

# Introducing Hebrews

What kind of book is Hebrews? We often refer to Hebrews as a letter, but the author calls it a “message of exhortation” (13:22). The usual features of other New Testament letters are missing – such as openings (from...to...greetings), reports of prayer and thanksgiving, personal greetings and instructions at the end. Perhaps it’s better to think of Hebrews as a written sermon.

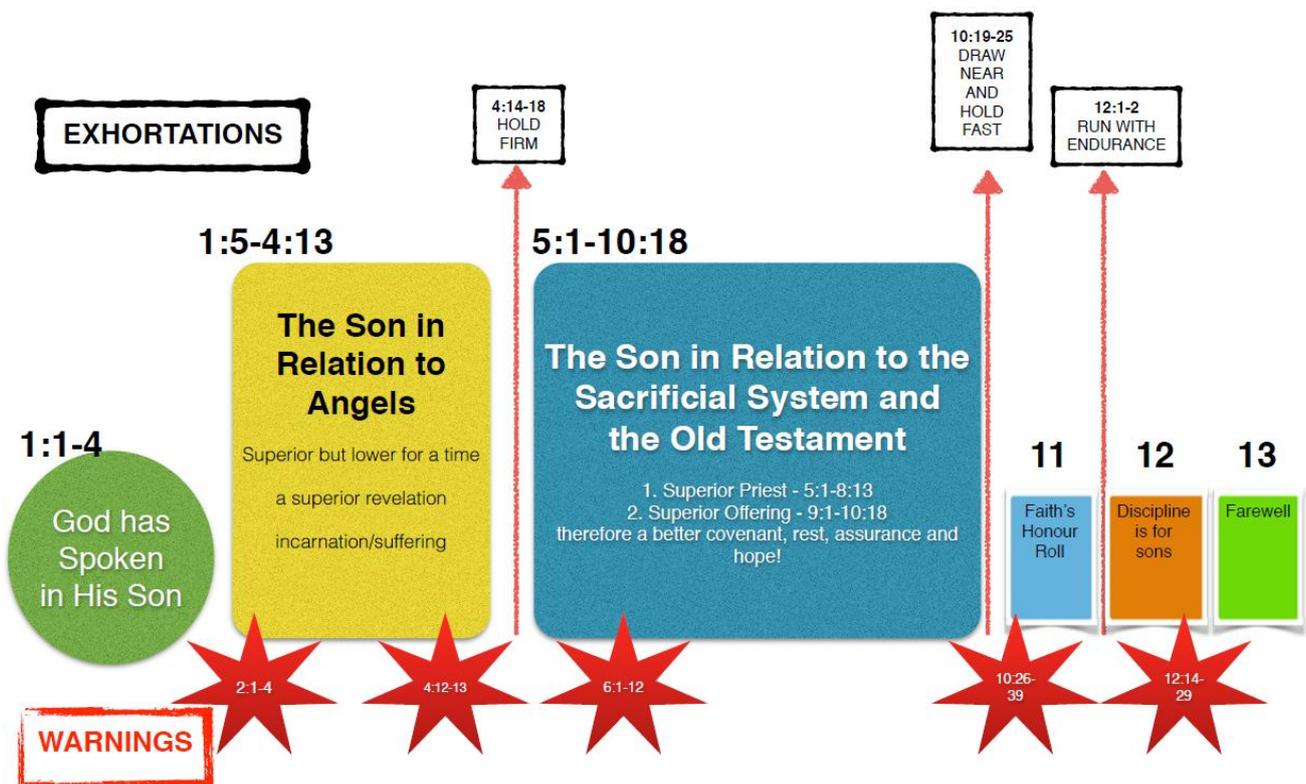
Some scholars think the author was Paul, but since no author is identified, most conclude that we don’t know who it was. Interestingly it is placed in our New Testament at the end of Paul’s letters, and before the “general epistles” of James, Peter, John and Jude.

Again, we don’t know who the recipients are – but given the emphasis on Old Testament concepts, it seems likely that they were of Jewish background (hence the title, “Hebrews”).

Although we don’t know the precise situation of the original recipients, we do know that they had started well in the Christian life, but in the face of hardships, they are now in danger of giving up their faith (and perhaps returning to Judaism). This is clear from the warning passages, especially Hebrews 10:32-39.

