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Hebrews

"... Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,..." Hebrews 12:2

Key verses: Hebrews 1:1-4; 4:1-11; 11:1-16; 12:1-3; 13:14

Key personalities: Early Jewish Christians

Timeline: The Church is established and grows by the Power of the Holy Spirit and the multiplying networks of Paul and other apostles, 59-70 A.D.

The Epistle of Hebrews is about encouraging Christians that forgot we have the God Who is here, the One who speaks. He is the God of promise and fact; He has an inheritance and an Inheritor for us. Hebrews is a call to affirm one's faith and hope in Christ, not in empty rituals and falsehoods. The theme is the Permanence, Sufficiency, Preeminence, and the Superiority of Jesus Christ! Jesus is the One upon Whom our faith rests and depends, from start to finish. Jesus is greater than the law, angels, Moses and the priesthood. The purpose was to challenge and encourage one's spiritual development and maturity in Christ, so to resist temptations and persecution by the building up of mutual faith and knowledge of Christ. We are also given the only and prime definition of faith, as exemplified by the "great line of splendor" of people of faith (Heb. 4:1-11; 11:1-16; 13:14).

Key Happenings: Jesus Christ is greater than anything and everything!

This Epistle of Hebrews introduces two major themes. The first is the divinity of Christ. He is supreme over all traditions, Law, and all that was created, including angels and Patriarchs. He is the Ultimate Word of God! Jesus is the heir of ALL things. He is incarnate, He made the universe, and He is the radiance of God's glory and sustains all things. In so doing, He is able to give us redemption and purify us from our sins (Mark 16:19; Eph 1:20; Col 1:15-20; 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:22). The second major theme is that we are in a new Covenant. Christ is our Divine Mediator and Priest. God is the One who speaks, then and now, and there is a relationship between the old and the new covenant (Heb. 2:2-3; 4:12; 6:5; 11:3; 12:25).

Jesus is the Son and the eternal Sovereign God; God wants the entire universe to recognize Christ's Sonship and LORDSHIP and rule--that includes you!

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. All that came before pointed to Him. This Book tells us of the Supremacy, Sufficiency, Pre-eminence, and Divinity of Christ. Jesus is Superior in His Name, His role, and His purpose; He is the Ultimate Word of God! Because He is so, He can give us redemption and purify us from our sins. These have been given by God for Jesus and presented to us.

The audience was a Church that was confused about the role of Christ and angels and which of them was superior.

The people tried to compromise His status to appease both pagans and Jews. For us, we can learn and be warned, so we can take the faith we have and grow it because He is able and He is the greater reality. The value and role we have in Christ is greater than any reality we may think we have.

By faith? Christian living is about our lives being centered in Christ and trusting Him for our provision without waiting around, doing nothing.

- *Now faith is.* This refers to the truth that faith is not just a reward, it is a duty for us to embark on here and now. Our faith is based on the knowledge given by God through His Word, and it is evidenced in His creation and people's testimonies. Faith is not just simple trust. Faith is not blind trust, either, because we know the One who is leading! We as people of faith must live by faith as this is the only thing we can do to show to others that Christ is real and concrete (1 Cor. 1:22-30; Heb. 11)!
- **Being sure/assurance.** This is a title deed; it is substantial evidence like an important business document in which we can trust. What we have in Christ has a real basis and foundation. In contrast, a lack of faith will lead one to hopelessness and despair, which leads to bad choices because of our sin and refusal to place God first in our lives. God's promise is real and tangible even when we do not see it (Rom. 1:16-17; 5:1-11; 10:14-17; Gal. 3:1-4; Eph. 2:8-9; James 2:14-26).
- **We hope/things hoped for.** This is our confidence in God for our future that is in His hands. Faith sees what is ahead when our eyes and thinking cannot. If we see what He has done in the past, we can have hope for the future, too. This also refers to a future time when we are with God for eternity. It is a Jewish metaphor for Heaven. This is an unshakable conviction in what must be, such as the North Star that guides ships; without it, a ship would be lost, but we know the Star will not go away. This is where we get the assurance of faith. Faith is not mere belief. It is real, as in genuine and authentic so we are sure in Whom we trust and to whom we go to live for righteousness.
- These people, Jews by birth and converts to Christianity, were under persecution and harassment from their synagogue, friends, and family; it would get worse. Thus, they had to learn faith and take what the Lord had done and let it become more real and impacting. Just as we struggle today, they had not done so well in this area. The understanding and application of our faith can be elusive when we are not focused on what faith is all about.
- Life comes at us hard and fast. When we are not prepared by the development of our faith, we will fail at the deployment of our faith and our call and opportunities and suffer needlessly as a result. God wants us to succeed in life and faith and gives us instructions, encouragements, and warnings to get lined up to Him before it is too late (Hebrews 10:32).

