



Brown Community Group Discussion Guide

Introduction to Hebrews; Verses 1-4

May 6, 2018

I. Series Starters:

Today we are initiating a new study of the Book of Hebrews. With the success of our last series on John, we will again be using our team teaching approach for this series. We have learned from the last series and are incorporating some new approaches to generate more CG participation, group discussions and less class long lectures. It is all about getting more interactive with class input and wisdom sharing.

We will also be attempting to cover less material each week, to allow for more in depth review and discussion. As we proceed, please feel uninhibited in recommending approaches or techniques we could use to better the series, teaching and our learning of God's Word.

We are now off on a fun and adventurous study with one of the most interesting books in the Bible, Hebrews! It will challenge us, make us think hard and have a lot of prayer to understand what God has instored for us through this series.

II. Introduction to Hebrews

1. Introductory Comments

Some would say the most enigmatic book in the New Testament, a book that is very difficult to interpret and understand. This book has long since been a historical battleground for New Testament Canon, since it is tied directly with the study of Christian origins.

2. Letter or Sermon

The book of Hebrews may actually be the earliest Christian sermon recorded in the New Testament. Some scholars object to this view based on the point that no one sermon could carry such involved theology, nor could any congregation be expected to comprehend so much and such profound thoughts. It is also possible that Hebrews actually represents a series of sermons collected and combined by the author.

Hebrews is beautifully balanced with extreme continuity of discussion, thus it can be strongly argued it is one piece of work as opposed to aggregation of sermons. The author himself calls this a "word of exhortation" in 13:22 and there is nothing in the document itself to indicate that it is a letter.

The long debate might be settled by saying that it was first a sermon to a particular congregation of Palestinian Christians and later sent by the author as a letter to the church at Rome. This gives rich insight into the high literary merit of the early Christian preaching, for it is a masterpiece of the first century Christians prose. It contains the purest and best Greek of the New Testament.

3. Authorship

The oldest manuscripts do not name an author. The first traces of the letter appear in the Western church in A.D. 95, when Clement of Rome wrote to the church at Corinth and quoted passages from Hebrews. Although Clement is writing to Corinth from Rome, he gives no indication that it was written by Paul.

In the first, second and third centuries, the Western Church did not claim it was written by Paul. Several first century writers quoted from Hebrews, respected it highly but never assigned any

authorship to Paul. It sure seems that if the Church at Rome was the first to receive it as a letter, it would seem strange that they would not have acknowledged it as Pauline.

Clement of Alexandria, writing early in the third century, contended that Paul wrote this book in Hebrew and that Luke had translated it to Greek, for he could readily recognize that the Greek of this author was different from that of Paul.

As a whole, the Eastern church accepted Paul as the author and received as such. But there were also several key doubters, such as Origen, who said in A.D. 186 that it appeared to be written by a disciple of Paul since the diction and phraseology are not those of Paul, but someone who may have been taught by Paul.

It is very significant that the Western church did not recognize Paul as the writer until the fourth century. Hebrews is not listed in the Muratorian Fragment, which is a collection of the New Testament books collected by Muratori as one of the earliest collections of Scripture. It was also not listed in the canonical lists through the time of the Eusebius, who was a father of church history and wrote New Testament criticism, who said that the book was questioned at Rome since it was not written by Paul.

Multiple other key writers, Irenaeus (AD 130-200) and Hippolytus (AD 150-222) knew the letter but denied that Paul had written it. Tertullian, the first great Latin father, ascribed it to Barnabas.

Interestingly, the Western Church canon only accepted Hebrews when it assimilated the Eastern canon in the fourth century. Augustine admitted that he only accepted Hebrews as a concession to the Eastern opinion.

Uneasiness also continued during the reformation when several leaders doubted it on literary grounds. Luther later doubted the Pauline authorship on doctrinal grounds and was the first to suggest that Apollos was the author (many believe today that he is the writer). Calvin also thought that Luke was the author, not just the translator into Greek.

The theological arguments against the Pauline authorship are quite convincing:

- Doctrine of Salvation is stated differently
- Concept of faith differs markedly
- The absence of “in Christ” passages
- Careful syntax of the author differs radically from the spontaneity of Paul’s typical writing style

4. Time of Writing

There is no clear historical evidence within the body of Hebrews to assist in setting the exact date of its composition. We can however, state that the outer limits of writings is A.D. 95, since Clement of Rome was already quoting from it in his epistle to Corinth. If one holds that it was written by Paul, then it had to have been before A.D. 64, when his martyrdom took place.

It was definitely written during a time of persecution. Dates seem to suggest a timeframe of between 68 to 70 A.D., when Qumran community had been destroyed and the sacking of Jerusalem had begun.

