

# How Hebrews Works (Theme, Structure and Purpose)

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## Introduction

A useful perspective on Hebrews comes from the pen of R. C. Sproul:

I have often said that if I were thrown in prison and in solitary confinement, and was allowed to have only one book, the book I would want to have would be the Bible. But if my options were even further restricted, and I was permitted to have only one book of the Bible, the book that I would choose would be the book of Hebrews.

Now that usually surprises people who know me because they assume the book I would want to have would be Romans. But the reason Hebrews is the book I would choose is because it so richly and comprehensively integrates all of the teaching of the Old Testament with the material that is found in the New Testament, serving as the best connecting link between the two. It is also one of the finest books of the New Testament – indeed, of the entire Bible – in terms of its literary quality. The book of Hebrews also gives us a very high Christology since the central theme is the supremacy of Christ. In Hebrews, Christ is compared to various people and things and shown to be superior to them all.<sup>1</sup>

In these words Sproul has identified what Hebrews is all about: “The central theme is the supremacy of Christ.” He is superior to all that have gone before him – to the angels, to Moses, to Aaron, to the old covenant, and indeed to all the heroes of faith who lived under the old covenant. The writer to the Hebrews plays his hand right at the beginning of the book.

Think of the majestic words of verse 3 of the opening chapter: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Nothing and no one is superior to Christ. He enjoys a supremacy that is unmatched by even the most privileged and exalted figures of the Old Testament.

- What creatures could be more lofty and exalted than the angels? Jesus has inherited a name far superior to theirs.
- Who of all the Old Testament saints was more revered and influential than Moses? He was just a servant in God’s house. Christ was the Son.
- Who could have been called to a higher office than Aaron, the first high priest? His position was only temporary because he was a mortal man. Christ is a priest forever.

So take any figure from the Mosaic order – the angels in all their splendour, Moses and his incredible intimacy with God in speaking with him face to face, Aaron whose privilege it was to enter into the holy of holies once a year into the very presence of God – take all of that, the splendour, the intimacy, the privilege, and even all of that put together doesn’t hold a candle to Jesus Christ. When it comes to superiority and supremacy they may have reached the mountaintop, but he has reached the stars. He is supreme, he is superior to all that have gone before.

So that’s the basic theme of Hebrews. The writer lays it all on the table in the very first paragraph. It’s no secret. The supremacy and superiority of Christ – that’s the grand theme that fills his mind. But how does he develop that theme? And why has he chosen this theme in the first place?

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Sproul, <http://www.doxapress.com/free2.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotes are from the NIV.

These are difficult questions. Identifying the theme is relatively easy. It stares you in the face from the very beginning. But how that theme is developed is harder to figure out, and what is even more difficult to figure out is why the writer chose this particular theme to begin with. These are challenging questions, but we must answer them if we are to preach meaningfully from this book. Yet even though these questions are so difficult, the answers can be found in the book itself. We don't have to look beyond Hebrews to work out how and why it was written.

**A. So we begin with the “how” question: How was Hebrews put together? What is the structure of the book?**

To answer that question we really need to answer an earlier question. What kind of writing is Hebrews to begin with? What kind of literature is it exactly? What is its literary genre?

That sounds like a very easy question. Don't we refer to the “Epistle to the Hebrews”? Isn't it a letter like all the letters of the New Testament? Isn't it preceded by the letter to Philemon and followed by the letter of James? Isn't that where it sits in the New Testament canon? Or have we been wrong all these years?

Well, we haven't been wrong exactly. Let's say that we have been only partly right. Hebrews doesn't open the way most of the other New Testament letters open. It certainly doesn't open like any of the epistles of Paul. The writer doesn't begin by identifying himself. He doesn't say who his intended readers are. He doesn't even give a greeting. He doesn't thank God for his readers as Paul does most of the time.<sup>3</sup> He launches right into his topic. His major theme, the supremacy of Christ, is right there in the opening verses. In one way that makes things really easy. We know right away what this writer is on about. But it also makes things far more difficult. We don't know who the author is and we don't know who he's writing to. This has caused considerable consternation to commentators down the ages.

