

**PREPARATION FOR LESSON:** Read the book of Hebrews

## BACKGROUND TO THE BOOKS FOR JEWISH BELIEVERS

These Jewish believers are part of the Church, the Body of Christ. While they are members of local churches or synagogues, they are not in the areas or places where Paul worked. Some have Paul's letters but have questions or situations he did not deal with. Paul was appointed by God to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

So the Holy Spirit guides other Jewish leaders to write a series of 9 books just for Jewish believers living in Jewish communities. They are written over a period of 50 years, from the mid-40s to the mid-90s AD. Like the other New Testament books, they are not in chronological order. They are arranged by the same topics as Paul's books: **SALVATION**, the **CHRISTIAN LIFE** and the **RETURN OF JESUS**.

## THE AUTHOR and READERS OF HEBREWS

The **author** is unknown, obviously Jewish. He is writing from Italy (13:24), is well-known to the readers and expects to see them in the near future. He is writing c. 68 AD, sometime after Peter's and Paul's death. Some have suggested Paul as the author, but Hebrews 2:3 shows the book was written by a Jewish believer who heard the gospel thru one of the apostles. Paul received the gospel directly from Jesus. Gal. 1:12 This means the author is unknown. It means that God wants the focus on the message rather than the messenger.

The **readers** are 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Jewish believers in Judea. As long-time believers they should be some of the teachers in their local churches. But they have not developed in their faith.

## BACKGROUND TO HEBREWS

I am indebted to Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum and his book, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles*, for the extensive Jewish perspective.

For a context to Hebrews, we need the background of the Gospels.

When Jesus began His ministry, He told the Jews He was their promised Messiah. A group of 70 Jewish leaders at the Jerusalem Temple were responsible for the spiritual welfare of the Jews. They were called the Sanhedrin. When anyone claimed to be Messiah, the Sanhedrin were to investigate him and then tell the Jewish nation - *Yes, He is our Messiah or no He is not and this is why*.

The Sanhedrin investigated Jesus for a year and a half - they saw miracles, which by their teaching, only the Messiah could do. They listened to what He said. But when they realized Jesus would not accept their man-made rules - the Mishnah - they rejected Him. They told the Jewish nation, *He is not our Messiah*.

This was a national sin of their spiritual leaders. Jesus said the consequence was national judgment. At a later time, the Romans would come, kill the Jews, destroy the Temple and take the nation off the map.

The Sanhedrin made this national decision in 30 AD and ordered the crucifixion of Jesus in 31 AD. They assumed with Jesus gone, people would lose interest. But instead, on the day of Pentecost, the Church, the Body of Christ was formed. As a result of Peter's sermon, thousands believed. This brought great persecution from the Sanhedrin over the next 3 years. Believers at the Jerusalem church left town and set up communities thruout the province of Judea. Because they were Jews, they always went to Jerusalem to celebrate Jewish holy days, but then returned to their communities. Later, when there was less persecution, some moved back to Jerusalem, but most stayed in their new locations and worshipped together in homes.

During the 50s and early '60s, things were relatively peaceful for Jewish believers in Judea. A 2<sup>nd</sup> generation develops and the message of Jesus continues to spread. The Sanhedrin now are determined to stop this growth with renewed persecution. If these Jews do not return to **Judaism**, their homes and incomes will be confiscated, they will be put in prison and some will be killed. Original **Judaism** was the form of worship and life that God gave to the Jews.

*Judaism of the Old Testament* - BC- meant *coming to God in God's way, obeying His law*.

*Judaism of the Sanhedrin / Temple* - AD - meant *depending on animal sacrifices to be right with God and saying that Jesus is not the Messiah*.

Some of the Jewish believers in Judea are spiritually mature and strong in their faith. But others are desperate to escape the persecution. In their immaturity of faith, they are *considering* what they think is a perfect plan.

They will temporarily give up their salvation of faith in Jesus, and go back to dependence on temple sacrifices during the time of persecution. After the Sanhedrin stop the persecution and leave them alone, they plan to put their faith in Jesus all over again, to get a **new** salvation that can erase their sin of turning away.



### TOPIC Salvation

**In Romans** - it is a detailed explanation for Jewish and Gentile believers established in the faith. It is a guide for them to use in their role as teachers and leaders.

**In Hebrews** - it is an explanation and warning about salvation for immature Jewish believers.

### WRITING STYLE

Everything is either a comparison or contrast with Jewish history of the Old Testament. The author uses history to give a warning. He teaches more history and then another warning. Five times he warns about the same issue. With 4 of the 5 he is saying, *As it happened to the Jews that came out of Egypt, so it could happen to you Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.*

Two Old Testament events are used as picture language for the New Testament truths of **salvation maturity**.

The **Jews coming out of Egypt** pictures **salvation** - they were God's people saved thru the Passover lamb.

The **Jews entering the Promised land** pictures **spiritual maturity** - able to enjoy God's blessings in the midst of conflict.

