

The Letter *to the Hebrews* and to Us



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Heb. 2:3, 4; 1 Pet. 4:14, 16; Heb. 13:1–9, 13; 1 Kings 19:1–18; Heb. 3:12–14; Numbers 13.*

Memory Text: “For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise” (*Hebrews 10:36, NKJV*).

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to hear Jesus, or one of the apostles, preach? We possess written excerpts and summaries of some of their sermons, but these provide only a limited idea of what it was like to hear them. God, however, preserved in the Scriptures at least one complete sermon for us: Paul’s letter to the Hebrews.

Paul, the author of Hebrews, referred to his own work as a “word of exhortation” (*Heb. 13:22*). This expression was used to identify the sermon, both at the synagogue (*Acts 13:15*) and at Christian worship (*1 Tim. 4:13*). Thus, it has been argued that Hebrews is the earliest “complete Christian sermon” that we have. Hebrews was addressed to believers who accepted Jesus but then experienced difficulties. Some were publicly shamed and persecuted (*Heb. 10:32–34*). Others faced financial problems (*Heb. 13:5, 6*). Many were tired and had begun to question their faith (*Heb. 3:12, 13*). Can any of us today relate?

The apostle, in a stirring sermon, however, challenged them (and, by extension, us) to persevere in faith in Jesus and to fix their eyes upon Jesus, now in the heavenly sanctuary.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 1.

A Glorious Beginning

In order to understand the sermon and apply its message to ourselves, we need to understand the history of the congregation and their situation when they received the letter from the apostle.

Read Hebrews 2:3, 4. What was the experience of the audience of Hebrews when they were first converted?

This passage implies that the audience of Hebrews had not heard Jesus Himself preach; instead, they had received the gospel from other evangelists who had announced to them the news of “salvation.”

Paul also says that the evangelists had “confirmed” the message to them and that God Himself had borne “witness both with signs and wonders” (*Hebrews 2:3, NKJV*). This means that God had provided experiential confirmation of the gospel by signs and other powerful deeds—among them the distribution of the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (*Hebrews 2:3, NKJV*). The New Testament relates that signs, such as miraculous healings, exorcisms, and the outpouring of spiritual gifts often accompanied the preaching of the gospel in new places.

At the beginning of the Christian church, God poured His Spirit upon the apostles in Jerusalem so that they were able to announce the gospel in languages previously unknown to them and to perform miracles (*Acts 2, Acts 3*). Philip performed similar wonders in Samaria (*Acts 8*), Peter in Joppa and Caesarea (*Acts 9, Acts 10*), and Paul throughout his ministry in Asia Minor and Europe (*Acts 13–28*). These powerful deeds were experiential evidence that confirmed the message of “salvation”—the establishment of the kingdom of God and a salvation from condemnation and freedom from evil powers (*Heb. 12:25–29*).

The Spirit gave early Christian believers the conviction that their sins had been forgiven; thus, they were not fearful of judgment, and as a result their prayers were bold and confident, and their religious experience was joyful (*Acts 2:37–47*). The Spirit also delivered those who were enslaved to evil powers, which was compelling evidence of the superiority of the power of God over the forces of evil and revealed that the kingdom of God had been established in their lives.

What is the story of your conversion? In what ways have you been confirmed in your faith and belief in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? Why is it good at times to remember how God first worked in your life to bring you to Him?

The Struggle

When believers confessed their faith in Christ and joined the church, they set a boundary marker that distinguished them from the rest of society. Unfortunately, this became a source of conflict because it implicitly passed a negative judgment on their community and its values.

Read Hebrews 10:32–34 and Hebrews 13:3. What was the experience of the audience of Hebrews after their conversion?

It is very likely that the readers of Hebrews suffered verbally and physically at the hands of mobs stirred up by opponents (e.g., *Acts 16:19–22, Acts 17:1–9*). They also were imprisoned, and it is possible that they were beaten, as well, because officials had the power to authorize punishment and incarceration, often without following appropriate judicial norms, while they gathered evidence (e.g., *Act 16:22, 23*).