Because all of this is so unusual, it should make us ask some questions. If the author doesn't introduce himself or his readers, and if he doesn't greet and doesn't thank, if he doesn't do anything that we would expect the writer of an epistle to do, then what is that telling us? Should we be trying to squeeze Hebrews into the mold of an epistle? Maybe it isn't an epistle pure and simple.

If we turn to the end of this writing we are given a great clue by the writer himself. In 13:22 he is almost at the end. He has just three verses to go and he chooses his language very carefully. In the NIV it reads: “Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.” Other translations have “I have written you briefly.” The Greek has the unusual verb *epesteila* (ἐπέστειλα) literally he is saying “I have epistled you.” The only other time this verb is used in the New Testament it refers to the letter sent by the Jerusalem Council to communicate its decision to the Gentile churches (Acts 15:20; 21:25). So Hebrews is an epistle of the utmost importance. It is up there with the Apostolic Decree.

So Hebrews is a very important letter. But it is more than that. The writer also calls it “my word of exhortation.”<sup>4</sup> At this point it could be very tempting to equate the “word of exhortation” with the “short letter” and leave it at that, but if we took that route we would be missing something crucial. Like the verb *epesteila*, the expression “word of exhortation” is quite unusual. This phrase also occurs in just one other book in the New Testament and once again it happens to be the book of Acts. In Acts 13:15, in Pisidian Antioch, the synagogue officials say to Paul and Barnabas, “Brethren, if you have any *word of exhortation* for the people, say it” (NASB). What follows is Paul's first recorded sermon. In that sermon what does Paul do? He tells the story of the Old Testament, the story of redemptive history, and shows how it is fulfilled in Christ. Again and again he quotes the Old Testament and applies it to the hearts of his hearers. And isn't that exactly what we find in Hebrews! Time and again the author quotes the Old Testament and applies it to the hearts of his readers. Hebrews is a written

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<sup>3</sup> The only exceptions to this custom in Paul's writings are the letters to the Galatians and to Titus.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase translates the Greek expression λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως.

sermon. Hebrews is a sermon in epistolary form. It is both a sermon and a letter. That's what Hebrews 13:22 tells us.

Let's explore this a little further. Hebrews doesn't begin like an epistle, but it certainly ends like one. At the end you have all the personal details, the greetings and the farewells that we have come to expect from the New Testament epistles, especially Paul's. Those last few verses (vv. 22-25) sound very much like Paul, and a little bit like Peter and John as well. In fact, all of chapter 13 sounds like an epistle. That's quite a claim, but there are enough stylistic variations between the end of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13 to indicate that our author is doing something different in this last chapter. In his commentary on Hebrews F. F. Bruce writes: "Ch. 13 resembles the usual assortment of ethical and practical admonition and personal information with which New Testament epistles tend to close."<sup>5</sup> P. E. Hughes comes to a similar conclusion. He calls chapter 13 "a postscript to the main body of the epistle."<sup>6</sup>

So chapters 1-12 are the main body. Chapter 13 is the P.S. In other words, Hebrews is twelve chapters of sermon and one chapter of epistle. The sermon ends on a rather fiery note: "For our God is a consuming fire" (12:29). What a challenging way to end a very powerful message!

So the main message of Hebrews is a sermon and it takes up the first twelve chapters of the book. If we can leave off chapter 13 as a P.S. or simply as the epistolary part of Hebrews, then in chapters 1-12 we are left with the homiletical part. If you take these chapters on their own you will soon notice that they form a very well structured sermon. They do what many preachers would do Sunday after Sunday. They teach and they apply. They teach and they apply. In the case of Hebrews the structure is so beautifully logical and straightforward. It is elegant in its simplicity.

In his introduction or prologue the writer states his theme – the supremacy of Christ. He then develops this theme under five points:

1. Christ is superior to angels (1:5-2:18)
2. Christ is superior to Moses (3:1-4:16)
3. Christ is superior to Aaron (5:1-7:28)
4. Christ is superior to the old covenant (8:1-10:39)
5. Christ is superior to old covenant believers (11:1-12:29)<sup>7</sup>

So that answers the how question. How was Hebrews put together? How is it structured? Apart from chapter 13 it is really a five-point sermon, and each point has some practical application. Once again the writer to the Hebrews does what most of us would do on a Sunday morning. The only difference would be that we preach three-point sermons rather than five-point sermons. The writer has a theme which is the superiority of Christ. He then takes that theme, develops it under five points and then drives it home with some trenchant application. It's all very logical and in its own way very simple. But now comes the most difficult question. Finding the theme was easy. Finding the structure was more difficult. Finding the purpose is the most difficult quest of all.

