

When God first told me that I would be teaching the book of Hebrews I was excited as I have always loved the book. But then I actually started studying the text and then I was: “what did you get me into—are you kidding—I can’t do this?” This started a total roller coaster relationship between me and this book. There were some chapters I read and had no problem understanding but the language in some of the other ones had me totally confused and kept throwing me in and out of all these old religious constructs that had previously been imbedded in my brain. But I knew that God had asked me to teach this book and that He was not a God of confusion but of peace and so I was confident He was going to open my mind to His understanding and sure enough I believe He did.

My initial struggle with this book was a great reminder for me of how critical it is that we train ourselves to always walk through the basic steps of Biblical interpretation (which we call Biblical hermeneutics) before we try and understand any text within the Bible. It is so easy to forget that this letter was written by a real person, to a real group of people, who were going through some serious stuff that was turning their lives inside out and upside down.

The drama in these peoples’ lives was intense and the Spirit wanted to build them up and encourage them. And, by the way, we must not forget that they were not living in the United States of America or Western Europe in the 21th century; but they lived during the 1st century smack dab in the middle of a Jewish political and religious culture—a culture that was very hostile to Christianity and made life for the average “Joe Blow” Christian very difficult, exhausting, and even terrifying.

Thus, we have to be careful to not filter everything we read first and foremost through our own western centric mindset. We must attempt to read and understand this letter through their eyes or else we will run a great risk of misinterpreting the text or imposing into the text something that is not really there.

For example, there have been many people who have not really understood the cultural and historical framework and have argued from Chapters 2, 6, and 10 that a person can lose their salvation. But as you will find out that is so misplaced and is not at all what the author was even addressing in those texts; therefore to impose some theology of salvation on the text completely distorts the message of the author as the audience would have understood it. It also interjects within the larger text of the New Testament something that is foreign, not supported, and which stands in total opposition to the overwhelming simple truth that God repeats over and over again about our belonging to Him.

This is why when we read our Bible we must always be aware of our own religious and cultural bias and the self-centered way in which we naturally tend to process everything. For if we do not slow ourselves down and go through the basic steps of good Biblical interpretation, there is a high probability that we will misinterpret the text and when we do that we give the enemy an opportunity to really mess with our heads and plunge us into confusion and fear—both of which are clearly not of God.

With that said, let's begin by taking a look at the "who," "what," "where," "when" and "why" in order to frame for us the context of this amazing book. Remember, it is only in first understanding the perspective of the author and the

audience that we can safely make application to our lives and to our current reality and experiences.

Who wrote it? Honestly, we have no idea and the author did not feel the need to identify himself or herself; so from our perspective we will stick to the fact that the Holy Spirit wrote this letter through some willing servant. Many of the early writers attributed the letter to Paul, but they themselves wrote 300-400 years after the time of Paul, so I am not sure how much definitive weight we should give the opinions of those writers. Besides, the Greek used in this letter is Alexandrian and quite technical; very different than the more casual style used by Paul in his letters.

Some have suggested that it might have been written by Apollos (a Jew who was Alexandrian in birth) and others have even suggested it was Prisca (Priscilla) a disciple of Paul who herself disciplined Apollos; but again we have no idea just speculations. The author clearly felt that his or her life, relationships, and personal drama added nothing to the message and so the author left it out entirely. So we will not spend any time working through assumptions and speculations about the author other than to point out that the author was most likely Jewish as he or she identified completely with the Jewish ancestry and wrote about it in a very personal and authoritative way which indicates for us that the author at one time was completely immersed within the Jewish religious system.

To “whom” it was written: I want to approach this “who” along two adjacent paths. First, it is clear that the author is writing to born-again believers—full on tried and true “Christians.” The author is not writing to the Jewish people at large

in an attempt to convince them to become believers and this point is critical as it frames for us part of that mental discipline that we must have when we approach the confusing parts of the text. **Hebrews 3:1** and **12:12** make it clear that the author is not writing to those who are lost or to those who might become lost, but to those who are permanently a part of the family of God.

