

Themes in Hebrews

1. *The New Covenant and Its Perfect Mediator*

The word translated “covenant” is used a total of 33 times in the NT. Of these, 17 occurrences are in *Hebrews* (7:22; 8:6; 8:8; 8:9 [twice]; 8:10; 9:4 [twice]; 9:15 [twice]; 9:16; 9:17; 9:20; 10:16; 10:29; 12:24; 13:20). Twelve of these occur in the central theological section of *Hebrews*, which opens (8:8-12) and closes (10:16-17) with quotation of the “new covenant” promise made in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**.

1. Promises and Covenants

Promises and covenants are closely connected, e.g. “Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises” (Heb. 8:6).

In *Hebrews* “promise” refers to God’s commitment to his people. It can mean (a) the spoken promise, (b) a gift or pledge that accompanies the spoken promise, or (c) the substance of the thing promised. The fundamental promises are those made to Abraham. They concern blessing, land and descendants. These promises indicate the goal of God’s plan of salvation (i.e. that God’s people [the descendants] might dwell in God’s presence [the land] and partake of God’s life [the blessing]).

Covenant is the formal agreement by which a relationship is established between two parties. Covenant provides the means by which God achieves his plan of salvation. But rather than act unilaterally, God has been pleased to put the covenant into effect through a mediator, the incarnate Son. The mediator does not bring the parties to the covenant together so that they can hammer out the terms of the covenant – rather he guarantees that the covenant is properly administered.

2. Jeremiah 31 and the New Covenant

The central section of *Hebrews* (chapter 8-10), opens with a declaration that “the Sinai covenant was unserviceable and outmoded; it had passed its ‘use by’ date, and its demise was a foregone conclusion.” “If that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second...In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:7,13).

This was not because of any fault on God’s part, as though he had tried, but failed, to make an effective covenant with Israel at Sinai. The fault lay in the fallen human nature of the people. While they remained unregenerate, the covenant relationship with God remained merely external to them. The whole process of administering the Sinai covenant deliberately underscored this weakness.

So God takes the initiative in establishing a new covenant. This is underlined in Jeremiah 31:31-34 by the emphatic use of the pronoun “I”. “I will establish a new covenant... I will make... I will put... I will write... I will be their God... I will be merciful..., and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:8-12).

The new covenant has three marks:

(a) *God will implant his law in the hearts of his people.*

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Heb. 8:10).

The problem is not with the law (“The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, and righteous and good,” Romans 7:12). The problem is with the human heart which is unable to “abide in the covenant” (Heb. 8:9). God required heart-obedience under the Sinai covenant, no less than under the new covenant (see for example Deut. 26:16; 28:45-47).

So under the new covenant, our hearts are made new. (Illustration of the paper map which remains external to an aircraft, and the integrated flight control system.) This is the new birth, and is accomplished by the Holy Spirit: “I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them” (Ezek. 11:19-20).

(b) *The knowledge of God will be a matter of personal experience.*

“And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Heb. 8:11).

Israel had historical knowledge of God through the wonders and signs he performed in Egypt, and preceptive knowledge of God through the Law. But the people did not put their trust in the LORD (see Heb. 3:9; Psalm 95). In this sense, they did not know him – they did not know, i.e. walk in, his ways (Heb 3:10). To know God is to recognize him, to trust him, and to obey him. This is also the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

(c) *God will forgive his people’s sins.*

“For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12).

Definitive forgiveness of sins is foundational to the new covenant. This cleansing is essential to the implanting of the new nature and the knowledge of God.

This cleansing has been achieved (Heb. 1:3; 10:10, 14) by the “once for all time” sacrifice of Jesus. This is of enormous consequence for our assurance because, “unlike the old covenant, the new cannot be broken. ‘Sin cannot imperil the divine-human relationships guaranteed by this new covenant, for sin will not be brought into account: “God will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.””

3. Christ and the New Covenant

(a) *Jesus is the guarantor of the better covenant.*

“But this one [i.e. Jesus] was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever.”’ This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:21-22).

The *guarantor* was the person responsible for the debt of another person if that other person could not meet it. As the guarantor of the better covenant, Christ is its pledge, i.e. he is the one who secures its ultimate attainment. The success of the better covenant is described in 7:19 as “a better hope...through which we draw near to God.”

And Christ's achievement relative to this description is reported in verse 25: “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

(b) *Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant.*

“Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15, see also 8:6; 12:24).

