures who loom large with much of the initial section of the chapter particularly given over to the figure of Abraham.
- We have seen the writer use the negative example of the wilderness generation throughout the letter, but here the examples are positive ones...the author is still moving between carrot and stick as he attempts to encourage his readers to remain faithful.
- The passage has four sections: 1-7...a definition of faith and early examples; 8-22...the example of Abraham; 23-31...the example of Moses; 32-40...a final list of examples referred to in brief.

Questions

Read 11.1-7

1. How do you understand the definition of faith offered in verse 1...how does this compare or even contrast with popular understandings of faith that are around and about? Does this sentence say all that we would want to say about what faith is?
2. What is the relationship of verse 3 to verse 1?
3. How do the examples of Abel, Enoch and Noah help us to understand a little more of the nature of faith?
4. What does verse 6 add to our understanding of faith?

Read 11.8-22

5. What key events from Abraham's life are referred to as the writer recounts his story...what is the point of referring to each of these events...how do these demonstrate Abraham's faith?
6. What is Abraham's experience would you have found difficult, if not impossible, with respect to the exercise of faith, if you were in his circumstances?
7. Verses 13-16 are a key passage. What does it mean to die in faith?
8. How is the experience of Abraham and others recounted in vss 13-16 like and unlike us today?
9. How would you sum up what the writer is trying to say characterized the faith of the Old Testament believers he has mentioned so far?
10. What are the conditions around us today that make it either hard or easy to put into practice the implied exhortation of this passage: have faith and long for a better country...

7. Hebrews 11.23-40: 'faithful examples' (2)

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 11.23-40

Some questions to consider: Can you think of a situation where your faith has been tested? What was the nature of the test; how was your faith tested? How did you get through it/are you getting through it?

Do you know anyone who has lost their faith? Why/how did that happen?

Jot down any thoughts, insights or questions you might have...

As you read through

What stood out for you as something you just did not get?

What was your emotional reaction at various points?

How would you explain these ideas to a non-Christian friend or relative?

Some notes on Hebrews 11.22-40

- Rahab...see Joshua 2, 6
- Jericho...see Joshua 6
- Gideon...see Judges 7
- Barak...see Judges 4-5
- Samson...see Judges 13-16
- Jephthah...see Judges 11
- David...see 1 & 2 Samuel
- Samuel...see 1 Samuel 1-17
- Shut the mouths of lions... Samson (Judges 14), David (1 Sam 17.36-37), Daniel (Dan 6),
- Quenched the raging of fire...Dan 3.19-28
- Escaped the edge of the sword...1 Sam 19, 2Sam 15, 1 Kings 19, 2 Kings 6, Jer 26.7-24
- Gained strength after being weak...Gideon, Samson
- Became mighty in battle...most of the names mentioned
- Women received their dead...1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 4
- Men were tortured, not accepting release...the word here suggests being stretched out on a frame and beaten...Eleazar in 2 Macc 6.18-31

- Mockings, scourgings, imprisonment...eg 1 Kings 22.26-27; 2Chron 16.7-10, 36.16; Jer 20.7-8, 37.4-21; 2Macc 6.30, 7.1, 7, 10
- Stoned...Zechariah 2 Chron 24.20-21; tradition says Jeremiah stoned by Egyptian Jews
- Sawn in two...tradition says Isaiah sawn in two
- Death by the sword...1 Kings 19.10; Jer 26.23
- Wandering in sheepskins and goatskins...Elisha and Elijah
- Wandering in deserts, mountains, caves and holes in ground...Abraham and Moses, people of God generally

Questions

Read 11.23-29

1. How does faith relate to the various actions described here from Moses' life?
2. Do you know people or have personal examples that can illustrate verse 25?

Read 11.30-40

3. Are any of these names, events problematic in a list of those supposed to be heroes of faith? What would you say about their place on this list if there are any names that seem troublesome?
4. What is the rhetorical effect of verses 30-38?
5. How does a list like this help? Isn't it more likely to put people off than encourage them to persevere in the faith? Why does the writer say all this?
6. What is the writer's point in verses 39-40...does this help answer the previous question?

Overall Reflection

7. What has stood out for you in the whole chapter?
8. How do you respond logically and emotionally to this chapter? What sort of action might you contemplate taking on the basis of reading this chapter?
9. If a person was struggling in their faith what part of Hebrews that we have read so far would you take them to?

8. Hebrews 12: 'you have come to the heavenly Jerusalem'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 12

Some questions to consider: What is the most helpful perspective that you have heard that helps make sense of suffering...either generally or as a Christian? What is the most unhelpful thing you have heard?

What kinds of motivation is offered in the New Testament for 'doing good'?

Jot down any thoughts, insights or questions you might have...

As you read through

What stood out for you as something you just did not get?

What was your emotional reaction at various points?

How would you explain these ideas to a non-Christian friend or relative?