Read Hebrews 11:24–26 and 1 Peter 4:14, 16. How do the experiences of Moses and of the readers of 1 Peter help us understand why Christian believers were persecuted?

To “bear the reproach of Christ” simply meant to identify oneself with Christ and endure the shame and abuse that this association implied. Public animosity against Christians was the result of their distinctive religious commitments. People can get offended by religious practices that they don’t understand or by people whose lifestyle and morals could make others feel guilty or shamed. By the middle of the first century A.D., Tacitus considered Christians to be guilty of “hatred against mankind.”—Alfred J. Church and William J. Brodribb, trans., *The Complete Works of Tacitus* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), *Annals* 15.44.1. Whatever the exact reason for that charge, certainly false, many early Christians, such as the ones that Paul had written this letter to, were suffering for their faith.

Everyone, whether a Christian or not, suffers. What does it mean, however, to suffer for the sake of Christ? How much suffering that we face is for the sake of Christ, and how much is brought about by our own choices?

Malaise

The readers of Hebrews were successful in keeping their faith and commitment to Christ, despite rejection and persecution. The conflict, however, took a toll in the long run. They fought a good fight and came out victorious but also weary.

Read Hebrews 2:18; Hebrews 3:12, 13; Hebrews 4:15; Hebrews 10:25; Hebrews 12:3, 12, 13; and Hebrews 13:1–9, 13. What were some of the challenges the believers were facing?

Hebrews tells us that the readers continued to experience difficulties. Verbal and probably other kinds of attacks against their honor continued (*Heb. 13:13*). Some believers were still in prison (*Heb. 13:3*)—something that may have drained the church financially and psychologically. They were tired (*Heb. 12:12, 13*) and could easily “lose heart” (*Heb. 12:3, NIV*).

It is usual among persons and communities that after the thrill of victory passes, psychological and other kinds of defenses are relaxed, and people become more vulnerable to the counterattack of their enemies. The strength that a person or community mobilized to face an impending threat is more difficult to summon a second time.

Read 1 Kings 19:1–4. What happened to Elijah?

“But a reaction such as frequently follows high faith and glorious success was pressing upon Elijah. He feared that the reformation begun on Carmel might not be lasting; and depression seized him. He had been exalted to Pisgah’s top; now he was in the valley. While under the inspiration of the Almighty, he had stood the severest trial of faith; but in this time of discouragement, with Jezebel’s threat sounding in his ears, and Satan still apparently prevailing through the plotting of this wicked woman, he lost his hold on God. He had been exalted above measure, and the reaction was tremendous. Forgetting God, Elijah fled on and on, until he found himself in a dreary waste, alone.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 161, 162.

Think about those times in which you failed in your Christian life, and try to understand the circumstances and factors that contributed to the collapse. What could you have done differently?

Press Together

What did the apostle advise the readers to do in view of their situation? What can we learn from Hebrews for our own benefit? Let us analyze how God helped Elijah recover from his discouragement.

Read 1 Kings 19:5–18. What did God do to restore the faith of Elijah, His servant?

The story of God’s dealings with Elijah after Carmel is fascinating because it shows the tender care and wisdom with which God ministers to those who are under distress and who struggle to regain faith. God did several things for Elijah. First, He cared for his physical needs. He provided food and let him rest. Then, in the cave, He kindly reproved him—“What are you doing here, Elijah?” (*1 Kings 19:9, NKJV*)—and helped him gain a deeper understanding of how He works and fulfills His purposes. God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire—but in a still small voice. Then, God gave Elijah a work to do and reassured him.

Read Hebrews 2:1, Hebrews 3:12–14, Hebrews 5:11–6:3, and Hebrews 10:19–25. What did Paul suggest that believers should do?

