

OneBook.

DAILY-WEEKLY

The Letter to the Hebrews

Ken Schenck



AN EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

The Letter to the Hebrews

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WELCOME TO ONEBOOK DAILY-WEEKLY

John Wesley, in a letter to one of his leaders, penned the following:

O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether.

Rarely are our lives most shaped by our biggest ambitions and highest aspirations. Rather, our lives are most shaped, for better or for worse, by those small things we do every single day.

At Seedbed, our biggest ambition and highest aspiration is to resource the followers of Jesus to become lovers and doers of the Word of God every single day, to become people of One Book.

To that end, we have created the OneBook Daily-Weekly. First, it's important to understand what this is not: warm, fuzzy, sentimental devotions. If you engage the Daily-Weekly for any length of time, you will learn the Word of God. You will grow profoundly in your love for God, and you will become a passionate lover of people.

How Does the Daily-Weekly Work?

Daily. As the name implies, every day invites a short but substantive engagement with the Bible. Five days a week you will read a passage of Scripture followed by a short segment of teaching and closing with a question for reflection and self-examination. On the sixth day, you will review and reflect on the previous five days.

Weekly. Each week, on the seventh day, find a way to gather with at least one other person doing the study. Pursue the weekly guidance for gathering. Share learning, insight, encouragement, and most importantly, how the Holy Spirit is working in your lives.

Welcome to OneBook Daily-Weekly

That's it. Depending on the length of the study, when the eight or twelve weeks are done, we will be ready with the next study. On an ongoing basis we will release new editions of the Daily-Weekly. Over time, those who pursue this course of learning will develop a rich library of Bible learning resources for the long haul.

OneBook Daily-Weekly will develop eight- and twelve-week studies that cover the entire Old and New Testaments. Seedbed will publish new studies regularly so that an ongoing supply of group lessons will be available. All titles will remain accessible, which means they can be used in any order that fits your needs or the needs of your group.

If you are looking for a substantive study to learn Scripture through a steadfast method, look no further.

INTRODUCTION

The letter to the Hebrews has two main points. It has a main teaching point; namely, that the offering of Jesus on the cross has forever taken care of our sins. No other sacrifice is required. We need no priest but Christ to reconcile us to God. Atonement is accomplished. By God's grace, salvation is ready and available for us to sign up for at any time.

The other main point is the implication of atonement. The audience needs to continue in faithfulness. They have no reason to doubt the truth of the message they have heard. They must not give up. They have every reason to cross the finish line and, indeed, the consequences would be dire if they do not.

We do not know many other aspects of Hebrews for certain, but these basic truths are clear enough. These two points hold true no matter what the specifics of the audience's situation. Did Hebrews warn its audience not to rely on the temple? Or did Hebrews console them after the temple was already destroyed? Either way, the point is that we need no further means of atonement. Jesus is all we need. Was the audience tempted to fall back into Judaism? Or was a group of Gentile believers having second thoughts about the God of Israel? Either way, the message to endure remains.

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WEEK ONE

Hebrews 1:1–12

Celebrating Jesus

INTRODUCTION

The book of Hebrews is in many ways one of the most puzzling books in the New Testament. We do not know who wrote it, and we are unsure of the church to which it was written. Experts on the book disagree on when it was written and whether its recipients were primarily Jewish or non-Jewish. Many think that its first twelve chapters were meant to be read as a sermon to a congregation the author hoped to visit in the near future.

The first chapter begins majestically, with an almost hymn-like contrast of Christ with the angels. Next to God himself, surely angels are the most exalted of God's creations. Yet next to Christ, they are nothing. They are only servants in the kingdom of the universe. To show the glory of the age that Christ is inaugurating, Hebrews 1 shows us how much more glorious Jesus is than the angels, the stewards of the age that is now passing away.

ONE

A Definitive Word

Hebrews 1:1–2 NRSV *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.*

Key Observation. From the very moment God started to create to the moment that Christ will bring his eternal kingdom, Jesus is God's last Word for the universe.

