

1. Jesus and the Book of Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 1:1-3; 2:3; 2:11; 13:8.

Quotes:

- The book of Hebrews is “a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles.” William Lane.
- Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen. J. Oswald Sanders.
- It were better to have no opinion of God at all, than such an opinion as is unworthy of Him. Francis Bacon.
- If God has created us in his image, we have repaid him well. Voltaire.
- We treat God as the police treat a man when he has been arrested; whatever He does will be used in evidence against him. C.S. Lewis.
- Only God is permanently interesting. Other things we may fathom, but he out-tops our thought and can neither be demonstrated nor argued down. John F. Newton.

Introductory questions

How would you sum up the theme of Hebrews? What is the major point of the book—and why is this important? The introduction says that Jesus came to make things clearer. How does Hebrews help in this? Much of Hebrews is about faith—so how do we define and explain faith to those around us—especially to those who may completely misunderstand what faith is all about? How do we pay attention to the subject? Who is the Jesus revealed in the book of Hebrews?

Discussion ideas

Hebrews 1:1-3 identifies Jesus as the most complete revelation of God. Though God has spoken in other ways and through human beings in the past, Jesus is the clearest picture of God—because he is God. Consequently Jesus is the primary focus of the book and happily the lessons concentrate on Jesus as he is described.

The matter of authorship is dealt with very briefly in the lesson quarterly. However it is important to note the long historical debate over who wrote Hebrews—for the language and imagery is very different from the other books associated with Paul. Unlike all the other letters of Paul, he does not give his name to Hebrews. But this should not disturb us overmuch, for others were used by Paul to write out his letters—note for example Romans 16:22 in which Tertius, the letter writer, adds his greetings. Perhaps the best place to leave the debate is that Luke or another scribe had greater leeway to write out Pauline ideas in the book of Hebrews.

The primary emphasis is on Jesus as God, as the one who “mediates” the truth about God, as the fullest and clearest description of the nature and character of God. Most of all is the encouragement to hold onto a trusting relationship with the God revealed by Jesus.

It seems that the Hebrews were losing faith, that they were beginning to doubt, and that the meaning and purpose of the Old Testament was unclear. Paul is writing as a Hebrew to the Hebrews, to explain how things tie together, drawing on his rich knowledge and experience.

What is the relevance for us? Are we losing faith by degrees? How do we see and understand God? What is our message about God to those around us? Can we like Paul help to “put it all together” to those we speak to?

Ellen White Comments on Jesus in Hebrews

He [Christ] represented God not as an essence that pervaded nature, but as a God who has a personality. Christ was the express image of His Father's person; and He came to our world to restore in man God's moral image, in order that man, although fallen, might through obedience to God's commandments become enstamped with the divine image and character--adorned with the beauty of divine loveliness (MS 24, 1891). {7BC 921.9}

Those who have a true knowledge of God will not become so infatuated with the laws of matter or the operations of nature as to overlook, or refuse to acknowledge, the continual working of God in nature. Nature is not God, nor was it ever God. The voice of nature testifies of God, but nature is not God. As His created work, it simply bears a testimony to God's power. Deity is the author of nature. The natural world has, in itself, no power but that which God supplies. There is a personal God, the Father; there is a personal Christ, the Son. (Heb. 1:1-3 quoted). {1SM 293.1}

His name shall be called Immanuel, . . . God with us." "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God" is seen "in the face of Jesus Christ." From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father; He was "the image of God," the image of His greatness and majesty, "the outshining of His glory." It was to manifest this glory that He came to our world. To this sin-darkened earth He came to reveal the light of God's love,--to be "God with us." Therefore it was prophesied of Him, "His name shall be called Immanuel."

