

HEBREW PREP SERIES

STANDING FIRM IN CHRIST

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON

and RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

HEBREWS

REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING HEBREWS

There is a scene from Jesus’s ministry that wonderfully depicts the **main theme** of the book of Hebrews. In Matthew 17, we are told that Jesus took his three closest disciples onto the mount, where they saw him being transfigured in glory and speaking with Moses and Elijah. Peter, one of the disciples, proposed that a tabernacle be built for the veneration of these three spiritual giants. Just then, however, the shekinah glory cloud enveloped them in brightness and the voice of God sounded: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matt. 17:5). When the disciples rose from their terror, they saw neither Moses nor Elijah, but Jesus alone. So it is in the book of Hebrews, which highlights the supremacy of Christ in his person and work and presents faith in him as being necessary for salvation.

Hebrews contains the most concentrated Christology—doctrine of Christ—in all the New Testament. Yet it was written not as a theological text. It is, instead, a sermon in letter form—its author describes Hebrews as “my word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22). The situation of his **audience** is made clear by the contents of the message. They were Jewish Christians who were experiencing persecution from the community in which they lived because of their faith in Jesus as the Son of God and promised Messiah. To be Christian meant repudiating their Jewish heritage, they were being told—making them traitors to their people. For them to join the church thus risked their expulsion from the synagogue, along with all the dire social implications this involved. Although they had not yet suffered violent persecution (see Heb. 12:4), they were experiencing social, economic, and relational exclusion from the society in which they had been raised. It is clear that powerful arguments were being leveled against their faith in Christ—all with the aim of persuading these Christians to deny

Jesus and regain social acceptance. In answer to this threat, the writer of Hebrews reminds his readers that there is no salvation apart from faith in Christ. The aim of Hebrews is therefore to encourage and exhort harassed Christians to remain faithful to their Lord, regardless of the cost.

It is not difficult to imagine the kinds of arguments that were being employed to dissuade these followers of Christ from their new faith. Playing on the fact that these believers, who were living in the mid-first century A.D., had not personally seen or heard Jesus, the Jews argued that he was only a man—the son of a poor carpenter from a backwater village. Jesus was an enthusiast in times of unrest, and his failure as Messiah was proved by his death on a cross—a humiliating execution that marked him as the worst sort of criminal. The real problem came when his deluded followers made outlandish claims that Jesus had risen from the grave and when they actually worshiped him as God. These were potent arguments—especially when they were enforced with such painful social affliction.

Against challenges like these, the writer of Hebrews begins by noting the continuity between Christianity and the Old Testament faith of his readers' fathers: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). Christianity is not a repudiation of Old Testament faith but rather the fulfillment of it! From this beginning, the author advances a series of proofs of Jesus's supremacy over every rival. Hebrews 1 presents biblical texts showing that Christ is the Son of God who is greater than the angels. Jesus is greater than Moses—just as the owner of a house is greater than the house servant (3:1–6). Jesus is supreme over Joshua, who gave Israel rest only in the land of Canaan—whereas the true Savior gives the final rest of salvation glory (4:1–13). Studies of these rich chapters will yield treasures of biblical truth on the deity of Jesus and on his atoning work on the cross to save sinners.

Starting in chapter 5, the writer of Hebrews launches his comparison between Jesus, as the true High Priest of God's people, and the Levitical priests of the Old Testament. Hebrews 5–10 provides the most concentrated and enlightening teaching in the New Testament regarding the priestly work of our Savior and Lord. In the words of John Calvin, "There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which

He offered by His death . . . and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law.”¹

When we see Jesus not only as the true messenger, the true prophet, and the true captain but also as the true priest and the true sacrifice by whom we are delivered from our sins, we embrace the writer’s plea as summed up in Hebrews 10:23: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

The author’s **method** is to cite an Old Testament text that foretells the coming of the Messiah and then to show its fulfillment in Jesus and apply its message to the struggling hearts of his readers. One of his primary texts is Psalm 95, in which God warns against the danger of hardening one’s heart and drifting from the gospel. By appealing to these Christ-centered Old Testament passages, Hebrews warns against the eternally dreadful results of forsaking Jesus, provides insight into the challenges that believers must face, and points out the importance of mutual exhortation among fellow Christians if they are to remain faithful. When you combine its forceful presentation of the supremacy of Christ with the author’s persistent exhortations to his readers to endure in faith, together with the classic examples of faithfulness in “the Hall of Faith” of Hebrews 11 and the many searching applications in the final chapters, Hebrews is a uniquely valuable book of the New Testament that speaks powerfully to challenges that Christians face today.

