

The Book of Hebrews: Introduction

Tonight, let us pray through Hebrews 2. Do not turn to it, just pray with me to start our class.

*Lord, Our Father, many of us come here already very tired from a long day. Lord, You know the motivation to study Your Word and to be trained and to be drawn nearer to You that would inspire us to work a long day. Perhaps a day that is already more than 12 hours old, and now we begin a span of time sitting and listening for some hours. Lord, we know that You understand our weakness because even as we have flesh and blood, You also took flesh and blood so You might share in our humanity. Lord, You did not just share that humanity; however, You also took upon Yourself a perfect body and a perfect mind and spirit, perfect nature and lived a perfect life and by that began to destroy the power of the devil. Lord, You finished that work by submitting, although innocent, to the severest punishments that the law of Israel and the law of Rome and that the wicked deeds of the world could render upon you. Lord, when You tasted death, You tasted death for us all. For this, we thank You. This is why we are here, to thank You, to praise You, to understand You better and to see that all that we say and do somehow flows out of knowing You in Your mercy, in Your power and Your majesty and Your gentle tender help that You render to us. Lord, we pray that as we meditate upon Your Word, Your work through the book of Hebrews, we would indeed taste of You tonight. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.*

Hebrews is the first book that we are going to survey in this class. We will study Hebrews 1, 2 and time permitting, Hebrews 3 tonight. Let me introduce you to the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a book like an eccentric millionaire. It is rich, but puzzling. Hebrews is puzzling because we do not know who wrote it, or when they wrote it. We do not know exactly why they wrote it, or who received it so there are some puzzles. There is also the fact that what the first readers experienced, what occasioned the book of Hebrews, is a long way from our daily experience. They were in the midst of the early stages of a persecution from the Roman Empire. They were frightened, and falling back. They were not up to the challenge of potentially shedding their own blood for the cause of Christ.

Something that complicates the book of Hebrews is that it seems to be written as a sermon. At the end of the book, chapter 13:22, the author says, "I exhort you brothers, permit me to permit a word of exhortation." In fact, "I have written to you briefly a word of exhortation" appears just one other time in the New Testament, when Paul preaches a sermon. He is actually invited to preach a sermon at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Barnabas is with him in Acts 13:15, and they are asked, "Give us a word of exhortation." What they mean is, "Give us a sermon." So this is a sermon written by a man who is some kind of pastoral leader. Maybe he is the pastor, maybe one of the pastors of a house church in Rome. He is not able to be with them so he writes this book, the book of Hebrews. Although he is absent from them physically, he is with them by the use of his pen.

There are a number of signs that this is a sermon. The words that he uses are verbal, sounding like he wanted to say them. For example, he constantly uses first and second-person pronouns. He talks about 'I,' 'we,' 'us,' and 'you.' It is not abstract language of the day; it is very personal language. He sounds like he wants to talk. Hebrews 2:1 states, "Therefore, we must pay closer attention to what we have heard [you hear spoken messages] lest we drift away." He says in 5:11, "About this we have much to say which is hard to explain, but you have become dull of hearing." He is almost imagining them listening to him. He says in 6:9, "Although we speak this way, we have hopes of better things." Then it sounds like he is running out of time at the end of the sermon, chapter 11:32, when he says, "Time would fail to tell of the other heroes of the faith." That is what preachers do when they are running out

of time. They say, “I wish I had time to tell you more, but I can just give you a few highlights here.” It sounds like he wishes he were preaching.

We know that the author knows them from the familiar pronouns he uses, and also because he shares some of their history. An important passage for understanding Hebrews is 10:32-34. It says, “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.” He says, “Now you remember” and he is implying that he remembers it too. There was a time of persecution that came earlier on. In verse 33, “Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution. At other times, you stood side by side with those who were so treated.” He remembers perhaps visiting fellow Christians who were thrown in jail, who were somehow victimized. Verse 34 states, “You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.” He is reminding them in some detail of a prior persecution that they went through, one that he knows about presumably because he was a part of it.

