

HOW TO STUDY

HEBREWS

Jeffrey Kranz

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About this guide

A quick read through Hebrews is one of the most encouraging, praise-inducing, shake-you-up experiences you'll ever have. I wrote this guide to give you a framework for studying and understanding one of my favorite books of the Bible.

The Bible wasn't written as one book: it's a library of messages God gave to his people over thousands of years. Because of that, one of the best ways to understand the Bible as a whole is to know what the individual books are about.

This guide focuses on the book of Hebrews, and it should be especially helpful if:

1. You're new to the book of Hebrews.

But this guide will give you a little bit of framework to help you as you start studying it on your own.

2. You're teaching from the book of Hebrews.

The toughest part of planning a lesson is finding where to start. I'll help get your creative teaching juices flowing.

We'll walk through the book of Hebrews asking some basic questions and looking to the Scriptures for answers. By the end of it, you'll have a good idea of the following:

- The book's theme and key verses
- Why the book was written
- What the book is about
- How the book is structured
- Ways to approach the authorship debate
- The covenant backstory of this book

If you're looking for a more in-depth approach to the book of Hebrews, I won't leave you hanging. I've recommended resources for further reading at the end of this book.

About the author

Jeffrey Kranz (that's me) creates Bible-study material at the [Overview Bible Project](#). I'm a Christian who loves studying the Bible and showing off how interesting it is.



I'm not a theologian, nor am I the son of a theologian. But I do have a bachelor's degree from a tiny Christian university and make a living by writing to serve the church. You can read the full-blown bio [here](#).

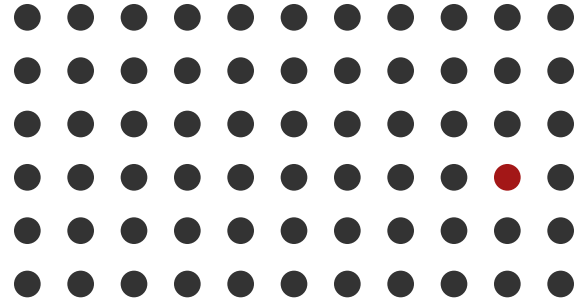
I like chatting with real people, so if you want to talk, you'll find me on Twitter: [@Jeffrey the Red](#).



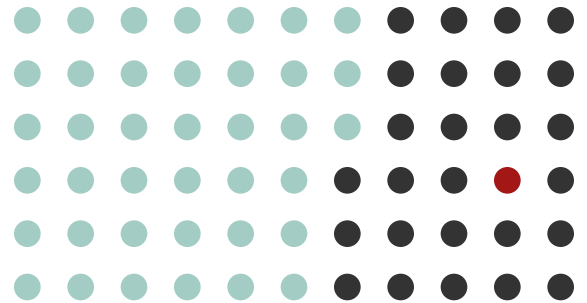
Hebrews and the Bible

Before we dive into the specifics of Hebrews, let's get a point of reference for how Hebrews fits into the Bible as a whole.

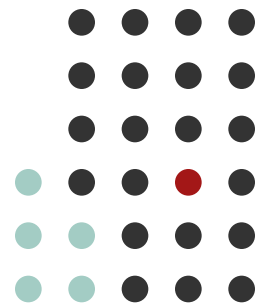
The Bible is made up of 66 smaller books (although my Catholic and Orthodox friends use a few more). Hebrews is number 58 in the lineup.



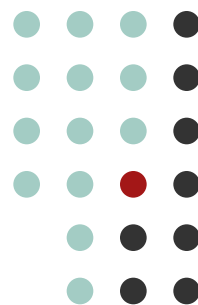
Those books are divided into two parts: the Old and New Testaments. The OT records God's relationship with the world through Israel. The NT shows God's relationship with the world through Jesus. Hebrews is in the New Testament.



The New Testament also falls into two parts: historical narratives and letters (or epistles). The narratives tell the story of Jesus and the early church. The epistles teach Christians how to live in light of what Jesus has done. Hebrews is an epistle.



The epistles are further divided into Pauline and General Epistles. The apostle Paul wrote most of the NT letters to specific people and churches. But the last several books of the Bible are letters from other authors to the church at large. Hebrews is the first of the General Epistles.



