"An Introduction to the Book of Hebrews"

The Messianic Jewish N.T. Epistle written to those persecuted in the land of Israel

[ Series Title ~ ‘In Christ Alone - Towards spiritual maturity!’ ]
Or
[ Jesus … Simply The Best! ]

9.30am Sunday 19 February, 2017

Delivered by Senior Pastor Marshall Muller @ the Laidley Baptist Church (Qld).

Introduction:

Over the next two months leading into Easter I will be teaching from the Book of Hebrews. Who has never had a deeper look at the Book of Hebrews? Why not?

In addition to looking at this Epistle, we are also planning to host a Passover Dinner for any people interested in our community. The celebration of the Passover is what Jesus used to institute what we know as the Communion Feast, celebrated on the first Sunday of each month here at Laidley Baptist Church. The original Passover Meal, celebrated by the Jewish people (including Jesus), is rich with meaning and symbolism. Many Christians today still don’t understand the link between this Jewish feast and our Communion. During our Passover Meal gathering there will be a mixture of the original meaning as well as the linkage to the New Covenant we have in Christ ... helping to connect the dots between the significance of the Old Testament and the arrival of Messiah Jesus in the New.

It is our intention to host the Passover Celebration on one of the evenings in the week before Easter. So keep an eye out for information as it is released. Perhaps you’ve been to one of these events, but if not, it is a wonderful gathering of God's people as we give thanks for Jesus, and get to eat all sorts of different food as well.

Just in case you haven’t worked it out, Easter is not about a rabbit who lays chocolate eggs ... it’s about the death, burial and glorious resurrection of our Saviour
Jesus. So start thinking about coming to this important celebration in the lead up to Easter.

Some might ask, why are you speaking on a whole book of the Bible?

Easy!! Christian believers are instructed to ‘rightly divide the Word of Truth’.

2nd Timothy 2:15 states, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth."

The Apostle Paul is instructing Timothy, a young leader in the Church, to correctly & accurately teach the Word of God. You might think that it should be a prerequisite for each of our elders to ‘rightly divide the Word of Truth’. Yes, that is true, however, I don’t believe that Paul is just instructing leaders here. I believe he is encouraging all believers to do the same (whether we are young like Timothy, or older in our faith), so that we can stand against false teachings, but also teach God’s Words of Truth correctly.

Let me give you an example: (Let’s see how good you are at rightly dividing the Word of God!!!)

As believers, are we commanded to gather for worship on the Sabbath or on Sunday? (Notice I chose something not so controversial!) When did Sunday become a day of worship?

What does God’s Word say? How do we ‘rightly divide the Word of Truth’ in relation to this often controversial topic?

If you look up every passage on the Sabbath in the Mosaic Law (i.e. The Law of Moses), the one thing you will not find is Moses commanding the people to gather together for corporate worship on the Sabbath day. (WHAT!!!)

What Moses did tell people to do is to stay home and rest on the Sabbath day. In fact, it was forbidden to travel more than a Sabbath day’s journey from your home, which was roughly one kilometre (about half a mile). The only ones commanded to meet regularly for corporate worship on the Sabbath day was the priesthood, and that was for the purpose of offering special Passover blood sacrifices. However, for the rest of the Jewish people, they were simply to stay at home and rest.

Corporate worship was required only three times a year: Passover (Pesach), Feast of Weeks (Shavuot/Pentecost), and Tabernacles (Sukkoth). Therefore, the Sabbath was simply a day of rest and staying home.

Also, there is not a command to have corporate worship on Sunday either. That was the practice of the early church as early as Acts 20:7. That is an example of what
they chose to do but no biblical command was given to follow it. The fact is in the Mosaic Law the Sabbath was strictly a day of rest and to stay home, and for that reason Jewish believers had their corporate worship on Saturday night (which is already the first day of the week), in order to worship with fellow believers. Gentiles also met on the first of the week but it was Sunday morning. Neither one was commanded so they both are equal options.

What the Bible commands is that believers gather together regularly for corporate worship but the day of the week is strictly optional. Some congregations choose to meet on Saturday afternoons, other groups meet on Friday nights and other groups meet on Sunday, some groups meet fortnightly and all of these are valid options. One is not more ‘biblical’ than the other. That is why it is so important to “rightly divide the word of truth.”

The Bible definitely provides a valid roadmap, but we have to make sure what commandments are applicable to what group of people. The Mosaic Law was given to Jewish people only, and only until Messiah died. The commandments you are obligated to obey today are the commandments of the Law of the Messiah and that is the law code you need to learn to follow and not the law code that was intended for different people for a different period of time.