The *mediator* was the person responsible for the establishment of the covenant. As mediator of the new covenant, Christ is the one who brought it into effect and who administers its outworking in the lives of the people of God. It would be a mistake, however, to think of Jesus as mediator just in terms of administration. Jesus is mediator the new covenant through his willing, obedient self-sacrifice.

Hebrews 9-10 describes the central aspects of the Sinai covenant (the tabernacle, the rituals of purification, and especially the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement) in terms of *blood*. Blood was necessary for the establishment of the covenant (9:18-21); and blood was necessary for purification and forgiveness (9:22). So in 10:1-18 the author of *Hebrews* declares that the “once for all time” sacrifice of Jesus simultaneously established the new covenant and secured purification of sins.

(c) *Jesus' success relative to the new covenant.*

How can we know that Jesus has actually established the covenant by his blood? Through his resurrection and exaltation. The author of *Hebrews* places enormous weight on the promise the LORD makes “my Lord” in Psalm 110:1, i.e. “To which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’” (Heb. 1:13).

The “sitting down” of Jesus at the right hand of God is the primary evidence that Jesus has indeed established the new covenant and is its mediator. So at the end of the central section on the new covenant, the author cites Psalm 110:1 again: “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb 10:12-13; compare Heb. 1:3; 12:1-2).

The confidence this gives the author of *Hebrews* is expressed in his closing benedictory prayer: “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant...” (Heb. 13:20). Christ’s “resurrection is the demonstration that his sacrifice of himself has been accepted by God and the new covenant [has been] established on the basis of that sacrifice.”

4. The People and the Place of the New Covenant

The idea that Jesus has sat down at the right hand of God introduces the thought of the people and the place of the new covenant. This comes to a rhetorical climax in Hebrews 12:18-24.

In this passage the author develops a contrast between the place where the old covenant people assembled and the place where the new covenant people are assembled, i.e. “You have not come to... But you have come to...” (vv. 18,22).

This suggests that we can be in only one of two possible places (either Sinai or Zion) and that we can relate to God in only one of two possible ways (either the old covenant which is inadequate to our spiritual needs, or the new covenant which is totally sufficient).

The place of the new covenant is where Jesus is: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God...and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood” (Heb. 12:22-24).

This where we have come to. Through our conversion we have entered the new covenant community and we have come to Jesus.

But there is also a sense in which we have yet to arrive. Like the Old Testament faithful who were looking forward to the city with foundations (Heb. 11:10, 16), we also “seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14), i.e. we long for and look forward to our final arrival in Zion with eager expectation.

This has two practical applications:

(a) *We are called to identify ourselves with the new covenant people.*

“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25).

We are to consider our gatherings (no matter how small – and the meetings of the people to whom *Hebrews* was sent were small and subdued) as foretastes of the joyful resurrection Day on which we will all be gathered to Zion.

(b) *We are called to identify ourselves with Jesus.*

“Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured” (Heb. 13:12-13).

This demands of us, appropriately, the exercise of faith (compare Heb. 12:1-2).

Themes in Hebrews

2. The Word of God

1. God's Word by the Prophets

Hebrews opens with statements about the speaking of God, first by the prophets, then by the Son: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

This seems rather dismissive of the ministry of the prophets. But in fact the author of *Hebrews* makes extensive use of the writings of the prophets, which he treats as the very word of God. These he does not introduce with the usual formula "it is written", but with verbs of speaking, usually in the present tense, and frequently with God the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, as the speaker, e.g.

- "But of the Son he [i.e. the Father] says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom' (Heb. 1:8).
- "That is why he [i.e. the Son] is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise'" (Heb. 2:11-12).
- "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion...'" (Heb. 3:7-11).

The author of *Hebrews* regards the Old Testament as an incomplete book which points towards its own fulfilment in the life and ministry of Jesus.

"God continues to speak through those same words that he spoke, but he speaks them now in the full light of the revealed and completed work of the Son in the great 'last days' of fulfilment."

God's voice is still heard today in the words of the Old Testament, e.g. "Again he appoints a certain day, 'Today,' saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'" (Heb. 4:7). As we encounter the writings of the prophets we find that they are the "living and active" word of God, able to expose the true state of our hearts (Heb. 4:12-13).

2. God's Word by the Son

Hebrews opens with the declaration that "in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son." It is perhaps surprising, then, that we do not find any sayings of Jesus (from his incarnate ministry) anywhere in *Hebrews*. When the author of *Hebrews* attributes words to Jesus, they are the words of the Old Testament writers.

