

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
The Book of Hebrews
Introduction

Today we're beginning what will be most likely a year-long study in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Apart from a few seasonal breaks, we'll be focusing each week on the truths of this book so rich in both doctrine and practical application.

By the way, how many of you have ever heard a series of messages on this book? I'm not surprised at the few hands that go up. Hebrews is not an easy book to understand and digest. In fact, one well-known commentator, William Barclay, says this about Hebrews:

“When we come to read the *Letter to the Hebrews* we come to read what is, for the person of today, the most difficult book in the whole New Testament.”ⁱ

Another commentator, William Lane, puts it like this: “Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Some of you know that I love to downhill ski. But sometimes Justin wants to go on runs that I would prefer to pass up. Every now and then he'll get me on a black slope full of moguls and steeper than my 53 year-old legs can handle. It's an uncomfortable feeling when you know you're in over your head or beyond your abilities.

Ever felt like that? It's sort of like beginning to play a board game without knowing all the rules. For many, the book of Hebrews is like that. The sometimes enigmatic argument of the author is hard to follow. His lengthy discourses on Melchizedek and his fiery warnings about falling from grace can leave the reader confused, puzzled and feeling like he's in “over his head.”

Part of the challenge is our lack of familiarity with the Old Testament. There are over thirty-five quotations of the Old Testament in Hebrews and thirty-four allusions to the Old Testament. Thirteen times the author mentions an Old Testament name or topic without giving a specific reference. And beyond the direct citations, there are concepts and teaching that cannot be properly understood and applied without a grasp of the Old Testament context.

Another part of the challenge is to recognize that the entire book of Hebrews is really a sermon, a message that is intended to exhort and motivate. In fact, the writer of this sermon says that himself. Check out Hebrews 13:22 – “Brothers, I urge you to bear with *my word of exhortation*, for I have written you only a short letter.” Of course, we all know that sermons don't always follow neat, packaged outlines.ⁱⁱⁱ

WHO WROTE THIS BOOK?

As I've told people that we were going to study the book of Hebrews, the first question is nearly always the same, “Who do *you* think wrote the book of Hebrews?” And my answer is not “nearly,” but *always* the same: “I don't know.”

Of course, we know that ultimately this book is the result of the inspiration of God's Spirit. But in contrast to the majority of the books of the New Testament, this letter doesn't begin or end with the name of its human author. So the reader is left with somewhat of a guessing game in trying to discern his identity. We do have a few clues, however. For example, we know that the book is written in a very eloquent, literary style of Greek. I'll never forget the challenge of translating portions of this book during my doctoral studies in France. It was a painstaking process. In comparison to a book like the Gospel of John or Paul's letter to the Philippians, Hebrews is in a camp all of its own. The style of the letter doesn't really match that of the Apostle Paul. This has led some to believe that this letter was written by Luke, Barnabas or possibly by Apollos who is described in Acts 18:24 as a "learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures."

Whoever wrote this book, we know that he had not only a thorough grasp of both the Greek language and the Old Testament, but he also had a pastor's heart for those to whom he's writing. He warns, he exhorts, he encourages, and he pastorally identifies himself with his readers. He often includes himself in the very exhortations given to the readers. He constantly addresses them as "brothers and sisters."

WHY DOES HE WRITE THIS BOOK?

We may not be able to say definitively *who* wrote the book of Hebrews. But we are able to determine just *why* the author is writing this book. It seems that a large part of those who comprised the churches to whom this author is writing were from a Jewish background. How else could they have even begun to understand the rich imagery and deep doctrinal teaching of this book drawn in large part from the Old Testament?^{iv}

We also know from Hebrews 5 and 6 that the readers had been Christians for awhile. We know, too, from Hebrews 10:32-34 that they had already faced some persecution and had remained faithful. There the writer says:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded Hebrews 10:32-35

On the other hand, according to Hebrews 12:4, they had not yet suffered martyrdom for their faith.^v However, many of these believers were becoming discouraged. They were struggling with lethargy and complacency. They were "stuck in a rut" and were having a hard time getting out. They were being tempted to scrap the whole Christian life and return to their Jewish roots.^{vi}

The author of this book is writing to encourage these believers, as well as you and me, to *move on to maturity*. His appeal is, "Don't remain stuck!" Don't turn back, don't give up, don't give in, and don't fall away. But let us move on to maturity.

