

MICHAEL J. KRUGER
**HEBREWS
FOR YOU**



the goodbook
COMPANY

Hebrews For You

© Michael J. Kruger, 2021

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Hebrews For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translation used:

ESV: English Standard Version (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

The book of Hebrews gives us an extraordinary sense of clarity and wonder about Jesus. As you read, you will very quickly become aware that this author just loves Jesus Christ. He thinks he is amazing, magnificent, extraordinary. He is wonderful. He is all in all.

You might respond by saying, “I felt like that once!” It may feel like a while since you have really been gripped by the magnificence of Christ. We all experience times when we just have our nose to the grindstone, following Jesus out of duty and obligation instead of delight in how wonderful he is. At those times it is easy to look over at something else—some other person or situation or community or way of living—and think, “That looks better.”

If that feeling is familiar, then the book of Hebrews is for you. It will remind you of Jesus’ superiority over all things, and it will do so right from the very first verses.

As we will see, the book can be summed up in one simple phrase: Jesus is better.

Curiously, we don’t know who wrote the book of Hebrews. It was likely written in the middle of the first century, probably in the early 60s AD, but no specific author is named. This uncertainty does not affect our confidence in the authority of the book. The author tells us that his message “was declared first by the Lord, and ... attested to us by those who heard” (2:3). Thus, while the author does not appear to have been an **apostle**,* the information he has given us in this book comes from the apostles themselves.

But it is the audience that really helps us to understand the book. “Hebrews” is just another name for the Jewish people. The audience appears to be primarily Jewish Christians who grew up in Judaism but have believed in Jesus. They have embraced him as the Messiah. Yet they have hit a snag. For whatever reason—perhaps the pressure of persecution and opposition—they are thinking about going

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 232).

back to Judaism. They are considering leaving this new-found faith and going back to the old ways: animal sacrifices, worship at the temple—the old paths, if you will, that

This is the
major theme
of the book:
Jesus is better.

Jews had trusted in for generations. In other words, these people are starting to doubt whether this Jesus thing is all it first promised to be.

Our author responds to this by showing, all through the book, how Jesus is superior to every possible thing

that you could put in his place. He's superior to the angels. He's superior to the prophets. He's superior to Moses, Aaron, and Joshua. His **covenant** is superior to the old covenant. This is the major theme of the book: Jesus is better. There is nothing grander, greater, more beautiful, more wonderful, more satisfying, or more extraordinary than him.

Of course, there are probably not many readers of this expository guide who are thinking about giving up on Jesus and going back to animal sacrifices. But we are all tempted to look to other things which we suspect may be better than Jesus—whether those be work, relationships, money, or anything else. That is why the message of the book of Hebrews applies to all of us. What God gives us in the book of Hebrews is a **doctrinal** anchor: a clear and detailed understanding of exactly how and why Jesus is better than anything else. This will prevent us from drifting away from our faith.

Before embarking on this journey, you should know that the book of Hebrews is not a light appetizer. It is more like a porterhouse steak. The author talks a lot about how Jesus' sacrifice is superior to the sacrifices made in the Old Testament—requiring us to think hard about the structure and complexity of the old-covenant system. It is heavy, meaty stuff. But it's wonderful stuff.

Many of us struggle to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. What is the relevance of the

Old Testament? What still applies and what doesn't? How do the two Testaments link together? Did people know Jesus was coming? These are monumental questions. And the book of Hebrews answers many of those questions. It helps us to understand the overall story of the whole Bible: the entire scope of **redemptive history**. It ranges across the Old Testament and shows us how Christ fulfilled it all. He is the crescendo of God's work on earth.

In the outline of the book below, you will immediately be able to see that Christ's superiority is the key point. You can also see that, punctuating the main flow of the author's argument, there are six warnings. All of these follow the same simple theme: don't turn away from Jesus. These warnings are there to keep us walking with him on the right path—the path to life.

