

The Book of Hebrews



“Thou shalt observe the feast of tabernacles seven days, after that thou hast gathered in thy corn and thy wine.” (Deuteronomy 16:13)

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

To get the full import of the message and the attendant blessing for the Christian in the Book of Hebrews, we must consider the background of the early Church. Among the converts to Christianity were former Jews who had strictly obeyed the Mosaic Law. In their enthusiasm for the grace of the gospel that was manifested in the teaching of Christ, and in their acceptance of this gospel, they were very joyous for a time. But afterwards, those Jews who did not accept Christ continually reminded the Jewish Christians of their supposed obligations under the Mosaic Law. In due time, this pressure began to adversely affect the early Church by undermining the gospel of grace in Christ. The purpose of the Apostle Paul in writing the epistle to the Hebrews was, we believe, to counteract the influence of the Judaizing Christians.

Notice the opening expression of the Book of Hebrews:

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners [that is, in fragments] spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,

“Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.” (Heb. 1:1,2)

The apostle was saying that for God to change His dispensational dealings with His people should not have been too much of a surprise. For long centuries, the Lord had dealt exclusively with the Jews and had schooled them under the Law. As He said, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). With this background, therefore, they did not anticipate any radical change in God's dealings with His people down here on earth. Paul reminded these Christians that in ancient times, God had used various manners and time periods and had spoken in fragments through the prophets to the fathers and, of course, to the nation, the children of Israel. Now in these last days, He was speaking unto them by His Son.

Paul continued his reasoning. Instead of being in a permanent role of humiliation following his crucifixion, Jesus had been exalted to glory. Therefore, the crucified Messiah was an evidence not of defeat but of the road to *victory*. As a result of pursuing the course that led to the Cross, Jesus was now highly honored of the Father.

Paul then proceeded to bring conviction to the Jewish Christians by showing that the Old Testament contained prophecies of such an individual who would arise at a later date to be Jehovah's representative. Under the Mosaic Law, the Jews properly reasoned that there was only the one God supreme over all.

However, some in the nation of Israel began to feel that Jesus was an impostor and that they should honor only the Lord God Almighty. This continual doubt in the Church had the potential to destroy the faith of some. Therefore, Paul told them (paraphrased), “If you will examine your own Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Psalms and the Book of Isaiah, you will see the predictions that Messiah would arise and that he would not be God Himself but God’s representative, prophet, and Son.” In quoting Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14, respectively, Paul said:

“For unto which of the angels said he [God] at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?” (Heb. 1:5)

With these prophecies in the Old Testament, the Jews should not have been so startled when Jesus appeared on the earthly scene and declared himself to be the Son of God and the Messiah. They should have tried to square the details of Scripture to make sure he was the *true* Son of God, the *true* Messiah, and they should not have set their minds against a Messiah arising in such a fashion.

“But unto the Son he [the Almighty God] saith, Thy throne, O God [or O Son], is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

“Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.” (Heb. 1:8,9)

Jesus is spoken of in Scripture as *a* God, whereas Jehovah, the Lord God Almighty, is *the* God of (or *above*) Jesus. The Trinitarian concept of three equal personages in the one God is not taught in Holy Writ. There is only the one Jehovah, and His Son is highly honored below Him.

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.” (Heb. 2:1)

In the next chapter, the Apostle Paul mentioned the danger of letting things slip. The message in the Book of Hebrews was primarily directed to those who were already Christians, and the danger to *Jewish* Christians was that the base of their convictions would be nibbled away. Jewish Christians had to be continually on guard, and they needed assurance that what they had accepted as truth was indeed the truth.

As the account proceeds, we see that the apostle took a commonsense approach. Some felt that Jesus' suffering and death did not comport well with his profession to be the Messiah. They wondered, How could he be the Messiah of God and yet have ended up on the Cross, being rejected by the nation? But Paul

called attention to the fact that the suffering experiences were necessary, for they helped to develop in Jesus, who was already morally perfect, a quality of mercy that might be lacking otherwise. Therefore, he was humbled under the mighty hand of God with these experiences to qualify him to be a *sympathetic* High Priest over the Church.

“For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” (Heb. 2:10).

In the third chapter, Paul called attention to the doctrine of the Sabbath, saying that if considered from the right standpoint, it would be very helpful to Jewish Christians in their walk in Christ. When God rested on the Seventh Day, it was a rest of faith in Jesus to finish certain work in connection with planet Earth (Gen. 2:2). Since God rested on the Seventh Day, they should anticipate that any activity would have to be based on a faith similar to God’s faith in Christ. Their inability to recognize this new teaching of faith probably resulted from a misunderstanding of the works of the Law. However, Paul showed that in times past, various prophets in the Old Testament had advised God’s people to enter into a rest of faith, but they were unable to recognize or take this proper step because of *unbelief*—not only in regard to going into the Promised Land but also in David’s day. In the

Psalms, an invitation to step to a higher plane was offered, but none of the people availed themselves of that opportunity.

In the fourth chapter, Paul emphasized that the basic reason for the Hebrews' failure to recognize and be led of Christ was not properly mixing their hearing of God's Word *with faith*. However, Paul did not simply tell the Hebrews to exercise faith. It would have been easy to point out their failures and say they lacked such-and-such a quality, but his primary objective was to *restore* their faith.