Throughout Hebrews we can find several instructions that the apostle gave the readers to help them recover their original strength and faith. One aspect that Paul emphasizes is the care of the physical needs of their fellow believers. He suggests that they should practice hospitality and visit those in prison, which implied providing for their needs. The apostle exhorts the readers to be generous, remembering that God will not abandon them (*Heb. 13:1–6*). Paul also reproved them and encouraged them. He warned them not to gradually “drift away” (*Heb. 2:1, ESV*) and not to have “an evil heart of unbelief” (*Heb. 3:12*), and he encouraged them to grow in their understanding of the faith (*Heb. 5:11–6:3*). He also remarked on the importance of consistent attendance at church meetings (*Heb. 10:25*). In summary, he not only suggested that they press together, encourage one another, and stir up love and good works, but he also lifted up Jesus and His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary in their behalf (*Heb. 8:1, 2; Heb. 12:1–4*).

These Last Days

Read Hebrews 1:2; Hebrews 9:26–28; Hebrews 10:25, 36–38; and Hebrews 12:25–28. What point is Paul stressing here, particularly regarding time?

There is a very important element that the apostle emphasizes that adds urgency to his exhortation: the readers are living in the very “last days” (*Heb. 1:2*) and the promises are about to be fulfilled (*Heb. 10:36–38*). It is interesting, as we will see, that throughout the document Paul compares his audience with the desert generation that stood right before the border of Canaan, ready to enter into the Promised Land. He reminds them, “‘For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry’” (*Heb. 10:37, NKJV*). And then he encourages them: “We are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul” (*Heb. 10:39, NKJV*). This last exhortation reminded the readers, and us, about the dangers that the people of God have historically experienced right before the fulfillment of the promises of God.

The book of Numbers talks about this very thing. The biblical record says that two times, right before entering the Promised Land, Israel suffered important defeats. The first time, recorded in Numbers 13 and 14, tells us about the doubts that several leaders spread through the congregation, which caused the faith of Israel to fail. As a result, the congregation decided to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt, just at the moment they were about to enter Canaan.

The second time, the Israelites got entangled with sensuality and false worship in Baal Peor (*Numbers 24, Numbers 25*). While Balaam was not able to bring a curse upon the Israelites, Satan used sexual temptations to lead Israel into false worship and sin and to bring God’s displeasure upon them.

Paul warns the readers of Hebrews against both dangers. First, he exhorts them to hold fast to the confession of their faith and to fix their eyes upon Jesus (*Heb. 4:14, Heb. 10:23, Heb. 12:1–4*). Second, he exhorts them against immorality and covetousness (*Heb. 13:4–6*). Finally, he exhorts them to observe and obey their leaders (*Heb. 13:7, 17*).

Considering our understanding of the state of the dead—and that as soon as we close our eyes in death, the next thing we know is the Second Coming—why can we say that all people have lived in the “last days”?

Further Thought: David A. deSilva explains clearly why the early Christians suffered persecution: “Christians adopted a lifestyle that . . . would have been considered antisocial and even subversive. Loyalty to the gods, expressed in pious attendance at sacrifices and the like, was viewed as a symbol for loyalty to the state, authorities, friends, and family. Worship of the deities was something of a symbol for one’s dedication to the relationships that kept society stable and prosperous. By abstaining from the former, Christians (like the Jews) were regarded with suspicion as potential violators of the laws and [as] subversive elements within the empire.”—*Perseverance in Gratitude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 12.

“For the disheartened there is a sure remedy—faith, prayer, work. Faith and activity will impart assurance and satisfaction that will increase day by day. Are you tempted to give way to feelings of anxious foreboding or utter despondency? In the darkest days, when appearances seem most forbidding, fear not. Have faith in God. He knows your need. He has all power. His infinite love and compassion never weary. Fear not that He will fail of fulfilling His promise. He is eternal truth. Never will He change the covenant He has made with those who love Him. And He will bestow upon His faithful servants the measure of efficiency that their need demands. The apostle Paul has testified: ‘He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. . . . Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.’ 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 164, 165.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Is it possible to be “different” because of our Christian commitment and yet not be accused of “separation” from and disregard for others? If yes, how?
- 2 The word “exhortation” in the Bible can refer either to reproof or to encouragement. What care should we take in reproofing a person who is discouraged?
- 3 What similarities do you find between the experience of the readers of Hebrews and that of the Laodicean church of Revelation 3:14–22? In what ways is our experience today, two thousand years later, similar to theirs, and what can we learn from the similarities?

