Course Study Guide

NT226
1 Timothy-Hebrews: Letters to Pastors & to a Church Struggling to Believe

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Lesson 1 Study Guide

NT226

1 Timothy-Hebrews: Letters to Pastors & to a Church Struggling to Believe

1 Timothy- Titus:
Three Letters to Two Pastors

Updated 2014
Objectives

Lesson One surveys the three pastoral epistles, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. These epistles, written to instruct young pastors, are rich in practical principles for godly living and church leadership and ministry.

When you complete this lesson, “1 Timothy – Titus: Three Letters to Two Pastors,” you should be able to:

- Discuss the authorship and dating issues associated with these epistles and establish an informed opinion on this controversy.
- Name and explain the concerns that led Paul to write each of the pastoral epistles.
- List qualities God requires in church leaders.
- Discuss themes and outlines of each book.

Scripture Reading

Read 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus.
Transcript

Course Title: 1 Timothy—Hebrews: Letters to Pastors & to a Church Struggling to Believe

Lesson One: 1 Timothy—Titus: Three Letters to Two Pastors

I. Introduction to Pastoral Epistles

Finally we come to the last three epistles in the New Testament that are attributed to the apostle Paul. Just as we looked at the Prison Epistles as a group in the last lesson, so now we want to look at these remaining three letters, often called the Pastoral Epistles, as a group. They are so called because Paul is writing two letters to Timothy and one to Titus, each of whom is functioning as a pastor in his local setting, Timothy pastoring the church that Paul had founded years earlier in Ephesus and Titus pastoring the church on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea.

A. Authorship of Pastoral Epistles

As we noted with Ephesians, and to a certain degree with some scholars with Colossians as well, there have been significant questions in many scholars’ minds about the authenticity of these three letters. Did Paul really write them, notwithstanding the appearance of his name in the opening verse of each of the three epistles? There are three particular concerns that have led to these questions. First of all, the language and literary style of the Pastoral Epistles, very much like itself as one compares 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, is on the other hand quite distinct from the language, vocabulary, and style of the remaining epistles attributed to Paul in the New Testament.

Secondly, there seems to be a different doctrinal focus and different milieu in which these letters are written. Repeatedly, the writer enjoins his audience to fight the good fight, to cling to sound doctrine, to be faithful to the truths, to the deposit of faith, that they have already been instructed in against a variety of forms of false teaching. Here is an atmosphere that has developed institutional offices—bishops, overseers, specific addresses to deacons, to widows who are to be enrolled in a church registry for financial support, commands to older and younger people—that suggest a more institutionalized form of Christianity that one naturally associates with a later generation, after the younger, more charismatic, origins of the church have begun to solidify.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, there is no natural place in the narrative of Acts to place these three letters. Clearly, 1 and 2 Timothy, addressed to Timothy in Ephesus, take place after the foundation of that church, after Paul’s ministry there. But 1 Timothy reflects Paul traveling as a free person, whereas in the book of Acts after Paul leaves Ephesus he sails directly for Jerusalem and does never again appear in the pages of Acts as a free man.

Titus, who is leading the church at Crete in the letter addressed to him, obviously is there after some period of time leading to the establishment of a Christian congregation, but there
is no evidence from the book of Acts that a Christian church ever existed—even in Acts 27 on those brief stops as part of Paul’s shipwreck voyage to Rome—in that particular island. So it would seem that we would have to date these three letters to some period after the narrative of the book of Acts. Understandably then, a majority of critical scholars believe these letters are pseudonymous; that is, written under Paul’s name—not out of any intent to deceive, but perhaps acknowledging Paul as the master or authority figure from the writer’s past Christian experience, but written to a new generation, applying Pauline truths into new contexts. There is, however, no clear evidence that the early church ever accepted the practice of pseudonymity, common though it was in other Jewish and Greco-Roman documents, as something that was permitted in books which they accepted as canonical.

We may have to turn to different kinds of explanations to account for these differences in the Pastoral Epistles. As we mentioned with the letter to the Ephesians, Paul may have been using a different scribe or amanuensis. He may have given that scribe greater literary freedom. The fact that he is addressing private individuals, rather than churches and the distinctive nature of the false teachings that he has to address, may account for other differences in vocabulary and content.

B. Date of Pastoral Epistles

As for the question of date, conservative scholars have usually appealed to early church tradition as old as the testimony of Clement, which claims that Paul did in fact receive release from his Roman imprisonment, with which the book of Acts ends, and proceed to carry on further ministry, during which time he could very easily have penned both 1 Timothy and Titus. 2 Timothy, which finds Paul in prison again, then may actually reflect a second imprisonment in Rome distinct from those from that period that led to the writing of the so-called Prison Epistles that we surveyed in the last lesson. This would still have had to have taken place sometime before the death of Nero in 68 and the end of that first persecution of Christians in and around Rome. So while we cannot be any more specific, 1 Timothy and Titus probably issue from sometime during the years 62 to 64, or perhaps slightly later, after the onset of the Neronic persecution, and 2 Timothy from sometime slightly later in that period, but before A.D. 68.

II. Titus

We have no way of determining which order Paul wrote Titus and 1 Timothy in, during this period of new-found, though short-lived release from imprisonment. So we will begin with the briefer of the two letters, Titus, and then proceed to some comments on 1 Timothy.

A. Introduction

As we have mentioned, while Paul is free he is writing to Titus, who is pastoring the church in Crete. And the implications we get is that this is a relatively new and not yet very mature congregation, dealing with some kind of heresy, perhaps not too different from the false teaching Paul has had to combat at Colosse or nearby Ephesus. The analysis of his letter is quite simple; in the three short chapters he begins with greetings in 1:1-4—omits the
thanksgiving (only the second time, following the book of Galatians, which was the first time that we have seen Paul omit this thanksgiving—again to stress the severity of the problem that he has to address).

