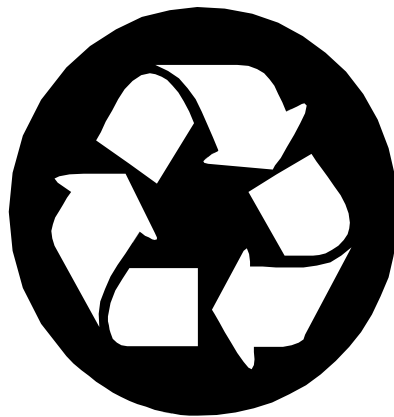


**NO COMPARISON!
THE MAGNIFICENT SON**

**STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF
HEBREWS**



**TERM 2, 2005
PART I**

ST ALBAN'S PRESS

HEBREWS INTRODUCTION:

The book in the New Testament known to us as Hebrews is perhaps one of the most illusive of all the New Testament literature. When first approaching any of the books of scripture, we need to understand their background. When this is applied to the New Testament letters, it means attempting to answer questions such as who wrote the letter? Who did they write it to? Where was it written from and delivered to? When was it written? What are the circumstances that brought it into being, ie why was it written? All of these questions are important questions to ask when starting the study of a New Testament letter. However, as William L. Lane has noted, “Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles.”¹ None of the information that we would like to know is found explicitly in this letter. Other letters in the New Testament start with a clear identification of the author and the intended readers, but no such introduction is to be found for Hebrews. Any information about the background must be deduced from “hints” at best in the letter itself.

So we know that the author was one who had the message of salvation confirmed to him by those who heard Jesus (2:3), ie he was most probably a disciple of the apostles. We also know that he was a friend of Timothy (13:23), but outside of that we have very little concrete information. From his letter we know that he was most likely a Jewish convert to Christianity as he is so well versed in the Old Testament and the practices of Judaism. He is also a very educated man, as the style and substance of his letter betrays.² Likewise the people who he is writing to are as mysterious as the author. He assumes too much of the Old Testament for us to say that these people were not Jewish in their background. However, the author has known them for a long time and has known of their conversion to Christianity from long ago (5:11-14, 6:9-11). It seems as if many in the congregation were faltering in their faith and their walk with God. They were tempted to abandon Christianity and revert back to their Jewish ways. And so the author’s challenge is to “to encourage a group of discouraged believers drifting from real Christianity by bolstering their commitment to draw near to God and to endure in commitment to Christ”.³ This makes the message of Hebrews as applicable today as ever.

Of all the New Testament letters, Hebrews is probably the most removed from our world of experience and knowledge. It was “written almost two millennia ago, in the Greek language, by an educated person of Jewish descent, in the form of a synagogue sermon, and for a church located in Greco-Roman culture. To say the least, this message is packaged in strange wrappings and lies on the far side of a wide cultural and linguistic divide”.⁴ However, time spent in the Word of God is always rewarding. We must do the hard work to bridge that cultural divide, but I think you’ll find then when we do, the reward will be well and truly worth the effort.

My prayer is that as we study this book together over this term our eyes will be opened to the glory of Christ, our faith will be strengthened and our pace will be quickened as we run the race marked out for us.

Steve Rockwell

¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*. Dallas: Word. 1991. p.xlvii (WBC)

² Some have described Heb 1:1-4 as “the most perfect Greek sentence in the New Testament” (George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1998. p25 (NIVAC))

³ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1998. p22 (NIVAC)

⁴ *Ibid*, p.33

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STUDY 1

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST (1:1-4)

Hebrews starts with an incredible couple of verses. They are rich in truth and deep in insight. They form a fantastic overture and backdrop to the letter. The first thing that the author wants his readers to know is that God has communicated with them...

1. Have you ever had someone say to you that they might believe in God if he just spoke to them, or maybe showed up? What would you say to such a person?

One of the most fundamental truths concerning God that is confirmed for us here is that God is a God who communicates with people.