By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels. He was the Word of God,--God's thought made audible. In His prayer for His disciples He says, "I have declared unto them Thy name,"--"merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,"--"that the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them." But not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe. {DA 19.1-2}

(Hebrews 2:1-3 quoted). We are neglecting our salvation if we give authors who have but a confused idea of what religion means, the most conspicuous place and devoted respect, and make the Bible secondary. Those who have been enlightened in reference to the truth for these last days will not find instruction in the books generally studied today, in regard to the things which are coming upon our world; but the Bible is full of the knowledge of God, and is competent to educate the student for usefulness in this life and for the eternal life. {FE 403.2}

Study carefully the first chapter of Hebrews. Become interested in the Scriptures. Read and study them diligently. "In them ye think ye have eternal life," Christ said, "and they are they which testify of Me." It means everything to us to have an experimental and individual knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, "whom He hath sent." "For this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent." {FE 404.1}

Extra material

Refer paper "The Divine Christ"

2. Jesus, Our King

Texts: Hebrews 1; John 19:1-15.

Quotes

- Yesterday we obeyed kings and bent our necks before emperors. But today we kneel only to truth, follow only beauty, and obey only love. Kahlil Gibran.
- The supreme, the merciless, the destroyer of opposition, the exalted King, the shepherd, the protector of the quarters of the world, the King the word of whose mouth destroys mountains and seas, who by his lordly attack has forced mighty and merciless Kings from the rising of the sun to the setting of the same to acknowledge one supremacy. Ashurnasipal, King of Assyria.

Introductory questions

What are common ideas of what a king is like? How is Jesus like a king? How is Jesus not like a king? Why is it important to see Jesus as a king? Any dangers?

Discussion ideas

Hebrews 1 does not specifically identify Jesus as king. However there is a reference to the kingdom—the kind of rule that God has chosen. What are the characteristics of God’s kingdom, and by inference, the character of the king? In the lesson (Wednesday) five characteristics are noted: peace, righteousness and justice, love and kindness, humility, immutability. Are there any other aspects you can think of to describe the kingship of Jesus?

The concept of king is also linked to that of priest—though in the OT there are few instances of kings acting as priests. Saul sacrificed and was condemned for this; David ate the sacred bread from the temple etc.

Hebrews 1:1 actually says God has spoken to us through “a son.” This describes the way God has chosen to reveal himself to us.

The OT quotes in Hebrews 1 help confirm the divine nature and character of Jesus the Son. Why did he come? What was his primary motive and objective?

Extra material: The Crucified King

“So you are a king, then?” Pilate asked Jesus. Later he said to the mob, “Shall I crucify your King?” (John 19:15). Jesus, the King who came to his people, meek, and sitting on an ass, the one acclaimed as King when the crowds shouted “Hosanna”—this King is to be crucified. The crucified King.

The people of His time were desperate for a King. And when they saw in Jesus a fulfilment of their hopes, they were overwhelmed with joy. Their King had come. They accepted him. They wanted him. But this acceptance soon changed when they saw that Jesus was *not* their sort of king.

“Shall I crucify your King?” asked Pilate, and the people screamed back, “Yes, Yes, crucify him, crucify him. Our king is the Roman king, Caesar.”

They rejected their king, and wanted him dead. Their enthusiasm turned to hate, and Jesus the King was condemned by his own people. Even the disciples were confused. After the resurrection the disciples asked “Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:7). The two on the road to Emmaus said: “We trusted that it had been he which should have

redeemed Israel.” (Luke 24:21). They still seemed to expect a military king of might, a great political liberator of Israel. False hopes. For their king was crucified.

Why? Because of their rejection. Because of their realization that this king would not be an earthly king. Because in their eyes he was not a *real* king.

“Shall I crucify your king?” Yes, because we don’t want one like him. He doesn’t fit our picture. He isn’t the right sort of king. We don’t want a spiritual king. We don’t even want a healing king or a preaching king. We want a king who will do what *we* want. A king of might and power.

Sounds too familiar, doesn’t it? Whether we like it or not, we probably would have been in that crowd shouting “Crucify him!” When someone doesn’t fit in with our preconceived ideas of what religion is, we’re very likely to want to get rid of them. The people of Jesus’ time believed that their king *should* have led them on a Holy War against the pagans, to demonstrate who were the chosen people of God, and who the true God was! After all wasn’t this what happened in the Old Testament times? So they shout, “Crucify him. He’s not our king. We don’t want a king like that.”

