

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter to the Hebrews

Readings: *Hebrews 1:1-6:12*

Reflections:

- Letter to the Hebrews: This writing is one of the most theologically rich letters in the Christian Scriptures. It is also one of the most irreligious as its main message is to demonstrate how Jesus has supplanted every main element of the Torah. There was a battle within the early church regarding those who wanted to still follow the Torah and those who wanted to take the grace of the irreligious message of Jesus and turn it into a license to do whatever you felt like. This letter was apparently written to an inner circle of Jewish Christians in Rome to help them understand the full message of Jesus particularly that he fully supersedes and replaces all need for religion, even the religion God gave to the Israelites. The author nowhere mentions his name. Some have suggested Paul. There are distinct parallels to Paul's message recorded in Acts 13. Yet it doesn't make sense that Paul would not refer to himself at all. Also there is mention of Timothy's release. Most scholars assume that this was written after Paul's death but before 70 CE when the temple was destroyed. No doubt the author would have mentioned the destruction of the temple in light of the focus of the teaching. Various names have been speculated as the author of Hebrews: Barnabas (note: he was the first person attributed to this letter), Clement of Rome, Luke, Apollos or Priscilla and Aquilla. What we know is that this letter was written to an inner circle of Jewish Christians in Rome by a well educated leader who grasped the depth of the message of Jesus. It is possible the final chapter of Hebrews (13) was a smaller letter that accompanied the longer sermon. In later copies it was then tacked on the end of the sermon (Hebrews 1-12). It seems strange that the author's name is intentionally removed but it may have been as simple as the person was well known and so when the smaller letter was copied on the end of the sermon the opening with the name was dropped. We see in the sermon a wonderful window into the teaching and preaching style of the early Christ-followers.
- The Majesty of Christ – God speaks through Christ: This opening paragraph finds incredible parallels to John's opening in his biography as well as much of the key writings of Paul (see Philippians 2:1-11). We see a particular emphasis here on the power of God's word and Christ's pre-existence and role in creating all things. Rather

than placing emphasis on the Scriptures as the Word of God, like other authors of the first church, the focus is on Jesus as the perfect word of God to us.

- Christ greater than the angels: The writer now begins a series of comparisons to demonstrate to his listeners that Jesus is greater than anything or anyone they have known within their religion. Jesus is superior as Son, as Lord of all, as the one seated at the right hand of God. We also see the humility of the angels as just servant spirits sent by God to secretly and silently serve God's people.
- Warning against rejection: The listeners are cautioned about not simply hearing the message and then ignoring it. Even messages sent via angels required a response in the story of Israel. How much more should we respond to the truth of Jesus, God's own son that was confirmed by signs, wonders and miracles as well as the working of the Holy Spirit and the gifts coming through the Spirit? We see here the vital importance of the role of the Spirit within community. As people are changed from the inside out and begin to hear God speak, it is all a part of God confirming the reality of his presence within community. We also assume that Christian communities are experiencing miracles in their midst.
- All things subject to Christ: This passage parallels Paul's teaching in Ephesians 1:20-23.
- Christ's death shows grace: We see the tension acknowledged. Jesus is Lord of all but not everything at present is fully submitted to him. Now there is a statement that has caused some to wonder. The writer says that through suffering Christ was made perfect. Some have taken this to mean that Jesus became perfect through his obedience. The Greek work translated "perfect" also means "complete." Christ completed God's will and became complete in his identification with us and in the full demonstration of God's grace. In this way, through his suffering and death fulfilled his role completely and perfectly. The writer also affirms our family relationship with Christ, our intimacy and unity with him as his brothers and sisters.
- Christ's humanity gives hope: Christ completely identified with us in his life, suffering and death so that he might completely undo the work of Adam and Eve and break the curse and power of the devil over our lives. He has also freed us from the power of fear ("I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid."). This slavery to the fear of death (fear of vulnerability) places humanity in bondage and so Christ came to free us from all fear. We also see he is now able to understand our frailty and weakness so that his heart is to help us with true empathy because he knows what we have gone through. It is remarkable how consistent the early church was on explaining both the divinity and humanity of Christ.
- Christ superior to Moses – Jesus is greater than Moses: We are reminded again to fix our thoughts on Jesus. The renewal of our minds is grounded in a relentless focus on Jesus. Jesus is called here an apostle (sent one) and a high priest. Moses was the closest parallel to an "apostle" in the story of Israel and Jesus is affirmed as being superior to all

