

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 27 – Hebrews

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

You know, tucked away in the New Testament, there's this book that feels totally unique. It reads like an intense sermon, it argues like a brilliant lawyer, and it ends like a personal letter. It's this incredible work of passion, depth, and honestly, a ton of mystery.

So today, let's try to unlock the puzzle of the book of Hebrews. Right out of the gate, we hit a major roadblock. See, most New Testament letters start with something like Paul, an apostle, or from Peter.

But Hebrews? It just starts. It's totally anonymous. And that leaves us with a central question that has fascinated scholars for 2,000 years.

Just who wrote this thing? For a really long time, the number one suspect was the apostle Paul. And it kind of makes sense, right? The theology has a Pauline feel to it, and putting his name on it would have given the book instant authority. For centuries, in a lot of churches, that was just the accepted answer.

But then, people started exploring other ideas. Martin Luther, you know, the famous reformer, he had a different theory. He championed a guy named Apollos.

Now, if you look in the book of Acts, Apollos is described as being this eloquent, super knowledgeable guy who was incredibly powerful in the scriptures. And when you read Hebrews, that description just fits the style perfectly. And believe me, the list does not stop there.

Other names that have been thrown around include Barnabas, who was Paul's traveling buddy, or even Luke, the guy who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. So the point is, a lot of brilliant people have been suggested, but no single theory has ever stuck for good. So, what's the real answer? Well, we just don't know.

And you know what? We're in pretty good company. The great third-century scholar Origen looked at all the evidence and basically said, "We can debate this all we want, but in the end, God only knows. And that's pretty much where we still are today.

Okay, so the author is a total mystery. Got it. But that's really only half of the puzzle, because when we start asking who this letter was written for, the book itself starts giving us a ton of clues about who they were and, more importantly, the dangerous spot they were in.

Yeah, the author might be anonymous, but they knew their audience inside and out. This isn't some abstract essay. It's a direct, passionate, and urgent appeal to a specific group of people who were standing at a spiritual crossroads, and they were seriously tempted to turn back.

Piecing together the clues, we can actually build a pretty clear profile of these readers. They were almost certainly Jewish people who had come to believe in Jesus. But, and this is key, they were probably second-generation believers.

They hadn't seen Jesus with their own eyes. And because of their new faith, they were facing some intense social pressure, maybe even outright persecution. Their spiritual life had kind of stalled out, and they were right on the edge of just giving up.

And just think about the choice they were facing. It was huge. On the one hand, they could go back to Judaism.

That meant familiar traditions, a religion protected by Roman law, and acceptance from their family and community. On the other hand, they could press on in Christianity. That meant worshiping a savior they couldn't see, risking persecution, and being cut off from pretty much everything they'd ever known.

You can just feel the pressure building. The scholar F.F. Bruce really nailed it with this quote. He said, "They have everything to lose if they fall back, but they have everything to gain if they press on.

That's the core message of this whole book. This isn't just some friendly advice. It's an urgent warning because the stakes could not be any higher.

So how in the world does the author try to convince them to stick with it? Well, this is where the genius of the book really shines. He doesn't tear down their old faith. Instead, he shows them that Jesus is the fulfillment of it.

The whole argument is basically this. What you have now in Christ isn't just different. It's infinitely better.

It is the ultimate upgrade. And he uses this fantastic analogy. He never, ever says the old covenant, you know, the system of laws and temple sacrifices, was bad or defective, not at all.

He says it was like a blueprint. Now, a blueprint is absolutely essential for a building, right? But you don't live in the blueprint. It was always, always meant to point forward to the finished building, Jesus.

So why on earth would you go back to the plans when the real thing is standing right in front of you? And the author builds this argument with this really cool rhythm that goes back and forth. First, he gives you exposition. He lays out this deep theological case for why Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than the entire old priesthood.

And then right after that, bam, he hits you with exhortation, a passionate personal plea that says, because this is all true, do not turn away. To really see how brilliant this argument is, let's just zoom in on one specific example: how he proves that Jesus is a new and much better high priest. See, for his Jewish audience, this was a huge theological problem.

Their scriptures were crystal clear. The Messiah, the King, had to come from the tribe of Judah, from the family of David, but priests could only come from the tribe of Levi. So how could one person possibly be both? It seemed like a flat-out contradiction.

So what does our mystery author do? Does he invent some new complicated idea? Nope. He does something way smarter. He shows them that the solution to this puzzle was actually hidden in their own scriptures the entire time.

He pulls out this one verse from Psalm 110, a Psalm they all knew was about the Messiah. And it says, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Wait a minute.

This verse talks about a priest, but not from Levi's family. It's a different, more ancient order: the order of Melchizedek. This one verse is the key that unlocks his entire argument.

Now, Melchizedek was this super mysterious figure way back in the book of Genesis. He was a king who was also called a priest of God Most High. By connecting Jesus to this ancient order, the author just brilliantly solves the puzzle.

Jesus can be a king from Judah and a high priest, not by breaking the rules about the Levites, but by belonging to an older, greater priesthood that the scriptures themselves pointed to. It's just a masterful argument. And all of this incredible theology, this intricate, detailed argument, it all serves one single, urgent goal.

To beg his readers, please do not give up. You know, near the end of the letter, the author actually describes his own work. He calls it a word of exhortation.

And that's really the best summary there is. This isn't just a theological essay. It's a heartfelt sermon from a pastor who is desperate to keep his people from making a catastrophic mistake.

And let's be really clear: the stakes were absolute. The author wasn't worried they were just having a bad week. He was genuinely convinced that if these readers turned back, it could mean falling away from their Christian faith for good.

So in the end, this anonymous masterpiece is this timeless, powerful call to just press on. It's a plea to choose the real thing over the shadow it casts. To choose the finished building instead of the blueprint.

It's a call to endure, to have faith, and to never, ever turn back. And that leaves all of us with a question that echoes way beyond the first century. The people who first read Hebrews were tempted to trade a risky, uncertain future for a comfortable, familiar past.

And it really makes you wonder, in our own lives, when we're faced with progress that requires faith, why is it still so incredibly tempting to just turn back to what's familiar?