

Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Three)

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God had specific reasons for supplying the contents of each book of the Bible to His converted children. If asked, not everyone would give the same reasons for each book's presence because each book does not influence every person to the same degree. However, each book is jam-packed with help that everyone needs, though not at the same time in each person's growth and development.

Many have described Hebrews as the Leviticus of the New Testament and the New Covenant. While true in a broad sense, they address far different circumstances, making them very different in the details. One point is certain: Each book remains vital to the spiritual growth of all of God's children. Each enhances the ability of the church to continue to fulfill the work Jesus assigned it after His resurrection and ascension (Matthew 28:16-20).

We will continue exploring a few specific areas that provide a foundation for understanding that Hebrews was written to fulfill several needs for the church at the time. These critical points provide building blocks for a clearer understanding of the epistle's contents. Previously, we speculated about who wrote Hebrews, when it was written, to whom it is addressed, who was being converted by the gospel, and the Jews' and their leaders' reactions to the preaching of the gospel. We extracted much of that information from the book of Acts.

Acts reveals key reasons why the church needed the epistle to the Hebrews. The Jewish religious leadership realized by the end of Acts 5 that their verbal warnings did not motivate Christians to cease from preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. So, having reached the point of violent opposition to the apostles, the leadership began jailing and beating them. The intensity of resistance against Christian preaching began rising steeply, but these pressures and persecutions did not stop God from converting more people. Acts 6:1-4 records that the number of disciples was not merely increasing but multiplying, signaling that the unconverted Jews' reaction was backfiring.

During this rising intensity of evangelistic activity, Stephen accused the Jewish leaders of being "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart," of betraying and murdering the Messiah, and not keeping the law (Acts 7:51-53), resulting in his martyrdom. These sharp and pointed truths stung the Jews, thrusting their consciences into fight mode almost instantaneously.

Acts 7:57-58 reveals that at this violent encounter, God chose to reveal that the man leading the mob that killed Stephen was the same man He soon converted to Christianity: "Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." We know him as the apostle Paul.

Stephen's murder at the behest of the Jewish authorities intensified the Jews' anger, but it did not stop the church's strong evangelism from continuing or conversions from happening. Rather, it seemed to ignite activity to an even higher level, increasing the gospel's spread even farther beyond the Jerusalem area.

A Vital Reaction to Consider

Acts' recounting of the church's growth continues virtually unabated. What we have seen so far provides a clear overview that life as a Christian then was culturally tumultuous. Considering the growing political and religious animosity in our times, the kinds of events we read about in Acts may be not far below the horizon for us. What will happen when Christ "stirs the cultural pot" more aggressively, making more widely known the doctrinal truths that separate the church of God from those who call themselves Christian but are not? Satan and those faithful to him, enslaved to their carnal natures, will not stand still and do nothing. When Christ does through us what He did through first-century Christians, the professing-Christian populace will react as the Jews did.

At this juncture, it may be helpful to ponder Jesus' admonition to those seeking baptism during His ministry:

Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'?" (Luke 14:25-30)

Both biblical and secular histories show that we need to understand that true Christianity has violent, dangerous enemies. Jesus and eleven of the twelve apostles suffered violent deaths, and through the centuries multitudes of other Christians without positions of authority within the faith have lost their lives due to their faith in Christ. While unpleasant to think about, it is a fact that, when the truth is revealed, many who do not believe God's truths take their feelings out on those who believe and practice them. The book of Acts and other scriptures present this reality for our admonition. Persecution for the faith may soon be on our radar, so we need to consider it seriously.

A Major Reason for Hebrews

Not every event that had a significant influence on the writing of Hebrews happened amid the turmoil in and around Jerusalem. From His place in heaven, Jesus Christ was arranging another dramatic cultural shock for the Jewish converts, one that would dramatically reshape the church. It produced a far more significant effect for a much longer time in church history.

In Acts 9, God calls and converts the apostle Paul. The far-reaching, momentous event occurs in Acts 10 and involves the apostle Peter and the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family in the city of Caesarea, about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Researchers are unsure about the date of this event, but they generally place it in the early AD 40s. It is interesting to consider that it did not occur in Jerusalem. God, it seems, was introducing the Gentiles into the Israelite-dominated fellowship of believers away from the most intense center of anger to soften the cultural shock to both Jews and Gentiles, making the acceptance of each other somewhat less tumultuous.