Three perennial questions that are asked about Hebrews are relevant to our study of this text. First, *who wrote the book of Hebrews?* Since the **author** never identifies himself, theories and guesses have abounded. There are good reasons why the apostle Paul is the most common answer to this question, as was assumed by many in church history. For one thing, the contents of Hebrews sound Pauline, especially since the book alludes to one of Paul’s favorite lines when it says, “my righteous one shall live by faith” (Heb. 10:38). Moreover, Hebrews 13:23 refers to Timothy—one of Paul’s known protégés. On this basis, the writer must have had an association with Paul. Yet there are reasons why Paul is not likely to have written Hebrews. One telling sign is the style of the Greek writing in Hebrews, which follows a higher literary quality than the more common Greek of Paul’s letters. Most conclusive is

1. John Calvin, *Hebrews and 1 & 2 Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1.

the statement of Hebrews 2:3, which says that the author’s message “was attested to us by those who heard”—meaning that he himself was not an eye- or earwitness of Christ. Yet, in Galatians 1:12, Paul explicitly denies that he received the gospel secondhand and asserts that he received it directly from the Lord.

When Paul is removed from consideration, other authorial candidates abound. Suggestions include some of Paul’s associates, such as Luke, Silas, Priscilla, Barnabas, and Apollos. In the end, we must agree with the ancient scholar Origen, who concluded, “Who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows.”² Indeed, since the Holy Spirit was pleased not to reveal the author of this book, we must content ourselves with knowing that it is the Word of God and was inspired through the pastoral concern of God’s faithful human instrument.

Although we have described the spiritual challenge of the letter’s recipients, another question is raised: *Were these Jewish Christians living in or near Rome or in Palestine?* Those who argue for a Palestinian **audience** point out the letter’s doctrinal affinities with the Essene community near the Dead Sea. Against this view is the fact that, while this letter states that its recipients had not yet shed blood for their faith, such violent persecution had existed in and around Jerusalem since the beginning of the church. Recent scholarly consensus has shifted in the direction of Rome—in part because Clement of Rome, in a writing from around A.D. 95, showed familiarity with this letter. Moreover, the books of Romans and Acts describe a large Jewish church that had been in Rome from early on. Hebrews 13:24 adds, “Those who come from Italy send you greetings,” which also supports Rome as the location of this struggling church. As for the letter’s date, almost all scholars place it in the mid-60s, when persecution against Christians was rising in Rome, and before the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple in the year 70—an event that would likely have been mentioned in Hebrews if it had already occurred.

Finally, *is Hebrews canonical—that is, should it be included among the New Testament books?* The early church’s basic test for **canonicity** was proof of apostolicity. This did not mean that a book had to be written by an apostle, as is shown by the ready inclusion of Mark, Luke, and Acts. It was sufficient

2. Quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. 6, chap. 25, par. 14.

if the author was an associate of an apostle, as long as the book's teaching was apostolic in character. We should not think, however, that it was the church that created the canon—the reality is exactly the opposite. The canon—that is, the apostolic teaching of the New Testament message—created the church.

Hebrews seems to have been a later addition to the canon, since it is not listed in the first known roster of approved New Testament writings—the *Muratorian Fragment* (ca. 170–180). The most likely reason for this exclusion is that during these years of persecution it had not spread to all the churches. It did not take long, however, before the imprimatur of the Holy Spirit on this book, together with the sheer excellence of its contents, led God's people to recognize it. John Calvin, in the dedication to his commentary on the book, not only commends the church's acceptance of Hebrews but also hails its great value to those who study it with care and in faith: "Since the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews contains a full discussion of the eternal divinity of Christ, His supreme government, and only priesthood (which are the main points of heavenly wisdom), and as these things are so explained in it, that the whole power and work of Christ are set forth in the most graphic way, it rightly deserves to have the place and honor of an invaluable treasure in the Church."³

