

## Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Two)

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Part One built a necessary foundation for this series on the reasons for the writing of the book of Hebrews. It came about as a reaction to significant misunderstandings within the package of doctrines that many who claim to be Christian believe the New Covenant teaches. A central theme of these misunderstandings could be stated as, "God's moral laws are done away."

They erroneously claim that Christians are not under the strict necessity of keeping God's commandments to be saved, therefore the Christian is essentially free to choose which ones he will observe. That is a dangerous belief! An individual's carnal nature can easily invent a justification that sets him free to devise his own god according to his desires.

A second careless misunderstanding is that the New Covenant, about which the epistle to the Hebrews is particularly concerned, provides authority to do away with our responsibility to keep the commandments. It does no such thing.

A third misunderstanding is that, under the Old Covenant, a person was saved by his keeping of the commandments. This has never occurred even once in mankind's sinful history! God has forever and always granted salvation to human beings by His merciful grace through faith.

As early as the seventh century BC, during the lifetime of the prophet Jeremiah, God assured humanity that He had prepared a new covenant, which was ready to be presented and ratified between God and men. The specific time of its institution was not revealed then, only that He would make it with a reunited Israel and Judah. However, the Bible shows that God did not wait for physical Israel and Judah's reunification into one nation, but instead, He introduced the New Covenant into the Christian church as a precursor agreement through and under Jesus Christ as the church began. This was part of God's Plan, and He is continuing to use its standards to prepare a people within the present-day church to fulfill its operations under Jesus Christ when Israel and Judah reunite after His return (Revelation 14:1-5).

The New Testament teaches that the Temple sacrifices and ceremonies commanded under the Old Covenant are indeed set aside. But God's setting aside of the ceremonial focus, as explored and expounded in the epistle to the Hebrews, does not automatically do away with any other laws dealing with public and private behavior relating to loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

God's institution of the New Covenant within the church has been a more intimate and effective guide for producing higher-quality relationships with Him and His Family than the Old Covenant. When combined with His appointment of Jesus Christ as our spiritual High Priest, this system features a personal, anytime, all-the-time relationship with Him that enhances the creation of the spiritual characteristics that God desires in His children. These elements allow us access to God that those under the Old Covenant did not have. We can approach Him anytime through Christ!

Much of the book of Hebrews is, according to chapter 8, focused on Jesus Christ's qualifications for fulfilling His responsibilities within the spiritual process that God has instituted under the New Covenant. Jesus Himself teaches us about our vital need of Him in John 15:4-6:

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

The close intimacy of the relationship with Jesus Christ that the New Covenant provides for us makes it extremely valuable to us. In turn, our spiritual relationship with the Father and Son influences our life's activities. His role is to assist us in making good spiritual use of the gifts God has made available to us when we accepted the New Covenant (Romans 5:1-5). Our goal now is to bring glory to God by yielding to His creative genius and power as we live our lives, being formed into Christ's character image. Jesus Christ *never* sinned. It is this quality of righteous living that honors the Father. Thus, we are called to walk in the steps of our Savior. Peter writes in I Peter 2:21-22, "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth.'"

The New Covenant does not abolish the Ten Commandments at all. Jesus' life proves that. We are to follow what He did. God's appointment of Jesus Christ as High Priest to aid us and His institution of a more effective system for preparing us for His Kingdom removed the typical Temple system of animal sacrifices and ceremonies. He replaced them with the far superior personal, individual, and spiritual attentions of Jesus Christ. At the same time, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raises our behavioral responsibilities, teaching us to keep the commandments in their spirit. This elevated standard makes them more refining and restraining than they are in the mere letter.

### **The Author of Hebrews**

It will be helpful to address some particulars about the epistle to the Hebrews before plunging into the specifics of the instruction itself. For instance, only God knows for certain who wrote it. Whatever God's reasons might be, He does not require that we know this fact, so we are left to speculate. Unlike nearly every other human author of a portion of the Bible, this author fails to identify himself explicitly. It really does not matter since God Himself, as the Inspirer of the human author, is the real author (II Timothy 3:16). Even so, according to most researchers, the most likely author is the apostle Paul.

