



HEBREWS

Jesus is greater

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SERIES OVERVIEW

Hebrews is a bit of a puzzle. We're told neither who the human author was, nor who the intended readers were. It's also hard to classify the genre – the final greetings make it seem like a letter, but it opens without a greeting and reads more like a well-crafted sermon. The writer himself refers to his work as a 'short word of exhortation' (13:22), which is a modest description. In the end it's probably best if we think of Hebrews as a written sermon, made into a letter, and unique!

Author, Date and Audience

As mentioned, we're not told who the human author was. He was obviously well known to the original recipients. There was no agreement in the earliest centuries regarding its authorship. Many have assumed that it was Paul, but especially since the Reformation it has been widely recognised that Paul could not have authored Hebrews: not only does the author not identify himself (as Paul does in every one of his letters), the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different to that of Paul's writings.

Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of the Jerusalem in A.D. 70 because (1) had it been written after this the author would surely have mentioned the destruction of the temple and end of the Jewish sacrificial system, and (2) the author consistently uses the present tense when speaking of the temple and the priestly activities connected with it.

The letter was addressed primarily to Jewish converts who were familiar with the Old Testament and who were being tempted to revert to Judaism or to Judaize the gospel (a la Galatians 2:14). There are references to significant pressures and challenges, which suggests they were facing consequences and persecution for remaining faithful.

Structure and Themes

In structure Hebrews alternates between sections that are mostly *expositional* or *doctrinal*, and sections that are *warnings* and *encouragement*.

The expositional sections are largely a *comparison* between the *past* (in the Old Testament) and *now* (in Christ). The warning sections are a warning not to develop a hard heart, not to grow unresponsive to God's word, not to go back to the 'shadow', because if you follow that course you run the unthinkable risk of not persevering (most commentators agree that the five 'warning passages' are 2:1–4; 3:12–4:2,11–13; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:25–29).

A key theme is the *absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ* as revealer and mediator of God's grace. Reading Hebrews provides us with enormous encouragement to persevere with our trust and hope in Jesus. We are told to fix our eyes on Jesus and fix our thoughts on him and the future rest he has planned for us.

As we read we come away with a much richer understanding of how Jesus fulfils the Old Testament; Jesus is greater in every respect. There are also significant implications for the way we read the Old Testament, the way we worship, and the way that we encourage one another to persevere to the end.

Whether you are studying Hebrews on your own, or looking at it together in a discipleship group, we hope you will find it to be both a challenge and an encouragement to your faith. Take time to pray, think, listen, and respond. As the book of Hebrews reminds us, investing this time in growing your faith has implications for you and for those around you – today and for eternity.

These studies are adapted from studies written by Mike Smith. Several helpful insights are owed to *Hebrews* (TNTCS) by Donald Guthrie, and *Hebrews: Running the Race Before Us* (Bringing the Bible to Life Series) by George H. Guthrie and Janet Nygren.

All scripture references are from the New International Version (NIV).

STUDY 1 | GREATER THAN ANGELS

Hebrews 1:1-2:4

READ Hebrews 1:1-4 and 13:22-25

1. What is Hebrews? Is it a letter, or a book, or a sermon?
2. Look again at 1:1-4. How does the passage compare the way God has spoken through his Son with the way he has spoken in the past?
3. What can we learn about God's Son from these verses alone?
4. What is God like?
 - How might you respond to someone who tells you they will believe God exists 'if he would show himself' to them?

READ Hebrews 1:5-14

5. List some of the ways Jesus is superior to angels.

6. Why might it be important to show that Jesus is greater than angels?

READ Hebrews 2:1-4

7. What was the message 'spoken by angels' (see Acts 7:38, 53; Galatians 3:19, and Deuteronomy 33:2)?

8. What is 'the message we have heard'? How has this message been both confirmed and testified to?

9. How might someone 'drift away'?

10. How can you tell if someone is starting to drift away?

- What danger is there that each one of us might drift? Discuss.
- What can be done to prevent drifting away?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

11. If you lived during a time of persecution and change, as was likely for the original audience, why would it be important to hear the author's challenge in 2:1–4?
12. Would what you've heard so far be a comfort or a challenge (or both)? Why?

