

Hebrews

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWES

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT? Hebrews was written to Jewish converts to reinforce their current faith in Christ and encourage them not to revert to their former religion. The overriding message of the book is that Jesus is superior to the Old Testament system of sacrifices for sin.

WHO WROTE IT? We don't know. Probably not Paul (the style is quite different from all of Paul's letters). But the author was certainly highly educated, with a thorough knowledge of Jewish religious practices and the Old Testament.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN? Because the sacrifices are described in the present tense, before the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.

WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT? During the third or fourth decade after the early church began.

THE BREAKDOWN

- Chapters 1-2: Jesus is superior to the angels
- Chapter 3: Jesus is superior to Moses
- Chapters 4-7: Jesus is superior to the Old Testament priesthood
- Chapters 8-10: Jesus is our High Priest
- Chapter 11: The faith hall of fame
- Chapter 12: Persevere in the faith
- Chapter 13: Final instructions

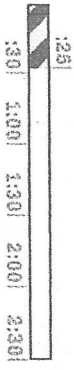
KEY CONCEPTS

- (Christ is) better than, greater than
- Sacrifice
- Priest
- Faith
- Discipline

SCORECARD

- Jesus:** The greatest of all priests
- Moses:** The Old Testament lawgiver
- Melchizedek:** Priest and king from the time of the patriarchs (see Genesis 14)
- Heroes of faith:** Chapter 11 presents more than 20 examples of people who lived and acted in faith.

READING TIME



WORTH MEMORIZING

- 4:12** The word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.
- 4:15-16** This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God.
- 11:1** Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.
- 11:6** It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.
- 12:1** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.** In chapter 12, the Christian life is compared to a race. Like athletes, we are to get rid of every unnecessary weight and keep focused on the finish line. The weight that holds us back is sin, and our focus should be Christ himself.

BACKGROUND

In the first century followers of Christ were often subject to persecution from their fellow citizens. Hebrews is a letter of encouragement to help Jewish believers in Christ who struggled in their newfound faith. The authorship of Hebrews is not as clear as that of other New Testament books. Eastern and Western churches debated between Paul, Barnabas, Luke, Apolllos, or Clement as the book's author. Although this epistle does not bear Paul's usual salutation, Christians from the about fourth century to the late 1800s believed him to be the author.

MESSAGE

To encourage believers who wonder whether Christianity is worth the pain of persecution, the writer discusses Christ's superiority to prophets, angels, Moses,

OUTLINE

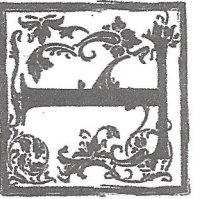
- I. The New Covenant in Christ**
 - Christ is God's Son
 - Christ is superior to angels
 - Christ came as a human
 - Christ is superior to Moses
 - Christ is the great high priest
- II. The Two Covenants**
 - Covenant with Abraham
 - Christ is like Melchizedek
 - Contrast of the covenants
 - The old covenant fulfilled in Christ
 - Privileges of the new covenant
- III. The Faith of Both Covenants**
 - Faith under the old covenant
 - Faith under the new covenant
- IV. Practical Advice**
- V. Final Words**

and the high priests. For the writer, Christ is simply the "better" way (1:4). He is over all and above all and deserves the believers' worship. He is the perfect fulfillment of the old covenant and the establisher of the new. The book of Hebrews includes an Old Testament "hall of faith," commending men and women who walked with God and persevered in their faith, sometimes suffering persecution and death. Regardless of their trials, believers are called and equipped in Christ to become more like him each day. Christ alone—"the mediator of the new covenant" (12:24)—is sufficient for salvation.

TIME

Since the Epistle to the Hebrews does not mention the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in A.D. 70, it was probably written between A.D. 64 and 68.

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|-----------|-----------|
| 1:1-3 | 1:1-3 |
| 1:4-14 | 1:4-14 |
| 2:1-18 | 2:1-18 |
| 3:1-4:13 | 3:1-4:13 |
| 4:14-5:14 | 4:14-5:14 |
| 6:1-20 | 6:1-20 |
| 7:1-28 | 7:1-28 |
| 8:1-13 | 8:1-13 |
| 9:1-10:18 | 9:1-10:18 |
| 10:19-39 | 10:19-39 |
| 11:1-40 | 11:1-40 |
| 12:1-29 | 12:1-29 |
| 13:1-17 | 13:1-17 |
| 13:18-25 | 13:18-25 |



he president of a Christian university was famous for telling discouraged students: "It's always too soon to quit." Those words ring true for all of us, because life is difficult and we sometimes want to give up. Hebrews was written to tell us to persevere, to keep going, to focus on our great high priest, and to run with patience the race before us.

According to background given in chapter 10, Hebrews was addressed to some Jewish Christians facing renewed challenges. Though they had confessed Christ as Savior and been faithful in the past, they now faced a new wave of persecution. Some were in danger of reverting to Judaism.

The writer of Hebrews—whoever he was—exhorted them to remain strong in Him who is greater than anything or anyone in the Old Testament. Jesus is truly our great High Priest, who instituted a new and better covenant and who ever lives to make intercession for His people. Words like *better*, *more*, *great*, and *greater* appear about forty-five times in this book, making Hebrews a book of superlatives about Jesus, who is superior to all the angels, prophets, writers, systems and sacrifices of Old Testament days.

While most of us don't have a heritage steeped in Levitical tradition, we all face discouragement. Hebrews tells us to hold firm to our faith, keeping our eyes on our Great High Priest, and to persevere, never giving up. With Christ on our side, it's always too soon to quit.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF

Hebrews?

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Jesus is the best.
Never take
your eyes off
of him.

KEY THOUGHT:

We must never yield to discouragement,
for our Great High Priest is supreme
over all and sufficient for all.

KEY VERSE:

"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest
who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the
Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."
Hebrews 4:14

KEY ACTION:

Persevere!

KEY PRAYER:

Lord, help me finish the race You have
put before me! Give me strength to be
a champion of the faith.

BASIC SURVEY

HEBREWS

AUTHOR: Not stated; Paul, Luke, Barnabas, and Apollos have all been suggested.

DATE: Sometime before AD 70, since Hebrews refers to temple sacrifices. The temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

Jesus is better than any Old Testament person or sacrifice.