- I. Christ Superior to the Prophets (1:1-3)
- II. Christ Superior to the Angels (1:4 – 2:18)
 - First Warning: Pay Attention (2:1-4)
- III. Christ Superior to Moses and Joshua (3:1 – 4:13)
 - Second Warning: Don't be Like the Israelites in the Wilderness (3:7-19)
- IV. Christ Superior to Aaron (4:14 – 7:28)
 - Third Warning: Don't Fall Away (5:11 – 6:12)
- V. Christ Superior to the Old Covenant (8:1 – 10:18)
- VI. Faith as the Superior Way of the New Covenant (10:19 – 13:19)
 - Fourth Warning: Don't Keep on Sinning (10:19-39)
 - Fifth Warning: Don't Miss the Grace of God (12:14-24)
 - Sixth Warning: Don't Refuse to Listen to God (12:25-29)
- VII. Concluding Exhortations and Greetings (13:1-25)

The word of God is a powerful thing. The book of Hebrews tells us it is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (4:12). It can penetrate your heart and your life in ways that you never knew or

Introduction

thought of. It can change you, encourage you, convict you, mold you, and empower you to share the gospel with those around you.

The book of Hebrews is one we don't tend to study often in our churches. But it is in our Bible for a reason. What would we do without a book that so clearly, grandly, and magnificently proclaims the wonders of Jesus? My prayer for you as you read the book of Hebrews is that the Lord will help you to see those wonders, and most importantly, to be changed by them. I hope that, in a fresh and new way, you will fall in love with Christ all over again.

1. THE SON IN ALL HIS GLORY

A Speaking God

One of the most common objections to Christianity is that God is silent. Skeptics say that, if God exists at all, he isn't really a speaking God. He is out there in the distance, disengaged from the world, and no one can be sure what he's like.

On the flip side, there are others in our world who think God speaks through anything and everything: every religion, every spiritualist, every crystal ball. There is no one channel that God speaks through primarily. It is open-ended.

The opening of the book of Hebrews refutes *both* of these views when it tells us that God "has spoken to us by his Son" (**1:2***). Contrary to the skeptic, we see that indeed God has spoken! We can know things about him. At the same time, he has not spoken in any old way. He has spoken fundamentally, fully, and finally through Jesus.

Thus, our author opens his letter with a focus on the overriding theme of the book of Hebrews: the supremacy of Christ over all things. In later chapters, our author will show that Christ is superior to angels, to **Moses**, to **Joshua**, to **Aaron**, and beyond.

But he begins by showing that Christ is the *superior revelation of God*. In the first three verses we see that Jesus is the best word from God we can get. He is the fullest, final, ultimate revelation of who God is.

* All Hebrews verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

The author makes his case by breaking down all of history into two parts. In the past God used to speak in certain ways; in the present, he speaks in a new way. For each of these, there are three things to notice. When did he speak? To whom did he speak? And how did he speak?

God's Prior Way of Speaking

The first words in **verse 1** are "Long ago." From the very start, God has been a speaking God. In the very beginning, when God made the world, he did so by speaking (Genesis 1:3-27). By definition, God is a God who speaks.

So, it is not that when God speaks through Jesus, it is the first time he says something. No, he has been speaking for generations and generations. Who has he spoken to? To "our fathers." These are the generations of believers that have come before us. The author has Israel in mind primarily.

The most fundamental point, though, is *how* God spoke. "At many times and in many ways, God spoke ... by the prophets." That is, God used to speak through intermediaries. Not just anybody could speak for God: you had to be appointed as a prophet and inspired by God to speak for him. These chosen individuals were God's mouthpieces for speaking to his people.

The author is getting ready to tell us that Jesus is the full, final revelation of God and that God's new way of speaking is better than the old. But what he is *not* saying is that the old way is irrelevant or wrong. It is the inspired, infallible word of God. It is just incomplete—like a play without a final act. If you go to see a five-act play and it stops before the fifth act, you are disappointed: not because there was anything wrong with the first four acts but because the play hasn't finished yet. It needs an ending.

This is how we need to understand the author's view of the Old Testament. It is a single coherent story that ends on a cliffhanger: a story

that needs an ending. God spoke to his people, and the cliffhanger is his promise to send a **redeemer** for them. When Jesus came, he resolved that cliffhanger.