The Law of Moses and the Law of the Messiah are two distinct and different ‘law’ codes. We need to know & understand them and discern what God’s Word says about each one.

Which brings me back to my original point of studying the Book of Hebrews – we need to know the ...

- **Who** (was it written to? Who is the author?),
- **What** (is it all about? What is it’s purpose),
- **Where** (the geographic & cultural significance),
- **When** (the historical background),
- **Why** (was it written? What questions are being asked? And by whom?)

... to be able to rightly divide (and teach) God’s Word correctly.

Let’s pray asking God to teach us to rightly divide His Word of Truth today.
Gracious God & our Heavenly Father, thank you for your Word that is foundational to your Truth about your perfect Son, Jesus ... given freely and sacrificially to release each of us from the shackles of sin and it’s curse – the curse of death. May You reveal to us the mysteries of the Good News as each week we unravel the deeper meanings of this epistle. Renew our minds as we learn. Convict us, teach us & love us as we learn. In the name of Christ our King. Amen

Five Epistles written to Jewish Believers:

Of the 21 Epistles in the New Testament, 5 were written to Jewish Believers dealing specifically with the needs of these believers. These 5 epistles are Hebrews, James, I & II Peter and Jude.

Messianic Jews in the first century faced 2 major problems –
- Persecution,
- False doctrine.

The book of Hebrews deals with the problem of persecution within the land of Israel. To deal with the problem of persecution of Jews who lived outside of the land of Israel (The Diaspora) the Epistles of I Peter & James were written.

The Book of Hebrews was written by someone in the Diaspora (i.e. outside of the land of Israel) to Jewish believers in Israel. Whereas, the Epistle of James was written by someone in(side) the land of Israel to those Jewish believers outside of Israel (in the Diaspora).

First Peter, however, is written by someone in one part of the Diaspora to others in another part of the Diaspora.

To deal with the second problem – false doctrine – the epistles of II Peter & Jude were written. II Peter was written from part of the Diaspora to Jewish believers in another part of the Diaspora. Whereas, the epistle of Jude was written from the Land of Israel to Jewish believers living in the Diaspora.

Who wrote the Book of Hebrews?

We don’t really know! The author chose not to reveal himself. The recipients of this 'letter' obviously knew who he was. Some have suggested it could've been Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Clement of Rome, Luke, Silas, Phillip, John Mark or Aristion.
Some have even suggested Priscilla (probably not, refer Hebrews 11:32 – the masculine participle is used to describe the author).

But we really don’t know who the author is.

However, 2 things are known about the author:

- **He was a Jew** (a Jewish believer in Jesus). He had special, intimate knowledge of Judaism (only a Jewish person would’ve known);
- **He was a second generation Jewish believer** (i.e. *not* an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry – refer Hebrews 2:3-4). This would exclude the Apostle Paul as the author. However, if this refers only to the 12 Apostles, then it would not exclude Paul.

Who was the letter of Hebrews written to?

We can deduce 7 things about the audience/readers of this epistle:

1. Like the author, they were second-generation believers;
2. They were Jewish;
3. They were Jewish believers. The main danger warned against was returning to Judaism. If they were Gentiles, this warning would not have been necessary. Some believe that the audience were NOT believers, but the author calls them *brethren* (Hebrews 3:1&12), *beloved* (Hebrews 6:9), *partakers of the heavenly calling* (Hebrews 3:1) which is unique to believers, *partakers of Christ* (Hebrews 3:14). Certain warnings like falling away are only applicable if the audience were believers;
4. The readers have been believers for a long time – they should now be teachers of the Word (Hebrews 5:11-14);
5. Even though they have been believers for a long while, they are spiritually immature and haven’t progressed in their faith (Hebrews 5:11-14);
6. They are wavering in their faith due to persecution (Hebrews 10:32-38);

Geographically, where were the readers located?

There are many suggestions by commentators about the location of the readers. They include Jerusalem (Israel), Caesarea (North Israel), Samaria (Israel/West Bank), Antioch (Turkey), Lycus (Turkey), Valley of Colosse (Turkey), Cyprus, Galatia (Turkey), Perea (eastern side of Jordan Valley), Corinth (Greece), Ephesus (Turkey), Alexandria (Egypt) & Rome (Italy).

