



Ministry of the Word

Sunday 10th June 2018

by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1

Subject: Part 1 – Introduction to Hebrews

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets”

Human Intellect, knowledge and experience can be of great benefit when reading the Word of God. Yet, no matter how intelligent or studious you may be, thoughts, knowledge and experience can never substitute the anointing of the Holy Spirit to unveil what God would have us to know. This is why we always need to pray that God would open our spiritual eyes, understanding and hearts to receive from the Lord the things we require for the building up of our faith and deepening of our relationship with Him.

This morning we are going to embark on a new study which is going to be The Book of Hebrews. I would encourage you to bring a notebook and pen for this study.

If you were to pick another comparative book in the Old Testament that would be of value like the book of Hebrews, what would it be? Surprisingly, it is the Book of Leviticus. The book of Leviticus is based on the principles, rules, commandments, sacrificial rituals of the Levitical priesthood. It would be a personal advantage if you were to read and familiarise yourself with this book. Get some of the background to it all, and you will see there, all the symbols and ceremonies, but the realities are in Hebrews.

Hebrews is about the “Pre-eminence of Jesus Christ”. It is all about His superiority and pre-eminence as well as Him being the fulfilment of all that we see in the Jewish religious system.

A fact that was clearly demonstrated by Jesus in His earthly ministry but was denied by the majority of Jews, religious and otherwise. Here in Hebrews like the book of Romans, the table of truth is laid out and makes clear to all, whom Jesus really is.

If you have never studied the Book of Hebrews before, let me assure you that it is a thrilling adventure of many challenging doctrines, mine blowing truths, and most importantly the Revelation of Jesus Christ and His work of Atonement. There are 5 major warnings also in this book which are as follows:

- The Danger of Drifting Chapter 2:1-4
- The Danger of Disobedience Chapter 3:7-4:13
- Progress towards Maturity Chapter 5:11-6:20
- The Danger of Willful Sin Chapter 10:26-39
- Warning against Indifference Chapter 12:25-29

All five warnings are united; they go together and complement each other, each building upon the other and each intensifying. The writer relies heavily on Israel's Exodus as an example type of individual Christian. Remember the Exodus generation, a redeemed people, failed to heed God's instruction and was judged for its disobedience.

Before we get into the book, we are going to look at some of the background to put the book in its context which I hope will be helpful.

The Authorship.

Many have spent what we can only describe, as a lot of time arguing as to who the author is as there is no clear indication at the beginning of the book. The main favourites that are accredited with it are Paul, Peter and some say even Barnabas due to the style of writing. What is certain is that it was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and it is to exalt our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. So as we study this book we will refer to the One we are certain and do know as the ultimate author, not only of this book but the whole Bible, the Holy Spirit.

The Audience

Interestingly, there are no reference to Gentiles in this book, and no problems or difficulties between Gentiles and Jews as expressed clearly in other epistles. It is almost certain that it is written to Jewish believers and even some unbelievers, for you always have the tares with

the wheat. Part of the evidence that it was written primarily to Jewish people is that the merits of Jesus as well as the New Covenant is heavily contrasted with the Old Testament Covenant which so many lived by. A situation that many coming from religion, no matter its name, can identify with.

The Assorted Groups

There are three main groups in the Book of Hebrews being addressed.

1. The Jewish Christian believers
2. The intellectual Jew who was convinced by the truth but never actually committed to Christ.
3. The Jews by tradition who were actually atheists at heart.

So we will begin with **The Jewish believers**.

When the book of Hebrews was written, many of the congregation of true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ had come out of the Jewish system from which they had been born and raised. Once they became born again and received Christ as their Messiah and Saviour, it was a very big deal, just as it still is today and clearly a work of the Holy Spirit. When they had come out of their traditional religious system, they experienced great hostility and were not just ostracized but they literally became dead to their family and community. They suffered terrible persecution, but none the less, they pressed on. Look at Hebrews 10:32-34 and we get a small insight into what we are talking about.

“But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: ³³partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; ³⁴for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.”

This has not changed for many of our brothers and sisters in many parts of the world today, and a growing and increasing number of countries are anti-Christian. So there are lessons for us here as well.