Hebrews 3:1

Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the apostle and chief priest of our profession, Christ Jesus,

Now the author states very clearly that his audience is holy brethren, those who are partakers of a heavenly calling. At first glance this could be understood to be either 1) a general reference to the Jews at large, whom a Jewish author would consider to be holy “brethren” because as a nation they were chosen by God, called by God, and were recipients of God’s promises and great revelations, or 2) it could be a reference solely to converted Jews who have been born-again and are believers whose inheritance is reserved for them in heaven. So how do we tell for sure who the audience was?

The author does something unique to narrow our understanding of the “who.” Both “brethren” and “partakers” are nouns (yes, “partakers” is not a verb) and they are stated in the most emphatic tense in order to exaggerate the author’s intent. In our convention we would underline, italicize, bold, and highlight these words to bring the strongest emphasis so the reader would not miss the point.

They are not just “brethren” in the general sense of the word, but in the very personal sense of the word. In addition, these brethren are “partakers” of the heavenly calling and as a noun that is their identity; it is not what they do it is what they are. There is no contingency in this description. In other words, they are not “partakers” just so long as they continue to do their Christianity right and not walk away in wrong belief, unbelief, or some god forsaken sin. No! There is no contingency. They are partakers and they are holy brethren—period!

Both nouns are in the vocative tense which means that the author does not want us to just read over these words causally but wants us to do a double take so we do not miss what is being said. Even the adjective “holy” is in the vocative tense and so it also screams out at us. Yes, these are ***holy brethren***. And we know from ***Luke 18:19***, ***Mark 10:18***, and ***Matthew 19:17*** that only God is good and only God is holy (***Revelation 3:7***); therefore, the only ones who are considered to be “holy” in God’s eyes are those who have a new nature created in God’s image, righteous, holy and true (***Ephesians 4:24***)—those who are the holy temple of the living God (***1 Corinthians 3:17***). Without question, the author is shouting to us that the audience is those who are believers and who are secure in their salvation as “***holy Brethren***” is what they are not what they are becoming or hope to be.

Likewise, they are “***Partakers***” of the heavenly calling--it’s their identity. For example, it’s like a doctor who delivers a baby and says, “It’s a girl.” He is not describing what the baby does or even what it is going to become, but what it is. It’s a girl. And we know that the only ones who can say they are now presently partakers of the heavenly calling—as in that is their identity—are those who have eternity now. In ***John 3:15, 16*** and ***6:40*** Jesus said those who believe in Him

presently possess eternal life—it is their now. It is not something to be received when they die but it is their present reality.

So again, the emphatic “partakers” is intended to making sure we understand that this is not some general reference to the nation of Israel as God’s chosen people, but a specific reference to those who have eternal life now—those who have been born-again and have been given this new nature that is in the image of God, righteous, holy and true.

In addition, just to make it abundantly clear, in **Hebrews 12:22-23** the author says that they (the audience of this letter) have come unto Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the assembly of God’s firstborn children whose names are written in heaven. The verb “come” is in the perfect active tense—meaning that because of a decision they made in the past they get to currently enjoy the result of that decision and be at rest for it has been perfected because their names have already been written by God in heaven.

So I believe we can safely conclude that this letter is addressed to born-again believers who are assured of their salvation. And this is critical to our obtaining the proper understanding of some of the more difficult parts of the text.

Second, we can conclude that they are Jewish. Keep in mind that the title of this letter was not part of the original manuscript but was added because of the content of the text and the historical references. For example, in verse 1 it says that God spoke to the “fathers” or ancestors in the prophets. Then the author brings up a lineage of players in the Jewish history books: Abraham, Moses, Melchizedek, and those who were delivered from Egypt and brought through the desert to the border of the Promised Land. These are all clear references to the

audience's Jewish ancestry. So I believe it is more than safe to conclude that this letter is written to born-again believers of Jewish ancestry by an unknown author who also personally identifies with the Jewish ancestry.