**B. So we come to our next main question: Why was Hebrews written? What is the purpose behind it? Why write a sermon with one chapter of epistle as an appendix? Why preach a sermon with a P.S. in the form of a letter? It does seem like a slightly unusual thing to do, so why does our author do it?**

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<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 386.

<sup>6</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 561.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix, "Structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews," at the end of this article.

This is such a difficult question that I would like to look for the answer in two places – firstly outside of Hebrews and secondly within Hebrews itself. This may seem a little indirect at first, but I think that in the long run it is the surer path to go.

- (a) To look outside of Hebrews we need to ask all the usual questions of New Testament introduction: Who was the author? Who were the readers? When did the author write? Where was he when he wrote? Where did the readers live?

Of all those questions the easiest to answer is the first – who is the author? The fact of the matter is that no one knows. Many have thought Paul, but his style is so different. Others have suggested Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Clement of Rome and even Priscilla. They all have their merits, but they all have their downsides too, and at the end of the day we still don't know. Most commentators are happy to quote the church father Origen. Back in the third century he penned these memorable words: "But as to who actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter."<sup>8</sup> Even the brightest scholars today can only echo Origen's confession of ignorance.

That's not a very promising start. Maybe things might look up a little if we ask the other questions. Who were the readers? Where did they live? When was Hebrews written? I really wanted to know the answers to these questions. So I checked eighteen relevant books. They were mainly commentaries, but they also included study Bibles, New Testament introductions and other books about Hebrews, and they had all been written in the last hundred years.<sup>9</sup> Some were very recent and reflected the latest scholarship.

So how did they answer these questions?

- (a) Who were the readers? Eleven said they were Jews.<sup>10</sup> One said they were Gentiles.<sup>11</sup> Six said they were either a mixture of Jews and Gentiles or we just couldn't be sure.<sup>12</sup>  
(b) Where did the readers live? Two said in Jerusalem or Palestine.<sup>13</sup> Seven said in Rome<sup>14</sup> and eight either said somewhere else or couldn't be sure.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, xlii.

<sup>9</sup> In chronological order of their date of publication, the following works were consulted: B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (third edition; London: Macmillan, 1914); Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Tyndale, 1960); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (third edition; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970); Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Hebrews: A Digest of Reformed Comment* (London: Banner of Truth, 1970); P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Kenneth Barker (ed.), *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985); William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985); Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Hermeneia, 1989); William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Waco: Word, 1991); Peter Adam, *Hebrews: The Majestic Son* (Sydney South: Aquila Press, 1992); D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992); Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 2001); David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004); Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos* (Leicester: Apollos, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Westcott, *Hebrews*, xl; Hewitt, *Hebrews*, 34; Bruce, *Hebrews*, xxxiv; Harrison, *Introduction*, 374; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 703; Wilson, *Digest*, 11; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 14-15; *NIV Study Bible*, 1857; Lane, *Call*, 22-25, *Hebrews*, lxvi; Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction*, 402-403; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Vos, *Hebrews*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12-13; Adam, *Hebrews*, 5; Koester, *Hebrews*, 54; deSilva, *Introduction*, 778; Blomberg, *Pentecost to Patmos*, 410.

<sup>13</sup> Westcott, *Hebrews*, xl; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Hewitt, *Hebrews*, 34; Bruce, *Hebrews*, xxxi-xxxv; Harrison, *Introduction*, 374; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 713-714; Lane, *Call*, 22-25, *Hebrews*, lxvi; Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction*, 401; Blomberg, *Pentecost to Patmos*, 413.

<sup>15</sup> Vos, *Hebrews*, 19; Wilson, *Digest*, 11; *NIV Study Bible*, 1857; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12-13; Adam, *Hebrews*, 6; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 27; Koester, *Hebrews*, 54; deSilva, *Introduction*, 778-779.

