

Through The Bible
Session #55 – Hebrews, Part 1
December 18, 2005

The author of Hebrews was clearly in the business of encouragement.

Hebrews is a unique book. It is generally designated as a letter or epistle. Yet it stands out completely from other NT letters.

- It is abstract and picturesque beside the blunt pastoral letters and general letters.
- It is genuinely anonymous in the midst of other letters who claim a certain author.
- Hebrews did not always find favor within the early Church's emerging Scriptures. Sometimes it was included among Paul's letters. Sometimes it was included...though no one knew where to put it. Sometimes it wasn't included at all.

Hebrews is traditionally identified as a letter...yet today, it's more often categorized as a sermon.

- We don't necessarily have to choose between the two though. It has characteristics of both.
- The standard greetings and salutations at the beginning are missing. But the ending closes like a letter. See 13.24. The reference to Italy in 13.24 could point to the location of the author.
- The author appears unable to deliver his or her message in person so he or she opts for written communication to deliver the message. Hence, a letter.
- Hebrews is a great example of a well-structured sermon intending to persuade the hearer / reader to agree to ideas. Hence, a sermon.

Who was the author? Who were the recipients?

- The possibility that Paul was the author gave special standing to the book in some Christian communities. Skepticism about Paul's authorship may have played a role in the reluctance of other communities to consider the book authoritative.
- Numerous suggestions for authorship: Barnabas, Apollos, Silas, Priscilla, and Aquila.
- We do know some things about the author.
 - The author is someone whose leadership and authority is recognized. Hebrews contains instructions a pastor would give to a congregation.
 - The author was a bold leader who had faith to weather storms of persecution.
 - Author has a keen mind for developing an image of Jesus from OT scriptures. Definitely artistic flair.

- It's often assumed Hebrews was written close to the middle of the 1st century. Interestingly, some have suggested that some of Paul's early female co-workers could have authored the letter. In the middle of the 1st century, women not yet excluded from authoritative standing by the growing hierarchical structure of the church. The self-reference in 11.32 to men would seem to squelch this notion.
- What about the recipients?
 - Just as anonymous as the author.
 - They were persecuted: See 10.32-33. Local persecutions were common. By declining to participate in civic religious rituals and social idolatry, Christians would often arouse suspicion and resentment by their neighbors.
 - They were faithful people. Chapter 10 catalogs the people's struggle and details their faithful response.
 - At the time of the writing, they were discouraged. Their despair seems to be a catalyst for the writing of this letter. They were discouraged and felt isolated in the culture in which they lived.
 - The title "Hebrews" may have been added to the letter after the original writing. The recipients could have had a Jewish heritage.
- Bottom line in thinking about Hebrews and our own hearing of Hebrews: Hebrews addresses believers who have grown weary in the Christian way and are in danger of abandoning their Christian vocation. See 2.1-3; 3.12; 6.1-6; 6.11-12; 10.23-25; and 12.12. These people have been Christians for a long time, but are now finding their enthusiasm waning and their commitment weakening.
 - They have become dull in understanding, sluggish, and are in danger of drifting (5.11-14).
 - Their earlier history was a model of perseverance (10.32-36).
 - Are these not some of our own struggles in the 21st century church?
 - What do these people need? They need a deepening understanding of the person and work of Jesus.

How do we understand Hebrews as a whole?

- Our chapters and verses in our Bibles often lead us to conclude the Bible is a collection or database of stuff about God. Remember that originally, the Bible didn't have chapter and verse designations. So, we must force ourselves to step back and look at the big picture.
- Hebrews is commonly seen as that book in the Bible that has verses about: (a) the priesthood of Jesus; (b) the doctrine of apostasy – i.e., a deliberate and total abandonment of the faith; and (c) a hall of fame of faithful people.
- Hebrews extensively uses the Old Testament. Quotations, summaries of Old Testament events, and bridges between the Old Testament and person of Jesus are part of the beauty of Hebrews.
- The work of Jesus is presented in two significant ways in Hebrews: (a) priesthood – through Jesus, Christians now have full access to God; and

(b) Jesus as pilgrim – Jesus is a trailblazer who leads us on an adventure of faith toward God.

- Hebrews seen by some as a dialogue between exposition – arguments and reasoning for a perspective – and exhortation – encouragements and warnings that are intended to steer one toward faithfulness.

Introduction (1:1-2:9)

Exposition 1: Glory through Suffering (2:10-5:10)

Exhortation 1: Pastoral assurances and warnings (5:11-6:20)

Exposition 2: Access to God through the Sacrifice of Jesus (7:1-10:18)

Exhortation 2: Pastoral assurances and warnings (10:19-39)

Exposition 3: Perseverance by Faith (11:1-12:24)

Exhortation 3: Pastoral assurance and warnings (12:25-27)

Conclusion (12:28-13:25)