I don't know of a more relevant message for you and me than this. We can all feel "stuck" at times in the status quo, spiritually speaking. Ever feel the need for a real breakthrough ... something that will take you to the next level?

I remember well the first time I went rock climbing. A fellow who used to be in our church took me up to Rocky Butt. We stood at the top and looked down that cliff and he started to describe to me the thrill of rappelling down that thirty foot drop. Sounded pretty exciting to me! But then he said, "First we have to climb up from the bottom!" I said, "Wait a minute, I didn't bargain for that! I just wanted the fun of going down!" So he took me to the bottom, from where I looked up to the top. My one word: "Impossible!" "No way can I scale that cliff and reach the top alive. What I'll do is reach the bottom dead!" But then, after a brief lesson in scaling, I started up. I'll never forget the strain of the eyes to find even the slightest foothold; and then the strain of the legs to push myself up to the next level. I remember that more than one I reached a point when I honestly felt I could go no further. There were no more footholds on the cliff and there was no more strength in this old body. I just wanted to give up and come back down.

That's a picture of the Christian life. We look at it and we say, "No way!" "Too difficult!" "Impossible!" Or maybe we get started in our journey with Jesus, but then we hit a snag. The journey gets rocky. The pathway is strewn with debris and obstacles. The hurdles are just too high. The journey is too long. We feel like giving up. We don't know how to move on to the next level. We can't seem to move on to maturity.

HOW DO WE MOVE ON TO MATURITY?

The book of Hebrews tells us how. It not only tells us to move on to maturity, but it tells us how to get there. And in doing this, the author first of all calls us to take a fresh look at the person of Christ. This is the first answer to the problem of being stuck in the spiritual status quo. He calls us to *consider Jesus, our Great High Priest*.

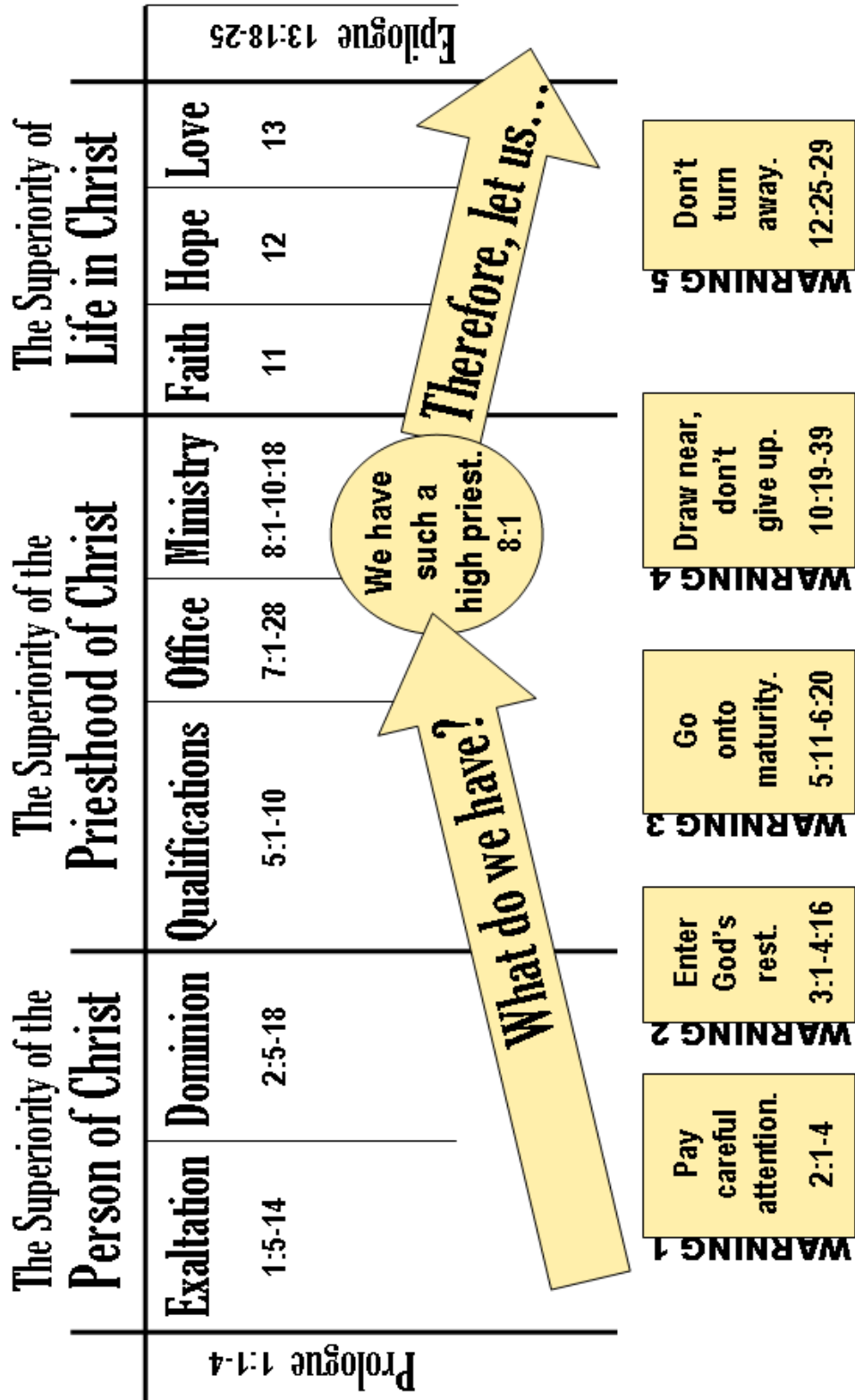
Throughout this book, the focus is on the *superiority of Christ*. In the first section, the emphasis is on the *person* of Christ (1:1-4:16). More specifically, we see his *exaltation* above the angels and above all things (1:5-14). And then the writer turns our attention to Christ's *dominion* over the world to come (2:5-18).

