



BOOKS OF THE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

by WAYNE PALMER

H E B R E W S



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INTRODUCTION:

The Book of Hebrews focuses on Jesus Christ's fulfillment of and superiority to every institution in the Old Testament—Sabbath, sacrifices, and priesthood.

AUTHORSHIP:

The Early Church argued over whether the Book of Hebrews belonged in the Bible, because the identity of its author was unknown. Some suggestions for author have included Paul, Luke, Apollos, and Barnabas, but each of these is problematic. The book was finally accepted into the canon without knowing the author because it agrees with the teaching of the apostles and puts Jesus Christ and His salvation at the center. We know it was written before AD 70 because the writer talks about the priests offering sacrifices—an activity that ended with the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70.

PURPOSE:

Hebrews is really a sermon written to Jewish Christians who were suffering persecution for their faith—and contemplating a return to Judaism, which was legally protected in the Roman Empire, unlike early Christianity. This letter reminds them of the glory they would be giving up—and the divine judgment they would bring upon themselves—if they returned to Moses.

OUTLINE:

Hebrews can be divided into the following outline:

- I. Introduction/Theme: Christ Is the True and Final Revelation of God (1:1–3)
- II. Jesus' Superiority (1:4–10:18)
 - A. Over the Angels (1:4–2:18)
 - B. Over Moses (3:1–4:13)
 - C. Superiority of Jesus' Priesthood: Jesus, the New Melchizedek (4:14–7:28)
 - D. Superiority of Jesus' Sacrifice (8:1–10:18)
- III. Exhortation to Faithfulness (10:19–12:29)
 - A. Invitation to Faithfulness (10:19–39)
 - B. Old Testament Examples of Faith: Following in the Faith of our Fathers (ch. 11)
 - C. Jesus as the Ultimate Example of Faithfulness (12:1–13)
 - D. Warning against Disobedience, Using Old Testament Examples (12:14–29)
- IV. Final Exhortations (13:1–19)
- V. Blessings and Greetings (13:20–25)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION—CHRIST IS THE TRUE AND FINAL REVELATION OF GOD (1:1–3)

Read Hebrews 1:1–3

Since the Jewish Christians reading this letter were considering a return to Judaism, Hebrews starts with a comparison of Jesus Christ to the prophets of the Old Testament. Think of all the great ones: Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel—none comes close to Jesus Christ.

Q 1: Describe the ways this passage shows that Jesus is superior to the prophets as messengers through whom God the Father speaks.

- The prophets were truly a powerful blessing to God's people throughout the Old Testament, but they were sinners just like us. God spoke to and through them at certain times and in various ways. Only Moses spoke to God face-to-face. But Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God who is heir of all things and the one through whom God made all creation. Even more, Jesus shines with the glory of God the Father—His divinity is the exact imprint of the Father's divine nature—He upholds all creation by His Word, and now He sits at the right hand of God the Father.

JESUS' SUPERIORITY OVER THE ANGELS (1:4–2:18)

The Jewish nation was visited and ministered to by angels. The writer of Hebrews compares these mighty, magnificent creatures to their almighty Creator.

Read Hebrews 1:4–14.

The Old Testament has many accounts of mighty angels: the angels who rescued Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1–25), the angels who brought Moses the Law on Mount Sinai (Galatians 3:19), the angel of God who struck down the army of the Assyrians (Isaiah 37), and the angel who shut the lions' mouths when Daniel was cast in the lions' den (Daniel 6).

Q 2: How does the writer of Hebrews argue that Jesus is superior to the angels?

- He quotes Old Testament passages that call angels “winds” and “a flame of fire”; then he quotes another Old Testament passage that calls Jesus “God,” and mentions how He laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning.

Read Hebrews 2.

Now, having established Jesus' superiority over the angels, the writer gives the first call to action to the Jewish Christians. We must pay careful attention to the things Jesus has revealed, since He is God's own Son. Not only is Jesus superior to the angels but the Gospel covenant He brought is also superior to the covenant of the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This is because Jesus stooped down to become one of us and offered His body and blood to be given and shed on the cross.

Q 3: Why does the writer point out in 2:18, “Because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted”?