(c) When was Hebrews written? Most said before 70AD.<sup>16</sup> One allowed for a possibility after 70AD<sup>17</sup> and one didn't know.<sup>18</sup>

So there was difference of opinion on every point, but the most popular solution would seem to be that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians living in Rome before 70AD. Then you can push that a little further and say that Hebrews was written at the time of Nero's persecution of Christians in the mid sixties. Then it all begins to make sense. The readers were Jewish Christians who were tempted to revert to Judaism under the pressure of Nero's persecution. That's what the writer is warning against. That's what the readers were tempted to do, and quite understandably under the circumstances.

Some very renowned scholars (such as Lane and Blomberg) have approached the issue along these lines. They anchor Hebrews historically in Rome in the mid-sixties. The case they put is a very convincing one and I for one was persuaded by their line of argument. So at the beginning of the year I produced a mini-paper on the subject. I had it all figured out – Rome, mid-sixties, persecution, reversion to Judaism, and it all tied in nicely with Timothy's visit at the end of chapter 13. I was so confident that I presented my conclusions to my honours student. He listened carefully and politely as he always does, but the next week he came prepared to present his counter-argument. After all isn't that what honours is all about? You're not much of an honours student if you just blithely accept what your lecturer tells you. So he came up with his counter-argument and it was based on the same material that I had considered (i.e. mainly Hebrews and 2 Timothy). From that same evidence he concluded that Hebrews was written by Apollos to Jewish believers in Ephesus. Apollos was in Corinth at the time, and Timothy would pass through on his way from Rome and bring greetings from friends in Italy. Those friends were probably Aquila and Priscilla who had worked in Ephesus during Paul's missionary journeys in Acts.

I had to admit that this was a very clever and creative solution, but who was right? Neither of us was humble enough to back down immediately and we each had logic and the Bible on our side! So who yields and who has the right of way? Then I thought of the eighteen scholarly works I had consulted which could have thrown any number of other opinions into the mix. So what do you do? You have to ask yourself whether you are asking the right question in the first place! Can we know who wrote Hebrews and to whom and when and where? Perhaps we need to invoke the church father Origen once again, and expand on what he said: "As to who wrote Hebrews *and to whom and when and where*, only God knows the truth of the matter." So let's be humble enough to confess our ignorance not only about authorship, but also about the readers and the time and the location of the epistle's composition. One of the commentators has wisely compared Hebrews to one of its main characters, the priest Melchizedek.<sup>19</sup> Like him it is "without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life" (7:3). The writer doesn't mean that Melchizedek had no parents or ancestors or descendants, but simply that Scripture doesn't tell us. So we just don't know. The same is true with all those introductory questions to Hebrews. We just don't know. So let's stop wasting our time by trying to guess. "Only God knows the truth of the matter."

But if we don't know, a serious casualty could result. If we can't answer the *who*, *where*, *when* and *to whom* questions, then how can we answer the *why* question? If we don't know the writer or the readers, or the time or the place of writing, if we don't know any of the background circumstances,

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<sup>16</sup> Westcott, *Hebrews*, xl; Hewitt, *Hebrews*, 39; Bruce, *Hebrews*, xlv; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 718; Wilson, *Digest*, 11; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 30-31; *NIV Study Bible*, 1857; Lane, *Call*, 22-25, *Hebrews*, lxvi; Adam, *Hebrews*, 6; Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction*, 400; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 27; deSilva, *Introduction*, 788; Blomberg, *Pentecost to Patmos*, 413.

<sup>17</sup> Koester, *Hebrews*, 27, claims that "a date between A.D. 60 and 90 is plausible, but greater specificity is tenuous."

<sup>18</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison,

*Introduction*, 367, θυοτες Φρανζ Δελιτζσχησ χομμενταρψ ον Ηεβρεωσ· †Ιτ ισ λικε της γρεατ Μελχηιζε δεκ οφ σαχρεδ στορψ, οφ ωηχη ιτσ χεντραλ πορτιον τρεατσ. Λικε ημ ιτ μαρχηεσ φορτη ιν λονελψ, ροψαλ, ανδ σαχερδοταλ διγνιτψ, ανδ λικε ημ ιτ ισ αγνεαλογητος; we know not whence it cometh or whither it goeth."

then how can we ever hope to know the purpose of Hebrews? At least under the old view you knew that someone was writing to Jewish Christians to warn them against falling back into Judaism. Surely in this very laudable confession of ignorance the victim has become the *why* question. Now we can no longer be sure why Hebrews was written!