When was it written? There are some indicators in this letter that helps us place it clearly within the 1st century but prior to the destruction of Jerusalem which occurred in 70 AD. For example, the author writes as if the Levitical system is still in operation (**8:4; 13:10**) such that the practices could lure people back into its religious clutches. Whereas, if the priesthood and the altar had already been destroyed it would have supported the author's argument that they were no longer needed and that is why God permitted their destruction.

In addition, the author points out in **12:4** that although they suffered greatly they had not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood which is clearly a reference that could only have been made prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. When the Romans finally invaded Jerusalem after a very long siege of the city they slaughtered indiscriminately and blood was spilled everywhere. Approximately 1,100,000 Jews were killed and only 97,000 were taken into slavery and captivity many having been raped and brutalized. It was ugly for sure.

So I believe it is safe to say that this letter was written sometime after the founding of the Church and the early persecutions endured by believers, which we read about in Acts, and the Roman invasion (between 30-33 AD and 70 AD).

Where was the author? We believe the author was writing from Italy because he sends a greeting from those in Italy (**13:24**). But this is of little consequence.

Where was the audience? This is actually quite significant as it helps us understand the "what" and the "why" which are the 2-keys to understanding how

to interpret this letter. First of all, the author places a heavy focus on Temple worship and the familiarity of the audience with the detailed workings of the religion and its practices. This would indicate that the audience was probably from or around Jerusalem and Judea which was the center of all Jewish worship. Second, it is in Judea where the persecution against believers by the Jews was the most intense which leads us to the “why.”

Why was this letter written? 1st century Judean believers lived in what can best be described as a police state. The Jewish leadership refused to forge any kind of peace with those who belonged to the Way (which was the name by which Christianity was first known) and instead they tried to crush the Way and stomp out what they considered to be an abhorrent religion.

In the history books we are not given a lot of details about this time but we do know that an average believer lived under constant duress. **Acts 8:1-3** says that the Jewish leaders would enter house after house dragging off men and women and throwing them into prison. And then of course we know that Stephen was dragged outside of the city and stoned to death (**Acts 7**) and the apostles were arrested beaten and flogged just for teaching Jesus as the Christ (**Acts 5:40**). In addition, **Hebrews 10:33-35** says that they were being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations and that they were even having their property taken and possessed by the state.

This was simply not a safe time to be a believer. Everyone was intolerant of their beliefs; and daily their lives, and that of their families, were placed at risk. The pressure and tension must have been unbearable. It seems as if Satan and his

demonic hordes had a field day motivating others to be given over to such extreme violence and hatred.

So this letter was written because of the great oppression and persecution that these believers were living under day-in-and-day-out. Understanding the “why” therefore frames for us the “what” which is the main key to unlocking our understanding of the book of Hebrews. Therefore, we must not forget that when we read this book we need to try our best to understand things through the eyes of people who are really suffering and living under duress and extreme coercion. This brings us to the “what.”

What is the letter addressing? Just imagine for a moment if you were living under such horrific conditions. What would be your biggest temptation? And remember that some of those who are watching you, eyeing you, and coming against you, are those who used to be friends, family members, and Jewish “brethren” with whom you used to “worship” the Lord. And because you live in such a relatively small community you are surrounded with this threat 24x7. You never knew when they would be breaking down your doors.

You have to know that the temptation was strong to give up, give in, and to just go back to their old Jewish ways—back to a religious system that, as we know, was just a shadow of the truth, but with which they were far too comfortable. It would have been so easy to just quietly blend back in and get their old life back or maybe try and do both—act like a Jew and carry on with all the rituals and stuff but secretly be a believer in Christ. After all, it must have been thoroughly exhausting day after day trying to deal with everyone hating you, watching you, hunting you down, oppressing you, calling you a cult, and so on. Besides, when

they became Christians they probably never expected this kind of violent and hateful reaction by those whom they thought loved them.

