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Hebrews

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Hebrews

A. Overview and Summary.

1. The author of Hebrews is anonymous, although of course it is recognized that it is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Various individuals have been suggested such as Paul, Barnabas, Silas, etc. but definite authorship has not been determined. The literary style and vocabulary do not match the writings of other New Testament authors. The author quotes extensively from the Septuagint and not from the Hebrew text. The text places emphasis upon the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices which confirms that the recipients are Jewish. And as they were still being practiced, this would place the writing prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple which occurred in 70 AD.
2. This community of Jews was predominantly believers, but among them were unbelievers who had “tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the age to come and then fell away” (6:5-6). Not understanding this composition of the recipients has caused confusion and interpretations inconsistent with the rest of Scripture. There was also a trend to focus on angels almost to the extent of placing them in a position higher than the Messiah, which explains the dialogue in chapter one of the superiority of Christ over angels.
3. An understanding of the book of Leviticus is helpful in understanding the book of Hebrews. God’s Old Testament covenant was established as Israel consistently sinned and God established a system of sacrifices representing repentance and Divine forgiveness. However, the need for sacrifices did not end and required a perfect priest and a perfect sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ the Messiah. This is the New Covenant and is the central message of the book of Hebrews.

B. Chapter One.

1. As mentioned in the summary, the “Hebrews” to which this epistle is addressed were toying with the idea that angels were superior to the Messiah. The author sets this straight immediately: “God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by different portions and in different manners, has at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds; who being the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the

Majesty on high; having become by so much better than the angels, as he hath inherited a more excellent name than they” (1:1-4).

2. Angels are created beings and Jesus, the Messiah is the creator (1:2b). The creator is not also the created. He continues this theme with: “In the beginning, Lord, You established the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain. They will all wear out like clothing; You will roll them up like a cloak, and they will be changed like a robe. But You are the same, and Your years will never end” (1:10-12). He closes the chapter with: “Now to which of the angels has He ever said: Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool? Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation? (1:13-14).

C. Chapter Two.

1. The chapter opens with a warning: “how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was first spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. At the same time, God also testified by signs and wonders, various miracles, and distributions of gifts from the Holy Spirit according to His will” (2:2-3). This is a word to the unbelieving Jews, the Hebrews who have heard the gospel but neglect it particularly as the signs, wonders and various miracles confirmed it.
2. Jesus’s humility is confirmed: What is man that You remember him, or the son of man that You care for him? You made him lower than the angels for a short time; You crowned him with glory and honor and subjected everything under his feet. For in subjecting everything to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. As it is, we do not yet see everything subjected to him. But we do see Jesus—made lower than the angels for a short time so that by God’s grace He might taste death for everyone—crowned with glory and honor because of His suffering in death” (2:7-9).
3. Jesus proclaims His unity with those that are His own: “For the One who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying: I will proclaim Your name to My brothers; I will sing hymns to You in the congregation. Again, I will trust in Him. And again, Here I am with the children God gave Me” (2:10-13). We need to have the understanding that when we assemble as believers in the church congregation and are singing hymns, Jesus is singing hymns with us to the Father.

4. The reason for Jesus's incarnation and passion is given: "He had to be like His brothers in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tested and has suffered, He is able to help those who are tested" (2:17-18).

D. Chapter Three.

1. The author continues with a warning against unbelief: "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works for 40 years. Therefore, I was provoked with that generation and said, they always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known My ways. So, I swore in My anger, 'They will not enter My rest'" (3:7-11).
2. Again, the author warns: "Watch out, brothers, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception. For we have become companions of the Messiah if we hold firmly until the end the reality that we had at the start" (3:12-14). He continues with a warning about hardening the heart. In portions of the chapter which are not included here, he references Moses and the Israelites who provoked God for 40 years because of their unbelief. The message has the prominent focus on the unbelieving Jews.

Chapter Four.