The function of the office of high priest is the subject of the fifth chapter. The Israelites went to Aaron and the priesthood for the typical forgiveness of their sins and for reconciliation. Thus the priest was very much like a spiritual doctor, and as a type, he prefigured the work of Messiah, who will be a spiritual priest to the world of mankind in the next age. Jesus will actually cancel sin and redeem mankind and bring those who are willing up the highway of holiness to salvation (1 John 2:2; Isa. 35:8).

In the original Aaronic priesthood, Aaron did not assume the honor but was distinctly called by God to be the first high priest (Exod. 28:1; Heb. 5:1,4). Afterward, and following the death of each individual high priest, successive priests arose from the sons of Aaron to be instituted into the office. However, Paul showed that the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood was not designed

to be perpetual but was a *temporary* arrangement for a particular time. If Jews prior to the Christian or Gospel Age had faithfully read the Old Testament, they would (or should) have been prepared to recognize certain mysterious statements made here and there about a Melchisedec priesthood. Melchisedec, priest of Salem, appeared on the scene at the time of Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20). Levi, who was yet unborn and thus still in the loins of Abraham, paid tithes to Melchisedec when Melchisedec met Abraham and blessed him. Not only did Abraham recognize the superiority of this mysterious person, but also, as Paul showed, Melchisedec represented a higher priesthood than the Aaronic priesthood. Even Levi was subservient in a sense to the higher Melchisedec priesthood.

In addition, the Book of Hebrews speaks of the Melchisedec priesthood as a *perpetual* institution. Paul quoted an Old Testament prophecy of Jesus, “Thou art a priest *for ever* after the order of Melchisedec” (Heb. 5:6). Such an oath never accompanied the Aaronic priesthood. Therefore, the apostle was contrasting the two priesthoods and saying that of the two, the Melchisedec priesthood was superior and that its operation, when begun, would be forever.

In the sixth chapter, when Paul mentioned “not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith

toward God,” etc., he showed that the Christian had to develop and go forward. In fact, in time, Christians should become teachers if they are properly exercised in the Word of God. The danger with Jewish Christians was that if they were wobbly or a little doubtful as to whether they had made the right choice when they came into the gospel calling through Christ—if they had to be constantly reaffirmed on the basis of their salvation—they would be greatly hindered in their development. God wanted the Christian to go on with *full assurance of faith* and to develop to *higher planes*. Going back to the basics should not have been necessary.

In regard to the institution of the Melchisedec priesthood, the account says that God swore by an oath to confirm the arrangement as being forever (Heb. 7:21). God similarly swore an oath to confirm the promise made to Abraham (Heb. 6:13,14). The role of the mysterious Melchisedec personage prefigured the future Messiah, who in time would be both a King and a Priest upon his throne. This assumption of power is still future, and when it takes place, the Melchisedec priesthood will supersede the Aaronic priesthood. Not only is the Levitical or Aaronic arrangement inferior to the Melchisedec one, but also Jesus Christ, according to the flesh, was not even of the priestly class. Called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah,” Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, and the circumstances of his birth and lineage make him a son of David (Rev. 5:5; Matt. 1:1,6).

Although Jesus could not fulfill the role of being a literal priest at the First Advent because he was not of the seed of Aaron, such lineage was not at all necessary for the Messiah. One reason is that the Aaronic priesthood is a *picture* of Messiah's work of the future and Melchisedec is the higher picture, the better order, the superior priesthood. In fact, Paul was telling the Jewish Christians, in effect: "Those who are trying to proselytize you to go back to the old Jewish arrangement of being under the Mosaic Law are actually damaging your faith. Does not the Book of Jeremiah say that a New Covenant will be made with the house of Israel? Does not the very fact that God predicted a New (and better) Covenant make the other one old? It is just a matter of time until the Old Law Covenant is replaced or superseded, and the Gospel Age is the institution of the beginnings of this new or higher arrangement. Instead of being surprised, you should be looking forward to the *better* priest, represented in the Lord Jesus himself, the *better* covenant, and the *better* arrangement in every way. The gospel message, rather than subverting, undermining, or overthrowing the old arrangement, actually supersedes it by developing into the new arrangement God has designed."

Paul also called attention to the fact that under the Aaronic priesthood, the priests *daily* performed sacrifices and *annually* went into the Most Holy to sprinkle the blood of atonement. In

many ways, these services were only pictures because if the blood of atonement had been effectual in canceling sin in the full sense of the word, there would have been no need to repeat the type year after year. Indeed the very repetition of the offerings was a continual reminder of the need for the *one sacrifice* of Jesus Christ.

Failure to realize the rituals of the Law were merely *pictures* that did not actually cancel sin led to trouble in the early Church. And eventually the doctrine of the Mass arose, which taught that Jesus had to be continually put to death, as it were, to give a person a fresh start from time to time in connection with his covenant relationship with God, but that is not what the type showed. When Jesus died, he died "*once for all*" (Heb. 10:10). The services in the type were *figures* of the one true reality future from that day. The Tabernacle building was a *pattern* of things to come, and the Law was a *shadow*, not the reality (Heb. 8:5). The Jews erred in thinking that a certain holiness would accrue from observing the rituals in the type. Such practices were not the end of the matter but simply a schoolmaster to prepare the Jews to accept Christ when he would appear on the scene (Gal. 3:24).