The book is a blend of warmth and intensity. It is warm because he calls those who read it his brothers and his friends. It is also an intense book. There are sharp warnings in the book that bespeak friendship. Remember Proverbs 27:9, which says, “The pleasantness of one’s friend springs from his earnest council.” That means a friend knows how to gently chastise and warn. In the book of Hebrews, the author will not let his friends get away with anything. He gives them some very mild, loving and gentle warnings, but he also reprimands them because he knows it is for their good, especially in chapters 5, 6 and 10.

Hebrews is a book written by someone who cares deeply about his friends. It is a pastoral work that is a wonderful model of blending pastoral concerns and interests with deep theology. The Hebrews knew that theology was very relevant. People often think that theology is boring, and what we need is to get to the ethical parts of the Bible, and the stories and the examples of the Bible. The truth is that nothing shapes our mind and heart more than doctrine. It gives us perspective on the world, so it teaches us who we are, what the world is, where it is going and why, and the consequences. Hebrews is an intensely doctrinal book, and simultaneously is intensely practical. It is a dense book that demands our attention because of its theology, and yet is very practical.

Let us talk about who wrote the book, and the circumstances of the writing. We have an anonymous author. It never says in the book who wrote it, and there is not any tradition or longstanding report from the early church as to who wrote the book of Hebrews. It is one of the things scholars spend their time on, guessing who wrote Hebrews. On some level, it does not really matter whether it was Barnabas or Silas or Priscilla or Apollis or Luke or someone else. Somebody wrote it, and even if we do not know who they are by name, we know a fair amount about them just from what they wrote. So what do we know about them?

First of all, we know that he is someone who was in the circle of the apostles. He sounds like Paul at various times, and we get the sense that he was in the Pauline circle because he sends a greeting to Timothy at the end of the book in the last chapter, chapter 13. The second thing about the author is that he knows the people to whom he writes. I have already alluded to that. He calls them his brothers in chapter 3:1 and 12, 10:29, and 13:22. He often uses the language of ‘we.’ He knows their experience and their suffering in the past. He is apparently somebody they know very well because he does not have to tell what his credentials are. He does not have to identify himself, which fits with somebody who is well known. When you write to your dear friends, you just say, “Dear so and so,” and maybe you sign your

name and that is about it. On email we do not even always sign our names anymore because the address has our name.

We also know some things about the author's relation with the church, and what kind of a man he was. He was an educated man. If you study Greek you can see that he was a master of the Greek language. His Greek is probably the most sophisticated in the entire New Testament. He uses a huge vocabulary, very intricate structures, both sentence by sentence and also paragraph by paragraph. His allusions loop back from chapter to chapter; he is a very sophisticated writer. He is also someone who knew the Old Testament well. Scan Hebrews and notice how many poetic lines there are. Those are all quotations of the poetic portions of the Old Testament. He was steeped in the Old Testament. He did not just know it or quote it. He worked with, and meditated upon it. He put it to use in ways that hardly anybody had done before. He was inspired by God to see how the Old Testament relates to Christ. And he was a preacher and a friend of Paul.

What caused a man like this to write? We know there was persecution. We know more than simply the fact that there was persecution, though. We know that it was a second round of persecution. We know from Hebrews 10:32, that the first time the Hebrews gladly suffered confiscation of property, identified with those who were being abused, and visited those who were in prison. They were doing very well the first time. The second round is about to get intense. A sign of that is Hebrews 12:4, which says, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." This implies there is a good chance that they will have to resist to the point of shedding blood and this time they are not doing well. Chapter 10:24-25 says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another all the more as you see the day approaching." How can you encourage each other if you do not meet together? Going to church is important and good, but I do not think Hebrews 10:25 is about going to church. For many people, 10:25 is their favorite verse of how important it is to go to church. It is about not giving up, not forsaking assembling together. But Hebrews 10:25 is not about going to church. It is not about people who did not go for a week or two. This is about people who have forsaken the assembly. This is a warning to people who do not want to be identified as a Christian anymore, people who do not want anybody to know, because they are afraid of the consequences. This is not missing once, but rather no longer standing with fellow Christians. This is for people who are thinking of renouncing the faith, of returning to Judaism. They are not able to stand the pressure and it is not hard to see why. At some point these people stagnated as Christians.