- (b) That, however, would be a very premature conclusion. It is now time to pursue a line of evidence that comes from within the epistle itself. This evidence has hardly been touched on as yet, but is crucial for understanding Hebrews as a whole. Chapters 1-12 read like a five point sermon and with each of these points the writer makes some penetrating application to his readers. These application sections, the so-called “warning passages,” provide the key to the purpose of Hebrews. The writer has called his work a “word of exhortation”. So it pays to identify his exhortations and listen to them carefully.

In the Greek text of Hebrews there are numerous exhortations. They occur almost exclusively in three types of grammatical constructions:

- There are imperatives or straight out commands, such as “Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees” (12:12) or “Make every effort . . . to be holy” (12:14). All told, there are 24 such imperatives in Hebrews.
- There are also negative commands or prohibitions, such as “Do not harden your hearts” (3:8ff.) or “Do not throw away your confidence” (10:35). In all of Hebrews there are nine such prohibitions.
- Finally there are also exhortations pure and simple, which in Greek grammar are called hortatory subjunctives. In English such exhortations begin with the words *let us*. For example, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (4:14) or “Let us be thankful” (12:28). There are a dozen such exhortations in Hebrews.

So that comes to a total of 45 imperatives, prohibitions and exhortations in Hebrews. That sounds like a lot, but no less than fifteen of these are found in chapter 13, the “epistle” part of Hebrews. The other twelve chapters have only twice as many examples as the last chapter. This is just one way in which chapter 13 is different to all the others. So that leaves another thirty examples scattered throughout the rest of the book. Yet you could hardly say they are scattered. Almost without exception they appear in the warning passages. For the most part that’s how the writer warns his readers – through commands, prohibitions and exhortations. Those of us who are preachers can identify with that style. In our sermons too we command and prohibit and exhort.

Now I would like you to follow me in what may sound like a rather daunting exercise - to work through all of the commands, prohibitions and exhortations in chapters 1-12. That may sound ominous, but it is a rewarding exercise and truly worth the effort. Not all thirty examples are in the warning-passages, but most are. So the following list will restrict itself to these.

**Warning 1** (2:1-4). The main idea comes in verse 1: “ We must pay careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.” This warning is addressed to drifters.

**Warning 2** (3:7-4:16). In the first warning passage there is just one single warning not to drift away. In this second passage the warnings come thick and fast, but they have a common theme. Some warnings are repeated over and over again. A pattern begins to emerge.

3:8 “Do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

3:12, 13 “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

3:15 “Do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” (The quote in v. 8 is repeated).

4:1 “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”

4:7 “Do not harden your hearts.” (The quote from 3:8 is repeated again.)

The next three exhortations in this passage are more positive:

4:11 “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”

4:14 “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

4:16 “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence.”

What is the thread that runs through this section? “Do not harden your hearts,” says our preacher, and he says it four times. Don’t have a sinful unbelieving heart. Otherwise you will fall short of the promised rest just as the Israelites did in the wilderness. So make every effort to enter that rest. Do it by holding firmly to the faith that you profess, and do it by approaching the throne of grace with confidence.

So what kind of problem is our author addressing in this section? It’s the problem of the hard heart. It’s the problem of the sinful, unbelieving heart. It’s that kind of heart that won’t enter the promised rest.

**Warning 3** (5:11-6:12). Like the first warning passage, this section has just a single warning and it’s in 6:1: “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death.” This is a warning against immaturity and stagnation.

**Warning 4** (10:19-39). Here we have a handful of exhortations, but again there seems to be a recurring theme.

10:22 “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith.”

10:23 “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

10:24 “Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good works.”

10:32 “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light.”

10:35 “So do not throw away your confidence.”

So what do all of these verses have in common? What is the preacher warning against? Isn’t this a warning against a sagging faith? All the emphasis seems to fall on confidence, hope and assurance of faith. So the spiritual danger here is sagging faith.

**Warning 5** (12:1-29). The last set of warnings takes up all of chapter 12. Here the warning is against losing heart. That’s the central idea that would seem to hold all of these various warnings and exhortations together.

12:1 “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

12:3 “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

12:5 quotes from Proverbs 3: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you.”

12:12 “Therefore strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.”

