

## Introduction

### Hebrews Forever

In her engaging book *A Distant Mirror*, author Barbara W. Tuchman invites us to view the reflection of our own times in the tumult of *The Calamitous 14th Century*.<sup>2</sup> She helps us to see the idealism, brutality, social unrest, and sense of foreboding and decline characteristic of our own age in the struggles of that far-off epoch that brought the Middle Ages to an end. In like manner, when we read the ancient letter to the Hebrews, we can, if we know how to look, see our own twenty-first century struggles as the post-Christendom people of God. Our temptation to spiritual indifference and sense of marginalization are not unlike the strains and difficulties faced by the little community of believers to whom this letter was addressed. The way in which the author of Hebrews speaks to their situation with compassion, pastoral insight, theological acumen, and profound biblical understanding has much to offer the people of God today. His message is about Jesus Christ, and is therefore relevant “yesterday, and today, and forever” (13:8 KJV).

### Hebrews Yesterday

In recent years Craig Bartholomew has expressed the sentiment of many by claiming that Hebrews is as important as Paul’s letter to the Romans.<sup>3</sup> The value of this book is demonstrated by the way in which Christians from earliest times persisted in reading it as Scripture, although they questioned its authorship. Near the end of the first century, 1 Clement, a letter from the church at Rome to the Christians in Corinth, made extensive use of Hebrews. Christians in the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Roman Empire

2. Tuchman, *Distant Mirror*.

3. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutic*, 487–88.

recognized Hebrews as Scripture from the earliest days, often including it among the Pauline letters. They suggested that Hebrews might have been originally penned in Hebrew or written by someone like Luke at Paul's direction in order to account for the evident differences from the other Pauline letters. In the third century, Origen, the greatest biblical scholar of antiquity, included Hebrews among the New Testament writings despite his admission that "only God knows" who actually wrote it. One early manuscript attests the assessment of Craig Bartholomew, mentioned above, by locating Hebrews right after Paul's letter to the Romans. We would be immeasurably poorer if this book were not in our Bibles.

### Hebrews Today

Unlike believers throughout the ages, some modern Christians fail to take advantage of these riches. They may be discouraged by what some consider the difficulties in this book. It is the only New Testament book that talks about Melchizedek, that strange character who encountered Abraham in Gen 14. It compares Christ and his death to the Levitical priestly/sacrificial system so foreign to modern sensibilities. Its seeming assertion that any who fall away from Christ cannot be restored sounds harsh and out of harmony with the general teaching of the New Testament. Thus, some content themselves with quoting a few choice passages, such as "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb 10:25 KJV), "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb 13:8 KJV), and "Now the God of peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep . . ." (Heb 13:20–21 KJV). Then they skip from the Pauline letters to that useful and practical book, James. It is, however, the very things that sound strange—Melchizedek, priesthood, sacrifice—that contain Hebrews' special treasures. I am writing to help you overcome any perceived difficulties so that you can profit from the legacy left us in this profound book.

Hebrews is, indeed, a sermon sent as a letter to a congregation in crisis by one who has a deep pastoral concern for the people of God. Let me get you started by describing the situation of this congregation, summarizing the content of the sermon, and describing the character of the pastor who wrote it. This information will enable you to understand the relevance of Hebrews for our time and know what to look for as you begin to read. It will give you an appreciation for the pastor/author whom you will meet in its pages.

*A Congregation under Stress*

From what the author of Hebrews says, we know that—like the church today—his congregation was suffering from marginalization, increasing persecution from without, and lethargy within. Their commitment to Christ as the only means of salvation isolated them from both the larger Jewish community and the surrounding Roman world. That pluralistic Roman world was quite happy for them to worship any number of gods, but was intolerant of exclusive loyalty to one God alone. Such loyalty was viewed as subversive and seditious because it separated its practitioners from many civic, social, and business functions that involved acknowledgment of other gods. The Romans only grudgingly tolerated the Jews' exclusive loyalty to the God of Israel. Once followers of Jesus emerged as a distinct group, they were excluded by everyone.