God prepared Peter, his fellow Jews, and Cornelius and his group beautifully for this tradition- and culture-changing event so that their minds were prepared to accept the others without resistance and not to reject them simply because of their different ethnicity. In Acts 10:25-29, Peter mentions an already historical reality for the Jewish-Gentile estrangement:

As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I myself am also a man.” And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”

Incidentally, it was not “unlawful” as a result of a God-given directive in His Word; it was unlawful due to carnal, Jewish adjustments to God’s laws.

Upon reflection, Peter perceived God’s hand in the entire occasion. In Acts 10:34-48, he gives this fuller response to Cornelius and his family:

Then Peter opened his mouth and said, “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

These passages broadly state that God is bringing the prevailing—and at times very heated—spiritual, social, and cultural animosities between Jews and Gentiles into the church’s fellowship to be confronted and solved. God’s action presented the church with a specific problem within an existing general problem that had been agitating community life. The broader animosities soon became close and personal.

God did not allow this beachhead victory in Caesarea to slip away. He quickly began converting Gentiles in other areas in large enough numbers to establish congregations. Converted people in larger numbers began wrestling with the demands of this new, more inclusive religion. Members needed direction, finding it challenging to adjust to the change from the religion that the Jews had cobbled together under Satan’s inspiration over the centuries. We may have difficulty appreciating the emotional upheaval the new converts faced in order to be loyal to their baptismal vows.

What Jewish Converts Faced

From our perspective, we may conclude that what was exerting the pressure on Jewish church members was that God never intended the Old Covenant worship regulations or the Jewish “adjustments” to it to last forever. Hebrews 8 unambiguously calls the New Covenant “better.” However, the mere knowledge of this fact did not change the realities of living through the sometimes-severe disruptions to family relationships (Luke 14:26) or to the broader social and business relations within their communities (Luke 14:27-30) that God’s changes imposed on them.

The apostle Paul addresses this issue directly but briefly in Ephesians 2:11-18. He directs his counsel primarily to Gentiles, but we cannot forget that Jews were on the flipside of this issue, so they also profited from his counsel. He provides positive advice to all involved in this life-changing doctrinal advancement, but the converts, both Jews and Gentiles, had to confront the challenges personally in their daily lives:

Therefore, remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

Because the enmity between Jews and Gentiles had existed for so long, it had become a natural part of both cultures to hold a prejudicial wariness of each other. In some cases, it had grown to outright hatred that had to be overcome in order to accept each other and meet together in the closest bonds of spiritual fellowship.

Following that special Pentecost when God gave His Holy Spirit, the apostles taught the new Jewish converts that they had to abandon what they sincerely believed was a God-instituted religion founded through Moses 1,500 years earlier. Gentiles were accepted into this religion only at a comfortable distance.

As the intensity of the persecution rose, the converts were gradually being revealed to their families and community. This exposure resulted in their exclusion from participating in all Temple activities. Moreover, their unconverted neighbors treated them as worse than Gentiles because they were seen to be recanting from the one and only God-given faith, because, if they accepted the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, they were considered to be giving up on the promises made by God within the Scriptures.

Were the Sanhedrin and priesthood wrong? Had the converts been prospered since declaring their belief in Christ? Would their Messiah return soon? Everywhere they turned in family and community life, converted Jews were being reviled and daunted by painful persecutions that believing in Jesus as Messiah was a delusion, a tragic mistake, a sin of the highest order. An interesting factor within this mix is that, in some cases, they were being persecuted within their communities through actions originally organized by the pre-conversion Paul.

Both spiritually and physically, the church members were being convinced that their highest need was for instruction from God on how to understand their dilemma and overcome it. In organized epistle form, it would not be made available for more than 30 years after the crucifixion. Until then, the members would have to be taught through Sabbath sermons and Bible studies given by the ministry. This testing of their faith was a challenging period of life for them. It is no wonder that Hebrews contains a warning not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (Hebrews 10:23-25), which Jewish converts might have decided to do to hide their association with Christianity.

Perhaps we can identify with the social tumult then taking place in the Jewish Christians' lives by imagining what will happen in our "Christian" nations when our fellow citizens are exposed to the fact that the religious doctrines that they believe are true Christianity are not God's truth. By remaining faithful to Jesus as Messiah, the first-century Jewish Christians were being banished from participating in areas of life they had held important before God called them. However, Hebrews 12:4 reminds us that these Hebrews had "not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." But in their case, it was at the door.

