

In These Last Days: The Message of Hebrews The Letter to the Hebrews and to Us

Lesson #1 for January 1, 2022

Scriptures: Hebrews 2:3-4; 3:12-14; 10:36; 13:1-9,13; 1 Peter 4:14,16; 1 Kings 19:1-18; Numbers 13.

1. This lesson will focus on the people to whom the book of Hebrews was written. No one is completely sure of who they were. However, we have some hints. Some have suggested that the book of Hebrews was written to a group of young students who were trying to learn how to become apostles. Notice these words:

The book of Hebrews was initially read and received by the early Christian church as a letter from the apostle Paul. Paul's authorship of Hebrews is indicated by the inclusion of Hebrews among the Pauline epistles in the Greek manuscripts. In the earliest extant manuscripts, dating around A.D. 200, Hebrews is placed right after the epistle of Paul to the Romans. Today, we find Hebrews right before the general epistles of the New Testament: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.

2. Hebrews does not begin the way we expect a letter to begin. Numerous examples could be given from Paul's letters how he started out by addressing a given church or a given individual and then proceeded to what he had to say. There are none of those kinds of introductions in the book of Hebrews. However, at the end of Hebrews in Hebrews 13, we find some suggestions that might give us some clues: See Hebrews 13:22-25.
3. There are three things emphasized in this lesson: (1) The *genre* of Hebrews, (2) The audience for Hebrews, and (3) The "last days" in which the readers of Hebrews were/are living.
4. Was the book of Hebrews an ordinary letter with the greetings at the beginning left off? Or, was it a sermon which was recorded and sent to the churches in the form of a letter?

Paul characterizes his work as a "word of exhortation" (*Heb. 13:22*), which is best understood as an oral discourse. Similarly, during their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas on Sabbath attend the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia. The synagogue leaders ask Paul and Barnabas if they have "any word of exhortation for the people" (*Acts 13:15, NRSV*). Paul stands up and delivers the evangelistic-synagogue sermon, recorded in *Acts 13:16-41*.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.[§]

5. Another suggestion hinting at the idea that Hebrews was a sermon is the fact that Paul addressed his audience in the first-person plural. That is, he used *we/us/our* in a very distinctive manner in the original Greek. Paul was clearly trying to identify with his audience while still asserting his authority in directing them.
6. Another suggestion that this was originally a sermon is as follows:

Third, there are several references to speaking and hearing rather than to writing and reading, which elsewhere characterize Paul's composition. Consider the following examples: "About which we are *speaking* . . ." (*Heb. 2:5, NRSV; emphasis added*); "About this we have much to *say*, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of *hearing*" (*Heb. 5:11, ESV; emphasis added*); "Even though we *speak* in this way" (*Heb. 6:9, NRSV; emphasis added*); "Now the main point in what we are *saying* is this" (*Heb. 8:1, NRSV; emphasis added*); "And what more should I *say*?" (*Heb. 11:32,*

7. Another suggestion that this might have originally been a sermon is the way Paul used exposition and exhortation all through the book. Paul discussed some issues and then talked to his audience about how they should have responded and what they should have done.

In summary, if one looks at Hebrews as a “word of exhortation,” then the conclusion seems inescapable: Hebrews was designed, at least originally, as a sermon. Other elements within the letter that give weight to this conclusion are: (1) the distinctive use of the first-person plural pronoun, (2) the references to hearing and speaking, (3) the alternation between exposition and exhortation, and (4) the manner in which Paul introduces themes subtly and later on develops them.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 14.

8. There are other sermons in the Bible. Matthew 5-7 is known as *the Sermon on the Mount*. However, comparing Matthew with Luke, we might come to the conclusion that what Matthew recorded in Matthew 5-7 was not a single, brief sermon; but rather, it was high points put together from a number of sermons.
9. We also have the very interesting sermon from Stephen recorded in Acts 7 just before his murder by stoning. However, it is quite possible that the book of Hebrews was originally a single longer sermon. It may be the earliest “complete Christian sermon” that we have available to us. And what do we see in this sermon? This sermon is very complicated!
10. The letter seems to be addressed to Christians, both Jews and Gentiles since he made no distinction in this sermon; it is addressed to Christians who after having accepted the Christian message were beginning to experience difficulties. Some were shamed and persecuted. (Hebrews 10:32-34) Others had financial problems. (Hebrews 13:5-6) Others apparently were just tired and had begun to question the real value of their faith. (Hebrews 3:12-13) Do any of these problems sound familiar to you? And Paul’s purpose, of course, was to encourage people and challenge them to continue practicing their Christianity and sharing it with others. In general, those people to whom he was speaking apparently had a wonderful experience at the time of their initial conversion.