This suggests that we should look elsewhere for the significance of God "speaking by his Son." We will consider two lines of evidence.

(a) *The Son is the creative wisdom of God.*

“...but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:2).

Jewish writers considered “wisdom” to be the “fashioner of all things”.

(b) *The Son is the radiance of God.*

“[The Son] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3).

Jewish writings outside the Old Testament described wisdom as “a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God.” The same Greek word is translated “radiance” in Heb. 1:3 and “reflection” in the Jewish writings.

So, when the author of *Hebrews* says that “God has spoken by his Son”, he is presenting Jesus as God’s word in human form. It is remarkable that, while Jewish authors regarded “wisdom” as a personification of a divine attribute, the author of *Hebrews* uses the same language to describe a man who had lived and died in Palestine a few decades previously.

3. The On-going Ministry of God’s Word

Hebrews is a sermon – in fact, it is the only example we have in the New Testament of a sermon which has been preserved in its entirety. The author of *Hebrews* regarded his sermon as the word of God, through which God spoke. So, for example, he writes, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today...’” (Heb. 3:7), and he urges his listeners to pay careful attention to his teaching (Heb. 5:11-6:12).

It is true that the author of *Hebrews* was the object of divine inspiration. But he closes with an exhortation to “remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God” (Heb. 13:7). A minister who endeavours faithfully to expound and apply the Scriptures preaches the word of God – it is no light thing to despise, disobey, or even just to neglect such a ministry.

Summary

- God not only continues to speak through the writings of the Old Testament; his speaking through them is perfected and completed because of the completed work of the Son.
- The God-Man Jesus is the fullness of the revelation of God, and apart from him we cannot understand either the Old or the New Testament.
- To submit to a faithful ministry of the word is to submit to the word of God; to despise, disobey or neglect a faithful ministry of the word is to despise, disobey or neglect the word of God.

Themes in Hebrews

3. *The Priesthood of Christ*

A recurrent theme in *Hebrews* is that God's perfect self-revelation in his Son has "provided something better for us" (Heb. 11:40). Among the many things that are now "better", the author of *Hebrews* gives pre-eminent place to Christ's high-priestly work.

1. The situation that calls for this teaching

Hebrews is not a dispassionate exposition of Biblical doctrine – it is a "word of exhortation" (13:22). *Hebrews* is like a written sermon – it is an appeal to the will of the hearers (remember that it would have been read out loud, in its entirety, during a meeting of the church). The author's aim is not merely to educate the minds of the congregation, but to effect a change in their hearts.

Why?

Because the congregation was in danger of:

- "drifting away" from the gospel (2:1);
- "falling away from the living God" through unbelief (3:12);
- being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13).

He compares their experience of hardship to the experience of Israel in the wilderness (3:7-4:13).

Between release from bondage in Egypt and possession of the Promised Land, Israel lived in the wilderness. It was "a time of need". But a whole generation of Israelites failed to depend on God's provision – they fell into unbelief (evident from their grumbling), and as a consequence they failed to enter the promised rest.

In the same way, the church lives between the first coming of Christ (to release us from bondage to sin), and the second coming of Christ (to give us full possession of God's rest). Living between these two comings is like living in the wilderness – it is a "time of need".

The author of *Hebrews* meets this situation with his teaching about the high priesthood of Jesus.

2. The source of "mercy and grace to help in time of need"

What did the high priest do? Year by year, on the great Day of Atonement, he went into the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle/temple and placed the blood of the atonement sacrifice on the "mercy seat" (the gold lid of the ark of the covenant). In this way he made propitiation for the sins of the people, and emerged from the presence of God to bless them.

This action foreshadowed the action of Jesus, our high priest. He has “passed through the heavens” (4:14) and “now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (9:24).

The “mercy seat” is now the “throne of grace”. Our high priest is so great and his work so complete that we are encouraged to draw near the throne with confidence, because there we will “receive mercy and grace to help in time of need” (4:16).

Thus, the teaching about the priesthood of Jesus meets our present situation.

3. The significance of the priesthood of Christ

The author’s focus on the high priesthood of Jesus is not on what Jesus has done on the Cross, but on where Jesus is and what he is doing *now* – he is in the presence of God, living in order to make intercession for us (7:25).

This emphasises the immeasurable importance of the resurrection of Christ. God exalted Jesus to the office of high priest by raising him from the dead and receiving him into his presence. He became a priest “by the power of an indestructible life” (7:16).