Understanding the Word. The first two verses of Hebrews present a contrast. In the past, God spoke to his people in many different ways. He spoke to his people through human prophets in Israel. He spoke to them through angels. He led them through the wilderness with a pillar of fire and a wandering cloud.

In days recent to the author, God had inaugurated a new Word: Jesus. He is not just one of many but *the* one Word. This final Word was the Son of God, the King to restore the rule of God on earth as it is in heaven. For centuries Israel had been without a king. They had hoped for God to give them full control of their land back.

In Jesus, they received a King greater than they could have possibly imagined. They received a people that was much bigger than those who had Jewish blood. They became part of a kingdom that was not only bigger than the land of Israel, not only bigger than the Roman Empire, but a kingdom that consisted of the whole universe, of all things both seen and unseen. The previous ways that God had spoken were “many and various.” Now God had spoken a singular, final Word in Jesus.

Jesus the Son spans the whole of history. On the one hand, he is the “heir of all things.” Everything that exists in the creation will be his when the kingdom fully comes. God has bequeathed it to him as his Son. In 1 Corinthians 15:26–27, we learn that God has destined everything in this world to be put under Christ’s feet, including death. So when Hebrews says that Jesus is the heir of everything, it truly means that Christ will rule over everything that God has made.

Then we learn that Jesus was actually at the beginning of the creation as well. This Son who is heir of everything was also the One through whom God created the worlds. Christians have long taken this statement to mean that Jesus must have existed before he came to earth as Christ. In fact, we believe that Jesus is God. In some mysterious way, even though there is only one God, God exists as three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 1:2 tells us that Christ was the agent of creation. Some Jewish writings from the time of the New Testament speak of God creating the world by means of his wisdom. An Old Testament example of this way of thinking is Proverbs 8:22–31, where God’s wisdom is pictured at his side helping him create the world. Might the author of Hebrews have been hinting to this

congregation that Jesus was God’s wisdom for the world, the One who gives meaning to everything? Jesus is the Word God spoke to heal the world.

So begins this majestic sermon. Jesus is at the beginning and end of history. Jesus is God’s last Word for the universe. We know that we are about to hear God’s answer to all the world’s questions and problems. We are about to know the secret to the universe from the beginning to the end of time. That answer and that secret is Jesus Christ.

1. Have you ever pondered the awesomeness of Christ? How great is this One who spans time from eternity past to eternity future! Are you living with an awe proper to his greatness?
2. How different would your community of faith look if Jesus were truly King? What is God calling you to do to make any needed changes?
3. Since Jesus is, in fact, God’s wisdom for the universe, should we not share that wisdom with as many people as we can? Are you excited to let God’s wisdom speak to everyone and every part of your own life?

TWO

The Image of God

Hebrews 1:3–4 *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*

Key Observation. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Jesus is a perfect reflection of who God is and the One who will make the universe what it is supposed to be again.

Understanding the Word. There are some books that we do not consider Scripture today that were nevertheless of great value to the earliest Christians. The author of Hebrews seems to draw on one of them in verse 3. The “Book of Wisdom” said something very similar to this verse when it was talking about

God's wisdom. In this book, God's wisdom is said to be the radiance of God's eternal light and an image of his goodness.

The author's point seems to be that if you want to know how wise God is, look at Jesus. Do you want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. If you want to understand God's plan for the world, pay attention to Jesus. In Jesus, we find a mirror of God the Father. God is glorious. He is so full of glory that we would not be able to look at him if he appeared to us. Jesus radiates and reflects that glory.

In some way, Jesus sustains all things. As Colossians 1:17 says, he holds everything together. Sin has put the whole universe off-line. It is not working as it should. In Jesus, God is hitting the Reset button on the world. Everything will work right once Jesus' salvation is fully in place. He is the solution to hold together everything that is falling apart.