Shortly after God took dramatic action to convert Paul on the road to Damascus, He told Ananias, who was commissioned to baptize him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Though Paul called himself an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13), this commission statement supports the fact that Paul directly authored thirteen epistles containing spiritual guidance for the congregations he served in his ministry. Why not one more? II Peter 3:2, 14-16 says:

That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior. . . . Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace,

without spot and blameless; and consider that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

Peter's words substantiate the idea that Paul's letters were passed from congregation to congregation. It also validates that his commission covers, not only the geographical areas within which Paul traveled, but also the people to whom he was directed to preach. In any case, whoever authored Hebrews had an unusually clear understanding of worship under the Old Covenant as a participant as well as a keen observer. Moreover, it was Paul who learned at the feet of Gamaliel, a highly respected Pharisaic teacher of his day (Acts 22:3).

Except for its final chapter, Hebrews contains instruction with some commentary about the effects of who Christ was and how His teachings and death affect the church. Most of the early converts were Jewish, especially those in and around Jerusalem, as most of them—directly after Christ's ministry and crucifixion and the giving of the Holy Spirit and the founding of the church—lived in the area.

From there, the gospel's impact spread as God began converting Gentiles, and they too began to understand and appreciate the Old Testament connections the apostles' teachings about God's relationship with the Israelites provided them. Their sermons gave them the foundational roots of living by faith, as their recounting of the stories of the Old Testament spiritual greats named in Hebrews 11 showed that they had lived by faith just as we must. Paul was familiar with these things even while he was a persecutor.

However, the epistle's writing style varies somewhat from Paul's other letters. It lacks the normal, pedestrian roughness researchers expect from Paul's writing in other epistles. Some researchers have described Hebrew's prose as "elegant," the best written of all New Testament epistles in terms of quality of grammar. At its beginning, it is organized as a treatise, a formal and systematic account of a subject, and reads as though it is a college lecture. It concludes as a personal letter from a church pastor, as Paul's epistles normally do.

Some speculate that Luke or Apollos wrote Hebrews, and others have even suggested Priscilla, but I believe those are vain speculations. I suggest that the apostle Paul's was the human mind that provided the accurate material contained in the epistle, but someone more skilled grammatically then "smoothed out" his writing. The best candidate for its human authorship is the apostle Paul, but in the end, it remains speculation.

### **When Written? To Whom?**

Hebrews is also undated. Internal evidence—such as the usage of present tense in certain passages—provides the distinct impression that the Temple still stood, and priests were still offering sacrifices at its altar. Conservative scholars conclude, though still somewhat speculatively, that it was written in the mid-AD 60s. Note that this date is more than thirty years after Jesus' resurrection, and by this time, its instruction was sorely needed to unify understanding and practice churchwide, as Acts 15 indicates.

Acts 11:22 establishes the fact that a congregation existed in Jerusalem early in the church's history, in fact, immediately following Christ's resurrection. The title of the book printed in our Bibles reads,

“The Epistle to the Hebrews,” but no truly reputable researcher claims this title is inspired. Yet, that does not mean it is entirely wrong because it is a reasonable conclusion from evidence within the epistle itself. More than just the internal evidence suggests this, as the history of the times provides additional, reputable evidence.

I Corinthians 1:1-2 is an example of how most biblical books get their titles:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.

This title is inspired because it is drawn from a portion of the contents of the epistle itself. Verses 1-2 are inspired, which is where the title comes from.

We know the title given to the epistle to the Hebrews is reasonably correct for the same reason. Hebrews 1:1-2 provides the internal proof: “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.” God sent His prophets to the Hebrew Israelites, including the greatest prophet of all, Jesus Christ. There is no evidence He sent prophets to other nations with any regularity.

