
Preaching From Hebrews

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Anyone proposing preaching from Hebrews should be cautious. The book of Hebrews poses problems for the preacher in holding his hearers' interest. Spurgeon writes

I have a very lively, or rather a deadly, recollection of a certain series of discourses on the Hebrews, which made a deep impression on my mind of a most undesirable kind. I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the Epistle to themselves, for it sadly bored one poor gentile lad.

1. Encouragements to preaching from Hebrews

a. It enables us to give an overview of the Bible

Nowadays we will find that many Christians and particularly newcomers to our congregations are immensely ignorant of the Bible. A friend of mine was converted and began to teach Sunday School in his local Methodist Church and the lesson was on Noah and the Flood. He didn't know the story of Noah was in the Bible. He is a person of above average intelligence and education.

Hebrews enables us to sweep through large areas of Old Testament History. Hebrews 11 deals with the events from creation to the inter-testamental period. Hebrews 3 and 4 deal with the wanderings in the wilderness and their relevance to us. Chapters 5-10 deal with how the covenant, tabernacle, sacrificial system and priesthood have relevance for us. Hebrews 12 deals with the events of Mount Sinai and our relation to them. We are able to give people a map and compass for the strange land of the Old Testament.

b. It invites Christ-centred preaching

Hebrews is almost uniquely Christ centred as a book. From the opening four verses we are confronted with the Lord Jesus and his person and work and we are constantly exhorted to turn our minds to this. See particularly Hebrews 1 vs.1 – 4, Hebrews 3 v.1 and Hebrews 12:1-3 but there is almost no part of the book not directly dealing with the person and work of Christ. Surely above anything these are the things we want to be preaching about?

c. It invites applied preaching

One criticism of modern reformed preachers is the lack of the note of exhortation and application in our preaching. We perhaps tend to model our preaching on the sort of division we have in Ephesians – doctrine in chapters 1-3 leads to application in chapters 4-6. Hebrews gives us a somewhat different model because it is a "*word of exhortation*" (13:22) which is supported with some of the most richly doctrinal passages in the New Testament. If we preach with the aim of faithfully identifying with

the author's Holy Spirit inspired intention we will constantly be exhorting and applying. This is not only an encouragement to preaching from Hebrews but the key to doing so properly.

d. It encourages a well rounded and biblical spirituality

A number of neglected themes about the Christian life are taken up in Hebrews. Christina Rossetti writes,

Good Lord, today
I scarce find breath to say:
Scourge but receive me.
For stripes are hard to bear, but worse
Thy intolerable curse:
So do not leave me.

Good Lord, lean down
In pity, tho' Thou frown;
Smite, but retrieve me:
For so Thou hold me up to stand
And kiss Thy smiting hand,
It less will grieve me.²

I was initially wary of the thinking here but these verses reflect a spiritual response to Hebrews 12:5,6. If our theology and spirituality don't interact with all scripture we are stunted spiritually and our hearers will be like us.

e. It promotes commitment

We are all concerned about the lack of commitment of many of our hearers. We hope they are saved but there seems to be a lack of urgency in their Christian walk. However you interpret the warning passages in Hebrews they are clearly intended to be a cure for complacency.

2 Recommended commentaries

As excellent commentary lists are available I am only recommending the two books I have found most helpful. Firstly, for overview and introduction, William Lane: "Hebrews – a call to commitment" – publishers Hendrickson – this is based on a series of radio bible studies and is accessible and insightful. If you struggle with Hebrews start here! As a major commentary I find PE Hughes – publishers Eerdmans – best. He is theologically aware and knowledgeable about the history of the interpretation of Hebrews.

3 An overview of Hebrews

I am assuming that the author is unknown, that the recipients of the letter are Jewish Christians who are tempted to go back to Judaism and that the letter was written pre-AD70 because of the present tense references to the Levitical Priesthood. The letter shows that the recipients had undergone harsh persecution and that such times were returning.

Hebrews is in the form of a synagogue sermon with each main section being a running doctrinal commentary on a passage. The writer's method is to make summary statements of truth and to develop them by proving and applying his assertions.

Chapter 1 is based around some key Psalm passages.