The author of Hebrews is also appealing to those who are philosophically minded, as the Jewish philosopher, Philo, who had some Gnostic tendencies, but is credited with saying *our reality on earth is only a mere shadow to heaven*. Here, the twist is that God is the Builder and the Essence of reality; we are in His shadow to please Him by following His purpose for our lives. We are shown the qualifications of Jesus to be our High Priest, sole Mediator, God, and Friend. We are shown our response, the importance of our emergent spiritual maturity, to know and grow in the power of God and His Word.

Who was Hebrews addressed to? A church or set of churches in Asia Minor (making them the same audience of Revelation) or the Macedonian area of Philippi. This is where the Jews were at this time outside of Judea as they were kicked out of Rome under Claudius in 49 A.D. (Acts 18:2). Rome is also a valid contender for this letter, as the phrase, *those in Italy* (Heb. 13:24) seems to refer to the author's vantage from where he was writing *from*, not *to* or like Paul's letters they were copied and went out to many churches.

- These were Jewish Christians whose faith was wavering under persecution and who had shown little spiritual growth to prepare for it. They were being pressured by family and Jewish cultural and rabbinic pressure. They were losing assets; and, family members tried to force them to abandon this new faith and return to their family and synagogue. (Heb. 10:34; 13:23).
- They were also struggling with bad ideas and false doctrine, such as a misguided consideration that angels were supreme and that their messages were binding and infallible beyond that of the Prophets and even Christ. This teaching was not from the Torah or Writings; it was a first century heresy infecting both Jewish and Christian groups.

- Why is this so important? So the role of Christ is not confused with the role and purpose of angels who are inferior. They were not to seek anyone or anything to replace Christ as so many Christians are doing today. People in the early church and today will not compromise Christ' status to appease others. Hebrews makes it clear: Christ is All in All and His Word is far more infallible and more binding than angels or anything else. A climatic and careful argument is made that builds on Christ' priesthood, so our rest is in Christ as Lord and Mediator. We all can be equipped and encouraged to move on in the faith for His glory and our mutual benefit as a Church. This is so we may draw nearer to Him and, in so doing, be the example for others to do so, too.

Who wrote Hebrews? The Big mystery is, *who penned this?* Although this Epistle has Paul's "fingerprints" all over it in the words and themes used, it is not in his style; perhaps, it was written from a lost letter he wrote after he had passed away. But, this work has no personal ascription to Paul or the autobiographical/personal references, as his other letters clearly do. Most of the word usage and styles do not match Paul or Luke, the only two likely authors who had the education and the ability to write in this high style over any other New Testament writer. This is written in a classic, formal Jewish "high language" style. Whoever wrote it was highly educated, and influenced or personally disciplined by Paul. Or, maybe Paul did write it to a different scribe near or at the time of his death where he slowly and carefully crafted this as a treatise--in contrast to his epistles that were dedicated in a hurry, while on the run, in prison or under some kind of pressure. Our clue is that Paul traveled with Timothy (Acts 16:37; Heb. 13:23; 1 Pet. 5:12)