DETAILS, PLEASE

Written to Jewish Christians (hence the name “Hebrews”), this letter emphasizes the superiority of Christianity to Old Testament Judaism. Jesus is “so much better” (1:4 KJV) than angels, Moses, and animal sacrifices. Jewish Christians, some of whom were apparently wavering in their commitment to Jesus, are reminded that Christ “is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (8:6 KJV)—a once-for-all sacrifice on the cross that provides “eternal redemption for us” (9:12 KJV).

QUOTABLE

> Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith (12:1–2 NLT).

UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

Hebrews is one of only two New Testament letters (the other being 1 John) that includes no greeting or hint of its author.

SO WHAT?

“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” (10:22 KJV).

READ HEBREWS 2-3.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 261. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 257. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 257. →

HEART OF THE BOOK

THE EXALTED SON OF GOD

Some Jewish believers in Rome were getting the idea that Jesus the Messiah had made some improvements to Judaism—but since they had suffered so much rejection and persecution for following Him, they began wondering if the differences were really *that* great and whether they might be as well off returning to Jewish worship.

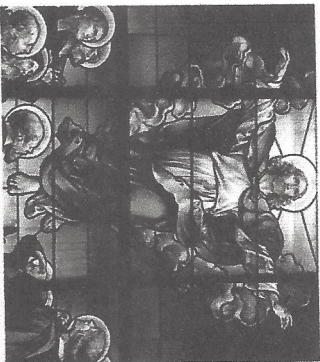
The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews set out to encourage and educate them. He began by stating that Jesus was God’s own Son “through whom also he made the universe,” and that He continues “sustaining all things by his powerful word.” How can He do this? Because He, too, is divine. “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:2–3 NIV).

The writer also made it clear how unique Jesus is. “He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.” Jesus is so exalted, in fact, that scripture states, “Let all God’s angels worship him” (Hebrews 1:4, 6 NIV).

The writer to the Hebrews went even further, stating, “To the Son He says: ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. . . . Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You’ (Hebrews 1:8–9 NKJV). He first pointed out that Jesus is called God, then states that “God, Your God” (the Father) anointed Him. This explains why, when Jesus was on the earth, He prayed to God His Father and called Him “My God” (Mark 15:34; John 20:17).

READ HEBREWS 1 AND 5.

- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 261. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 258. →



The writer of the book of Hebrews encouraged faltering believers to fortify their faith and emphasized the fact that Jesus is God’s Son.

CLOSER LOOK

WHAT IS FAITH?

Many people wonder what exactly faith is. The Bible says, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 NKJV). The Greek word translated as “substance” is *hypostasis*, and in the NIV Interlinear Greek-English New Testament its meaning is given as “reality.” Thus, “faith is the *reality* of things hoped for.”

The Amplified Bible gives further insight: “Now faith is the assurance (the confirmation, the title deed) of the things [we] hope for, being the proof of things [we] do not see and the conviction of their reality” (Hebrews 11:1 AMB).

A title deed is an authoritative document. While it’s only a piece of paper and not the actual house or property that it speaks of, if a person’s name is on a title deed and it’s notarized by the proper authorities, it’s proof that they own a tangible real estate. If they haven’t seen the properties yet—say they received them as an inheritance—they aren’t revealed to the senses, but the person can still be convinced that they own them. Why? Because they have the title deed. Faith is a very solid reality, but this raises the question why it doesn’t seem to work for some people. They believe for a while, then give up without receiving what they were praying for. Why is this? Often it’s because they have, at some point, discarded their title deed. “So do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord. Remember the great reward it brings you!” (Hebrews 10:35 NLT).

READ HEBREWS 11 AND JOB 13:1-15.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 259.



CLOSER LOOK

GOD’S LOVING CHASTISEMENTS

Some Christians had the idea that after they were saved, Jesus would solve all their problems, bless them abundantly financially, and remove all sickness. So they became confused and distressed when they suffered troubles. But the apostle Peter said, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Peter 4:12 KJV).

The writer to the Hebrews asked, “Have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, ‘My child, don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline, and don’t give up when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child’” (Hebrews 12:5-6 NLT). He then asked, “Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father?” (v. 7).

He also explains the reason God allows difficulties and hardships: “He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:10-11 NASB).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus told straying Christians, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Revelation 3:19 KJV). God disciplines us when we get out of line, but His purpose is not simply to punish us. The literal meaning of the word *discipline* is “to train.”

READ HEBREWS 12 AND JOB 14.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 261.



GROWING UP SPIRITUALLY

A number of Christians in the early church, after finding salvation, never really hungered to learn more about their faith and didn't take the opportunity to study the scriptures, so they never grew up spiritually. As a result, they remained baby Christians. The writer of Hebrews noted, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary



The book of Hebrews states that we must start with spiritual milk so that we can progress and grow spiritually.

truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature" (Hebrews 5:12-14 NIV). Back then there were very few copies of the Gospels and the epistles of the apostles—but today we have an abundance of the Word to feed on.

READ HEBREWS 6-7.

HIDDEN TREASURE

THE THRONE OF GRACE

The book of Hebrews tells us some very good news: "Jesus the Son of God . . . was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16 NKJV). Since Jesus was repeatedly tempted to sin, just like we are, He knows what it's like to suffer. That's why Christians can *confidently* come before His throne to ask for His mercy, forgiveness, and grace to help them during times of testing. He understands. Notice that He sits, not on a throne of judgment—to condemn believers who struggle with sin—but on a throne of grace. And He dispenses not punishment but strength and mercy.

READ JOB 9:1-20 AND HEBREWS 4.

Personal Gold

from BILL HYBELS

A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION

It's an honor to be able to speak to God. We don't have to go through a priest or a saint or any other intermediary. We don't have to follow any prescribed rituals. We don't have to wait for an appointment. Anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances, we can "come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most" (Hebrews 4:16, NLT).

It's ironic, though, that most of the time we think of prayer as talking to God, rarely stopping to wonder whether God might want to talk to us. But as I've studied prayer and prayed, I've sensed God saying, "If we enjoy a relationship, why are you doing all the talking? Let *me* get a word in somewhere!"

How does God speak to us? One way is through his Word. As we read it and meditate on it, he applies it to our lives. A familiar verse jumps off the page at us just when we need it. It seems to take on new meaning to fit our circumstances. The verse has not changed; it has always been part of God's Word. But the Holy Spirit gives it to us when it will help us the most.