So we know Hebrews is a letter written to Christians. That should bring a few questions to mind:

- Who wrote Hebrews?
- To whom was it written?
- Why was it written in the first place?
- What's it all about?

We'll take a closer look at each of these questions. But first, let's do a quick exercise to get more familiar with the whole book.

Next steps

When you get a letter from a friend, do you read a few paragraphs, put it down, and come back to read a little more another day? No way: you read the whole thing. That's how your friend intended you to read it.

Well, Hebrews was written as a letter, so let's treat it the same way. Before moving on to the next section, I recommend reading the whole book of Hebrews in one sitting.

Don't worry: it shouldn't take more than half an hour to read. ;-)



Authors, readers,
and date

Who wrote Hebrews?

That's the question, isn't it?

Most of the letters in the New Testament open by identifying the author. Paul, James, Peter, and Jude always do so, and John identifies himself in Revelation. But the letter of Hebrews has no such introduction, and the writer never identifies himself (or herself) in the letter.

Furthermore, the church hasn't traditionally agreed on who wrote Hebrews. Paul, Barnabas, Priscilla, Apollos—you can find arguments for these people (and others!) being the author Hebrews.

There's one verse that might give us a hint about who *didn't* write the book, though. The author claims that salvation was first spoken through Jesus, then through those who heard Jesus. "Those who heard" then performed signs, wonders, and miracles (Heb 2:3–4).

The author of Hebrews puts himself and the readers in a third category of people: those who heard about Jesus second-hand

from the eyewitnesses. This probably rules out eyewitnesses like Paul and Peter.

However, even though the author wasn't an eyewitness of Jesus, they were pretty important in the church. The author is familiar with the church in Rome, and probably knows Timothy well (13:23–24).

It's a frustrating mystery, but we're not the first ones to struggle with it. Even the ancient theologian Origen says, "Who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows."¹

We sure don't.

1 Eusebius of Caesaria, "The Church History of Eusebius," in Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 273.

Who read it?

The letter is aimed at Christians who, like the author, heard about Jesus via other witnesses (Heb 2:3–4). According to tradition, the epistle is written to (surprise, surprise) Hebrew Christians. The text of the letter never clearly states that the readers are Hebrews, but they must have known a lot about the Old Testament.

For example, the author of Hebrews drops references to all kinds of Jewish history—and it's not all stuff an Old Testament newbie would pick up on. Here are just a few examples:

- Moses, Joshua, and the Sabbath (3:3; 4:8–9)
- Aaron's priesthood and the accompanying rituals (5:1–4)
- God's covenant with Abraham (2:16; 6:13–15)
- Melchizedek, an obscure character from Genesis 14 (7:1–3)
- Various characters from Judges (11:32)

These people may not have been Jewish, but they sure had a handle on the Old Testament.


So our original readers were probably well-versed in the Old Testament. They had probably been Christians for a while, too. They were familiar with the elementary Christian teachings (6:1) and had already suffered for their beliefs (12:4). In fact, they'd been established long enough for the author to think they should have been teaching others (5:12).

When was it written?

Hebrews was probably written around 60 A.D.² The Bible was written over the course of about 1,500 years, from Genesis to Revelation.

Genesis (c. 1400 B.C.)

Revelation (c. 90 A.D.)



Hebrews (and the rest of the New Testament) was written during the last few decades of that time period: after Jesus had risen from the dead and before John saw his apocalypse.

² Demarest, Bruce A, Walter A. Elwell, and Barry J. Beitzel. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volumes 1 and 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988.

Next steps

Read through the book of Hebrews again, and as you do:

1. List everything you can learn about the author. Why is he writing? What does he believe? What does he want?
2. List everything you can learn about the readers. What situation were they in? What do they need to know and believe and remember?



Why Hebrews was written

When I study a book of the Bible, I like to start with three As:

- Author
- Audience
- Aim

We know the first two—sort of. Hebrews is a letter written from some mysterious person (author) to a group of Hebrew Christians (audience).

Now we need to find the aim: why was Hebrews written?

It's very important. Remember: the Bible wasn't written as just one book. Instead, most of the individual books of the Bible were written as stand-alone documents. Each book had a specific author, audience, and aim. We'll understand each individual book better if we know these three As.