2. Complete the following table:
God Spoke.....

	Old Communication	New Communication
When?		
To Who?		
Through Whom?		
How?		(implied)

3. List some of the ways in which God has spoken in the past? (For examples see Gen 3:8-9, Ex 3:1-6, Ex 20 (esp 20:19-21) Num 22:21-31, 1 Sam 3, Isaiah 6, Dan 5)

4. What does the phrase, “these last days” refer to?

5. What does it mean that God has spoken by His Son? (Read John 1:1-18 in discussing our answer)

6. Should we expect any further communication from God after speaking through his Son?

7. There are 8 things that the author wants us to know about the Son. List them below

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8. What is your picture of who Jesus is? The above description tells us about who the Son is (ie His nature), about what he has done (ie His Works) and about what he has accomplished (ie His Status). Are any of the above things missing in your picture of Jesus?

9. What does it mean that Jesus is superior to the angels and why is it important to mention here?
(Think through in light of 1:5-2:18. We will look more at this next week. To Be Continued ...)

10. Can God speak in various way and at various times still today?

11. Should we expect God to reveal himself in various different ways still today?

12. What should we think when someone says that they have a revelation from God that goes beyond what the bible teaches us?

STUDY 2

SUCH A GREAT SALVATION (1:5-2:18)

Last weeks study ended with the affirmation that Jesus was superior to the angels (1:4). This is where the author picks it up again in 1:5 and proves this by using quotes from the Old Testament.

1. Spend time noting and observing how the quotes in 1:5-14 reaffirm what was said in 1:4.

2b 10

3a 8

3b 13

4 6-7

2. The author spoke in 1:1 about the way God has spoken in the past. What do we learn about the author's view of the Old Testament from all these quotes?

3. Do these verses further help our view of who Jesus is? What more can we learn from these quotes about Jesus?

9. Read Psalm 8. How would you summarise its teaching about mankind?

The problem is that as mankind, we never lived up to what God had created us to be. And so now Christ comes as a man. The one who is higher than the angels, lowers himself to become a man, a perfect man, and we wait for the time when everything is subject to Him. Note the overtones of Philippians 2:5-11.

10. What does it mean for Jesus, the author of our salvation, to be made “perfect through suffering” (2:10)? Hasn’t the author spent all of Ch 1 telling us that Jesus is in fact God himself?

11. 2:9 says that Jesus “suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone”. What a great verse! Along with tasting death for everyone, what other things do 2:10-18 tell us that Jesus’ death achieved:

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12. Jesus, who is “the exact representation of God’s being” (1:3), was made “a little lower than the angels” (2:9) in becoming a human being. What reasons are given for the necessity of Jesus to be human in 2:10-18?

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13. Summarise the main things we have learnt about Jesus from Chapters 1&2. Who is he? What has he done?

14. The original readers were ‘drifting away’ from such a great salvation. What can cause us to drift away from the salvation that is found in Jesus?

15. Because Jesus is God’s final word, there is no escape for those who ignore the salvation found in him. Have you found that salvation? If so then thank him. If not, perhaps you might want to think seriously about 2:3.

STUDY 3

WORTHY OF GREATER HONOUR THAN MOSES (3:1-19)

1. Therefore...fix your thoughts on Jesus. (3:1). To recap, what things have we learnt about Jesus that makes the author conclude that we should fix our eyes on him?

For a Jewish person, Moses was a highly esteemed leader. This highly exalted view of Moses is used by our author again, from the idea of the lesser to the greater, to show the superiority of Christ.

2. How is Jesus like Moses?

3. How is Jesus greater than Moses?

4. Read Numbers 13:26-14:35. What does the Psalmist tell us about the Israelites in Psalm 95? What was their problem?

5. Why does the author of Hebrews include this quote from Psalm 95? (Note his view of the Old Testament as the inspired word of God, it wasn't the Psalmist speaking, it was what the Holy Spirit said)

6. The author applies the "Today" of Psalm 95 to the today of today. Thus this warning has wrung through the ages. First to the people in the wilderness then to the readers of Psalm 95, then to the original recipients of Hebrews, and now to us who read it today. What is the warning then for us today?