Jesus is the glue that can reattach us to God. All have sinned and are lacking the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We are separated from God. But Jesus is the One who can reconcile us to our Father and Creator.

This work is done, although it is not yet fully enacted. Jesus' death has paid for the work. He has taken a seat because the purification is accomplished. God, the greatest Majesty there is, has enthroned him and installed him as King of the cosmos. Christ became lower than the angels for a little while (Heb. 2:7), but now that the work is done, God has exalted him far above any angel. He is now enthroned far above all principalities and powers (e.g., Col. 1:16).

What is the name he has inherited? The next verse will prompt us to think Hebrews is talking about the name of a son. While we often think of a name in terms of a person's name, it probably refers to Jesus receiving the *title* of "Son of God." Tomorrow we will explore what this title "Son" probably means in Hebrews.

What we see clearly in this rich collection of statements about Christ is how exalted he truly is. He shows us who God is. He shows us the very essence of what the universe is meant to be about. He has, in one faithful act, forever reconciled us to God. He made a purification for the sins of the world and then sat down because the work was done. We now only await his return for everything to be finally restored.

The angels are still helping us, but their role as ministers of the creation is coming to an end. Before long, the King who is not seen will be seen, and every knee will bow before Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. Although Jesus uniquely reflects God's glory in some respects, are we good reflections of who God is to those around us? When others look at us, do they see Jesus?
2. Are we glue, not only in our churches, but in our communities? Do people tend to hold together when we are around, or are we a dividing force? What changes do we need to make?
3. Jesus has set in motion the restoration of all things. Are we spreading the word? Are we participating in his mission of reconciliation?

THREE

Jesus Is King

Hebrews 1:5–6 ESV *For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”?*

“And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.”

Key Observation. “What a friend we have in Jesus!” Yes, but he is also our Lord and Master. Every knee must eventually bow and every tongue confess that Jesus, the King, is Lord.

Understanding the Word. Although we naturally think of sonship in terms of biological offspring, the background to this term in many parts of the Bible has to do with kings. In parts of the Old Testament, we can see that when a king was installed, he was thought in a sense to become God’s son. The first two verses that Hebrews quotes in 1:5–6 both referred originally to human kings.

The first quote comes from Psalm 2, which was an enthronement psalm. It is suggested that this psalm might have been read at the coronation of kings. “Today”—on the day of enthronement—God declared that the king was being installed as God’s “son.” The second quote from 2 Samuel 7:14 clearly refers to David’s son Solomon. While David was in prayer, God told him that Solomon, David’s biological son, would be God’s son as king, and God would be a father to Solomon.

As Christians, we believe, of course, that Jesus has been the Son of God for all eternity past. One of the early creeds of Christianity clarifies that Jesus was “eternally begotten of the Father, begotten, not made.” One of the most famous debates in the 300s was whether Jesus was the first thing that God created when he made the universe or whether Jesus had always existed. The church strongly concluded that Jesus has *always* existed as God’s Son.

Nevertheless, although Jesus was the heir apparent to the throne for all eternity, the New Testament gives us the sense that he was officially installed as King after his resurrection and exaltation to God’s right hand. Jesus came to earth, lived out the human experience, and died to atone for the sins of humanity. Then the One who was always destined to rule the universe finally took office!

Experts debate exactly when the angels worshipped Jesus in 1:6. Because we know Jesus’ birth story in Luke 2 so well, it is tempting to think Hebrews is thinking of the “angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o’er the plain.” It is possible; it is also possible that the author of Hebrews had the second coming in mind. Hebrews seems to be quoting a version of Deuteronomy 32:43, which has a strong sense of God’s judgment.

However, in the flow of Hebrews 1, it is more likely that Hebrews 1:6 is talking about the angels worshipping Jesus when he entered into heaven after finishing atonement, rising from the dead, and returning to heaven. As Jesus returned to the throne room, the angels bowed before him who was also their King, enthroned officially over them as well as humanity and the rest of the creation. The world Hebrews has in mind is the coming world spoken of in 2:5.

