

Hebrews for Today

Mark Roberts

Introduction:

- A. A young Charles Spurgeon once remarked, “I have a very lively or, rather dead, recollection of a series of discourses on the Hebrews . . . I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the Epistle to themselves, for it sadly bored a poor Gentile lad.”¹
- B. Hebrews is, without doubt, the most useless book in the New Testament.
 - 1. I say that because when one opens most any commentary or article written on Hebrews there is almost endless attention given to questions like authorship, and who the book was written to, and how the O.T. is used in the book and many other issues that fascinate Bible scholars and preachers.
 - 2. *But very little (if anything) is said about what this book means for contemporary Christian living right now.*
 - 3. Indeed, at the outset of most classes in Hebrews we announce this book was written to keep Jewish Christians from returning to Judaism. Yet I have never yet taught Hebrews to even a single Jewish Christian, and especially not to one who was thinking about defecting.
 - 4. If we are honest, the chief arguments we make from Hebrews - that Jesus is superior to Moses, that Christianity is superior to the Law of Moses - are truths that are already accepted by most nearly everyone in our audiences, even denominational friends and neighbors! So why then are we making them?
- C. Is Hebrews the most useless book in the Bible?
 - 1. I don’t believe that, but I fear that the way we teach it may cause many people to sympathize with Spurgeon.
 - 2. It is my privilege to talk with you about what I deem to be the most important topic for preaching and teaching Hebrews: zeroing in on the book’s practical and relevant values. *What does Hebrews mean today?*

Body:

- I. **THE VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM: THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT TEACHING HEBREWS**
 - A. Acts 2:13-15 – let’s start with the listeners!
 - B. **“This book is really hard and complicated.”**
 - 1. Hebrews and Romans are both quickly listed by people as monsters, full of deep theology regular folks can’t understand.
 - 2. Hebrews is tough - notice Hebrews 10:5-9
 - 3. Obstacles to understanding Hebrews:
 - a. It uses the O.T. in a difficult way, unlike any other book in the N.T.
 - b. It does not outline easily.
 - c. It is very difficult to trace out the argument.²

- d. It is full of typology - using persons, institutions and events as types. This is very difficult for modern readers to understand.³
 - e. We are not sure who wrote it, when it was written, or who received it.⁴
4. **Implication 1:** Teaching Hebrews demands we keep things as simple and straightforward as possible. As David Watts said “Let’s put the cookies down where everyone can get them.”
- C. **“I have no idea what this book means to me and my life.”**
- 1. Some books of the Bible immediately present their value (cf. John 20:30-31).
 - 2. Hebrews does not do that. Very few people can immediately identify a relevant, practical value theme that unifies everything in this book. *Can you?*
 - 3. We believe 2 Timothy 3:16-17 means what it says, especially that “all scripture is profitable” part, but we need to take the time to identify Hebrew’s profitability.
 - 4. **Implication 2:** We have got to specifically tie this book to contemporary problems by pointing out its meaning and relevance for disciples today.
- D. **“No one ever talks much about what this books means today.”**
- 1. I read more than twenty different commentaries looking for material on my topic and found next to nothing.
 - 2. An extensive scan of the journals and literature from the last 100 years found little on this as well.
 - 3. Most scholars are too absorbed in the fine points of Hebrews to ever worry if anyone even cares to study it.
 - 4. Earnest Ward Burch, wrote in 1921 that “This epistle can be understood only by first recognizing its intensely practical aim”⁵ but then failed to set out those practical aims!
 - 5. If you find a section in an introduction on “Value for Today” it usually runs like A.W. Pink’s material - break down the book into a few key passages.⁶
 - 6. **Implication 3:** Good news! Be practical and you’ll be unique and you *will* be heard.
- E. How can you be simple and practical with Hebrews? Let me suggest four steps:

II. STEP ONE: STOP NARROWING THE FOCUS.

- A. Most commentaries, workbooks and classes in Hebrews begin?
- 1. “The theme of Hebrews is Christ’s superiority to the old covenant.”⁷
 - 2. “The principal aims of the writer are to establish the superiority of Christ and Christianity (1:1-10:8) . . .”⁸
 - 3. Why do we frame the book in such narrow terms?
- B. Do we do any other book that way? Who would be interested in the following?
- 1. Song of Solomon: “Story of royal courtship rituals in the pre-exilic Israelite monarchy.”
 - 2. “1 Corinthians 8-10 is about eating meats sacrificed to idols.”

3. I want to be true to the original content. I believe the first question we ask of the text is “What did it mean to the original audience?” and without that question we cannot answer the question “What does it mean now?”
 4. But I don’t believe that asking that first question means putting such a tight-fitting title on material that no one can imagine it having any bearing on our lives today.
- C. When we pin Hebrews’ message down so specifically to “Jewish apostasy” or “Christianity is superior to Judaism” we make the audience for the material too small.

