

Christ is Better: An Introduction to Hebrews
Hebrews 10:19–25
September 3, 2023

Some of you know this, but our family recently spent a few nights in a hotel due to water damage. Though hotel stays are *far* from common for us, usually at some point Owen and I will go do a little “exploring.” It’s imperative that we answer essential questions like, “Where is breakfast?” “Where is the pool?” or “How sad is the exercise room?” This particular stay was no different. On our quest, eventually we stumbled upon a room with this sign hanging outside: *Hotel Library*. As something of a book guy, I thought, “I *must* see this.”

At one point, while my eyes were squinting at—maybe scrutinizing—the three or four underwhelming shelves of paperbacks, Owen asked, “What are you looking at?” There just wasn’t much to see. It’s safe to say that most, if not *all*, of the children in this room have a *better* library than the Staybridge Suites. I don’t anticipate ever going back.

Because if you know there’s something *better*, you generally don’t return to what’s *lesser*. This principle plays itself out in millions of ways. I remember when I was in school in North Carolina, a student or a professor would inevitably say, “Oh, you’ve *got* to try North Carolina BBQ.” I’d roll the eyes of my heart, but inevitably join them. However, since that season, I’ve never—not one time—daydreamed about that state’s weak sauce imitation. I’m acquainted with something better.

If you find more comfortable shoes for the same price, do you buy the *less* comfortable next time? If you have a sharper saw in the shed, do you grab the dull one? If this cleaning product works better than what you used to use, do you purchase what was *less* effective? If next week I played the prelude on violin, would Jim ever ask me to do so again? Generally—all other things being equal—if there’s something *better*, you don’t go back to what you’re convinced is *lesser*.

It’s a simple principle. When I say it plays itself out in millions of ways, that’s not hyperbole. It’s how we live our lives. And that simple principle is right at the essence of the book of Hebrews. A group of men and women that had followed Christ for some time were considering—or at least being tempted to consider—going back to something *lesser*.

So, knowing *that* about the people he was writing, what will the author of this book do? He’ll compare what they’re *currently* trusting in, to what they *used* to trust in. And from angle after angle, he’ll make his case. While the argument is certainly complex, the conclusion is simple: Christ is better. Don’t go back. We’ll overview the book with three questions.

1. What is the background to Hebrews?

The first matter, a consideration that gobs of ink has been spilt on, is “Who wrote this letter?” Origen said Paul. Tertullian said Barnabas. Calvin said Luke was a possibility.¹ It’s not a stretch to say that most of the main characters in the book of Acts have been suggested.

But not *just* the main characters. Luther was the first to propose Apollos as the author. This morning I’m going to make that case, *not* because I’m convinced of it, but because I do think we should have in mind someone *like* Apollos. To remind us who he is, this is what Luke wrote about him in Acts 18:24: **Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures.**

To take that piece by piece, Apollos was a Jew. It’s quite clear from the book of Hebrews that this author is well-acquainted with both the Jewish Scriptures and Hebrew tradition. It’s also quite clear that whoever wrote Hebrews had received a good education. In the first century

¹ See D. A. Carson and Doug Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 603–604.

Alexandria was *the* leading intellectual and cultural center of the world,² renowned for its emphasis on education.³ Within Alexandria was a 400,000-volume library. Apollos was from there. Further, it was in that city that the Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Greek—what we call the Septuagint. Whoever wrote Hebrews knew that book well, quoting from it repeatedly.

Apollos was a Jew, from Alexandria, mighty in the Scriptures, and eloquent. What did Acts 18 describe him doing? Acts 18:28: **he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.** He powerfully refuted. When Apollos spoke, it wasn't a ho-hum lecture. He'd labored in his thinking, gathered up his case, chosen his words with care, and then overwhelmingly made his case.

What was the tool he used to contend that Jesus was the Christ? He demonstrated this **by the Scriptures**, meaning the Old Testament Scriptures. Maybe we could imagine he took up the sacrificial system, the priesthood, Abraham, Noah, covenant, rest, the Psalms, and dozens of key themes in Israel's narrative, one by one methodically demonstrating how Christ fulfilled each and every one. He's a better high priest. He's rest. He's the sacrifice all those pointed to. Sound familiar?

