

# ***The Book of Hebrews***

## ***Part 1: Those Who Crossed Over***

### **An Introduction: Two Levels of the Book**

The word “Hebrews” means “*those who crossed over.*” It speaks to those descended from the original Hebrew people who had crossed the Red Sea, leaving behind the slavery of Egypt for the joy and freedom of the Promised Land.

This book speaks to us on two levels. First and foremost, it calls us to realize the perspective of eternity, that we are those who have already “crossed over” from death to life, condemnation to righteousness, separation to union.

On a second level, it speaks in time and space today where the church is being called to cross over from legalism to grace, fearfulness to trust, “religion” to true intimacy with the living God.

In all of this, the crown jewel of the book is its deep and expansive revelation of Jesus Christ. It reveals who he is, what he’s done, and why this changes everything.

### **The Author . . . and a Note on “Encounter Bible Studies”**

Early church leaders attributed Hebrews to the hand of the apostle Paul. Modern scholarship believes it was more likely a close associate of his. Hebrews lacks Paul’s typical greeting and other common Pauline elements, yet it carries the core passions and intricacies of his teaching. It may be someone who was mentored by the apostle.

In reality, this doesn’t matter. What matters is the Hand that guided the one who held the pen. The Holy Spirit inspired this letter, and the writing is an opportunity to encounter the Spirit of God within you.

As an “Encounter Bible Study,” this journey through Hebrews is meant to lead you into a direct encounter with the true Author of Scripture. The following teaching notes endeavor to provide some meaningful guidance; however, the real goal is for you to learn to hear from God yourself.

**Remember:** Take time to digest each passage for yourself, asking the Lord to show you what he wants you to see. It’s also important to take time to pause and meditate on certain truths that get highlighted to you. And finally, for an encounter with the Word to have its deepest impact, it’s important to have others with whom can share what you’re learning and receiving.

### **The Audience**

The letter was written sometime between 50 and 66 AD to Jewish believers in Jesus who were being heavily tempted to turn back to the Jewish Law and religious works in order to secure their salvation (forgiveness and freedom from sin, and peace and favor with God). These religious works were connected to the Jewish temple system of the day.

For this audience, the Jewish Law handed down by Moses was more than just their “religion.” It was their entire way of life. For instance, individuals and their families would have “BBQs” by using the meat from animal sacrifices done at the temple. The entire culture met and celebrated around many of the laws dictated by Moses.

Following Jesus and accepting his death as the final sacrifice meant a complete disruption in your ability to fit in and connect with people.

The author of Hebrews has little patience for those who want to stay in the old system. He compares a person returning to these old ways to “re-sacrificing” the Son of God and “putting him to open shame” (6:6). He also refers to this religious system as “dead works” (6:1 & 9:14).

But it was greatly difficult to make this transition. It meant being isolated and spurned by family members, friends, and community leaders. Your social status and relationships were put into jeopardy. In some cases, heavier forms of persecution were experienced, such as imprisonment (although the recipients of this letter are reminded that they have not yet “shed blood” for their trust in Jesus’s message of grace—see 12:4).

As a follower of Jesus, you were also a political outsider from both the highly conservative Jewish community and the radically liberal Roman world.

The Jews were zealous to defeat the tax-heavy, controlling governmental system of their day. As a follower of Christ, you were encouraged to pay your taxes and forgive your enemies. This looked like absolute weakness and went against what the people believed was their primary Jewish “story” of overcoming controlling empires. They despised these parts of Jesus’s teachings.

Meanwhile, the Romans engaged in lavish idolatry, sexual immorality, and all kinds of corruption. Being a follower of Jesus meant standing against such things as well.

Communities and entire nations often find themselves dividing into dualistic systems such as this. Believers in Jesus are the outliers who stand in the gap between both worlds, witnesses to a higher path.

To be a follower of Jesus—and to embrace his final sacrifice at the cross—*disrupted everything*.

