

Hebrews-by Nathan White

Chapter 1

The entirety of the book of Hebrews centers around Christ being better than what came before Him. Over and over again, the author takes the shadows present in the Old Testament and shows us that Christ is their substance. That is the driving theme of this letter, so it makes complete sense that it would open with a statement about Christ's supremacy. From the outset, we see that this book leaves no questions about the divinity of Jesus. He is the radiance of God's glory. He was present and active at creation. Even now, Jesus upholds the entire universe. While the messages of the Old Testament were delivered through intermediaries, we have now seen the exact imprint of God's nature face to face. He is, by His very nature, superior to the prophets who testified about Him and is better than the angels who are simply "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation," (v.14) which is found in Jesus Christ. Notably, we already see the author quoting Psalms, which will happen again, and insisting that they have always been about the person and work of Jesus.

Chapter 2

Accompanying the theme of Christ's supremacy over what came before Him are various warning sections. Each of these sections will be built on the argument that if rejecting and neglecting types and shadows was a dangerous act that deserved God's judgment, then rejecting and neglecting the now-revealed substance of those types and shadows must be even more dangerous. Would we really expect to escape God's judgment if we neglect so great a gift? Here, Hebrews outlines exactly how Jesus is the founder of this great salvation that we should not neglect. In grand and glorious language, we see Jesus tasting death on our behalf (v.9), bringing his work to completion through his own suffering (v.10), calling those He saves and makes holy His brothers (v.11), becoming like us in our weakness to conquer Satan, destroy death and free us from slavery (v.14-15), and intercede for us in our temptation (v.18). Surely, we would be fools to neglect so great a salvation (v.3).

Chapter 3

The theme of Christ's supremacy over all that pointed to Him continues as Hebrews examines the figure of Moses. We could spend this entire reflection considering the ways that Moses foreshadowed Christ. Just as Moses led Israel out of Egypt, Jesus leads God's people out of a greater slavery to a greater Promised Land. Where Moses plead with God not to kill rebellious Israel, Jesus offered Himself in place of His own rebellious people. Jesus is the better lawgiver. He is Himself the sustenance for His people in the wilderness. He deals with our foolish, hardened hearts without ever sinning like Moses did. The parallels are almost innumerable. Hebrews is drawing our attention to the greatness of Christ who is faithful as a son where Moses was faithful as a servant and if opposing the servant denied Israel rest in the Promised Land, would disbelieving the Son not bring upon us a great judgment as well? Should we really expect to receive God's rest if we oppose Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Chapter 4

Carrying on the parallel to the Exodus narrative as well as drawing on Psalm 95, Hebrews now calls its readers to turn in repentance to enter God's promised rest. He makes the very clear point that the entrance to the Promised Land foreshadowed a greater rest, offered to us in Christ (v.8). Their entrance into the land was never an end in itself. It pointed us to what was coming in Christ and the rest that is given to those who believe (v.3). And that is really the crucial thing for us to remember in this chapter. It might be easy to read this as a call to action and, in one sense, it is. But that action is to turn from our sin and believe Christ, whose work is

enough to cover our sins, who offers us mercy and grace (v.3,14-6). The entrance to this rest is dependent not on our self-righteousness, but on our recognition, in submission to the Word of God, that we are sinful, that we will have to give an account for that sin, and to throw ourselves wholly on the mercy of Jesus Christ, our great high priest (v.11-16).

Chapter 5

Admittedly, we're entering the portions of Hebrews that typically give people the most trouble. Without a strong grounding in the Old Testament, we will likely have no idea who this Melchizedek is or why he is important. We might also raise an eyebrow at Christ "learning obedience" and "being made perfect." (v.8-9). Each of these is important, not only to this chapter, but to all of Hebrews. Melchizedek is the first priest we see in the Bible, ministering to Abraham in Genesis 14. There is much worth saying, but the main point here is that Christ's priesthood is not like the Levitical priesthood. Rather, He is in a different, higher order of priesthood. His "being made perfect" and "learning obedience" are not to indicate that he ever lacked godliness, but instead that his work was made complete in his suffering and that, as he lived, he consistently displayed his obedience in the face of various trials and temptations. He then knew, according to his truly human nature, what it was to suffer and to be tempted. This is not a rejection of the divinity of Christ that Hebrews has previously displayed.

Chapter 6

In order to address the most common question that arises from reading Hebrews 6, this reflection will focus heavily on the warning in verses 4-8. To begin with, I do not believe this is talking about a regenerate person forfeiting their salvation, which would be a direct contradiction to many texts including John 6:39-40, 1 John 2:19, and Philippians 1:6. However, I also believe that it must be more than a hypothetical situation with no bite. I think that this passage refers not simply to people who professed faith, but never really believed, and walked away. I think this grave warning speaks to a particularly rare situation in which a person is fully aware of the truth of the gospel and participates in an open-eyed, high-handed rejection in spite of fully knowing - perhaps even openly admitting - that it is completely true. We might think of the council in Acts 4 who knew John and Peter were telling the truth about Christ, but hated them for it. Or even the pharisees in Mark 3 who knew that the miracles of Jesus must have been done by the power of God, but accused Him of exorcising demons by the power of Satan instead. I believe it entails a full knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and actively setting oneself against Him. Such a position would quite literally be demonic. (Because this is an unusually difficult passage and these reflections are brief, feel free to email me at nathan@decatuRPCA.org with any further questions about my position or competing readings.)