Guess what? Even Peter, the great Apostle who was beaten and imprisoned while in Jerusalem, succumbed to the pressure and to this kind of compromised thinking and behavior. In ***Galatians 2***, Paul describes an event when Peter was hanging out with him and his gentile friends in the city of Antioch. Everyone was together having a very good time until certain Jews from Jerusalem showed up who were demanding that these gentile believers be circumcised (these were those who were trying to comingle Judaism with Christianity—the law with grace). Peter feared this crew and immediately he separated himself from his gentile friends and soon all the other Jewish believers joined him in his hypocrisy. This just shows you how much oppression Peter lived under in Jerusalem and how jittery he became when the threat surrounded him. I feel sorry for Peter; he was probably walking around with PTS (post traumatic stress) syndrome.

Some of us know what this is like. When you decided to start walking by faith and trusting Jesus with your life for real, letting the Word of God truly be authoritative over your life and not just suggestive, believing you could know Him as a person, hear His voice in your life, and know with certainty His will, you received a lot of opposition by those with whom you used to “worship” the Lord. They came against you treating you as if you were a heretic to the faith and part of some cult.

Surprisingly, a lot of this oppression came from family members, friends, and even religious leaders. Some of you walked through it all trusting Jesus but others, as we know, quit and just decided that it was much easier to run back to their

religious ways and blend in than it was to stay the course of faith and let Jesus totally dominate their lives in the midst of intense opposition.

Personally, I have endured many scars at the hands and mouths of those who love their religion, regardless of whether or not their religion really works for them. I have also endured a lot of pain watching some of the intense suffering and opposition that many of you have had to similarly endure. It has been hard and yes sometimes I have wondered whether or not the disruption and terror was worth it. In fact, I remember when I was writing the book, *We Have Been Lied To*, and also in preparing many of my teachings, I was tempted to soften language or conform things to what I know would be easier for religious people to receive, but the Spirit would not let me do it. And I knew that as I was writing certain words that they would come back to bite me with a vengeance—and they have.

I bring up all of this because God wants us to study the book of Hebrews for a reason and He purposefully waited until we absorbed all that we were supposed to learn in Ephesians and John before that, as well as in the series: *Laying the Foundation*, *How God Speaks*, and *The Faces of Love*. The order in which God has given us our studies has all been very intentional as it purposefully leads our body to the next area of growth and maturity. Therefore, He wants us to listen closely to this message. Besides, the experiences of many of us are not that different from many of those who would have been reading this letter and the Lord wants us to get in touch with those emotions and past experiences so we can understand this letter in the way it was meant to be understood.

And even though we have been given, as a body, a temporary reprieve and protection from the direct nasty opposition and hostility of the religious

community (even though the opposition and hostility from the demonic forces has been brutal and unceasing), we must not be tempted to give in and give up and go back to many of our religious ways. Remember, faith is always active and if we ever are not betting our life on who God says He is and who He says we are in Him, then by definition we are going back to our old religious ways where we try and find approval from God by our “good” behavior. This is something we cannot do; we must not do.

The author reminds these Judean believers (and by extension us) that regardless of what is happening in their circumstances they can be above it all if they continue to walk by faith in the Spirit of God; daily, actively trusting themselves completely to Jesus in all those rooms deep within their soul where they have for so long trusted themselves. Yes, they had learned the 4-Pillars which Sarah taught us from the story of Joseph (God love us, God is in Control, God has a plan for our lives, and God fully intends on fulfilling that plan) but now they were worn down, tired and I am sure they were very afraid. So the author writes to encourage them and remind them of:

- **Who** it is that they belong to and **Who** it is that they serve,
- The worthlessness of religion that is just a shadow or a type of the truth,
- What has been accomplished on their behalf by Jesus,
- The practical perils of living in wrong belief and unbelief,
- The promise of rest that God gives to those who presently and actively walk by faith; believing Jesus to be their “I Am” – not in the theological or religious sense of the word, but in the most personal and practical of ways,

- All those heroes who walked this path of faith before them, and
- The ways in which our loving Father deals with us, disciplines us, and brings into our own as eternal beings that just happen to temporarily live and dwell in a physical world.