- The Jewish Christians were suffering persecution for clinging to Jesus by faith. They were wondering if it was truly worth it when all they would have to do was to go back to the Old Testament faith, renounce Christ, and then the temptation and suffering would end. But Hebrews reminds the Jewish Christians—and us—that Jesus Himself experienced suffering when He was tempted, yet stood firm and saved the world by His death and resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they could persist in faith and overcome.

JESUS' SUPERIORITY OVER MOSES (3:1–4:13)

From the angels of the Old Testament, Hebrews turns to Moses, the greatest figure of the Old Testament. Moses was the deliverer through whom God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He was the lawgiver who climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments on their behalf. He was Israel's leader through forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Yet Jesus is far superior to Moses.

Read Hebrews 3:1–6.

In comparing Jesus with Moses, Hebrews states that both were faithful to God and His call, but Moses was faithful as a slave or servant, while Jesus was faithful as a Son. In the culture of that day, a servant could be a steward who had proved himself so trustworthy that he would be entrusted with running his master's entire household (as Joseph had been entrusted with Potiphar's entire household in Genesis 39:1–6). But that slave was not a son, the heir who could share his inheritance. Thus it was better to know the son than the most-honored slave.

Q 4: How did Moses' sin at Meribah in Numbers 20:2–13 (striking the rock rather than speaking to it as God commanded) strengthen the argument of Hebrews to stick with Jesus rather than run back to Moses and Judaism?

- Moses was faithful, but not perfectly faithful. Because of his disobedience at Meribah, Moses disqualified himself from completing his work of bringing Israel into their land of rest. Another had to replace him (Joshua). That is symbolic in that through Judaism, Moses (the Law) is unable to bring a Jew to his or her eternal rest in heaven. Jesus, on the other hand, was completely faithful throughout His earthly life. He is qualified to lead us to our eternal rest through His Word and His return on Judgment Day.

Read Hebrews 3:7–4:13.

Hebrews now gives a second call to action: Do not harden your hearts. The entire history of Moses leading Israel across the wilderness was filled with the nation's rebellion against God, disobedience to Moses, and sin. That hardness of heart didn't end when Joshua brought Israel into the Promised Land. Indeed, the Law cannot deliver us from our own sin and hardness of heart. Only the Gospel can do that.

Q 5: What are some ways we harden our hearts today?

- We can harden our hearts through our love of sin, by relying on our works rather than Christ's works, by elevating human tradition or wisdom over simple and humble obedience to the Gospel.

SUPERIORITY OF JESUS’ PRIESTHOOD: JESUS, THE NEW MELCHIZEDEK (4:14–7:28)

Another aspect of Judaism that had strong appeal to the persecuted Jewish Christians was the high priest in Jerusalem and the sacrifices that were made at the temple. The writer to the Hebrews points out that those animal sacrifices were merely symbols of what God’s almighty Son accomplished by His all-availing sacrifice on the cross.

Read Hebrews 4:14–5:10.

One appeal of Aaron’s high priesthood was his approachability. God had chosen a weak sinner who could understand other sinners’ plights, represent them before God, and give assurance of God’s great forgiveness.

Q 6: How does this passage show us that the eternal, almighty Son of God is just as approachable to us fallen sinners as Aaron was?

- It points to Jesus in His state of humiliation. Jesus humbled Himself, setting aside His divine power and glory, and lived as a man among us. He suffered weakness and want—just like we do. And when we see His pleas and tears in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, we realize how approachable He truly is. But even better, we see that this High Priest is perfect, offering the perfect sacrifice to remove sins once and for all—His own body and blood given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.

Read Hebrews 5:11–6:12.

This is Hebrews’ third call to action. It takes the form of a complaint against the readers. It diagnoses their childish way of thinking that would even consider abandoning Christ to return to Judaism. In a sense, the writer is saying he shouldn’t even have to write this letter.

Q 7: Describe some ways that our own thinking becomes childish and we require the milk of the Gospel rather than the meat.

- We stumble and fall with our weak faith over and over again—just like the Israelites in the Old Testament and the twelve apostles in the New. Jesus expressed something like this when He told His disciples, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31). Over and over, we find ourselves filled with fear, anxiety, dread, hopelessness, and doubt as we face adversity in our lives—when we should be bold in faith, trusting in God’s loving care and providence and Jesus’ great salvation. But thankfully, we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, forgives

us, and gently leads us as He binds up our wounds and strengthens us to live as mature Christians.