This is evident in the passage which first speaks of Melchizedek (5:5-10). This passage:

- speaks of the appointment of Jesus as high priest as his exaltation (v. 5a);
- links his resurrection with his appointment (vv. 5b, 6);
- contrasts his exaltation with his humiliation (vv. 7-8);
- links his “being designated by God a high priest” with his “being made perfect” and becoming “the source of eternal salvation” (vv. 9-10).

The point of the comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek is *not* to excite speculation about Melchizedek. It is rather to demonstrate that Jesus is a priest in a class of his own. This is because he is “the Son of God” (7:3). “It is Christ’s divine, eternal nature as the Son of God that shapes his priesthood and gives it its uniqueness. His divine, eternal Sonship makes his priesthood what it is in distinction from every other kind of priesthood.”

Summary

“Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest...” (8:1-2).

So when we are buffeted by the living in the wilderness – this “time of need” – our hope is placed not in our faith or our works or our experience, but in Jesus Christ who, as our forerunner and high priest, has entered into the Most Holy Place on our behalf (6:19).

Themes in Hebrews

4. The Tabernacle

It is a fact that *Hebrews* makes no mention of the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, the letter talks about the Tabernacle because the Tabernacle was intimately associated with Sinai and the old covenant.

Its design was revealed by God: “When Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’” (Heb. 8:5).

And it was designed as a system of prophetic symbols, pointing forward to Christ: “The law has but a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb. 10:1).

1. The shape of the Tabernacle

“For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place” (Heb. 9:2-3).

The Tabernacle was tent divided into two rooms.

The first section (called “the Holy Place”) was entered by Aaronic priests every day: “The priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties” (Heb 9:6). The priests trimmed the lampstand and arranged “the bread of the Presence” on the golden table.

The second section was partitioned off from the first section by a heavy and beautifully woven curtain. This was “the Most Holy Place”. It contained the ark of the covenant, and was entered:

- only once every year, on the Day of Atonement,
- only by the high priest,
- who presented the blood of the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of Israel.

“Into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people” (Heb. 9:7).

2. The purpose of the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle was the means by which God dwelt among his people. The Hebrew word for “tabernacle” is formed from the word which means “to dwell”. So the Tabernacle was God’s “dwelling place”. And since the Tabernacle was set in the very centre of the camp of Israel, it demonstrated that God’s desire was to dwell among his people.

But the Tabernacle also demonstrated that God could not dwell among his people while sin remained unforgiven.

3. Hebrews' application of the Tabernacle

- (a) "By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places [the Most Holy Place] is not yet opened as long as the first section [the Holy Place] is still standing" (Heb. 9:8).

If the heavy veil was removed, then the Tabernacle would become one room and the distinction between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place would be obliterated, and the way into God's presence would be open and obvious.

- (b) "[Jesus] entered once for all into the holy places [the Most Holy Place], not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12).

"For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands [the Most Holy Place], which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24).

Jesus has done in reality what the high priest did only symbolically – he has entered the heavenly sanctuary, the very presence of God.

Jesus has entered the heavenly sanctuary carrying blood – not the blood of an animal as the high priest did, but his own blood.

In this way Jesus has actually dealt with sin – he has secured "an eternal redemption". As a result God can now dwell among his people; the veil can be removed.

- (c) "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near..." (Heb. 10:19-22).

The way of access into God's presence is now open and obvious. Sin can no longer act as "a separator, a perennial, detrimental force disallowing a permanently right relationship between God and his people." Our access is not something we wait for – it is a privilege which we enjoy right now.

Summary

"Christ has entered...into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24).

"That the Son of God should return to heaven from which he came is surely to be expected. What is astonishing is that he appears in the presence of God *for us*, as our forerunner and representative. God is aware, of course, that Christ represents all of us who trust him. In accepting him, therefore, God accepts us. In that confidence we can enter his presence" (David Gooding).

The Most Holy Place was a 15-foot (4.6-m) cube, containing only the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10–22; 37:1–9). It was here that Yahweh would descend to meet with his people in a cloud theophany (divine appearance). The high priest could enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (see note on Heb. 9:7).

The framed structure was covered by four layers of cloth and skin (Ex. 26:1–14).