### PURPOSE

To logically prove that going back into any Judaism is giving up the greater for the lesser.

Old Testament Judaism focused on angels, Moses and animal sacrifices. Step by step the author shows that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses and greater than everything involved with the animal sacrifices. So why give up Jesus who is greater and go back to that which is lesser? Why go back to things that served as picture language, when you have Jesus who is the complete fulfillment?

The emphasis in the book is spiritual maturity.

### OUTLINE

Teaching and 1 <sup>st</sup> Warning Careless about Obedience	1 - 2
Teaching and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Warning Doubt about His Protection	3 - 4
Teaching and 3 <sup>rd</sup> Warning Insensitive to right and wrong	5 - 6
Teaching and 4 <sup>th</sup> Warning Willful rejection of God's Warnings	7-10
Teaching and 5 <sup>th</sup> Warning Refusal to obey what God says	11 -13

### DEVELOPED OUTLINE

#### Chpt. 1-2 Teaching

Jesus is greater than the prophets 1:2-3 He is Creator. He is Deity - the exact representation of God the Father; He is like Him in every way. As Savior, He made payment for sin and sat down at the right hand of God the Father. *Seated* means His payment for sin is finished and complete. *At the right hand of the Father* means His payment is accepted.

The first Jewish prophet was Moses. He received some of the law directly from God. But he also received some of the law from God thru angels. Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:3. So angels were important. But Jesus is greater than the angels.

Based on this history, there is now...

**1<sup>st</sup> Warning 2:2-3** *As it happened to them, it will happen to you.*

The Jews who came out of Egypt received God's law given to Moses thru angels. When they did not obey, there were consequences - sometimes loss of blessings; other times loss of physical life. Jesus is greater than the angels who gave God's law. If Old Testament Jews were punished for not obeying, how can New Testament Jews escape punishment if they disobey what **Jesus** has said.

If they neglect and become careless in their obedience, they will lose their spiritual blessings and may lose their physical life. The warning is not about loss of salvation/eternal life, but about losing their physical life.

#### Chpt. 3-4 Teaching

Jesus is greater than Moses. God took the Jews out of Egypt, gave them His law and was ready to take them into the Promised Land. But the people and 10 of their scouts rebelled. They refused to believe God could protect them. They were God's people, but the consequence of unbelief was death in the wilderness. They never experienced the joy and blessings God had for them .



**2<sup>nd</sup> Warning 3:12-14** *As it happened to them, it will happen to you.*

First-century Jewish believers have unbelief that God can protect them in the persecution. To avoid persecution, they are considering going back into Judaism. If they do, they will physically die in 70 AD when God's judgment comes on the Sanhedrin and the Temple is destroyed. In addition, they will never have the joy and blessings that come with spiritual maturity pictured by the Promised Land. This warning is not about losing salvation, but about losing spiritual blessings that come with spiritual growth. If they continue in unbelief, they will lose their physical life. However, they will have eternal life because they had accepted the payment of Jesus.

**3:12-14** *Take care, brothers - believers - lest there be in any of you with an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* The evil is unbelief of God's provision in persecution.

*Exhort - encourage one another* - especially those who are weak and immature in their faith - *every day, as long as it is called "today"* - as long as you have opportunity - *that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin* - rationalizing - thinking you can temporarily give up your salvation to escape persecution. *For we have become sharers in Christ* - have become and are believers in Christ. But how can others be sure of our faith? *if indeed we continue to hold fast that original confidence firm till the end.*

Those who continue in faith in spite of persecution prove they **are** true believers. Does that mean those who become weak or renounce their faith do not have or have lost their salvation? No. It means others cannot be **sure** that weak members have salvation. There is no longer the outward evidence their faith is genuine. This is why mature believers should encourage and warn the weak.

To confirm his picture language, the author repeats that in the Old Testament those who rebelled were God's people. But they refused the Promised Land because of the physical dangers. The consequence was they died in the wilderness. They never had God's rest that the Promised Land offered them – a picture of spiritual maturity. This warning is not about unbelief of salvation. It is warning about unbelief in God's protection in persecution.

#### **Chpt. 5-6 Teaching**

Because the New Testament believers are so immature, they are not going to understand further teaching about Jesus. So he deals with their immaturity and how they want to avoid persecution.

**Warning 6:4-9**

They had full spiritual knowledge - maturity - in the past but did not use it. The author wants to help them regain it. But God will not give the opportunity if they do not want spiritual growth. In their immaturity, they think the Sanhedrin persecution is too much. Their lack of sensitivity about right and wrong has them considering giving up their salvation temporarily and going back to Judaism. When persecution ends, they plan to repent and ask for a **new or different** salvation - one that would forgive this sin of turning away.


