

Route Sixty-Six

Part Fifty-Eight

Hebrews

A Heavenly Country

(John 5:39; Hebrews 11:14-16)

With Study Questions

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For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:14-16).

Introduction

I came to faith on the tail end of what came to be known as the *Jesus Movement*. It was a sort of religious stepbrother to the Hippie Movement of the sixties. The Jesus Movement didn't like the word, *religion*. We were fond of saying things like, "I'm not religious, I just love Jesus." The whole movement had the feel of a Christian protest against cold, lifeless orthodoxy¹. People were happy to leave the institutionalized church for something more real and personal. Bibles were dog-eared from intense study. In many respects there was something healthy about this movement.

At the same time, there were side-effects. For we do see the institution of the church as we read the Scriptures. Many of my Jesus Movement friends, as they grew older, reintroduced themselves to very sound churches. It then became very interesting to watch them raise their own children in the faith and in the church. Would their own children catch the Jesus Movement fire, or would they be more akin to the lifeless orthodoxy or something else altogether?

I open with this in our study of Hebrews because it is likely very difficult for us to appreciate the pull of religion that these Jewish Christians (the primary audience to which this epistle was written) were likely feeling.

¹ I am not a fan of the term "lifeless orthodoxy" since true spiritual life comes through that which is orthodox (*orthos* correct + *doxa* belief), though I understand what people mean when they use it.

In a sense, they got swept into a first century Jesus movement. Yet there was still the temple! Like a magnet, the temple and all the attending rituals were beckoning them back to a religion they had practiced all their lives. And not just all their lives; the lives of their parents, grandparents, great grandparents for thousands of years!

And it wasn't a cult or a sect. It was the true religion, ordained by God. The practice of this religion was articulated in great detail both doctrinally and liturgically (what they believed and how they were to worship).

Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Hebrews 8:5b).

Many of the recipients of this letter showed great faith and obedience early in their conversions (Hebrews 6:10; 10:32-34). Yet difficulties and persecutions can become laborious over time and they were tempted, not only to become sluggish (Hebrews 6:12), but to retreat back to the comfort of their religious history.

The purpose of Hebrews is to inform these Christians that the purpose of the long history of their religion was to placard the promise of Christ. The history of Israel was, to be sure, the history of God's covenant people. It was the true religion. But the true religion, from the dawn of time, was the promise of Christ. For thousands of years, through prophets, priests, kings, battles, judgments, signs, wonders, the covenant people of God were being taught what God would do through this promised Messiah.

Yet when the Messiah came, He was ignored and attacked. The church had so descended that it had no place for Christ. A good question for us to continue to ask ourselves. Perhaps here, more than any other portion of the New Testament, do we see the appropriate application of the theme verse for this sermon series.

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Survey of Hebrews

Hebrews is not a crescendo. It begins with an explosion of the superiority of Christ. An audience who had learned to revere angels, Moses, Joshua and Aaron are taught that Christ is over them all. It is through Christ

that all things were made, and all things are continually upheld (Hebrews 1:2, 3). The Christ would not merely be one more religious character in the history of redemption. The design of those characters was to teach us of, and lead us to, Christ. It is Christ who would grant **“so great a salvation” (Hebrews 2:3a).**

This great salvation would come at a cost. The Captain of our salvation would be perfected **“through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10).** This does not mean Jesus was sinful then became sinless, but that He would become the complete and sufficient sacrifice for sins. He would **“fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).**

There is no religious person or being, inside or outside of the Christian faith, who could claim for themselves these credentials. He was perfect, sinless and complete. The author is seeking to bring into fullness the readers estimation of the full superiority and sufficiency of Christ. What blessed astonishment there must have been for them to read that through the death of Christ, Jesus

...might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14b).

Since the initial readers of Hebrews were likely very conversant with the Old Testament, the author takes opportunity to help them play the correct role. We watch movies or read books and pretend to be the heroes. We would certainly be brave and faithful! In my fantasies I unhesitatingly enter the cave of the dragon to save the potential victim. Yet when I book down, I can barely make it a minute without full dedication to self!

As they read the Old Testament, who did they imagine themselves to be? Because they were apparently very close to being the very ones they would not desire to be. Hence the warning straight from Scripture.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, ⁸ Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness,⁹ Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years.¹⁰ Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.’¹¹ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest’ (Hebrews 3:7-11).’

There is in this epistle the warning that we avoid imitating “**an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God**” (Hebrews 3:12). The issue with those people is a problem that still exists, even in churches, to this very day, the word of God was “**not being mixed with faith in those who heard it**” (Hebrews 4:2b). If your religion is merely external, as accurate as those external things may be, it is of no saving value.