Some notes on Hebrews 12

- The idea of witnesses in 12.1-3 focuses on the athletic stadium but the witnesses in mind (see chapter 11) are to be looked at as much as they look on...note the continuation of the athletic imagery through the early verses of this section
- The writer points to Jesus as the forerunner and also example of faith.
- See Proverbs 3.11-12 for some verses that seem to be behind the idea of discipline
- The phrase 'so that the lame may not be dislocated' in verse 13 probably refers to the weaker members of the community meaning that as the community strengthens itself the weaker members may not be lost to it but strengthened
- See how the accent falls on the community once again in vss 14-17
- You can find Esau's story in Gen 25.29-34...Esau gives up his inheritance rights in exchange for a plate of lentil stew. In later Jewish thought Esau is also seen as sexually immoral because of his marriage to non-Israelite women...this might be in mind but sexual immorality was also often seen as a metaphor of idolatry and turning away from the Lord...for a single meal he gave up his inheritance; he rashly gave away God's gift to him and lost it forever.
- In verses 18-24 the writer summarises so much of what we have already read by pointing out what has happened for the Hebrew Christians in Christ, comparing this to the Old Covenant Mt Sinai. 7 points of comparison are laid out to show how superior coming to the heavenly Jerusalem is
- The final warning in the section (12.24-29) warns against rejecting the one who speaks from heaven. We need to remember the words of 1.1-4 and see that God has spoken finally in Jesus.

Questions

Read 12.1-2

1. The writer asks us to do three things...lay aside distractions, lay aside sin and consider Jesus...what do each of these mean and how would we do these things?

Read 12.3-13

2. The writer speaks of some hardship and suffering as the Lord's discipline...at some length. How do you respond to the idea of seeing some suffering as the Lord's discipline...how pastorally useful is this?

Read 12.14-17

3. Peace and holiness are gifts given to us in Christ; yet we have to pursue them...what does it mean to pursue peace and holiness?
4. How does the example of Esau relate to the writer's overall purpose through this letter of exhortation?

Read 12.18-29

5. What two types of motivation are offered to keep listening and persevering here?

Overall Reflection

6. What is the most helpful thing for you said in this chapter?

9. Hebrews 13: 'let us then go to him outside the camp'

Preparation: If you get time: read through Hebrews 13

Some questions to consider: What are the hardest or most confusing issues or areas for you personally as you think about trying to faithfully live for Jesus?

How easy do you find it to 'swim against the stream' in terms of Christian lifestyle and the application of Christian teaching?

Jot down any thoughts, insights or questions you might have...

As you read through

What stood out for you as something you just did not get?

What was your emotional reaction at various points?

How would you explain these ideas to a non-Christian friend or relative?

Some notes on Hebrews 13

- In chapter 13 a whole string of instruction is given in the light of Hebrews 12.28-29...to truly worship and serve the awesome and holy God
- The instruction to hospitality to strangers in verse 2 is an injunction that would have been well understood in the ancient world where hospitality was a strong value for Jew and Gentile alike. The reference to entertaining angels reflects Genesis 18 (see v 2 and 16) and 19 (vv 1, 15-16).
- After the general instructions of verses 1-6 the writer moves on to wider issues to do with the congregation, especially the treatment of congregational leaders.
- When the writer says we have an altar in verse 10 he is most likely referring in a shorthand way to the sacrificial death of Christ and harking back to Leviticus 16.27 and the day of atonement. The writer says that those who serve in the tabernacle cannot eat from the altar that Christians have. This is referring to people who choose to stay under the Old Covenant and system...they cannot eat (participate) in the new thing that Christ has brought about.
- Under the old system the animal that was sacrificed was not eaten but was taken outside the camp and burnt up. Jesus was sacrificed outside Jerusalem (Jn 19.17-20)...he died as an outcast but paradoxically this shameful death makes it possible for people to draw near to God.
- The writer applies this thought by urging his readers to go to Jesus 'outside the camp' and join him in this shameful and rejected place. To move from the safe place within Judaism (original readers) to the threatening space with Jesus.
- The letter ends with a prayer and doxology (word of praise to God).

Questions

Read 13.1-6

1. What are we to make of these instructions...what is most/least relevant for you in your circumstances?

Read 13.7-18

2. In his teaching about leadership note how the balance is struck between the responsibilities of leaders and followers...how well do we remember and submit to our leaders in our context? What does this passage we should reasonably expect from our leaders?
3. How do you respond to the imagery and exhortation involved with going to Jesus 'outside the camp'?

Read 13.20-25

4. How does this prayer/doxology capture some of the themes that we have seen through the letter?
5. See how Hebrews is described as a 'message of exhortation in verse 22...what have you been exhorted to do/think/act/respond as we have been reading through the letter?

Overall Reflection

6. From your perspective has been the most memorable and the most challenging thing said in the message of exhortation to the Hebrews