In Hebrews 5:11-12 the author is about to launch into a dense theological section, and he knows that his people may not be ready for it. He says, "I would like to go on. We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food." What is their problem? Verse 14 continues, "Solid food is for the mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil." What has happened is that they have lost their ability to listen because they have not been practicing what they already know. You become mature by practicing what you know, by training to become more mature by using what you have. The author is saying that they are losing their ability to pay attention so he cannot go on. He states that they should be teachers, but they are still on milk, and that "anyone who lives on milk, still being an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness."

The Bible uses 'milk' or 'drinking or eating milk' to signify two things. One is good and one is not. The positive significance of milk is that God blesses His people with milk and honey. Milk is pure and

simple. The negative significance of milk implies that you are an infant. Isaiah 28 talks about the drunken priests and prophets of Israel who refuse the instruction of Isaiah. Isaiah 28:7-10 says, "It is beneath them; it is simple food. It is for those who have just been weaned." They have just barely been weaned; they are sickly and weak. Hebrews is saying that they need meat, but like infants, they are not acquainted with righteousness. They still only have milk. What they need to be able to do is eat solid food, but they are not up to it.

Hebrews is written to those who are contemplating returning to Judaism. Why would they do that? Judaism was a religion that was protected by the Roman Empire. The Romans divided up religions within the Roman Empire into two groups, the recognized and the unrecognized religions. A religion that was recognized was called a *religio licita*. Some people say that Judaism was a *religio licita*, a recognized or legal religion. That is not exactly true. *Religio licita* meant that a religion was recognized, officially approved, officially protected, and that their gods were in the Roman Pantheon. The Jews' gods were not in the Pantheon, but they were treated the same way because Judaism had all the features that they were inclined to admire. It was ancient, and the Romans liked ancient things with rich traditions. Another very important reason was that Judaism has lots of adherents. Perhaps as many as three-and-a-half or four million of the 50 million people in the Roman Empire would have called themselves Jews, making it one of the more prominent religions. The Jews were also very feisty, and had a reputation of fighting against emperor worship. One time the Roman guards went to kill the Jews because they would not stop a protest. The guards said, "If you do not disperse at once, we are going to kill you." The Jews all knelt down, bowed their, pulled back their robes, and said, "Go ahead, kill us; we are not leaving." Jews had a reputation for that sort of thing, so they were okay.

Christian Jews were in trouble for being Christians for several reasons. One reason is that Christianity had almost all the features that the Romans did not like. It was new, and growing rapidly. Judaism was big, but it was not growing rapidly. Christianity was intolerant of other religions, something that we see as a virtue, but that Romans thought was terrible. They thought you could be a Christian and worship the emperor too. Christianity caused dissension in the empire, so they were suspicious. There were also reports that the Christians were cannibals because they ate flesh and drank blood. It was thought that they met in the dark to do dark deeds.

Initially, the Christians were regarded as a sect of the Jews and so they were tolerated. After a number of decades passed people began to realize that not all Jews were Christians, and not all Christians were Jews. When they realized that the Christians and Jews did not always agree with each other, the Christians were out of favor.

Hebrews was probably written to Christians who lived in Rome. Some people think it was written to Jerusalem because of the many references to the tabernacle system, the sacrifices and the idea of a coming crisis. They think maybe that was the time when the Roman armies came and crushed the Jewish rebellion in the years 66-68 A.D. It is more likely written for Christians in Rome for a couple reasons. First, there was a persecution in Rome around the right time for this book to be written. Second, there is not any reference in the book to anything that happened in Jerusalem in detail. The references to the Old Testament are not to what actually took place in the temple in the year 60 or 65 A.D., but to the way things were in the year of the tabernacle in the Old Testament law.