The recipients of this epistle should have anticipated the response they receive due to the change of their convictions and matured enough to deal with it. But like most today they did not and could not. You see they lacked full confidence in the Gospel and this resulted in their

lack of confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were very much in danger of going back into Judaism which would result in diminishing their faith and testimony. They had serious problems in accepting the clear-cut distinctions between the Gospel, the New Covenant in Christ, the structures, ceremonies, patterns and methods of Judaism. They were still hung up on temple ritual and worship. This is why the Holy Spirit talks to them about the new priesthood and the new Temple as well as the new sacrifice and the new sanctuary, all of which are better than the old ones.

Yes they had gone beyond Judaism in receiving Jesus Christ but, understandably, they were tempted to hang on to many of their old religious habits that had been so much a part of their lives. When their friends and their countrymen began to persecute them in earnest, the pressure led them to hold even tighter to some of the old Jewish traditions. Remember, they would have also held on to old superstitions just like many in religion do today. They felt they had to keep a foothold in their old and familiar relationships. It was hard to make a clean break and I'm sure we can all relate to this on some level. For Jesus to be Lord there must be no-one or nothing else blocking the way. The 1st commandment is very clear on this, and important to know as well as practice.

With all that pressure, together with their weak faith and spiritual ignorance, they were in great danger of mixing the new with the old. The first ecumenicals you could say! They were in great danger of coming up with a ritualistic, ceremonial, legalistic Christianity. They were a whole congregation of "weaker brothers".

1 Corinthians 8:9 –

"But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak."

who were still calling "unclean" what the Lord had sanctified (**Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15; Romans 14:12; 1 Timothy 4:1-5**).

The Holy Spirit directed this letter to them to strengthen their faith in the New Covenant, to show them that they did not need the old Temple (which in a few years after this book was written, the temple would be completely destroyed by Titus Vespasian in 70 AD anyway, showing that God had brought an end to that religious economy).

Luke 21:5-6: *“Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations, He said,⁶ “These things which you see—the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down.”*”

These verses are the very words of Jesus. I believe them. In fact, the “wailing wall” which is supposed to be the last few stones of the last temple in Israel is a mockery. According to old historical writings and very recent archaeological discoveries, the original temple was not near the known wailing wall. The wailing wall in truth, is part of the old Roman fortress of “Fort of Antoni” where over 10,000 soldiers and company subjugated during the Roman occupation. This has been proven and that it is not the site of the Temple. Josephus, in his book 4, recorded in his historical records that the temple had been completely wiped off the face of the earth and no one would or could find any trace of it. Literally fulfilling Jesus words.

They did not need the old Aaronic-Levitical priesthood. They did not need the old day-in, day-out, sacrifices. They did not need the ceremonies. They had a new and better covenant with a new and better priesthood, a new and better sanctuary, and a new and better sacrifice. The pictures and symbols were to give way to the reality.

The book of Hebrews was written to give confidence to these floundering believers. The Lord was encouraging his followers to hold to the better covenant and the better priesthood, and not go back into the patterns of Judaism, either to that priesthood or to that assemblage. They must steadfastly and exclusively live in, and live out, their new relationship in Christ.

The second group addressed by the Holy Spirit through The Book of Hebrews were **The intellectual Jews who was convinced by the truth but never actually committed to Christ.**

We have all met these type of people, who have heard the truth of Jesus Christ, who are intellectually convinced that He is indeed who He claims to be, and yet are not willing to make a commitment of faith in Him.

Among the Hebrews to whom this epistle was written, there were such non-Christians, just like there are in many groups today. It is likely that every church group since Pentecost has had people in it who have been convinced that Jesus is the Christ but who have never committed themselves to Him. These intellectually convinced but spiritually uncommitted,

are the object of some of the things that the writer addresses. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, spoken of in the Jewish Scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament), but they had not been willing to receive Him personally as their Saviour and Lord. Why? Perhaps, like those described by John, they believed in Him, but they loved the approval of men more than the approval of God, please look at John 12:42-43 –

“Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”

They were not willing to make the sacrifice required. So, they are exhorted by the Holy Spirit to go all the way to saving faith; to go all the way to commitment to the lordship of Christ. In chapter 2 verses 1-3 , there is one of these special statements to this group of the intellectually convinced but spiritually uncommitted.

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

They were guilty of the great sin of neglecting to do what they were intellectually convinced what is right. The truth of the gospel had even been confirmed to them by the apostles, with all the miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 2:4).

In chapter six this group is addressed again.