Ah, you say, we would never do that! We would never try to crucify our king. Jesus is just who we want. Is he? When we want to do something dubious it’s good that our king isn’t around. When it suits us, we’ll forget about the character of our king. And we try very hard to make our king into just the sort of king we want. A sweet baby in a manger who doesn’t really affect us.

Or even the cross. It becomes a symbol, an ornament to be worn round the neck. A sign on churches. We want to get away from the disturbing things that our crucified king means, and what he taught. But every time we deny our king, we do the same as the Jews who shouted out “We have no king but Caesar.” As Hebrews 6:6 puts it: “We crucify afresh to ourselves the son of God, and put him to an open shame.”

Read again Luke 22: 24-30, that sad story of political manoeuvres, of seeking position and doing others down. Arguments—even in front of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Just before the terrible trial of Jesus in Gethsemane, the agony of the Cross, Jesus’ disciples are arguing over who is the greatest. The king about to be crucified explains the essence of *his* Kingdom. Earthly kings are proud and vain. They seek praise and position, the adoration of those they rule. They look for recognition and respect for their authority, but you’re not to be like that, he says. The greatest is to be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves.

A totally new idea of rulership—the words of a king about to be crucified. The old way of thinking is to be overturned. In the world the servant is less than the one sitting at table. But, says Jesus, I am among you as one who serves. Jesus the king serves us. He is our example. We serve as he served, as a common servant washing his friends’ feet, the lowest job possible. He passes around the bread and the wine. He serves *us*. And so we too serve as his trustworthy friends.

The king who came to reveal God to us is the king who died for us, to show us who he really was and win us to *his* kind of kingdom. Everything he ever did was for us, so that through him we might be saved. Saved into his kingdom of peace and joy, restored to total trust, welcomed back not as pardoned sinner but as beloved friend. Safe forever, because each one knows what sin leads to—separation from God that so overwhelmed Jesus on the cross. Above all else, completely confident in the trustworthiness of God and his kingdom. God’s kingdom is based not on force but on choice, not on threat of punishment or imposed penalty, but on total agreement that right truly is right and that no one would ever wish to live in any other way.

When the rulers of this world ask us, “Shall I crucify your King?” our response must be “No, a thousand times No,” and choose to follow the way of our wonderful King:

“When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.”

3. Jesus, One of Us

Texts: Hebrews 2; John 1:14; Philippians 2:6, 7; Galatians 4:4, 5.

Quotes

- God was made man that we might be made god. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.
- What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us. Just a stranger on the bus, /Trying to make his way home? Eric Bazilian with Joan Osborne, “One of Us.”
- Not only do we not know God except through Jesus Christ; we do not even know ourselves except through Jesus Christ. Blaise Pascal.

Introductory questions

How is Jesus like us? How is he not like us? Why did Jesus have the name Emmanuel? Why is it important that Jesus took upon himself the form of a servant and made himself of no reputation? Why did Jesus the Word become flesh and dwell among us? How do we see God in this way? What are the dangers?

Discussion ideas

The main theme in this chapter is how Jesus “emptied himself” to come to us, to be our salvation, and to reveal God as he truly is. “He too shared in their humanity,” Heb. 2:14 NIV.

How did Jesus experience life like one of us? Hungry (Matt. 4:2), thirsty (John 19:28), tired (John 4:6), beaten (Luke 22:63), wept (John 11:35) compassion (Matt. 9:36), forsaken (Matt. 27:46), tempted (Luke 4:2), as well as betrayed, insulted, mocked, and ridiculed on the cross.

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Hebrews 2:18 NIV. How was Jesus tempted? Could Jesus have fallen? What would this have meant? Or was Jesus just playing a role?

Psalm 8:5—humanity made a little lower than the angels—is cited here (Heb. 2:9). This same psalm is also mentioned by Jesus (Matt. 21:16) and by Paul again (1 Cor. 15:27). What is the significance of this—especially in regard to Jesus’ position and humility?

God came to be with us, to take on humanity, so that we could see and understand, and by his grace become like him. We are to be participants in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

C.S. Lewis comments that Jesus “said that we were ‘gods’ and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.” *Mere Christianity*, p. 174.