Surprise Guardians

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Marriage usually is a joyful time when families celebrate. But Khome and her husband, Eung, only suffered in their remote village in Laos.

Khome, who belongs to the Laven people group, was the daughter of a spiritual medium. She had been groomed from childhood to take her mother's place. But she found the Lord and gave her life to Him against her mother's will. Even worse, she married a Christian man from another people group. Everyone seemed to oppose their marriage—even the evil spirits.

One day, an evil spirit appeared to Khome and laughed at her. Khome quickly knelt down and prayed. Rising, she tried to walk to her Bible to read it. The Bible lay only a few steps away, but her feet felt so heavy that she could hardly move. Her feet seemed to be stuck in the ground. As she struggled to walk, she prayed, "God, protect me. God, protect me." Finally, she reached the Bible and opened it. After reading a few passages, she prayed in the name of Jesus, and the evil spirit left.

The struggle with evil forces continued for years, but Khome and Eung worshiped God faithfully in their home. Their parents, siblings, and neighbors expressed open hatred of them. Someone reported them to the authorities on false charges of wrongdoing. When police officers arrived to detain the couple, they were met by mysterious, powerful figures in front of the house. The officers fled in fear. A second attempt to arrest the couple failed when the police officers were frightened away by the sight of two mysterious figures inside the house. Word spread that the couple had special supernatural guardians, and people began to respect them.

Meanwhile, the couple shared their faith with family and neighbors. They helped others at every opportunity and, although desperately poor themselves, assisted those who were even more impoverished. Slowly, people began to come to them for help. The sick and demon-possessed sought healing. One by one, people accepted God, and the couple's home became a house church. Khome's sister resisted the gospel for some time, but one night she saw a bright light shining in Khome's house. The next day, she asked her sister how she had light when nobody in the village had electricity. Khome did not know what to say. She had been asleep with her husband. The sister accepted Jesus.



Today, Khome and Eung are shining the light of God among the Laven people of Laos. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open an elementary school in the country. Please pray for the school project, Khome and Eung, and the precious people of Laos.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Heb. 2:3, 4; 1 Pet. 4:14, 16; Heb. 13:1–9, 13; 1 Kings 19:1–18; Heb. 3:12–14; Numbers 13.*

Introduction: The book of Hebrews was initially read and received by the early Christian church as a letter from the apostle Paul. Paul’s authorship of Hebrews is indicated by the inclusion of Hebrews among the Pauline epistles in the Greek manuscripts. In the earliest extant manuscripts, dating around A.D. 200, Hebrews is placed right after the epistle of Paul to the Romans. Today, we find Hebrews right before the general epistles of the New Testament: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

Hebrews does not begin in the usual letter-writing manner with the standard protocol (*see Heb. 1:1–3*). Indeed, the book lacks the name of Paul, the specific addressees, the greetings, and the thanksgiving (*compare with Phil. 1:1–11*). Hebrews ends, however, in a letter-writing mode. Here, the author, who Ellen G. White attests is Paul, gives pertinent instructions to his audience: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation” (*Heb. 13:22, NRSV*). He also greets the church, as well as its leaders: “Greet all your leaders and all the saints” (*Heb. 13:24, NRSV*). In conclusion, he adds final farewell wishes: “Grace be with all of you” (*Heb. 13:25, NRSV*). Thus, in light of the deviations we have noted, we can say that Hebrews is a somewhat unusual epistle.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson emphasizes three things: the “genre” of the epistle, its audience, and the “last days” in which the readers are living.

Part II: Commentary

The Genre of Hebrews: The style of Hebrews has been identified as a Christian homily or sermon. What are the textual reasons for considering Hebrews as a sermon?