This letter is a plea to these believers to not waver in their faith or return to the customs and practices of their old religious system. After all, Jesus is bigger, better and far superior than anything they previously had or experienced in Judaism. It is a cry that they do not return to that old system that will just result in death (in the *Romans 8* sense of the word where it says that the mind set on the flesh is death but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace).

The Spirit is definitely concerned that instead of enjoying and experiencing Jesus, they will, according to Ephesians *4:17-19*, live in the futility of their own minds, being darkened in their understanding of God, because they will have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against him and given themselves over to sensuality just like their ancestors who were not permitted to enter into the Promised Land but were relegated to wondering in a lifeless desert until they were dead—all dead.

The Spirit wants all believers—holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling whose names have been written in heaven—to know peace and experience the peace that is only found when a believer, by faith, fully occupies and possesses their Promised Land—the land which God has given them. And as we go through this study, we must remember our lessons from John and Ephesians. Jesus is our peace, Jesus is our joy, and Jesus is our life. These are not emotions and they are not something that can be obtained independent of knowing Jesus in an

extremely personal and intimate way in every room within the corridor of your soul. Yes, these things come with the literal presence of Jesus in your life.

Further, the rest that is promised to us as believers (which is a key theme in the book of Hebrews) is only experienced when we know **“why”** we can trust ourselves to Jesus, **“how”** to trust ourselves to Jesus and then actively **“choose”** to do it; to place all our hope in Him regardless of the troubles and difficulty we might be experiencing in this life. Keep in mind, many of us say we “trust” Jesus because of our religious upbringing or experiences, but so few of us really live as if He is our Lord getting to call all the shots in our life where we refuse to trust in our own wisdom but are 100% dependent upon His wisdom for our lives. But as we will learn, that is the pathway to occupying our Promised Land.

With that said; this letter starts off with a powerful and convincing reason “why” we can trust ourselves to Jesus.

Hebrews 1:1-3

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

As we start this study you have to take note of the fact that everything that is being communicated is to purposeful and intended to make a stark distinction

between Christ and the Jewish system; don't miss that point. Accordingly, in the past the Word of God came to various men through all manner of complicated means: through angels, visions, dreams, mental impressions, writings on the wall, and so on; but now, in the last days (which technically is the times from Christ forward), it comes one simple way and that is through God's Son. This statement alludes back to an Old Testament passage that was well known but for the most part ignored and definitely misunderstood.

Proverbs 30:4

“Who has ascended into heaven and descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son's name? Surely you know!

Yes, it was known from the scriptures long ago that a son was a distinct character within the Godhead and now the Spirit gives full revelation to that passage as we will find out that the Son is none other than Jesus Christ who came in the flesh in the form of man but in the Spirit of God.

Notice that the author assumes that the audience has no issue with the Word of God having been spoken authoritatively to man through man. To believers of that day and age (and Jews alike) that was never a problem. The vessel used was irrelevant as they believed God was sovereign over His Word and no one even questioned that fact; therefore, regardless of the vessel the Word of God was considered to be authoritative. But now the living Logos—the Word itself—

became flesh and actually lived among us (**John 1:14**) and in so doing the *person* of Jesus Christ became the pure, direct, and complete expression of God to all of mankind as He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact perfect imprint or impression of God's nature or substance.

It is interesting that although our translators provide the personal pronoun such that it reads "by His Son" the actual Greek only says "by a Son" or "in a Son" by whom He made all things. You see God has many sons as that word would have generally been understood, but only one Son through whom all things came into existence and who is the successor of all that belongs to the Father.