STUDY 2 | GREATER THAN MAN

Hebrews 2:5-18

READ Psalm 8

1. Who does the psalm say God has placed over creation?

READ Hebrews 2:5-10

2. The author quotes Psalm 8 here. Why? What point about creation authority is he making? (Consider the reference to angels in v.5)

3. Hebrews 2:8b says, 'Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.' Who is the writer talking about?

4. Why is this situation the way it is – and how permanent is it?

5. What's the connection that's made with Jesus in v.9?

6. Can you see a glimmer of hope for humankind in these verses?

Hebrews 2:10 says Jesus was 'made perfect' through suffering. This doesn't mean Jesus wasn't perfect in terms of sin, rather that, through suffering, he became our perfect/complete saviour.

READ Hebrews 2:11-18

7. What do we learn about 'the one who makes men holy' and 'those who are made holy'?
8. If you stop and think about Jesus' being our brother, many ideas come to mind. But what particular point is the author making in these verses?
9. Why did Jesus have to be 'made like his brothers in every way'?
10. What present benefits does that give us?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

11. Jesus' humanity makes him more approachable. How can you take greater advantage of this aspect of who Jesus is?
12. We're not just brothers/sisters with Jesus – we're also family with all who trust Jesus. How might this be an aid to living faithfully as one of God's people today?

STUDY 3 | GREATER THAN MOSES & JOSHUA

Hebrews 3 and 4

READ Hebrews 3:1-6

1. What are we encouraged to do? Why?
2. How is Jesus compared to Moses?
3. Verse 6 refers to 'the hope of which we boast'. What hope do we share as Christians?
4. Consider v.6b. How does the argument progress as the writer continues towards the second major warning (in 3:12 and following)?
 - In what ways do you find these verses challenging?
 - When we find things hard in this life, how can these verses encourage us?

READ Hebrews 3:7-18

5. In 3:8–11 the author quotes from Psalm 95:8–11. To what historical event(s) is the psalmist (and, thus, the author of Hebrews) referring?

6. How does the author use the history of God's people to issue a warning to Christians?

7. How are they/we to avoid falling into this trap?
 - What might this look like in practice?

READ Hebrews 4:1-13

8. What was the rest promised to the Israelites?

9. What does the author mean when he says that the promise of entering [God's] rest 'still stands'?

10. How is this rest entered into?

11. Why is v.12 there? How does it follow from the previous verses?

READ Hebrews 4:14-16

12. How is Jesus a 'greater' high priest for us?

13. What difference does Jesus' mediation make for us, especially in our struggle with sin?

STUDY 4 | GREATER HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 5 and 6

READ Hebrews 5:1-10

1. What was the role of the high priest under the old covenant (Old Testament)?
2. According to the author of Hebrews, what were the limitations of what the high priest could or couldn't do?

In drawing out the differences between the old covenant high priesthood and Jesus', a priest named Melchizedek is referenced (v.6, quoting Psalm 110:4, and v.10).

Melchizedek was a priest-king of the city Salem (which would become Jerusalem). After Abraham's return home from rescuing his nephew Lot from captivity, Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, met Abraham. He pronounced a blessing over Abraham and Abraham gave him a tithe (Genesis 14:18-20).

The author of Hebrews goes on to talk about Melchizedek in more detail, and to understand what the point he is making here we will jump briefly ahead to chapter 7.

READ Hebrews 7:1-10

3. What does Melchizedek's name mean? What significance does this have to Jesus ('the Son of God')? What other connection is made between Melchizedek and Jesus?
4. How is Melchizedek's priesthood compared to the Aaronic/Levitical priesthood (vv.4-10)? How does this add to his argument back in ch.5 that Melchizedek represents a 'greater high priest'?

READ Hebrews 5:11-6:3

5. After introducing the idea of Melchizedek and the greater high priest, the author diverts in v.11 to matters of faith. What is the concern of the author regarding the people to whom he's writing?
6. As Christians how do we go on to maturity? What stops us doing this?

READ Hebrews 6:4-12

7. What does the author say is 'impossible'?

8. Why do you think it is impossible?

9. Do you think he has in mind Christians? Why/why not?

10. How, then, do we make our hope 'sure' (v.11)?
 - What challenges do you find in these verses?

 - What comfort do you find in these verses?

After this 'detour', the author returns to reflecting on the nature and character of God, and how that helps us better appreciate the great priesthood of Jesus.

READ Hebrews 6:13-20

11. What do these verses tell us about God? How does this give us hope?

12. According to vv. 19-20, how is Jesus a greater high priest?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

13. The reason for having a high priest is to allow us to draw near to God. Jesus is the best high priest there could possibly be.

- Does this make a difference to your daily life? How?

STUDY 5 | GREATER THAN MELCHIZEDEK

Hebrews 7:1–8:6

In art and photography the right background in a picture will make the foreground stand out. Understanding the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament gives the background for seeing Jesus more clearly in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews has already done that to an extent. Let's remind ourselves of one more brief detail to do with Old Testament priesthood.