12:13 “Make level paths for your feet.”

12:14 “Make every effort to live at peace with all men and to be holy.”

12:25 “See that you do not refuse him who speaks.” (This seems to be a reminder of the very first warning back in chapter 2).

Finally we come to the last exhortation, in 12:28-29: “Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

So these are all the commands, prohibitions and exhortations in chapters 1-12. Note again the kinds of spiritual dangers that our preacher is warning against – drifting away, hardness of heart, spiritual immaturity, a sagging faith and losing heart. This is why he preached his sermon. This is why he wrote his epistle. This is the purpose of Hebrews.

Now compare this conclusion to the traditional explanation, that Hebrews was written to warn Jewish Christians against reverting back to Judaism. How many people in your churches are inclined to convert to Judaism? I suspect probably not too many. But how many are facing the kinds of spiritual dangers that Hebrews is warning against?

How many of us have people in our congregations who are inclined to drift away?

How many of us preach to people suffering from hardness of heart?

How many of us pastor churches where people are spiritually immature?

Who doesn’t have at least some members whose faith is sagging?

And is there anyone here who does not occasionally lose heart?

These are the kinds of spiritual issues that Hebrews is dealing with. And how relevant they are! These are the kinds of spiritual conditions that some of us encounter on a daily basis. It is precisely to these kinds of issues that Hebrews is addressed. So how relevant, how timely, how opportune it is to preach a series of sermons on Hebrews!

- Drifters need Hebrews.
- The hard-hearted need Hebrews.
- The spiritually immature need Hebrews.
- Those with a sagging faith need Hebrews.
- Those who are losing heart need Hebrews.

So preach Hebrews!

But there’s a catch. It’s not an easy thing to do. One of the first sermons I ever preached was on Hebrews and it had just one problem. No one understood what I was talking about! It was all far too deep and mysterious. It’s all very well for a theological student to get all excited about these deep doctrines, but what about the average person in the pew? How do you get the message across? Of course, there should be all the usual requirements – clear teaching, helpful illustrations and penetrating

application. But in the case of Hebrews there is more. We also have to understand how it all holds together – and it holds together in some unusual ways. Think of the five points to our author’s sermon in Hebrews.<sup>20</sup> Let me summarise what we have discovered so far and you’ll find that we have come up with some unlikely combinations:

- The first to be addressed are the drifters and they are reminded that Christ is superior to angels. That may not seem like the most direct way to deal with drifters.
- Then those with hard hearts are told that Jesus is superior to Moses.
- The message for the spiritually immature is that Jesus is superior to Aaron.
- Those whose faith is sagging are reminded that Jesus is superior to the old covenant.
- Those who are losing heart are told that Jesus is superior to old covenant believers.

How does all this work? How does it all hold together? The logic here does not appear to be immediately obvious. So let me give you some suggestions as we look at each of the main sections one by one.

1. Drifters are reminded that Christ is superior to angels. But what does Christ’s superiority to angels have to do with drifters? In 2:2 the writer speaks of “the message spoken by angels.” Now what was this message? The common understanding in the first century was that this was a reference to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. This thought formed the punch line to Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin, when he declared: “You have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it” (Acts 7:53). Likewise Paul, in writing to the Galatians, makes this claim: “The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator” (Gal 3:19). So that’s the assumption behind Hebrews – the law was spoken and put into effect through angels. If you miss this connection the whole argument in the first two chapters makes little sense. Christ is greater than the angels and so the gospel is superior to the law. Then comes the point of application: If the law “was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:2-3). If you thought those who ignored the law were dealt with severely, what will happen to those who ignore the gospel?
2. Those who are hardening their hearts are told that Jesus was greater than Moses. Again what’s the logic here? This whole section is an exposition of Psalm 95. This is a Psalm of David and was written centuries after the exodus. The people were now in the Promised Land under a Davidic king. You would think they had entered the rest. But no, David can still say, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Here they were under their own vine and fig tree. The desert wanderings were in the distant past. You would think they had it made. Well maybe, but this is not the ultimate rest. Even under David’s benevolent reign there was still more to come. David warns people in his day not to miss out on the greater rest. The writer to the Hebrews does the same. His readers are not to harden their hearts or they will miss out on true rest. Moses may have directed his people to the Promised Land but Jesus leads his people to the greater, eternal rest of God, the heavenly Mount Zion.,
3. The spiritually immature are reminded that Jesus is superior to Aaron. Once again this is a line of reasoning that is not immediately obvious. But when you notice where the warning passage sits you begin to get a clue. In 5:6-10 the writer introduces Melchizedek into the discussion. Then he seems to digress (5:11-6:12) before returning to Melchizedek at the end of chapter 6 and then discussing him in great detail in chapter 7. Here the preacher seems to be taking a calculated risk. He knows that his people are spiritually immature and that they need milk rather than solid food. But he’s going to take his chances and tell them about Melchizedek! That is a risky thing to do. When we have immature people in our churches we are tempted to dumb down the gospel. But maybe we need to do the opposite. What is the opposite of “dumb down”? Whatever it is, we need to do it. And what better way than preaching Hebrews!