B. Instructions

The body of the letter, from 1:5-2:15 then, can be outlined as instructions for various groups in the church. First of all, he begins by addressing elders, also called overseers, especially in 1 Timothy. His criteria for this head position of church leadership are amplified in 1 Timothy, and we shall make some comments about them there. Verses 10-16 then combat the issue of the false teachers that Titus and his church have to face, and apparently there is a significant ascetic or world-denying tendency to this false teaching, as we have seen elsewhere. Paul’s main rebuttal, in 1:15, is that the Cretan church shun such asceticism. Simply denying the body normal bodily appetites may, at times, promote a certain kind of spirituality, or at least the perception of such, but is not in and of itself anything foundational or crucial to the Christian faith, and can actually lead people astray from true spiritual behavior.

Chapter 2:1-8 turn to instructions for men and women of various ages. As in Ephesians and Colossians, it is clear that there is a certain patriarchal or hierarchical nature to these commands, although it is perhaps important to note that in the passage in verse 5, in which women are commended to be good “home-workers,” the word that is used is not a similar Greek word that simply meant to stay at home, but a word in which the emphasis was on work. Even up to as recently as a couple of hundred years ago in contemporary civilization, the home was often much more an integrated workplace where either husband or wife or both could do their respective occupations.

Verses 9-10 of chapter 2 very briefly address slaves, much as we have seen in the domestic codes of Ephesians and Colossians; and verses 11-15 then enunciate the particular rationale, for these conclusions. Although verses 5, 8, and 10 have all pointed out how fitting in with certain cultural conventions of the day actually promotes the spread of the Gospel and avoids putting unnecessary obstacles in front of the preaching of Christ and His message, this is not simply cultural accommodation that Paul is describing here. Verses 11-15 sum up an even more fundamental reason for following proper role relationships: These things are good in and of themselves, and what God requires.

C. Concluding Exhortations

Chapter 3 comprises the concluding exhortations of Paul’s epistle. They include in verse 5 an important reference to the deity of Christ, and in verses 9-11 an interesting reminder that factiousness, much as we saw at Corinth, can be an extremely problematic issue for Christian congregations. Ironically, factiousness itself is one of the few clearly defined, scripturally excommunicaible offenses. If someone simply refuses to cooperate with the majority of church members, it may be better for that person to leave and go elsewhere.
D. Application

Today there are, of course, many debates over the roles of men and women and older people and younger people. Slavery, for the most part, has been overthrown. And undoubtedly, Titus, like Ephesians and Colossians, will raise many difficult questions in contemporary readers’ minds about the specifics of application. What is clear, and very significant for applying a short letter like Titus today, however, is its call on all Christians to submit to one another—to God’s will and God’s plan for their lives. We, particularly in the West, who have a legacy of radical individualism and a focus on human rights, often have a particularly hard time coming to grips with this fundamental component of the Gospel that in Christ we relinquish our rights for the sake of others.

III. First Timothy

First Timothy, which is extremely similar in many respects—both style and content—to Titus, is nevertheless longer and expands on several of the same themes raised there as Paul writes Timothy in Ephesus. Again, there clearly is false teaching that has to be addressed, and perhaps even more clearly than in Titus we can see elements very similar to what we identified at Colosse—elements of both a Judaizing and a Gnosticizing tendency.

A. False Teachers

After the introduction, Paul goes on to elaborate the reason for this letter throughout chapter 1, and encourages Timothy to stand fast against the false teaching in Ephesus. The hints that we pick up from this opening chapter demonstrate the twofold theological tendencies of the heresy in Ephesus. The reference to the misuse of the law in verses 8-11 almost certainly is a reference to Judaizing, as probably are the references to the myths and genealogies of verses 4-5. Nevertheless, later in the letter, 4:1-5 will talk about those who are forbidding marriage, something very few if any Jews have ever done, given their high respect for that institution. And 6:20 at the close of the letter will talk about those who follow what is falsely called “knowledge”—the Greek word gnosis, from which we derive “Gnosticism.” Whether or not this is full-blown Gnosticism, it at least seems to be pointing in that direction, with its more ascetic and world-denying tendencies. Verses 18-20, then, succinctly state the purpose of the epistle: to fight the good fight and not be like those who fell into the heresy and are having to be disciplined.

B. Control over Worship

The rest of 1 Timothy may be seen as a series of methods by which Paul encourages Timothy to counter this particular false teaching. The first method, which occupies 2:1-3:16, is to exercise careful control over church worship and leadership. Chapters 2 and 3 contain undoubtedly the most disputed, but also the most interesting passages, in all of the Pastoral Epistles. Towards the end of chapter 2, we read about proper role relationships for men and women in the church. Men are to pray—decently, and not quarreling—as apparently some have been. But more significant and lengthy comments are addressed to the women. After comments about their appearance and dress, the most problematic and talked about verses begin in 2:11, through the end of that chapter.
C. Women Learners

Women are to learn in silence and with all submission. It is important here to recognize that the only command—that is, the only verb in the imperative mood in this passage—is the statement that women are to learn: They must learn. That in itself was countercultural enough, even in the Greco-Roman world, although more wealthy women often had access to education. But they comprised a very tiny percentage of the society. In the Jewish world, it was extremely uncommon for a young girl to be given any chance to be educated in the way that boys were. We’re reminded of Jesus’ behavior with Mary and Martha when he praises Mary’s desire to be a learner. The words for “silence” and “submission” are those that are used elsewhere in 1 Timothy (compare, for example, 2:2) to refer to a respectful and cooperative demeanor, not to absolute silence and never talking.

