

Chapter 1 - Why study the letter to the Hebrews

I want you to fall in love with Jesus. And I want you to fall in love with the letter to the Hebrews, which is all about Him.

I never truly appreciated the confidence that God wants me to have in coming to him in prayer before I studied Hebrews. I never before realised what a fervent and faithful intercessor Jesus is on my behalf as He stands before God as my High Priest. I had never realised what value God places on persevering faith and steadfast confidence in Him before studying this letter.

I think Hebrews is a book, more than any other in the new testament, whose overall message cannot be grasped by reading short passages here and there. Hebrews is so rich in wonderful promises and exhortations, which are often quoted and sung in choruses, yet how many of us could say what the letter is about?

God has given us the letter to the Hebrews to help us throw off guilt and inherit God's promises. It contains every kind of help. It has solidly argued theology, it has motivating stories and imagery, it has severe warnings, it sets forth the gospel, it exalts Christ, it magnifies God, it promises help, it prepares us for discipline, it gives us examples to follow and promises to reach for. Hebrews sets forth Christ as the one who made a full and sufficient sacrifice for our sins, as the one who brings us into loving relationship with God our Father and as the one who intercedes for us day and night so that we might inherit the promises and enjoy all God has for us.

I want to urge you and encourage you with all my heart to read Hebrews through in two or three sittings, several times over. Read it in your normal version, then in a paraphrase such as the living bible or the message and then read it again in your normal version. After three readings through you will hopefully begin to get a feel for the message of the letter and why it is that the writer talks about angels and describes the temple and discusses Melchizedek and Abraham's loins, and how the cloud of witnesses fit in and the mountain of fire and smoke, and why it is that God disciplines us and why we should submit to our church leaders. But much more than this, perhaps you will be captivated by the High Priestly role of Jesus. Perhaps you will gain confidence in prayer and worship. Perhaps you will be re-motivated to draw near to God and grow in discipleship. Perhaps you will find yourself strengthened for temptation, suffering or persecution. Perhaps you will be stirred to study this wonderful letter much more closely hoping to see your walk with God and with your fellow believers deepened and empowered.

This is the word of God that has power to transform our lives and feed our souls with nourishment so rich that its effects will last for eternity. If you will study this letter, praying always for the Holy Spirit's help in understanding it; if you come with a detective's search for meaning and truth, tracing the flow of the argument through the letter, going back when you seem to have lost the thread, persevering until you can see the whole, then you will be rewarded with a far deeper thrill than getting to the next stage of difficulty in some computer game or finishing a crossword.

This book has quite a long introduction before we get into the letter to the Hebrews itself; I have some important things to say, but I also want to give you time to read the whole of Hebrews before we look at it together. I urge you therefore, if you want to get the most that you can out of this book, to put it down now and pick up your bible and read the letter to the Hebrews through in one or two sittings. Then return to this introduction.

Hebrews – indispensable for maturity

My guess is that for most people, Hebrews is the second most neglected book of the New Testament¹ (Revelation being the most neglected) and yet I believe its study is indispensable for

¹ Ok, so may be Philemon, 2 & 3 John and Jude are fairly neglected, but they are also very short!

maturity. I have no hesitation in suggesting to you that you take a holiday from your daily reading notes and spend a full year immersing yourself in Hebrews. I have repeatedly devoted my quiet times for periods of up to two years in a single book and can assure you that such an unbalanced diet is in no way damaging to your spiritual health, but rather is of the utmost benefit. The key is to keep reading and praying over each passage day after day, asking God to work it into your spirit and your soul and conform your mind and will to His. Be confident that the Holy Spirit will teach you, as he has promised to do.²

Furthermore, I have no hesitation in claiming that if you read this letter as I have suggested, and then you prayerfully meditate on it passage by passage until the whole letter is unlocked before you, that you will emerge a more Christ-like believer. You will have a deeper faith, having a clearer understanding of the Gospel of grace, and you will, as a consequence, reap eternal rewards from the obedience and faith that flow from your labour.

This book is my small contribution to this task. I have three aims in mind:

1. I want to help you to become confident that the Holy Spirit really has been given to you to glorify Christ and reveal the truth to you as you study His word. I hope you will learn good study technique and to be truly expectant that the Holy Spirit will be your teacher and guide as you study.
2. I want to help you to discover the unique and incredible truths found in this letter to the Hebrews and to understand them in the light of the whole of Scripture.
3. I want to help you to apply the truths you discover to your own life and to all those you care for – whether they be your friends, your children or churches you care for.

How to use this book

However you use this book I hope you will be encouraged and enriched. You can read it through from beginning to end or just read the chapters that look most interesting to you. However, my hope is that you will take it much more slowly, and that you will do more reading and studying of your bible than reading this book. My great hope is that this book will motivate you and equip you to study for yourself, rather than rely on the fruits of my labour. Perhaps you will disagree with my methods or conclusions – that is fine. But if you are encouraged by this book to put more confidence in the Holy Spirit as your teacher and to live in faith and obedience to Him then I will have accomplished my goal.

Now it is time to put this book down and read Hebrews again in a different version.

² “But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (Joh 14:26)