Determining a book's aim is important, but it's not always easy. Some authors explicitly tell us why they're writing; others are more subtle.

Explicit statements of purpose

How many times have you written an email that said, "I just wanted to say thanks," or "Just a note to remind you ..."? It's pretty customary for us to explicitly state why we're writing what we're writing.

Sometimes the authors of the Bible do the same thing. Some writers come right out and tell us why they're putting pen to paper. The apostle John may be the best example of this. As John wraps up his story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, he says,

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God;

*and that believing you may have life in His name.
(Jn 20:30–31)*

See how John tells us exactly why he’s writing all this down? That’s the kind of stuff you want to keep your eye out for when you’re reading a book of the Bible for the first time.

Fortunately, the author of Hebrews gives us a few explicit statements of purpose, too.

Hebrews is a letter of exhortation

But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. (13:22)

“Exhortation” isn’t a word we throw around in conversation a lot today. It means “coming alongside,” or an earnest motivation to do God’s will. **Exhortation comforts. Exhortation warns. Exhortation strengthens and establishes.** [[Click here to tweet that.](#)]

And although the author doesn't label his letter until the last few verses, you don't have to wait until the end of the book to learn that this is a letter of exhortation. The epistle is peppered with strong calls to action throughout:

We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. (2:1)

Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. (3:6)

We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end [...] (3:14)

Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. (4:1)

Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall [...] (4:11)

Since we have a great high priest, [...] let us hold fast our confession. (4:14)

Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace [...] (4:16)

Let us press on to maturity [...] (6:1)

We [...] have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. (6:18)

Let us draw near with a sincere heart [...] (10:22)

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful [...] (10:23)

Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds [...] (10:24)

Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with

endurance the race that is set before us [...] (12:1)

Let us show gratitude [...] (12:28)

Let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. (13:13)

Let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. (13:15)

Hebrews is about Jesus' ministry

The author spends a lot of time talking about Jesus, specifically Jesus' role as a priest. The author tells us explicitly that there's a lot to say about this:

And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Concerning him we

have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (5:9–11)

“Woah. Who’s Melchizedek?” We’ll get to him later on.

For now, we just need to know that the author had a lot to say about Jesus’ priesthood.

Hebrews is about reunions

In addition to all the teaching elements of Hebrews, the author has logistics to consider, too. The author wants to let the readers know that he will be visiting soon.

Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner. (13:18–19)

Take notice that our brother Timothy has been

released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. (13:23)

This is pretty common for New Testament epistles. Toward the end of the letter, you'll often find the author's travel plans.

Now that we have a good idea why Hebrews was written, we'll look at the major themes in the book of Hebrews.

Next steps

Now that we know Hebrews is a book of exhortation, you might like to try some of the following exercises:

1. Read through the book in a week (two chapters a day) making a list of all the instructions the author gives to the reader.
2. Write your own letter (or email, or text, or Facebook message) of encouragement to a friend. I'm sure your pastor, your children, your spouse, your boss—hey, I bet anyone would really enjoy it!



Major themes in Hebrews

We've looked at the who and the when and the why: it's time to look at what the author of Hebrews said.

We'll be looking at a few major themes and difficult passages in Hebrews. This guide is just a primer, so we won't go into too much detail.

Major themes in Hebrews

When you read through Hebrews, it's hard to escape a few recurring ideas:

- **Covenant.** The author spends a lot of time discussing agreements between God and mankind. One was made through Moses and the other through Jesus. You can probably guess which one is greater.
- **Priests and sacrifices.** Priests show up all over Hebrews: Aaron and his sons, Melchizedek, and Jesus. He also brings up the sacrifices those priests made, the nature of their offices, and the like.

- **Old Testament heroes.** This book gives many, many nods to the characters of the Old Testament, and not all of them are the ones you heard about in Sunday school.
- **Jesus' superiority to those heroes.** The author brings this up time and time again. **Because of who he is and what he did, Jesus trumps everything and everyone else.** [[Click here to tweet that.](#)]
- **Warnings for believers against giving up.** The readers were coming under fire for their faith (12:4), but the author encourages them to “hold fast” to their confession of Jesus.