First, Paul characterizes his work as a “word of exhortation” (*Heb. 13:22*), which is best understood as an oral discourse. Similarly, during their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas on Sabbath attend the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia. The synagogue leaders ask Paul and Barnabas if they have “any word of exhortation for the people” (*Acts 13:15, NRSV*). Paul stands up and delivers the evangelistic-synagogue sermon, recorded in Acts 13:16–41.

Second, the book of Hebrews uses the first-person plural pronoun (we/us/our) in a distinctive manner. This use enables the speaker to identify with his audience while also asserting his authority.

Third, there are several references to speaking and hearing rather than to writing and reading, which elsewhere characterize Paul's composition. Consider the following examples: "About which we are *speaking* . . ." (*Heb. 2:5, NRSV; emphasis added*); "About this we have much to *say*, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of *hearing*" (*Heb. 5:11, ESV; emphasis added*); "Even though we *speak* in this way" (*Heb. 6:9, NRSV; emphasis added*); "Now the main point in what we are *saying* is this" (*Heb. 8:1, NRSV; emphasis added*); "And what more should I *say*?" (*Heb. 11:32, NRSV; emphasis added*).

Fourth, a skillful alternation between exposition and exhortation runs throughout Hebrews. An orator of the Greco-Roman period would use this pattern in order to drive home his points without losing the listener's attention. This oratorical device helps us to identify readily the patterns of alternation in the book of Hebrews. Thus, we observe that the exposition of Hebrews 1 leads directly into the exhortation of Hebrews 2:1–4. The argument of Hebrews 2:5–18 turns immediately into an application in Hebrews 3:1. The discussion of Hebrews 3:2–6 is driven home by the word "therefore," which, in turn, funnels into the exhortation of Hebrews 3:7–13. Then the exposition of Hebrews 3:14–19 is applied in Hebrews 4:1, while the exposition of Hebrews 4:2–10 discharges into the exposition of Hebrews 4:11–16, et cetera. (For more on the alternation between exposition and exhortation in Hebrews, see Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition*, Encountering Biblical Studies [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002], p. 28).

Fifth, the manner in which Paul introduces themes speaks in favor of an oral form of discourse by which he creates a cumulative effect. These themes are fully developed later on. For example, the fellowship Jesus has with humans, spoken of in Hebrews 2:14–18, is made thematic in Hebrews 5:1–10. His faith, portrayed in Hebrews 3:1–6, is made explicit in Hebrews 12:1–3. His role as High Priest (*Heb. 4:14, Heb. 5:1–10*) is developed more fully in Hebrews 7:1–9:28.

In summary, if one looks at Hebrews as a "word of exhortation," then the conclusion seems inescapable: Hebrews was designed, at least originally, as a sermon. Other elements within the letter that give weight to this conclusion are: (1) the distinctive use of the first-person plural pronoun, (2) the references to hearing and speaking, (3) the alternation between exposition and exhortation, and (4) the manner in which Paul introduces themes subtly and later on develops them.

Thought Questions: Where else in the Bible, or in the New Testament, do we have sermons recorded, and how do they compare to Hebrews? What

elements do these sermons have in common with Hebrews, and what elements are different?

The Audience of Hebrews: The precise identity of the audience of Hebrews is not clearly revealed because the book lacks the standard letter-writing introduction, wherein the audience would have been named. What we can say with certainty from the biblical text is that the addressees are Christians. This conclusion seems to be clear from Paul's appeal to them to hold on to their confession: "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession" (*Heb. 4:14, NRSV*; see also *Heb. 10:23, NRSV*). Whether the addressees were Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, or a mixed audience is strongly debated. The epistle never mentions Jews or Christians. Neither does it mention circumcision or the temple (not to be confused with either the "holy," translated as sanctuary, or the "tent," translated as tabernacle). Furthermore, the epistle refrains from divisive references to Jews or Gentiles. These facts speak in favor of a mixed audience. Thus, the title "to the Hebrews" is an ancient conjecture about the addressees. Regardless of who they may be, the important group for them to belong to is the "people of God" (*Heb. 4:9*).