Though Carson doesn't make the case for Apollos, he does write this, "In all likelihood the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian . . . steeped in the LXX⁴, and judging by his excellent vocabulary and Greek style, had enjoyed a good education."⁵ So, while I won't pretend to have settled two-thousand years of debate today, I do think it's helpful to have someone *like* Apollos in mind.⁶ And then just humbly admit our ignorance.⁷

But, now that we've solved that, what is the letter's genre? *How* does it say what it says? As you notice, there's no, "To the church at _____" that is typical in New Testament letters. Yet what we read was written down and sent *like* a letter. In Hebrews 13:22 the author calls what he's written **a word of exhortation**, using language that often described a synagogue homily or sermon.⁸ So, is Hebrews a sermon *or* is it a letter? Probably it's a letter that was originally a sermon or series of sermons.⁹ Why bring that out? *How* it says what it says affects *how* we hear it. It's to be understood from both the perspective of a reader *and* the perspective of a hearer. *With* these words, the author aims to persuade.

Why? What was going on with those to whom he spoke and wrote? We hinted at it earlier, but they were struggling with the cost that following Christ demanded.¹⁰ Though the Romans recognized the Jewish religion as legitimate, they did *not* do the same for those following Jesus of Nazareth. Over time it seems that those pressures piled on by authorities and reinforced by society and culture began to wear on these young Christ followers. Maybe they were tired of "bearing the shame of living outside the mainstream of their cultural heritage."¹¹ Can you identify? As Jim said last week, they had a comfort zone. And its pull was strong. Were the authorities over them accepting of Genesis, Exodus, and the Psalms? To a certain degree, yes. As were their long-time friends, family, and those they did business with. But were those same authorities, their friends, family, and their contacts in the marketplace accepting of Christ? No. Hebrews 10 recalls that **after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public**

² David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 525.

³ Craig Keener, *Acts*, NCBC, 468.

⁴ Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament

⁵ Carson and Moo, 604.

⁶ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC, wrote that it's the, "least unlikely of the conjectures," 21.

⁷ Carson and Moo, 604.

⁸ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 15.

⁹ Carson and Moo, 596.

¹⁰ O'Brien, 16.

¹¹ Carson and Moo, 612.

spectacle through reproaches and tribulations . . . (you) accepted joyfully the seizure of your property (Heb. 10:32–34).

How did they accept that suffering joyfully? Listen for the theme mentioned earlier. You, **accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one** (10:34). That “better” language is a good place to transition into the argument of the book.

2. Exposition: **What does Hebrews say?** (10:19–21)

Maybe in school you did both pre- and post-tests? If not, we used to walk in on the first day of class and take a quiz on material we hadn’t yet covered. Then, four months later we’d take the same quiz and see how much material we’d actually absorbed. Sometimes we’d learned something.

There is more than one way to approach an overview, especially with a book like Hebrews. For example, I could attempt to summarize the entire book in my own words. Honestly, I don’t think I could do that justice without keeping you for quite a long time. Or, for a second option, I could pick a theme—Christ as priest, for example—and run that theme through the book. In one sense, you’ve already done that in Sunday School. Or, for a third option, we could read the prologue (the introduction) and expound upon how God has spoken through His Son. Lord willing we’ll do that next week. So, instead of those options, today I’ve decided to skip to the *end* of the book—to see where the argument ascends to—so that we might go ahead and know where we’re headed.

Most would say the central argument of the book ends in chapter 10:18.¹² So, that’s where we’re going to pick up. I do anticipate this being *less* effective than it will be later. Because when we return to this text, we will have spent nine months detailing the first nine chapters. We’ll appreciate the peak because we will have ascended the mount. So, today is something of the pre-test.

In this section that begins in 10:19, the author does two things. First, he sort of sums up what he’s said thus far. And then he applies it. We know this is a major transition in the book because of the “therefore,” a word that seems to reach all the way back to chapter 5, maybe even stretching into chapter 4.¹³ At this point, in chapter 10:19, the central argument of the book has been made.¹⁴

Because he’s made the case, the author doesn’t use “if,” language; he uses “since.” Verse 19: **Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place.** I didn’t consider this until recently, but in at least one way our study of the Psalms of Ascent set the stage for Hebrews. Why? Because what would those pilgrims singing those Psalms do? They’d travel to Jerusalem, ascend the mount, go to the Temple, but at some point they’d have to stop. Their journey ended. They could venture no farther. There were places, by the Lord’s design and decree, they *couldn’t* go.