Another way God speaks to us is through people. "I provide for you," he says, as a neighbor shows up with a casserole we had no time to cook or money to buy. "I care for you," he says, through the arms of a friend who understands our grief and seeks to console us. "I guide you," he says, through a counselor who points us to the path God has chosen for us.

A third way God speaks to us is through direct leadings of the Holy Spirit. This third Person of the Godhead is ready, willing and able to communicate with us. According to Scripture, he leads, rebukes, affirms, comforts and assures Christ's followers.

A lot of Christians, however, don't expect God to speak to them. By their actions you would expect that Jesus packed up and went back to heaven forty days after his resurrection and hasn't been heard from since. Though this attitude is common, it does not fit the picture of God painted throughout Scripture.

We think of prayer as talking to God, rarely stopping to wonder whether God might want to talk to us.

HEBREWS

A. THE SUPERIORITY OF JESUS

1. He Is More Powerful Than the Angels (1:1—2:18)
 2. He Is Greater Than Moses and Joshua (3:1—4:13)
 3. He Surpasses Everything in the Old Covenant Priesthood (4:14—7:28)
 4. His New Covenant Is Superior (8:1—10:18)
8. THE FREING POWER OF FAITH AND HUMILITY (10:19—13:25)
1. Faith Needed in Hard Times (10:19—39)
 2. Faith Seen in Old Testament Times (1:1—40)
 3. Faithfulness and the Loving Discipline of God (12:1—29)
 4. Faithfulness and the Trustworthy Foundation of Christ (13:1—25)

THE BIG PICTURE

All of us have felt the tug back to an old habit or a former way of life. We often long for the familiar, even though it may be destructive or lead us outside of God's will. At times, the challenge to remain strong in our faith may seem too hard for us. Our old lives beckon, tempting us with familiar sources of comfort.

Many of the Jewish Christians in the first century thought about returning to their Jewish faith. Some of Jesus' teachings didn't line up with the teachings of the Jewish rabbis. Was Jesus really the Messiah? Did following him mean they had to give up their old, familiar forms of worship? Would it be wrong to go back to their old beliefs and traditions? Did it make sense to follow this new way when it would only lead to harsh persecution?

The writer of Hebrews dealt with the doubts of the Jewish believers by demonstrating that salvation in Jesus Christ is clearly superior to the way of the Jewish law.

The author urged Jewish Christian readers to hold on to their new faith, to encourage one another, and to look forward to the return of Jesus the Messiah. These believers were further warned of the consequences of rejecting the salvation offered by God in Christ and were reminded of the blessings promised to those who would entrust their lives to Christ.

Spiritual renewal requires that we seek God, surrender our lives to Jesus Christ and follow his ways. From time to time we will almost certainly feel a temptation to return to our former ways of life. But God is more than able to help us and to empower us to grow.

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL THEMES

THE PRIMACY OF JESUS CHRIST

The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as God, explaining that Jesus is the ultimate power and authority in the universe, superior to any and every other leader in history. He is the full and complete revelation of God to us. And Jesus is the one who can forgive us our sins. Christ is the center of our hope and trust. For that reason he is our only real hope for spiritual renewal.

JESUS FILLS WHAT IS REQUIRED OF US

Because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, he fulfilled all that the Old Testament sacrifices represented—he was the means of God's complete forgiveness of our sins. That means every sin—past, present and future—can be forgiven completely. Through Christ, God did for us what

we could not do ourselves. Jesus removed the barrier of sin between us and God so that we could have access to God's very presence. Christ's complete sacrifice removed the guilt that accompanied our sin. Through his sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has fulfilled all that God requires of us.

THE NECESSITY OF FAITH

Faith is "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). Our spiritual renewal is based on faith—our confident trust that God will help us do what we are powerless to do alone. As we place our trust in God, he will transform us with his power. He has promised this to all who believe in him.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSEVERANCE

Our spiritual renewal is a lifelong process. We need to learn to persevere when obstacles and problems block our way. The first readers of the book of Hebrews experienced incredible persecution for their faith. But the writer of Hebrews assured them that they could endure if they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. We also need to pray for the strength to endure because perseverance is essential to our ongoing spiritual growth.

Essential Facts

PURPOSE: To demonstrate the wisdom of following Christ and the foolishness of looking elsewhere for salvation.

AUTHOR: The writer of this letter is uncertain, but Paul, Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Silas, Philip, Priscilla and others have been suggested as possible authors.

AUDIENCE: Jewish believers.

DATE WRITTEN: Probably shortly before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.

SETTING: Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were being persecuted, encouraging and reassuring them that Jesus was who he claimed to be—the Son of God and the promised Messiah.

KEY VERSE: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (1:3).

KEY PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS: Jesus Christ, along with many men and women of faith.

HE JEWS

Is following Jesus worth it?

"Sure," you might say, not really thinking much about it.

How about when others make fun of you for your faith? Or, when you miss some of the things you did before you became a Christian? Or, when people you like try to draw you into some spiritual practices that aren't compatible with the Bible?

Wouldn't it be easier—and more enjoyable—just to let the faith thing slide?

Sometimes, as a matter of fact, it would be.

Following Jesus isn't always easy. And we shouldn't expect it to be. Jesus himself said, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you" (Jn 15:19).

That's the way it is for Jesus followers today, and that's the way it always has been. The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Consequently, they were thinking about abandoning Jesus and going back to the religion into which they had been born. It seemed like the easier—and safer—thing to do.

So the writer of this letter focused on the surpassing greatness of Christ. Jesus Christ is superior to the angels (1:5), superior to Moses (3:3), superior to Joshua (4:8), superior to the rest of the Israelites (3:4-6, 16-19), and superior to the Jewish priesthood (5:1-10). He is the great high priest, making a sacrifice greater than the sacrifices the Jewish religion could offer. And the new covenant He put in place between God and humans is greater than the old covenant upon which Judaism is based.

Furthermore, said the writer, faith in God has always required extraordinary commitment. For people of faith, it's normal to experience persecution and discipline. History has innumerable examples to offer, some of them pretty frightening. And so followers of the Lord Jesus have to learn to be patient and to persevere.

The writer's point isn't exactly subtle. If you abandon faith in Jesus for any other belief system, you're going to be giving up the greatest for something lesser. Keep on believing, even if that means toughing it out through persecution.

Severe persecution for the faith is—thankfully—rare in our society (though it's comparatively common in some other parts of the world). But teens and adults can expect to face at least mild persecution from time to time. The temptation to give in will be strong.