Hebrews' Theme

A theme is a topic to be developed and discussed for a purpose within a document or speech. It is also the purposeful development of the reason for the document or speech. The theme of Hebrews lends convincing evidence that the epistle was primarily intended for Jewish converts because they were the only converts who had experience with its subject matter and illustrations at the time it was produced. The new Gentile converts had little background to deal with its subject matter because their familiarity with the Old Covenant worship system extended only to what they had gathered from sermons at services. Hebrews' theme can be best understood if we recall what was happening culturally among the Jews because of the awe-inspiring excellence of Christianity over Judaism.

Central to its superiority is Jesus Christ. Hebrews develops the theme of the immeasurable superiority of Christ, Christianity's High Priest, over all that had gone before. He is superior, not merely to all high priests who had served Israel, but to everybody—including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, or anybody else in Israelite history—regardless of their office within God's creative purposes. In other words, Hebrews' dominant theme is the contrast between the traditional religion of the Jews and what Jewish converts had chosen by deciding to live by faith in Jesus Christ and casting their lot with His people.

The following provides an overview of how Hebrews' theme is arranged:

- » Hebrews 1:1-3: Christ's superiority over the prophets
- » Hebrews 1:4-14: His superiority over angels
- » Hebrews 3:1-6: His superiority over Moses
- » Hebrews 4:6-10: His superiority over Joshua
- » Hebrews 5:1-11: His superiority over Aaron
- » Hebrews 6:1—10:39: His superiority over the entire ritual of Judaism

» Hebrews 11:1—12:3: His superiority over all the heroes of faith

Hebrews 10:1-10 compares the ministry of Jesus Christ to that under the Old Covenant:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. Therefore, when He came into the world, He said; “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God.’” Previously saying, “Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them” (which are offered according to the law), then He said, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God.” He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

This passage makes a distinct statement about the comparison between Christ and everything or everyone who came before He arrived on earth to complete the work of God. Jesus’ teaching, leadership, and personal example is reality compared to the misty shadows cast by everything else.

The key term throughout Hebrews, then, is “better.” The author uses the comparative “better” a number of critical times: Hebrews 1:4 (“so much better than the angels”); Hebrews 7:19 (“a better hope”); Hebrews 7:22; 8:6 (“a better covenant”); Hebrews 8:6 (“better promises”); Hebrews 9:23 (“better sacrifices”); Hebrews 10:34 (“a better and enduring possession”); Hebrews 11:16 (“a better . . . country”); Hebrews 11:35 (“a better resurrection”); and Hebrews 11:40 (“something better”).

Not only is “better” emphasized, but “greatness” is also mentioned several times: Hebrews 2:3 (“so great a salvation”); Hebrews 4:14 (“a great High Priest”); Hebrews 7:4 (“how great this man was”); Hebrews 9:11 (“the greater and more perfect Tabernacle”); Hebrews 10:32 (“a great struggle with sufferings”); Hebrews 10:35 (“great reward”); Hebrews 12:1 (“so great a cloud of witnesses”); and Hebrews 13:20 (“that great Shepherd of the sheep”).

The author draws the Hebrews’ attention to the contrast between what they gave up in converting and what they gained: Christians have “a great High Priest” (Hebrews 4:14); “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19); and an exclusive altar (Hebrews 13:10). Christians are also exhorted to look forward to “the world to come” (Hebrews 2:5); to “the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5); to the New Covenant being made with the united houses of Israel and Judah (Hebrews 8:10); to “the good things to come” (Hebrews 9:11); to Christ’s second appearing for salvation (Hebrews 9:28); to the receipt of the promise at His coming (Hebrews 10:36-37); and to a future heavenly city (Hebrews 11:14-16; 13:14).