“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” (6:4-6)

Here is a warning to the merely intellectually convinced not to stall on the side-line but to step over and become part-takers of the gift of Salvation. For if he stops after having received full revelation, and especially after being convinced of the truth of the revelation, he has only one way to go. If, when a man is totally convinced that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be, but then refuses to believe, this man or woman, is without excuse and without hope, because, though convinced of the truth of the gospel, he still will not put his trust in it. Here, he is warned that there is nothing else God can do.

What is the greatest sin that a man can commit? The sin of rejecting Christ.

“For if we go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” (10:26).

The warning continues:

“How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under-foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (10:29)

These are controversial passages, and we will deal with them in detail at the proper places.

Now we come to the last, third and final group -

Jews by tradition who were actually atheists at heart.

These were not convinced, intellectually or otherwise. Not only does the Holy Spirit in this book speak to Christians in order to strengthen their faith and to the intellectually convinced in order to push them over the line to saving faith, but He also speaks to those who have not believed at all, to those who may not yet be convinced of any part of the gospel. He seeks to show them clearly that Jesus is in fact who He claims to be, and this truth is the main thrust of chapter nine.

For example, in 9:11 He says:

“But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation.”

The Spirit of God explains Christ’s new priesthood in the same chapter in verses 14-15”

“how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? ¹⁵ And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. “

And verses 27-28”

“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation”

These messages speak directly to unbelievers, not to Christians and not to those who are already convinced of the gospel intellectually. They are given to those who first need to know who Christ really is.

These, are the three groups in view in the epistle. The key to interpreting any part of Hebrews is to understand which group is being addressed. If we do not understand that, we are bound to confuse issues. For example, the Spirit is surely not saying to believers, *"It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment"* (Hebrews 9:27).

We must always understand what group it is to whom He speaks as we study the book of Hebrews, which we will do as we journey through this book.

The Overall Theme

The overall theme is the superiority, or the pre-eminence of Christ. He is better than anything that was before. He is better than any Old Testament person; He is better than any Old Testament institution; He is better than any Old Testament ritual; He is better than any Old Testament sacrifice; He is better than anyone and everything else. This general outline of the book of Hebrews shows the basic pattern of presenting the superiority of Jesus Christ.

The letter begins with the general superiority of Christ to everyone and everything, a kind of a summary of the whole epistle is in the first three verses. Next comes the superiority of Christ to the angels, then the superiority of Christ to Moses, the superiority of Christ to Joshua, the superiority of Christ to Aaron and his priesthood, the superiority of Christ to the Old Covenant, the superiority of Christ's sacrifice to old sacrifices, the superiority of Christ's faithful people to all the faithless, and the superiority of Christ's testimony to that of any other. This brief outline gives us the flow of the book, which, above all else, teaches the total, complete, and absolute superiority of Jesus Christ.

At the start, I mentioned how this book was comparative to the book of Leviticus. So as we study the book of Hebrews its important as well as a great blessing to keep in mind what the Some background truths that the primary readers of this Book would have been taught as well as believed all their lives.

The first thing was – No-one could see God and Live.

Before we begin looking at particular passages and verses, let me suggest a couple of footnotes. To the Jew it had always been a dangerous thing to approach God.

"No man can see Me and live" Exodus 33:20.

On the great Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which occurred once a year and many Jews today still try to keep to one degree or another, but they can't really because there is no temple. Only at that singular time in the year, could the High Priest enter into the Holy of Holies, where the Shekinah Glory dwelt, where God was uniquely present. They could not see God, or behold God. They could not even approach Him except on this one day a year; and only one person, the high priest, could do this. He had to go in and get out quickly. He could not linger there lest he put Israel in terror of judgment. Only he would sense the presence of God. Since there was naturally no personal nearness to God, there had to be some basis for communion between God and Israel. So God established a covenant. In this covenant God, in His grace, and in His sovereign initiative, offered to Israel a special relationship with Himself. In a unique way He would be their God and they would be His people to reach the world. They would have special access to Him if they obeyed His law. To break His law was sin, and sin interrupted their access to Him. Since there was always sin, access was always being interrupted.

This leads us to the second thing to keep in mind which is the Old Sacrifice.

So God instituted a system of sacrifices as outward acts of inner repentance. Through the Levitical priesthood, sacrifices were made to symbolize atonement for sin, in order that the barrier might be taken down and there might be access to God. It worked like this: God gave His covenant, which included His law, and thereby offered the people access to Him. Man sinned, the law was broken, and the barrier went up again. Another repentant act of sacrifice was then made so that the barrier would be dropped and the relationship re-established.

