

The Letter to the Hebrews

Introduction

Today we're starting a new series on the letter to the Hebrews.

The main theme in this letter is the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ in every aspect of His ministries towards us as human beings.

Even though I'm not going to explain specific verses of this letter today, let's just take a quick look at the opening verses of this letter.

Hebrews 1:1-4

- God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

As we see in these verses God has been speaking to mankind throughout the ages in various ways, mostly through prophets, but, in what the writer calls these last days, God has spoken through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The information in these 4 verses already points us towards the superiority of Christ over all the other creatures God used to speak unto mankind.

Throughout the letter we will see this aspect of superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ being mentioned again and again.

Today I will just point out different kinds of aspects for which this is true.

But let's first look at some basic information of this letter.

Origin of the Letter

- The name of the writer is not mentioned in the letter
- Reasons for Paul as most likely author

Unlike any other of all the letters in the New Testament we do not see the name of the writer of this letter in it.

In these days there is no agreement among scientists about the actual writer of the letter.

However, that has not always been so in the past.

And one of the reasons why Paul was considered to be the author of this letter is found in the order of all the letters of the apostles in many old manuscripts.

The present order in our Bibles was finally introduced by Jerome, the writer of the Latin Vulgate, a Bible in Latin.

On the next sheet you'll see the order of the books in the New Testament as it was found in those old manuscripts and as recognized by the council of Laodicea, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius and the eastern churches.

Early order of NT Books

- The Gospel of Matthew
- The Gospel of Mark
- The Gospel of Luke
- The Gospel of John
- Acts
- James
- I and II Peter
- I, II and II John
- Jude
- Romans
- I and II Corinthians
- Galatians
- Ephesians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- I and II Thessalonians
- Hebrews
- I and II Timothy
- Titus
- Philemon
- Revelation

Maybe you think: what difference does it make in which order these books and letters are? But it does matter!

For instance, Peter, in his second letter (2 Peter 3:14-16) refers to the letters written by Paul and the passages about the end of times in his letters, mentioning that in those passages there are many difficult sayings about this issue. In this order we do get that warning before coming to those letters.

Regarding the Old Testament the difference is even bigger. Not only was the order of the books changed, but also new categories have been added. Our Old Testament is divided in 5 categories: the Law, historical books, Poetry/Writings, major prophets and minor prophets.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into 3 categories: Moses (the Law), the Prophets and the Writings. We see that confirmed in Luke 24:44 where our Lord Jesus Christ refers to that division.

Luke 24:44

- Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.”

If our Lord and Savior referred to the Old Testament Scriptures as divided in the 3 categories of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings (the Psalms is the first book in the category of the writings) than maybe it would be wise for us to stick to that division also.

After all, the category in which a book is included, can and most likely will have an impact on how we look at such a book and with what mindset we will read it.

When we go through the book of Acts we find that several times it says that Paul explained Jesus as the expected Messiah from Moses and the Prophets. How else could it have been as there was no New Testament yet!

Let’s take a look at the way all these books appear in the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible.

Scrolls of the Old Testament	
• Genesis	• Psalms
• Exodus	• Proverbs
• Leviticus	• Job
• Numbers	• Song of Songs
• Deuteronomy	• Ruth
• Joshua / Judges	• Lamentations
• 1 – 2 Samuel / 1 – 2 Kings	• Ecclesiastes
• Isaiah	• Esther
• Jeremiah	• Daniel
• Ezekiel	• Ezra / Nehemiah
• 12 Minor prophets	• 1 -2 Chronicles

In the Hebrew Bible most of what we call the historical books are included in the prophets.

In this list all the books from Joshua through the 12 minor prophets form the category the Prophets.

In some Bibles 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings are combined into 1-4 Kings. As a matter of fact it is a better way of referring to these books, as even 1 Samuel speaks more about Saul and David than about Samuel. And in 1 Samuel 28:3 we read that Samuel died, so, he even didn't live until the end of that book.

Therefore he isn't mentioned also in 2 Samuel.

Let me make one more comment regarding these matters as related to the verse on the next sheet.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

- All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

We need to realize that no book of the Bible is given to us just for the purpose of informing us about some historical facts.

Every book in the Bible has this purpose as described by the apostle Paul in this letter to Timothy.

This should be another reason to hold on to the categories of the Old Testament Books as it has been declared by our Lord Jesus Christ.

After this intermezzo let's go back to the letter to the Hebrews.