Hebrews 2:3-4: ³How, then, shall we escape if we pay no attention to such a great salvation? The Lord himself first announced this salvation, and those who heard him proved to us that it is true. ⁴At the same time God added his witness to theirs by performing all kinds of miracles and wonders and by distributing the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his will.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Hebrews 2:3-4). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].‡

11. This passage implies that the audience of Hebrews had not heard Jesus Himself preach; instead, they had received the gospel from evangelists who had announced to them the good news of “salvation.” Remember that Paul himself had never seen Jesus.
12. More than that, there was a lot of experiential evidence that Christianity had real power. People had been raised from the dead; they had been healed from terrible diseases; demons had been cast out; etc. What would it take to convince you that such stories were true? Miracles are happening even today, although not many people know about them. There are documented stories of people being raised from the dead in our day.
13. One of the most remarkable pieces of evidence that those Christians were experiencing

miraculous things was the fact that they could speak fluently and clearly in any language in which they needed to speak.

This miraculous gift [of speaking other languages at and after Pentecost] was a strong evidence to the world that their commission bore the signet of Heaven. **From this time forth the language of the disciples was pure, simple, and accurate, whether they spoke in their native tongue or in a foreign language.**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 39.2.†‡

14. Paul used examples from the Old Testament to warn his audience not to turn away from God.

Hebrews 12:25-29: ²⁵Be careful, then, and do not refuse to hear him who speaks.

Those who refused to hear the one who gave the divine message on earth did not escape. How much less shall we escape, then, if we turn away from the one who speaks from heaven! ²⁶His voice [the voice of Christ] shook the earth at that time, but now he has promised, “I will once more shake not only the earth but heaven as well.” ²⁷The words “once more” plainly show that the created things will be shaken and removed, so that the things that cannot be shaken will remain.

²⁸Let us be thankful, then, because we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let us be grateful and worship God in a way that will please him, with reverence and awe; ²⁹because our God is indeed a destroying fire.—*Good News Bible*.*† [Does that sound appealing to you? Would you want to give Him a hug? To the people in Paul’s day who worshiped Greek and Roman gods with all sorts of crazy “powers,” it may not have seemed so strange. Our sun is the ongoing source of all life on planet earth; but, if one gets too much exposure, it is dangerous. (Compare Isaiah 33:10-16.)]‡

15. As you think of the conversion of Saul—who later became Paul—on the road to Damascus or the conversion of 3000 people at Pentecost, do you wish that you had had some kind of almost-miraculous conversion like that? Where in or around Jerusalem did all those people get baptized? At local mikvahs? Or, at the pool of Siloam? As you think back at your own conversion, of what do you think?
16. If you think about the pagan societies in which those Christians were trying to practice their Christianity, it should be obvious that their behavior had changed. They had set up a kind of boundary between themselves and their associates. Unfortunately, the Jews had their barriers against Gentiles. This made it more difficult for them to reach out to those in the community. The people in the community felt judged by them. Would that be true of Adventists today? Does that make it more difficult to spread the gospel to others? Hebrews 10 and 13 suggest that many of those young Christians had suffered serious persecution, even losing almost all their possessions.
17. Think about the experience of Paul himself and all that he suffered. (See Acts 16:19-22; Acts 17:1-9; and **2 Corinthians 11:21-29**.) Paul supported himself.
18. For Christians to suffer should not be a surprise. Think of the story of Moses (Hebrews 11:24-26) and of Christians noted in 1 Peter 4:14-16.
19. To better get an overall picture of what happened, consider these words:

To “bear the reproach of Christ” simply meant to identify oneself with Christ and endure the shame and abuse that this association implied. Public animosity against Christians was the result of their distinctive religious commitments. People can get offended by religious practices that they don’t understand or by people whose lifestyle and morals could make others feel

guilty or shamed. By the middle of the first century A.D., Tacitus considered Christians to be guilty of “hatred against mankind.”—Alfred J. Church and William J. Brodribb, trans., *The Complete Works of Tacitus* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), *Annals* 15.44.1.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, December 27].^{†§}

20. So, considering all of those issues, why do you suppose some of the Christians seemed to be falling into a kind of malaise?

Hebrews 2:18: And now he can help those who are tempted, because he himself was tempted and suffered.—*Good News Bible.**

Hebrews 3:12-13: ¹²My fellow-believers, be careful that no one among you has a heart so evil and unbelieving as to turn away from the living God. ¹³Instead, in order that none of you be deceived by sin and become stubborn, you must help one another every day, as long as the word “Today” in the scripture applies to us.—*Good News Bible.**

Hebrews 4:15: Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin.—*Good News Bible.**

Hebrews 10:25: Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.—*Good News Bible.**

21. And the ultimate Example of going through unbelievably difficult times and being treated so poorly would be the example of Christ.

Hebrews 12:3,12-13: ³Think of what he went through; how he put up with so much hatred from sinners! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up....