Only 3 of these locations could be valid:

**JERUSALEM** – unlikely that there were people in Jerusalem who had not heard Jesus speak. (cf. Heb. 2:3-4). Readers were known for their charity (Heb. 6:10, 10:34),
however Jerusalem Church was known to be very poor (Other churches sent donations to help them – see Acts 11:29, Romans 15:25-27). And the author mentions that none had suffered martyrdom. This was not true of the Church of Jerusalem (e.g. Stephen, James the Apostle, James the brother of Jesus – all killed by the time Hebrews was written).

ROME – discounted in 2 areas. Firstly, according to Hebrews 2:3-4, believers were evangelized by eyewitnesses of Jesus. But the Church in Rome was not evangelized by eyewitnesses (Romans 1:1-14 – Paul states that the Church of Rome was not established by an apostle). Secondly, the readers felt a ‘strong pull’ to return to the sacrificial system. Not possible for Jewish believers in Rome – too far away from Jerusalem to be tempted so strongly to return to the religious Judaism of Jerusalem.

CHURCHES OF JUDEA – written to Jewish believers in the Churches of Judea (Gal.1:22) located outside of Jerusalem. They were being persecuted heavily at the time this was written. But also living close enough to Jerusalem to be tempted back to the sacrificial system of Judaism.

**When was Hebrews written?**

No date is given; however, it can be narrowed to a particular time in history. One of the early church fathers, Clement of Rome, wrote letters in A.D. 96 in which he quotes from the Book of Hebrews. So we know it was before A.D. 96.

In Hebrews 13:23, the author mentions Timothy, therefore had to be written after A.D. 50 when the Apostle Paul led Timothy to the Lord (Acts 16:1-3). It was written before Timothy died (the writer speaks about Timothy in the present tense).

The believers (audience) were second-generation believers & had been believers long enough to be teachers of the Word. The writer writes about the sacrificial system in the present tense. This shows that the Levitical system was still functioning, and prior to it’s dismantling in A.D. 70 by the Romans. In Hebrews 3:17, it is implied that it had been almost 40 years since the crucifixion, which occurred in A.D. 30. Hebrews 12:26-29, the writer makes statements about a shaking in the land, which had already begun (the seeds of the Jewish revolt were already being sown - A.D. 64-66)

Based on all these ‘clues’, we can deduce that the Book of Hebrews was written between A.D. 64 and 66.
Historical background for Hebrews

The writer draws on several Old Testament examples:

**FROM GENESIS** → **ESAU** – an example of one who made an irrevocable decision, and once making that decision, there was no turning back. The readers of the Book of Hebrews are also in danger of making an irrevocable decision. And if they make it, there is no turning back for them either. They become subject to divine discipline in this life and loss of reward in the next.

**FROM EXODUS** → **The TABERNACLE and the PRIESTHOOD.**
The TABERNACLE – lesson regarding the means of access to God.
The PRIESTHOOD – the concept of a mediator between God and mankind.

**FROM LEVITICUS** → Blood sacrifice (Ch. 1-7) & Day of Atonement sacrifice (Ch. 16). Animal blood sacrifices only covered sin – it didn’t remove them! It was just for ritual cleansing. Day of Atonement sacrifice – parallels drawn between burning the sacrifice outside the camp and the crucifixion of Christ outside the city gates.

**FROM NUMBERS** → **Description of Moses (Ch. 12)** – Jesus even greater than the faithfulness of Moses.
The sin of Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13-14) – the issue of making an irrevocable decision. 12 spies sent out to inspect the Promised Land. Disagreement - only 2 spies said they could take the land with the Lord’s help. The people of Israel made the common mistake of believing the majority, and rebelled against Moses’ leadership. Because of this, God declared judgment on the Exodus generation – they would not enter the Promised Land until 40 years passed, wandering in the desert until all those who had departed Egypt had died, with the exception of the two righteous spies, and those under the age of 20. They made an irrevocable decision and would lose the blessing of the Promised Land.

**MELCHIZEDEK** → the writer compares the Messiah with Melchizedek, and that he will be a priest after the Order of Melchizedek. (Genesis 14:18-20 and Psalm 110:4).

**THE LAW OF MOSES** → used as a background to the Book of Hebrews by the writer. Main thing here is that blood sacrifices were available for some sins, but there was no sacrifices for others. For certain sins there was only physical death.

**THE PROPHETS** → distinction between Remnant (believed what God revealed through Moses & Prophets) & non-Remnant Prophets (did not believe, chose idolatry). In the New Testament, the Remnant believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but the non-Remnant rejected Him.