Therefore, the Apostle Paul wanted the Jewish convert to have *boldness* to enter in by Jesus Christ to commune with God and to have fellowship on a higher plane. The Jewish Christian was not to allow his faith to be subverted; he was not to be

beguiled back into the Law of works and thus to fall from his position of grace. This problem was no light matter. In reviewing the heroes of faith of the Old Testament in Hebrews chapter 11, Paul emphasized that while they did works that pleased God and their lives demonstrated their love for God, the basis of their acceptance was their *faith*. By *faith*, Abraham, Noah, Moses, and the other faithful ones of old pleased God. Even though their works were acceptable and commendable proofs and evidences of their faith, what made them pleasing to God was their *conviction and assurance* that what they were doing was proper. He dealt with them on the basis of their *heart intention* and not on the basis of their deeds of the flesh, which were imperfect.

After a review of faithful individuals in the Old Testament, Paul's instruction in chapter 12 was to consider Jesus. Jews who came into Christ realized a great change in their life through the gospel of joy and the lifting of the burden of sin from their shoulders, that is, the lifting of the burden of trying to keep a *perfect* Law as *imperfect* beings. However, while they recognized that in Christ, they had happiness and joy, Paul wanted them to have the *assurance* that they were on the right path and that Jesus was able to finish their faith. Not only was Jesus the beginner of their salvation, but also he was the finisher, and they could not serve both Moses and Christ (Heb. 12:2). The relationships were

different, for the house of Moses was one of servants, and the house of Christ was one of sons.

Paul warned Jewish Christians not to confuse the two pictures. If they took the matter too lightly and allowed themselves to drift back into their former condition under the Law, they were being unfaithful to their consecration in Christ and would have no hope for the future. Stated another way, if after becoming Christians, they went back to the works of the flesh, they would lose God's favor entirely because they would lose the imputed robe of Christ's righteousness that covered their imperfections. Unless the tendency was corrected, they would at first become discouraged and disheartened, then confusion and darkness would set in, and eventually their path would lead to death. In the Book of Hebrews, Paul kept reminding Jewish Christians of this danger.

“And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.” (Heb. 9:22)

Paul spoke about the blood that was continually evidenced in the various sacrifices under the Mosaic Law. The lesson repeated over and over was that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. The type showed that blood was necessary for the forgiveness of sin. In the antitype, this blood represented that Jesus had to die as the world's priest in order to

constitute the sacrifice that would ultimately provide the opportunity of salvation for all mankind. Jesus had to “taste death for every man” (Heb. 2:9). The literal sacrifices pointed forward to the death of such a priest. On the annual Day of Atonement, the high priest went under the veil and into the Most Holy, appearing in the presence of God, as it were, and sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. Paul showed that what the high priest did once annually under the Law represented the death of Christ (Heb. 9:7,11,12,24-26).

The apostle was saying to the Jewish Christians: “I have already told you that the Old Testament predicted the coming of the Son of God, and I have already reminded you that the old Aaronic priesthood was to be replaced by a new priesthood. With the coming of Christ, we have both the Son and a new High Priest, and his death was pictured in the Old Testament. Therefore, instead of causing you to question whether Jesus really was the Messiah, his crucifixion should have brought conviction and joy to your heart that you are actually seeing the fulfillment of the type. The coming of the antitype should give you the *full assurance of faith* that now you can come boldly to God through His Son, Jesus Christ, for these things occurred exactly as they were prophesied and prefigured back in the Old Testament Scriptures.”

In the last chapter of the Book of Hebrews, Paul was able to introduce an entirely new subject that, if presented earlier, without the proper groundwork being laid, would have caused confusion and problems in the Church. Paul said that not only did the blood back in the type prefigure the coming and the death of Messiah, but also Christians, in their covenant relationship, are privileged to share in that sacrifice. The apostle spoke the following words:

“For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp.

“Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

“Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.” (Heb. 13:11-13)

The bodies of bulls and goats, whose blood was brought into the Most Holy and applied on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant on the Day of Atonement for the cancellation of sin, were burned outside the camp of the Israelites. As Jesus, pictured by the bullock, was crucified outside the city and temple area of Jerusalem, so the Christian is to go out unto Jesus and share the same experience. Those who faithfully bear his reproach are identified with him in this sin offering. Christians should not be

ashamed of Jesus' name and cause, realizing that he is the true Messiah sent of God.

“By him [Jesus] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.” (Heb. 13:15)

Thus, with a full assurance of faith, the Jews could be more aggressive as Christians in *publicly* espousing the cause of Christ and not just keeping it secretly confined within their hearts. The knowledge recorded in the Book of Hebrews is very helpful to *all* Christians, Jew and Gentile. In summation at the end of the epistle to the Hebrews, Paul wished God's blessing:

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,

“Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Heb. 13:20,21)

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