Those who first received Hebrews may have begun to wonder if God had truly revealed himself in his Son. To the Greeks and Romans the idea of God revealing himself in history was absurd. Jews who did not follow Christ accepted only what is today our Old Testament. Had God actually spoken in Christ? Had he spoken at all? It appears that the author's congregation was suffering from fatigue and laxity. They had been believers for some time. The way of Christ had become difficult. Was Christ *really* the only way of salvation? Was he *really* God's ultimate self-revelation? They were growing tired of the struggle. Wouldn't their lives be easier if they abandoned this loyalty to Christ and either blended into the Jewish community or conformed to the tolerant lifestyle of the society around them? In our secularized culture that denies God's speaking this scenario feels disturbingly familiar. It presages our "pluralistic" world that tolerates no absolutes. It describes our contemporary religious climate that approves of belief in "God" but is militantly hostile to the exclusive claims of Christ.

*A Sermon Addressed to their Situation*

Let me summarize the answer given by Hebrews. The writer of this sermon addresses his hearers' situation by reminding them of who they are: "But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (Heb 10:39). "We" do not belong to that disobedient, faithless wilderness generation described in Heb 3:1—4:13. That generation refused to trust God's promise of future blessing and to rely on his present power to bring them into that future. No, "we" belong to the faithful people of God throughout history, whose story is at the heart of Heb 10:26—12:3. This grand company lived as if God's promise of

ultimate “rest” in the “heavenly City” was certain and relied on his power to sustain them in obedience until arrival at that destination. “We” who suffer as an isolated and persecuted minority are in reality members of this grand company—if we persevere.

In Heb 1:1—2:18 the writer tells us why “we” who believe in Christ are the heirs of God’s faithful people of old. The God who spoke in the Old Testament (referred to as “the prophets” in Heb 1:1) has now spoken in Christ, the Son. Through his incarnation, obedient suffering, and exaltation the eternal Son of God has become the “Source of eternal salvation” (Heb 5:9) and thus the ultimate revelation of God. Thus, we who faithfully follow Christ walk in the steps of those who obeyed before us. Those who “neglect such a great salvation” (Heb 2:1–4) reject the fulfillment of God’s self-revelation in his Son. They will suffer ultimate loss with the faithless wilderness generation of Heb 3:1—4:13.

In Heb 4:14—10:25, the heart of this sermon, the writer expands the foundation he has laid in Heb 1:1—2:18. Through his incarnation, obedience, suffering, and exaltation the eternal Son has fulfilled everything anticipated by the sacrificial system so central to the Old Testament. He has offered the one and only sacrifice sufficient for cleansing from sin. He has become the ultimate High Priest who provides access into God’s presence. He guarantees the New Covenant of obedient fellowship with God. He is “the Pioneer and Perfecter of the way of faith” who brings the faithful to their eternal destination (Heb 12:2). He guarantees God’s promise of ultimate “rest” and he is the source of God’s power for daily perseverance. “We” who draw near to God through him avoid the wilderness generation who “shrink back and are destroyed” (Heb 3:7—4:11) by joining the victorious company who “have faith and are saved” (Hebrews 10:25–12:17). The secret of our success is to keep our eyes focused on this Savior seated at God’s right hand.

The author brings his message to a climax in Heb 12:18–29 by reminding his hearers that the God who “spoke” through the Son’s incarnation and exaltation (Heb 1:1—2:18) will bring all to its eternal consummation by “speaking” again at the Son’s return. At that time “we” certainly will not want to be among “those who shrink back and are destroyed.” In Heb 13:1–25 the author makes application, addresses several concerns, and gives greetings, reiterating the key themes of his sermon as he does so: There is a sure word from God. The danger of eternal loss awakens us from our lethargy. The promised reward is worth all hardship. Our Savior and High Priest is more than sufficient to meet our need.