So, the story of Jesus not a new story, but the finishing of an old one. The writer to the Hebrews is showing us that we need to look back at how God spoke at first, in order to understand how that led up to his final word in Jesus.

God's New Way of Speaking

If you understand the overarching biblical story, Hebrews **1:2** is like the author lighting a piece of dynamite and throwing it into the room: "But in these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son."

For generations, the Israelites had been eagerly waiting and longing for the "last days"—that special time when God would intervene in the world and bring the redemption that he had promised. And now our author is saying that this has happened with the coming of Jesus. Finally, the story of the Bible has reached its climax. For the readers of the letter, this would have been a tremendous and exciting claim.

Of course, the phrase "last days" can be confusing. We tend to think it refers to a time in the future which will come right before Christ's second coming. But that's not how our author and the other New Testament authors use the phrase. For them, the "last days" are happening now! They began with Jesus' first coming and will last until his second coming.

Thus, the "last days" does not tell us about *how much* time we have left but about the *kind* of time we are in. To say we are in the "last days" means that we live in the world's last period of time (however long that lasts) before Jesus returns.

The language of this verse means that we live in a very privileged time. This should give us a sense of urgency. Our author is saying, *All those promises the Israelites have been waiting for over thousands of years, all those things you've been longing for God to do, have been*

completed in Christ. Now you're living in the last times. God has spoken the final word in Christ, and it is time for us to respond. And so this is a time not to put our feet up but to spread the gospel faithfully.

God has, after all, spoken this word “to us.” I love the personal nature of this. Do you ever feel as if God doesn't speak to you personally but only in a general sense, out there somewhere? The author of Hebrews is asserting that God has spoken to *you*. His word is for us today.

But the major difference between the way God spoke in the past and the way he speaks in the present is *how* he speaks. Here is the crescendo of **verses 1-2**. In the past, God used to speak through his intermediaries, but now he has shown up in person: “He has spoken to us by his Son.” God came in the person of Christ, fully enfleshed, and spoke to his people himself. This is the stunning reality that makes the revelation of Jesus so special.

To help us to grasp this, our author next describes the glories of this Son. He shows his audience that Jesus is the fullest, final, most wonderful revelation of God himself.

King: The Ultimate Ruler

These verses do several things to describe Jesus as the ultimate King. First (**v 2**), the author says that because Jesus is the Son, he is “appointed the heir of all things.” That's what sons are—they are the heirs of all that belongs to their father. So the whole world, all of creation, belongs to Jesus; he is its King.

Jesus is also King in another way. Jesus is the one “through whom [God] created the world.” He is the Creator (see also Colossians 1:16-17; John 1:3). This is a way of saying he is God—the ruler of the world—because creation is something that only God does.

A third thing to notice about Jesus' kingship is that “he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews **1:3**). Again, this is a way to show that Jesus is God, because God is the One who sustains and

upholds the world (see Psalm 104). Our author has taken attributes which are given to the God of Israel throughout the Old Testament and ascribed them to Jesus. He is the heir of the whole world, the one who sits on the throne as King; he is the Creator of the world, and the one who sustains it. Jesus is the Lord of the universe.

How would our lives look different if we thought about Jesus not just as our Savior from sin but also as the **sovereign** King of everything? How would focusing on Jesus as the ruler of all and master of the universe change our lives? We would be more prayerful. We would be less anxious because we would entrust all our cares to Christ. (Of course, being fallen people, we would still worry; but this view of Jesus is the thing that will fight that.) And we'd be less despairing about the advance of the gospel, because we would remember that the great God who upholds the whole universe is the One leading his army forward. Jesus is not going to lose; the world is his inheritance, and he will prevail in the end, however dark things seem.

Jesus is not going to lose; he will prevail in the end, however dark things seem.

Let Jesus be your King. It will change your life.

Prophet: The Ultimate Revealer of God

Next we see that Jesus is the ultimate prophet. If a prophet reveals God—his intentions, his character, his commands—then Jesus is better than any prophet who has ever gone before. This is because he is God enfleshed. Who can reveal God better than God?