- **Read Hebrews 6:13–7:28.**

To impress upon the reader the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood to that of Aaron, Hebrews discusses the mysterious high priesthood of Melchizedek during the time of the patriarch Abraham—centuries before the birth of Moses and Aaron.

Q 8: How does the character of Melchizedek's high priesthood more closely match Jesus' high priesthood than Aaron's?

- When we first meet Melchizedek in Genesis, he is already established as high priest. He comes out of Jerusalem at God's direction to bless Abraham and assure him of God's great promises. In Exodus, we see Aaron the man becoming Aaron the high priest. For Melchizedek, the Bible provides no genealogy, no father or mother, it is as though Melchizedek was eternal. We see Aaron stumble into sin even as high priest—it was Aaron who formed the golden calf for Israel while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments and the covenant from God (Exodus 32). Finally, we see Aaron's mortality as he dies and his high priesthood is passed on from generation to generation—which also shows the ineffectiveness of the sacrifices he offered. They had to be repeated year after year, generation after generation, century after century. Only Jesus' high priesthood is eternal, and His one sacrifice is effectual for all time.

SUPERIORITY OF JESUS' SACRIFICE (8:1–10:18)

Next, Hebrews cuts to the chase and takes on the temple sacrifices themselves.

Read Hebrews 8:1–9:10.

Hebrews describes the layout of the temple—the Holy Place and the curtain that provided a barrier from entering the Most Holy Place. All of this was symbolic of our sin, which bars us from direct access to God in heaven. Judaism did a fine job of representing the devastating separation sin caused between our holy God and us sinful humans.

Q 9: How would this argument persuade Jewish Christians not to run back to Judaism?

- The whole sacrificial system, with its constant, endless repetition of the same sacrifices over and over and over, shows clearly that sin has raised a barrier between God and us that is insurmountable from our side. For instance, one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went behind the curtain to stand in God's presence. But the next year, he had to do it all over again. The tearing of the temple curtain at Jesus' death made it crystal clear that no other sacrifice was necessary—Jesus' body and blood effectively cleanses us from all sin.

Read Hebrews 9:11–10:18.

As important as it was for Judaism to have a high priest, it was more important that the priest had a sacrifice to offer, a sacrifice that could satisfy God's wrath and His just and holy demands for payment for sin.

Q 10: Why was bloodshed an integral part of the sacrificial system God established for Israel? Why did Jesus have to shed His blood to save us from our sin?

- God had told Adam that the day he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. To be truthful to His word, God had to punish sin with death. The blood of the animals shed at the temple was a stark and visual reminder of the price that had to be paid for us to be forgiven and for God's justice to be completely satisfied. But not all the animals in the world could accomplish that. Only the blood of the Lamb of God, God's own Son, could once and for all.

INVITATION TO FAITHFULNESS (10:19–39)

We have reached the fourth call to action in Hebrews. Building off of Jesus' entering the Most Holy Place in heaven carrying His own blood from the cross, we are encouraged to enter God the Father's presence with Him through the torn temple curtain. With solid, sincere faith, we come before God our Father.

Read Hebrews 10:19–39.

The persecuted Jewish Christians are given a great, inspiring promise along with a solemn warning. Through the forgiveness won by Jesus Christ, they have direct access to God. But if they reject Jesus, trampling His blood in their anxious flight back to the deceptive safety of Judaism, there will no longer remain a sacrifice for sins. Finally, the writer reminds them of the early days of their faith, when they were strong in Christ and willingly endured hardship and persecution and showed compassion for those imprisoned because of the faith.

Q 11: How does this warning guard us against a false sense of security in Christ?

- As long as we remain in repentant faith, we are secure in Christ's forgiveness. But if we wander from either repentance (into sinful temptations) or faith (into self-righteousness), we risk our eternal future and security. It simply is not worth what we risk to lose.

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF FAITH: FOLLOWING IN THE FAITH OF OUR FATHERS (CH. 11)

Hebrews turns a corner at this point. Having established Jesus' superiority over the whole system of Judaism, it now turns to the tremendous examples of Old Testament saints who held on to the promised Savior, even when that meant tremendous suffering and persecution like that which was intimidating the Jewish Christians at this time.