D. Women Teachers

Verse 12, however, becomes even more problematic and controversial, as Paul says that he does not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over men. The word here translated “exercise authority” is found nowhere else in Scripture, and in some other Greek contexts may carry the more negative sense of “to domineer,” or “to exercise authority improperly”—in which case, then, this does not become a timeless prohibition of women teaching men. If, in fact, it does refer to the more neutral and more general sense of exercising authority, there is also the interesting phenomenon that throughout 1 Timothy 2 in almost every verse Paul uses a pair of words to refer to one particular function. In other words, two terms mutually define one another, leading to one concept. This is a well-known ancient rhetorical device called hendiadys, from the Greek words for one through two. If this is what is going on in 1 Timothy 2:12, then teaching and exercising authority are not two separate functions, but help to explain one another.

Women, on this interpretation, in the church at Ephesus may teach—presumably in a variety of contexts, including over men—but are not to teach in the role that is recognized as the authoritative teaching role. The attraction of this interpretation is that, in chapter 3, the very next passage that Paul deals with, discusses the criteria for the overseers or elders, those who among the criteria for that office, had to have the ability to teach; whereas in 5:17 elders are given a supervisory function, and although a different word is used than in chapter 2, it refers again to their exercise of authority. It would appear that what set the elders or overseers off from the deacons, or indeed from the church as a whole, is this twin function of teaching in an authoritative fashion.

Paraphrasing, then, perhaps what Paul is saying in 2:12 is that he does not permit women to be elders, or to be overseers. That does seem to be the fairest view in light of the entire data from Acts in the Pauline corpus about what women did or did not do elsewhere in the first Christian churches. It still leaves, however, entirely open the question of whether this is a timeless mandate or not. Some today, for example, would argue that women were involved in the teaching of the heresy, which Paul is clearly combating at Ephesus; and, therefore, the timeless application of 1 Timothy 2:12 is that women, and presumably men, should never be allowed to teach heresy. Others, particularly appealing to the immediate context of verses 13 and 14
that seem to refer back to the way God made things—a creation ordinance—and the way things took place at the time of the Fall—who sinned first—believe that Paul is giving more timeless teaching here, prohibiting women from at least the highest offices of Christian ministry.

E. Leadership Criteria

Whichever view one takes, chapter 3 certainly does proceed to deal with the criteria for offices under the headings of the “elder” and “overseer,” also translated as “bishop,” and secondly, “deacon.” Although in the history of the church many different terms have been applied to a variety of offices of leadership, a plausible case can be made that at least throughout the New Testament no more than these two primary offices are distinguished, going back all the way to the precedent set in Acts 6 of the apostles who are concerned primarily with the spiritual leadership of the church and those ad hoc leaders of the Christian Hellenistic Jewish community there who were called upon “to serve,” using the verb of the same root that would later create the noun “deacon,” or “servant.”

It is interesting that in this context of 1 Timothy 3 there is reference to women. Some translations call these women “deacons’ wives,” but the Greek word is simply the word for “women,” and it may equally plausibly be translated as “deaconsesses.” We do know from church history that for the first several centuries after the first century women were regularly in the office of deaconess, not always with the identical role of male deacons, and at times with privileges that were excluded to men—privileges that involved ministering to, counseling, and aiding in the baptism of women. It’s at least arguable that men in leadership in the church today might fall into temptation a little bit less if we cultivated the role of women’s ministry with other women a bit more zealously.

The other major controversy surrounding the criteria for office holders in 1 Timothy 3 involves the criteria that both overseer and deacon be “husbands of one wife.” Does this mean that they can never have been married twice, excluding a widower who has remarried? This was the dominant interpretation in the early centuries of church history, and yet very quickly Christianity was corrupted, particularly in the area of sexual ethics, by an unbiblical Hellenism, and even Gnosticism, that denied the legitimacy of sexual relations in their appropriate spheres. The minority view in the ancient church and the other one which should probably be seriously considered today is that these expressions mean that the individual in question was very loyal and committed to his or her family, if married. It does not rule out the possibility of a second marriage, not even on grounds of divorce. It makes no sense to say that “the husband of one wife” can mean someone who has remarried because they have lost a spouse to death, but not if they had lost a spouse to divorce. Whether or not it is appropriate for someone who has been divorced not on biblically legitimate grounds is, however, another matter of greater controversy.

F. Godliness, Proper Respect, and Warnings

Chapter 4 then proceeds to the second method that Timothy is called upon to use to combat the false teaching in Ephesus: namely, to enjoin true godliness rather than asceticism. Chapter 5:1-6:2 introduces a third method: proper respect and rules for various other categories of
people in the church. And 6:3-21 conclude the letter with warnings, particularly against the influence of wealth. Here we are reminded that the impoverishment of the early Christian church, particularly in Judea, did not uniformly carry over to other wings of the church. Indeed, even the lavish dress with which some of the erring women of chapter 2 are described would have been something possible only for the very well-to-do of that particular culture. Riches are a temptation, and 1 Timothy 6:10 has frequently been quoted and also misquoted. The correct translation is “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” Note that Paul does not say money is the root of all evil, nor even that the love of money is the root of all evil, but is a root of all kinds of evil. Notwithstanding these cautions against mistranslating the verse, it is clear that Paul again has to enjoin contentment with whatever God grants one, recognizing the lures to move away from God and dependence on Him that wealth often brings.

IV. Second Timothy

A. Introduction

The final Pastoral Epistle, 2 Timothy, is presumably the last epistle that Paul ever wrote. He has now been imprisoned, he realizes that his death is very near (see especially 4:6), and he is writing his last will and testament of sorts, his final charge to his young son in the faith, Timothy, encouraging him to pass it on, to carry the torch of Christian faith after Paul has passed from this scene.

B. Analysis

Chapter 1:1-18 give greetings, give the conventional thanksgiving, and are a memorial to Timothy’s faithfulness—and indeed the faith, both Christian and Jewish, that lived in his mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice, preceding him. Chapter 2:1-26 forms the heart of the body of the letter, speaking of the commitment which faith requires. And if we had to summarize the lesson of 2 Timothy in one verse, we would probably want to turn to chapter 2:2: “These things that you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses commit, or entrust, to faithful people who will be able to teach others also.” In other words, keep the chain of Christian leadership unbroken. What Paul has taught Timothy, he must teach others and prepare them to teach others. It is a reminder that Christianity in any given location is never more than one generation away from extinction.