*The readers of this epistle were members of the Remnant of their day.*
THE GOSPEL BACKGROUND ➔ One of the key passages to understanding the book of Hebrews is Matthew 12:22-45. This passage speaks about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and the unpardonable sin. The leadership of Israel at that time in history rejected the Messiahship of Jesus – stating strongly that He was demon-possessed, and therefore could not possibly be the Messiah. Jesus withdraws the offer of the Kingdom from that generation & declared that they were now under judgment (a physical judgment). This was fulfilled by the Roman destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in A.D.70.

WHAT IS THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?
The national rejection by Israel of the Messiahship of Jesus, while He was present, because He was believed to be demon-possessed.

So, for the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, that was their irrevocable decision. Called by Jesus the unpardonable sin. Judgment was now inevitable. Just like when the spies came back & the people listened to the 10 unrighteous spies, the offer of the Promised Land was withdrawn from that generation, in the same way, the Kingdom was withdrawn from the Jewish people to be re-offered to a future generation that will accept it.

The Bible suggests that this generation will be the one living in the Great Tribulation (refer Matthew Chapters 24-25).

So, the generation to whom the Author is writing to here (in the Book of Hebrews) is the same generation that was guilty of the unpardonable sin ... and facing the pending judgment in A.D. 70.

THE BOOK OF ACTS ➔ Understanding that the unpardonable sin is a national sin (not an individual sin) the message to that generation is the message of Acts 2:38-41

38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.
To escape the judgement on that generation, individual Jews had to do 2 things:

1. **They had to repent** (i.e. change their mind ... about Jesus). Rather than think that Jesus was demon-possessed, they needed to change their minds and believe that Jesus is the Messiah. This act of repentance would lead to their spiritual salvation. But there was something else that was required.

2. **They had to be baptized.** Baptism would separate them from that generation and the Judaism that had rejected Jesus as Messiah. Therefore, the act of baptism would save them physically from the judgement of the unpardonable sin.

**Context**

The context of Hebrews is dealing with Jewish believers going through severe persecution. Because of this serious persecution, they were considering going back to Judaism (i.e. keeping all the Levitical laws ... the system that rejected Jesus as Messiah). As a temporary measure to lay aside their salvation, they could go back to Judaism, and when the heat was off, then they would return and be saved again later. By doing this they could get the best of both worlds → reduced/no persecution by going back to the old ways of Judaism AND then start their spiritual life anew which would erase the sin of what they had done by denying Christ.

That’s what they thought they could do. However, the author of the Book of Hebrews wants to remind them that they don’t have these 2 options. Starting their spiritual lives again down the track would require a re-crucifixion of Jesus. That’s not an option.

Not only that the author is urging them not to go back into the same system that committed the unpardonable sin, which would be fulfilled with the coming judgment of A.D. 70.

Keep in mind that this was a national sin, as mentioned earlier, applicable only to the Jewish generation of Jesus’ day (not to subsequent generations). The judgment was the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem and the world-wide dispersion of the Jews.

The write is urging them to make a once-and-for-all break from Judaism. I’m not sure if you know it, but the way to make that break from Judaism, both in Jesus’ day & today is by water baptism. No water baptism, no salvation from the coming judgment. Unless they underwent water baptism in Christ, they would be included in the destruction of the coming judgement of A.D. 70. It’s a physical judgment – they would die!
The choice is now theirs – they can escape the judgment, OR they can fall under that judgment. If they do not repent they will suffer serious consequences.

There are 5 warnings in the Book of Hebrews. They are often used to teach that one can lose their salvation. But rather, these passages are dealing with physical death. We will look at this later as we go through the Book of Hebrews.

Nevertheless, the readers are being encouraged to refrain from going back to the old law of Judaism (so as to escape the judgment).

On the positive side, the author encourages them instead to press on to spiritual maturity (Hebrews 5:11-14; 10:33-39), and not falling into the danger of apostasy (Hebrews 2:1-4;10:19-25).

**Why was the Book of Hebrews written?**

The main reason the author writes this epistle is to show that Jesus is much more superior to what they have in Judaism. It didn’t mean that Judaism was all that bad (it had been the system given by God to the Jews for thousands of years), but the author is attempting to show them that which is better … Jesus our Messiah!

Judaism was good, but the Messiah is better!

The writer of Hebrews contrasts the Messiah with the 3 main pillars of Judaism – Moses, angels & the Levitical Priesthood – and shows that what the readers have now in Jesus (their Messiah) is FAR SUPERIOR to anything else.

In the midst of this heavy theological discussion, there are 5 warnings. Some people believe that as a believer in Christ that they can lose their salvation based on these warnings. This belief is based upon the difference in meaning of the Jewish terms ‘save’ & ‘salvation’ - the terms are not always used in the spiritual sense. More often than not they refer to physical salvation. But because of these 5 warnings, many teach (and believe) that it is possible to lose their salvation.