Knowing their thinking, the author explains why this is not possible

They had, once and for all, been enlightened and received genuine salvation in the past. They had tasted - enjoyed - their relationship with Jesus. The Holy Spirit was within them and had given them spiritual gifts. They had experienced specific answers from God as well as the power of God in their lives. They are genuine believers.

As such, they cannot temporarily give up their salvation and later find a new salvation to forgive them. If it takes a **new or different** salvation to forgive that sin, Jesus would have to return and make a new payment. This would bring shame to the name of Jesus, implying His first payment was not adequate. So if *that* is what they think they need to be forgiven, they will never be forgiven because there can never be a different or new salvation.

They have two choices. Return to Sanhedrin Judaism and lose their physical life (70 AD) when Jerusalem is destroyed or separate from Judaism and spiritually mature. The author now uses picture language to say, *as it happens with land - it will happen to you.* Land responds to the blessing of rain with either fruitfulness or thorns and thistles. These Jewish believers have received salvation blessings. If they mature, they will have the fruit of the Spirit, good works and receive rewards. If they go back into Judaism, there will be discipline including physical death. At the Reviewing Stand of Jesus, they will have no rewards.

Chapter 6:9 is important. The author says he is convinced his readers will choose to develop their faith.



**Chpt. 7-10 Teaching**

The author reviews everything connected with the Jerusalem Temple and worship. Thru contrast he shows that Jesus is greater. In the Old Testament, for God's people, animal sacrifices could only forgive sins of ignorance. When God's people were guilty of willful sin, the judgment was physical death. Using these facts of history, he gives instruction.

They should enjoy the privilege of entering directly into God's presence. They should find ways to show love and support for each other. They should keep meeting with other mature believers. Some Jewish believers have stopped meeting with others to avoid persecution. But it is mature believers who will provide strength, encouragement and spiritual insight when things get worse.

**Warning 10:26-29**

Verse 28 - *As it happened to them, it will happen to you.* God's people had loss of physical life in the days of Moses when there was willful sin. If first-century Jewish believers willfully return to Judaism and renounce belief in Jesus, there is no sacrifice - no forgiveness - no escaping the consequences because it is willful. They will have God's judgment of physical death. Notice, it is not loss of salvation; it is loss of physical life.

Verse 29 - even if **believers** denounce Jesus - they are still *sanctified* - have salvation because they accepted payment of Jesus. The severe judgment is loss of physical life in 70 AD and no rewards at the Reviewing Stand of Jesus.

**Chpt. 11-13 Teaching**

Avoiding persecution is the major issue for these immature believers. So the author reviews Jewish history to remind them of Old Testament heroes of faith. Some were rescued from persecution; others were killed for their faith. They should also remember the suffering and persecution of Jesus. Sometimes God uses persecution as discipline to bring maturity. Thru it, they will have spiritual discernment, faith to endure hardship and look forward to the joys of eternity.

**Warning 12:25** *As it happened to them, it will happen to you.*

In the days of Moses, the Jews knew what God wanted at Mt. Sinai but they refused to listen. The result was physical death. Jewish believers who want to return to Judaism with animal sacrifices are warned, *do not refuse what God has said.* He has made it clear - animal sacrifices no longer forgive sin - it is only thru Jesus. God the Father is speaking to grace at the present time. If they refuse to listen, He will speak in judgment that brings physical death.

If they follow the author's instruction of chapter 13, it will lead to spiritual maturity.

These warnings are given in 68 AD. Less than 2 years later, God's judgment came on Jerusalem in 70 AD. When the Roman general started to surround Jerusalem, Jewish believers in Judea recognized the danger and left town immediately. They escaped to the eastern side of Jordan. All survived.

If any Jewish believers returned to the Temple, they were caught off guard and were killed when the Romans killed one million Jews. They lost their physical life, but would not have lost their salvation as a true believer.

**APPLICATION**

Because these Jewish believers were part of the Church, the Body of Christ, this book has lessons for us as well. It answers our questions about believers who wander from the faith.

For those who accepted the payment of Jesus and then wander away, deny or rebel, there will be consequences in this life and loss of rewards in eternity. But there is no loss of salvation because they were declared holy when they accepted Jesus' payment. However, when there is no outward evidence, **we** cannot be **sure** if their original decision was genuine - maybe *yes*, maybe *no*. But we can be sure that God knows those who are His, even in their failures.

Hebrews teaches us the importance of spiritual maturity.

Without growth, we will become careless in obedience, have doubts that God is adequate for our situations and lack sensitivity to right and wrong. We will knowingly reject God's warnings and refuse to obey what He has said.

This is not salvation as God intends it, so Hebrews teaches us how to spiritually grow.

- Have mutual support and love with mature believers.
- Obey God's rules and stay within His boundaries.
- Meet together to study God's Word in depth - the meat of the Word.
- Listen to the warnings of God's mature leaders.
- Have a thankful heart. Ask God for and then accept His grace and mercy.

This is living the salvation life as God wants it to be.