Chapter 3:1-17 describes the godlessness that has arisen, and will continue to arise, that Timothy must stand firm against. In this context appear the famous verses, 3:16-17, about both the divine inspiration and relevance of Scripture in this battle. And 4:1-22 give Paul’s final charge to Timothy, just as he commanded him in a previous letter to fight the good fight, Paul now reminds him that he has, in fact, fought the good fight, the noble contest. His life is being poured out as a drink offering, but he is prepared to meet Christ with confidence and to leave Timothy in charge of the church at Ephesus, believing that it is in good hands there.
Discussion Questions

In your opinion, what did 1 Timothy 2:11-14 mean for the role of women in the context for which it was written (i.e., the church at Ephesus which Timothy was leading)? In your opinion, what are the implications of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 for the role of women in the church today?

Why did Paul teach against asceticism? What danger(s) did he see in it?

First Timothy 6:10 contains the often misquoted verse about money. In your opinion, what is Paul teaching in 1 Timothy 6:3-10? How can you apply this teaching in your life today?
Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:


Read Chapter 66: “Hope for the Future, Help for Today” (Titus)

**Philip Yancey Devotional**  
**Growing Pains - 1 Timothy 1:1–2:7**

I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight. (1 Tim. 1:18)

The role of women in the church, a Christian’s relationship to society, fund-raising techniques, social welfare programs, materialism, order of worship—the list could describe the agenda for a modern-day denominational convention. But the apostle Paul was already addressing these issues in the first century, just a few decades after Jesus’ life on earth.

Actually, the problems discussed in 1 Timothy represent growing pains. For example, out of Christian compassion Christians had extended help to needy widows. But before long, some members with a “welfare mentality” saw the widows’ list as an easy way to avoid financial responsibility for their families. In 1 Timothy, Paul outlines a form of “enrollment” to establish who was truly needy.

These and other problems were afflicting the church at Ephesus where Timothy now served as pastor. The church had grown and thrived despite intense opposition from within that secular city. The letter to the Ephesians was one of Paul’s happiest, but now, almost ten years after his visit to Ephesus, Paul has learned of major troubles brewing. The time had come for older churches to get organized and to bring some order to their worship and outreach programs. Otherwise, they would drift toward endless division and disagreement.

For that thankless job, Paul turned to his trusted companion Timothy. Given his shyness and his half-Jewish/half-Gentile ancestry, Timothy did not seem the ideal choice for a heresy fighter in a turbulent church. But Paul was convinced he could do the job. “I have no one else like him,” Paul once wrote of Timothy. “As a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (Philippians 2). Through disturbances, riots, and even into prison, Timothy had loyally accompanied the apostle. Despite a weak stomach and timid disposition, Timothy had proved his mettle to Paul in many ways, and Paul wrote this letter to encourage him in a difficult task.

Life Question: Do you have any personality traits that make Christian service seem difficult?
Glossary

**Crete** — A large island in the Mediterranean Sea. Lying southeast of the Greek mainland, it forms the southern boundary of the Aegean Sea, together with Cythera on the northwest and Carpathos and Rhodes on the northeast. It is about 156 miles from west to east and varies from eight to thirty-five miles in breadth.
Quiz

1. A clear application from the letter to Titus for today is:
   A. To be prepared for one’s death
   B. For Christians to submit to one another
   C. For women to refrain from the highest church offices
   D. For all Christians, including women, to exercise their gifts

2. A key phrase for 2 Timothy is:
   A. Priesthood of believers
   B. God is light
   C. Day of the Lord
   D. Be faithful—pass it on

3. First Timothy and Titus were apparently written:
   A. During Paul’s third missionary journey
   B. During Paul’s first imprisonment
   C. After Paul’s first imprisonment
   D. During Paul’s second imprisonment

4. This church office gets its name from the verb “to serve”:
   A. Deacon
   B. Overseer
   C. Elder
   D. Bishop

5. What does Paul teach about the love of money in 1 Timothy?
   A. It is only permitted if one is generous with the money.
   B. It is a sign of ungodliness.
   C. It is a root of all kinds of evil.
   D. It is not a sin, as long as love for God is stronger.

6. What was Timothy doing when Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to him?
   A. Serving as Paul’s representative in Corinth
   B. Pastoring the church in Ephesus
   C. Pastoring the church in his hometown of Lystra
   D. Finishing the collecting for the saints in Jerusalem

7. Who is Titus?
   A. The leader of the church in Crete
   B. One of Paul’s traveling companions
   C. The leader of the church in Ephesus
   D. A well-known Judaizer
8. Which is **not** a main theme in 2 Timothy?
   A. Remember that salvation is by faith, not by works.
   B. Paul has fought the good fight and is prepared for death.
   C. Keep the chain of Christian leadership unbroken.
   D. Use the Scriptures to gain spiritual maturity.

9. Which of the following is **not** true of 1 Timothy and Titus?
   A. They are written in a very similar style.
   B. They both address false teaching.
   C. They both have lengthy and controversial passages about women.
   D. They both give specific instructions about church offices.

10. Which was **not** one of Paul’s methods for countering heresy in 1 Timothy?
    A. Be cautious not to allow young men into pastoral roles.
    B. Keep careful control over church worship and leadership.
    C. Practice true godliness rather than asceticism.
    D. Have proper respect and rules for various other categories of people in the church.

