**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (1): The Book of Better Things**

**“Welcome To The Epistle To The Hebrews”**

**January 7, 2024**

Imagine that you are taking a walk in your neighborhood. You come across an envelope in which there is a lengthy letter. It doesn’t belong to you, but you’d like to deliver it to its rightful destination. You are going to have a hard time.

There are no names on the front of the envelope. Nor is there any address – no city, no state, no zip code, no country. There’s no return address in the upper left-hand corner of the envelope, and there’s no postmark. So you’re wondering *where* and *to whom* the letter is written, and *by whom* and *when*.

Your only hope of delivering this letter to the right person now becomes obvious. You open the letter, thinking that it will begin like most letters do; “Dear Sgt. Geraghty,” or “Dear Coach Diaz.” But there’s no greeting. So you look at the end of the letter, hoping to find something like, “Give my love to the family, yours truly, Ralph DeGroat.” But there’s no concluding salutation.

What’s the next step? Without knowing who wrote the letter, and when it was written, and from where and to whom, you start reading the letter! You are hoping that the letter itself will provide some clues that will help you answer those questions.

My dear friends, welcome to the Epistle to the Hebrews! By whom was it written? We don’t know. Where was it written? We don’t know. Where was it sent? We don’t know. When was it written? We don’t know. Why was it written? This we *do* know. How? By carefully reading through the letter. As we do, we can also find clues about its author, its destination, and its recipients.

But one thing is for certain. The title of this letter, “The Epistle to the Hebrews” is not original. This was the title given to it by the early church over 100 years after the letter first appeared. The title found in the KJV, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews” is also not original. That title first appeared some 400 years after the letter was written. But since the Protestant Reformation, it has been widely recognized that Paul *could not* have been the author.

Our task this morning, then, is to attempt to find the most likely answers to some of these important questions. In the process, we’ll also see the reason why we are launching into a rather extensive study of this letter. It will have much to teach us about how we should be thinking and living as Christians in such dangerous and perilous times.

**(1)** **Who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews?** The bottom line is that we don’t know. Some of the leading names suggested as possibilities include **Barnabas** (Paul’s missionary companion), **Luke** (the author of the third gospel and the book of Acts), **Apollos** (first suggested by Martin Luther), **Priscilla** (the wife of Aquila), and, of course, the **Apostle Paul.**

As I have already noted, it has been widely recognized since the Reformation that Paul could **not** have been the author. Here are some of the reasons why: **(a)** unlike Hebrews, none of Paul’s letters are anonymous; **(b)** the polished Greek style of Hebrews is noticeably different from Paul’s; **(c)** there are noticeable theological differences between this letter and Paul’s letters; Hebrews makes no mention of justification by faith and union with Christ as does Paul; and Paul does not mention the high priesthood of Christ, which is central to the author’s argument. **(d)** this author does not share any of his spiritual experiences in this letter, as Paul often does in his; **(e)** the author of Hebrews appeals to the authority of those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry (2:3), whereas Paul appeals to his own apostolic authority and to the revelation he’s directly received from the Risen Christ (Gal. 1:12).

**(2) When was it written?** Most likely it was written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD. The author actually speaks of the ritual sacrifices of the Temple as still occurring (Cf. 5:1-4; 7:26-28; 8:4-7, 13; 9:6-10, 25; 10:1ff; 13:10-11).

**(3)** **To whom was the letter written, and from where?** Many believe it was written to the church in Rome. In Hebrews 13:24 we read, “*Those who come from Italy send you greetings*.” This most likely refers to Italian Christians living in the city where the letter was written. If so, then the probability is that it was addressed to the church in Rome before 64AD, when Nero began his murderous persecution of Christians. We know from Hebrews 10:32-34 and 12:4 that these believers had not yet died for their faith. But we simply have no way of knowing where the author was when he wrote this letter to the Roman church.