This is clear in the language of Hebrews **1:3**: “He is the radiance of the glory of God.” This word “radiance” means “brightness” or “shining.” Old Testament visions of God describe him as bright and glorious (Exodus 24:10, 17; Ezekiel 1:4; Daniel 7:9). When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his own face was shining because he

had been speaking with God—shining so much that the people could not bear to come near him (Exodus 34:29-35). Likewise, during the time of the tabernacle, the glory of God would fill it, and the people would know he was there because of the brightness they could see (Exodus 40:34). Hebrews **1:3** says that all that glory, all that power, all that shining, is on Jesus.

In Jesus' earthly life this became evident at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Moses and Elijah, two key prophets, appeared and talked to Jesus; but they weren't being transfigured into glory. Only Jesus became a shining, bright white. When we read these accounts, we realize that Jesus is the way to come to God. He doesn't just reflect God's glory like Moses; he is himself the shining, bright, brilliant One.

Remember how Paul saw Jesus on the road: the light was so strong that he was blinded (Acts 9:3-8). Or think of the book of Revelation, in which John, one of Jesus' own disciples, meets Jesus afresh in his vision (Revelation 1:12-18). Jesus' glory is so stunning that John falls over like a dead man. This is the Jesus who is being described for us here. Jesus is the very glory of God.

He is, as Hebrews **1:3** continues, "the exact imprint of [God's] nature." Jesus perfectly represents God's being. The word "imprint" could also be translated "stamp" and was often used to describe the impression of an image on a coin. It referred to the exact image of the king or emperor. What the writer to the Hebrews is saying is that if you have seen Jesus, you have seen God. Jesus himself told us this: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Priest: The Ultimate Savior

Later in Hebrews we will unpack more fully what it meant to be a priest in the Old Testament, but for now it is enough to say that a priest made sacrifices for the sins of the people. The major difference with Jesus was that when he made sacrifices, he didn't offer bulls and goats. He offered himself.

This is described in the second half of Hebrews **1:3**. “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” Jesus has achieved what all of Israel had been longing for throughout generations: the real, full, final forgiveness of sins.

This is all the more amazing when we remember that Jesus is the ruler of the world and the exact imprint of God’s nature. He is a king whom we have offended, against whom we often rebel; but he became a man and gave his own life for us. That’s why it is important to understand all three roles or offices that Jesus has—king, prophet, and priest. If you think of Jesus just as a savior, you start taking him for granted. But if you realize that Jesus is also the King of the universe—if you realize that the King of the universe died for you and gave himself for you and laid aside everything for you—you are left thinking, “What king is this?” Kings don’t save their enemies; they destroy them. Yet here is the Lord who has given himself in order to purify us from our sins.

And then “he sat down.” In the Old Testament, while priests were doing their work, they never sat down. There was no chair inside the **tabernacle**. Their job was never done. Animal sacrifice doesn’t take away sins, so the priests had to perform the rituals again and again and again. But Jesus paid for our sins and then sat down because his job was finished. The wrath of God is fully satisfied.

Final Revelation

Have you ever read the Old Testament and thought to yourself, “I wish I could have seen what Moses saw,” or “I wish I could have been a part of the life of Elijah”? In these first three verses of Hebrews, the writer’s perspective is the opposite. In Jesus, God has given you a clearer, fuller revelation of himself than he gave to the Old Testament prophets. If only Moses had seen what you have seen!

We are living in the last days, when the fullness of the ages has come. We have seen God break into the world in the person of Jesus and rise from the dead to share his glory with the world. People were

longing to see that for thousands of years; the angels long to look into it (1 Peter 1:10-12). But we are living in the “last days,” when it has finally happened. The Old Testament days were not the glory days: they were days of shadows and types that only pointed toward Christ. But we have seen more than Moses ever imagined, because we are witnesses to the glory of Christ revealed on earth. This is the fundamental takeaway point from these verses: that we have the honor and privilege of living in the age of Christ, through whom God has fully and finally spoken.

Questions for reflection

1. To what other places do you sometimes turn to hear God “speak” besides Jesus and the prophets?
2. What characteristics of Jesus stood out to you from this passage? How did those encourage you?
3. How should Jesus’ position of power and exaltation affect your everyday life?