If the angels bow before King Jesus, how much more should we? How easy it is in our time to think of Jesus as our buddy and God as our daddy! Yes, we are immensely privileged to call God our Father and Jesus our Brother. But Jesus is also our King, and we are also part of God’s kingdom. Jesus is our Lord, our Master, in addition to being our friend.

1. Where are you on the spectrum between Jesus being your buddy and Jesus being your King? Do you have a healthy balance between communion and awe?

2. Does the community of faith to which you belong bow before their King? When is the last worship service when you sensed the awesomeness of Christ?
3. Are you an ambassador of King Jesus to the community and world around you? Are you bringing fairness, redemption, and mercy to your world?

FOUR

The Divine King

Hebrews 1:8–9 NRSV *But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. ⁹You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

Key Observation. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. As God, he rules over all the creation. As a human, he showed us true righteousness.

Understanding the Word. Hebrews 1 has a series of contrasts between Jesus and angels. We do not know exactly why. Some have speculated that the audience may have thought of Jesus as more of an angel than the Son of God. Others wonder if this church had too high a view of angels. What we do know is that angels were the primary ministers of the old covenant (1:14), and since Jesus had started a new covenant, the angels would soon no longer need to watch over humanity.

Verse 7 points out how angels are like winds and flames of fire. They are also servants. The Greek being translated makes it clear that we are to see this verse in contrast with the verses that follow.

For example, while the angels are servants, the verses for today indicate that Jesus is not only King, but he is God. He is the One we all must serve, alongside the angels. Similarly, the roles the angels play are temporary. They come, play their role, then go away. By contrast, Jesus’ royal role as King will never end. His throne is forever and ever.

Hebrews 1:9 points out a key characteristic of Jesus as King: he is righteous; he rejects wickedness. The human Jesus faced choices when he was on

earth, just as we do. In each case, Jesus chose righteousness. Therefore, as the book of Acts says repeatedly, God raised him from the dead. God anointed him with an “oil of gladness.” This is an allusion to the coronation ceremony of a king, where the new king is anointed.

We will see in the second chapter that humanity, men and women, are Jesus’ brothers and sisters. It is from among these companions that Jesus has been anointed King. He is both like us and yet unlike us. He is like us in that he has partaken of the same flesh and blood that we have (2:14). He is like us in that he was tempted and tested just as we are (4:15). He is the pioneer of our faith (3:1; 12:2) who wants to lead us to the same glory he has attained (2:10).

He is also quite different from us. He is God. He is the King. As King, Jesus will now reign with a righteous scepter. He is our King and the King of the universe.

As Christians have reflected on these verses, they have seen a glimpse of the divinity of Jesus, just as we also see a glimpse of his humanity. We believe as Christians that Jesus is and was both fully human and fully divine. As God, he is our King. As human, he is our Brother.

We have the blessing to have inherited centuries of godly Christians reflecting on passages like these. Jesus is the last Word for creation, but it took several centuries to unpack that significance. This unpacking most definitively took place in the New Testament, but the unpacking continued in the first few centuries. What a privilege it is for us not to have to figure all these things out from scratch. The Holy Spirit has already given us not only the Bible but also some common understandings of it.

1. Do you think of Christ as an example of righteousness to follow? How would you live differently if you did?
2. Are the leaders of your community known for their righteousness? If you are such a leader, are you someone who leads with righteousness?
3. When you see injustice, are you and your community part of the solution?

FIVE

The Forever King

Hebrews 1:10–12 *He also says, “In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. ¹¹They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. ¹²You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”*

Key Observation. This world will soon pass away, but Jesus will be King for all eternity. He was here at the beginning of time and he will be here long beyond its end.

Understanding the Word. These three verses are the second part of a contrast between Christ and the angels that began in 1:7. Angels may be like winds and flames in their temporary service for humanity, but the years of Christ as King will never end. In fact, the whole of the current creation will eventually wear out and perish. It is not merely the winds and flames that come and go. The current role of angels as servants to the created realm will eventually pass. By contrast, Christ’s rule and his role is permanent.