The word "*apagugasma*" which is translated brightness or radiance occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It properly means the radiance of a source. For example, when we look in the sky we do not really see the sun but we see its radiance as the light waves are emitted from the source. The idea is that Jesus is the only way by which we get any idea of the true character and nature of the Father. He is the one who perfectly and accurately reveals the source. He actually says this in **Matthew 11:27**: "...and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Peter, James and John actually got to see a glimpse of the Father's glory at the mountain of transfiguration where Jesus revealed Himself as Spirit and they described it as follows: "His face shone like the sun and His clothing became as white as light" (**Matthew 17:2**).

Just so you know, Jesus being the radiance of God's glory stands in contrast to Moses who after he spent time in the presence of the Lord would shine with

God's glory but only temporarily. Moses used to wear a veil over his face so that the people would not see the glory fade away and perhaps lose faith in him as a leader (**2 Corinthians 3:13**). But Jesus keeps on shining.

The author also reaches back to the Torah and **Genesis 1:1** and ties the very act of creation to the spoken words of the Son and then adds that it is by the spoken utterance of the Son's power, or the saying of His might, that He also holds all things, the entire universe, together. Now, that is impressive! But I want you to remember from our study in John that a Jew would place the highest respect, honor and authority on the Torah for it is considered to be the very breath of God and the sum of His communication to man. So this link to **Genesis 1:1** (in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth) is very powerful.

Did you know that the word "God" in **Genesis 1:1** is in the Hebrew plural, which supports the pre-existence of the Godhead? In fact, rabbinical interpretation of **Genesis 1:1** actually concludes that in the beginning, or the pre-existence of all things, was the Word as all that has been created has been created for the sake of the Word, for the sake of the Torah, the breath of God. And as we know **John 1** tells us that the Word is Jesus who we must therefore afford the highest respect, honor and authority.

The Son is also the exact imprint of God's nature. The word "charakter" (from which we get our word character) is also only used this one time in the entire New Testament. The brightness of the glory of God and the imprint of His nature are special words and they are reserved exclusively for the Son. The idea is that of a seal or something engraved or stamped that perfectly matches the tool by which it was created. If God, who is Spirit (**John 4:24**) is represented by substance,

then Jesus, the man, is the perfect resemblance of God. “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God” (**Colossians 1:15**).

Keep in mind the contrast. From God’s perspective the Tabernacle was not even the real Tabernacle of God. It was just patterned after that which exists in heaven (**Exodus 25:40**). This is significant as the best that Judaism had to offer was still only a semblance of what was real whereas Jesus is the real thing as He is the substance of God.

Now, I want you to understand that the words which God uses to communicate ideas cannot be entirely understood from man’s perspective. In other words, Webster’s dictionary is not authoritative but the rest of the Word of God to which we look to for definition is to be our authority. For example, a son is believed to be derived from a Father, but Jesus was not derived and was not created; rather, He always existed in the form of a “son.” **John 1:1** “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Likewise, an heir is one who is entitled by law to the estate of another and that usually happens upon the death of the owner. But the Father is not going to die as He is eternally existent. But the Father’s plan is to bring everything in heaven and on earth under the authority of Christ (**Ephesians 1:10**) and in this sense Jesus is an heir to all.

Therefore, the Son has always been part of the Godhead, is of the same essence of the Father yet is distinct from the Father, as a Son has the authority of the Father, possesses all that belongs to the Father, is the exact image of the Father, and has therefore become the center point of all of the Father’s activity with regard to mankind. All that the Father desires to express toward man is contained in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, all religion (whether Judaism,

the “religion” of Christianity or any other system of belief) falls pathetically beneath the glory and majesty of the true Word of God, the person of Jesus Christ. He is **Who** we belong to and He is **Whom** we serve.

How is this for a gripping, dramatic and powerful reminder to get our eyes off our circumstances, off ourselves, and to place them on the one whose glory we will one day get to share. When your strength is beginning to wane and you are struggling to merely hold on to who you are in God and the things God has said about you, just stop and take a very good look at the glorious living Word of God and believe me your entire perspective will shift and you will find what you need to make it another minute, another hour, and another day.

We will stop right here for this week and next week we will pick up in the second half of verse 3. Let’s pray.