This letter was written about 30 years after Jesus taught publicly throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. In all likelihood, he was speaking to some of the same people who would later read this letter (or at least to the parents of who received this letter).

During his earthly ministry, Jesus warned people about persecution. He spoke of family members turning against one another and promised a difficult path ahead in terms of leaving behind the systems of religion, idolatry, and fear.

We typically interpret such words from Jesus as being directed at us today. This is right, since his words carry eternal weight; however, it's important to see how relevant his words were to the people of that time period. Context is highly important, especially in understanding some of the more difficult things Jesus taught.

In these same messages, Jesus also warned about destruction coming to the temple.

**1 Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. 2 And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."**

Jesus went on to talk about a time of great tribulation for Israel and made this statement:

**... 34 "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matthew 24:1-2, 34)**

This is exactly what happened. 40 years after Jesus's ministry (a biblical "generation"), the first Jewish-Roman War culminated with the destruction of the temple and the diaspora of the Jewish nation.

In the book of Acts we learn about believers selling their properties and handing them over to the apostles (Acts 4:34-35). While this is an obvious act of sacrifice and love that followers of Jesus are still called to emulate, this was also a very practical decision made by people who believed Jesus of Nazareth was telling the truth about coming destruction of Jerusalem. Why continue holding property that is going to be dismantled by the Romans?

This 40-year dynamic is an incredible fact of history outside of the Bible attesting not only to Jesus being a true prophet but to the divine timing of his appearance in the world.

This holds a clear connection to the Hebrew people 1500 years prior under Moses' leadership who refused to "cross over" the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. As a result, they wandered 40 years in the wilderness. The generation who chose not to believe in the good news of the Promised Land suffered the full consequences of their unbelief, all ending up dead in the wilderness.

The book of Hebrews references this story in chapters 4 & 5. As it was most likely written in the mid-60s, we can see now how Hebrews was a clear and direct warning that a similar thing was going to happen to the Hebrew people who had encountered the Messiah around 30 AD. It was an urgent call for people to trust in the Messiah's message and enter the true *Promised Land*.

This is the Promised Land of the gospel. It is the reality of our union with God and our perfect salvation in Christ. This is what we are going to unpack through the text and “enter into” in our own lives today.

## **The Book’s Prophetic Significance Today**

Though the Book of Hebrews has a clear original context, its words speak to us with fresh urgency. It is an inspired letter that carries the breath of eternity, speaking to every generation. *However, we are at a particular turning point in history where its words are more pertinent than ever.*

Much like the world of the first century, we are in the midst of a radical societal shift with great changes in the spiritual, political, and technological arenas. As such, this book holds a certain prophetic weight.

Today, the global church is being called to leave the systems of man—even good systems like the Jewish Temple with its roots in biblical truth—and embrace the scandalous freedom of the gospel and the true community that is built around it (i.e. the living church of God).

The book contains a dire warning for anyone who is clinging onto the old and failing systems of this world. The structures of this world, especially religious structures, are being shaken, and this will only intensify in the days ahead. *That which is built on Christ and his work on the cross is the only thing that will remain.*

The latter half of the 2020s will mark a significant acceleration of the aforementioned shifts which have been slowly emerging. The world in the next decade will be incredibly different from the world in this one.

More than ever, the words of Hebrews call our attention to the most unchanging and solid thing imaginable. This was articulated well by an Old Testament prophet:

***10 "For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,  
But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,  
And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,"  
Says the LORD who has compassion on you.  
(Isaiah 54:10)***

The book of Hebrews provides a theological foundation for these two interlinked realities that Isaiah says will never be shaken: ***The lovingkindness of God and his covenant of peace.***

Those who find their footing and build their lives on the impenetrable fortress of Christ’s love and his “New Covenant” (the core theme of Hebrews) will thrive in the days ahead!