¹²Lift up your tired hands, then, and strengthen your trembling knees!

¹³Keep walking on straight paths, so that the lame foot may not be disabled, but instead be healed.—*Good News Bible.**

22. It is often the case when people go through exciting times and get all worked up for one reason or another that, later, there is a “let down.” Christian evangelists have found that these are times when the Devil comes with a counterattack. Consider the case of Elijah.

1 Kings 19:1-4: [After Elijah inspired and assisted in the killing of 850 “prophets” who had been employed by Jezebel,] ¹King Ahab told his wife Jezebel everything that Elijah had done and how he had put all the prophets of Baal to death. ²She sent a message to Elijah: “May the gods strike me dead if by this time tomorrow I don’t do the same thing to you that you did to the prophets.” ³Elijah was afraid, and fled for his life; he took his servant and went to Beersheba in Judah.

Leaving the servant there, ⁴Elijah walked a whole day into the wilderness. He stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree and wished he would die. “It’s too much, LORD,” he prayed. “Take away my life; I might as well be dead!”—*Good News Bible.** [That was serious depression! Had he forgotten God’s care? Had he forgotten what God had already done for him?][†]

But a reaction such as frequently follows high faith and glorious success was pressing upon Elijah. **He feared that the reformation begun on Carmel might not be lasting; and depression seized him.** He had been

exalted to Pisgah's top; now he was in the valley. While under the inspiration of the Almighty, he had stood the severest trial of faith; but in this time of discouragement, with Jezebel's threat sounding in his ears, and Satan still apparently prevailing through the plotting of this wicked woman, he lost his hold on God. He had been exalted above measure, and the reaction was tremendous. Forgetting God, Elijah fled on and on, until he found himself in a dreary waste, alone.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 161.1-162.1.†

23. So, what did God do for Elijah? Remember that God had plans soon to take Elijah to heaven in a fiery chariot.

1 Kings 19:5-18: ⁵He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, "Wake up and eat." ⁶He looked round, and saw a loaf of bread and a jar of water near his head. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The LORD's angel returned and woke him up a second time, saying, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." ⁸Elijah got up, ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to walk forty days to Sinai, the holy mountain. ⁹There he went into a cave to spend the night.

Suddenly the LORD spoke to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

¹⁰He answered, "LORD God Almighty, I have always served you—you alone. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed all your prophets. I am the only one left—and they are trying to kill me!"

¹¹ "Go out and stand before me on top of the mountain," the LORD said to him. **Then the LORD passed by and sent a furious wind** that split the hills and shattered the rocks—but the LORD was not in the wind. The wind stopped blowing, and then there was **an earthquake**—but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake, there was **a fire**—but the LORD was not in the fire. **And after the fire, there was the soft whisper of a voice.** [What kind of wind was that? What kind of earthquake? What kind of fire?]

¹³When Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. A voice said to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

¹⁴He answered, "LORD God Almighty, I have always served you—you alone. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed all your prophets. **I am the only one left—and they are trying to kill me.**"

¹⁵The LORD said, "Return to the wilderness near Damascus, then enter the city and anoint Hazael as king of Syria; ¹⁶anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king of Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷Anyone who escapes being put to death by Hazael will be killed by Jehu, and anyone who escapes Jehu will be killed by Elisha. ¹⁸Yet I will leave 7,000 people alive in Israel—all those who are loyal to me and have not bowed to Baal or kissed his idol."—*Good News Bible*.*† [Did Elisha kill anyone on Mount Carmel?]‡

The story of God's dealings with Elijah after Carmel is fascinating because it shows the tender care and wisdom with which God ministers to those who are under distress and who struggle to regain faith. God did several things for Elijah. First, He cared for his physical needs. He provided food and let

him rest. Then, in the cave, He kindly reproved him—“What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:9, NKJV)—and helped him gain a deeper understanding of how He works and fulfills His purposes. God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire—but in a still small voice. Then, God gave Elijah a work to do and reassured him.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, December 29. § [If God was “not in” the wind, earthquake, or fire, who was? Who would have loved to kill Elijah?] †

24. What did God do for Elijah? What might He do for us? Paul emphasized several things:

(1) Christians were/are to care for the physical needs of fellow believers.

(2) They were/are not to gradually “drift away,” developing “an evil heart of unbelief.” (Hebrews 3:12)

(3) Their faith was/is to grow by remembering the importance of consistent attendance at church meetings. (Hebrews 10:25)

25. One of the interesting challenges in understanding Paul’s writings is found in Hebrews 1:2. If Paul was inspired by God, why would he call the people in his day as living “in these last days”? Paul went on later in the book (in Hebrews 9:26-28; 10:25,36-38; and 12:25-28) to suggest that God would return soon and there “would not be long delay.” “God’s promises were about to be fulfilled.” (Hebrews 10:36-38) However, that was almost 2000 years ago! Was that wrong? Was God’s inspiration not adequate? Or, is the problem that we who live in the time after Paul, failed to do what we are supposed to do?

