

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 28 - Hebrews

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Okay, so let's talk about the book of Hebrews. You know, when most of us think about it, we probably picture this deep, kind of heavy theological book. And don't get me wrong, it is.

But here's the thing, at its core, it's not some calm academic lecture, not at all. It's really more like an emergency broadcast, a passionate, high-stakes warning to a group of people standing right on the edge of a spiritual cliff. I want you to just imagine something for a second.

Picture that you've been on this long, hard journey for years. You've been through it all, and you finally get there. You're standing on the very brink of the amazing future you were promised.

It's right there in front of you. At that exact moment, would you even consider turning around and going all the way back? It sounds kind of crazy, right? Well, that is the exact question these people were facing. So, to really get why that question is so incredibly urgent, we have to understand who these people were.

We need to zoom in on their situation. Because this letter wasn't written to just anyone. It was written to a very specific community that was in the middle of a full-blown crisis.

So what we've got here is a group of first-century Jewish people who had started following Jesus. But the pressure on them, wow, it was just immense. They were, and I love this phrase a scholar used, teeter-tottering.

It's kind of wobbling there, caught between their new faith in Jesus and all the deep-rooted traditions they grew up with. And they were actually seriously thinking about just giving up on Jesus and going back. Now, you've got to remember, back in this early period, the line between Judaism and Christianity was, well, it was blurry.

It wasn't the sharp, clear division we think of today. So for them, going back might not have felt like this huge betrayal. It probably felt more like going home, back to what was familiar and comfortable.

The author of this letter sees that hesitation, that sort of one foot in, one foot out attitude, and he knows it's putting them in terrible danger. So what do you do? How do you convince someone not to turn back from the edge? Well, the author doesn't just write an emotional plea. Nope.

Instead, he builds this incredibly powerful, logical, and just brilliant argument for why Jesus is the only way forward. It's designed to show them exactly what they'd be throwing away. The entire strategy of the book boils down to this one single point.

Jesus is superior. Not just a little different, but the ultimate fulfillment of everything their own Jewish faith had been looking forward to for centuries. He's basically saying, look, why would you go back and stare at the blueprint when the actual building is finished and standing right in front of you? It's about choosing the real thing over its shadow.

So the argument kicks off by comparing the two covenants. On one side, you have the old covenant that came through Moses. It's based on the law, on external rules.

But on the other side, you've got the new covenant in Jesus. And that's all about grace, with the law written right on your heart. He's asking them a pretty blunt question.

Why would you ever go back to the shadow now that the reality is here? And the argument just keeps building. Next up, the priesthood. The old system had human priests, right? They were mortal, they were imperfect, and they had to constantly offer sacrifices for their own sins as well as everyone else's.

But Jesus, the author argues, is a perfect and eternal high priest. He's at the right hand of God forever. It's a clear-cut comparison between something temporary and something that lasts forever.

And this all leads to the final brilliant point about sacrifices. Think about it. The old system demanded an endless cycle of animal sacrifices.

Day after day, year after year, they were just a constant reminder of sin. But Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a single perfect offering. It was made once, for all people, for all time.

It basically fulfilled and ended the need for that whole old system. So the question becomes obvious. Why would you return to something that's now obsolete? Now, after laying out this rock-solid logical case, the author moves on to his masterstroke.

He pulls a story from their own sacred history, a story they all knew by heart, and he uses it as this absolutely chilling and powerful warning. You remember the story, right? The generation of Israelites who were freed from slavery in Egypt- I mean, these people witnessed unbelievable miracles. The Red Sea parting, food literally falling from the sky.

They were led right to the very edge of the land God had promised them. And then, at the final moment, they refused to go in. They just failed to believe God's promise.

Just think about the tragedy of that for a second. They had come so far. They were right there, within touching distance of their destination, a place they called rest.

But because of their disobedience, their unbelief, that whole generation was barred from entering. They forfeited the promise right at the finish line. And that word right there, rest, that is the key that unlocks this entire warning.

The author uses that one word to build a direct bridge from that ancient failure to the crisis his readers were facing right now. See, for that generation, wandering in the wilderness, rest meant something physical: finally settling down in the promised land of Canaan, being safe from their enemies. But the author of Hebrews says, hold on, that was just a preview.

That was just a shadow of a much bigger reality. The ultimate true rest is the spiritual salvation and peace that you can only find in Jesus Christ. And this is where the warning hits with its full force.

The author basically looks his readers in the eye and says that story isn't just ancient history. It's about you right now. You are standing on the brink of a far greater rest, and you are in danger of making the exact same fatal mistake your ancestors did.

So the message couldn't possibly be any clearer. You've been brought to the edge of the ultimate promise. Your ancestors failed at this exact spot because they refused to trust God.

So don't let history repeat itself. I mean, in the simplest terms, the author is just screaming at them, "Don't blow it. And this brings us to the final, urgent conclusion of the whole argument.

The decision these readers were facing wasn't a small one. It had eternal, massive consequences. We're talking about everything being at stake.

The author frames the choice in the starkest terms possible. This isn't a choice between two equally good religions. No, it's a choice between a temporary shadow and the permanent reality it was pointing to.

It's the choice between an old promise and its ultimate glorious fulfillment. This single idea just echoes through the entire book. If you turn back, you lose everything, the fulfillment, the reality, the true rest.

But if you press forward, if you hold on to Christ in faith, no matter what it costs, well, you gain everything. The stakes just could not be any higher. The writer of Hebrews used this urgent, almost shocking approach because he wanted to wake his audience up.

He wanted them to really feel the weight of their decision. And it leaves us with a pretty big question, doesn't it? In a world like ours with endless options and where a belief can sometimes feel kind of casual, does this ancient all-or-nothing warning still have the power to stop us in our tracks and make us think about what we truly believe?