The superiority of Christ then moves to the superiority of the New Covenant. The neglect of the New Covenant and focus upon the Old Covenant might be compared to a wife whose husband spent years at war and all she had was a photo of him. For years she found comfort in the photo. But when he comes home, all she wants to do is look at the photograph!

The rituals and religion of the Old Covenant became an unhealthy source of comfort. It was so unhealthy, that when the Person came, to whom all those rituals and religion pointed, He was rejected and abandoned. Hebrews is seeking to correct, what amounts to be, that soul-damning error. What necessarily follow the superiority of Christ is the superiority of the covenant. The superiority of (if we can use the term) religion!

The word “**better**” *kreittonos* is used 13 times in Hebrews. There is a “**better hope**” (Hebrews 7:19), “**better promises**” (Hebrews 8:6), “**better sacrifice**” in a better sanctuary with better results (Hebrews 9). In the Old Covenant there was a great deal of emphasis given to the deliverance from physical slavery in Egypt into the promised land. All the earth belongs to God and, as faithful stewards, Christians should promote His glorious rule in all the world. At the same time, we would also be missing the proverbial point if we didn’t plant our hearts firmly in a “better” country. A worldly country should never have been their main objective, nor it should be ours.

For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:14-16).

We also see a great deal of attention in Hebrews to the priestly role of Christ. A simple, albeit insufficient, distinction between a priest and prophet would be that a prophet approaches people on behalf of God and the priest

approaches God on behalf of the people. In Hebrews we read how insufficient the role of human priests are in genuinely accomplishing anything.

The high priest would enter the temple on behalf of the people. He would, once a year, enter the Holy of Holies, which was a small room containing the golden censer, ark of the covenant in which there was manna, Aaron's rod and the tablets of the covenant. This room was designed to teach us of how God was to be approached. There was a veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. When Jesus was crucified that veil was rent from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). It was a picture of the opening of heaven!

In Hebrews we learn we have one true High Priest. He doesn't enter into a temple made by human hands. It might be said, that it is the religious activity of One Person that truly matters.

But Christ came *as* High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. ¹² Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11, 12).

If it is the religious activity of Christ alone which obtains eternal redemption, how does it become ours? This is the final emphasis of Hebrews. The superior instrument...faith.

Yet faith was not unique to the New Covenant. In chapter eleven the readers learn that if they wish to take rank with the true church, both old and new, it is by faith (Hebrews 12:22-24). It was faith at the dawn of history and throughout history for without faith it is impossible to please God. The author reaches back to Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses' parents, Moses, Jericho, Rahab and others. Their works were works of faith.

Yet in their works of faith, they found great difficulty from the world. We should expect no different. Unlike the world, though, we should understand our difficulties as coming from the loving, chastening hand of our heavenly Father (Hebrews 12:7). How beautiful and comforting the words:

Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of

righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

In light of the superior Savior, the superior covenant and the superior instrument, we are called to **“run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).**

The epistle concludes with what should be produced in our daily lives when we are governed by such heavenly realities. We are to exercise brotherly love and a willingness to entertaining strangers/angels. Let remember prisoners, not from afar, but as if chained with them. We are to have godly attitudes toward marriage and avoid covetousness. Let us seek contentment and love and respect for leaders. We are to appreciate the immutability of Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever and be wary of strange doctrines.

The Old Covenant was soon to end (Hebrews 8:13). The temple would be destroyed the way a parent would remove a temptation or distraction from their child’s environment. In the meantime, the author calls his readers to avoid a godless church. As Jesus suffered outside the gate, we are to go to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach, offering our sacrifice of praise. It is to those persevering faithful that the benediction is offered.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,²¹ make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20, 21).

Questions for Study

1. What do you know of the Jesus Movement? What were some of its strengths and weaknesses (page 2)?
2. Are there things, places, people, etc. from your past that draw you back? How would the practices of the Old Covenant be like a magnet to the Hebrew Christian (pages 2, 3)?
3. Was the Old Covenant a false religion? Explain (page 3).
4. How is Hebrews unlike a crescendo (pages 3, 4)?
5. What is unique about the Captain of our salvation (pages 3, 4)?
6. A record of dispositions to avoid are given to us in Hebrews 3 & 4. What are they and how do you find yourself contending with them (pages 4, 5)?
7. Christ is the superior one. What does His superiority lead to (page 5)?
8. In what respect is Christ our High Priest (pages 5, 6)?
9. What is the instrument through which the riches of the superior covenant become ours (pages 6, 7)?