Lesson 2 Study Guide

NT226
1 Timothy-Hebrews: Letters to Pastors & to a Church Struggling to Believe

Hebrews: The Struggle to Believe in Jesus

Updated 2014
Objectives

This lesson guides you through a study of Hebrews. Like Romans, Hebrews is a crucial book of doctrine. The author explains to Jewish Christians why, when they already have a religion from God, they should adopt Jesus as their Christ and follow His teachings.

When you complete this lesson, “Hebrews: The Struggle to Believe in Jesus,” you should be able to:

• Discuss similarities and differences between the literary form of Paul’s letters and the form in Hebrews and the general epistles.

• Explain various ways Hebrews presents Jesus as superior to any other religious person, practice, or belief.

• List and explain the Jewish distinctions found in Hebrews.

• Grow in your love for and worship of Jesus Christ, God’s ultimate statement to humanity.

Scripture Reading

Transcript

Course Title: 1 Timothy—Hebrews: Letters to Pastors & to a Church Struggling to Believe

Lesson Two: Hebrews: The Struggle to Believe in Jesus

I. Introduction

We have now completed our survey of the epistles attributed to Paul in the New Testament and proceed in this lesson to the epistle to the Hebrews. As we mentioned in our opening survey of the contents of the New Testament, from Hebrews on through the remaining epistles we do not find precisely the same literary form as in the epistles of Paul. The model of the five-part outline of a Greco-Roman letter does not appear to be followed as closely, and in some instances not very closely at all. It would appear that in these non-Pauline epistles of the New Testament various other literary and rhetorical devices combined with the mere sending of a conventional letter.

A. Form

If we look at the epistle to the Hebrews, we see nothing at the beginning to suggest a letter form at all. There are no greetings. There is no announcement of who the author of the letter is; in fact, no such announcement appears anywhere in the epistle. There is no thanksgiving or prayer. But when one turns to the end of this book, one does see the typical greetings that a Greco-Roman letter would have ended with. So it appears that we have some kind of hybrid form. A clue to what the writer of this book, traditionally called an epistle, was doing appears in the closing verses of the epistle in Hebrews 13:22, where a writer refers to what he has just penned as the “word of exhortation.” The only other place that this phrase appears in the New Testament is in Acts 13:15, when Paul refers back to the sermon that he is giving in Pisidian Antioch. That, too, is referred to as a word of exhortation. It may well be, therefore, that we are to understand the writer to the Hebrews as composing a sermon, or a homily of some kind, in written form. And, of course, because it was sent as a piece of mail, we can think of it as a kind of letter or an epistle as well.

B. People Addressed

Like all of the titles that we find to books of the New Testament, the original autographs or manuscripts did not include them; but the earliest existing copies that we are aware of, the earliest traditions about this letter, are that it was addressed to a group of people known simply as the Hebrews. Almost certainly this refers to Jewish Christians rather than non-Christian Jews, but there is no doubt that the book is replete with references to the Old Testament—prophecies and other passages that are believed to be fulfilled in one form or another in Christ—and allusions to the major themes and characters and institutions of Judaism, right throughout the entire letter.

There are also various hints, language, theme, styles that are used, such as comparing the
things of this world to heavenly archetypes or using rather obscure Jewish characters, such as the high priest Melchizedek—himself originally not even a Jew, although prominent in Genesis when Abraham pays him a tithe as priest of Salem, the city that later would become Jerusalem. These somewhat more obscure references have suggested to many writers that perhaps the Jews who became Christians, to whom this writer is addressing himself, came out of various sectarian backgrounds. The Hellenistic Jew, Philo, who tried to combine Greek philosophy with Jewish thought, has a number of parallels to the thought world and worldviews of the book of Hebrews. And the Essenes, that we know now so well from the Qumran literature, the Dead Sea scrolls, made a lot of Melchizedek while he otherwise did not figure prominently in Jewish writing. So it may be that at least some of the Jews come from one of these more Hellenistic or more sectarian Jewish backgrounds.

C. Authorship

The author of the letter, as we have just mentioned, is anonymous. There is no claim anywhere in one of the verses of the epistle as to who was its writer. In the early centuries of church history, Roman Catholics often equated the writer with Paul, particularly because the apostolic authorship, and therefore canonicity of the book, could easily, then, be justified. On the other hand, there are no other letters that tradition has ever attributed to Paul which he did not personally sign and did not include a reference to his name in the opening verses.

And there are passages, 2:3 in particular, that make it rather clear that the author of this epistle is a second-generation Christian, someone who is getting his information secondhand rather than directly from having spent time with Jesus or having encountered the risen Lord, as Paul so adamantly stresses elsewhere was his experience. In the early church, then, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox wing, there were numerous other suggestions that were made about the author of this letter. Such suggestions included Luke, Barnabas, and Clement of Rome.

In more recent centuries, Martin Luther made famous the suggestion that perhaps Apollos was the author of this letter. He, too, was a Hellenistic Jew turned Christian, known for his wisdom and philosophy, and the combination of concepts found in this epistle might well be accounted for by understanding Apollos to have been the author. Others in more recent years have suggested still other companions of Paul such as Silas, Philip, and even Priscilla, if in fact the anonymity of the letter might be accounted for if the author were a woman but wishing to disguise that information lest the letter seem less credible or authoritative in a patriarchal world.

If we want to be completely honest, however, we would probably do best to follow the commentator in approximately the year 200, the Hellenistic Jewish Christian Origen, who said only God knows who the true author is. Nevertheless, all of the suggestions that have been made—ancient and modern—do place the author, if not Paul himself, as someone who was a close companion of Paul, thus fulfilling the criterion for canonicity of someone who emerged from the apostolic generation with a link to one of the apostles.
D. Destination and Date

The information that we do get at the very end of the letter does suggest that the author is writing to Jewish Christians in the city of Rome. In 13:24, he writes, “Those from Italy send greetings”; and this naturally is explained if the writer is somewhere else with some Christian companions from the Roman church and these companions are sending their greetings back to their friends and Christian compatriots in Rome. There are two other hints in the closing chapters of the letter that reinforce this setting. In 12:4, the author speaks to his audience as those who have not yet shed blood as martyrs for the cause of Christ. This would suggest that the author recognizes that persecution is increasing, and they may yet have to become martyrs for their faith. This would fit a setting in Rome right at the very beginning of the Neronic persecution in approximately A.D. 64, or perhaps just prior to that date.