Let's explore each of these themes a little more. To save space, I'll give a high-level summary of each theme and give you some references for further reading—so you might want to have your Bible handy for this section.

Covenant

“Covenant” is a word that just keeps coming up when you read the Bible, and it’s a concept that’s especially important to Hebrews. When I started writing this guide, I was going to talk about covenant last—it’s not directly mentioned in the Book of Hebrews as often as the other themes I’ve listed here.

But in order to really understand why these other themes are so prevalent in Hebrews, we need to understand what covenant means. So we’ll start here.

When we hear the word “covenant” today, it sounds like lofty legalese for “contract,” or “agreement.” But covenant is a weighty theme that dominates Scripture.

When the Bible mentions a covenant, it’s referring to a strong, solemn agreement between two parties. However, biblical covenants are very different from the kinds of agreements we make nowadays.

Covenants make two into one. When two parties make a covenant in the Bible, they are joined together and identified with each other. They may exchange coats (1 Sa 18:3–4), have a commemorative meal (Ex 24:11), and erect a long-lasting memorial to their promise (Gn 31:46). At every covenant's core, there is a change in relationship.

Covenants involve promises. People don't just join together at random: the agreement usually includes some kind of practical application. Sometimes it means not harming one another (Gn 31:50). Sometimes it means protecting one another (1 Sa 20). Sometimes it means agreeing not to obliterate a weaker people group (Jos 9:15). In some cases, it can have everlasting consequences—we'll get to those later.

Covenants involve families and bloodlines. In the Bible, two parties may make a covenant that is intended to last for generations. The following generations are automatically included in the covenant, and they share in the duties and benefits. For example, David made a covenant with his friend Jonathan, but after Jonathan died, he still cared for Jonathan's relative, Mephibosheth (2 Sa 9:7).

Covenants are spiritually charged. When Jacob and Laban agree to keep the peace, they don't just say, "I'll do this, you'll do that. OK?" They call God as witness (Gn 31:50). David and Jonathan call God as witness between them, too (1 Sa 20:17). Covenants are taken seriously, and for good reason: two people are joining together based on little more than their words. They trust a divine being to hold them accountable, which means . . .

Covenants are not easily broken. The people making covenants often slaughter animals to demonstrate what should happen to the one who breaks the covenant. To break a covenant is a serious thing. Jonathan calls on God to kill him if he does not alert David of danger (1 Sa 20:13). When Saul breaks a covenant his forefathers swore to the Gibeonites, God punishes Israel with a three-year famine (2 Sa 21:1–2).

When the Bible speaks of covenant, it's usually more than just an alliance, and certainly more than a transaction of goods and services: it's a bond that God Himself holds people to.

Much of the Bible's story is shaped around the covenants between God and man. The author of Hebrews spends a lot of time

discussing the covenant God made with Israel through Moses.

This covenant begins in the book of Exodus. After rescuing the people of Israel from Pharaoh, God leads them to Mount Sinai. And then something truly awesome happens.

God speaks directly to an entire nation at once.

And what does God say? “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:2). God then tells his new nation what to do about it. He gives a short list of expectations—a list we know as the Ten Commandments.

That one speech God makes from the mountain, just 246 words long (in its original language), kicks the rest of the Old Testament into gear. This is the Law of Moses, the first covenant, God’s solemn agreement with Israel. The next 37-and-a-half books of the Old Testament explain the Law and tell us how this covenant plays out.

But the people can’t handle the presence of God (He 12:18–21), and they sure can’t meet God’s expectations. Therefore, the people of

Israel needed sacrifices—and priests to offer them. So it shouldn't be a surprise that the book of Hebrews talks about these a great deal.

Priests and sacrifices

Again, the words “priest” and “sacrifice” carry really, really different connotations to different people. So before we look at what Hebrews says on priests and sacrifices, let's look at what the author has in mind when he brings them up.

- Sacrifice: something or someone that dies so that someone else can live.
- Priest: someone who mediates between God and the people.

After God had rescued Israel from Egypt and made a covenant with them, the Lord set up a system of priests and sacrifices. The responsibility of priesthood fell to Aaron, Moses' brother. The office of high priest was passed on through Aaron's bloodline.