7. Note the twofold encouragement in 3:12-13. Note also how there is a flow of logic. We do 3:12 by doing 3:13.

8. 3:16-18 is the crux of this argument and leads onto what we will look at next week in Chapter 4. Remember the idea of the lesser to the greater. Fill in the table on the next page to help you understand where the author is heading

	Lesser	Greater
The Salvation Seen		(see 2:3b-4)
The Response		
The Result		

9. In light of this, what are we to make of the conditional statements in 3:6 and 3:14?

10. This is the second real warning so far in the book (the first being in 2:3a). How are we to respond to such warnings?

11. What would you say to someone who shows no real signs of being a Christian now but who says they are OK because they accepted Jesus as their Lord earlier in life?

STUDY 4

ENTERING GOD'S REST (4:1-13)

In Chapter 3 our author used the story of the Israelites rebellion and unfaithfulness to show how God forced them to wander in the desert for 40 years. He encouraged us not to have such hard hearts as they did. Here in Chapter 4 he continues this idea, but now focuses on the promised rest that the Israelites missed out on.

1. The NIV says in 4:1 “let us be careful” which is a polite way to translate the original verb which literally means “let us be afraid”. What is it that we should be afraid of and why?

2. What does it mean that “they had the gospel preached to them” (4:2)?

4:1 seems to be a bit of a jump, “since the promise of His rest still stands”? Why does it still stand? This is something the author will explain in 4:3-10. So let's follow his logic through.

3. What do we learn about God's rest from Gen 2:1-3?

4. Israel were supposed to enter God's rest when they entered into the promised land. Did they ever experience God's rest in the way it was supposed to be?

5. So when God spoke through David about the "Today" what was he saying about the possibility of entering God's Rest?

4:8 then reaffirms 4:1a and shows how the author got to this understanding. And 4:11 reiterates the challenge of 4:1b.

6. What does it mean to rest from one's own work? (Note we do not rest from work all together! We rest from "one's own" work)

7. Read Matt 11: 28-30. What light does Jesus promise in these verses from Matthew shed on our understanding of this passage?

8. Is this rest a spiritual or a physical rest? Is it a promise for life now or is it a promise of something in the future?

9. At the Exodus, entering into God's Rest was about physically entering into the Promised Land. What is this passage telling us about where and when we enter into God's rest?

10. 4:12-13 are often quoted to bolster our understanding of the power of scripture. In the context of Hebrews 4, what are these verses referring to?

11. God's rest is something far too wonderful to be missing out on. We should be afraid that some of us might (4:1, 11). Have you entered into the eternal rest promised by God? As long as it's called "Today" there is still a chance to do that.

12. Entering God's rest comes through Christ, but we will not experience it fully until we find ourselves at home in heaven. Read Rev 7:9-17, 21:1-8. How do these images add to our understanding of the rest we receive through Christ?

STUDY 5

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST (4:14-5:10)

The author alluded to Jesus being our High Priest back in 2:17 and 3:1, but doesn't take up the idea fully until now. This notion of Jesus being the High Priest will occupy the author's purpose, with an aside, up until 10:25

1. Many religions have priests and sacrifices. List some of the roles that you think a high priest performed(s).
2. Do you think that you need a High Priest? Why? Why not?
3. Compare 4:14-16 with 10:19-25.
4. All that is written in these next chapters that explain how Jesus is our High Priest and how he functions as a High Priest should be an encouragement for us too:

* 14b

* 16

5. Is it a sin to be tempted? What does it mean for you that Jesus has been tempted in every way that you have, yet was without sin?