This would also make good sense, then, of the reference in 10:32-34 of a previous time when the Jewish Christians—on this interpretation, in Rome—experienced the confiscation of their property, and yet were able to respond with a measure of joy. Claudius’ expulsion, which we alluded to in our introduction to the letter of the Romans, in A.D. 49, would fit this reference very naturally. The Jews who had to leave Rome would not have been able to keep the titles to their property, but these were turned over to the state under Claudius’ reign. We suggest, therefore, that the best interpretation of the letter to the Hebrews is that an anonymous follower of Paul is writing to a Jewish Christian wing, perhaps even one specific house church, as part of the larger congregation of Roman Christians in or around the year A.D. 64.

E. Purpose

The main purpose for his writing is to prepare his audience for increasing persecution against the Christian believers there, and to call them to stand fast against the temptation that would have been very natural in the first century—namely, for Christians who came from a Jewish background to revert back to pure Judaism. You see, this was that period in early Christian history when, for the first time, Roman emperors clearly began to recognize that Christianity was becoming something much more than just a Jewish sect. Jews still enjoyed the freedom to worship God following their own laws and the exemption from having to honor the emperor with any kind of a sacrifice that would impinge on the Jewish belief in one God alone.

As soon as Nero, and other emperors following him, recognized that Christianity was becoming predominantly a Gentile religion and therefore much more than a Jewish sect, Christians were no longer exempt from these laws and no longer given the privileges that Jews had received. The whole outline or structure of the epistle to the Hebrews, therefore, is one of comparing Christ, and the revelation that He brought, to all the various institutions and figures prominent in Jewish history—to make the claim that Christ was supreme over everything else, short of God the Father Himself, that Jews might be tempted to exalt and therefore to fall back on in some kind of reversion away from clear confessing of Christianity to the Judaism of their origin.
II. Superiority of Christ’s Person (1:1-4:13)

The letter begins, in 1:1-4, with a lofty prologue emphasizing the full deity of Jesus Christ as clearly as any other portion of the New Testament. He is the exact representation of the Father—the mirror image, we might say.

A. Superior to the Angels

And then the body of the letter begins in 1:5 with a series of comparisons of Christ to many important Jewish figures and institutions. The first of these, that occupies the writer’s attention from 1:5-2:18, is Christ’s superiority even over the angels. Angels had become the focus of much interesting Jewish speculation, especially during the intertestamental period, and especially at Qumran among the Essenes. The first point that the writer makes about Christ’s supremacy over the angels is that He is more sovereign, He is more lofty, He has greater grandeur and majesty than even the angels.

This point he makes by stringing together a series of Old Testament quotations in 1:5-14. And here, as throughout the epistle, one has to understand many of the writer’s uses of the Old Testament, not as straightforward predictions with their later fulfillments but as various forms of typology, as we discussed in our introduction to the birth narratives of Jesus. Patterns of God’s redemptive action throughout history are repeated in striking ways in the events surrounding Jesus’ life and ministry that enable a very Jewish writer to say the Old Testament passages have been “filled full,” another legitimate meaning in that age of the concept of fulfillment. Another distinctive of the letter to the Hebrews is that after each main theological affirmation the writer moves immediately into exhortation, rather than saving all of his commands for one connected section toward the end of the epistle.

Chapter 2:1-4, therefore, move into the first of these exhortational sections, warning the audience of this letter that if the revelation that came by means of angels—a reference to the Mosaic law, following certain Jewish traditions—was so important, then the revelation that came through Christ, who is superior to the angels, must be followed that much more closely. After this brief exhortation, the writer continues his comparison of Christ to the angels; this time, however—somewhat more strikingly—speaking not of Christ’s superiority in sovereignty, but of His superiority in suffering. Christ, as one who became fully man (something that angels never did), was therefore qualified to be the one who died for the sins of the world, and therefore did what Adam and his descendants had never successfully done—namely, bore the image of God, as described in Psalm 8 (which figures prominently in this section), completely and completely perfectly exercising the dominion over humanity that was part of the charge given to Adam and Eve originally in Genesis 1. Christ’s superiority, therefore, in completing the atonement, means that we are free from sin and free from the fear of death, which verses 14-18 stress.

B. Superior to Moses

The second major comparison the letter to the Hebrews develops is between Christ and Moses—Moses, the one who gave the law at Sinai, and therefore clearly very prominent in Jewish history. Chapter 3:1-4:13 develops this comparison. Here the theological section, the
expositional material, is quite brief, chapter 3:1-6. Moses was faithful within his house, but
Christ was faithful as the builder of the house, as the creator of the universe. Clearly Christ is
supreme, therefore, even over Moses.

The main portion of this comparison, however, is the exhortational material that proceeds,
beginning in 3:17 and continuing all the way over to 4:13. Here the main point the writer
makes is that we must not rebel like those who supposedly were following Moses, a majority
of the Israelites who wound up wandering for forty years with Moses in the Sinai wilderness.
Rather, we must do what the majority of the Israelites of Moses’ day were not successfully able
to do, and that is enter into God’s rest.