The people would break God's commandments, and the price for their sin was death. But instead of the people dying, the high priest would sacrifice an animal: the animal died so the people could live.

But the people would keep sinning after that, so the priest had to do this every year. **Animal sacrifice was a Band-Aid solution. It couldn't fix the real problem: people sin.** [[Tweet that, if you like.](#)]

Plus, even the priests couldn't live sinless lives! The high priest had to kill a separate animal for himself just to cover his own sins. Only then could he go before God and offer a sacrifice for the rest of the people (7:27).

People needed a better priest to mediate between them and God. We needed someone who was sinless enough to go before God, but human enough to sympathize with us. So God sent Jesus to be our great high priest (4:14–15, 7:26).

People also needed a better sacrifice. We needed a sacrifice that wouldn't expire every year. We needed a sacrifice that could make us new. We needed a sacrifice that would finally make peace

between us and God. Animals just wouldn't cut it. So God sent Jesus to be our great sacrifice (7:27).

Jesus is the priest and Jesus is the sacrifice. These themes show up all through Hebrews, but especially in the center of the book: chapters 7–10.

“Hey, wait a second. How is Jesus a high priest? He's not even from Aaron's bloodline!”

The author knows this is running through his readers' minds. So he spends a good deal of the book explaining that Jesus isn't a priest of Aaron's order. Jesus' priesthood is a lot more like that of another Old Testament character.

Which leads us to the next major theme of Hebrews: Old Testament heroes.

Old Testament heroes

The book of Hebrews is chock-full of references to the Old Testament. The author name-drops all kinds of characters from the Jewish Scriptures, both the famous ones and the obscure ones.

For example, the author mentions a few names you probably recognize:

- **Moses**, the one who lead Israel from Egypt and gave God's laws to the people. You can read the full story of Moses in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but the deacon Stephen gives us the abbreviated version in Acts 7:20–39.

The author of Hebrews sets up Moses as a servant in the household of God (3:3–6), the one who gave God's laws regarding the priests (7:14), the one who set up the first tabernacle (8:5), and the one who sealed the people of Israel into an agreement with God (9:18–21). Moses is also a case study of persevering faith (11:23–29).

- **David**, the God-anointed king of Israel, the one whom God promised would always have an heir on the throne. The author quotes David's Psalms often, and drops David's name when encouraging the readers not to harden their hearts (4:7). David is also an example of faith: one who conquered kingdoms and acted righteously and received promises from God (11:32–33). You can read the whole story of David in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles.
- **Abraham**, the father of Israel. Back in the book of Genesis, God singles out one man from the rest of the world—the man we know as Abraham. God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him a nation and a land. God says that through Abraham, the entire world will be blessed. The author of Hebrews brings up the promises God made to Abraham (6:13) and Abraham's faith in those promises (11:8–19).

Noah's ark. Daniel's lions. Cain and Abel. Jacob, Joshua, Samson, Samuel—your favorite Sunday-school stories all get a shout-out in Hebrews.

The author doesn't just stick to the Old-Testament hits, though. In fact, he mentions some characters you may never have heard of. In the eleventh chapter, the author lists examples of faith in the Old Testament. Along with the big-time heroes, the author mentions a few obscure ones, like Rahab the harlot and Jephthah the judge (11:31–32).

But there's one super-obscure character who gets far more attention than any of the famous Old Testament people we've listed thus far: Melchizedek.

Don't feel bad if you've never heard of him before reading Hebrews. Melchizedek (pronounced "mel-KIZZ-uh-deck") is only mentioned two other times in Scripture. If the Bible were a movie, Melchizedek would be one of those blink-and-you'll-miss-it roles.

It's an important story, though—it's key to understanding the book of Hebrews. So let's get a quick recap on who Melchizedek is before we move onto the next major theme. (If you already know who Melchizedek is, I won't bore you—meet me on page 41.)

In Genesis chapter 12, God speaks directly to a man named Abram

(he's later named Abraham). God calls Abraham to leave his father's household and move to a new land—a land God plans to give him. Abraham takes off for the land of Canaan with his wife and his nephew Lot.