Let us suppose that Hebrews was written to Christians at Rome. We are not sure that the persecution we know about from Rome is what is striking that church, but we do know about a persecution from the right time against Christians in Rome. It is the persecution unleashed against the Christians by Nero. The

city of Rome burned in large measure, with about 10 of the 14 precincts of Rome suffering extensive fire damage while Nero was emperor. There is a rumor that Nero stalled while Rome burned. The rumor surfaced almost immediately because although Nero started off well as an emperor, he became very unpopular and very erratic quite early on. Some of the best Roman historians say that orders were given to quench the fire that started, and some people even reported that soldiers were found throwing burning fire brands in the houses. The idea was that Nero, who was a fabulously vain man at this point in his life, wanted to burn Rome in order to have the privilege of rebuilding it and gaining glory for it. The truth is very dubious, because he just finished his palace a few months earlier and it was burned to the ground in the fire. He also did everything he could to help after the fire, building houses, bringing in food, and even giving people money to stop the rumors. Nothing would work, so he decided to use the Christians as a scapegoat. It worked for a while because Christians were new, rapidly growing, secretive, did not go to emperor parties, and were rumored to be cannibals. People did not like them and Nero became more and more vicious. There were almost unspeakable cruelties, to the point that even some of the Romans thought the persecution should stop.

This persecution does fit the attitudes of the Romans and their distaste for the Christians. The attitude of the Romans is shown perfectly in a letter written by a man named Pliny the Younger, because of another famous Roman who was known as Pliny the Older. Pliny the Younger was governor of Bithynia during the period of emperor Trajan whose dates are around 98 to 117 A.D. This letter was written by Pliny, perhaps the year 112, 114 A.D. He is a governor, an important person. He is writing to the emperor for advice. He says, "Lord, Emperor, I refer all questions where I am in doubt to you and here is my question. I have been investigating the Christians, and people who were accused of being Christians have been brought to me. I asked them if they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution, for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserved to be punished." So, people were accusing Christians of being wicked and guilty of something, and they were brought to the governor. The governor asked, "What have you done?" Their answer was, "Nothing, we are just Christians." If he asked them three times and they said three times they are Christians, they were killed, just because they should have realized that the governor did not like that. The mentality of the time was, if the governor does not like it, you should not do it. He did interrogate some Christians, and what he found was that it was their habit to assemble at daylight on a fixed day, and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as God. They bound themselves with an oath not to commit any crime, not to commit theft, robbery, adultery, and not to break their word. After this it was their custom to take food, ordinary and harmless, although they had ceased that as one of the governor's edicts. Pliny also wrote that he took two maid-servants, rumored to be the leaders of the church, into his chambers and tortured them to see if it was true. He could not get anything out of them, except that they promised not to commit any crimes. Pliny said Christianity "was an extravagant and perverse superstition," and he asked the emperor, "Am I on the right track? Killing young men or middle-aged men is no problem, but I feel bad killing old people and women just for being Christians. It does not seem quite right. What do you think, my lord, Emperor? Am I doing what is right or not?" We do not have the answer from Trajan, but this incident gives you a sense of the raw antipathy that was directed towards Christians during this period of time, that could allow them to be persecuted as they were by Nero.

The book of Hebrews is written to Christians who are being persecuted for the second time, and they become weak. They know the Old Testament well. They have been progressing for a while, but are no longer. Now the persecution is coming sharply for the second time, and they are not ready to face it. The question is, what shall they do? Will they try to hide or quickly run away? Will they scurry away as fast

as they can, like a mouse or rodent in a field when the shadow of a hawk passes by? Or will they take the perspective of the fatalist, saying, “This is coming our way, there is nothing we can do about it. We have to suffer.”

When some people see persecution, they take the position of a skeptic: “This proves there is no God. How could a good God allow bad things to happen?” Maybe some of the Hebrews were wondering about that themselves, but most of them were probably thinking, “How can I hide, how can I preserve my life?” That is the situation that Hebrews addresses.

Now what does Hebrews say? Hebrews says that we need a different perspective, the perspective granted by the vision of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. He took flesh and blood, the same flesh and blood that allows us to suffer, He took and He suffered. He was tempted as we are. He was tempted to find an easy way of escape, but He did not do it. He endured to the end. He did not succumb. Nonetheless, He did really face these things, so He sympathizes with us or empathizes with us in our weakness. Hebrews says He gives us grace in time of need, if we turn to Him and ask Him. Even though we fail, He sacrificed Himself to cover our sins, to release us from the one who has the power over us. Like many others who faced persecution, He finished the race and now He awaits us, He awaits you, Hebrews. He awaits us at the finish line. That is the perspective that Hebrews would give us, the perspective to see suffering through the eyes of Jesus Christ.