

Hebrews- An Introduction.

Colossians 3:1-11
Ephesians 4:10-16
Proverbs 15:1-9

So this morning we are going to start our Journey through the book of Hebrews. My goal this morning is just like any other time that we have started out in a book, and that is to lay out a foundation and give some background information to hopefully give us a better, fuller understanding of this book. I for one have been looking forward to taking this journey. While Mark was an interesting study, I am looking forward to diving into a book that is more instructive in nature, then one that is an historical account.

This book is unique in it's structure and style, unlike any of the other books in the new testament. There is no formal introduction, it begins sort of like an essay, just laying out some truths, but then it progresses into a structure that more matches a sermon. Being instructive, and informative, and finally as you approach the end of the book it changes yet again and takes on more of a form of a letter, closing out in a similar fashion to other new testament books. So it is this structure that makes it unique, and also contributes to the difficulty to determine who the author of this letter to the Hebrews was.

Which brings us to our first point of controversy in this passage. We haven't even started out yet in Hebrews and already there is an issue that I think is important to address, and that is the Authorship. Now most books of scripture are quite obvious who they were written by, for they often have some sort of greeting at the beginning, introducing themselves, but as I had mentioned this does not open like a typical letter, but rather just starts in as if someone was making proclamations of the glory of Christ. There are quite a few theories as to who was the author of this letter, but being that there is no internal evidence pointing to who it was written by and the external evidences are circumstantial at best, it is pretty much impossible to know with any sort of certainty who the author was. One one think that by using the location, and time that this was written would give clues at least to who may have written it, but that just opens up even more problems for there is no real evidences as to who directly it was written to, other then it being called, The Letter to the Hebrews. And while with the evidences inside we can get a pretty good clue as to when it was written, that still does not shed any light on the by who, or for who it was written debate.

The term Hebrews is not one that we see in the new Testament, and unlike the other letters which are either named after the author themselves, such as the gospels, or the book of James, or named after who the letters were sent to such as Roman's or Ephesians. This is just a letter written to a rather large group of people, not specified by any location. So, as the name and content suggest, this was written to Jewish Christians, but we do not know geologically to where. Some speculate and believe that it is written to Jewish Christians in Palastine, and that the author himself was in Rome, but there are others who seem to believe that the recipients were in Rome and the author was elsewhere. So the realty is that there is not enough evidence either within this book, or even externally to give any accurate clues as to who, or where this book was written. But one thing we do know, is that this letter was written to Jewish Christians, who the author personally knew for there are hints throughout this book that the recipients were aware of the trials of the author, and in closing statement he also says that he desired to be back with them again.

As for the date, that is the one thing that there is at least a decent amount of evidence pointing to, it is believed to be written around early AD 60. In this book the author makes mention of the ministry of the Levitical priests, to which is consistently refers to in the present tense throughout this writing shows that this book was written before the fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple in AD 70. We can quickly see some examples of this starting in chapter 5, verse 1. “For every high priest taken from among en is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins” This is not written as a practice that has past, but as a practice that was still continuing. Or in chapter 7, again using present terminology, says, “He has no need, like those high priest to offer sacrifices daily, that is just a few and we will see that this is true throughout the book as we work our way through it.

But it is not just the fact that the author uses the present tense when talking of such things that is proof enough of its timing, the fact that one of the main pushes of the Letter to the Hebrews is the superiority of Christ over all, that passing away of the law, and of the temple, and that all things are in Christ. If this was written after the destruction of the Temple it likely would have been a point in the authors argument. But instead, on this side of history we see that after this was written, Jerusalem did fall, and the temple was destroyed not only fulfilling scripture but also verifying the legitimacy of the claims of the author of Hebrews.

Because of the themes, and the focus of this book it would appear that to whoever the recipients were, they were struggling with some sort of persecution and temptations to at the very least, compromise their faith. IT would seem that due to the focus on the temple, the old covenant, and the temple worship practices that it was likely the Jews who were giving these Jewish Christians trouble. Judging by the content of this letter, it would seem that this particular group of Christians to whom it was written were in danger of falling away, and in effect abandoning the gospel itself. It would appear that they were faced with daily persecution, which would lead to a temptation to not fight for their faith and beliefs but rather to compromise, and in doing so were in danger of leaving the very foundation of their belief.

It would seem that these Hebrews were showing a disposition to assigning glory to angels above that of Christ, and to treat the Mosaic system with all of its traditions and laws, with the levitical priesthood as a system having value for the Christian. The temptation to compromise with the Jews in such a way would have likely brought around some relief of the persecution that they were under, and the point of this letter is to show them, that the faith which they first believed, is worth suffering for, it is worth dying for even if it where to come to that point. We can get a picture of what some of this may have looked like from Lukes accounts of the early church, and that the first real opposition that the Christian faith had was from the Jews, but not only that for this group of Jews who had converted to Christianity it is likely a special kind of persecution. For they would have been regarded as traitors to their forefathers, traitors to their ancestry. In the book of Acts we see some accounts of this type of persecution, Pete and John were summoned before the Sanhedrin and were reprimanded and threatened because of what they taught. We see apostles were imprisoned by the high priests, Stephen was stoned to death, and as we know Paul, who later became an apostle of Christ, was first a Pharisee who pursued, and was systematically persecution the Christians. But as we know later, after his conversion, he himself became the recipient of this very same type of persecution. It is because of this that it is likely what lead to the church in Jerusalem for the chronic poverty that its members suffered being shunned from the Jewish society there.

