

Our Great High Priest

Major and Minor Themes in the Book of Hebrews

In the book of Hebrews, the author is writing to Jewish believers who have been scattered by persecution. Very possibly, the martyrdom of Stephen (recorded in the book of Acts) was the start of the persecution of the Church by Saul of Tarsus who later became Paul the Apostle. It is very interesting that he, who was the greatest instigator, became a victim of that very persecution, which led to his death.

The major theme in Hebrews is the high priesthood and the greatness of Jesus Christ. In the first two verses of chapter one, the author states that Jesus is greater than the prophets. *“God, who at various times and in various ways, spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”* The Lord Jesus Christ is greater than the angels: *“having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they”* (v. 4). They worship Him (v. 6); they are all at His service (v. 14).

Jesus is greater than the prophets. He’s greater than the angels. And then, what would probably shock a first-century Jew, at the beginning of chapter three, Jesus is greater than Moses (v. 3)! Moses was a servant in the house (v. 5). Christ is the son over the house (v. 6)—much greater and much more superior to Moses. Moses gave us the Law; Jesus Christ gave us life.

Hebrews chapter three continues the major theme of Jesus as the high priest. He is a priest *“according to the order of Melchizedek”* (see 5:5–6, 10; 6:20–7:28). This idea takes us all the way back to Genesis 14, where Abraham returns from the slaughter of the kings, meets Melchizedek, and gives him tithes. The author of the book of Hebrews makes a point to tell us that the lesser is blessed by the greater. Melchizedek blesses Abraham. To bless someone, you must be greater than them. As great as Abraham was, Melchizedek was greater. Jesus, our high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, is greater than Melchizedek himself. It doesn’t get any greater than that.

The minor theme is one of warning. There are five warning passages in the book of the Hebrews. We have a warning beginning in chapter two. *“Therefore we must give the more earnest heed [pay much closer attention to] the things we have heard, lest we drift away [from them].”* Chapters 2, 3, 6, 10, and 12 comprise the five warning sections. Each warning intensifies. “Don’t let the things that you’ve heard cause you to drift away.” This introduces us to the problem that he was addressing: Jewish believers in the first century who had come under intense persecution, were in danger of turning back to Temple worship as a way of escaping that persecution—they were turning back to the rituals, sacrifices, and feasts. Hebrews warns that this is an act of apostasy (*apostasia*).

The warning sections create a lot of trouble for many people who study the book of Hebrews. I remember, as a young Bible college student, Hebrews scared me because on the surface these warnings seemed like they were saying, “if you continue in sin, fall into sin, or even turn away from the things that you’ve learned, you will lose your salvation.” Thankfully, there is no passage in Hebrews (or in all of Scripture) that teaches that the believer can lose their salvation.

It is impossible. We are secure in Christ because of what Christ has done—not because of anything that we do or do not do.

In Hebrews 3, the author uses the Exodus generation as a warning about what these persecuted Jews were doing in turning back. What happened with the Exodus generation? They were led out of Egypt. The Lord opened the Red Sea. They were led by the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud. Many magnificent miracles happened. They had complete and total deliverance. They were fully liberated. But what did that generation do? They wanted to go back to Egypt. They wanted to turn back. They wanted to go back to their old way of life. And that's the great warning in Hebrews. Hebrews 3:12 says, "*beware, brethren,*" talking to believers, "*lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.*" All of us know people who came to Christ in the local church. We saw them grow and we saw them serve. They eventually became believers in distress under the testing, the battering and the buffeting of life—temptations that every single one of us face. We should realize that all of us could fall tomorrow with the right pressure, pain, negative influence, or temptation. We must be vigilant every day of our life because it's so easy for us to fall— "*depart from the living God.*". By application, we need to stay sharp.

But there's one more question we ought to answer. The issue that always comes up with the book of Hebrews is "who is the author?" All kinds of suggestions have been made. Among suggested authors, people argue for Barnabas, Apollos, and Luke. It is interesting, though, what we find out about this book in 2 Peter. Remember, the Apostle Peter was writing to the Jews. In his first epistle, Peter tells us that he is writing to the "pilgrims who have been scattered abroad" (Jews who had been driven from their homes, lost their businesses, lost family members, and were scattered under persecution). So now, in 2 Peter 3:14, he concludes with these words, "Therefore, beloved, seeing that you look for such things," referring to the promise of the blessings that we will have in eternity, "*be diligent that you may be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.*"

Verse 15 says, "[On account of] *the long suffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you.*" Peter confirms that Paul also wrote to the Jews that were scattered abroad—those who were driven out of Jerusalem and Judea and surrounding areas. Peter goes on to say in verse 16, "*as also in all his [Paul's] epistles.*" So, it is obvious that Peter had read some of Paul's epistles, "*... speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*"

Here are a couple of summary points from this short section:

- 1) Peter says Paul had written to the Jews that had been scattered. and that what Paul had written to them was comparable to his other epistles. In other words, what Paul wrote to them was Scripture.
- 2) Some had twisted the things Paul wrote in this epistle, referring to Hebrews, as they did with Paul's other epistles, and as they do with the rest of Scripture.