However, we must understand that this epistle was not written to Hebrews in general. Like the other epistles, it is directed primarily to Hebrews—Jews or Israelites—who had converted and were fellowshiping in church congregations. Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and Matthew were all Israelites, as were others converted through them. Note that other apostles did not send their epistles to the world; they sent them to church of God congregations. Paul explains this spiritually, writing in Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” The “Jews” addressed are people with God’s Spirit.

The epistle to the Hebrews is inspired, and Christ’s words to His church were passed around to all the congregations. This epistle was most certainly not restricted only to Hebrew Christians but was fully intended for all Christians since its instruction is vital to everyone’s salvation. Yet, it went first to aid the Hebrews because of what was happening at that time both spiritually and culturally within their nation because of their faith in Jesus as Savior.

The author writes in Hebrews 5:12, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” This verse indicates that the Hebrew recipients were not young in the faith. Acts 8:1 records what was happening immediately after Stephen’s martyrdom: “Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Hebrews 10:32 reminds the epistle’s original recipients about their earlier persecutions: “But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings.” We can conclude that the epistle was written to a group of Christians who were not young in the faith.

Hebrews 13:24 adds: “Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you,” giving the impression that the congregation may have been relatively large. It also suggests that the epistle probably went first to the congregation in Jerusalem (Acts 11:22) and then copies were made and sent elsewhere.

### **An Urgently Needed Message**

Besides the pressures being exerted against the church by outside persecution, the book of Acts reveals that the church urgently needed the doctrinal teaching the epistle to the Hebrews contains. Its purpose was to instruct Jewish converts first and then Gentile converts as God began calling them to know, understand, and use the gospel in their lives.

Acts 15:1 provides insight into a significant doctrinal issue that had to be overcome: “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” A major purpose of the epistle, then, was to be a unifying factor under Christ so that church members could be speaking and acting as one. The circumcision issue caused extensive turmoil during this critical period. The specific issue will be addressed in far more detail later in this series.

We can learn a great deal by accepting the reality that the church does not exist in a vacuum. It affects and is affected by the surrounding culture its members live and operate within. God intends it to be this way. We can understand this better by reviewing what is happening in our times as several major cultural issues have burst forth on us recently. Somewhat similar events were taking place in Judea and reshaping daily life there.

1. The term “Christian” does not present a unified doctrinal view to the world. Americans claim to live in a Christian nation, but its Christian churches have never presented a united view as to exactly what a Christian is or what Christian doctrines are. Christianity is more divided now than it has ever been. Is Christ divided? This disunity increases cultural conflict.
2. Cultural conflict exists because Muslims, for example, want to convert us to their religion and at the same time passionately desire to conquer us. We can combine this with the fact that immigrants—many of whom also have a conquering mindset—make little or no effort to blend in or assimilate with American culture. Those migrating to the U.S. undoubtedly have needs that are not being met in their home nations, which are torn with dangerous turmoil. Nonetheless, rather than working to improve their countries, they demand that America take care of them no matter the expense or effect on American citizens.
3. This nation is experiencing cultural conflict because secular citizens are doing their best to convince nominally religious Christians that God does not exist and that human intellect is sufficient to overcome all cultural problems. At the same time, through the courts, they actively persecute those who believe in God. While this kind of persecution has slackened recently, it is still happening here and there.
4. Cultural clashes are occurring over the role and style of our government. Many people want to alter the government to become socialist or communist to force wealth-creators to redistribute their wealth to those who are, for whatever reason, not working. In other

words, they promote a form of theft under the guise of fairness, equality, and compassion.

5. To gain advantage and push their agendas, people both in government and in media are twisting truth to advance their cause of the day. “Fake news” has become the phrase of the day, and it is widening the divisions among Americans both politically and culturally.

No matter when in history God calls an individual into His service, human nature never stops attempting to gain control of cultural life to achieve its self-centered ends against God. Romans 8:7-8 records a human constant: “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” In practical fact, this means that first-century Judea was in many ways not much different culturally—and certainly religiously—than today’s America. It had a constant undercurrent of low-level, cultural turmoil.