But Abraham and Lot have an issue: they're both just too wealthy to travel together. Sounds like the original "first world problem," right? But it's a true cause for concern. In Abraham's time, wealth is a function of livestock, and both men have plenty. The problem: animals eat a lot of grass. The fields just can't sustain all those sheep and cows and donkeys. Abraham's herdsman and Lot's herdsman aren't on the friendliest of terms, either—they are competing for the same grass space (Gn 13:1–6).

So Abraham says to Lot: "We need to split up. You pick a direction to take your people, and I'll go the other way." Lot goes east and Abraham goes west.

That works fine, until war breaks out in the area. Lot's town is sacked, and he's taken as a hostage (along with all his animals). A few of Lot's neighbors escape, and one makes his way back to Abraham to relay the bad news.

So Abraham goes on the offensive. He divvies up his men, and starts raiding Lot's captors by night. His guerilla warfare tactics work, too: he rescues Lot, drives the enemy completely out of the land, and returns to Canaan with all the spoils.

This is when we meet Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is the king of Salem, a nearby city-state. He's also a priest of the Lord. When he sees Abraham returning, Melchizedek brings bread and wine out to Abraham. He gives Abraham a meal, and then gives Abraham a blessing:

*Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.
(Gn 14:19–20)*

And Abraham gives Melchizedek ten percent of all the spoils from battle.

[Welcome back to everyone who skipped here from page 38!]

Now, remember how the author of Hebrews says Jesus isn't like the priests from Aaron's bloodline? That's because Jesus is a different kind of priest: Jesus is like Melchizedek.

- Melchizedek was a king. Jesus is the king, the heir of David.
- Melchizedek was the king of Salem. "Salem" means "peace" in Hebrew. Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Is 9:6).
- Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness" (He 7:2). Jesus is the king who rules with righteousness.

Melchizedek is the Old Testament hero the author uses to describe Jesus' ministry as a priest—and it's a far greater ministry than Aaron's descendants could ever pull off.

You've probably picked up on a pattern in these major themes thus far: they all involve some kind of contrast. Covenant is a major theme, but the author talks about two covenants. Priests are important in Hebrews, but there are two orders of priests. Sacrifices

are key to the book, but there are two kinds of sacrifices. And there's no Old Testament hero who can hold a candle to the Hero of the New Testament.

If you've already noticed this, then you've probably already worked out another major theme in Hebrews.

The supremacy of Jesus Christ

This is the pinnacle of Hebrews. It's the major major theme—the main main point: **Jesus is greater.**

No other book of the Bible so powerfully demonstrates Jesus' supremacy. Throughout Hebrews, the author compares Jesus to the heroes and icons of the Jewish faith. Each hero played a part, but Jesus' status, Jesus' sacrifice, Jesus' covenant, and Jesus' ongoing ministry are far, far greater than anything the others have to offer.

Whenever you study a book of the Bible, you want to make a list of everything you learn about God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. As you read Hebrews, you'll want to make a special list of all

the ways Jesus is superior. I'll touch on a few here, just to get your wheels turning.

Jesus is greater than the angels. This is the first thing the author gets out of the way. Angels are a big deal in the Old Testament; they even prompt some of the text (Da 8:16, 9:21; Zec 1:9). But if you think angels are great, you really need to check out Jesus. Jesus is the divine King of Heaven (Heb 1:4, 6, 8), whose name, position, and deeds surpass any angel's. Ever.

Jesus is greater than Moses. Moses wrote more of the Bible than any other human. He's the greatest of the Old Testament prophets (Dt 34:10). He leads the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and writes down the terms of that old covenant between Israel and God (called the Law). But while Moses is the iconic servant of God, Jesus is the Son of God—and that trumps Moses big time (Heb 3:3–4).

Jesus is greater than Joshua. Joshua takes over when Moses dies in the book of Deuteronomy. He's the one who finally brings the Israelites into the promised land. Through Joshua, Israel finds rest from her wanderings and her enemies (Jos 11:23; 14:15; 21:43–45).

But as great as Joshua's rest is, Jesus brings an even greater rest to the people of God (Heb 4:8–9).

Jesus is greater than Aaron. We've already looked at priests and sacrifices, but it's important enough for a quick recap. Aaron and his descendants have two major weaknesses:

- Aaron's priests are mortal, so there's always a need for more priests to make sacrifices for the people's sins. Oh, and ...
- Aaron's priests are sinners. So when Aaron and the priests minister, they first have to make sacrifices for their own sins, and then make sacrifices for the sins of the people.