Consider the amount of sacrifices that they had to make? The answer is incessantly; hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year. They never stopped. They couldn't afford to! Besides this, the priests themselves were sinners. They had to make sacrifices for their own sins before they could make sacrifices for the sins of the people. And

so, the barrier went up and down, up and down, up and down. This in itself proved the ineffectiveness of man to keep the law thus, it was a losing battle against sin. Besides this, the whole system never removed sin fully and finally. It only covered it up. We need to grasp that the Law was given to show man his imperfection. Galatians 3:11&12

But that no one is ^(a)justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.”¹² Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.”

It was always by Faith, that man could be brought near to God which we will see in Chapter 10 and 11 of this Book. What man needed was a Perfect Priest and a Perfect Sacrifice to open the way once and for all. A sacrifice that was not just a picture and that did not deal just with one sin at a time, over and over again, but one that took it all away once and for all. That, says the writer of Hebrews, is exactly what Jesus was and what He did.

Jesus Christ came as the Mediator of a better covenant because it is one that does not have to be repeated every hour, or even every month or year. Christ came as the mediator of a better covenant because His sacrifice once and for all removes every sin ever committed. Christ came as the mediator of a better covenant because He is a priest who does not need to make any sacrifices for Himself. He is totally perfect, the Perfect Priest and the Perfect Sacrifice. Jesus Christ, in His own sacrifice, His sacrifice of Himself, showed the perfection that eliminated sin.

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

Sanctified remember is the process of being "made pure," and the emphasis is: through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ 'ONCE'. That is something wonderfully new in the sacrificial system, one sacrifice, once offered. That is indeed a wonderfully better covenant.

“But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.” Hebrews 10:12

That is something no priest could ever do. There were not even any seats where the sacrifices were made in the Tabernacle or the Temple. The priests had to keep making sacrifices; their task was never finished. Jesus made His sacrifice and "sat down". It was finished. It was done. The Holy spirit declares;

"For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" Hebrews 10:14

So Hebrews announces here is a better priest making a better sacrifice. This is the central message of the book of Hebrews. To the believing Jew the Spirit says, "Continue to have confidence in this Priest and this sacrifice." To the one intellectually convinced He says, "Receive this Priest and accept the sacrifice He made. You are on the borderline of decision; don't fall into perdition when you are only a step away." And to the unconvinced He says, "Look at Jesus Christ. See how much better He is than the Levitical priests and how much better His one sacrifice is than all of their innumerable sacrifices. Receive Him."

The Spirit today is saying, "All of your lives, you Jews have been looking for the Perfect Priest. You've been looking for the Perfect Final Sacrifice. I present Him to you—Jesus Christ."

Keep in mind that the idea of a new covenant was not easy for Jews to accept. Even after they accepted the new, it was hard for them to make a clean break with the old. The Gentiles did not have that problem, of course, since they had never been a part of the old. They had long before lost any real knowledge of the true God, and in consequence were worshiping idols, some of them ancient and some of them more sophisticated than others, but all of them idols (**Romans 1:21-25**).

But the Jews had always had a divine religion. For centuries they had known a divinely appointed place of worship and a divinely revealed way of worshiping. God Himself had established their religion. One might effectively say, when witnessing to a Gentile, "Here is the truth." But when you went to a Jew and said, "Here is the truth," he would likely say, "I already know the truth." When you countered this, "But this truth is from the one true God," he would respond, "So is the truth that I have."

Throughout Hebrews these immature, but beloved, Christians are told to keep their confidence in Christ, the mediator of a better covenant and their new Great High Priest. They are reminded that they were losing nothing for which they were not getting something infinitely better. They had been deprived of an earthly temple but they were going to get a heavenly one. They had been deprived of an earthly priesthood but they now had a heavenly Priest. They had been deprived of the old pattern of sacrifices but now they had one final sacrifice.

In this epistle, contrast reigns. Everything presented is presented as better: a better hope, a better testament, a better promise, a better sacrifice, a better substance, a better country, a better resurrection, a better everything. Jesus Christ is presented here as the supreme Best. And we are presented as being in Him and as dwelling in a completely new dimension—the heavenlies. We read of the heavenly Christ, the heavenly calling, the heavenly gift, the heavenly country, the heavenly Jerusalem, and of our names being written in the heavenly books. Everything is new. Everything is better. We don't need the old and we don't want it to be honest. Now the point in what has been said is this: we have such a High Priest of high priests, whose work is completely finished, once and for all, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, who has prepared a place for you.

Amen.