5. Destination/Recipients

Hebrews was primarily addressed to Jewish converts who were familiar with the OT and who were being tempted to revert to Judaism. These verses apply equally with temptations common to all Christians about growing cold and losing interest. The title of the book means pilgrims or sojourners. In Genesis 14:13, The Hebrew meant “the man from across the river”. We know that the recipients of

Hebrews were second generation of hearers. They were losing some of their original enthusiasm and growing lax in their faith. This drift was finding expression in their antipathy to the church.

6. Purpose

The writer is most obviously concerned with problem of religious drift, waning enthusiasm and the loss of courage and zeal on the part of the early Christian congregations. Let's look at several problems occurring during that time:

- Religious formalism
 - True worship is defined as drawing near to God, but the churches had allowed it to degenerate into the fulfillment of certain acts, rites and ceremonies
 - All worship is inappropriate unless it helps people draw near to God
- Familiarity with divine truth
 - Nothing can be deadlier when we handle the word of God so casually that we lose our understanding
 - Spiritual and intellectual laziness leads to casually addressing the Word of God
 - God's magnificence should never become commonplace; If we begin to drift, then we need to go back and ponder Christ and its meaning to the Christian faith
 - Arouse ourselves and do not let a day pass without deliberately standing in wonder and not taking anything for granted
- Complacency and religious drift
 - Churches were drifting and not pressing on to a fuller maturity
 - The Law was never able to produce perfection. As a Christian, we must constantly live in a dynamic tension between what we currently are versus what we can become
 - Severe persecution had sapped their underpinnings, they were drifting with no moorings
 - Encourages fortitude in the face of persecution
 - Early Christians were disillusioned by their supposed "dragging timeline" of Christ's expected return
 - Ethical compromise also contributed to drift. Christians had assumed that they could be associated with Christ while also conforming to the patterns of their pagan society
 - They were crucifying Christ afresh with their behaviors
 - Clean break of self-commitment was required

In light of the influences toward drifting, there is a four-fold summons for Christians:

- Summons to self-commitment; The symbol of Christianity is the cross, death to self and all that impedes our journey
- Summons to Advancement; Nothing is more damaging to the Christian faith than the thought that we have "arrived at perfection", therefore spending our best energies defending our doctrines and glorifying the present condition of our church.
- Summons to Evangelism; Hearers of the word should be out in a dying world proclaiming Christ
- Summons to a sturdy belief in the reality of the unseen world; When most of our energy is consumed by our endeavor to fortify our brief encampment in the flesh for health and financial security, this is a problem. God deliberately made our journey precarious to constantly remind us that we are pilgrims on this earth. We must keep our focus on our eternal life and the end times.

III. God's Final Word For the Final Age, Introduction Verses, Vs 1-4

¹ "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat

down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Many believe these opening lines to be the most beautiful single passage in the New Testament. Theology of the writer is thoroughly Hebrew. The two basic assumptions of Hebrew theology are that God is and that God has spoken. The source of all authority was in the voice of God.

Christianity begins with the affirmation, God spoke! For the writer of Hebrews, **Christ was God's voice!** What God said partially through each prophet before, He then through Jesus, made known the totality of His character.

Christianity is a religion of revelation. God in his grace takes the initiative. Israel was not like any other nation on the earth. God had given his word personally to Israel and his people with a covenant. The writer is not attempting to destroy the nation's roots, but has deep respect for the traditions of his fathers. The supremacy of Christ was to bring the vine of Israel to its full fruition.

Hebrews gathers Jesus life and work, his birth, teaching, death, and resurrection into a single entity. Through him, God has given us **this full and final word**. Numerous earth shaking and monumental points are made with respect to the "Son of God" in verses 3-4:

1. Appointed heir of all things
2. Everything in the world and heavens were created through Christ
3. Christ fully reflects the glory of God
4. The universe is upheld by the power of his word
5. Only Jesus purifies sins
6. He sat at the right hand of God
7. Christ is above all heavenly beings

IV. Group Discussion Questions:

1. In Point 6 of the Purpose section, Discuss how Christians can become "disillusioned" if we focus on our own timeline and expectations as opposed to waiting on the Lord's?
2. In Point 6 of the Purpose section, Discuss how Christians can find themselves drifting away by absorbing or accepting ethics or norms of the society we live? What happens when we try to have it both ways? The ways of God and the ways of the World?
3. Have you caught yourself looking back and thinking that you have spiritually "arrived"? Do you think older Christians have a tendency to feel "satisfied spiritually"? Do we find ourselves constantly pushing for more maturity?
4. Have our actions, functions, motions or rituals taken over as the most important items as opposed to the worship of God? Should we be concerned or notice when they have replaced our God?
5. Why do we at times begin to put things on "cruise control" for enjoying this life and essentially lose focus on the eternal life God desired?