6. Who were the High Priests of the Old Covenant?

7. In what ways is Jesus similar to the High Priests under the Old Covenant?

8. In what ways is Jesus different to the High Priests under the Old Covenant?

9. It is important for the author to prove the legitimacy of Jesus High Priesthood. Two things stand in the way of this for a Jewish mind. Firstly a priest must be appointed by God, not take the honour on himself (5:4). How do the quotes from Psalm 2 and 110 show that this was not a problem for Jesus?

10. What does it mean for Jesus to be made perfect ? (See thoughts on 2:10 in Study 2, p10)

The Second problem for a Jew is that a Priest had to be a descendant of Aaron. Jesus was clearly not a descendant of Aaron, so the author introduces us to a greater priesthood, one in the order of Melchizedek. Don't worry about this at the moment, we will look into it in Study 7.

11. Remember, all this is supposed to help us draw near to God in confidence and hold firmly to our faith. Has your understanding of this passage helped you to do these things?

12. How can Jesus help us in our daily struggle to be obedient to God?

STUDY 6

CONFIDENT OF BETTER THINGS (5:11-6:12)

This is probably by far the most controversial section of the book of Hebrews. Many people insist on what is known as the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints”, that is that those who are truly regenerate and elected by God cannot lose their salvation. On the other hand, many people reject this teaching on the basis of personal experience (we all know people who seemed to be the strongest Christians who have now wandered from the faith), and on the basis of passages such as this passage in Hebrews.

WARNING! This discussion usually ends up getting quite heated!

Spend time before the bible study thinking about where you stand in this debate and praying that all in the group would be able to humbly submit to God’s word on this issue, and discuss it in a godly manner.

1. Read Heb 5:11, in light of Heb 5:8-10 and 6:19-20. What does this tell us about the section in Heb 5:11-6:12?
2. Why does the author go on this side track? What is his concern?
3. We often hear 5:13 used in all sorts of contexts, “you need milk, not solid food”. People will say they want to move on to the solid stuff, not the milk of Christianity. In the context here, what do you think the author actually meant by his metaphor? What is the solid food? (see 5:13-14)

4. Notice how the author does not give them milk! He does not pamper to their immaturity, but pulls them along (6:1), knowing that it is God who will grow them to maturity (6:3). In light of 5:12, 6:9-10 & 10:32-34 what do you think this shows us about the original readers?

5. In 1 Cor 2:2 Paul says that he resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. If Jesus is what Christianity is all about, how can the author write here that he wants his readers to “leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity”?

6. List the things that the author does not wish to lay again as a foundation. In light of question 3 above, what is missing in this list??

Heb 6:4-6 are harsh words, but before we look at them closely, read Heb 2:1-4; 3:6, 12-14; 4:1-2; 10:26-31; 12:25-29. These words are not in isolation, Hebrews could be considered as one long letter of encouragement and warning.

7. The best interpreter of scripture is scripture itself. We believe that the bible, being the word of God, does not contradict itself. How then do we read Heb 6:4-6 in light of John 10:27-29 and 1 John 2:19?

8. The keys to understanding 6:4-6 are in the illustration in 6:7-8 and the confidence in 6:9-10. The illustration of agriculture is no coincidence, it is a common theme throughout the bible. What does it remind you of? (See Mark 4:1-20)

9. In the Parable of the Sower there are 4 groups of people mentioned. How many of these groups are truly Christian?

10. At the early stages of development of the seeds in the Parable of the Sower, how would one know which ones would wither, which ones would be choked by the world, and which ones would produce a good crop?

11. Is it possible for the people in the Parable of the Sower, whose plants eventually die, to be described in the terms used in Heb 6:4-6?

12. What does the author mean when he says that people who fall away are “crucifying the Son of God all over again”?

13. Yet the writer is confident of far greater things for his readers, he is confident that they are the good soil. Why?

14. Why do you think he gives such strong warnings all throughout his letter, and particularly here?

15. In John 10:27 Jesus says “My sheep listen to my voice”. Do you need to listen to God’s warning here in Hebrews. The question is not theoretical, “Can Christians fall away”, it is personal, “Will you fall away”?