However, Jesus is both sinless and immortal, which makes him a far greater priest for us (Heb 7:26–28).

But not only is Jesus better than any other human religious figure—He also has a better ministry after ushering in a better covenant built on better promises with a better sacrifice, that is, Jesus Christ Himself (Heb 7:22; 8:6; 9:12).

You might wonder, “Why the emphasis on Jesus’ superiority? Wasn’t that pretty much common knowledge to the Christians?”

Good question. There’s one more dominant theme we should look at to put this in perspective.

Encouragement to hold fast to Jesus

We noticed when we first started studying the recipients that the church was going through some tough times. You also recall that these were predominantly Hebrew Christians: folks who grew up Jewish and then believed in Jesus as Messiah.

But these people were having a hard time, and there are a few decent reasons why:

- The Roman world wasn’t very fond of Jews.
- The Romans weren’t big fans of the Christians, either.

- The Jews thought the Christians were heretics and blasphemers.

So if you were a Jewish Christian, you didn't have it easy. Your culture disliked you and your family disowned you.

In this light, you can imagine how the Hebrew Christians might have thought, "Aw, man. Is this Christianity thing worth it? Did I make the wrong call? Should I just go back to the old Jewish way? The Law was given by God after all"

The author of Hebrews anticipates this—that's why this epistle is a long list of reasons to cling to the Lord Jesus Christ. He also throws in a few warnings against turning away from the faith. As you read through Hebrews, keep an eye out for these exhortations to hold fast to Jesus.

Next steps

Whew! We've covered a lot of ground. This is one of the meatiest parts of studying a book of the Bible: discovering and exploring its

major themes. We've only covered some of the larger ones that will give you some context as you study the book of Hebrews.

Now comes the fun part: exploring how the author teases these themes out.

I recommend you read through the epistle and list everything you learn about these major themes. You may want to list them in the margins of your Bible, or on a piece of notebook paper, or just type them out in your note format of choice.