But God stands by to help us through the persecution. And His rewards for those who hold fast until the end are out of this world.

So is it worth it to follow Jesus?

You'd better believe it!

Author: Unknown (some possible authors: Paul, Luke, Apollos, Priscilla, Clement of Rome, Barnabas)

Date: Written sometime between A.D. 60–96

What in the world is going on?

A.D. 26–30 Years of Jesus' ministry

A.D. 59–62 Festus is the governor

ca A.D. 60–65 Matthew writes his Gospel

ca A.D. 60–63 Luke writes his Gospel and the book of Acts

A.D. 60; Paul writes the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon from prison in Rome

ca A.D. 60–64 Paul is free from Roman prison and writes letters to Timothy and Titus

A.D. 61 Suetonius Paulinus, the governor appointed by Rome, invades the island of Anglesey in a campaign against the Druids

ca A.D. 62 Roman author Pliny the Younger is born

ca A.D. 62 According to historian Josephus, the Sanhedrin orders James (Jesus' half-brother) to be stoned to death

A.D. 64 Fire breaks out in Rome and burns for nine days, destroying most of the city

Hebrews

BOOK INTRODUCTION

To put it succinctly, Hebrews was written to a group of first-century Christians who were in danger of giving up.

As Christianity began to spread in that defining era, many new converts found themselves being tested: exposed to fierce persecution, physically assaulted, cast into prison, their homes plundered. While some believers accepted this adversity with joy, others were wavering in their newfound faith in Christ. In particular, a group of Jewish Christians—probably living in Rome—were tempted to return to their former religion and its familiar practices.

In addressing this issue, the author of Hebrews certainly had a difficult task: to convince his readers not to turn their backs on Christ but to press on with confidence. How does one convince former Jews that the centuries' worth of ceremonial ordinances applying to the priesthood and the sacrificial system—not to mention the contributions of the OT patriarchs—have now been consummated in one Man? And in the face of persecution, how does one inspire the first generation of Jewish believers to hold fast to Jesus and not seek refuge in the familiar world of Judaism?

The writer's solution was to demonstrate that Christ is the zenith of God's redemptive plan—prophesied under the Old Covenant and fulfilled in the New.

Who was the person assigned this monumental task of explaining such complexities to an uncertain Jewish-Christian community? Although 2,000 years of study has produced no clear consensus among scholars about the author of this rigorously argued and richly worded letter, the letter itself narrows the field dramatically. It might well have been Barnabas, a Jew who was intimately involved with Paul and the Jerusalem church from the very beginning (Acts 4:36, 37; 9:27; 11:25–30; 12:25–13:6). Others have suggested Apollos, a Jew "born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures" and very active in the spread of the gospel (Acts 18:24; 1 Cor. 3:4; Titus 3:13), and some have suggested Luke, one of Paul's companions (Col. 4:14; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). Or perhaps the author was a theologically informed leader in the church whose name never found its way into the biblical record (Acts 6:7). Still, a few known facts about the author also shed light on the letter:

First, the author had not been with Christ personally or received direct revelation from Christ (2:3), a fact that excludes all the original apostles including Paul (2 Cor. 12:1–4; Gal. 1:11, 12). Second, he had

been imprisoned for the gospel meaning he was deeply committed to and involved in the building of the church (10:34).

Third, the author was apparently well educated. The Greek is the finest in the NT and the vocabulary his richest. In fact, according to commentator William L. Lane, "Of the 4,942 words in Hebrews, the writer uses 1,038 different words—169 found only in Hebrews in the NT." The author is also skilled in rhetoric and argumentation, and shows a deep knowledge of the OT.

Fourth, Hebrews 12:4 indicates that his readers have not yet suffered to the point of death. If these Jewish Christians lived in Rome, some would have died for their faith under the extreme persecution of the church by Emperor Nero starting in AD 64. That means the author ministered and wrote in the middle of the first century with persecution looming on the horizon.

WHAT IT SAYS | *Once and for All*

Of all the NT books, Hebrews best illustrates how to bridge the gap between Judaism and Christianity. The letter to the Hebrews is a masterwork of biblical theology, demonstrating the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ: He was God in the flesh, God's final revelation to man, and the One who fulfilled (and therefore ended) all the ceremonial activity that paved the way for the Jewish Messiah.

To understand Hebrews, we need to understand the difference between a prophet and a priest. A prophet represented God to the people; this person was a spokesman for God. (This is why Christian ministers are occasionally called prophets in the NT: because they can and do represent God to the people.) On the other hand, a priest represented the people to God. In the OT, the priest was responsible to offer up sacrifices on behalf of the people before God, but it was God who would forgive the people's sins. In the NT, Jesus is the ultimate High Priest who forgives our sins by offering up Himself as a sacrifice on our behalf.

Because the readers of Hebrews had suffered for Christ (10:32–36; 13:3) and were tempted to give up their faith and turn back to Judaism, the author's mission was to put strength into their spines, giving them a passionate but tightly reasoned argument for remaining committed to Christ. Why should these Jewish believers go forward with Christ instead of returning to their traditions?

- Because Jesus was the climax and final Word of God to his people (1:2).
 - Because Jesus was greater than all whom God had previously sent to reveal His will and purpose—superior to the angels, to Moses (the standard-bearer of Judaism), and to the priests of Israel (1—7).
 - Because Jesus, our true High Priest, had instituted a new and better covenant, providing once-and-for-all access into the heavenly sanctuary of God through His own blood (8—10).
 - Because Jesus fulfills the OT, these Hebrew-Christians were not following a new faith but the perfection of the faith of their ancestors. Their current suffering was the very evidence they sought—evidence that they were children of God in whom He was perfecting righteousness (11—12).
- For these reasons and more, these believers needed to persevere, letting their lives be the evidence of their faith (13).

WHAT IT MEANS | *Christ: Supreme and Sufficient*

The chief theme of Hebrews is the superiority of Christ and why it is worth enduring persecution for His sake.

- **Supremacy of Christ:** Words like *better*, *more*, *great*, and *greater* appear some 45 times in the book, making Hebrews a book of superlatives about Christ and the New Covenant. Christ fulfills the entire OT: He was what it pointed to all along.