1. The first portion of the chapter concerns the Sabbath rest: "For the person who has entered His rest has rested from his own works, just as God did from His. Let us then make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall into the same pattern of disobedience" (4:10-11). Genesis 2:2-3 tells us that God rested on the seventh day after His creation work was complete. God is all powerful and this did not mean He was tired. It does mean that He stopped His creation work. In Exodus 20:8-11, God tells His people "To remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy". They were to stop their work and rest for a day. This has a deeper spiritual meaning than just to rest from labor. The Law of Moses required the Jews to labor intensively to attempt to keep all of the commandments that included ceremonial, civil, and Temple law. They could not do it and had to constantly offer animal sacrifices for forgiveness. Jesus met all of God's righteous requirements and

completed His work of salvation on the Cross. He declared “It is finished” (John 19:30) before He died meaning He had satisfied all of the requirements of the Law for us. Now we can enter into His rest and cease from our works to earn salvation.

2. The author then gives an insightful word about the Word of God: “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart. No creature is hidden from Him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account” (4:12-13). Man is comprised of three parts: body, soul, and spirit (1st Thessalonians 5:23). Our soul, where we make decisions, our emotions reside, and is where our rational thinking is. The spirit is where the Holy Spirit dwells in believers who are born again. The boundary between soul and spirit is very hard to discern, but the Word of God can make that distinction and judge our ideas and thoughts, which are laid bare before Him.
3. The chapter closes with a word about Jesus as our High Priest. Once a year, the Jewish High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple to offer sacrifice for the people. Jesus has done that once and for all for us, His people. “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to the confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time” (4:14-16).

F. Chapter Five.

1. The chapter presents Jesus as our High Priest: “During His earthly life, He offered prayers and appeals with loud cries and tears to the One who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence. Though He was God’s Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. After He was perfected (through the cross, burial, and resurrection), He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him, and He was declared by God a high priest in the order of Melchizedek” (5:7-10). We are first introduced to Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18-20. There is no previous history given in Scripture about him other than he was “King of Salem” meaning “peace”. He is without beginning or end (7:3). Abraham offered tithes to him, signifying that he was higher than Abraham.

He was an analogy of Christ, who has no beginning or end and is eternal as our High Priest.

2. The chapter closes with a rather scathing word about the immaturity of the recipients of the book of Hebrews: “We have a great deal to say about this, and it’s difficult to explain, since you have become too lazy to understand. Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God’s revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. Now, everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil” (5:11-14).

G. Chapter Six.

1. Chapter six contains a difficult verse to interpret unless there is an understanding of who the recipients are. The following passage can be misunderstood to mean loss of salvation because it is not interpreted with a viewpoint of the entire New Testament passages: “ For it is impossible to renew to repentance those who were once enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, became companions with the Holy Spirit, tasted God’s good word and the powers of the coming age, and who have fallen away, because, to their own harm, they are re-crucifying the Son of God and holding Him up to contempt” (6:4-6). Again, the recipients are Jews who have “tasted” the heavenly gifts and received some enlightenment of the Messiah but have fallen away without accepting Christ as Savior. They may have even repented, but did not take salvation.
2. The chapter closes with a promise: “We have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. Jesus has entered there on our behalf as a forerunner, because He has become a high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek” (6:19-20). The inner sanctuary refers to the Temple where the Holy of Holies was separated from the other portions by a heavy curtain. It is an analogy pointing to Jesus, who has entered into the presence of God to act as our High Priest.

H. Chapter Seven.

1. Much narrative is spent comparing the temporary priesthood of the Levites with that of Christ. The Levite priest perished, but Christ remains forever. “Now many have become Levitical priests, since they are prevented by death from remaining in office. But because He remains forever, He holds His priesthood permanently.

Therefore, He is always able to save those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to intercede for them” (7:23-25).

2. The chapter closes with a firm statement about our High Priest Jesus: “For this is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He doesn’t need to offer sacrifices every day, as high priests do—first for their own sins, then for those of the people. He did this once for all when He offered Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak, but the promise of the oath, which came after the law, appoints a Son, who has been perfected forever” (7:26-28).

I. Chapter Eight.

1. The chapter opens with the essential point of the previous chapters: “Now the main point of what is being said is this: We have this kind of high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that was set up by the Lord and not man” (8:1-2).
2. The balance of the chapter pertains to the better covenant we have in Christ: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people” (8:10).

