

## Hebrews - encouragement for weary pilgrims (part 2)

Hebrews is a letter/sermon of exhortation, encouraging us to persevere when the going gets tough.

Jesus Christ's role as high priest is vital in reconciling alienated people to God.

If Hebrews teaches us anything, it is to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Jesus is the **Son of God**, a designation that emphasizes his divine nature.

According to Hebrews 3:1, Jesus is "**our apostle and high priest**" (NIV).

Jesus Christ is **the mediator of a new or better covenant**.

But Jesus has now obtained a superior ministry, and to that degree *he is the mediator of a better covenant*, which has been established on better promises (Heb. 8:6 CSB).

Therefore *he is the mediator of a new covenant*, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant (Hebrews 9:15 CSB).

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and ... to Jesus, *the mediator of a new covenant* ... (Hebrews 12:22-24 NIV).

There are four NT references to Jesus Christ as a mediator (Greek term *mesitēs*).

Apart from those in Hebrews, the only other reference comes in 1 Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5 NIV).

- The Greek term for covenant, *diathēkē*, appears 33 times in the New Testament.
- Of these, 17 are found in the Hebrews, reflecting the author's special interest in covenant.

In Hebrews 7:22, the author states that Jesus is 'the guarantor of a better covenant.'

As a guarantor, Jesus ensures that the covenant's objectives will be met.

Hebrews also states that the new covenant is an "eternal covenant" (Hebrews 13:20).

The author of Hebrews also refers to it as the "second" covenant (Hebrews 8:7 ESV); the "first" covenant was made at Mount Sinai.

To provide scriptural support for his argument that God has replaced the Sinai covenant (Hebrews 8:6-7), the author of Hebrews turns to the Old Testament book of Jeremiah.

He quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34, a passage that begins with the prediction: "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (Hebrews 8:8).

The quotation from Jeremiah 31 is the longest Old Testament quotation in Hebrews, and part of it is quoted a second time in Hebrews 10:15-17.

After the Israelites came out of Egypt, God made a covenant or friendship treaty with them.

Unfortunately, the OT story reveals that the Israelites failed to fulfil their covenant obligations.

According to Hebrews, Jesus Christ establishes a "better covenant," one that promises an entirely harmonious relationship between God and sinful humans.

Whereas the old covenant relates to the earthly sanctuary and its Levitical priesthood, the new covenant is centred on the heavenly sanctuary and Jesus as high priest.

### **The city of God**

The author of Hebrews reminds his readers that they are on a journey, a pilgrimage, and Jesus Christ is their leader.

We first encounter this theme in chapters 3-4 of Hebrews, when the author uses ancient Israel's wilderness experience as a template for his readers' Christian experience.

The author quotes from Psalm 95:7-11.

<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,  
“Today, if you hear his voice,  
<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years.  
<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;  
they have not known my ways.’  
<sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath,  
‘They shall not enter my rest.’” (Hebrews 3:7-11 ESV)

He then proceeds to expound its relevance for his readers.

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12-13 ESV)

For the author of Hebrews, the “today” of the Psalm applies to his readers.

In Hebrews “rest” is linked to the language of inheritance.

Rest and inheritance are associated with the city of God.

Hebrew 11 begins with the statement: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1 NIV).

The rest of the chapter describes the heroes of faith, those who hope for something that cannot be seen.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:8-10 NIV)

A few verses later we read:

<sup>13</sup> All these people (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. <sup>14</sup> People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16 NIV)

When we get to the end of Hebrews 11, we read:

<sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, <sup>40</sup> since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39-40 NIV)

References to a heavenly city are not limited to Hebrews 11.

But you have come to Mount Zion, **to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.** (Hebrews 12:22 NIV)

One further mention of a future city comes in Hebrews 13:14: “For here we do not have an enduring city, but **we are looking for the city that is to come**” (Hebrews 13:14 NIV).

The apostle Paul contrasts “the present city of Jerusalem” with “the Jerusalem that is above” (Gal. 4:25-26).

Revelation 21:1-5 states:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

<sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:1-5 NIV)

In his book, *The Bible and the Future*, theologian Anthony Hoekema writes:

One gets the impression from certain hymns that glorified believers will spend eternity in some ethereal heaven somewhere off in space, far away from earth. ... But does such a conception do justice to biblical eschatology? Are we to spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs, and flitting from cloud to cloud while doing so? (p. 274)

He goes on to answer his rhetorical question in this way:

On the contrary, the Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God’s praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On that new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity, enjoying its beauties, exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God. Since God will make the new earth his dwelling place, and since where God dwells there heaven is, we shall then continue to be in heaven while we are on the new earth. For heaven and earth will then no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be one (see Rev. 21:1-3 NIV). (p. 274)

After focusing on the Old Testament heroes of faith, the author of Hebrews writes:

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, **the pioneer and perfecter of faith.** (Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV).

The Greek term translated as “pioneer” in the NIV is *archēgon* ἀρχηγὸν. Other English versions translate it as captain (KJV), founder (ESV), source (CSB), perfect leader (NLT), and author (NIV1984).

In his commentary on Hebrews, the American NT scholar Tom Schreiner writes:

Jesus is described as the “source” (ἀρχηγός [*archēgon*]) of salvation for the many sons who are brought to glory. This word is also translated as “pioneer” (NIV, NRSV) or “founder” (ESV), indicating that Jesus is the pathfinder of salvation for the sons who are brought to glory by God. He is the trailblazer who secures salvation for his brothers, but the word also has the idea of leader, and hence “pioneer” is perhaps the best rendering for the term. (T. R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*).

The idea of Jesus as a trailblazing leader fits well with the theme of pilgrimage.

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:2-3 NIV)

In encouraging his readers to remain faithful to Jesus, the author writes in chapter 10:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. (Hebrews 10:32-35 NIV)

### Summary

Firstly, let us keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, the Son of God, our great high priest, the mediator of a new covenant, and our trailblazing leader.

Secondly, let us look forward in faith to our eternal inheritance, the new Jerusalem.

Those who approach God through Jesus draw near to God’s throne and hold fast their hope, not as independent individuals but as members of a band of pilgrims who—though weary in the wilderness—hear and heed God’s summons to gather, to exhort each other, and to stimulate each other to love and good deeds (3:12–14; 10:23–25, 32–34). (Johnson, *Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims*)

### Further reading:

Hoekema, A. A. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.

Wright, N. T. *Surprised by Hope*. London: SPCK, 2007.

Middleton, J. R. *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014.

Thomas, D. W. H. *Heaven on Earth: What the Bible Teaches About Life to Come*. Fearn: Christian Focus, 2018.

Alexander, T. D. *The City of God and the Goal of Creation*. Short Studies in Biblical Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2018.

Johnson, D. E. *Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims*. Grand Rapids: Crossway, 2024.