- **Sufficiency of Christ:** The sacrifice of Christ was so all-sufficient that it never has to be repeated. As God's final revelation (1:1-4), He fully meets every spiritual need.
- **Faith:** Believing OT Hebrews hoped for but never saw the fulfillment of prophecy in their lifetime, yet they had great faith (1:1:1). How much greater should be the faith of those who have realized Jesus as the completion of the Old Covenant (12:1, 2)?
- **Endurance:** Because Christ is sufficient and supreme over all, there is no fear of death for those who will endure in the face of opposition. But there is fear of judgment for those who turn their backs on Christ and the gospel (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29).
- **Last Days:** The advent of Christ signals the beginning of the last days, thus supporting the notion of Christ as God's final revelation to man (1:2; 2:5; 9:9-28; 12:22-29).

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU | Christ Is the Answer

As modern-day Christians, many of us do not wrestle with the ceremonies of the Levitical system and the confines of the law as the first-century Jewish Christians did. We also seldom face the type of soul-searching persecution that those believers did. Yet we are still tempted to give up. And we are still inclined to substitute other things—family rules, religious traditions, human wisdom, salvation by works—for Christ's once-for-all work.

Hebrews teaches that Christ is not only the answer for every aspect of faith, but God's final answer—the one and only fulfillment of His plan for His beloved. Christians have no higher calling but to press on in the faith, no matter the cost—confident in Christ and anchored in His Truth!

In Jesus we find more than the voice of God; we find the enduring principles of the faith, all knowledge of the truth, and direct access to the very grace of God to help us in our time of need.

SPOTLIGHT

THE ALL-STARS

Hebrews 11 is a "hall of fame" of Old Testament men and women who believed God. Here is the roster and where to learn more about them.

Abel Genesis 4:1-12	Isaac Genesis 21-28	Joshua and his army Joshua, especially chapter 6	Samson Judges 13-16
Enoch Genesis 5:18-24	Jacob Genesis 25-38 and 42-49	Rahab Joshua 2 and 6:22-25	Jephthah Judges 11
Noah Genesis 6-9	Joseph Genesis 37-50	Gideon Judges 6-8	David 1 Samuel 16-1 Kings 2
Abraham Genesis 12-25	Moses Exodus-Deuteronomy	Barak Judges 4-5	Samuel 1 Samuel 1-16 plus 25:1; 28:1-20

THE EPISTLE TO THE
HEBREWS

MANY JEWISH BELIEVERS, HAVING STEPPED out of Judaism into Christianity, want to reverse their course in order to escape persecution by their countrymen. The writer of Hebrews exhorts them to "go on to perfection" (6:1). His appeal is based on the superiority of Christ over the Judaic system. Christ is better than the angels, for they worship Him. He is better than Moses, for He created him. He is better than the Aaronic priesthood, for His sacrifice was once for all time. He is better than the law, for He mediates a better covenant. In short, there is more to be gained in Christ than to be lost in Judaism. Pressing on in Christ produces tested faith, self-discipline, and a visible love seen in good works.

Although the King James Version uses the title "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," there is no early manuscript evidence to support it. The oldest and most reliable title is simply *Provs Ebraïous*, "To Hebrews."

WATCH WORDS

- **express image** (exact representation)—1:3
- **make intercession** (plead with someone on behalf of another)—7:25
- **remission** (sending a person away forgiven, pardoned, with all punishment, obligation, or debt canceled by divine decision)—9:22
- **once for all** (finished; final and ultimate)—10:10 (also 7:27)
- **make perfect** (complete, fulfill, achieve the end goal)—12:23 (also 5:9)

TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

Faith to Stay on Course

Hebrews 12:1-4

God wants to transform our lives and redirect our course to follow his paths. The author of Hebrews understood this and likened the Christian life to a race. Our faith in Christ motivates us to run the race. And in spite of the number of times we stumble along the way, God's power ultimately gives us the strength to finish the race of faith.

Hebrews 11 has been called the "Hall of Faith." This chapter contains a long list of people who accomplished great things for God because of their faith. Chapter 12 then sums up the point of this list by reflecting "since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). This illustration refers to the races of ancient Greece. Athletes would strip off their tunics and robes so that they could run without difficulty. If someone tried to run in his robes, that person would get tangled up, losing both the race and the prize.

It is God's will for us to finish the race of life. The entangling robes of our recurrent sins need to be laid aside. Many of the spiritual greats in the "Hall of Faith" veered off course at times. But God transformed the course of their lives in order for them to get back in the race. Running to win the race of faith will call for exertion on our part too. Yet we are told to pace ourselves and run with endurance, remembering that "great cloud of witnesses" who have run the same race, finished the same course and are cheering us on. We can finish our race of faith if we continually look to God to help us.

Turn to 1 Peter 4:

Picture This

A Tale of Two Mountains • 12:18-24

The readers of Hebrews were tempted to turn their backs on the gospel of Jesus Christ and return to their former life of Judaism with its observance of the law. In a final attempt to get them to move forward, the author contrasts the two covenants—the Old and the New—by describing two mountains. These two mountains also tell the story of every Christian's life.

The first mountain, Sinai, represents the past—a place from which we have come. Sinai was the location on which the law was given. It stands for the Old Covenant and life lived under the law. The second mountain is Zion, which stands for the New Covenant and life under grace.

Mount Zion is one of the hills on which Jerusalem is built. In the time of David, it was a Jebusite stronghold that David captured and made his royal residence (2 Sam. 5:6-9). David also brought the ark of the covenant there (2 Sam. 6:2). Consequently, Zion became the dwelling place of God (Ps. 78:68, 69). Later, when Solomon built the temple north of Zion and subsequently moved the ark of the covenant there, the name Zion expanded to include the temple and became virtually synonymous for Jerusalem.

Mount Zion represents the New Jerusalem, a place of celebration and peace toward which we should be running. The children of Israel came to Mount Sinai to receive the law. The children of God come to Mount Zion to receive grace. They also receive these six blessings:

1. At Mount Zion is the city of God (12:22).
2. At Mount Zion is the company of angels (12:22).
3. At Mount Zion is the church of the firstborn (12:23).
4. At Mount Zion is the Creator of all (12:23).
5. At Mount Zion is the community of saints (12:23).
6. At Mount Zion is the Christ of the New Covenant (12:24).

Where once there was terror and distance between God and His people, now—because of Jesus—there is joy and closeness. Everything has changed.