READ Exodus 28:1–3 and 29:29–30

1. Who were to be made priests?
2. How is the role of priest envisioned here?

In addition to the last chapters of Exodus, the Old Testament books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy also include many instructions for the priests. Here is a (very) brief list of the things we find:

- The various offerings (esp. sin, guilt and fellowship) involved following highly-prescribed regulations (Leviticus 6:24–7:21)
- The priests had to keep extremely high moral and ritual standards (Leviticus 21:1ff)

- Their job involved more than offerings sacrifices – it was a full-time vocation (Numbers 3:1–10)
- They needed sacrifices offered for them to make themselves holy (Numbers 8:5ff).
- They were not to have their own inheritance (Deuteronomy 18:1ff; cf. Joshua 21:1ff).

As we've seen, there are clear *similarities* between Jesus' priesthood and the Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood: Jesus is a mediator between people and God and Jesus offers sacrifice for sin. We've also seen some of the *differences* between Jesus' priesthood and the Levitical priesthood, most significantly, that Jesus is a priest 'in the order of Melchizedek' (5:6–10, 6:20, 7:11–17). This passage highlights these differences while also showing how Jesus' priesthood is also (wonderfully) different from Melchizedek's.

READ Hebrews 7:11–28

3. What language is used (implicitly and explicitly) to say that the Levitical priesthood was inadequate (cf. vv.11, 18–19)?
4. This is a fairly strong critique. What do you think the author IS and ISN'T saying about the law/old covenant?
5. How specifically is Jesus qualified for a better priesthood than the Levites? Perhaps look at the following verses:

7:16

7:19

7:21

7:24

7:25

7:27

- In what ways do you think Christians may tend to fall back to the 'Levitical' way of doing things (rather than holding onto the greater benefits that are ours in Jesus)?

READ Hebrews 8:1-6

6. What further comparisons are made between Jesus and the old High Priests?
7. So: how is Jesus greater than Melchizedek? (Perhaps look back at the previous study and think about what was at the heart of Melchizedek's priesthood.)

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

8. What continuing themes do we see so far in Hebrews?
9. How might you be able to take better advantage of Jesus' greater priesthood?

STUDY 6 | GREATER COVENANT

Hebrews 8:7–9:28

Hebrews is a long letter/book, and it is easy to forget that it all hangs together – and that it is all one ‘argument’. For example, 8:1 is a reminder that the author is still talking about the same person as he was back in 1:3 – Jesus, the ‘radiance of God’s glory’, who is ‘sitting at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven’ and ‘crowned with glory and honour’ (2:9). And he is still talking about Jesus as our high priest, as he began to do in 2:17.

In chapters 5–7 we saw how Jesus’ priesthood is of a completely different order to the Levitical priesthood – and even greater than Melchizedek’s. Now we see that the tabernacle he serves in is different too, and the covenant that sits behind it has also changed.

READ Hebrews 8:1–13

1. In this section Jeremiah 31:31–34 is quoted. According to the author of Hebrews, what was ‘wrong’ with the first covenant?
2. How is the new covenant different?
3. Now that there is a new covenant, what happens with the old?

- What do you think it means for the new covenant to be 'written on our hearts'? How is this different to the old?
- What difference does this new covenant reality – and the reality of permanent forgiveness – make to you as you struggle with sin?

The Tabernacle and the Temple

After God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he renewed his covenant with them at Mt Sinai, then instructed Moses to build a sanctuary – the *tabernacle*, or 'tent of meeting' (cf. Exodus 25:1–9). During their wandering through the desert, the Israelites moved the tabernacle around with them. This continued as they made their way into the Promised Land (with a few hitches here and there, like temporarily losing the Ark of the Covenant!). Later, King David wanted to build a temple to replace the tabernacle (2 Samuel 7). God said David couldn't, but that his son would. Solomon then built the temple (2 Kings 6–9).

Solomon's temple was destroyed and rebuilt (a couple of times). When Jesus came into Jerusalem he cleared out money lenders and traders. When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple tore from top to bottom, symbolising the end of the usefulness of the temple. 30–40 years later the temple was destroyed – again!

When we come to John's vision of heaven as a great city, recorded for us in Revelation, we're told there was to temple to be seen because it is no longer required:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Revelation 21:22).