Peter's message was what we are told in Isaiah 40:6–8, "*All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades ... but the Word of our God*

stands forever.” Therefore, if Paul did not write Hebrews, then God did not preserve Scripture as we believe He did. And, if Hebrews is not that epistle, then we’re missing Scripture, and the preservation of the Word of God falls to the ground.

In Hebrews chapter ten, Paul wraps up his arguments of the book. It is full of exhortations encouraging people to join him in action. This chapter repeats the phrase, “*let us*” several times. He is saying, “let’s do this together.” In Hebrews 10:19, “*Therefore, brethren ...*” Who does the word “*brethren*” refer to? This takes us back to the minor theme of the book—namely, warnings to believers turning away from faith under persecution.

“*Brethren*” transcends the Hebrew reader of the time. “*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest [the very Presence of God] by the blood of Jesus.*” He is referring to something he mentioned earlier in chapter four, namely, “*we have a great high priest*” and “*therefore let us come boldly to the throne of grace.*” When should we come boldly to His throne? When we are doing good? When we have no faults, flaws or failures? No, the verse says, “*let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” The time God wants us knocking on His door—the time He wants us coming into the Throne Room—is the time when we’re struggling. The time when we may be failing, the time that we may be hurting—that’s when He’s going to supply the grace that is necessary to pick us up and help us to press on in the Christian life. Continuing in 10:20, “*by a new and living way [into the holy place,] which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.*” “*The new and living way*” is the New Covenant; the Old Covenant had a “*veil.*”

“*The veil*” demonstrates that no one except the High Priest himself is fit to enter into the presence of the Holy of Holies. One day a year he was allowed, and only if he was pure. Jesus has consecrated a new way for us “*through the veil, that is, His flesh.*” When His body was torn on the cross, the veil ripped from top to bottom, proclaiming symbolically that the way into God’s Presence is now open.

Now, having a High Priest (Jesus) over the House of God, Hebrews 10 gives us three exhortations. In verse 22, “*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of **faith**, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*” In verse 23, “*let us hold fast the confession of our **hope** without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*” And in verse 24, “*let us consider one another in order to stir up [provoke] **love** and good works.*” These three verses encode the famous Pauline trio: “faith, hope and love.” Faith is encoded in verse 22; hope, in verse 23; and love, in verse 24. What is he exhorting us to do? He is exhorting us to fulfill the three ministries that God gave to every believer, which one day we will answer for.

First, we have the exhortation to “*draw near with a true heart.*” In other words, to enter God’s Presence. This is the foundation of ministry—your priesthood. 1 Peter 2:5–9 states that every believer in Jesus Christ is a priest and is required to pray/intercede for other people. The purpose of a priest is to stand between God and man. His purpose is to reveal God to men and to lead men to God. As we pray for those around us, we are exercising that function of a priest and we draw near to him with a true heart and “*full assurance of the faith,*” knowing that He is going to

hear our prayers. Revelation 5:8 and Revelation 8:3–4 tell us that the prayers of the saints are the incense before God in His throne. Your prayer life is your priesthood.

The second exhortation, verse 23, says, “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.*” Here, our ministry is aimed toward the lost—toward the unsaved. We are holding fast a profession of the hope that we have of life and eternity in the presence of Jesus Christ. We must “*hold fast,*” which means that we must continue to hang onto that profession before a lost and dying world. We are professing a hope that the world does not have. We are proclaiming to the world that the promises of God are true and sure, and that He will fulfill every single one of them. The world does not have that hope. They don’t have that assurance. They don’t have that security. Verse 23 shows that we have an ambassadorship. We are ambassadors of God to the world around us. And in our ambassadorship, we are telling other people about the hope that we have in a living Savior—Jesus.

As priesthood focuses on our relationship to God, and ambassadorship, our relationship to the lost, this third and last exhortation focuses on our relationship, or ministry, to fellow believers. In verse 24, we should “*consider*” them. This is a word that means “to think over and over, to dwell on, to make something a priority in your mind.” “*Let us consider one another* [those who are fellow believers] *in order to stir up* [provoke] *love and good works.*” “To provoke them” is the Greek word for “iron sharpening iron,” and it implies “with friction,” which produces sparks and heat.

Sometimes people don’t appreciate our provocation. We don’t have to be nasty or pushy about it. We should be very gracious about it. But we should strive to provoke, to encourage, to exhort one another to “*love and good works.*” According to Ephesians 2:8–9, we are saved by grace through faith, and it is not of ourselves; “*it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*” But Ephesians 2:10 tells us that “*we are His workmanship.*” The Greek word *poema* means we are His masterpiece “*created in Christ Jesus for good works.*” This is what we are here for—good works.

How do we wrap all this together? Hebrews 10:25 says, “*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*” You and I are pilgrims. We are here in a pilgrim land and we can intercede by praying for everyone around us without ceasing. Let’s be good priests. We can share the Gospel with the lost. Let’s be good ambassadors. We can encourage fellow believers. Let’s be good ministers.

We’re the only royal priesthood known in history with these privileges. Did you know that there’s never been another royal priesthood such as ours? It is patterned after the royal priest, Melchizedek—the King of Salem. I can’t help but believe that when Abraham came and offered Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22), Melchizedek wasn’t very far away—looking, watching, and praying.

Let us be looking, watching, and praying as we honor and wait for the return of our great High Priest and King—the Lord Jesus Christ!