And this isn't really the first of such letters dealing with this issue, the book of Galatians had some of the same problems, with Judiasers coming in and persuading the Galatians, who were Gentiles to submit to the authority of the priest in Jerusalem, to form a compromise between their belief, and the temple rituals, and laws. So in light of all of this, we can see quite clearly the intention of the author in his letter to these Hebrews is to encourage and exhort his readers to stay true to the gospel which they were first given, not to compromise, for in so doing they would in reality be abandoning God, and the faith that they had come to have. His intention is to show that in Christ, is a better covenant, better promises, better hope, then the old covenant laws and traditions could ever produce. Infact, the term, Better, is quite central in this authors argument against their turning to compromise.

In Hebrews 8, he argues that Christ and his covenant is superior, in Hebrews 1, he says that Christ is better then the angels, in chapter 7, he says that in Christ is a better hope, and in him is the surety of a better covenant. Chapter 8 says that Christ is the mediator of a better covenant, which is established on better promises, and also that Christ's sacrifice is a better sacrifice, and he being a better priest, having abolished and payed for sin once for all, and not yearly as the priests must do. The book of Hebrews can be broken down into various divisions 1 is as I had just mentioned, the arguments for the superiority of Christ, that he his superiority is greater then the prophets of old, he is better then the angels by virtue of his nature, being both divine, and human. Better then Moses, because he is the Son of God who provides a heavenly rest, and he is one better then Aaron, for his priesthood is superior, and everlasting.

The next division that we will see as we journey through this book is a set of warnings that the author puts forth to his readers. Which is where we derive the likely motivation for this letter, and its purpose. This can be broken down into 6 warnings that we will see as we go through this book. I just want to take minute to summarize them today, and we will of course go into more detail as we take this verse by verse. So the first warning, the author warns his readers against drifting away from the faith. This is something that can easily happen if we become complacent, and begin neglecting the things which helps to set our mind upon Christ, such as church services, fellowship with one another, bible reading and prayer. Once these things all start to bet set aside, it is the natural tendency for us to start to drift away That is why such things are so important in the life of a believer.

The 2nd warning, not unlike the first is a warning against departing from the faith, or from what you have been taught. This basically is the outcome if we have allowed ourselves to drift away. As we drift and become caught into the snare of sin, we are in danger of hardening our hearts against the truth that we once held to. Doubt, and despair can creep in, we can at times feel estranged or abandoned by God but it isn't that God has abandoned us, it is that we have allowed sin to come and we have abandoned him. This is one of the reasons why the gathering of the church, and the fellowship of the saints is so important in the life of a believer, it is through these 2 things that one can be confronted in their drifting away, their lack of faith, or their fall into sin. Which is why we are to exhort, and encourage, pray, and bear one anothers burdens.

The 3rd warning Is a warning against falling into disobedience. Once again, this warning is not unique from the others but can rather be a symptom of the other 2. As we drift, and we begin departing from the things which are important to a vibrant, live faith we are in danger of falling deeper into sinfulness leading to disobedience. And just like the other 2 warnings, the way to combat disobedience is to be mindful of God's word, to be in prayer, and to head the advice and exhortation of your brothers and sisters.

The 4th warning a warning against becoming dull to the faith. Which is something that the recipients of this letter were dealing with. The author says, in verse 5 chapter 11. talking about the priesthood of Christ, he says, “of this I have much to say, and hard to explain since you have become dull of hearing, for though by this time you out 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.” It would seem that this is an issue hat has plagued our churches today, so many gather together in worship seeking an experience, not being filled with the food of the word, but only having their thirst for a spiritual high feeling being temporarily quenched. The church in America has in a large sence become dull. They have fallen away from the first principles, from the root of the word and has instead filled it with empty emotions and feelings. The only way that this dullness of faith can be combated is through focused, true teaching of God's word, or as the author puts it here, to have the meat of the word. To grow in understanding and faith.

The 5th warning, is a warning against despising your faith. This is a dark place to be, at calls into question the persons faith to begin with. Such despising can be brought on by tribulation and persecution that your claim to faith has brought you. Maybe friends, or family has been lost because of your faith. IF we are not careful it an be the natural tendency of mankind to look to blame our problems on our confession of faith. But instead we should have confidence and hope in Christ through such things, as the author of Hebrews says in chapter 10, verse 32. “Recall the former days in which after you were illuminated you endured a great struggle with sufferings, partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated. Therefore do not cast away your confidence which has great reward, For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise. For yet a little while and he who is coming will come and will not tarry, now the just shall live by faith, but if anyone draws back my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

And lastly, a warning against defying the word of God. Chapter 12, verse 24, “To Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel, See that you do not refuse Him who speaks, for if they did not escape who refused him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from him to speaks from heaven.” This final warning here appears to me to be warning to heed the call to believe. For if death came to those who did not heed the old covenant, how much more so for those who do not heed the call to repent and believe in the new covenant. We need to be diligent and wary of our faith, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, we should examine ourselves as to whether you are in the faith, tests yourselves, Do you not know your selves that Christ Jesus is in you? Once again this is why prayer, bible reading, fellowship with each other and gathering together to worship is so important.

So that is pretty much what I had planned for today, my intention was to just do sort of a quick summary and overview of this book for this week. Starting next week we will be diving deeper into this book.