of the key images of associated with Moses. Moses built the tabernacle but Jesus is the builder of the true temple, the community of Christ followers (see Ephesians 2:19-22).

- Scripture calls for belief: Woven throughout the text are encouragements to remain faithful to Christ and the truth in spite of persecution and suffering. Here the writer credits the Holy Spirit giving encouragement through the Psalmist. The Holy Spirit is a prime mover within the unfolding story of God.
- Sin of unbelief: The warning against unbelief is as strong as it could be. Sin is viewed as deceitful in its ability to slowly harden our heart to trusting God. As we act selfishly and reject God in our pursuit of sin, in time our heart gets hardened to trusting God and hearing him speak or seeing him work. We become increasingly unable to perceive or believe God. This spiritual numbness sneaks up on us so that we don't even know that it is happening to us. That is the subtle deception. For this reason we must always actively choose to embrace whatever we understand as God speaking to us. Only when we actively choose to live out of our trust in God will we remain soft to him and to his heart for us.
- Israelites' unbelief: The writer now reminds the listeners of Israel's own story. They experienced the miracle of being delivered from Egypt but they didn't believe and were judged in the desert. They failed to enter into the rest of the Promised Land because they didn't trust God even after all God said to them and did for them. Their example should inspire us to choose to trust God and embrace all he says to us. Now within Israel's story everything is external and physical. Here within the story of the first church, everything is now focused on an internal and spiritual understanding of entering into a peaceful and restful place before God.
- Christ superior to Joshua – promised rest for faithful: God is portrayed as living in a continual state of rest and through faith in Christ we can enter into God's eternal place of peace. Only as we fail to believe and then start to strive to be our own rescuers and saviors do we then fail to enter the place of rest God desires us to have in Christ. We become like Martha slaving in the kitchen rather than Mary resting at Jesus' feet.
- Christ's rest superior: In Christ we can rest from trying to work our way into heaven through religion. Jesus gives us completely free access to peace with God. How excited the first Jewish Christians would have been to be freed from the labor of the Law.
- Need for obedience: Now our labor or effort is not to do the work of religion but to work to trust and rest. It is a play on words like we might say, "Hurry up and wait!" The writer now inserts a comment about God's word. This word may either be the Spirit inspired word of Scripture and it may also be the Spirit inspired word spoken prophetically within community (see 1 Corinthians 14:24-25). In both cases the truth of God has a way of cutting through all of our rationalizations and deceptions and challenges us to get our hearts right with God. Again we see that God is ultimately concerned about our hearts first and foremost. God wants to do heart surgery to save

us. We are reminded that he is a holy God who will one day judge all humanity. And so we are motivated by both his love and grace as well as his perfection and holiness.