In chapters 3 and 4, Hebrews develops a rather elaborate and intricate set of comparisons, all
involving the Sabbath rest of the people of God. Beginning with the one day of the creation
week on which God rested, which became the paradigm in the Mosaic Law for God’s people
to rest one day every week, the writer to the Hebrews proceeds to discuss how the complete
fulfillment of the concept of Sabbath rest has not yet occurred. At one level, Sabbath rest
was figured and prefigured by the Israelites’ entrance into Canaan. But they were never able
permanently to enjoy the blessings of the land in peace and prosperity and freedom and safety
from their enemies because of their repeated disobedience. Jesus, therefore, in the Christian
revelation, brings an even greater rest, but it still is not as perfect as the complete rest that
will come in the life to come. There is still time to enter this rest, therefore; and picking up
on the psalmist’s application of the Sabbath rest theme, the writer to the Hebrews more than
once encourages his audience to be sure they have fully entered into the Sabbath rest of God.
In other words, they must remain faithful Christians and persevere to the end, even under
persecution.

III. Superiority of Christ’s Work (4:14-10:18)

A. Superior to the Priesthood

In 4:14 all the way through 7:28, the writer to the Hebrews develops his most elaborate
comparison between Christ and a particularly prominent Jewish figure or institution: in this
case, the Jewish priesthood. The introductory exhortation of this section occupies 4:14-16.
Here the writer begins with exhortation even before developing his theological exposition,
encouraging his audience to be sure that they have accepted and are continuing to accept
God’s grace. Chapter 4:16 includes that famous exhortation to come boldly before the throne
of God’s grace because of the new intimacy of access that Christ’s sacrificial death has opened
up for believers.

Throughout these chapters, one of the many central points that the writer develops is that
where the Jewish priesthood kept people at a certain arm’s length from God, Christ’s complete
and full priesthood, His complete sacrifice for sins, enables us to approach through Christ,
without the benefit of any human intermediaries, and pray and hear directly from God,
apparently in a more intimate and direct way than most Jews were used to thinking of things.
In 5:1-10 the writer develops a comparison with Aaron, the brother of Moses, through whom the priestly lineage followed, emphasizing primarily the parallel ways in which Christ, although He Himself was not a biological descendant of Aaron, nevertheless fulfilled the various functions of the Jewish priesthood. Chapter 5:11-6:20 turn again to another key section of exhortation, and include 6:4-8—one of the most famous and perhaps the strongest warnings in all of the New Testament against committing apostasy. Those who believe that it is possible for a true Christian to lose his or her salvation regularly turn to these verses—although there are ways to understand each of the statements predicated of these people as being references to people who have made some kind of superficial profession of faith, perhaps are part of the community of those who are claiming to worship God, perhaps even outwardly indistinguishable from those who have true faith.

Whichever approach one takes to these and other warning passages in the epistle to the Hebrews, the point of agreement across this interpretive debate should not be lost sight of. Both Calvinists, as those who stress eternal security, and Arminians, as those who believe one can lose their salvation, agree upon, Hebrews is referring to people who have made some kind of outward profession of faith who then repudiate that profession under difficult circumstances, particularly persecution of Christians, never make any attempt to repent of that repudiation, and therefore die in a state of eternal separation from God. It's an important theological debate whether these people really ever were true Christians or not, but we must not lose sight of the point that both sides agree on. Such people are lost, and therefore it is incumbent for Christian witnesses and Christian ministers in every context, but particularly those of apparent Christians suffering hardship, to warn against apostasy in no uncertain terms.

Chapter 7:1-28 continues the comparison between Jesus and the priesthood, this time by focusing on Levi, the one of the twelve sons of Jacob through whom the priestly lineage was named, and this time focusing on the differences between Jesus and the conventional Levitical priests. This leads the writer to think of a different priest from the Old Testament—namely, Melchizedek, the priest of Salem, all the way back in the time of Abraham in the narrative of Genesis. Here was one, outside of explicit faith in the God of Israel, who apparently still somehow knew of the one true, Almighty God over all of the universe; and Abraham acknowledged Melchizedek in some way as his superior by offering a tithe to him. Jesus is said to be “a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek,” which means that he is superior to the Levitical priests who were descended later from Abraham; and therefore the spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith, Christians, can acknowledge Jesus as a greater high priest than even the priests of Judaism.

B. Superior to the Old Covenant

Chapter 8:1-10:39 then develop the supremacy of Jesus over the old covenant. Chapter 8 includes the longest quotation of any Old Testament passage in the New Testament, and also the strongest statement of the virtual obsolescence of that old covenant, although the writer does stop short of making that exact claim. Chapter 9 develops the comparison with covenants by noting the play on words, in both the Hebrew and Greek languages, of a covenant to a testament. A testament, like what we would call today a will, requires the death of the one who
made it before its terms can come into play. And Christ’s death, therefore, inaugurates the New Testament or the new covenant. Chapter 10 develops the typology or the comparison between earthly shadows of a heavenly reality or substance, and leads to the final warning passage in 10:19-39, around which the same debates attach that we have noted under 6:4-8.


With chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews proceeds to the concluding part of his epistle: a final set of comparisons—this time with a roll call, as it were, of the heroes of the faith throughout Old Testament times. The main point of this chapter is no matter who one picks as a great hero of Judaism prior to Christ’s day, none of them ever received all that God had promised, and therefore they had to live by faith. Why not? The chapter concludes by pointing out that God had determined that it would not be without believers of the new covenant era that they should be completed or perfected. The final exhortational passage, therefore, in chapter 12 encourages us to focus our eyes on Jesus and nothing about all of His Jewish predecessors—the one who is the author and the perfecter of our faith—and also those who have preceded us in death and in martyrdom who surround us like a great cloud of witnesses in a stadium, cheering us on to finish the race no matter how difficult it may be. Chapter 13 then concludes the epistle with miscellaneous exhortations and greetings.