Chapter 7

In this chapter, Hebrews dives more deeply into the matter of Christ's priesthood in the order of Melchizedek that we first saw in chapter five. This would have been of great importance for the Jewish recipients of this letter. If they are to assume that Jesus is their final high priest and that they should not return to their old priesthood then they have to reckon with the fact that Jesus did not come from the line of Levi. They could make sense of his kingship because he came from the line of Judah, but for many of them, that lineage would exclude him from the priesthood. However, the author of Hebrews very helpfully notes that Melchizedek was a priest of Yahweh long before the Levitical priesthood was established, which necessarily means that the Levites were not the only legitimate order of priests. By attaching Jesus to Melchizedek, Hebrews makes the point that his priesthood actually predates the Levites. Further, the author begins to show how Christ's priesthood is even better than that of the Levites by noting that though the Levites all eventually died, Christ holds the office and intercedes for us for eternity.

Chapter 8

Here, Hebrews continues to explore exactly how Jesus Christ is a better priest than any who came before. We have examined how Christ's priesthood predates the Levites and how Christ's priesthood lasts forever because it cannot be ended by death. But now, the author of Hebrews begins to very openly and very clearly state that the entire priesthood was a shadow for which Jesus is the substance (v.5). Their service was always intended to point forward to a better priest who was coming. Their earthly service quietly pointed to heavenly promises that would be fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The ministry that Jesus fulfills is "much more excellent" (v.6) because the promises have been brought to fruition. What we have been given now is immeasurably better than what we had before. As tempting as it might have been for the first audience of this letter to go back to Judaism for the sake of comfort or safety, they would be walking away from the promises of Christ in favor of shadows that were vanishing away.

Chapter 9

Having dealt with how Jesus Christ is our final high priest, Hebrews now starts to pivot toward how Jesus is also our final sacrifice. Formerly, priests entered the presence of God by the blood of bulls and goats. Now, our great high priest approaches the throne of God to intercede for us by means of his own blood. Again, we see in no uncertain terms, that the former sacrifices, though good, were never intended to be final or permanent. They were always meant to point us toward Christ, the final sacrifice for sins. More to the point, as the author notes in 13-14, if "the blood of goats and bulls" or "the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer" could momentarily purify Israel, how much more sure can we be that the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all of our sin? How much more confidence can we have in our standing before God? In Christ, and in Christ only, we can boldly approach God, knowing that the blood of Jesus is enough to "purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God." (v.14).

Chapter 10

The author of Hebrews brings into clearer focus in exactly what way Jesus is a greater sacrifice than those of the Old Covenant. He builds up to the promise of a "full assurance of faith" (v.22) by emphasizing the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. It was impossible for the sacrifices of bulls and goats to actually do away with sin, which was evident in the fact that they had to be made over and over again (vs.1-4). Christ's single sacrifice was enough to end the sacrifices forever because it was enough to actually pay for our sin. Similarly, although priests had to stand to offer their sacrifices, Jesus Christ *sat down* at the right hand of God (vs.11-13) because the work was finished. The basis for our assurance is not primarily found in our being good. It is not primarily found in our knowing the right answers. These are certainly good things, and although a changed life is a sign of God's work in us, our confidence should not be in the strength of our faith. Our confidence should be in the final, sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ in our place.

Chapter 11

After multiple warning passages that call readers to hold to the faith that they claim to profess, the author of Hebrews begins to show us what faith really is. This has become something of a famous chapter of the Bible and people often run to it to look at examples of faithfulness. While we should certainly be encouraged by the faithful testimonies of those who have believed God's promises before us, if we turn this chapter into nothing more than a list of examples to follow, we will eventually be crushed under the weight of it. We will inevitably find that in ourselves, we are unable to live the sorts of lives described here. As we read these stories, we should remember that the courage of these men and women is not rooted in themselves, but in the

God they trust. This is the very reason that chapter twelve will open with a call to lay aside what hinders us and keep our eyes set on Jesus Christ who is himself the fulfillment of the promises that every man, woman, and child in this chapter believed.

Chapter 12

The author now encourages his readers to endure the suffering they face with faithfulness by reminding them of the hostility that Jesus Christ endured both from and for us. Further, this suffering that they face actually functions as a form of discipline which conforms them more to the likeness of Christ and will produce in them “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” (v.11). This future-oriented hope is then meant to “lift [their] drooping hands and strengthen [their] weak knees.” (v.12). In Christ, their suffering is not without purpose and it is not without end. God will use it to sanctify them, glorify himself, and on the other side of it, bring them into “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (v.28). The strength to hold fast through their trial is not based on some power or courage they have within themselves. It is centered entirely on the work, example, power, and promises of Jesus Christ that are displayed and offered to them in the gospel.

Chapter 13

The final chapter of Hebrews is full of exhortations to remain faithful. We see commands to be hospitable (v.2), which no doubt would have been especially dangerous for a church being persecuted, commands to uphold sexual morality (v.4), commands about contentment (v.5), commands about honoring leaders (v.7), and commands about protecting true doctrine (v.8-9). It would be easy to see all of these as disconnected thoughts that the author just wanted to make sure to include, but this all seems to relate to their suffering. They are not to give into the culture, prioritize their safety over their faithfulness, or abandon and malign those who are shepherding them faithfully through these trials. Further, just like everything else in Hebrews, the commands are rooted in the suffering and reproach that Jesus Christ endured for us (vs.11-13). Though it would be easy to use trials as an excuse to shrink back from these things, both they and we are called to continue to offer sacrifices that are pleasing to God, not in the form of sin offerings, but in the form of good works and generosity (v.16), sure that God will equip his people with all that we need to do his will (v.21).

-Reflecting on Hebrews-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Hebrews. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Hebrews before we move forward?

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. John 4.24