

# The Challenge of Hebrews

©David Peterson (2014)

- Although there are many serious warning passages in Hebrews, overall there is a *positive encouragement to persevere in faith, hope and love*
- This is particularly clear in the *exhortations immediately before and after the central doctrinal section* (5:11 - 6:20; 10:19-29)
- Everything in that central doctrinal section (7:1 – 10:18) needs to be *related to those exhortations*: exposition is in the service of exhortation

## Outline of the structure and argument

1. *Opening declaration*: God's final word in his Son (1:1-4)
2. *Biblical proofs and primary exhortation*: the greatness of the Son and the need to pay the most careful attention to what we have heard (1:5 – 2:4)
3. *God's plan of salvation outlined with a challenge to respond appropriately*: the ministry of the Son enables us ultimately to reign with him in glory and in the present to hold firmly to the confidence and hope he gives us (2:5 -3:6)
4. *An exhortation based on Psalm 95:7-11*: a warning about hardening hearts in unbelief, with encouragements to enter the rest that the Son has made possible (3:7 – 4:13)
5. *An exhortation based on a preliminary exposition of the Son's high priestly ministry*: holding firmly to the faith we profess and approaching God with confidence (4:14 – 5:10)
6. *An exhortation preceding the central section of the argument*: warning about immaturity and falling away, together with encouragements to realize the hope set before us (5:11 – 6:20)
7. *Central exposition of the work of Christ and its benefits* (7:1 – 10:18):
  - a. The Son who has been perfected as high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
  - b. The high priest who has inaugurated the New Covenant (8:1-13)
  - c. The eternal consequences of his sacrificial ministry (9:1-28)
  - d. The sanctifying and perfecting of believers (10:1-18)

8. *An exhortation concluding the central section of the argument: encouragements to persevere in faith, hope and love, together with a warning about turning away from the Son of God and his achievement for us (10:19-39)*

9. *An exhortation based on biblical examples, climaxing in the example of Jesus: encouragements to persevere in faith in the face of testing (11:1 – 12:3)*

10. *A series of concluding exhortations, prayer and greetings: enduring hardship as God's discipline, strengthening one another to persevere in faith and holiness, resisting false teaching and taking advantage of every God-given resource to do his will (12:4 – 13:25)*

### **Drawing near to God through Jesus**

- The idea of 'drawing near' or 'approaching' God occurs at key points in the argument (4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22), though 'enter' is sometimes a parallel with respect to the tabernacle/temple or heaven (e.g. 6:20; 9:6-7, 11-12, 24-25; 10:19)
- The Israelites drew near to God at Mount Sinai *in a limited way* (12:18) and approached God at the tabernacle/temple *through mediators and animal sacrifices* (10:1-4)
- But a 'better hope' of drawing near has been introduced by Jesus (7:19, 25) in his high-priestly ministry, which *fulfils and replaces the priesthood and sacrificial system ordained by God under the Old Covenant* (8:1-6, 'copy and shadow')
- Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and *inaugurates the New Covenant by means of his sacrificial death and heavenly exaltation* (8:7-13; 9:11-15)
- His once-for-all sacrifice for sins removes the need for all the OT sacrifices and *provides the definitive forgiveness predicted by Jeremiah* (10:5-18)
- Jesus gives us confidence to 'enter the Most Holy Place' by his 'blood' and his continuing priestly ministry (10:19-21), making it possible for us to *keep on drawing near to God through him*, 'with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (10:22)
- Christians have already drawn near to God in heaven through faith in Jesus and have become members of his heavenly 'church' (12:22-24), but the encouragement in 4:16; 10:22 is to *keep on expressing this confident approach to God*

- The explicit reason in 4:16 is *to receive 'mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need'*, which is related to persevering in faith (4:14-15) and not falling away (3:7 – 4:13): the alternative is to 'shrink back' and be 'destroyed' (10:36-39)
- So continuing to draw near to God with confidence through Jesus our heavenly high priest is *a secret of perseverance and fruitfulness in the Christian life*:
  - a. Prayer to keep enjoying the mercy shown in the sacrifice of Jesus (an expression of ongoing repentance and dependence on God's forgiveness)
  - b. Prayer for help to persevere in faith, hope and love (an expression of complete dependence on the empathy and empowerment of the ascended Lord Jesus)
- This is not simply prayer for everyday needs or intercession for others, but *relational, gospel-focused prayer, expressing what it means to be beneficiaries of the New Covenant*:
  - a. John Calvin described this as 'the gateway to prayer'
  - b. In the Book of Common Prayer it is regularly expressed in the corporate confession of sin, in the weekly collects and in the Lord's Supper, where we are encouraged to 'feed' on Christ (crucified and exalted to heaven) 'in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving'

## **Faith, hope and love**

- Faith in God and his promises has been *a characteristic of true believers throughout the ages* (11:1-40), but Christian faith is explicitly *'fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith'* (12:2; cf. 3:1)
- Faith and hope merge together because Christian faith concerns *what is promised, as well as what has already been offered* (6:11-20; 10:32-35; 12:25-29)
- Since we are believers together in God's 'house' (3:6) or heavenly 'assembly' (12:23), we are called to *support and encourage one another in love as we journey in faith and hope to the destination God has established for us* (3:12-14; 6:10; 10:24-25; 12:12-17; 13:1-19)