## **A Wild FACT from Josephus & Roman History**

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that those who followed Christ in Jerusalem 40 years after Jesus's ministry ***all made it out safely*** during the Roman siege when the warnings all came true and the entire Jewish nation was either executed, enslaved, or exiled.

In other words, those who trusted in the words of Jesus (and the repeated warnings in the letter to the Hebrews) escaped the tribulation of that time.

They still lived through difficult situations, but their spiritual community and the embrace of Jesus's wisdom caused them to not only to survive, but to thrive and prosper.

From there, followers of Jesus would go on to slowly overtake the whole Roman population, seeing a multi-generational victory not only over Jewish legalism but Roman idolatry.

A similar reality played out over the three centuries that followed this event as other "tribulations" hit the world. Believers in Jesus would continue to heed the wisdom of Hebrews. Building their lives on the solid ground of the New Covenant, they continued to thrive while the Roman population diminished.

**This is factual history outside of the biblical narrative.** This thriving aspect of the church occurred not only during the Jewish-Roman Wars but also during two plagues that devastated the Roman Empire: The Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian.

Because of their commitment to meet together, to take care of one another, and to trust in the power of Jesus's shed blood, the Christian community exploded during these two world-changing pandemics.

Early followers of Jesus demonstrated fearlessness in the face of these plagues, which some historians believe led to them developing a strong immunity, especially since they didn't stop taking care of the sick and elderly. The pagan world quickly isolated and neglected the sick (especially the poor, widowed, or disabled). Christians, on the other hand, often risked getting sick to help other. (See *Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark)

This puts a whole new level of understanding the core and summative words of Hebrews. Right before the letter commends us to embody those in the famous "hall of faith," we read these timeless words:

**23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging [one another;] and all the more as you see the day drawing near.**

**26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.**

**(Hebrews 10:23-27)**

It is very important to note that “*sinning willfully*” is a reference to the core “sin” that will be addressed throughout this letter. The third chapter of Hebrews calls it the sin of “unbelief” (which is what the Hebrews did in refusing to enter Canaan). This is about rejecting the amazing, good news of Jesus and his complete salvation.

The author is saying that if the Jewish people reject the reality of Jesus’s sacrifice and try to cling to their old system of animal sacrifices and earthly priests, there is no longer another sacrifice that can cover and protect them. The only thing to expect is a cleansing fire that will consume all things not built on the grace, love, and righteousness of Jesus.

The three verses before this, however, carry the heartbeat of this book:

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope (the finished work of Christ) ... stimulating one another to love ... assembling together ...*

This was a **clarion call** to believers from that time, as well as today, to remain true to the gospel of Jesus and to embrace the community of faith. Though taking a stand for these things does not always seem like the “comfortable life,” it is the narrow path between the political and religious systems of the day and it always leads to joy and blessing, both in this life, and in the age to come.

## **Key Elements of the Rising Church**

Part of the reason we are engaging with this book is a clear sense of continued “shakings” in the world which will purify and bring forth an even greater expression of the kingdom of God on earth.

This will involve a purer “church,” which is the believing community of those who follow Jesus and trust in his finished work. The book of Hebrews lays out the unshakable foundations that makes up this victorious Kingdom.

The following are key trends and characteristics we will see emerge in the global church. This is shared to inspire an even greater passion to embrace the foundational wisdom of this letter that will help give way to these realities:

1. A greater focus on the final and all-encompassing sacrifice of Jesus.
  - All our love and impact will flow out of the communion table and the growing revelation of the identity, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation found at the cross.