However, in the next main section of the book, the focus becomes more specific, moving from the *person* of Christ to the *priesthood* of Christ. Here we see Christ's *qualifications* as High Priest (5:1-10), his *office* as High Priest (7:1-28) and his *ministry* as High Priest (8:1 – 10:18).

The first ten chapters of this book are answering one specific question: What do we have? You see, when I was scaling that wall and feeling that I was stuck, I asked myself the question, "What do I have?" Do I have a foothold? And if so, do I have the strength to pull myself up using that foothold?

(see chart on next page)

Consider Jesus, our Great High Priest



It's the same in the Christian life. Except that we don't look first of all at *our* own human resources. We look first of all at the resources we have *in Christ*. And throughout these first ten chapters, that is where the author is pointing us. And then he finally comes to chapter 8, verse 1:

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. Hebrews 8:1-2

What is the answer to our lethargy, our complacency, our spiritual immaturity? Look to Christ. Recognize his superiority over anyone else or anything else that could stir your imagination or temporarily give you motivation. Don't let anything or anyone be a substitute for the person of Christ in your life.

For these Hebrew Christians that might have been areas of particular interest and speculation. Being Jewish Christians, they seemed to be fascinated with certain prophets, with the angels, and with the rituals of Old Testament worship. And today, for you and me, being American Christians – with all of our high-profile personalities, books, resources, and trends – we too can easily lose sight of the supremacy of Christ Jesus in our lives.

It may be that this idea of Christ being a “high priest” says very little to you. After all, who needs a priest? Maybe the whole idea sounds a little bizarre. However, just to give you a taste of how awesome this truth is for you and me, let me mention from this book two important things that Jesus Christ does as our High Priest.

First, he *identifies* with you and me in our struggle. I remember well my friend who took me rock climbing. Even with his best intentions, he wasn't able to come alongside of me and carry me up that cliff. He counseled me from a distance. My feet were aching, my hands were bleeding, and my muscles were giving way. And he had the audacity to shout up advice from the comfort of his safe haven 20 feet below. Of course, he couldn't do otherwise,

But Jesus can! As our High Priest, he *identifies* with you and me. That's what the writer of this letter is saying in 2:17-18 –

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Hebrews 2:17-18

While the book of Romans deals with the righteousness of Christ, and the book of Ephesians deals with the fullness of Christ, the book of Hebrews deals with the *nearness* of Christ. He doesn't shout counsel to us from a distance. He is near. He identifies with us in our weakness and struggle. And that is why we need to have our eyes firmly fixed on Him.