- Jesus as High Priest – Jesus brings access to God: The phrase “gone through the heavens” affirms that Jesus in his ascension is Lord of all. Jesus experienced all aspects of what it means to be human and to struggle. He did this without sin but yet is now able to really understand and sympathize with our vulnerabilities and temptations. He is the perfect person to help us. He gets us and he understands struggles. He has the love and power to enable us to make choices that will honor God.
- High Priests intercede: The writer points to the parallel of the office of priest. He is someone who struggles as well and has to offer sacrifices for his own sin under the Torah.
- Jesus a special High Priest: Melchizedek was a mysterious figure in Genesis 14:18. He is called the king of Salem and a priest of the most high. There is long history of mythology about this character in ancient writings. In brief, we really know very little about this character. Abraham gives him an offering and this king priest blesses him. Some have speculated that this is Christ. Others suggest this is just a mysterious figure we know nothing about. The key to this passage is that Melchizedek (which means “king of righteousness”) is a pre-Torah priest. In other words, Jesus as our High Priest is from a line of non-Torah priests. Again we see the irreligious nature of Jesus coming through. The writer goes on to highlight how intently and passionately Jesus prayed (see Luke 5:16). It is interesting that Jesus who is one with God the father still prayed so passionately and consistently. He models for us what true intimacy and union with God looks like. All of this was an expression of his submission to his Father. In all of this and through his suffering it says he learned obedience. In other words, he walked out and experienced what true obedience felt like. In this place of complete identification with us and with complete submission to God, Jesus opened the way for all to draw near to God and to be rescued from our sin and self-destructive self-centeredness.
- Parenthetical thoughts regarding readers – explanation difficult: The writer now in the middle of the sermon challenges the listeners to maturity. This passage has very close parallel to Paul’s challenge in 1 Corinthians 3:2. It is clear that the goal of maturity is to be able to teach others as well as have a great ability to distinguish good and evil. The term “training” has a particular emphasis on correct action or lifestyle rather than correct belief or thought.
- Need to mature: We see in this passage a very clear delineation of the basic teachings of the Jesus movement. Here are the initial steps:
 - Step One - repentance - sin is self-centered acts that destroy our lives and lead to death, relationally, physically and spiritually; repentance is a change of mind and will that leads to a change of action, it means turning around and going the other direction;

- Step Two - faith in God – learning how to trust God in everything rather than trusting yourself to be your own lord and rescuer;
 - Step Three – instruction about baptisms – water baptism as a symbol of dying and rising again with Christ, being plunged into Christ; baptism in the Spirit where a person is filled with the Spirit to being the inside out transformation by God’s presence pouring his love and power into his or her life; we should note that this is teaching about these baptisms which then sets the stage for the fourth teaching topic;
 - Step Four - laying on of hands – This was the practice of praying for people to be filled with the Spirit and to be commissioned into their role within community; laying of hands was a physical expression of solidarity and unity as God worked through community is the mutual experience of his presence;
 - Step Five – the resurrection of the dead – This was an important teaching to help people realize our ultimate security in eternal life and the promise of the resurrection and the new earth; this teaching is particularly important to those who suffer;
 - Step Six – eternal judgment – This teaching was important to help them realize the role God plays in settling all accounts; this frees people from having to settle their own accounts and take revenge; they can trust God to deal with their enemies and those who persecuted them; they can simply focus on loving their enemies.
- Warning against falling away – Here in this passage we have an expansion of what is included in the work of the Holy Spirit within a person’s life. The work of the Spirit results in enlightenment (seeing things from God’s perspective, perceiving spiritual truth), an experience of the goodness of the breathed or prophetic word of God (how great it is to have God speaking to you personally and giving his input into your life) as well as a tangible encounter with God’s power (getting a taste of the world when Jesus returns). Now the warning of this passage seems to align with Jesus teaching in Mark 3:29 and Luke 12:10 that suggests there is a sin against the Holy Spirit that can’t be forgiven. As we have suggested previously, this inability to repent is less about God’s heart hardening towards a person but rather a hardening of the person’s heart due to their conscious decision to completely reject the work of God in their lives. The writer here goes further to point out how this rejection of Christ is like crucifying him and causing public disgrace to fall on him. Those who know Christ intimately and then reject him like Judas did are warned of judgment. The more we know and experience, the more accountable we are for our response to Christ.
 - Confidence in continued faith: The writer concludes on a positive note affirming his listeners for their love for God demonstrated in all they have done. The purpose of this challenge was to ensure they didn’t become lazy and so lose the certainty of their hope

in Christ. How easy it is to coast and not keep challenging ourselves to embrace all God has for us?