HEBREWS 5:7

Tough Questions

Can a Christian lose his or her salvation? • 6:4-6

As one of six warning passages in Hebrews, these three verses are among the most debated in Scripture and have at least four different interpretations:

1. Some teach that these verses prove that believers can lose their salvation and "fall away." But of course, if the passage teaches this, it also teaches that those who have lost their salvation can never be saved a second time, for "to renew them again to repentance" is impossible. It is difficult to reconcile this view with the NT teaching on the believer's security in Christ (Rom. 8:28-39).
2. Others believe these verses refer to those who profess faith in Christ but are not genuinely saved. In other words, the fact that they fall away proves that their faith was not genuine in the first place and that they never really personally accepted the gospel.
3. There are some who claim that these warnings refer to Christians losing their reward and blessing now and in heaven, but not losing their salvation.
4. Finally, some teach that this passage assures believers through a timely warning and an urgent command, this view interprets the text best. The author of Hebrews does not teach that apostasy or falling from salvation is possible, but that it is impossible to go back and start over, because doing so would require the re-crucifixion of Christ. The believer's only option is to go on, to move forward!

Ultimately, Andrew Murray summarized it well: "In commerce, in study, in war . . . there is no safety but in advance. . . . The only sure mark of our being true Christians, of our really loving Christ, is the deep longing and the steady effort to know more of Him. Tens of thousands have proved that to be content with beginning well is but the first step on a backward course. . . . The whole point of the argument . . . is—Let us press on!" (Hebrews: The Holiest of All).

4 Steps to Change Your Mind

Read: Hebrews 2 | Habit: Engaging Scripture

When we read or hear the words of Scripture, do we “pay the most careful attention” (Heb 2:1)? How often have you noticed that by the end of the week, you’ve forgotten the Bible reading you did only a few days earlier?

Too often we attempt to build a framework for scriptural knowledge without first gathering the lumber and cement needed to create a solid foundation. To lay that groundwork check out this simple four-step process that could transform your life by, quite literally, changing your mind:

1. Choose a book of the Bible.
2. Read it in its entirety.
3. Repeat step #2, 20 times.
4. Repeat this process for all books of the Bible.

The benefits of following this process will become obvious. By fully immersing yourself in the text, you’ll come to truly *know* the text. You’ll deepen your understanding of each book, as well as your knowledge of the Bible as a whole.

This method is adapted from the book *How to Master the English Bible* by James M. Gray, so we’ll let him explain the benefits in his own words:

The first practical help I ever received in the mastery of the English Bible was from a layman ... One day I ventured to ask him how he had become possessed of the experience, when he replied, “By reading the epistle to the Ephesians. ...”

He had gone into the country to spend the Sabbath with his family on one occasion, taking with him a pocket copy of Ephesians, and in the afternoon, going out into the woods and lying down under a tree, he began to read it; he read it through at a single reading, and finding his interest aroused, read it through again in the same way, and, his interest increasing, again and again. I think he added that he read it some twelve or fifteen times, “and when I arose to go into the house,” said he, “I was in possession of Ephesians, or better yet, it was in possession of me, and I had been ‘lifted up to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus,’ in an experimental sense in which that had not been true in me before, and will never cease to be true in me again.”¹

Here are three suggestions for putting this reading plan into practice:

1. *Choose shorter books*—Because you’ll be reading an entire book of the Bible and not just a chapter or two, you’ll want to choose books you feel are manageable. You might want to start with a short book that has only a few chapters that can be read several times in one sitting. This will give you a sense of accomplishment and help develop the reading habit. For example, a short book like John or Jude can be read four or five times in one sitting, allowing you to finish the entire 20 readings in less

than a week. And then you always have the option to work your way up to more extensive readings.

2. *Read at your normal pace*—Treating the material reverently does not require reading at a slower than normal speed. Read for comprehension, ignoring the division of chapters and verses and considering each book as one coherent unit.

3. *Stick with the process*—After the eighth or ninth reading you’ll hit a wall similar to what runners face in marathons. The text will become dry and lose its flavor. You’ll want to move on to the next book or abandon the program altogether. Stick with it. Persevere and you’ll discover the treasures that repeated readings can provide.

Keep in mind that not every book will be equally rewarding. It doesn’t mean something is wrong with you if during one of your readings you find 2 John a bit redundant or Jude just plain boring. The Bible tells us “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching” (2Ti 3:16–17). Keep reading, and you’ll fully understand the truth of those verses.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY: Reading books of the Bible multiple times can transform our worldview.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: BIBLE STUDY AND MEDITATION

LETTING GOD’S WORD DO ITS WORK

Hebrews 4:12–14

ot only do we search God’s Word, but God’s Word also searches us. When we seek to understand God’s Word, we also seek to stand under its authority.

As we read the Bible, we may be tempted to draw back from its soul-searching power. We may argue with its teaching, resent its discipline or question its assertions. But these reactions simply alert us to the fact that God is searching our hearts. Spiritual renewal will come as we examine not only God’s Word but also our response to it. Why do we feel upset or challenged? Why does the Bible affect us in a particular way? What specific attitudes or behaviors are suggested that differ from our way of living? Questions such as these can move us beyond impulsive reactions to spiritually productive reflection. The psalmist wrote, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24).

When we surrender our resistance to the soul-searching power of the Bible, we find the grace of Jesus Christ will sustain us. The writer of Hebrews recognized that God’s Word not only exposes our sin, but it also reveals the remedy for that sin—Jesus, our great high priest. Through him we find his mercy that removes our sin and his power that works through our weaknesses.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

God’s Word is a mirror in which we often see things that are hidden during the ordinary course of life. It causes us to reflect on our motives, our inner thoughts and the unspoken assumptions and expectations that drive us. In what way does God’s Word make you uncomfortable? Is God’s Word exposing an area of your life that needs attention? Ask God to show you specific ways that you can change. Record these thoughts in your journal and refer to them from time to time to check on your progress. You may want to make the prayer of Psalm 139:23–24 your prayer as you regularly read your Bible.

For more on Bible study and meditation, turn to Deuteronomy 17.

Why Church Is Vital to Our Faith

Read: Hebrews 10:24–25 | Habit: Fellowship

In the movie *Man in the Moon*, a young girl asks her mom why her dad goes to his “church” (fishing) every Sunday morning instead of attending worship services with the rest of the family. The mother replies, “When he asked my daddy if he could marry me, my daddy said only if he agreed to find the Lord. And he says it’s a lot easier finding the Lord out fishing than in any church he’s ever been in.”

