

A Study of Hebrews

Lesson 1

Our Goals in this Study

1. To know and understand the Bible better. In times past in a study of Hebrews, students were required to memorise the entire book. We are not going to call for that, but we do want to KNOW what the text says. Still, Hebrews can be one of the more difficult books to understand. At the completion of our study, we want to be able to understand the words, phrases, and concepts in Hebrews.
2. To gain a better appreciation for the greatness of Jesus the Christ
3. To be challenged and encouraged to grow in our Christian life
4. To be better prepared to share our faith with others

Class Requirements

1. Read through the New Testament book (or letter) of Hebrews – Multiple times – Try to read through Hebrews once per week over the next 13 weeks. (That is less than 2 chapter per day)
2. Read the textbook *Everyone's Guide to Hebrews* by Neil Lightfoot. If you do not have this book, it can be purchased from [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).
3. Answer the questions at the end of each chapter in *Everyone's Guide to Hebrews* – If there is anything that you can't answer, please ask your instructor.

Introduction:

Hebrews is one of the most beautiful books in all of the New Testament. It is the story of the greatness of Jesus as we will see in the next few weeks as we study it together. The first part of the letter is about the person of Christ. The last part about the work of Christ --- So in our lessons we will be talking about Who Jesus Is and then What Jesus has done.

In our textbook by Neil Lightfoot, he writes in the beginning of chapter 1, *"There is something about Hebrews that is appealing and beautiful. Its majestic language and style, its bold declarations, its sweeping arguments, its heartfelt pleas, all are without parallel in the New Testament. For a literary standpoint alone, it deserves the description 'a little masterpiece.'"*¹

¹ Lightfoot, Neil R. *Everyone's Guide to Hebrews*, p. 11.

At the beginning of any study of a book of the Bible there are a few questions that we need to try to answer. These questions include: 1. Who wrote the book? 2. To whom was the book written. When was the book written. These are very difficult questions to answer when it comes to the book of Hebrews.

I. Authorship

The authorship of Hebrews is difficult to determine because:

- A. No one claims authorship within the book. As opposed to Romans for instance where Paul claims to be the author.
- B. There has been debate on the authorship of Hebrews since the early years of the church. Even as early as A.D. 255 Origen said no one knew who the identity of the author.
 - 1. Some of the people who have been identified as the possible author include: Clement of Rome, Luke, Barnabas, Peter, Jude, Stephen, Aquila and Pricilla, Ariston, Mary the mother of Jesus, Epaphras, Silas, Mark, Apollos, and the Apostle Paul.
 - 2. Among all of the possibilities, Paul is most often believed to be the author of Hebrews and perhaps Apollos is second. – It is so popular to believe that Paul wrote Hebrews, that the King James Bible even says: “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.
 - 3. We should agree that it could be one of these people or it could be someone else that is not even known to us by name.
 - 4. We could list possible reasons why this person wrote the book or did not write the book, but we are left with the conclusion that we do not know. The author did not name himself and we cannot say with any certainty who wrote the book of Hebrews.
 - 5. We must agree with Origen who said, *"God alone knows."*
- C. We do know a few things about the author.
 - 1. He was well acquainted with his readers' spiritual condition. (5:11-14)
 - 2. He was well aware of their past. (6:10; 10:32-34)
 - 3. He was certain that they could do better spiritually than they were doing. (6:9)

II. The Original Recipients

This is another difficult question to answer because the recipients are not named clearly like we find in the book of Philipians. All our Bibles call this book Hebrews or they may say "The Epistle to the Hebrews." This title was not a part of the original writing and was added later. Still, as we will see it probably was a letter to Jewish Christians and certainly Hebrews should be described as a

letter. Furthermore, it was a letter to a specific congregation, though we do not know the original destination.

- A. Some suggestions for possible destination include: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Rome, Caesarea, Samaria, or Palestine. The Old Testament quotations in Hebrews are from the Septuagint and therefore some believe that this points to Diaspora Jews since they used this translation widely, but Palestinian Jews did not.²
- B. Most believe that the letter was written to Jewish Christians living in one of these areas. We can assume they were meeting as a house church since church buildings were not in use in the 1st century.
 - 1. We know the original recipients were Christians (3:1, “*Therefore, holy brothers ...*”
 - 2. The writing leads us to believe the original readers were Jews because of all the Old Testament quotations and allusions. The readers must have been well acquainted with the OT scriptures.
 - 3. The first readers knew the author (13:19) and Timothy (13:20).
 - 4. The recipients were experiencing persecution (10:32-34)
 - 5. It seems that these people had been Christians for awhile (5:12) long enough that some may have died (13:7).
 - 6. As with authorship we must say that we do not really know where the original recipients were located.

III. From Where was the Book Written?

This is again unknown. **Hebrews 13:24** says that “*those whom come from Italy send you their greetings.*” This may mean that the letter was sent from Italy; perhaps Rome or that there were Italians present wherever the author was located.

III. Date

Without conclusive knowledge of who wrote the book and who the original recipients are it is nearly impossible to precisely date the letter.

We can say with some certainty that the letter was written before AD 96 when Clement of Rome quotes from the book. We can also say that it is likely that the book was written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 because the writing says much about Jewish sacrifices and says nothing about the fall of Jerusalem.

² Ellingsworth, Paul, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, pp. 3-21.

This is the only book that mentions Timothy's imprisonment, so it must have come later in his life. Imprisonment for the faith seems to have become a well known fact (10:34; 13:3) and we know that when Nero came to power he persecuted Christians beginning around the year A.D. 64.³

Hebrews 5:12, 13:7 and other verses seem to indicate that the book was written to second generation Christians. Therefore the most likely date is in the late 60's. Let us say probably around the year A.D. 68.

IV. Purpose of Hebrews

The book of Hebrews stands as a great exhortation to faithfulness in Christ. (13:22). Lightfoot points out that the entire book is filled with exhortations and in fact of the 305 verses in Hebrews, 172 are verses including exhortations. This is why this book is so important because today we too need to be exhorted and encouraged to faithfulness.

Hebrews encourages us to see the great and surpassing superiority of Jesus Christ. He is superior to the angels. He is superior to Moses. He is superior to the Old Testament priesthood.

Because he is superior we must listen to Him. Those who contemplate leaving faith in Christ place themselves in a terrible condition (6:4-6; 10:23-30). The book then encourages these Jewish Christians to remain faithful to Jesus Christ. Throughout the book is a clear warning to those who fall away from the faith. The first readers of Hebrews along with all of us are faced with the question: "Will Jesus really be first in my life or will something else take His place?" For these Jewish Christians there was the pull back into the old life in Judaism. For us, there may be a pull back into the world.

Hebrews also makes it quite clear the Lord expects us to grow in the faith (5:11-6:3).

V. Vocabulary

As Lightfoot points out in our commentary, the vocabulary of Hebrews is different than any other New Testament writing. The writer uses extensive use of Old Testament quotations and Old Testament imagery or allusions to the Old Testament. There are about 30 quotations from the Old Testament in the 13 chapters of Hebrews and there are about 70 allusions to the Old Testament.

It is a vocabulary of ritual and ceremony. There is much talk of priests and sacrifices and the use of priestly terminology.

It is a vocabulary of comparison and analogy. Christ is compared to angels, to man, the New Covenant is compared to the Old. Other comparisons include Canaan and heaven, Aaron has high priest and Jesus as high priest. The blood of bulls and goats compared to the blood of Christ.

³ Constable, Thomas L. *Notes on Hebrews*. Available online at: <http://www.soniclight.com>.