These Jewish Christians knew this, not *only* because they’d heard their people’s history, but because they’d lived it out multiple times a year. After Nadab and Abihu failed to treat the Lord as holy in Leviticus 10, Leviticus 16:2 addressed their father, Aaron, as high priest: **he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die.** Let us be clear: a holy God is far from safe for an unholy people. So, if God told the where to stop, if He limited access, it was in mercy. The pilgrims would only go so far. In fact, there was only one day of the year *anyone* entered into the Holy of Holies—the holy place. And on this one day of the year, only *one* man did so: the high priest, the representative of the people of God. Their mediator.

¹² O’Brien, NSBT, 90.

¹³ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 272; Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 462; Ellingworth, 517.

¹⁴ We also know we’re at a turning point in the argument because of the second word, “brethren,” Harris, 272.

We live in a day where access is assumed, at all times. I don't have to get on a train or depend on the post office to contact you. I should *always* be able to reach you. And access is assumed at all times with all manner of people. We even have access to people we don't know. Of course, it's the illusion of access. But our world fosters the idea that we always deserve it.

That's not the case with a holy God. We *don't* deserve access to Him. Israel knew this. Yet, what did verse 19 of Hebrews 10 just say? Not only that we might enter the holy place, but, **we have confidence to enter the holy place.** Verse 20 goes on: **By a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil.** I trust you see the "access" language of **enter** and **way**. The author of Hebrews is saying that there's a *new* way, a way *not* there before.¹⁵

Before, throughout Israel's history, on the Day of Atonement—on the one day—the high priest—the one man—would enter in the Holy Place and make an offering for the people. He'd follow the instructions the Lord gave in Leviticus 16. Two goats would die, picturing the propitiation of the wrath of God against sin, temporarily taking away their guilt, dying so that they might continue to have access. However, at the *end* of those instructions for the Day of Atonement, they were told: **And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins** (16:34). In short, the Israelites were told they would *never* have a good year. Their access would continue to be limited. The next year, and the next, the high priest alone would enter through the veil, on behalf of the people. They could only go so far.

Hebrews speaks of *better* access. **We have confidence to enter the holy place.** Why? Verse 20: **by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil.** The author writes that the veil is no longer where we must stop; it's no longer a barrier. Instead, the veil is something we go *through*. Maybe we'd say, "Is this the veil in Jerusalem? The one at the temple?" What is this veil we walk *through*, this new and living way by which we confidently enter into God's presence? Hebrews answers: **through the veil, that is, His flesh.** Rather than the tabernacle or temple curtain, the new and living way to God is Christ Himself.¹⁶

In one sense, there was *no* access. Now there is. He's the way. That's better. It's *also* better because He went where the Old Testament high priest could *never* go. Hear Hebrews 9:24: **Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.** Leon Morris writes, "The high priest went into a tiny, dark room which was a symbol of the presence of God. The access with which Christ was concerned was access into the very presence of God in heaven."¹⁷

He—our way—went where the high priest could never go. And He did so, that verse from chapter 9 just said, **on our behalf.** It's better access, in part, because it's no longer a copy. It's better access because of where He goes. Where He went, we might now go. And it's better access because it's no longer access by proxy on one day a year. It's access for *all*. Hear the word, "brethren." This is for God's people. Hebrews 10:19: **Therefore, brethren since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is His flesh.**

Leading up to the Day of Atonement, the High Priest went through dress rehearsal after dress rehearsal to ensure he nailed every jot of Leviticus 16. He practiced his lines; he pretended to clean the altar; he burned the incense. Israel's hope hinged *entirely* on Aaron or another getting this right. In fact, before the high priest would make an offering for the people, he would make

¹⁵ Harris, 273.

¹⁶ Stephen Witmer, *The Preacher's Greek Companion to Hebrews*, 287.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*, 84.

atonement first for himself and his own house (Lev. 16:6). He'd *have* to. He—the holiest man they could put forward—was himself a sinner.

But Hebrews reminds us that there's better access because there's a better priest, a better mediator. The veil is *His* flesh. We have confidence to enter the holy place, verse 19 says, **by the blood of Jesus**. To what degree is this better? Hebrews 7:27 says that this Mediator, this Priest: **does not need daily, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people** (Heb. 7:27). Why? The verse immediately preceding tells us: **For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens**. That's what verse 21 reiterates in our passage today, **and since we have a great priest over the house of God**.

This great priest is the radiance of God's glory (1:3), the sustainer of all things. He's exalted above the angels (1:4), the Son of God incarnate (2:5ff), the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (12:2). He belongs, not to a temporary priesthood, but to an eternal one (Hebrews 7). *That* priest is the One who made purification for sins (1:3).