Structure of Hebrews

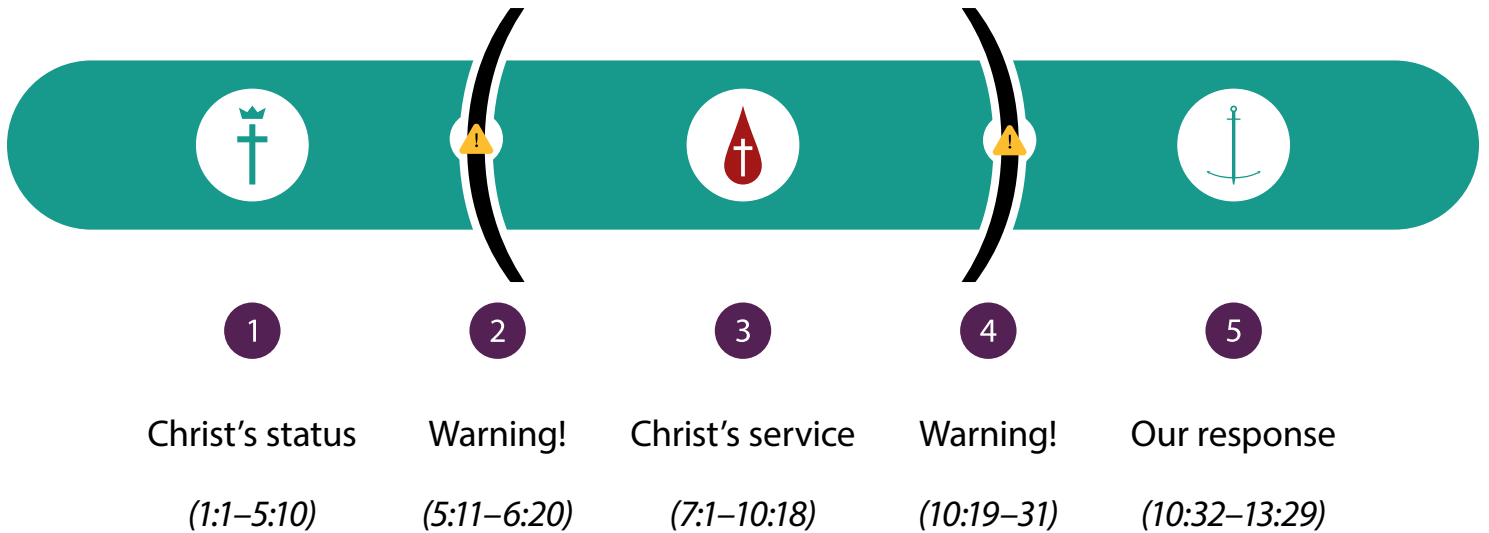
The structure of Hebrews

Now that we've seen what Hebrews is about, there's one more piece that we want to tackle: how the pieces of the book fit together.

Structure is an important part of Bible study. One of the best ways to understand what the Bible says is to look at how it's arranged. It's a matter of context: when you have the big picture, the little pictures become a lot easier to understand.

So let's take a look at the big picture of Hebrews. If you've been following the "Next steps" segments of this ebook, you've already read through the book several times. You may have already picked up on the way the book is structured.

The next page will give you a general roadmap for the epistle of Hebrews, and then we'll discuss the different blocks one at a time.



1. Christ's superior status (1:1–5:10)

The author opens with the case for Christ's superiority. Long ago, God spoke through prophets, but now God has spoken through his Son. The first five chapters show how Jesus is greater than angels, the devil, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron. The author also exhorts the readers to cling to Jesus: he's the best.

But just as the author starts describing Jesus as the perfect priest, he switches gears.

2. Don't slow down now! (5:11–6:20)

The author has a lot to say on the point of Jesus' priestly service (part 3), but knows it won't be easy to explain. The readers should already understand this stuff—in fact, they should be able to teach these truths to other people (5:12). But instead they have grown “dull of hearing” (5:11), and are getting rusty on discerning good from evil (5:14).

The author warns the readers of what happens to those who turn away from Jesus (6:4–8), and encourages the readers to instead imitate the patient, faithful believers (6:12).

3. Christ's superior service (7:1–10:18)

This is the theological climax of Hebrews. Now that the author has addressed his concern for the readers, he starts explaining Jesus' ministry as our great high priest.

The author explores how Jesus is a priest according to Melchizedek's order, not Aaron's. Then he talks about how the

covenant that Jesus put in place makes the old one (and its sacrifices) obsolete. Then he tells us how Jesus' blood was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, and how Jesus is the mediator between God and man.

Jesus is both the greater priest and the greater sacrifice of a greater covenant with greater results. [[You know you want to tweet that.](#)]

4. Hold fast! (10:19–31)

Now, in light of how great a work Christ has done, how should the “dull of hearing” readers respond? The author encourages them to “hold fast the confession of hope without wavering” (10:23). Instead of being “sluggish,” (6:12), they should push each other to love and perform good deeds (10:24). Because if someone knows how supreme Jesus is and they *still* choose to keep sinning, they're toying with the judgment of God.

5. Our steadfast response

Now the readers have heard the message. They're reminded of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. What should they do?

They've been saved. They've suffered for Christ's sake (10:32–33). Now they need endurance. And the author gives them a long list of people who have endured—we know them as the Hebrews 11 “Hall of Faith.” The readers should accept God's discipline and live God-honoring lives.

Because Jesus is greater, the readers (and we, too) should be anchored steadfastly in Him.

Next steps

If you found this structure helpful, you can download it free by [clicking here](#).

Now you've got a high-level idea of what Hebrews is about, and you're ready to dive in for yourself!

Well done!

You've reached the end of this ebook, but you've barely scratched the surface of Hebrews. Now comes the really fun part: studying the book in depth.

If you want to keep studying Hebrews, I recommend [*The Key to Living by Faith: Hebrews*](#) by Kay Arthur and Pete De Lacy. If it weren't for Kay's ministry, I wouldn't be writing this. And yes, that's an Amazon affiliate link, which means if you buy this book, a few dimes go toward me and the Overview Bible Project. So thanks in advance!

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If this ebook helped you appreciate and understand Hebrews, maybe you know someone else who would enjoy it. I bet they'd love to get a free ebook from you!

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