The table for the bread of the Presence (Ex. 25:23–30)

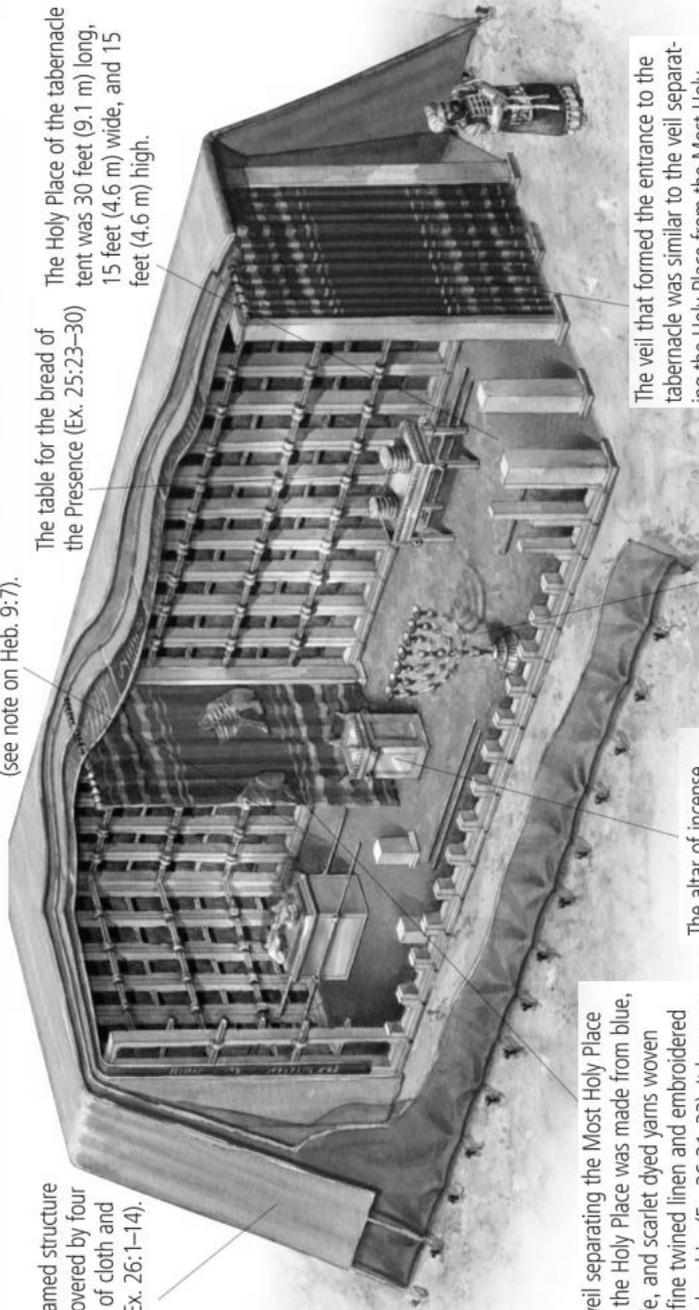
The Holy Place of the tabernacle tent was 30 feet (9.1 m) long, 15 feet (4.6 m) wide, and 15 feet (4.6 m) high.

The veil separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place was made from blue, purple, and scarlet dyed yarns woven with fine twined linen and embroidered with cherubim (Ex. 26:31–33). It hung on four golden pillars.

The altar of incense (Ex. 30:1–5; 37:25–29)

The golden lampstand (Ex. 25:31–40; 37:17–24)

The veil that formed the entrance to the tabernacle was similar to the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, except that cherubim were not embroidered on it. It was suspended on five golden pillars (Ex. 26:36–37).



Themes in Hebrews

5. Warning and Assurance

The purpose of the author of *Hebrews* is to exhort his readers to persevere in the faith. His letter is full of strongly worded admonitions in which he warns his readers about the danger of falling away. We have seen that *Hebrews* also gives us strong grounds for assurance, i.e. the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus and the promise of God, “I will certainly not remember their sins or their lawless deeds any more.”

Clearly warning and assurance are held in tension in the letter. How are we to understand the warnings?

1. The Warning Passages

There are five primary warning passages in *Hebrews*, i.e. 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-31; 12:25-29. The first and the last of these passages form bookends on the warnings:

- “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:1-3).
- “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven” (Heb. 12:25).

The five warning passages share important characteristics:

- The author speaks to his readers about their responsibilities. E.g. “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).
- The author often includes himself in the exhortation. E.g. “...we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (Heb. 2:1).
- The author illustrates his warnings with shocking examples of people who have apostatised – apostasy is a reality, not a fiction. E.g. “Who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?” (Heb. 3:16).
- The author emphasises the fearful consequences of apostasy. E.g. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).
- The author balances his admonitions with encouragements. E.g. “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation” (Heb. 6:9).

