

Understanding Hebrews

Jonathan Gallagher

One of the best ways to gain new insights into Scripture is to read a different translation. Searching for a better understanding of Hebrews, I turned to J.B. Phillips' excellent version and found it very helpful in elucidating some of the more complex concepts, and with his different expressions, able to move away from some of the more restrictive language that can so often dominate interpretation.

Here are just a few of the helpful insights Phillips provided.

The essential concept of trust

Hebrews 3:6. And we are members of this household if we *maintain our trust* and joyful hope steadfast to the end.

This is better than the NIV "courage" or NJB "fearlessly maintain," expressing the vital aspect of faith as trust maintained—which immediately invites consideration of whom we are trusting and why. Similarly,

Hebrews 3:18, 19. Was it not these very men who refused to trust him? Yes, it is all too plain that it was refusal to trust God that prevented these men from entering his rest. Hebrews 4:3. Yet the message proclaimed to them did them no good, because they only herd and did not believe as well. It is only as a result of our faith and trust that we experience that rest.

Instead of the more formal and legal "unbelief," the dynamic nature of the *trust relationship* is evident here—that it was not because of some forensic problem or legal infraction, but because of refusal to place their trust in God that the Israelites were unable to enter the Promised Land.

For trust is the basis, and refusal to trust is the greatest problem. That is why the concept of "not hardening your hearts" is at the heart of chapters 3 and 4—because it prevents God from working with us, as we go our own way. Hard hearts cannot respond to God and his winsome message of love and acceptance—like Cain we turn away, stony faced, and go out into the wilderness that leads nowhere.

Need for deeper understanding than the basics

Hebrews 6:1. Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and go forward to adult understanding.

In other words, we need to grow up. And we can only do that by studying deeper, by exercising our thought processes, by not just repeating simplistic formulas of faith, but grappling with the really important issues.

[Note also Hebrews 6:10. God is not unfair. (cp unjust or unrighteous).]

Covenant and Law—what for?

Hebrews 7:18, 19. Quite plainly, then, there is a definite cancellation of the previous commandment, because of its ineffectiveness and uselessness—the Law was incapable of bringing anyone to real maturity—followed by the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

This is so much better in terms of comprehension than the KJV—verse 18 reads: “For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.” What????!

Also, the concept of “approaching God” is used, and is in fact a major concept in Hebrews—for that is what the aim is—to be able to come to God through the revelation of who he is in Jesus (see also 7:25). That is also the great theme as expressed in Hebrews 4:16: Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with fullest confidence, that we may receive mercy for our failures and grace to help in time of need.

(In fact, why do you need a priest—even a High Priest—if you can access the throne of grace directly?!)

Hebrews 8:8-13—explaining the meaning of the new covenant, which ends (v.18): The mere fact that God speaks of a new covenant or agreement makes the old one out of date. And when a thing grows weak and out of date, it is obviously soon going to be dispensed with altogether.

Hebrews 10:1. The Law possessed only a dim outline of the benefits Christ would bring and did not actually reproduce them.

Hebrews 10:16. This is the covenant that I will make with them. After those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws on their heart, and upon their mind also will I write them. (quoting Jeremiah 31:33).

A new concept of covenant—not rule-based, but mentally and spiritually based. But note that this is actually a quote from the OT, showing that rule-based concepts are not the only ones operating even here...

Investing new meaning in old imagery

Here we see clearly the intent of Hebrews—that God is operating in a way that takes the old “methodology” and now explains it all in Jesus. Paul is using all the old symbols and

types to show that they now make sense—and make sense only in the person, life and ministry of Jesus. So there is no need to insist on the old “patterns”—for they have no meaning of themselves, only as God is revealed in Jesus.

So, Paul explains:

Hebrews 10:4 “the blood of bulls and goats cannot really remove the guilt of sin.”

Yet: Hebrews 9:22, “You will find that in the Law almost all cleansing is made by means of blood—as the common saying has it: “No shedding of blood, no remission of sins.”

But as this logical argument makes clear, this applies only to the law-based system. Paul is not saying that blood is therefore essential for a forgiveness process—only that this was the way things were supposed to work in the sacrificial system. Yet he also admits that the blood didn’t actually work at all—it didn’t really remove the guilt of sin.

Consequently it would be unwise to derive from this argument that blood is the essential aspect as a mechanism of guilt-forgiving and sin-remitting. In fact Paul is saying the exact opposite. In fact later he says:

Hebrews 10:18. Where God grants remission of sin there can be no question of making further atonement.

That’s not to say Paul dispenses with using what is so valuable a metaphor—the blood, as a shorthand for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (see Hebrews 10:19). But it is not as some objective talisman or charm, it is the demonstrated love of God in its deepest and most profound form.

The primary perspective

--is to encourage those Jewish Christians that their past was important, but only as it directed them to the fullest expression and demonstration of God revealed by Jesus. Consequently, despite referring back to what had gone before, Paul wants to point to the vital present and beckoning future:

Hebrews 6:11. It is our earnest wish that every one of you should show a similar keenness in fully grasping the hope that is within you, until the end.

Hebrew 6:19, 20: This hope we hold as the utterly reliable anchor for our souls, fixed in the innermost shrine of Heaven, where Jesus has already entered on our behalf...

After the order of Melchizedek

Paul in Hebrews is citing Psalms 110:4, referring back to the story in Genesis 14:18. He repeats the phrase often (5:6; 5:10; 6:20; 7:1; 7:10; 7:11; 7:15; 7:17; 7:21).

This king of Salem is also priest of the most high God. He has no genealogy (always very important in OT times), and is not of the Aaronic line. There is no priestly “order” that he established.

So why is Jesus linked to this “order” of priests? Because there is not order—no line in which he follows. He is unique, and truly representative of a God-man communication (which what a priest is supposed to be). Paul finally explains in commenting on how different a priest Jesus is—and no wonder, for he is truly God. (Consequently there is no priest between us and God, because Jesus is God!)

Hebrews 7:17 How fundamental is this change becomes all the more apparent when we see this other priest appearing according to the Melchizedek pattern, and deriving his priesthood not by virtue of a command imposed from outside, but from the power of indestructible life within.

This sums up the message. Jesus is our priest because he conveys the God information—yet he is also God. Like Melchizedek, Jesus is both priest and king, and is not only mediating God but is truly God. This is the huge difference in the systems that Paul is pointing to in Hebrews. For Jesus in Hebrews is not to be compared with the former priestly system, but with a completely different kind of priesthood that is not attached to the rites and rituals. Melchizedek is a type of Christ:

“It was Christ that spoke through Melchizedek, the priest of the most high God. Melchizedek was not Christ, but he was the voice of God in the world, the representative of the Father. And all through the generations of the past, Christ has spoken; Christ has led His people, and has been the light of the world.” {1SM 409.3}

This is such a different kind of priest—one who truly represents God for he is God.

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