**(4)** **Who were the Hebrews, and what was the problem the author was addressing?** Most likely they were Jewish members of the church at Rome, all of whom had professed faith in Christ. Shortly after, they had suffered persecution. Since Judaism was protected by Roman law, some were tempted to turn back to their old ways of religious life. As F. F. Bruce explains:

 The addressees appear . . . to have been a group of Jewish Christians who had never

 seen or heard Jesus in person, but learned of Him (as the writer of the epistle also did) from

 some who had themselves listened to Him (2:3). Since their conversion they had been exposed

 to persecution – particularly at one stage shortly after the beginning of their Christian career

 (10:32ff) – but while they had had to endure public abuse, imprisonment, and the looting of

 their property, they had not yet been called upon to die for their faith (12:4). They had given

 practical evidence of their faith by serving their fellow Christians and especially by caring for

 those of their number who suffered most in time of persecution (6:10; 10:34). Yet their

 Christian development had been arrested; instead of pressing ahead they were inclined to

 to come to a full stop in their spiritual progress, if not indeed to slip back to a stage which

 they had left (5:11ff). Very probably there were reluctant to sever their last ties with a religion

 which enjoyed the protection of Roman law and face the risks of irrevocable commitment

 to the Christian way. The writer, who has known them, or known about them, for a

 considerable time, and feels a pastoral concern for their welfare, warns them against falling

 back, for this may result in falling away from their Christian faith altogether; he encourages

 them with the assurance that they have everything to lose if they fall back, but everything to

 gain if they press on (2:1ff; 3:12ff; 6:4ff; 10:26ff; 12:15ff). (The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. XXX).

**(5) Why was Hebrews written?** From the previous statement, it is apparent that the main purpose of the epistle is double-edged: (a) to deter the danger of apostasy (turning away from Christ and lapsing back into Judaism); and (b) to promote steadfast endurance in the faith.

**(6)** **How was Hebrews written?** The author calls his letter a “word of exhortation” (13:22), which was the conventional way of describing a sermon given in a synagogue service (in Acts 13:15, for example, Paul and Barnabas were invited to deliver a “word of exhortation” at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch). Like a sermon, Hebrews is full of encouragement, exhortations, and warnings. There are three noteworthy features of this sermonic exhortation:

**(a)** The author uses the Old Testament itself to demonstrate that Jesus is better than the Old Testament prophets, better than the angels and Moses (mediators of the former covenant), better than Aaron and the Levitical priesthood, and better than the priestly sacrifices. His point could not be more clear: if Jesus is better, then why would anyone want anything else?

**(b)** He parenthetically includes five warnings about the peril of turning away from Christ (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-31; 12:18-29). These warnings contain some of the most severe language in the New Testament and are directed to some within the Christian community who have heard the truth and professed faith in Christ. But they are not (and never were) genuine believers. If they yield to the temptation to abandon their profession of faith, their plight will be hopeless, for apostates can never be saved.

**(c)** He repeatedly connects the doctrine he is expounding to its practical application, both by his negative warnings and his positive exhortations. For example, in 4:14 we read “***Therefore****, since we have a high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,* ***let us hold firmly*** *to the faith we profess*;” and in 6:1 we read, “***Therefore****,* ***let us******leave*** *the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity . . .* ;” and in 10:19; “***Therefore****, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus . . .* ***let us******draw near*** *to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith . . . .*”

**(7) What’s the central theme of Hebrews?** Jesus is “better.” In fact, Hebrews could be called “the book of better things,” since the two Greek words for “better” and “superior” occur 15 times in the letter. For example, Jesus is “better” than the angels (1:4a); he introduces a “better” hope (7:19) and has become the guarantee of a “better” covenant (7:22). He mediates a “better” covenant (7:22), since it’s based on “better” promises (8:6). Whereas it was necessary for the earthly sanctuary to be cleansed with the blood of animals, it was necessary for the heavenly sanctuary to be cleansed with “better” sacrifices than these (9:23). Those who know Christ have “better” and lasting possessions (10:34b), and desire a “better” country, that is, a heavenly one (11:16a), and obtain a “better” resurrection (11:35b), since God has provided something “better” for us (11:40).

The Epistle to the Hebrews is a constant reminder that Jesus Christ is better than anything this world has to offer. When it comes to the daily challenges of life, He is the only One who can sustain us and supply us with a never-ending abundance of resources to meet our every need. Hebrews is also here to explain in great detail why that is true! Its appeal, therefore, could not be more relevant: Come to Christ. Listen to Him. Rest in Him. Trust in Him. Put your hope in Him. Jesus Christ *is* better!