We will turn our attention to the best known of the warning passages.

2. Hebrews 5:11-6:12

The introduction and conclusion are important. The author's purpose is to motivate his readers to step up to the mark in their confession of faith:

- "...you have become dull of hearing... by this time you ought to be teachers... you need someone to teach you... You need milk... Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity... And this we will do if God permits" (5:11-6:3).
- "Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation... And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness... so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:9-12).

This is the context of the warning in 6:4-8.

Vv. 4-5 list five privileges of the Christian life which parallel the experience of the Exodus generation. Hence, the apostasy of the Christian and the apostate's judgement also parallel the apostasy and judgement of the Exodus generation.

In verse 6 the leading word is literally "having stepped aside" and it suggests "having failed to follow through on a commitment". This highlights the appalling contrast between the generosity of God (enlightening, giving, granting participation, vv. 4-5) and the faithlessness of the recipients. The apostate has made a radical break with core salvation experiences.

Reflecting on the enormity of this apostasy, Calvin wrote, "It must be understood that they who choke the light of the Spirit with deliberate impiety, and spew out the taste of the heavenly gift, will cut themselves off from the sanctification of the Spirit, and trample upon God's word and the powers of the age to come."

Apostasy is not an accident – it is a deliberate stepping into the abyss.

But apostasy may creep up on a confessing Christian who has failed to heed the warnings about closer paying attention to the Word of God and following through on commitment to grow in Christ.

Summary

The warning passages in *Hebrews* speak about what will happen if we abandon the faith. But the fact that there are warning passages in *Hebrews* does not mean that the author thought that any of his readers had fallen away. The warnings "are instructions shouted to runners in the race, not armchair reflections on the race subsequent to the action."

The warning passages are one of the means by which God keeps us from falling away – stern words motivate us not to walk away from Jesus. Calvin's comment is to the point: "If anyone asks why the apostle makes mention of this kind of apostasy when he is addressing believers who are far from such sinful treachery, my answer is that he is giving them early warning of the danger, so that they may be on their guard against it"

Themes in Hebrews

6. *Progress and Arrival*

We have seen that that letter to the Hebrews uses two pictures of movement:

- Like Israel moving through the wilderness towards the land of Canaan, we are moving towards the promised rest.
- Like Jesus, our great high priest who has entered into the very presence of God on our behalf, we have access into the Most Holy Place.

These two pictures seem paradoxical – on the one hand we are to journey on; but on the other hand we have arrived. The author of Hebrews skilfully weaves these pictures together to exhort and reassure us. The paradox between “journeying on” and “having arrived” helps us understand the doctrine of assurance.

1. **Progress and assurance**

The progress imagery in *Hebrews* is used to call us to persevere in the faith.

- On the one hand we are to learn a negative lesson from the Exodus generation which refused to believe the promises and trust in God, and who died in the wilderness. They failed to enter into the promised rest because of unbelief (Heb. 3:7-4:13).
- On the other hand, we are to emulate all the Old Testament believers described in Hebrews 11. These men and women persevered in the faith, and progressed towards the promised rest. But, in the picture of Hebrews 11:39, they have arrived on the east bank of the Jordan, but have not yet crossed over into their promised inheritance because they are waiting for us.

But, what would happen if we built our assurance on our perseverance and progress? We would fall into legalism. We would congratulate ourselves on our achievement (if we considered ourselves to have succeeded) or we would envy others (if we considered ourselves to have failed).

So, although *Hebrews* uses the picture of progress on a journey to exhort us to persevere, it does not use that picture to give us assurance – that would lead to legalism. Instead, assurance is given to us through the picture of arrival:

- Even now we may draw near the throne of grace with confidence (Heb. 4:16);
- Even now we draw near to God through Christ (Heb. 7:25);
- Even now we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:19-22);
- Even now we have come to mount Zion in festal assembly, and the sprinkled blood of Jesus (Heb. 12:22-24).

Assurance is of the essence of faith, because is assurance comes from what God has done for us in Christ, not from our progress in the faith.

2. Arrival and perseverance

But someone will object that such an absolute assurance militates against making any effort “to fight the good fight, to the run the race, to keep the faith”. If I “have arrived” then why should I persevere?

This was one of the pastoral issues hotly debated during the Reformation. The Reformers taught that believers know that they are already forgiven and justified in God’s sight; that they have no fear of eventual judgment (Rom. 8:1); and that they have passed over ‘from death to life’ (John 5:24). The promise of God enables believers in Christ to have “full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22).