The aim of the letter/exhortation is clear – to urge Christians not to step back from faith in Jesus, but rather to persevere and inherit salvation. To this end, as you can see from the diagram below, the author uses:

- Exhortations to hold firm, draw near to God and persevere
- Warnings against drifting/falling away
- Positive examples of those who have persevered and what they received
- Negative examples of those who didn’t persevere in faith and the consequences
- All based on solid teaching about the supremacy of Christ as the Son of God and Great High Priest



# Hebrews 1:1-4 The Supreme Son

1. In 2002, American pastor John Piper wrote:

*"One of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. It hangs in the air we breathe. We are easily hurt. We pout and mope easily. We blame easily. We break easily. Our marriages break easily. Our happiness breaks easily. And our commitment to the church breaks easily. We are easily disheartened, and it seems we have little capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of criticism and opposition... When historians list the character traits of America in the last third of twentieth century, commitment, constancy, tenacity, endurance, patience, resolve and perseverance will not be on the list. The list will begin with an all consuming interest in self-esteem. It will be followed by the sub-headings of self-assertiveness, self-enhancement, and self-realization..." We all need help here..."*

*John Piper, The Roots of Endurance, IVP, 2002, page 79.*

While clearly a generalisation, to what extent do you think Piper's views reflect Australia in 2021?

2. Hebrews is written to urge Christians to persevere (4:14-16, 10:19-25, 12:1-2), and on the flipside not to drift/fall away. The "message of exhortation" (13:22) is grounded in a wonderful presentation of Jesus as God's supreme Son, who is superior to everyone and everything else. The opening 4 verses get straight to the point. **Read verses 1 & 2.** What two eras are compared here? What continuity is there? In what ways is God's revelation in these last days superior to the prior era? (Hint – there are at least 3 contrasts)
  
3. What do these verses imply about our need/expectation of further revelation from God in our time?
  
4. Hebrews 1:2b-4 paints a majestic picture of Jesus as God's Son. Using your own words, what 9 statements are made about Jesus. (We will look at the comparison with angels in study 2. A key feature of the OT law is that was given via angels – Acts 7:38 & 53, Galatians 3:19)
  - i.
  - ii.
  - iii.
  - iv.
  - v.
  - vi.
  - vii.
  - viii.
  - ix.

How does this list increase your appreciation of Jesus? What in particular strikes you as important?

5. How would you summarize the main point in these opening 4 verses? How might this have helped the Hebrew Christians to persevere (and not go back to Judaism)? (Hint – look ahead to 2:1-3)
  
6. How does knowing/being reminded of/dwelling on this help us to persevere in the faith today? How might it help us to overcome some of the cultural features of our age raised by Piper?
  
7. What can you pray in response to these opening words?

# Hebrews 1:5-2:4      The Supreme Message

1. What communications do people receive that would be very foolish to ignore - and why?
2. In the opening words of Hebrews we saw the comparison between how God spoke in the Old Testament and how he spoke by his Son. The message spoken by God's Son is supreme, because the Son is supreme. The opening section concludes in verse 4 that the Son is far superior to the angels.

What do we learn about angels in Hebrews 1: 14?

What do Acts 7:38 & 53, Galatians 3:19 teach us about the role of angels in God's Old Testament revelation?

3. **Read 1:5-14.** Using 7 Old Testament quotes, the author draws at least 5 contrasts between the Son and angels. What are they? (Note: the 7 quotes are from Psalm 2:7, 2 Samuel 7:14, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 104:4, Psalm 45:4-6, Psalm 102:25-27 & Psalm 110:1)

	The Son	Angels
1:5		
1:6		
1:7-9		
1:10-12		
1:13-14		

4. **Read 2:1-4.** What is the message we have heard and why should we pay even more careful attention to it? What is the flow of logic in these 4 verses?
5. How have people you have known who have drifted away from following Christ? In what ways do you think that you might be most susceptible to drifting from Christ and neglecting such a great salvation? What is the antidote to drifting?
6. What might it look like for you, your group and our whole church to "pay even more attention to what we have heard" so we will not drift away?
7. What would be good to pray in response to this passage? Pray together now.

## About Angels

1. **Angels are real** – Angels are mentioned around 100 times in the Old Testament and 160 times in the New. The word basically means a messenger - and if you think about it that's often what they do. Angels first announced Jesus' birth, his resurrection, and his ascension. Angels are not human beings, but often they appear to look like us. Sometimes they seem to be kind of superhuman. In the Bible there's no question that angels are real and active in the world.
2. **Angels are created by God** – Angels are not like God in the sense of being eternal, they are part of the creation that God has made (Psalm 148:2 & 5). They're not part of the physical world that we live in, they're part of the spiritual world that is outside our direct sensory experience.
3. **Angels worship & serve God.** Psalm 103:20.
4. **Angels serve God people.** Twice in the book of Acts an angel rescues people from prison. In the Old Testament an angel destroyed a whole army and saved Jerusalem. When Jesus was being tempted he was attended by angels.
5. **Angels can be very powerful.** In Isaiah 35 an angel goes out and kills 185 000 soldiers in one night. The usual response when someone sees an angel is to fall flat on their face. And the angel's first words are "fear not". Angels are impressive and important beings. If an angel comes to you with a message - then well you'd better listen.