Chapter 2:5-18 is based around Psalm 8:4-6.

Chapters 3:1-4:13 are based around Psalm 95:7-11.

Chapters 4:14-7:28 are based on Psalm 110:4.

Chapters 8:1-10:18 are based around Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Chapter 10:32-12:3 around Habakkuk 2:3,4.

Chapter 12:4-13 is based around Proverbs 3:11,12

The remainder of chapter 12 is about Esau from Genesis and the Sinai narrative.

Chapter 1:1-3

The superiority of the Lord Jesus to the prophets of the Old Testament is brought before us, as the fragmentary and varied revelation of the Old Testament period is contrasted with the unitary and final revelation of the Son (v. 2), "*in these last days*". Because of the nature of the Son's revelation, all earlier revelations are superseded. The Son is of one substance with the Father and is the Father's agent in the creation and sustaining of the universe. He is heir and redeemer of creation and provides an offering for sin and applies redemption from his position at the Father's right hand.

Chapter 1:4-14

It is part of the Christian apologetic that the incarnate Son is greater than the angels, who were regarded in Judaism, and by the writer to the Hebrews (cf. 2:2) as agents of the Sinai revelation. William Lane (page 35) notes that the confession of faith in vs. 1-3 is paralleled and proof-texted in the rest of chapter one:--

- i) appointment as royal heir (2b and vs. 5-9)
- ii) mediator of the creation (2c and v. 10)
- iii) eternal nature and pre-existent glory (v. 3a and vs. 11-22)
- iv) exaltation to God's right hand (v. 3c and v. 13)

This underlies the formal structure of Hebrews 1 which is:--

- i) The Son is called "my son" which gives him a greater name than angels (v. 5)
- ii) The Son has greater dignity than angels because he is worshipped (v. 6).
- iii) The Son has greater status than angels because he is unchangeable (vs. 7 -12).
- iv) The Son, because he reigns at God's right hand and is not a "ministering spirit", has a greater function than angels.

Chapter 2:1-4

With this contrast of the two revelations in mind we need to realise the danger of ignoring such a great salvation and so drifting away. The answer is to pay more careful attention to what we have heard.

Chapter 2:5-18

This takes up in detail the earlier points about angels. Jesus is greater than angels but is this not disproved by his incarnation and death? In fact man's superior destiny, that everything is put under his feet, is accomplished only in Jesus. PE Hughes (page 5), "*For the Son, who to procure our salvation made himself for a little while lower than*

the angels, is even now crowned with glory and honour, far above all angels.” Verses 10-18 emphasise that Jesus identifies with his suffering and dying people by incarnation and suffering. By his death he destroys the evil power against them and operates as a high priest who offers atonement for sin and help in temptation.

Chapter 3:1-4:13

The writer encourages us to, “*fix (y)our thoughts on Jesus the apostle and high priest whom we confess.*” He first deals with Jesus as the apostle who leads us with God’s authority. Because the Hebrews are tempted to return to Judaism, which gives Moses priority over Christ, he contrasts them in 3:1-6. Both are faithful in God’s house but Moses was faithful as a servant whose ministry pointed to the future ministry of Jesus who is son and heir.

Chapter 3:7-4:13

The writer shows us that the work of Moses and Joshua (4:8) was incomplete. With Moses the people were disobedient and died in the wilderness and with Joshua the later repeat of the promise in Psalm 95 shows that the promise of rest was not fulfilled by occupying the land. The writer’s approach in warning them is significant – 3:6, “*and we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.*” and 3:14, “*We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first.*” Faith’s reality is seen in its continuance and triumph. A quality of God’s word is that our response to it reveals our innermost thoughts and attitudes (4:12,13).

Chapter 4:14-5:10

The challenge to hear God’s voice and respond in faith leads to the fact that we have a great high priest who offers sympathy and help. William Lane writes of this sympathy (page 75), “*It must be understood in an experiential sense; our high priest suffers together with the one being tested and brings active help.*” The confidence with which we approach God means we have a right to do so and an expectation of help.