But the religious system against which the Reformers protested was characterized by a host of doubts and uncertainties. It viewed the Reformation’s claims to Christian assurance as conceited, and potentially disastrous from an ethical and pastoral point of view.

This is the danger of antinomianism, i.e. the idea that, because our salvation is secure we can do as we please.

Hence it is important that *Hebrews* balances its teaching on assurance with its teaching on perseverance. Notice that the passages that give assurance are cast in the form of exhortations:

- “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16).
- “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” (Heb 10:19-23).
- “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...See that you do not refuse him who is speaking” (Heb. 12:22,25).

Assurance of salvation is used as a motivation to persevere in the faith – “Be what you are.” A child who has the assurance that he belongs in the home will want to behave as a member of the household.

Summary

The metaphors of progress and arrival enable us to balance our understanding of assurance and perseverance.

- Our progress is faltering – but our assurance of salvation is based on the promise of God, not on our performance. This knocks legalism on the head.
- Access into God’s presence is even now our experience – but God is holy and this motivates us to struggle against sin and to persevere in faith. This knocks antinomianism on the head.

Themes in Hebrews

7. Perfection: Achieved and Experienced

Hebrews speaks about the perfecting of Jesus and the perfecting of believers. We will look at these two “perfectings” and how the latter depends on the former.

1. The perfecting of Christ

- (a) “For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb. 2:10).

God qualified Jesus for his role as the founder of our salvation through sufferings. Jesus’ sufferings were not a prelude to his being made perfect, neither were they the purchase price of perfection. Rather, his sufferings were a necessary experience through which God perfected the Saviour.

- (b) “And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb. 5:9).

In what way was Jesus “made perfect”? Not morally – Heb. 4:15 makes it clear that he was without sin. The perfection spoken of in Heb. 5:9 is vocational, i.e. learning obedience through suffering equipped Jesus to be “a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (Heb. 2:17).

- (c) “For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever” (Heb. 7:28).

Hebrews 7 contrasts Jesus as priest with the Levitical priests. On the one hand they are weak (they must make atonement for their own sins [7:27]; the law of which they are the functionaries “made nothing perfect” [7:19]; and they die [7:23]). But Jesus is perfect (he is sinless [7:26]; he is able to save to the uttermost [7:25]; and he never dies [7:24]). In this context “having been made perfect forever” points to Jesus’ heavenly exaltation.

2. The perfecting of believers

The perfecting of believers is dependent on the perfecting of Jesus. Perfection is achieved for us by the perfecting of Jesus. It is only because of his “being made perfect” that we can also “be made perfect”.

- (a) Perfection and service

Hebrews also speaks about the perfecting of people. This perfecting may refer to our ability to approach God to serve and worship him, i.e. it is vocational. This vocational perfection is seen in passages which speak about the inability of the law to perfect the people, e.g.

- “According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the worshipper with respect to conscience” (Heb. 9:9).

- “For since the law has but a shadow...it can never...make perfect those who draw near” (Heb. 10:1).

But vocational perfection is available in Jesus. Heb. 7:19 contrasts “the law [which] made nothing perfect” with “a better hope [in Jesus]...through which we draw near to God.”

(b) Perfection and sanctification

The “better hope” in Jesus is the result of his once for all time sacrifice. Heb. 10:14 says, “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” The words “he has perfected” stress that our perfection has been accomplished in the past and that the benefits are permanently enjoyed by those who are “being sanctified”. “Being sanctified” does not refer to “progressive growth in sanctification” – instead, it means that we are those who continually benefit from the saving death of Jesus, which makes it possible to draw near to God with confidence (see also Heb. 10:10).

(c) Perfection and glorification

The men and women of faith in the OT looked forward to the heavenly city, Zion (Heb. 11:10,13-16), but they had to wait “since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Heb. 11:40). But we have now come to Zion (Heb. 12:22-24), and Zion is the place of Jesus’ “being made perfect forever” – so it is also the place of our “being made perfect forever”. We have come to “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb. 12:23).

(d) Perfection and maturity

Heb. 6:1 calls us to “go on to maturity.” The Greek word translated “maturity” is closely related to the word “to become perfect”. It is important to emphasise that perfection is achieved for us by the perfecting of Jesus. Perfection is the gift of God to those who draw near through Jesus. But the point of the teaching on Jesus’ perfection and ours is to spur us on to maturity – it should encourage us to be confident about our relationship with God and to persevere in that confidence.