There's better access because there's a better priest. And we have better access because this better priest is Himself the better sacrifice. The sinless priest was also the spotless victim.¹⁸ It was *always* impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (10:4). That's why they had to do it again and again. The Day of Atonement was always pointing forward to another. Hebrews 10:11 exults in what's *better*. **Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sin; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God** (10:11–12). What He offered—Himself—was final and sufficient for past, present, and future.¹⁹

In three pages, have I exhausted the exposition of Hebrews? No, I've barely touched three verses. In this book the author will describe a better covenant, a better possession, a better rest, a better revelation alongside that better sacrifice, priesthood, and access. But this is a hint at where we're going.

And the truths are not merely abstract or esoteric; they are intended to affect our lives. Since we have better access, because of a better priest and a better sacrifice, what should we do?

3. Exhortation: **Why should we read Hebrews?** (10:22–25)

It's been said that verses 19–21 serve as a description of the *benefits* Christ's priesthood provides. Then, that verses 22–25 serve as an exhortation to take *advantage* of those privileges.²⁰ In other words, if all *that* is true, what should we do? Verse 22: **Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith**. Since we have this better access, we avail ourselves of it. With confidence, we approach God Himself. Does that include those well-aware of our frailty? Hear Hebrews 4:15: **For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need**.

We have need. We need mercy. But what do we often do? We draw near to everything *else*. Why? Maybe because we lack full assurance that we *can* approach. We know our sin. Our conscience is conflicted. Will He accept us? Hear verse 22 again: **Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies**

¹⁸ O'Brien, NSBT, 81.

¹⁹ O'Brien, NSBT, 82.

²⁰ Cockerill, 464.

washed with pure water. Not evil. No longer dirty. His *better* atonement means *full* atonement, once-for-all atonement. So, in Him, *through* Him—the veil—access is ours now and forevermore. So, with full assurance, draw near. Receive mercy and grace.

That's the first application. The second is in verse 23: **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.** These Jewish Christians would've been tempted to go back to their comfort zone. They would've wavered. The challenges, the threats, the demeaning, the ostracism, would've taken its toll. In that context, not a context we're entirely unfamiliar with, the author implores them to hold fast.²¹

We know why they wavered. But why shouldn't they? Here is the ground, the reason. Verse 23 goes on, **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.** In Hebrews 6 we'll be reminded that it is impossible for God to lie (6:18). In fact, the book of Hebrews has carefully unfolded the manifold ways that Christ is the perfect fulfillment of all that God promised. The promise of Psalm 2 is fulfilled in Him. As are the promises of Psalm 40, 95, and 110, as well the new covenant assurances of Jeremiah 31. Hebrews will assure us of a certainty from Deuteronomy, that He **will never desert you, nor will He forsake you** (13:5). Why? Hebrews 13:8: **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.** He does not change. He who promised is faithful. It's on that basis that we hold fast the confession of our hope.

That's the second application. The third is detailed in verses 24 and 25: **and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 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.** Sometimes it's portrayed as if those that walk away from the faith do so overnight. That's generally *not* the case. Instead, it's a slow drift, away from God in private—drawing near less and less—and *then* from His people. Why would I want to be around those that challenge me to love Him more?

If we aim to persevere, we don't go at it alone. Further, those that aim to persevere actually care about the endurance of others. We consider *how* we might provoke,²² how we might spur others on. It's clear from verse 25 that we can't do this apart from assembling together. And it's clear that one of the purposes of our assembling is for the goal of encouraging one another.

Notice two other quick things about this section of three exhortations. First, note the triad begun in verse 22, **let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.** Verse 23: **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope.** Verse 24: **and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love.** One man writes, "By enjoining faith, hope, and love, these three exhortations encompass the totality of the Christian life."²³ Note, secondly, that all of these verbs—draw near, hold fast, and consider how—are present tense verbs, meaning they are to be things we *keep* doing. This is what we do, in light of what Christ has done.

Conclusion

So, why read this letter to the Hebrews? Because we're constantly warring within, tempted to lean on and trust in *lesser* things. We keep driving to the hotel library. Hebrews says, over and over again, in this way and that way: Don't go back. What Christ has done is better. *He's* better. Draw near.

²¹ He'd said this earlier in chapter 3 too: **Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope until the end** (3:6).

²² Usually a word with negative connotations.

²³ Cockerill, 465.