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<sup>20</sup> See appendix.

4. To those with a sagging faith our preacher reminds them that Jesus is better than the old covenant. The exhortations in the second half of chapter 10 are based on the masterful discussion of the new

Passage	Theme	Exhortation	OT Text
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covenant that began in chapter 8. Twice our author quotes the section on the new covenant from Jeremiah 31. He quotes it at length in 8:8-12. With 130 words this is the longest Old Testament quote to be found anywhere in the New Testament. Then he quotes this passage again in summary form (in just 35 words) at the end of his discussion in 10:16-17. This reminds us that all along he has been discussing the new covenant. But he does it in a particular way. Between these two quotes from Jeremiah 31 he discusses the Day of Atonement from Leviticus 16. The high priests would enter the holy of holies once a year with blood not their own, but Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary once for all with his own blood. We therefore have access to the heavenly holy of holies “through a new and living way” (10:20) and we can do so with a clean conscience (10:22). Is any more incentive needed for a sagging faith?

5. Then those who are inclined to lose heart are told that Jesus is superior to old covenant believers. In chapter 11 we have the honour roll of faith, a list of believers that stretches all the way from Genesis to the Apocrypha. Some of the examples at the end of chapter 11 best fit the period of the Maccabees. Those who are in danger of losing heart can take inspiration from all those old covenant believers who have gone before and who have persevered under incredible odds. But in our admiration of those ancient saints let’s not forget one thing. When it comes to perseverance and endurance they cannot match Jesus. Of all those who have gone before us he is the greatest inspiration of all. He “endured the cross, scorning its shame” (12:2). If we are tempted to lose heart in the race of faith, “let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). For those who are inclined to lose heart it makes a lot of sense to remember that Jesus is superior to old covenant believers no matter how faithful and heroic they may have been.

## Conclusion

So how does Hebrews work? We don’t know who wrote it or who it was written to or when or where, but it still works very well. It works like a very well constructed sermon. The preacher doesn’t mince any words when it comes to stating his theme. He’s very up front about it. It’s right there in the opening paragraph, clear as a bell. It’s all about the superiority of Jesus. Then he pursues his theme with relentless clarity right to the end of chapter 12. Jesus is superior to the angels, to Moses, to Aaron, to the old covenant and to old covenant believers. So be prepared to be exhorted - if you’re a drifter, if your heart is hardening, if you are spiritually immature, if your faith is sagging and if you are tempted to lose heart. And who of us has never suffered from any of these spiritual maladies? Yes, Hebrews has a message for our people, but first of all it has a message for us. Only when God has used it to deal with us at a fairly deep level can we be ready to preach it to our people.

## Appendix: Structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews

1:1 – 4	Prologue: Supremacy of Christ		
1:5 - 2:18	Christ Superior to Angels	Pay Closer Attention (2:1-4)	Various
3:1 - 4:16	Christ Superior to Moses	Don't Harden your Hearts (3:7-4:16)	Psalms 95:7-11
5:1 - 7:28	Christ Superior to Aaron	Press on to Maturity (5:11-6:12)	Psalms 110:4
8:1 – 10:39	Christ Superior to Old Covenant (especially the sacrifices)	Don't shrink back (10:19-39)	Jeremiah 31:31-34
11:1 – 12:39	Christ Superior to Old Covenant Believers	Run the Race (12:1-29)	Various
13:1 - 25	Conclusion: Closing Exhortations		