26. Several times, Paul used the example of the Hebrews wandering in the desert as a comparison with the audience to whom he was speaking. We know that on several occasions, the children of Israel were led into fertility cult worship, dancing, and sexual practices which ultimately led to thousands of people dying.

27. And Paul understood well that the environment in which his Christian friends were living was full of immorality and covetousness. Their only safety was to follow the guidance of their teachers and particularly to fix their eyes on Jesus.

28. Notice these words in Hebrews 12:1-4.

Hebrews 12:1-4: ¹As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses round us. [See Hebrews 11.] So then, let us **rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly**, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us. ²Let us **keep our eyes fixed on Jesus**, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right-hand side of God’s throne.

³Think of what he went through; how he put up with so much hatred from sinners! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up. ⁴For in your struggle against sin you have not yet had to resist to the point of being killed.—*Good News Bible*. *†

29. Of course, with our understanding of the nature of man and the state of the dead, it would be correct to say that as soon as someone passes, closing his/her eyes in death, the next thing s/he will see will be the second coming of Jesus. So, for him/her, it would be “the last days”!

30. So, why were the early Christians persecuted?

“Christians adopted a lifestyle that . . . would have been considered antisocial and even subversive. Loyalty to the gods, expressed in pious

attendance at sacrifices and the like, was viewed as a symbol for loyalty to the state, authorities, friends, and family. Worship of the deities was something of a symbol for one's dedication to the relationships that kept society stable and prosperous. By abstaining from the former, Christians (like the Jews) were regarded with suspicion as potential violators of the laws and [as] subversive elements within the empire."—*Perseverance in Gratitude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 12. —[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, December 31]. [Brackets and the content in brackets in the paragraph above are in the Bible study guide.]^{‡§}

31. Is it possible to be “different” because of our Christian beliefs and understanding and not be considered “separate” or “strange” by the world?

32. Are there similarities between the experiences of these people to whom Paul was preaching, and the people living in our day in the period known as *the Laodicean dispensation*? (Revelation 3:14-22)

33. It is interesting to notice that Numbers 13—which Paul referred to with the sending of the 12 spies into Canaan—could give one a very wrong impression if one were to read only Numbers 13. Notice that there were obvious contradictions in the report of the 10 spies.

Numbers 13:23: They came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there they cut off a branch which had one bunch of grapes on it so heavy that it took two men to carry it on a pole between them. They also brought back some pomegranates and figs.—*Good News Bible*.*

Numbers 13:27-28: ²⁷They said to Moses, “We explored the land and found it to be rich and fertile; and here is some of its fruit. ²⁸But the people who live there are powerful, and their cities are very large and well fortified. Even worse, we saw the descendants of the giants there.”—*Good News Bible*.*

34. Then dropping down to verse 32:

Numbers 13:32-33: ³²So they spread a false report among the Israelites about the land they had explored. They said, “That land doesn’t even produce enough to feed the people who live there. Everyone we saw was very tall, ³³and we even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. We felt as small as grasshoppers, and that is how we must have looked to them.”—*Good News Bible*.* [The symbol of two men carrying a huge cluster of grapes on a pole is the symbol used in Israel today for their tourism industry!][‡]

35. But, who were the ones that suggested that they should send spies into Canaan?

Deuteronomy 1:19-25: ¹⁹ “When we reached Kadesh Barnea, ²⁰⁻²¹I said, ‘You have now come to the hill country of the Amorites, which the LORD our God, the God of our ancestors, is giving us. Look, there it is. Go and occupy it as he commanded. Do not hesitate or be afraid.’

²² “**But you came to me and said, ‘Let’s send men ahead of us to spy out the land, so that they can tell us the best route to take and what kind of cities are there.’**

²³ “**That seemed a good thing to do, so I selected twelve men, one from each tribe.** ²⁴They went into the hill country as far as the Valley of Eshcol and explored it. ²⁵They brought us back some fruit they found there, and reported that the land which the LORD our God was giving us was very fertile.”—*Good News Bible*.*[†]

36. So, whose idea was it to send spies? **Was that God's idea? Did the people ask Him?** If they had depended completely on God, there would have been no reason to hesitate! God would have fought the battles for them! (See Exodus 23:20-33.)
37. With some very important words in the book of Hebrews, Paul addressed a group of new Christians. He reminded them of the experience of the Israelites exiting Egypt and also of the conditions of the Gentiles living around them.
38. Do you think Paul's letter would be appropriate for us today? How many of the things that Paul wrote in this letter are issues in our day?

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Last Modified: December 20, 2021