Not only does he *identify with* us, he *intercedes for* us. Isn't that an amazing thought? That's what this writer says,

...but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because *he always lives to intercede for them*. Hebrews 7:24-25

When was the last time that you encountered a temptation, a discouragement and thought about the fact that Jesus was interceding for you? Men, when was the last time you were tempted to go on that computer where you shouldn't go and you thought of Jesus in heaven interceding for you? Women, when was the last time you experienced the emotional upheaval of that monthly cycle, and you thought of Jesus Christ interceding for you?

I have a favorite picture that sits on my desk. It was given me by a friend who was sensitive to a struggle I was going through. Maybe you've seen it? It's the famous painting entitled "Forgiven." This despairing man has a mallet in one hand and a large spike in the other. Hebrews tells us that when we turn away from the Lord, we are "crucifying the Son of God all over again" (Hebrews 6:6). But this picture also presents Jesus, our High Priest, holding us up. He identifies with you and me. He is near. He also intercedes for you and me. He is praying.

What hope this can give you and me in hard times! What an encouragement to move on towards maturity! And that's what we see in the final section of this book. After speaking of the superiority of the *person* of Christ, and the *priesthood* of Christ, the author now says, "Therefore, let us..." Let us persevere in our *life* in Christ, i.e. in faith (chapter 11), hope (chapter 12) and love (chapter 13).

But these final chapters are not the only place where the writer brings all of this deep, doctrinal truth down to everyday, practical application. Remember, this is a sermon. And as in most sermons, the speaker gives spontaneous application all along the way. He doesn't wait until chapter 11 to say, "Therefore, do this..."

Throughout this book, there are five sections that we can call "warning" passages. It's particularly in these passages that we find some of the sternest, most severe warnings in the New Testament. By the way, as we move through this letter, we'll deal with each one – both its meaning and application for our lives.

The first one is found in 2:1-4 and the main appeal is "pay careful attention." The second warning passage is found in 3:1 – 4:16 where the main encouragement is "enter God's rest." The fourth warning passage is in 10:19-39 where we are encouraged to "draw near...and not give up!" The fifth warning passage is in 12:25-29 where we are told to "not turn away." What have we left out? The third warning passage which is found in 5:11 – 6:20. And it's here that we come back to the main theme of this letter: "Let us go on to maturity." Notice what the writer says:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary 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, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity... Hebrews 5:11-6:1

Over recent weeks I've had one of the most awesome experiences a granddad can have – watching his granddaughter laugh in his arms, begin to crawl and take her first solid food. Rachel Lynne has moved from mommies' milk, to bottled milk, and now to some solid food. What we think is so natural and expected when it comes to babies is somehow and so often hindered when it comes to spiritual growth. Somewhere along the way so many Christians get stuck.

Where are you in the process? Are you still in need of spiritual milk rather than solid food? At a point where you should be teaching others, are you still dependent on others to teach you? The urgent appeal of this book is "Let's move on to maturity!" Is that your desire for this New Year 2008?

ⁱ William Barclay as cited by George H. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary – Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 14.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The author composes his book like a musician as he intertwines one theme after another." John Bligh as cited by David J. MacLeod, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* April-June, 1989, 186.

^{iv} But don't think that they were *all* Jewish. There were also many Gentiles who were God-fearers or had been proselytes to Judaism and who now were part of these believing churches.

^v All of this suggests that this letter was written in the mid-60s A.D. just before the extreme persecution of the church under the reign of Nero.

^{vi} Where were these believers located? A good guess is near Rome. Acts 2:10 tells us that at the first preaching of the gospel at Pentecost, there were Jews from Rome. It may well be that some of these became believers at that time and returned to form house churches in and around Rome. There are several reasons for Rome being the most likely destination of this epistle: 1) Hebrews 13:5 says, "Those from Italy send you their greetings." In Acts 18:2 this same expression refers to Aquila and Priscilla who were living in Corinth at the time and who, with other Jews, had been expelled from Italy, i.e. Rome; 2) The use of the word "leaders" rather than "elders" and "deacons" (13:7, 17, 24) in this epistle as well as in other early Christian documents which were clearly associated with the church at Rome; 3) The early *First Clement* written from Rome is largely dependent upon sections of Hebrews, and so connects this epistle with the Roman capital.