Chapter 5:1-10

This deals with his proper appointment as High Priest and the needed personal qualifications through experienced weakness and suffering so as to be able to deal gently with those in need. Proper appointment is taken up in vs.4-6 and this introduces the fact of Christ’s appointment to a new Melchizedekian order of priesthood. Personal qualification through suffering is taken up in vs. 7-9 with particular significance being placed on the tears and cries in Gethsemane.

Chapter 5:11-6:20

This deals with the problem of the Hebrew Christians the writer is seeking to help. So much could be said, but the problem lies with the hearers who are at such a babyish stage of Christian living, that they are in danger of falling away. They must go on showing diligence and love in persevering faith. To encourage them, they are told that the promised blessings of the Messiah were actually promised on oath by God. This makes them absolutely certain to us and they are attached to Jesus who is in God’s very presence for us.

Chapter 7

Remember the point of interest is not Melchizedek but Jesus. This great High Priest is greater than Abraham and therefore he is greater than Levi and the Levitical Priesthood (vs.1-10). The Levitical order had crucial weaknesses because it (v. 19)

"*made nothing perfect*", because the priests were many and short-lived and sinful (vs.23-27) and because they were appointed without an oath (vs.18-22). In contrast Jesus is guarantor of a better covenant (v. 22) who is appointed with God's oath and is permanently able to offer complete salvation (vs. 24 and 25). New concepts such as a once and for all sacrifice (v. 27) and a better covenant (v. 22) are introduced for later consideration.

Chapter 8:1-10:18

The three themes of the tabernacle, the covenant and the sacrificial ministry are taken up and the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 is central. The worship of the earthly tabernacle is prescribed by God and is patterned on the heavenly tabernacle (8:5), "*the pattern shown you on the mountain.*" While that tabernacle stands, it shows that (9:8) "*the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed.*" The worship of Judaism is a confession of the failure of the Old Covenant.

The Old Testament contains the promise of a, "*new covenant*" (8:8 quoting Jeremiah 31) which means that the first is obsolete. (8:13), "*what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.*" It failed at the most basic level to secure the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' sacrificial ministry is superior being based on the better promises of the new covenant (8:6). It can "*cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God*" (cf. 9:14). In 10:1-18 it is established that Christ's death is once for all and no sacrifices for sin continue (v. 18). This means that a return to Judaism or the sacrifice of the mass or the erection of a new temple for sacrifice must be anathema to a Christian.

Chapter 10:19-31

These verses serve as an application of the section above. The writer uses old covenant language to assure us of our access to God to urge us to use it. Secret access to God goes with a bold profession of faith and hope (v. 23) and courageous and constructive meeting together (vs. 25,26).

Chapter 10:26-31

This is a passage of severe warning. Greater privilege means greater penalty. If the penalty for rejecting the law was severe, it is much more dangerous to reject the gospel, because of what this means about our attitudes to Christ's sacrifice and to the Holy Spirit's gracious influences.

Chapter 10:32-12:3

Now the writer moves from contrasting our situation with that of Old Testament believers, to highlighting the parallels between us and them. We both live in the tension of having to respond in faith to the promises of God and to make them the basis for our actions. To fall away is to be destroyed (10:39) but to continue in faith is to be counted as righteous and to know God's deliverance.

Chapter 11

This chapter explores the multi-faceted nature of faith with each example of faith having a relationship to the Hebrews in their life situation. For example: we need to make the right choice about the sacrifice we rely on (Abel in v. 4), to live as pilgrims without current security (vs. 8-10 and 13-16) and to keep going when the promise of salvation seems utterly hopeless (vs. 11,12). The section ends with the supreme example of Jesus enduring suffering and shame because of the promise of future joy in God's presence.

Chapter 12:4-13

This section shows that the Hebrews are misunderstanding their experience. They are losing heart (v. 5) because they don't know the discipline of suffering is integral to salvation (v. 6). We are to accept our hardships as fatherly discipline and training (vs.7-11).³

Chapter 12:14-18

Having had examples of faith we now have an example of "unfaith" in Esau who had the promise but rejected it and so lost the blessing. The readers are to be wary that their own tendency to sin does not lead to eternal loss.