J. Chapter Nine.

1. This chapter compares the Old Covenant ministry with the New. It gives the illustration of the Temple items and then says: “The Holy Spirit was making it clear that the way into the most holy place had not yet been disclosed while the first tabernacle was still standing. This is a symbol for the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the worshiper’s conscience. They are physical regulations and only deal with food, drink, and various washings imposed until the time of restoration” (9:8-10).
2. The chapter closes with a statement of the New Covenant ministry: “For the Messiah did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that He might now appear in the presence of God for us. He did not do this to offer Himself many times, as the high priest enters the sanctuary yearly with the blood of another. Otherwise, He would have had to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. But now He has appeared one time, at the end of the ages, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment— so also the Messiah, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him” (9:24-28).

K. Chapter Ten.

1. Chapter ten continues with a discussion of the Old and New Covenants. He says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws on their hearts and write them on their minds, He adds: I will never again remember their sins and their lawless acts” (10:16-17). This gives us the boldness to approach God: “Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way He has opened for us through the curtain (that is, His flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (10:19-23).
2. A difficult passage to interpret is given: “For if we deliberately sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries” (10:26-27). Again, we must consider the recipients. To “deliberately sin” within the context of the surrounding passages, is to reject the only sacrifice for sin which under the New Covenant is forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. For a Christian, we can choose to sin. But if we allow the Holy Spirit to convict us and bring us to repentance and asking Christ for forgiveness, there is His sacrifice for our sin. Remaining in sin does have consequences and we will account for it at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

L. Chapter Eleven.

1. Chapter eleven is often called the “faith” chapter due to its focus on those of great faith in the Old Testament. It opens with: “Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen. For our ancestors won God’s approval by it. By faith we understand that the universe was created by God’s command, so that what is seen has been made from things that are not visible” (11:1-3).
2. It goes on to name several Old Testament faith heroes. Then it says this: “by faith (they) conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the

mouths of lions, quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength after being weak, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead—they were raised to life again. Some men were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might gain a better resurrection, and others experienced mockings and scourgings, as well as bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and on mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground” (11:33-39).

3. The chapter closes with these words: “All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us” (11:39-40).

M. Chapter Twelve.

1. The chapter opens with an admonition to endure: “Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God’s throne” (12:1-2).
2. He then gives a word about discipline: “Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline—which all receive—then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had natural fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn’t we submit even more to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time based on what seemed good to them, but He does it for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness” (12:7-10).
3. He gives a warning about rejecting God’s grace: “Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and by it, defiling many. And make sure that there isn’t any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for one meal. For you know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected because he didn’t find any opportunity for repentance, though he sought it with tears” (12:15-17).

4. The chapter closes with: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (12:28-29).

N. Chapter Thirteen.

1. The author gives a final exhortation: “Let brotherly love continue. Don’t neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it. Remember the prisoners, as though you were in prison with them, and the mistreated, as though you yourselves were suffering bodily. Marriage must be respected by all, and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge immoral people and adulterers. Your life should be free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for He Himself has said, I will never leave you or forsake you. Therefore, we may boldly say: The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (13:1-6).
2. The book closes with several notable sayings: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Don’t be led astray by various kinds of strange teachings” (13:8-9). “Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name. Don’t neglect to do what is good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices” (13:15-16).

O. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it On.

1. The Judaizers attempted to place the Gentiles under the Law of Moses. The New Covenant is very explicit in that Jesus is our Sabbath rest and how can we neglect so great a salvation. Are you resting in Christ for your salvation or do you depend upon your good deeds? Why are good deeds important? (See Ephesians 2:8-10 for help).
2. Are you able to explain why Hebrews apparently says that salvation can be lost but that is not true based upon the Hebrew recipients and the rest of Scripture?
3. Are you able to eat solid food, or are you still consuming milk? How do you mature in the faith?
4. Do you sin deliberately? What does that mean to a born-again Christian?

This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations (JoshuaNations.org)