Many Christians take a similar view, thinking they can “find the Lord” better by spending time in nature or hanging out with friends than by worshiping in a church service. But the Bible is clear that as obedient Christians we are to not only regularly meet with fellow believers (see Heb 10:24–25), but we must also have confidence in the authority of church leaders (see Heb 13:17). Commenting on this passage, Derek Rishnaway says,

In many parts of the world today Christians risk their lives to attend worship services.

The point is very simple. In the Bible, Christians are commanded to submit and listen to the elders and deacons (pastors, etc.) whose job it is to guide, guard, and love them. Well, if you’re not a member of a church that has those leaders, you can’t very well submit to them now can you? The implication is that everyone who has professed faith in Christ is also simultaneously a part of a local body of believers.⁵

Why would we shun what others cherish? In many parts of the world today Christians risk their lives to attend worship services. As theologian Gavin Ortlund says,

I feel grieved and embarrassed wondering how Christians outside the contemporary West—Christians who walk a dozen miles to meet with their church, or who meet underground for a 10-hour service—would feel about the idea that sitting in an air-conditioned sanctuary for 90 minutes is just too difficult.⁶

While a person can be Christian and never step foot inside a church, Scripture makes it clear that to be obedient to Jesus and become more like him it is essential to consistently attend church.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY: For Christians, obeying the Lord and growing in spiritual maturity involves regularly worshiping and fellowshiping with other believers.

What Is Biblical Faith?

Read: Hebrews 11:1 | Habit: Faithfulness

What is faith? A common misperception—held even by some Christians—is that faith is believing something without sufficient evidence or reason. Biblical faith, however, is the exact opposite of “blind faith.” As Elton Trueblood said, “Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation.”

The most foundational definition of faith in the Bible is found in Hebrews 1:1. Notice the two parts to the definition. To understand faith, we need to understand the meaning of both parts:

Because we trust in God’s promises, we can be completely confident about the outcome.

► *Confidence in what we hope for*—We tend to think of hope as an emotional state that reflects what we would like to happen in the future but are unsure will actually happen. For instance, we may “hope” our favorite sports team will win the championship. Despite our earnest desire, though, we have no assurance they will win.

In Scripture, though, hope means something entirely different. Hope is a desire for a future outcome that is absolutely certain. Because we trust in God’s promises, we can be completely confident about the outcome. Because we know God can and will do what he says, our hope is a form of knowing. As R. C. Sproul says, “Hope is faith looking forward.”

► *Assurance about what we do not see*—“Seeing is believing.” “I’ll believe it when I see it.” We like to see for ourselves, and there’s a tendency to think that if something can be seen then it’s tangible and real, while what cannot be seen (or experienced by one of our other senses) is less certain or even unknowable.

In reality, though, we place a great deal of “faith” in what can’t be seen. We can’t see tomorrow, yet has that ever stopped us from making plans in expectation it will come? We have faith that tomorrow will occur because we’ve experienced a lot of “tomorrows” throughout our lives. Our assurance is based on our prior experience.

Similarly, we have assurance that God will do what we cannot see because we know and trust him. If God tells us something is going to happen, we can have absolute assurance it will actually happen. We have faith in God because he’s proven he’s absolutely trustworthy.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY: Faith is not believing in God but rather believing God.

Scripture is rich with testimony about good angels who are messengers of God and the tragic rebellion of bad angels (demons) who serve Satan in his attempts to undermine God, His purposes, and His people. In fact, the OT mentions angels more than 100 times, and the NT mentions them 160 times.

Hebrews 1:14 gives us one of the clearest statements about the purpose of heaven's angels: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" Angels help to ensure that God's will on earth is done.

They were present at the giving of the law to Moses (2:2; Acts 7:38). An angel rescued the apostles from prison (Acts 5:17-20). In Revelation, John is led by an angel to see his vision (Rev. 17:1; 21:9; 22:6), and angels play a key role in dispensing God's judgment upon the earth in the end times (Rev. 8:2; 14:17-20; 15:1; 16). Angels also appeared to the mothers of Samson (Judg. 13:2-6), John the Baptist (Luke 1:13), and Jesus (Luke 1:26) before each child was born. Angels played an important role during the earthly life and ministry of Jesus as well—from announcing His birth to the shepherds (Luke 2:10-15), to strengthening Him after the wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:11; Mark 1:13) and in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43), to rolling the stone from His tomb (Matt. 28:2). They will also accompany Him at His second coming (Matt. 25:31).

Not surprisingly, when angels in their true form come face-to-face with humans on earth, the humans often are told, "Do not be afraid" (Matt. 28:5; Luke 1:13). A close encounter with a supernatural being startles the beholders. (Even Balaam's donkey was shocked by the appearance of an angel in the road [Num. 22].) Yet angels are created beings too (Ps. 148:2-5; Col. 1:16)—something people are prone to forget. This means they have limited capabilities (Matt. 24:36; 1 Pet. 1:12).

They also are not equal to God or superior to Jesus, as some have claimed. The writer of Hebrews shows Jesus to be superior to the angels, for only He is God's Son and the reflection of God's glory and character (1:3). However, because angels are supernatural beings—created on a higher plane than humans (2:7, 9; Ps. 8:5)—they are able to help us. Psalm 103:20 says angels "excel in strength" and "do [God's] word, heeding the voice of His word."

For God and His ministering angels, their greatest adversary is Satan and his army of demonic angels. Satan is sometimes called God's opposite, but God has no true opposite. Only God is uncreated, all-powerful, independent, infinite, and eternal. Satan, on the other hand, is none of these.

Satan has been allowed a limited rule over all the earth (1 John 5:19). The time in which he and his evil forces have in which to operate, however, is already running down. During Jesus' earthly ministry, our Lord "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). When Christ cast out demons, it was a sign that God's kingdom had already invaded the rule of Satan to bring it to an end (Matt. 12:28).

Satan and his angels do operate in the physical realm, but their battleground is primarily the mind and spirit, where they seek to deceive God's people into disbelieving and disobeying Him. Christ is an advocate for those Satan accuses. He defends His people with His own shed blood (Rev. 12:10, 11). He has paid the price for our sin and made Satan's accusations groundless.