Chapter 12:18-29

There was a tendency to contrast the plainness of Christian worship with that of Judaism. Judaism's worship was inaugurated with visible signs of God's presence at Mount Sinai. The passage shows Christians are involved with far greater and more wonderful realities than those at Sinai. We must not confine the life of worship to cultic gatherings but such gatherings have significance beyond edification. This leads naturally to a passage of severe warning (vs. 25-27) where the greatness of the salvation involved makes its rejection more serious. Notice that the severity of the language does not exclude thankfulness, worship and assurance (see vs. 28,29).

Chapter 13

Many commentators regard this as a largely irrelevant addendum which the writer felt that he had to include as giving direct moral guidance. Even though it is not directly linked to the main thrust of Hebrews. I think that we can easily see the relevance, because people do not fall from the faith simply because of a shift in their thinking. Generally, specific temptation and sin are involved, together with a failure to live by faith in God's promises, when tempted. That certainly applies to sin regarding sex and money (vs. 4,5). Other instructions can easily be seen (vs. 1-3 and 7-16) as fairly direct application of what it actually involves to continue in the faith.

4 Encouragement in Hebrews

Hebrews is "*a word of exhortation*" (Hebrews 13:22), and so to understand it we need to see how this exhortation/encouragement is seen as taking place. As an illustration, at the last Commonwealth Games, the Australians did well in the swimming, showing great team spirit with plenty of support from the team for each competitor. Much encouragement takes place at that basic level of presence and mutual commitment. We are not to, "*give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another*" (10:25). And we are to, "*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...*" (3:12,13). At a more direct level this may involve direct admonition from scripture as in Hebrews 12:5, "*And you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:*" when he then proceeds to quote Proverbs 3:11,12. However one Australian swimmer could not be helped in this way because she had completely lost the stroke at which she had been world champion and could no longer compete in it. She needed a complete rebuild of her swimming style. Hebrews encourages when it rebuilds an understanding of truth and life and so enables Christians to cope where they are not coping. The responsibility to encourage involves firstly: a concern of the individual for the community (3:13), "*exhort one another*" and

secondly: a concern of the community for the individual (3:13), “*that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*”

5 Preaching difficult passages in Hebrews

a. The warning passages

PE Hughes summarises the book’s message: “*It is evident, therefore, that the whole practical thrust of the epistle is to persuade those to whom it is addressed to resist the strong temptation to seek an easing of the hardships attendant on their Christian profession by accommodating it to the regime of the former covenant*”. Therefore the warning passages are for professing Christians as I have argued elsewhere.⁵ To introduce a warning to the almost-Christian at these points in the text is artificial, alien to the context and pastorally unhelpful. Christians are to be warned of the danger of hell if they do not continue in the faith and there is nothing unusual in this except the strength of the language employed in Hebrews. Other proposals, such as that of RT Kendall and Michael Eaton that the warning passages are to do with loss of reward and not loss of salvation, are unhelpful. Kendall and Eaton reject the doctrine of the saints’ perseverance and believe in the eternal security of those who profess faith. Some Reformed preachers would deny that this is their position but are reluctant really to warn the regenerate of eternal punishment.

It is thoroughly scriptural for the loss of salvation and the experience of eternal punishment to be given as warnings to Christians who fall away. As with Paul, “*By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain*” (1 Corinthians 15:2) and Jesus, “*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell*” (Matthew 5:29).

b. Passages which involve seemingly irrelevant Old Testament detail

The key is to remember that the letter is not about old ceremonies but spiritual needs. When writing about the details of Old Covenant worship in 9:1-10 his concern is that, “*the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper*” (v. 9). We cannot finally know our sins are dealt with and that we, “*may serve the living God*” (9:14), without a permanent priest and a completed sacrifice. When the writer goes into small details he is still dealing with big questions and it is our task to discern these and to preach the whole passage in that context.

References

- ¹ CH Spurgeon, *The Early Years* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth reprint), p. 48.
- ² AW Tozer: *A Christian Book of Mystical Verse* (Christian Publication Inc., 1963), p. 39.
- ³ See DM Lloyd-Jones: *Spiritual Depression* (Pickering and Inglis, 1965) p. 247, “In God’s Gymnasium.”
- ⁴ PE Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 10.
- ⁵ Article: “Falling Away” *Foundations*, Spring 1993, number 30.

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