V. Conclusion

Hebrews is unique among New Testament writings, not only in the length to which it goes to develop the theme of the full deity and humanity of Christ; it is the only New Testament epistle that develops, and it develops it at length, the theme of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And it is also, and perhaps most significantly, the strongest and clearest call to Christians facing situations of hardship or persecution not to renounce their faith. Because apart from Christ, there is no other way. Particularly today for Christians who have lived in more affluent and more democratic countries and who have not experienced the intense persecution, to say nothing of martyrdom, for their faith that people in other parts of the world today are experiencing and have in centuries past, the book of the Hebrews may be one of the more neglected parts of the New Testament, to which we should turn again and again. It may be the case that apart from severe trials or testing we can never be entirely sure about the reality of others’ or perhaps even our own faith, and therefore should be careful about falling into the danger of glibly assuming we know who is saved in God’s eyes.
Discussion Questions

Why is it essential to the Christian faith that Jesus Christ is understood to be both fully divine and fully human, as expressed in the letter to the Hebrews?

What lesson(s) from the book of Hebrews can you apply in your own life? Explain how you might apply the lesson(s).

Dr. Blomberg discusses the author’s purpose in writing the book of Hebrews as one of preparing the audience for increasing persecution against Christians. How does this apply to your life today?
Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:


Read Chapter 69: “The Roll Call of Faith” (Hebrews)

**Philip Yancey Devotional**

**Tough Faith - Hebrews 11**

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (Heb. 11:1–2)

The last few paragraphs of chapter 10 reveal much about the original readers of Hebrews. Converting to Christ had brought them much abuse: confiscation of property, public insult, and even imprisonment. In the early days, they accepted such persecution gladly, even joyfully. But as time went on, and the trials continued, some were beginning to lose heart.

To these discouraged people, Hebrews 11 presents a stirring reminder of what constitutes “true faith.” It’s tempting to think of faith as a kind of magic formula: If you muster up enough of it, you’ll get rich, stay healthy, and live a contented life with automatic answers to all your prayers. But the readers of Hebrews were discovering that life does not work according to such neat formulas. As proof, the author painstakingly reviews the lives of some Old Testament giants of faith. (Some have dubbed Hebrews 11 the “Faith Hall of Fame.”)

“Without faith,” Hebrews says bluntly, “it is impossible to please God.” But the author uses rather pointed words in describing that faith: “persevere,” “endure,” “don’t lose heart.” As a result of their faith, some heroes triumphed: They routed armies, escaped the sword, survived lions. But many others met less happy ends: They were flogged, chained, stoned, sawed in two. The chapter concludes, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.”

The picture of faith that emerges from this chapter does not fit into an easy formula. Sometimes faith leads to victory and triumph. Sometimes it requires a gritty determination to “hang on at any cost.” Hebrews 11 does not hold up one kind of faith as superior to the other. Both rest on the belief that God is in ultimate control and will indeed keep His promises, whether in this life or in the next. Of such people, Hebrews says, “God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

Life Question: In your own life of faith do you identify with the victorious heroes of faith or with those who “hang on at any cost”?
Glossary

**Clement of Rome** — Clement (c. 30-c.100) was the fourth bishop of Rome. He is considered by the Roman Catholic church to have been the fourth pope. Besides the spurious “Clementine Literature,” his name has been ascribed to a general letter usually known as 1 Clement. He wrote 1 Clement (c. 96) in the name of the Roman church to deal with the fierce strife in the church at Corinth. His letter stresses apostolic succession. 2 Clement, another early work, is really a homily, assigned on stylistic grounds to a separate author. He is perhaps mentioned in Philippians 4:3. He was martyred under Domitian.

**Origen** — Origen (c. 185-c. 254) was an Alexandrian biblical critic, exegete, theologian, and spiritual writer. The facts of his life are recorded by Eusebius. His chief work on biblical criticism is his famous *Hexapla*. The most important of Origen’s theological works is the *De Principiis*, which covers a wide range of doctrinal topics in four books.

**Philo Judaeus** — Philo, usually known as Philo the Jew or Philo of Alexandria, lived from about 20 B.C. to about A.D. 50. He is best known for having consciously created a link between Jewish Scripture and Greek philosophy.
Quiz

1. According to Hebrews 1:1-4, Jesus is:
   A. The exact representation of the Father
   B. The exact representation of the Holy Spirit
   C. The exact representation of Adam
   D. None of the above

2. Especially during the intertestamental period, angels had increasingly become a focus of this Jewish group’s writings:
   A. Pharisees
   B. Sadducees
   C. Essenes
   D. Zealots

3. Hebrews speaks of Jesus as being superior to all of these except:
   A. Angels
   B. Satan
   C. Moses and the priesthood
   D. God the Father

4. In what format is Hebrews written?
   A. A lengthy poem
   B. A written form of a preached message
   C. A letter that was written in segments
   D. A letter penned and embellished by a scribe

5. The author’s purpose in the book of Hebrews is to:
   A. Prepare his audience for increasing persecution
   B. Call them to stand fast against the temptation to revert to Judaism
   C. Prepare his readers for the coming day of the Lord
   D. Both A and B

6. Which of the following was most likely to have written the book of Hebrews?
   A. A companion of Paul
   B. A Hellenistic Jewish Christian
   C. Paul himself
   D. Only God knows who the true author is.

7. To which priest of the Old Testament is Jesus compared in Hebrews?
   A. Eli
   B. Samuel
   C. Aaron
   D. Melchizedek
8. To whom was Hebrews most likely written?
   A. Churches scattered throughout Macedonia
   B. Largely Gentile Christians in Mysia
   C. Jewish Christian believers in Rome
   D. New Christians in Athens

9. What is the key theme of Hebrews?
   A. The humility of Christ
   B. The duality of Christ
   C. The atonement of Christ
   D. The supremacy of Christ

10. Which point does the author of Hebrews not make in chapter 11?
    A. Old Testament believers could not be completed or perfected until the coming of new covenant believers.
    B. People who lived before the time of Christ also had to live by faith.
    C. All things are possible to those who believe.
    D. None of the heroes of the Old Testament received the fullness of God’s promises.