As in 1:2, these verses suggest that Christ in some way served as the agent of creation, as the instrument through which God made the world. Significantly, Hebrews here quotes a verse that in the original psalm was about Yahweh, about God the Father (Ps. 102:25–27). It is thus natural that we hear in these verses some of the most exalted language about Jesus in the New Testament. These verses reinforce the Christian sense that Jesus is fully God, of one substance with God the Father even though he is a distinct person.

Jesus remains the same. He remains the same not only in his role as King but in his character and desire to help us. One of the themes we will see later in Hebrews is the fact that in Jesus there is help for us on the journey. What a relief to know that Jesus will never change his love for us! As the final chapter of Hebrews says, Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (13:8). The same Jesus who was there for the early church is also available as our intercessor as well.

Another theme we will see near the end of Hebrews is the fact that the current creation will, at the very least, be transformed when Christ returns. This world is currently enslaved to some of the same forces of decay and corruption that we are (cf. Rom. 8:19–21). Nevertheless, this age is passing away and will soon come to an end, in God’s timing. Then God will change the clothes of this earth like taking off a coat.

Several passages in the Bible talk about both the judgment and the new creation. Second Peter 3 talks about the destruction of the current world by fire. Hebrews 12:26 talks about how God will remove the skies and the earth that are part of God’s current creation. But this is not the end of the story in Scripture. Revelation 22 speaks of new skies and a new earth. It speaks of a heavenly Jerusalem that will come down to earth. Then all it seems that will be left for the angels to do is to worship God (Heb. 12:22).

This current world is going to pass away. Of course, that is not an excuse for us to forget about what God wants to do here and now. It seems hard for us to keep from going to extremes. A person can be “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” Probably most of us are too this-worldly minded, meaning that we live for now and do not take enough stock in the fact that this world is temporary and about to pass away. These verses remind us about the truly temporary nature of this world.

1. Do you tend to focus more on the world that is to come or on the problems of today? How might you reorient your focus in whichever way is most needed?
2. Things that we do for others, we do for Christ. They are eternal deeds. How is our community of faith doing in regard to the deeds of eternity?
3. Even though the creation is decaying, God has given it to us to steward. How is your community doing as stewards of God’s world?

WEEK ONE

GATHERING DISCUSSION OUTLINE

- A. Open session in prayer.
- B. View video for this week's readings.
- C. What general impressions and thoughts do you have after considering the video and reading the daily writings on these Scriptures? How have you grown deeper in your faith and understanding of Scripture?
- D. Discuss questions selected from the daily readings.

1. **KEY OBSERVATION:** From the very moment God started to create to the moment that Christ will bring his eternal kingdom, Jesus is God's last Word for the universe.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: How different would your community of faith look if Jesus were truly King? What is God calling you to do to make any needed changes?

2. **KEY OBSERVATION:** If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Jesus is a perfect reflection of who God is and the One who will make the universe what it is supposed to be again.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Although Jesus uniquely reflects God's glory in some respects, are we good reflections of who God is to those around us? When others look at us, do they see Jesus?

3. **KEY OBSERVATION:** “What a friend we have in Jesus!” Yes, but he is also our Lord and Master. Every knee must eventually bow and every tongue confess that Jesus, the King, is Lord.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Are you an ambassador of King Jesus to the community and world around you? Are you bringing fairness, redemption, and mercy to your world?

4. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. As God, he rules over all the creation. As a human, he showed us true righteousness.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Are the leaders of your community known for their righteousness? If you are such a leader, are you someone who leads with righteousness?

5. **KEY OBSERVATION:** This world will soon pass away, but Jesus will be King for all eternity. He was here at the beginning of time and he will be here long beyond its end.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Even though the creation is decaying, God has given it to us to steward. How is your community doing as stewards of God’s world?

- E. Close session with prayer.