III. STEP TWO: INTRODUCE DISCOURAGEMENT AS THE UNIFYING THEME

- A. Discouragement is common to everybody, even preachers!
1. So much the more the Christian who regularly sits in the classroom and auditorium as we teach and preach.
 2. They are in a different world than many of us, in a different place, and for many of them that world and place is terribly discouraging.
 3. Blevins notes “The book is especially designed for Christians on the ‘long road’ leading into the kingdom. Along this road many have grown weary and faith, some have drifted away, and others may have openly denounced their faith.”⁹
 4. Guthrie: “Their experience of persecution and an increasingly blurred picture of Jesus and the Christian faith had led to further drifting from right thinking and right living.”¹⁰
 5. These Christians were wavering, and not just due to Judaism’s past influences.
- B. Hebrews is loaded with material on discouragement and perseverance!
1. 1:1-12: a powerful portrait of Jesus that is very encouraging
 2. 2:1-4: struggle to hold fast against spiritual lethargy
 3. 2:9-14: Jesus suffered, destroyed the work of the devil
 4. 3:7-4:2: don’t fall away like faithless Israel did (note esp. v. 11).
 5. 4:14-5:10: encouragement of Christ’s High Priesthood
 6. Ch. 6: the need to press on and the threat of what happens to those who fall away
 7. Ch. 7: Jesus our great High Priest (encouraging if you understand ch. 4:14ff).
 8. Chs. 8-10: we’re in the better covenant and can enjoy its blessings (like forgiveness of sins)
 9. 11:1-12:1-2: others have persevered you can too!
 10. 12:3-11: trials can work good things in us
 11. 12:12-29: the wrath of God expressed toward quitters
- C. Somehow we have forgotten that Hebrews is a word of “exhortation” (13:22)! People need Hebrews today!

IV. STEP THREE: RE-OUTLINE THE BOOK USING DISCOURAGEMENT AS THEME

- A. The outline of the book sets the tone and pace for your class.
1. I am impressed with various structural motifs and devices as markers to change of thought but believe George Rice’s effort may be the most helpful.

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2. Hebrews is full of warnings about apostasy and discouragement and it is not difficult to organize the material around those ideas. Rice offers an outline based on the passages that speak of apostasy and quitting.¹¹
 3. He argues that there are five main sections in Hebrews that follow a distinctive pattern.
 - a. Teaching - he calls it a “theological expose” which just means the teaching of why forsaking Jesus is unthinkable.
 - b. Followed by a warning.
 - c. Then it is concluded by a statement of judgment.
 4. It all works together to say “Don’t become discouraged, don’t give up, don’t give up on Jesus Christ.”
- B. Rice’s outline (with some adaptation and addition by Mark Roberts)
1. **Discouraged? Listen to Jesus! (1:5-2:4)**
 - a. Teaching (1:5-14): Jesus is the Son of God, elevated to God’s right hand and thus superior to angels
 - b. Warning (2:1): Do not let slip what has been heard and thus drift away from it.
 - c. Judgment (2:1): If disobedience to the message declared by angels received just retribution, how shall one escape who neglects the salvation provided by Him who is greater than angels?
 - d. Questions to explore: Am I listening to Jesus? How do I listen to Jesus?
 2. **Discouraged? Keep an open heart! (2:5-4:13)**
 - a. Teaching (2:5-3:6): Jesus is made like His brethren so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest. As high priest, He is faithful to Him who appointed (like Moses) but Jesus is greater than Moses.
 - b. Warning (3:7-19): Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.
 - c. Judgment (4:1-13): Fear, lest you have failed to enter God’s rest. God’s word knows your heart!
 - d. Questions to explore: What’s the state of my heart? What did a corrupt Israelite heart look like? What would a corrupt heart look like today? What role does fear play in Christianity?
 3. **Discouraged? Grow up and appreciate Jesus your High Priest! (4:14-6:8)**
 - a. Teaching (4:14-5:10): Jesus is the great high priest after Melchizedek. He sympathizes with human weakness and we can draw near with confidence.
 - b. Warning (5:11-6:6): Do not be weak and immature, remaining babes!
 - c. Judgment (6:7-8): As thorns and briars are burned up so judgment awaits those who apostatize!
 - d. Questions to explore: How can I grow? How can spiritual growth be measured? What are signs of spiritual immaturity and weakness?
 4. **Discouraged? Remember God keeps His promises - yes, to save but also to condemn those who are disobedient! (6:9-10:39)**
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- a. Teaching (6:9-10:25): God will fulfill the covenant promises to Abraham through Jesus Christ who is high priest and the mediator of the new covenant.
 - b. Warning (10:26-27): Do not sin deliberately or no more sacrifice for sin remains!
 - c. Judgment (10:27-31): As a man who violated Moses' law died without mercy so he who forsakes Jesus will be condemned by the witnesses against him (1) he has spurned Jesus (2) he has profaned the blood of the covenant and (3) he has outraged the Spirit of grace.
 - d. Secondary judgment (10:32-39): those who draw back into apostasy will be destroyed.
 - e. Questions to explore: How can I forsake Jesus? What does Jesus' priesthood mean for me? What constitutes deliberate sin?
5. **Discouraged? Learn from the example of others who were faithful! (11:1-12:29)**
- a. Teaching (11:1-40): The great people of faith served faithfully and they are cheering on disciples right now.
 - b. Warning (12:1-24): full of warnings and exhortations, e.g. "Do not despise the chastening of the Lord" (vv. 5-6), "Lift up your drooping hands" (v. 12).
 - c. Judgment (12:25-29): As those who were disobedient in ancient Israel did not escape those who are disobedient will not escape the God whose voice will shake earth and heaven to remove all who are disobedient!
 - d. Questions to explore: How do faith and works go together in Hebrews 11? Am I like the faithful in Hebrews 11? Also focus on specific warnings and admonitions.