Jesus has already won the victory (Eph. 1:20, 21) so that even in the present we can overcome Satan and his demons by the means God Himself has provided: the armor of God—truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and Scripture (Eph. 6:10-18).

For Further Reading: Ps. 91:1; Eph. 1:20, 21; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 12:10, 11; 20:10

SEEK GOD AND SURRENDER TO HIM

A God Worthy of Faith

Hebrews 11:1-10

If we desire spiritual renewal, we must have faith that our spiritual pursuit will be rewarded. But what is faith? The Bible says, "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is a certainty that what we desire will come about. The Bible also tells us that our faith is grounded in our very understanding of God: "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). If we truly believe that our search will lead somewhere—that God will indeed grant us spiritual renewal—then we will be willing to actually seek God.

If our faith has not matured to that point yet, we can start by asking God for the faith we need. This may seem like putting the cart before the horse, but God is the only one who can give us faith. In a sense, we must come to him with empty hands and ask him to fill us with faith. Learning about God through the Bible and seeing his provision for us reinforces the faith God has given us. With this reinforced faith we are renewed in our spiritual walk.

Turn to James 4.

FW The Aspects of Faith • 11:1

In the Bible, faith has the following three aspects:

1. *Perception (The Mind)*. A person cannot have saving faith unless the mind embraces the content of the gospel. People must accept the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as fact and then understand the personal implications of those events in their lives. Faith is not blind, but it is only as valid as the truthfulness of its object.

Over the years, in talking to people about faith, I have asked them this question: If you were going ice fishing this year on a frozen lake in the mountains, would you rather have a little bit of faith in a section of ice four-feet thick, or a huge amount of faith in a section of ice one-inch thick? To my amazement, many people choose to have a huge amount of faith in the thinner ice. Besides making a note never to go ice fishing with them, I love to point out that the object of faith must be worthy of their faith, or the amount of faith will not matter.

2. *Persuasion (The Emotions)*. Although people may be under persuasion at the same time that they receive knowledge, many know the gospel but do not accept the gospel. Faith is a real conviction based upon the revelation of God: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).
3. *Volition (The Will)*. In this aspect, a person's will responds with a personal commitment to and complete acceptance of Christ as the only hope for eternal salvation. Saving faith, then, consists of someone embracing all of Christ with their whole being.

Real faith does not bypass the mind and the emotions. In a similar vein, intellectual understanding or warm feelings do not qualify as biblical faith if they do not lead to trust and action. Faith is an action word: Faith does. Faith works.

God calls Christians to avoid any discrepancies between what they say they believe and what they practice. And yet, plenty of people who identify themselves as Christians are not actively involved in a local congregation of believers. In other words, many Christians seem to regard regular participation in a local church as optional.

But the NT instructs us otherwise. The author of Hebrews declares: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another" (10:24, 25).

Here are some reasons why every Christian should be an active member of a local church:

The body of Christ. Every Christian is a member of the universal, spiritual body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Part of becoming a Christian (Eph. 2:1–10) is being united with other believers into one body, the church (Eph. 2:11–22). This invisible union is expressed in hundreds of thousands of localized communities of believers around the world. The characteristics of the universal church—fellowship, unity, spiritual gifts, the indwelling of the Spirit, a mission to the world—are to be worked out in individual churches. To be part of the universal church (a believer in Christ) without being part of a local church (actively participating) is to miss out on God's plan to manifest the reality of Christ to the world . . . and to you.

Maturity. In Ephesians 4, Paul writes that Christians should live, minister, and work together in community so that they can experience the fullness of Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13). The body of Christ becomes stronger and more mature when every member participates (Eph. 4:16). To the degree that individual Christians isolate themselves from the rest of the body of Christ, they delay their own maturity and slow the growth of the entire body.

Spiritual Gifts. God has given every Christian grace in the form of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3, 6; 1 Cor. 12:18; Eph. 4:7). These individual gifts of grace are intended for the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12)—to strengthen the body of believers so the church can continue to change the world. Certainly, people can find ways to express their spiritual gifts outside the gathering of a church, but these gifts of grace are primarily given to enable Christians to complete the work of God's kingdom on this earth. If you are not actively engaged in the body of Christ, you will not be touched and strengthened by the gifts of others. More importantly, you will not be using the gifts God has given you—gifts the church needs. The church can only grow when all its members are contributing in the unique ways God has equipped each person. The church needs you!

Peer Pressure. Scripture tells us that a healthy form of peer pressure can change us when we participate in something larger than ourselves. When we are around people who "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works" (10:24), we are more likely to be "stirred up" ourselves. "Exhorting one another" (10:25) is how we are challenged to grow in Christ. The local church is God's primary venue for such spiritual transformation.

Perseverance. On a very personal level, your ability to stay the course as a Christian is directly linked to your participation in the body of Christ. Our enemy, Satan, constantly seeks to devour God's people away from God's path. Those who fail to meet regularly with other believers will be more likely to give up in the face of temptation, discouragement, or problems (10:25).

So, if you are a Christian who is not actively connected to a local community of believers, prayerfully take that next step to join a church and get involved. Others need the benefit of your gifts and service and faith, and their strength and encouragement will help you keep the course.

For Further Reading: Acts 20:28; Rom. 12:3–5; 1 Cor. 10:31–33; Eph. 2:11–22; Col. 3:14–16

PRESERVE SPIRITUAL GAINS

Our Shield of Togetherness

Hebrews 10:23–34

Preserving our spiritual gains often involves spiritual warfare. God does not expect us to win our spiritual battles alone. God wants us to grow spiritually within a network of mutual commitment and accountability, helping each other to think and live in new ways. Alone we are vulnerable to temptation. Together we form a shield of protection for one another.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16). A believer's faith is their trust in Christ for salvation. Faith also means, in general terms, staying true to our convictions. Paul's analogy of the shield of faith paints a picture of the shields carried by Roman soldiers. These shields covered the entire body. To advance in battle, a group of soldiers would assemble together, making a wall of shields for protection as they moved forward.

In like manner, believers in the faith are told to stick together. The writer of Hebrews wrote, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24–25). We are to meet together with other believers so that we can stand firm in times of spiritual battle. Our mutual encouragement and shared faith in God and his Word will serve as a strong shield to preserve our spiritual gains.

Turn to 2 Peter 1.

FOR REFLECTION The Danger of Drifting • 21

"We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the discipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated." —D. A. Carson in *For the Love of God*

"As a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?" —C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*