The most important aspect of Christ’s coming to human beings was to reveal God in his true nature—in contrast to all Satan’s misrepresentations. Without Jesus, the image of God would continue to be warped and misunderstood. Who would want to be saved into the presence of a divine dictator, cruel and severe? To deny the charges of the Devil, God comes in person.

Ellen White Comments on Jesus' Humanity

Let every human being be warned from the ground of making Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves; for it cannot be. {5BC 1128.6}

I perceive that there is danger in approaching subjects which dwell on the humanity of the Son of the infinite God. He did humble Himself when He saw He was in fashion as a man, that He might understand the force of all temptations wherewith man is beset. {5BC 1129.1}

Jesus looked upon the world in its fallen state with infinite pity. He took humanity upon himself that he might touch and elevate humanity. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. He reached to the very depth of human misery and woe, to take man as he found him, a being tainted with corruption, degraded with vice, depraved by sin, and united with Satan in apostasy, and elevate him to a seat upon his throne. We have been commissioned to go forth and preach the gospel to every creature. We are to bring to the lost the tidings that Christ can forgive sin, can renew the nature, can clothe the soul in the garments of his righteousness, bring the sinner to his right mind, and teach him and fit him up to be a laborer together with God. {CE 96-97}

The souls that turn to Him for refuge, Jesus lifts above the accusing and the strife of tongues. No man or evil angel can impeach these souls. Christ unites them to His own divine-human nature. {CC 309.5}

Do your best, ever looking to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. In no other way can we do the work of God and magnify His truth than by following in the footsteps of Him who gave up His high command to come to our world, that through His humiliation and suffering, human beings might become partakers of the divine nature. For our sake He became poor, that through His poverty we might come into possession of the eternal riches.... {CH 320.2}

Extra material

“The common Protestant theories of atonement provide for an excellent basis to begin a Christian life (the forgiveness of sins) but go nowhere from there.... The issue is not just forgiveness of sin; rather it's our ultimate destiny. Certain moral qualms aside, the main Orthodox objection to 'pop' evangelical treatments of the Cross is that they stop too quickly with justification and forget our ultimate destiny.

“A forgiven sinner is still a sinner, and while he may feel better about himself because of the forgiveness of his sins, forgiveness alone offers no hope for a future free from sin. The Orthodox Church teaches what the Apostle Paul teaches: we are forgiven so that we may live a new life in Christ. Being in Christ is not an abstract legal standing in some heavenly court of law. Rather, it is the existential reality of being transformed into the image of Christ.” John Stamps, “What if God was One of Us?”

<http://christianity.com/CC/article/0,,PTID3863%7CCHID460478%7CCIID1075240,00.html>

4. Jesus, Higher and Better

Texts: Hebrews 1:4; 3:3; 7:7-26; 12:24.

Quotes:

- The divinity of Christ is the believer's assurance of eternal life. Ellen White.
- I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ. Mahatma Gandhi
- Life can be beautiful, profound, and awe-inspiring, even without an irate god threatening us with eternal torment—or god's self-appointed spokespersons imposing their various notions of proper god-subservient behaviors on everyone else. Judith Hayes.
- I don't want anybody to die for me. Ted Turner.

Introductory questions

What does the concept of "Jesus' superiority" say to you? Did Jesus claim such superiority while on earth? Is it enough for God to say "I'm superior"? While Jesus is surely higher and better, is this the primary issue—that Jesus' provided a higher and better sacrifice, better blood etc? In what way is Jesus "better"?

Discussion ideas

The lesson points out (Sunday) that Jesus never strived for superiority while here on earth. In fact, his whole mission was the exact opposite of this. So why should we concentrate on Jesus' superiority? Are we saying that the mechanism Jesus provided was better than previously? Or is it more to do with the person, rather than the religious system?

We need to realize how shocking Hebrews would have been to observant Jews of the time—e.g. the statement made about Moses: "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself." Hebrews 3:3 NIV.