Summary

Jesus was perfected through the experience of suffering. And he was perfected for the purpose of being our high priest. And his being made perfect is the grounds of our assurance that he saves to the uttermost.

Jesus is the “perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). His faith is qualitatively different from ours, not just quantitatively greater. But by the exercise of his faith, he has given our faith the perfect basis, achieving our salvation by his obedience.

Themes in Hebrews

8. *Suffering with the Saviour*

Hebrews was written to a group of believers who had suffered for the faith, and who faced the prospect of renewed suffering. This study aims to unpack the nature of their suffering and the pastoral response of the author of *Hebrews*.

1. The reality of suffering

Hebrews 10:32-34 catalogues the sufferings the Hebrew believers endured when they were first converted: “Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings” (Heb. 10:32).

(a) Verbal abuse in the theatre “...being publicly exposed to reproach” (v. 33a)

This vilification occurred in the theatre – compare Acts 19:21-41. Honour and shame were of immense importance in the ancient world, and such public reproach was aimed at breaking the will of the Christians to persevere.

(b) Public scourging “...being publicly exposed to...affliction” (v. 33b)

“Affliction” means floggings. Aulus Avilius Flaccus, Prefect of Egypt AD 32-38, humiliated Alexandrian Jews by having them stripped naked and scourged in a public spectacle in the theatre. Some died of their wounds.

(c) Imprisonment “..you had compassion on those in prison” (v. 34a)

The sufferings were prolonged by imprisonment. Conditions in prison were harsh.

(d) Confiscation of property “...the plundering of your property” (v. 34b)

This was legal confiscation of property (including houses) by the State. It was a heavy blow. Cicero asked, “What is more sacred, what is more protected by all religion than the house of each and every citizen.”

(e) Impending exile “...let us go to [Jesus] outside the camp” (13:13)

10:35-39 makes it clear that more suffering was waiting in the wings. 13:11-14 suggests that this included exile. Going “outside the camp” was no mere metaphor for social exclusion – it spoke of the punishment of exile. Humiliation, physical abuse, imprisonment and confiscation of property were bad, but exile must have seemed like the final straw.

2. The reasons for suffering

(a) Roman law

The five forms of punishment outlined above are codified in Roman law. What, then, was the charge against the Christians that they were so punished?

The law forbade associations from meeting weekly (with the exception of the Jews). The emperors viewed associations as hotbeds of political dissent and a thorn in their side. This ban throws light on the exhortation not to neglect to meet together (Heb. 10:25).

(b) Roman loyalty

The opening of *Hebrews* would have astonished 1st century readers – in it Jesus is accorded divine honours which were claimed by the emperor. For example:

- The emperor claimed perpetual divinity. But Jesus is the Son.
- The emperor claimed to be *pontifex maximus*, i.e. the mediator between the citizens and the state gods. But Jesus is the great high priest.

Anyone who failed to engage in the veneration of the emperor was viewed with suspicion, and could be charged with treason.

(c) Pressure to conform

The pressure to conform was immense, and was a major reason for believers apostatizing. Mitchell writes, “It was not a change of heart that might win a Christian convert back to paganism, but the overwhelming pressure to conform imposed by the institutions of his city and the activities of his neighbours.”

Alternatively, Christians could seek refuge in the synagogue, which required circumcision, and was a rejection of Jesus.

3. The reward

More suffering was expected (Heb. 10:35-39). The future must have looked bleak.

The Christians had “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property.” Why this unexpected attitude? Because they knew that they “had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb. 10:34). So the author exhorts them, “Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward” (10:35).

The “reward” is the eschatological promise, i.e. the end is in sight: “For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay’” (10:37). This view of the return of Messiah and the end of the age directly contradicted the 1st century philosophical view that the world is eternal. It also opposes the modern scientific view of hundreds of thousands of millions of years future and the extinction of our race, the expansion of the Sun and the “heat death of the universe”.

Christians face two choices: continue to live in the light of the promised return of Christ (“but my righteous one shall live by faith,” Heb. 10:38); or cut and run because we cannot take the heat any more.

The answer is “to look (to focus without distraction on a distant object) to Jesus”. His sufferings and his joy are the model for ours. In this way, our sufferings are not a sign of God’s disapproval but the assurance of our filial relationship with God (Heb. 12:5). Our relationship as sons (see 2:11-14) is our highest privilege and in suffering our greatest comfort.

Summary

Jesus is the beginning, middle and end of our salvation. The only way we can run the race with perseverance is by looking to him.