Read Hebrews 11.

There is a pattern here for each saint mentioned. They all held on to a divine promise of something that was not yet visible for them. And each of them faced persecution for acting on that faith, whether it was Abel's sacrifice, Enoch's walk with God, Noah's building the ark, Abraham's leaving his father's country and trusting God's promise of a son, or Moses' forsaking his royal position as an adopted Egyptian to suffer with God's people.

Q 12: Choose one of the saints mentioned in this chapter. Which gives you the greatest encouragement? Why?

- Answers will vary, but each of these great saints lived in faith, trusting a promise of God that remained unseen at the time. Circumstances in their lives were pressing to make them question or doubt God's faithfulness, but by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word of promise, they remained in the faith. This great cloud of witnesses can encourage us to also remain in the faith despite the persecution and troubles we may be called to endure.

JESUS AS THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF FAITHFULNESS (12:1–13)

It was good to look at the saints of the Old Testament and draw encouragement from their examples of faithfulness. But the author of Hebrews wisely turns us back to the ultimate example and source for our faithfulness: Jesus Christ.

Read Hebrews 12:1–13.

Jesus is described as the “founder” and “perfecter” of our faith. From before time was created, Jesus was the Word of God, and all creation was brought into being through Him. He was the Word who spoke throughout the Old Testament, giving the first promise of salvation to Adam and Eve and completing or perfecting that salvation by His suffering and death on the cross and His glorious resurrection on the third day.

Q 13: The author speaks of a joy that sustained Jesus through His time of intense suffering on the cross. What was that joy He held onto?

- Jesus rejoiced to know that His suffering would accomplish the salvation of all believers. He even had tangible evidence of that by the repentant thief at His side. He also found joy in knowing that that very day His spirit would return to His Father in paradise. He spoke of that joy when He reassured the repentant thief, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). When we suffer for our faith, we have that same joy in the sure and certain promise of everlasting life that makes us strong and confident even in the face of death—because death will be the door through which Christ will bring us to paradise.

WARNING AGAINST DISOBEDIENCE, USING OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES (12:14–29)

Hebrews gives a final warning to the Jewish Christians, based on examples of unbelief from the Old Testament.

Read Hebrews 12:14–29.

We are called to hold firmly to Jesus Christ and not let bitterness spring up in our hearts because of persecution. Think of the example of the apostles who were beaten and imprisoned, yet instead of harboring bitterness and hatred toward those who wronged and mistreated them, they turned their hearts to God, singing songs of praise while clapped in chains (Acts 16:25).

Q 14: Does 12:17 mean that Esau had no chance to repent of his sins and be saved?

- No. It means that once Esau carelessly gave away his birthright and lost his blessing to Jacob, there was nothing he could do to get them back. Despite his tears, his father, Isaac, could not change things. As long as we draw breath on earth, it is not too late to repent of our sins and receive God's forgiveness—though we may have to live with the consequences of our sins throughout what is left of our earthly life. But if we wait until Judgment Day, it will be too late to repent.

FINAL EXHORTATIONS (13:1–19)

The final chapter of Hebrews begins with some miscellaneous encouragements and exhortations.

Read Hebrews 13:1–19.

All of these exhortations are great reminders for us. They express our love of God and our hope in His deliverance as we endure persecution.

Q 15: In verses 12–13, how did Hebrews encourage Jewish Christians who faced being expelled from synagogues for their faith?

- It reminds us that Jesus Himself was rejected and driven out of the Holy City to be crucified. The question is, where should we go? Back to the Temple Mount, with its meaningless sacrifices, or out to Mount Calvary, where the one eternal sacrifice was offered to take away the sins of the world?

BLESSINGS AND GREETINGS (13:20–25)

Hebrews closes with blessings and final greetings.

Read Hebrews 13:20–25.

We are given a great parting blessing or benediction in verses 20–21.

Q 16: What great encouragement comes from considering Jesus the “great Shepherd of the sheep” whom God the Father “brought again from the dead”?

- A shepherd may lay down his life to save his sheep from a fierce predatory animal like a lion or bear. But after that, what good is a dead shepherd when the next enemy comes along? But our Good Shepherd is alive and ever with us to sustain and strengthen us—especially through times of suffering and persecution.