- When was Hebrews written? I believe it was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., since the sacrificial system was still in play (Heb. 8:4, 13:9:6-9; 10:1-3, 11). I believe it to be 67-69 A.D. Timothy being freed in chapter 13 (2 Tim. 4:21; Heb. 8:13; 13:23-24), and correlating it to Acts and Paul, this happened during the terror of Nero's persecutions against Christians, 67-69 A.D. (Heb. 10:32-34).
- Hebrews also points to God's provision for us now and in eternity to come. He is the God of the past, present, and future, He is our Maker and Builder and our Promise now and to come. We are His people, His pilgrims called into His rest. We must take our Christian faith seriously and never become lazy or conceited or apathetic, rather take what He gives, grow it, and give it back to Him continually (Psalm 95:7-11; Heb. 3:6-15; 4:6-8; 11:10; 13:14).

Christ a Sacrifice for All: The sufficiency and importance of Christ; His sacrifice is all that is needed and it is complete. Here is imagery of *perfection*. Perhaps the writer, to further make his point, used residues from Plato's teachings of the *perfection of heaven* and that *all that is on earth are mere shadows of feeble replicas*. The Gnostics picked up on this and said we must escape the earth's corruption by centering our minds on God; what our bodies do is irrelevant, thus providing an excuse to sin. But Plato was referring to reason alone; Christ is our reason, faith, life, our all in all, and He is perfect. Heaven and the Temple in Heaven are perfect. The earth's Temple was a mere copy as the writer previously stated. Now he gives hope that our true home is Heaven, as we were not made for this world.

While we are here, we have a duty to learn and grow, but our true home is still to come. We are to make the most of life now as we wait either for His return or for our homecoming into eternity before He comes and all of its rewards because of our trust in Christ (Heb. 10:1-18; 11:1-3; 12:1-3).

Key Takeaway: These people were once growing and thriving Christians who had stopped or had become lethargic in the furtherance of their faith. Many people in this early church were taking their new faith for granted because they thought grace was a license for apathy and irresponsibility. Indifference and sluggishness will cause us to drift away from the Word of God and His wondrous precepts and call and the opportunities He has for us, too.

Remember your call to imitate the faith of our forerunners and build anew upon Christ as our LORD!

The Call to the Church? The people Hebrews was originally addressed to struggled with some of the same things that we struggle with today. We are faced with stress, laziness and complacency; we have leadership transitions and prideful people just as most church leaders throughout all time. They were in imminent danger of backsliding away from Christ and into their old ways and even sin. They needed a lesson on the preeminence of Christ and encouragement to persevere and carry on what Christ had given them. We are called today to boldly preach, teach and proclaim (Heb. 6:19; 11:10; 12:4; 13:3-17). We all have a call to get right with Christ, and move on with our faith is a call that we must heed, model and impart (Heb. 4:11-16; 6:1; 10:19-25)!

Questions to Ponder

1. Who is Jesus to you? How does this compare to who He is in reality as revealed in the Scriptures? How is Jesus more than just a name?
2. What do you do when you face setbacks, failures, adversities, persecution, oppositions, injustice, ingratitude, and apathy? What can get you rebooted?
3. How do you display in your life that Jesus is Supreme and the Ultimate?
4. How would you describe faith? What about “mutual faith?” Why do you think Hebrews 11 is the prime definition of faith?
5. What gets in the way of your having more authentic hope? How is your response of faith evidenced as you live out your life? What about during times of stress and confusion?
6. What can encourage Christians that forgot we have the God Who is here, the One who speaks?
7. How have you pleased Jesus? What does it mean to follow His purpose for our lives?
8. What happens when we seek to replace Christ as so many Christians are doing today? What do we replace Him with? How do some Christians compromise Christ' status to appease others?
9. We have to be willing to see what needs to be done for the kingdom and then do it. The gifts of leadership will entail such attitudes, and the ability to motivate others to do this.
10. How can your church challenge and encourage one's spiritual development and maturity in Christ, so to resist temptations and persecution?
11. What does it take to recognize Christ's LORDSHIP and rule? What can your church do to help people recognize and worship Jesus as LORD?
12. What can you do to have more full confidence, trust, and assurance in Christ? What do you need from your church to make this so?