This summary of Hebrews’ content suggests the careful way in which the writer has arranged his material in order to encourage the perseverance of his hearers. We might outline this arrangement as follows: God

has spoken in his Son, now seated at his right hand, by providing “such a great salvation” (Heb 1:1—2:18). Therefore, we must avoid the fate of the unbelieving wilderness generation (Heb 3:1—4:13), by embracing the full sufficiency of the eternal, incarnate, now exalted Son our High Priest at God’s right hand (Heb 4:1—10:25), so that we can join the great company of the faithful who persevere (Heb 10:28—12:17), and thus be among those who participate in the “unshakable kingdom” when God speaks once again through his Son at the Judgment (12:18–29). I have provided a fuller presentation of this careful arrangement in Appendix A: “The Beauty of Hebrews: Art in Service to Truth and Spiritual Well-being.”<sup>4</sup> The commentary throughout this book highlights, where appropriate, the contribution of each passage to this overall arrangement. If you give careful attention, you will have a holistic picture of the beautiful tapestry that our author has woven for us when you finish this reading guide.

#### *A Pastor Concerned for the People of God*

I, like Origen long before me, do not know the author’s name. But I feel like I know him! I have studied his legacy in depth for more than thirty-five years. I have listened carefully to what he has to say. I have laid aside, as best I could, my preconceptions, that I might understand and obey the truth of God thus revealed. The author of Hebrews writes with a burdened pastor’s heart. He has a deep concern that his hearers appropriate the full sufficiency of Christ for perseverance in faithful, obedient living until they reach the end of their pilgrimage. That is why I refer to this nameless writer as “the pastor,” Hebrews as his “sermon,” and the hearers as his “congregation.” I feel like I am introducing you to my friend, rather than explaining a book.

This pastor is a deeply insightful biblical scholar who has thought long about how Christ fulfills the Old Testament. He has gained profound insight into the unity and wholeness of God’s plan of salvation fulfilled in Christ. He is a theologian who has a clear grasp of Christian truth. Finally, he is a preacher who has skillfully employed the resources of ancient persuasive speech (rhetoric) as an aid in presenting the truth. He writes this way urging us to appropriate the complete sufficiency of Christ and find in him all that we need to persevere. It is well worth listening to this pastor, so passionate about Christ, so compassionate toward his hearers, so insightful in the things of God. As you read this book I ask you to let him be your pastor so that you might derive maximum benefit from his

4. If you would like a more extensive analysis of the way Hebrews is arranged, see “The Sermon’s Rhetorically Effective Structure” in Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 60–81.

sermon, as I have done. As we read Hebrews together we will be taking our place among the company “of those who through faith and patience are inheriting the promises” (Heb 6:12).

### The Purpose and Plan of this Reading Guide

I have divided this reading guide into seven weeks of daily readings so that you will have the time to be formed and shaped by prayerfully encountering God’s word. You might want to read together with friends, or perhaps use this book as the basis for an in-depth class on Hebrews. My commentary, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, provides additional resources for teachers or anyone else with further questions. I have used the translation of Hebrews from that commentary in this present book (with occasional modification). You can begin with week one, day one, at any time.

I want you to experience the impact not only of each individual passage but of the pastor’s sermon *as a whole*. I want you to understand the role that each passage plays in that whole. I want you to grasp the careful way in which the pastor has put his book together in order to stress the sufficiency of Christ and the crucial importance of perseverance. I hope the message of Hebrews will shape your mind and heart. Most of all, I invite you, by attending to Hebrews, to “draw near to God” (Heb 10:22) through his Son who “is able even to save completely those who come to God through him, because he is always living to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). And so, through the “Spirit of Grace” (Heb 10:29), you will take your place among the “we” who “do not belong to those who shrink back” (10:39). Now, in order to receive the pastor’s answer to our own spiritual needs and to some of the pressing concerns of our time, let us begin to meditate on the Letter to the Hebrews.