In the OT, Moses is surely the greatest leader, the one who took God's people to the promised land, the one through whom God gave the law, and the writer of the first five books of the Bible. So to place him in an inferior position to Jesus was a huge offence in Jewish eyes.

The truth is that Jesus is God, and represents God. Some of the time thought Jesus was some "super-man," or high angel. Greek philosophy had a problem with a god becoming human—for physical flesh was seen as evil. So it was essential to stress Jesus' divine nature.

Yet by taking on human nature and its painful situation, Jesus too is "made perfect." (Heb 2:10) Not that God is not already perfect—rather we can appreciate God all the more. It is not to change anything in God—for otherwise the picture would be of Jesus returning to the Father to persuade him to be kind to us. No: the important aspect of Jesus and his divine nature taking on humanity is that this is the only way back for us; the only way we can be won to love and trust in the saving God who came because of his great love for us.

Our reaction (Wed-Thurs) is one of absolute admiration and amazement that God would go to such great lengths to save us and to answer the questions in the great controversy. It is not God's superiority that attracts us, but Jesus dying on the cross that draws all to him.

Our prayer: "Lift up my soul; strengthen and enlighten my mind that I may comprehend more clearly the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, that I may know that it is my privilege to be a partaker of the divine nature." {OHC 146.3}

Ellen White Comments on Jesus' Divinity

Christ condescended to assume human nature, but the dwarfed powers of man were unable through ignorance to comprehend or distinguish the divine. Jesus was not spared the necessity of defining and defending His divine nature, because the minds of men were so thoroughly human they could not discern the divine beneath the assumption of humanity. In order to make His lessons forceful, He was compelled, when these impressions hindered His usefulness, to refer to His mysterious and divine character, leading their minds into a train of thought that was favorable to the transforming power of truth. {1888 260-261}

How wide is the contrast between the divinity of Christ and the helpless infant in Bethlehem's manger! How can we span the distance between the mighty God and a helpless child? And yet the Creator of worlds, He in whom was the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was manifest in the helpless babe in the manger. Far higher than any of the angels, equal with the Father in dignity and glory, and yet wearing the garb of humanity! Divinity and humanity were mysteriously combined, and man and God became one. {FLB 48.5}

If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the divinity of Christ, it is in vain to argue the point with them; for no argument, however conclusive, could convince them. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." [1 COR. 2:14.] None who hold this error can have a true conception of the character or the mission of Christ, or of the great plan of God for man's redemption. {GC88 524.2}

Jesus came into the world to illustrate the character of God in His own life, and He swept back the misrepresentations that Satan had originated, and revealed the glory of God. It was only by living among men that He could reveal the mercy, compassion, and love of His heavenly Father; for it was only by actions of benevolence that He could set forth the grace of God. The unbelief of men was deep seated, and yet they could not resist the testimony of His God-like example, and His deeds of love and truth. {SD 139.3}

Such was the character of Christ as revealed in His life. This is the character of God... Jesus, the tender, pitying Saviour, was "God manifest in the flesh." {BTS, March 1, 1908 par. 2}

Extra material

Not everyone appreciates the message of Jesus, as explained by the Church. How would you respond to a critic such as Robert Ingersoll: "The religion of Jesus Christ, as preached by his church, causes war, bloodshed, hatred, and all uncharitableness; and why? Because, they say, a certain belief is necessary to salvation. They do not say, if you behave yourself you will get there; they do not say, if you pay your debts and love your wife and love your children, and are good to your friends, and your neighbors, and your country, you will get there; that will do you no good; you have got to believe a certain thing. No matter how bad you are, you can instantly be forgiven; and no matter how good you are, if you fail to believe that which you cannot understand, the moment you get to the day of judgment nothing is left but to damn you, and all the angels will shout 'hallelujah.'" *Orthodoxy*, 1884.

"The Jews pacified Jehovah with the blood of animals, and according to the Christian system, the blood of Jesus softened the heart of God a little, and rendered possible the salvation of a fortunate few. It is hard to conceive how the human mind can give assent to such terrible ideas, or how any sane man can read the Bible and still believe in the doctrine of inspiration." *The Gods*, 1872.

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