Richard D. Phillips
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Bible Study series
Author of *Hebrews* (REC)

3. Calvin, *Hebrews and 1 & 2 Peter*, ix.

LESSON 1

A SUPERIOR LORD AND SAVIOR

Hebrews 1:1–14

THE BIG PICTURE

If one could summarize the book of Hebrews in just one word, it may well be the one that is used to describe Jesus in relation to the angels in 1:4—*superior*. Hebrews is a glorious exposition of the Old Testament Scriptures—one that makes manifest the absolute superiority of Jesus Christ above all and exhorts us to follow in the footsteps of all those who have placed their faith in him in the past. The author of Hebrews is unknown, though he almost certainly writes to predominantly Jewish believers who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah.

Hebrews 1, specifically, demonstrates Jesus’s superiority over the angels of heaven—those glorious (yet still created) beings who dwell with God and serve his purposes. Jesus, the “radiance of the glory of God” (1:3), is distinct from even these angelic creatures—he holds the unique position of “begotten Son” of God (see 1:5). Not only did Jesus die to make purification for sinners, but he is also the one who will reign forever on the great throne of God (1:8). Jesus possesses an utterly unique relationship with the Father, who will ultimately deliver the nations to his gracious rule (1:12–13). The author of Hebrews grounds much of this argument in the words of the Old Testament Scriptures, which point toward Jesus as the Messiah—the promised King and Savior of all. This chapter soars with a declaration of the absolute supremacy and superiority of Jesus Christ—the Savior, King, and exalted Son of God. Even the angelic hosts,

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. With what subject does the author of Hebrews begin? Why might this be significant, particularly for the original audience of Jewish believers who received this epistle?
4. Look at the sheer amount of Old Testament Scripture that is quoted in this first chapter of Hebrews. What does this tell you about the perspective and intent of the author of this epistle?
5. In what ways does the author of Hebrews exalt Jesus throughout this first chapter? What titles does he give to him? What accomplishments are attributed to Jesus—both in the past and in the future?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. How did God speak to his people throughout the age of the Old Testament, according to Hebrews 1:1? In what way has God spoken in “these last days,” and how is this different from before (1:2)? What do we learn about God in just these opening two verses of Hebrews?

7. What claims are made about the divinity and supremacy of Jesus Christ in Hebrews 1:2–4? What does the author assert that Jesus has accomplished for God’s people? Why might these claims about Jesus be so important to make at the outset of this epistle?

8. What might the author’s mention of “angels” suggest about false teachings that may have circulated in the church when this letter was written (1:4)? Why might it be important to affirm that Jesus is exalted above the angels of heaven—even in our context today?

9. Why would the author of Hebrews choose the first two Old Testament references that he quotes in this chapter (Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14) to establish Jesus as being superior to angels (Heb. 1:5)? How are the angels commanded to respond to Jesus, and how does this further establish the author’s point (1:6)?

A Perfect Revelation, pgs. 19–20

This passage exalts Christ not only as Lord of all but also as the one who perfectly reveals God in all his glory. He is the true king, but also the final prophet. . . . Without the Son we remain in the dark regarding the glory of God. But with the Son we have an ideal—indeed, a perfect—revelation of God.

13. Read Colossians 1:15–20, which is sometimes called the “Christ Hymn” of Paul’s letter to the Colossian church. What similarities do you see between the claims about Jesus that both Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 make? What differences do you observe between them?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that “God hath appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father” (33.1). How is this truth clearly taught and affirmed in Hebrews 1? Which Old Testament references does the chapter use to defend this teaching?

15. The heresy of Arianism, which ultimately taught that Jesus was a created being, was roundly condemned at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. How might you use Hebrews 1 to counter the teaching that Jesus is a created being rather than the eternally existent God?

PRAYER PROMPT

Today, as you complete your study of this first chapter of the book of Hebrews, spend some time praising God for his clear, final, sufficient revelation. Thank him for the Bible, and ask him to enable you to see it as the gift it truly is. Pray that you would appreciate more deeply the beauty of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, his Son. Then spend some time confessing the deficient views and perspectives that you are tempted to have concerning Jesus. Ask God to expand your understanding of Jesus's glory, supremacy, sufficiency, and eternal glorious reign, and pray that these truths would encourage you in the midst of suffering, hardship, and struggle.