- This will lead to greater measure of joy, holiness, and purity that comes through a revelation of identity as opposed to the outward pressures of guilt and spiritual manipulation.
2. With a great return to the communion table, there will be a greater emphasis and understanding of family. This will produce the following:
    - Healthier marriages and parenting. This will include families having “altars” of communion in their home.
    - A move from hierarchal structures (heavy top-down leadership) to five-fold teams and familial/servant roles of leadership. Healthy spiritual fathers and mothers will overtake the celebrity/CEO pastor imagery.
    - Both evangelism and discipleship will happen around the table, person-to-person, as people invite friends and neighbors to partake of God’s grace with them. (*“The church is moving from the stadium to the table”* - Bill Vanderbush)
      - **Note:** The fastest growing church in the world in Iran will continue to be a premier example of how things will unfold. This involves an organic and decentralized movement evangelism and discipleship.
  3. A purer vision of the Father’s heart.
    - According to Hebrews 1, Jesus is the perfect radiance of God the Father. Ministries and teachings built on legalistic and worldly ways of seeing God will continue to lose their footing.
    - Tying in with the last point, spiritual fathers will arise with a greater humility and a desire to pour into the generations.
    - *Side-note: The revelation of the “Father’s Blessing” that accelerated in 1994 through the Toronto Revival (seeded by movements in Argentina a few years prior) turns 30 years old in 2024, the year we’re commencing this study. 30 is the biblical number of maturity and fullness. There is a fullness coming where people touched by the revelation of the Father’s true nature will be released like never before to bring his love to the rest of the world.*
  4. Woman coming into their full identity in God.
    - Just as the Father-heart of God has been revealed with power, there will be a greater understanding of the Mother-heart of God as well.
    - This will produce a purer expression of both the male and female dimensions of God’s image.
      - The church in Iran is also demonstrating this by the fact that the world’s fastest growing church is primarily a woman-led movement.
  5. An overall higher expression of unity. This will involve:
    - A growing trust in the image of God within our brothers and sisters. The church will see themselves more and more as one entity connected by the central bond of Jesus’s broken body and shed blood.

- A greater flow of forgiveness and reconciliation.
  - More interchurch partnerships that are relational, organic, and Spirit-led.
  - Deeper merging of eastern and western traditions. Charismatic expressions will continue merge with contemplative movements that draw upon the wisdom of church fathers and mothers. Catholic and Protestant lines will also be broken down through deeper love and humility that builds in people's hearts as they encounter the Father, Son, and Spirit together.
6. The church will be known more and more as a *House of Prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:7)*
- As a "house of prayer," the church will be a place for deep encounters with God and a growing intimacy with his Spirit.
  - As a place for "all nations," there be a much more inclusive and purer way of seeing humanity as lost family members. "Us vs them" mindsets will continue to crumble.
  - Practically speaking, ongoing worship and prayer that is centered on Christ will fill places of worship. At the same time, more and more gatherings will happen online and in smaller settings as churches use more of their property for the community. Buildings will be seen as gifts not for ourselves, but for those around us. Many properties that do not embody these expressions will be sold and given to other Kingdom initiatives.
7. Global awakening and intensified spiritual breakthrough in the Middle East.
- There will be a higher love for the people of Israel and their Arab neighbors as the church stands in intercession for Abraham's children to come together as One New Man in Jesus (Ephesians 2). This will erupt even out of the birth pangs of greater conflict and accusation within these regions.
  - **Final Note:** As conflicts intensify in a world that does not understand the true image of God (and thus lives more by the "mark of the beast"—a false and corrupted image), the church will arise with a unity and love that is highly attractive and brings in a powerful harvest of awakened sons and daughters. This will happen all over the world and culminate with great revival in the birthplace of the Abrahamic religions.

### **Follow-up Encounter:**

*Prepare to take communion, either by yourself or (preferably) with others.*

*Ask God to prepare your heart to receive more from him in this Letter to the Hebrews. Ask him to tune your ears to the wisdom of Jesus's Spirit. Quiet your mind and listen for what comes to you.*

*After some time, take the bread and the cup. Give thanks for the full power of Jesus's blood over your life. Ask your Father for more revelation of what Jesus's blood reveals and gives to us. Share your thoughts with others. If you are with others, pray for each other.*