Everywhere a reader turns within Hebrews, by means of sheer repetition of comparisons revealing the superiority of Christ, Christianity, and the New Covenant, he or she is quietly but forcefully drawn to one overriding reality. The center of Judaism was the Temple, the priesthood, and the

sacrifices, all of which were fine teachers and good experiences as God intended them. Even so, they are not what God desires for His children at this time within His purpose. They are not good enough for His children now. The author writes in Hebrews 8:4-6, 13:

For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, “See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. . . . In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Though the Jewish converts were indeed deprived of the distinctive symbols of the past, they were but shadows, symbols, mere copies of heavenly things. Through God’s calling and the gifts He provides, they were then, as we are today, dealing with realities and preparing for the realities of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

The Epistle’s Character

The *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines *character* broadly as “the combination of qualities and/or traits that we discern in an individual, group, or thing.” In this case, we are trying to discover characteristics in a document by an unknown person.

That the author is unknown may be one of its more important characteristics. Why did God hide the identity of this specific writer when He had revealed the authors of virtually every other book in the Bible? It may be that, combined with the tenor of the times, the identity of the author—whom many may have disliked or distrusted—might have complicated the impact of the material covered in the epistle. Hiding the author’s identity may have diminished resistance to its message. Perhaps God permitted nothing that might distract a reader’s focus from the main character, so the author is unnamed to keep readers focused on the main character.

Second, unlike the other epistles, it has no opening salutation identifying for whom all its vital information is intended. This omission was intentionally done as a clear signal that the issue at hand has significant doctrinal ramifications and applies to the whole church. It is not a mere local problem between a few members.

Third, perhaps its most valuable asset, the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ and His character are opened to full view, including His origins, words, works, and personal character. It reveals that He is worthy of all honor and trust.

Fourth, the epistle focuses on “Old Covenant teaching” more frequently, thoroughly, and powerfully than any other New Testament epistle. The author provides this instruction so all Christians, but especially new converts, can see clear purpose in the comparisons Hebrews contains.

Fifth, its warnings against apostasy are the strongest and most frequent in the New Testament. They are a testament against the temper of the times, especially the turmoil within the Jewish culture.

Sixth, its appeals to the brethren for faithful steadfastness and perseverance are numerous and firmly stated.

Seventh, an exceedingly important trait, the first time Christ is mentioned in the epistle is in Hebrews 1:3, where He is described as seated “at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” This description sets an emphatic tone for the entire epistle. From the very start, the reader knows the position of authority from which Jesus operates.

Hebrews’ emphasis is heavenly in contrast to the fact that, throughout our entire lives, our natural focus has been earthly, carnal.

The author himself describes what he has written:

Now may the God of peace [Who is the Author and Giver of peace], Who brought again from among the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood [that sealed, ratified] the everlasting agreement (covenant, testament), strengthen (complete, perfect) *and* make you what you ought to be *and* equip you with everything good that you may carry out His will; [while He Himself] works in you *and* accomplishes that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ (the Messiah); to Whom be the glory forever and ever (to the ages of the ages). Amen (so be it). I call on you, brethren, to listen patiently *and* bear with this message of exhortation *and* admonition *and* encouragement, for I have written to you briefly. (Hebrews 13:20-22, *The Amplified Bible*)

The author gives it a barebones character trait: a “word of exhortation.”

Its Value to Us Today

The epistle to the Hebrews would not make the top of many professing Christians’ list of favorite Bible books. If anything, most Christians would assess Hebrews as among the more difficult epistles to understand. Their evaluation would probably consider it “heavy.” This assessment is understandable, as the epistle is heavily doctrinal and deals with important technicalities. No bloody wars are fought within its pages. It contains no soaring poetry or poignant songs. No dashing personality like David or Joshua graces its pages, nor any wise personality like Moses. That is not its purpose.

In the midst of difficult persecution, it addresses a crucial issue facing the almost brand-new church of God. The church was just barely “out of the womb,” and the enemy was already marshaling its forces to destroy it through the combined pressures of doctrinal disputes and persecutions that, in some cases, had assaulted their families. The epistle to the Hebrews pulls together the doctrines the church’s small membership needed to have and process so they could steadfastly move forward in fighting the spiritual battle with truth and faith.

Its purpose is not merely to encourage church members to hold fast to what they have been given, but also to grow as the war rages on. Each Christian is fighting his own little war, as it were, so he needs the understanding contained within Hebrews to give him confidence that he has access to Christ and the spiritual tools that, with His help, can enable him to fight and win.

Never forget that Christ declares, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). We need the instruction in Hebrews to move forward in faith, knowing that we are on the right path and following the one and only Leader and Savior we need.