When Christianity began, Judea’s culture had already been unstable for several decades. First-century Judea was rife with political, religious, and economic strife. The Jews were under the military and political thumb of the all-conquering Romans, and that kept the cultural pot continually simmering with barely suppressed resentment. Authors consistently portray the Romans of the time complaining about Jewish religious activists inciting people emotionally. Satan is expert at revealing injustices to people who then cannot hold their tempers in check. They go on to agitate others into joining with them to secure an advantage over those they believe are oppressing them.

The comedic movie, *Time Bandits*, portrays this theme well using midgets as the central figures. The movie illustrates that, no matter what period of history the characters crashed into, the culture was at some level of uproar and agitation. The movie even had a scene portraying Satan sitting on his throne above all this commotion, actively keeping the cultural pot stirred through his incessant meddling in human affairs.

### **Enter Jesus, the Gospel, and the Church**

Jesus was born into this simmering culture. Religious Jews had high expectations of the Messiah’s arrival. Without a doubt, God drew attention to Jesus’ birth, moving people to talk about the unusual activity taking place in Bethlehem. In this way, the cultural pot was kept simmering for thirty years as Jesus matured and began preaching the truth of God’s awesome purpose. Large crowds of people gathered to listen to His messages.

Increased attention was focused on Him especially when news of His miracles entered the mix. The biblical accounts record that, just before the Passover of His crucifixion, huge crowds in Jerusalem wanted to proclaim Him king. His popularity helped spur Jewish authorities into public action against Jesus, adding more kindling to the growing attention and turmoil surrounding Him. His trial, conviction, crucifixion, and resurrection stoked the cultural fire even higher. However, things exploded on the Day of Pentecost when God poured out His Holy Spirit, and people heard Peter’s sermon explaining what they were witnessing.

The term *gospel* essentially means “good news.” The book of Acts chronicles the impact of the first few years of preaching God’s wonderful purpose to the people of that area of the world, combined with His miraculous interventions to amplify its influence. It is not difficult to perceive of Acts as a

collection of news bulletins from the front lines, informing the church membership of the astounding effects of the gospel message. By following God's overview of events as given in the book of Acts, we can come to understand why He inspired the book of Hebrews to be written.

In Acts 2:29-43, Peter explains from Scripture what the people were witnessing as Acts begins unfolding its story:

“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The Lord said to my Lord, sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

This event is only the beginning of the cultural impact of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and of the early church through the efforts of the apostles in Jerusalem. Notice Acts 3:11-21:

Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed. So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: “Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of

restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

Peter preaches the gospel with vigorous authority. The Jewish authorities respond in Acts 4:1-4:

Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of men came to be about five thousand.

The number of those converted was up to 5,000 in just a few days. Though the focus is Jerusalem, the surrounding culture in Judea was receiving quite a shock.

God continues the powerful revelation of His good news, stirring the Jerusalem area as it had never been before. Acts 4:13-21 details the first weak, satanic counterattack against the apostles by the carnal religious elements:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, “What shall we do to these men? For indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.” So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.

These initial actions against the apostles had no effect at all. Acts 5:14, 17-18 reports:

And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. . . . Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.

The authorities, failing to discourage the apostles, imprisoned them, but an angel of the Lord released them from their imprisonment. The religious authorities subsequently tried them, but Peter and the other apostles proclaimed in Acts 5:29, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Though this infuriated the religious authorities, the highly respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, calmed them down by warning them to take care because they could be fighting God rather than men.

By the close of Acts 5, though still very angry, the Pharisaic mob relented, deciding to do no more at that time than strongly warn the apostles to speak no longer in Christ’s name and give them a beating. Paradoxically, their actions produced a high measure of joy in the apostles because they saw

it as being proved worthy to suffer shame for His name. Acts 6 begins by reporting that “in those days, . . . the number of the disciples was multiplying.” Clearly, God was frustrating the unconverted Jews from making any headway in their attempts to thwart the knowledge of His purpose from expanding.

We will continue to gather evidence for the main reasons why the church needed the epistle to Hebrews.