C. This outline changes how we look at and teach the book of Hebrews!

V. **STEP FOUR: KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING**

A. Let me give you two themes in Hebrews that I believe answer any and every form of discouragement and that keep us centered.

B. **Hebrews 2:9: "So we see Jesus" - look to Jesus!**

1. So many today water down Jesus, so many today don't know Jesus accurately, don't understand His work, who He is.
2. Hebrews clearly sets forth who Jesus is, that attracts us, encourages us to endure.
3. I'm going to show you the Jesus that calls you to persevere! He is God's Son, more powerful than angels, greater than even Moses....
4. I want to look at every chapter and say "What does this say about Jesus? What does this say about Jesus that encourages the downhearted?"

C. "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" - **Show that salvation is found only in fully following Jesus**

1. Hagner: "Hebrews intends to set forth the incomparable superiority and hence finality of God's work in Jesus Christ. Christianity is thus absolute in character and universal in scope. It is nothing less than the fruition of God's intended purposes from the beginning and is indeed the fulfillment of what God spoke 'through the prophets at many times and in various ways.' **This means that turning away from this teaching**

to any other is unthinkable. The answer to any such tendency is an understanding of the true significance of Jesus Christ and what He has accomplished.¹²

2. Guthrie: “The O.T. priest who stands day after day performing religious duties, typifies the futility of **any religious system** which ignores the supremacy of Christ’s work.”¹³
3. We need to set forth clearly from Hebrews that salvation is found only in following Jesus fully, and that excludes denominational versions of Christianity.
4. It’s not found in religions that are “kind of” like Christianity or that “sort of” honor God - that could be said of Judaism.
5. I need to ask: How can I use this material to develop true and total faith in Jesus?

Conclusions:

- A. Spurgeon was wrong about Hebrews. We would be much the worse off if the Hebrews had kept their epistle to themselves.
- B. I hope this material whets your appetite for teaching Hebrews.
 1. Let’s use this book as God’s remedy to discouragement and despair.
 2. Your people are hungry for what God is saying here – let’s go home and give them the word from God found in the book of Hebrews!

Mark Roberts
 3808 Horizon Dr.
 Bedford, TX 76021
 (817) 267-8296 or (972) 986-9131
 robertsmark@sbcglobal.net

Endnotes

¹Quoted in Raymond Brown’s, “The Message of Hebrews,” *The Bible Speaks Today Series*, ed. by John R.W. Stott, IVP Press, Down’s Grove, IL, 1982, p. 20.

²Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 128.

³Jeffrey Sharp, “Typology and the message of Hebrews,” *East Asia Journal of Theology* 4 No. 2, 1986, p. 95.

⁴Donald Hagner, *New International Biblical Commentary*, Hendrickson, 1990, p. 18.

⁵Earnest Ward Burch, “The Homiletical Value of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Methodist Review* 104 July 1921, p. 601.

⁶See A.W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, IC Herenden, publishers, 1954, p. 17ff.

⁷Robert J. Dean, *Hebrews: Call to Christian Commitment*, Convention Press, Nashville, 1985, p. 3.

⁸Ferrell Jenkins, “Better Things, A Workbook on Hebrews,” Florida College Bookstore, 1988, p. 2 citing Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 304.

⁹James L. Blevins, “Preaching and Teaching Hebrews,” *Review and Expositor*, 82 Sum 1985, p. 407.

George Guthrie, “Hebrews,” *NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, 1993, p. 22.

¹⁰George E Rice, “Apostasy as a motif and its effect on the structure of Hebrews,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 Spring 1985, pp. 34-35.

¹¹Donald Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews*, Baker, 2002, pp. 25-26.

¹²Brown 21-22.