READ Hebrews 9:1-15

4. List some of the elements of worship under the old covenant in the earthly sanctuary (vv.1-5).

5. Who could enter the Most Holy Place? And under what condition only?

6. What does the writer say the Holy Spirit was teaching and illustrating through the ceremony that took place in the tabernacle each year?

7. The writer observes that 'The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer' are only able to make a person 'outwardly clean' (v.13). So, how are we made *inwardly* clean?
 - Because of Jesus' perfect sacrifice we have a clean conscience, have been made perfect, and are being made holy. Does this describe your experience, or do you still fall short and feel guilty at times? How would you explain this reality?

8. For what reason (that is, *purpose*) is Christ the mediator of a new covenant (v.15)?

- How does it help you to view the new covenant promises as an 'inheritance'?

READ Hebrews 9:16-28

9. Outline the metaphorical use of 'will' in this passage.
10. What is the importance of blood in the sacrificial system?
11. How is Christ's covenant 'greater'?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

12. Consider vv.27-28. How do these truths encourage you? In what way do you find them challenging?
13. What difference does the assurance of Christ's new covenant, and the certainty of Christ's return, make to the way you share the gospel?

STUDY 7 | GREATER SACRIFICE

Hebrews 10:1-31

READ Hebrews 10:1-18

1. How is the law and its sacrifices described?
2. In what ways were the law and its sacrifices a 'shadow'?
3. What, then, was the *purpose* of this 'shadow sacrifice' under the old covenant?
4. The author quotes Psalm 40:6-8 to express Christ's obedient submission to the Father. He then goes on to say how Jesus is not satisfied with sacrifices, even though the law required them to be made.

Why is Jesus is not satisfied with sacrifices? (N.B. think about 'doing your will', v.7b)
5. Why is Jesus' sacrifice greater than past sacrifices?

- There continue to be 'ritualistic' aspects to the Christian life. What are they? How does what we read here help the way you do/view/approach them?

READ Hebrews 10:19-25

6. How does the writer summarise the benefits that are ours in Christ (vv.19-21)?
7. What does it mean to 'enter the Most Holy Place'?
8. In light of this, what are we encouraged to do (note the 5 exhortations in vv.22-25)?
 - How can we spur one another on to love and good deeds?
9. What does it mean to 'draw near to God'? Has it got anything to do with 'meeting together' in v.25?

10. What does it mean to 'hold unswervingly to the hope we profess'? Is that even possible? What encouragement is there here for us?

- What does it look like, then, for you to 'hold unswervingly to the hope you profess'?

READ Hebrews 10:26-31

The final section of chapter 10 is another 'warning' passage – in this context, a warning about deliberately sinning (that is, again and again without conscience) while knowing the perfect sacrifice of 'the Son of God' on their behalf.

11. By 'deliberately' sinning after receiving knowledge of the truth (about Jesus), what are we doing (v.29)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

12. How do you think 'worship' takes place under the new covenant?

13. Why should we not give up meeting together? Does it mean we *have* to go to church? Why/why not?

STUDY 8 | GREATER FAITH

Hebrews 11:1-12:3

On our way through Hebrews we have highlighted some negative warnings. The warning not to drift. The warning not to become hard-hearted. The warning not to be sluggish of hearing and responding to God's word. In this study we'll focus on the positive encouragement to keep going. In the passage (11:1-12:3) we have a long list of people held up as examples for us, and we're encouraged to join them in persevering.

But first: let's set the scene.

READ Hebrews 2:5-10 and 4:1

1. What do we have to look forward to as Christians?

READ Hebrews 6:11-12

2. We're taught how important it is not to become sluggish in hearing and responding to God's word. Have another look at the encouragement in 6:11-12. Who are we to imitate?

Finally, **READ** 12:1–3 (this will give context for thinking about chapter 11).

3. Who are we 'surrounded by'? What does this mean?

4. On whom should we 'fix our eyes'? What does this mean?

Now we will look more closely at this 'great cloud of witnesses.' Complete the table on the next page as you go through chapter 11 (N.B. Not every column can be filled out for every person). Stop as often as you need along the way – and feel free to talk 'off topic' about things you find interesting!

READ Hebrews 11:1–40

Person/People	What they hoped for	How they demonstrated faith	What they received/did not receive.

- How might this chapter be a source of encouragement for the original audience? Keep in mind the persecution and difficult circumstances they could have been facing (see *Series Overview*).

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

5. Discuss these statements:

(a) "These people (in Hebrews 11) received the *shadow* but continued to hope for the 'reality'". How well do you feel this statement expresses vv.13–16 (cf. also vv.39–40; 10:1)?

