

Chapter Summary: Hebrews

"Think back on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering... Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies."

The book of Hebrews was sent to Jewish believers who were facing persecution for their faith in Jesus. Some were tempted to leave the believing community and return to Judaism in order to escape their mistreatment and pain.

It's likely that the recipients of this letter lived in Italy, perhaps even Rome. The author (whose name is not given) sends greetings to them from "the believers from Italy," that is, people they would likely have known but who were now living abroad, probably displaced from Rome by persecution. This also makes it likely that the "terrible suffering" they had experienced earlier was instigated by Emperor Nero, who was known for persecuting Christians – especially in and around Rome. It was probably Nero who ordered the executions of the apostles Paul and Peter. Since these Jewish believers may have lived near the center of power in the Roman Empire, they would have been prime targets for the next wave of persecution.

But in this new wave of persecution, Christians who were also Jews seemed to have an easy way out. The Roman authorities had recently begun to make a distinction between followers of Jesus and Jews. Judaism was a legal and protected religion in the Roman Empire. Jews who had come to believe in Jesus could return to that protective umbrella if they identified themselves as Jews only, walking away from their faith in Jesus.

In response to this situation, the author of Hebrews argues that there's no going back. All of Israel's history was leading up to the "great salvation" that had now finally appeared in Jesus. The author insists, "The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come." Through Jesus, believers could participate in "a far better covenant with God, based on better promises." In fact, the Lord Jesus Himself announced this great salvation of the new covenant, and the old covenant was now out of date. So believers need to stand firm in their faith, hanging on to everything that had come to them through Jesus.

The author makes the case for all this by using a specific literary form. The book of Hebrews consists of four messages, much like ones given in a Jewish synagogue. In fact, the author calls the book an "exhortation" — the same Greek term used for the "word of encouragement" given by Paul and Barnabas in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia.

In this form, the speaker would first bring a teaching from the Scriptures and then apply it to the present-day situation of the listeners. So Hebrews alternates back and forth four times between teaching and application, first explaining truths about Jesus from the Scriptures and then urging the people to respond to these truths.

Since the recipients were familiar with the Scriptures and traditions of Israel, the author's message presents four key themes, each built on a Jewish tradition.

- God's Son is greater than the angels and the messages they delivered: the laws of the old covenant (Heb 1-2).
- Jesus is God's greatest messenger, superior even to Moses and Joshua, and He offers an even greater rest and peace than they offered (Heb 3-4).
- Jesus is our true High Priest, superior even to Aaron and his priestly family (Heb 5-10).
- The followers of Jesus must be faithful just as God's people of old were faithful, even in the face of suffering (Heb 11-12).

These messages were collected and then sent out like a letter. So Hebrews ends the way any ancient letter would: with personal news, greetings, and information about when the sender next hopes to see the recipients. Of course, the sender also hopes that when that time arrives the recipients will all still be following Jesus together, "proclaiming our allegiance to His name."