Recipients of the Letter

- Addressed to the Hebrews
- Estimated date of writing

The letter itself is addressed to the Hebrews, which clearly indicates that it was written to a Jewish audience. Where this audience lived is not mentioned, so this could mean that it was meant for all disciples of Christ from a Jewish background.

The letter is most likely written within the period of 63 AD to 69 AD. One of the reasons for this time period is the fact that it does not mention the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in 70 AD. It still refers to the various sacrifices that had to be brought according to the Law of Moses, and that was no longer possible after 70 AD as there was no temple anymore.

Let's continue.

Purpose of the Letter

- Encouragement
- Warning

We have to keep a few things in mind while dealing with these things. First we need to remember that what we call Christianity today started as a new movement within Judaism. Therefore we see in the book of Acts that for an extended period of time the disciples of Christ still also came together in the temple. We see that not only in Acts 2:46-3:8, but also from Acts 21:26-31, where we see that the apostle Paul is expelled from the temple. We also must keep in mind that at a certain point in time the disciples of Christ were no longer accepted in the temple and in synagogues. This fact, in combination with other upcoming forms of persecution, may have made disciples from a Jewish background considering to go back to traditional Judaism.

The apostle Paul in this letter encourages them to continue to follow Christ and warns them for the consequences of forsaking Christ.

Let's now go to a general overview of the letter.

**Jesus, Son of God, greater than all
1:1 – 2:18**

- **The greatness of the Son 1:1-3**
- **Jesus is superior to angels in his person 1:4-14**
- **Jesus is superior to angels in his message 2:1-4**
- **Jesus is superior to angels as a human being 2:5-18**

In the Bible we read several times about people seeing an angel or several angels. And when an angel speaks to a person most of the time he starts by saying; “do not be afraid”. So we may conclude that it must be quite some experience to see an angel.

But in Hebrews Paul makes it very clear that the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is without any doubt far superior that any of the angels.

And that is very definitely true for the ultimate purpose for which he came unto earth as we read in Matthew 1:21

“And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”

No angle was capable of doing that.

The superior apostle 3:1-4:13

- Jesus is superior to Moses 3:1-6
- Warning to obey 3:7-4:2
- Warning not to miss God's promised rest 4:3-13

While Moses is a very important person in the history of the Jewish people he too couldn't do what Jesus came to do.

God chose him to give His laws to the people He had chosen to be His special people, but just having the laws of God didn't set them free from the power of sin.

Reading through the Old Testament, and even in parts of the New Testament, we can see that very clearly throughout the history of the Jewish people as a nation.

People hearing the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ recognized that He spoke as one having authority, and not as one of their scribes/teachers of the law.

The greatest chief priest 4:14-7:28

- **Jesus is superior to Aaron 4:14-5:14**
- **Jesus is superior in promises 6:1-20**
- **Jesus is superior to Melchizedek 7:1-28**

Every high priest had to bring sacrifices year after year, also for himself.

But our Lord Jesus Christ had to bring the sacrifice of His death only once. That was enough. And therefore, and for the fact that He is our High Priest for all eternity, He is greater than any other high priest and even greater than Melchizedek.

And as He is God, His promises will never fail.

**Jesus is the better mediator
8:1-10:39**

- **A new and better agreement 8:1-13**
- **A new way to praise God 9:1-28**
- **A new sacrifice and way to life 10:1-39**

In Christ God fulfilled the promise He made in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

We see these verses on the following sheet.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

- “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — “not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.
- “But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
- “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Under the Old Covenant the Jewish people received the Law of God in written form.

There was nothing wrong with that Law, it was indeed a perfect law, as we also can read in the Psalms 19 and 119.

The real problem was, that the hearts of the people weren’t changed. Under the New Covenant the Law of God will be written on the hearts of His people. And that will result in the transformation of disciples of Christ by the renewing of their thinking (Romans 12:2).

Let’s go to the last sheet for today.

The better way 11:1-13:25

- **The way of trust and hope 11:1-40**
- **The right way to live 12:1-29**
- **The way of love and doing what God wants 13:1-25**

In these last 3 chapters of this Letter the apostle Paul calls on the Jewish disciples of Christ to continue in the ways of the Lord. We all recognize that this isn't easy, but we can and should depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us in our walk with God according to His laws.

And just as Paul so called on the Jewish disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, so we are reminded of the necessity to continue in the ways of the Lord, even when our society despises these ways and will do all it can do to try and convince us to stop following God in all His ways.

Let us pray!