(b) About vv.39–40: "Hebrews 11:1 is not so much a 'definition' of faith as a *description* of what faith will 'look like' in someone's life."

6. How is what we hope for the same as what the Old Testament people hoped for?

7. How does chapter 11 motivate your own 'race'? Consider 12:1–13 again. What might it look like to do this?

STUDY 9 | GREATER MOUNTAIN

Hebrews 12:4-24

1. Talk about this statement: *Indifference is worse than punishment.*

Do you agree or disagree. Why?

Last study we were exhorted actively to persevere in trusting God. As we read on into chapter 12 we might add, 'even when things are hard'. As we've seen, in 12:1-3 Jesus is held up as an example for us to follow, as 'the author and perfecter of our faith'. In the verses that follow Jesus continues to be held up as an example – this time in our struggle against sin.

READ Hebrews 12:4-13

2. What does v.4 say about the Hebrew believers? What might this be referring to?

3. How does God discipline? How is it described?

4. How does God's discipline demonstrate his love? (What might it look like if God were 'indifferent' towards us?)

5. What does this passage say is the *goal* of God's loving discipline (vv.10–11)?
 - What do you think this discipline looks like? Is it only hard things that are 'discipline' (like those mentioned in 11:35–38)? Or are we being disciplined every time something goes wrong in life?

READ Hebrews 12:14–17

6. In what does v.14 exhort 'every effort'? How is this a continuation of the exhortation in v.4 to strive against sin?

7. Is v.14 implying that we need to be 'good enough' to see God (that is, by our own merit)?

8. In our struggle for peace with others and holiness before God, we are told to make sure that 'no one misses the grace of God' (v.15). How could someone miss the grace of God?

9. A specific example of this cited: *bitterness*. How might a person's bitterness 'defile many'?

- Is this something you have experienced?

10. Why do you think sexual immorality is mentioned in this context?

11. How was Esau 'godless' (or 'irreligious' as the HCSB puts it) in dealing with God's promises (his birth right)?

- What might this look like for us? What are some ways we can be 'Esau like'?

READ Hebrews 12:18-28

12. What IS Mt Zion? And how is it possible that we have come to it?

13. Fill in the table on the next page comparing the 'shadow' with the 'reality' which we find in these verses.

	Shadow	Reality
Mountains		
Warnings		
'Shakings'		

STUDY 10 | GREATER LIFE

Hebrews 13:1-25

READ Hebrews 13:15-16

1. What sort of sacrifices should we be offering to God (this will give us a lens through which to look at the preceding verses)?

Let's now go back to the beginning of the chapter and consider what this life of worship and sacrifice could look like.

READ Hebrews 13:1-6

2. List the ways we're exhorted to treat people (vv.1-4).

The reference to angels is an often-discussed part of this passage. In the New Testament, the word 'angel' actually means 'messenger'. Hence, it is often translated as 'saints' or 'believers' – but not here.

3. Is the writer talking about a heavenly messenger (an 'angelic being')? Or is it a reference to human messengers (God's people/Christians)? What do you think? Does it make a difference?

4. Consider vv.5–6. What should our attitude be towards money? Why? What does it say about our relationship with God when we begin to love money?

- Do you find it a hard call to treat people as described in vv.1–4? Why/why not?
- What might it look like in our lives not to love money but to be content with what we have? What might need to change?

READ Hebrews 13:7–9 and 17–19

5. What do we learn about the role of leaders? And what's the connection between v.7 and v.8?

6. What should our attitude to our leaders be, and why?

7. How are these attitudes towards our leaders appropriate for people who worship God?

- What do you find easy about this? What do you find challenging?

READ Hebrews 13:19-14

These verses hint at inappropriate teachings or practices that may have involved some of the original readers. Perhaps some were being drawn back to traditional Jewish ceremonies.

8. How might some well-intended ceremonial practices have been a hindrance to the 'race of faith' for those early Christians?

- Are there aspects of your worship (in all its varied forms) that are done purely for tradition or conformity with others – things that might actually *sidetrack* you from focussing on Jesus?

READ Hebrews 13:20-25

9. How does the writer's benediction (blessing; lit. 'good word') summarise the 'short letter' he has written (vv.20–21)?

- Is there one particular aspect of this benediction that speaks loudest to you?

10. Consider the final words of this letter (vv.23–25). What do they tell you (about the writer, those receiving this letter, and the Church at the time)?

- Do these final words encourage you? If so, how?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

11. What is the biggest theme you have found repeated throughout Hebrews? How does that affect your life as a Christian?