Understanding that the Jewish usage of ‘save’ & ‘salvation’ can mean either physical or spiritual will help us clarify what the 5 warnings are about. The 5 warnings ALL have to do with physical judgements.
How do we know? Every example the writer uses from the Old Testament deals with physical judgement and physical death. All of them are physical judgments not spiritual.

But, although the author gives these warnings, he also encourages them in their persecution. Through faith they can run the race before them with patience.

Key Words in the Book of Hebrews

If I had to nominate some key words from the Book of Hebrews they would be:

- PERFECTION (meaning maturity, contrast to immaturity)
- ETERNAL (contrast to temporal)
- FOREVER (as above)
- HEAVENLY (contract to earthly)
- BETTER (contrast to good)

Major Theme of Hebrews

The major theme of the Book of Hebrews is to show the superiority of the Son (Jesus) ... to any other religious system, or person.

That’s what the first part of the Book of Hebrews deals with. The Latter part (from Chapter 10 onwards) focusses on the practical application of the superiority of Jesus in our walk as believers. (In other words ... what difference does it make?)

Why Should We Study the Book of Hebrews?

Well, there’s a lot to digest, but hopefully you have found this introduction helpful. Can I encourage you to read the Book of Hebrews, or at least Chapter 1 this week ready to get into it next Sunday? That’s your homework this week!

Why should we study the Book of Hebrews? There are a great number of reasons why I believe it is time for us to study the Book of Hebrews. Let me suggest just one or two of them to you.

REASON 1 - I truly believe that a study of the Book of Hebrews may be the next step for us as a church as we seek to grow in our desire for greater intimacy with Christ, greater faith, and bolder acts of service, as we discover & deploy our Spiritual gifts.
As your Pastor, I want you to think of our Lord in much greater terms – greater in power, in majesty, in love and mercy and grace. I want you to exercise much greater faith in what He can and will do in us, in our church, and in our community (in addition to what He is already doing).

I am drawn to that passage in Psalm 42 that we occasionally sing - As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you O God. I believe Hebrews is just the book God’s Spirit may employ to move us in this direction.


In Colossians 2:16-17, the Apostle Paul writes,

> “Therefore do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbath days – these are only the shadow of the things to come, but the reality is Christ!”

The Old Testament foreshadowed the New, and Hebrews is the place to go if we wish to understand this as we should.

We, like the readers of the book of Hebrews, may have been Christians for a while, but have we moved from milk to meat. This is the time – I believe God has us in the Book of Hebrews to mature us. We should also be teachers of the Word by now.

So let’s realize that it is God speaking to us here, not just a man, so why don’t we step up to the plate and partake of the feast that God has set before us.

**CONCLUSION: A few questions to finish:**

I want to finish with a few challenging questions → Once you accepted that Jesus was the Son of God, and greater than anything/anyone else, what difference did that make to you & your life? And what difference does it make to your life every day now?

The difference that Christ makes in your lives here at LBC right now will determine the blessing that we could be to this community.
If Christ makes no difference in your life every day, if He is not superior to every other thing, then you will make no difference to this community. We should just forget about it!

But I’m guessing that you, like me, want to serve Christ with everything you’ve got, that Christ changes everything, and as a result of His Holy Spirit within us, we desire for others to know about him. We want others to have the same love/joy/peace that we understand.

But we can only see this community changed if we trust Christ Alone as we grow into maturity with Christ as our perfection. That’s why God is leading us through His Word in the Book of Hebrews.

More next week: Hebrews 1 – God’s Final Word: JESUS!

Let’s pray …

Loving and Mighty Father God, the author & finisher of our faith, we are grateful that you have revealed Your Son Jesus to us as the Saviour of this world. And that when you did that, as a result of your great act of grace by your Holy Spirit, that we were prompted not to reject this great message. Help us to fall in love even more with Jesus, and to know the trap of the law and it’s legalism and judgmentalism, and to contrast that with the love and grace of God, lived out in active service in our daily lives.

Grow us into mature disciples of yours each day through this series. When we don’t want to be teachable, renew our minds with the beautiful truth of your Word through Jesus. Challenge our stiff-necks with the sharpness and correctness of your Word as it cuts deep into our souls. May we never go back into the Law – give us the reality of Christ, He is simply the best!!!

Bless your people this week God, through the revelation of your Word of Truth. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Song ~ The Old Rugged Cross