The epistle has been addressed to a community of Christians who obviously underwent at least a three-phase experience.

The first phase was characterized by evangelism, carried out by the eyewitnesses and earwitnesses of Christ (*Heb. 2:3*). This phase was accompanied by God-given signs, miracles, and the distribution of the Holy Spirit (*Heb. 2:4*). Those individuals who became Christians during this phase were "enlightened," "tasted the heavenly gift," "shared in the Holy Spirit," and "tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (*Heb. 6:4, 5, NRSV*). Through such experiences, the community developed its group identity and distinguished itself from the outside world.

The second phase was characterized by persecution from outside the community, while those persons inside the community showed solidarity among themselves (*Heb. 10:32, 33*). The persecution became terribly ferocious; yet, Paul remembers that the audience "cheerfully accepted the plundering of" their "possessions" (*Heb. 10:34, NRSV*). Such vicious persecution over an extended period of time can lead to fatigue, doubt, and malaise.

This condition seems to be the problem in the third phase. That is why Paul delivers such a passionate sermon. He wishes to encourage, exhort, and warn his audience. He warns them in order that they might

“not drift away” (*Heb. 2:1, NRSV*), for he desires that no one “turns away from the living God” (*Heb. 3:12, NRSV*) and “that no one may fall through such disobedience,” as did the Exodus generation (*Heb. 4:11, NRSV*). Paul encourages his audience to progress rather than regress. Yet, he realizes that the members of his audience “need milk, not solid food” (*Heb. 5:12, NRSV*). Furthermore, his addressees are “neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (*Heb. 10:25, NRSV*). Paul exhorts his audience not to abandon their confidence because “it brings a great reward” (*Heb. 10:35, NRSV*).

In summary, one can conclude that the audience of Hebrews consisted of Christians who went through the phases of enthusiastic evangelism; then fierce persecution; and, finally, were so fatigued and discouraged that Paul feared for their eternal salvation. That experience of spiritual exhaustion and discouragement is Paul’s purpose for delivering his energetic sermon.

Thought Questions: Think back over your church’s life cycle. Analyze where you are in your journey with God compared to the audience of Hebrews. Would you be willing to suffer to the extent that you joyfully would accept the plundering of your possessions? Christ observed that the church in Ephesus had lost their first love (*Rev. 2:4*). A similar observation might be made of the audience of Hebrews, whose spiritual ardor waned as their suffering intensified and grew. What are the consequences of such a loss?

“These last days”: The final and decisive address of God to humanity comes through Jesus, the Son, “in these last days” (*Heb. 1:1, 2, NRSV*). These “last days” begin with Christ’s incarnation and will end with His second coming when His enemies will be made a “footstool” for His feet (*Heb. 1:13, NRSV*). God not only spoke through Jesus’ words “in these last days” but also through His actions, especially His death, resurrection, and exaltation. That is why both the audience of Hebrews and we “must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it” (*Heb. 2:1, NRSV*).

Thought Question: What does the nautical metaphor in Hebrews 2:1 of “drifting away” convey?

Part III: Life Application

When Beethoven was five years old, he played the violin under the tutelage of his father. By the time he was 13 years old, he was a concert organist.

In his 20s, he studied under renowned musicians, such as Haydn and Mozart. As Beethoven developed his skills, he became a prolific composer. His enthusiasm for music brought to fruition several majestic symphonies, a handful of concertos for piano, and numerous pieces of chamber music. His love for music propelled him further and further into his musical achievements. However, Beethoven was no stranger to difficulties. While still in his 20s, he began losing his hearing. When he reached his 50s, Beethoven was completely deaf. Just imagine what that meant for him as a musician!

Put yourself in the place of the audience of Hebrews. At the height of your Christian enthusiasm, unexpected disaster strikes. How would you, then, respond to the sermon in Hebrews?

Notes
