

Hebrews: remedies for Drifters

Introduction:

Why read Hebrews?

Hebrews is a great book to read, because it tackles an issue which is important for all Christians. It was written to those who had been active as Christians for a while, but who had begun to slip away from their original commitment and practice. They were beginning to drift away, perhaps unaware of what was really happening. They were, in fact, turning away from the living God! So it is essential for us to read Hebrews today, because it is just as easy to slip, to drift, to turn away from the living God.

How it's organised?

Hebrews describes itself as a word of exhortation or message of encouragement and so at its heart the teaching of Hebrews is pastorally driven. In that sense it is better to think of it as a written sermon rather than a letter. As a sermon, the writer to the Hebrews explains parts of the O.T to his listeners in the light of Jesus Christ, and then applies these passages to them, finishing with an exhortation which alternates between both strong encouragement and a helpful warning...eg: compare the warning of 6:4-6 with the encouragement of 6:9

Starting off in Hebrews

When you read Hebrews-try to do it in one or two sittings - mark or briefly take note of

- (a) those parts which you understand and are encouraged by,
- (b) any parts which you find difficult to understand or believe.

For Leaders,

Get a hold of a Bible Dictionary and take some brief notes on the following questions:

1. Who wrote it?
2. Who was it written to?
3. Where did it come from?
4. What is the historical background?
5. When was it written?

Don't Drift

Hebrews 1:1-2:4

Introduction:

1. Why do you think it is important for Christians to read the O.T. as well as the New?
2. What particular difficulties do you have in reading the O.T.?
3. Share with the rest of the group any helpful tips you have for getting more out of the O.T.

Main Course

4. Look closely at Hebrews 1. In what ways is Jesus superior to previous messengers?
5. What new things does this passage tell us about the Son? Why is it more serious to neglect Jesus' message? 2:2-3
6. These days Christians seem to know more about demons than about angels. Look up a Bible dictionary to learn more about angels and study these passages:
 - Luke 1:11-19, 26-37, 2:13-14, 22:43
 - Matthew 4:11
 - Acts 5:19, 7:53, 8:26, 10:3, 12:23, 27:23-25
7. Practically speaking, what does it mean to listen to Jesus?
8. How does the warning in these verses (2:1-4) relate to the first chapter?
9. What pressures tend to make us drift away from what we have heard?

Application:

10. In what ways can you help a friend who is drifting from their faith?
11. What times in life are we/you most prone to drifting?

Can You See the Finish Yet?

Hebrews 12

The examples of faith in Hebrews 11 form the background for our entry into Chapter 12. The first three verses of this chapter set the theme for what is to follow. Looking to Jesus helps us to ‘run the race’ faithfully and with perseverance.

Appetisers...

1. Are you good at completing a project? When did you last leave one unfinished?
2. Discipline is unpopular nowadays. Why do you think that might be?

Main Course...

3. What does “Jesus the pioneer/author and perfecter of our faith” mean? How does Jesus ‘pioneer’ our faith? Compare Hebr. 2: 9, 11 – 13; 3: 5 – 6; 6: 20 and 7: 28.
4. We also need to struggle against sin (v. 4). What would have caused the recipients of this letter to be slack at resisting sin? What pressures do we feel regarding resisting sin “to the point of shedding our blood”?
5. Verses 4 – 13 deal with discipline.
 - a. What do these verses say about God’s discipline?
 - b. How does discipline differ from punishment?
 - c. Do you look at your own painful situations in the light of this passage?
6. In what way have we come to the heavenly Jerusalem etc. (vv. 22 – 24) and what is the significance for your Christian walk?
7. Can you be certain about your enrolment in heaven (v. 23)? What would you say to a person who denied the possibility of such certainty?

To Ruminare...

8. What makes you weary and faint-hearted, and what is the best plan of action you can take for dealing with these times?
9. How can we be heaven-minded (v. 22 – 24) and at the same time fully engaged with the world around us? Which of the two is the most difficult and why?
10. What sort of fear of God should we have both in our prayers and in our daily walk (compare 12: 28)? Did anything change after the Resurrection/ Pentecost? For “fear of God” in the New Testament see also 2 Cor. 5: 10, 11; 1 John 4: 18 and Rev. 14: 7.
11. Pray together about this passage, for each other, and also remembering any Christians you know who are struggling with sin or enduring hardship, and finding it hard to believe that God loves them.

True Worship

Hebrews 13

In Chapter 9 we noticed (9: 1) that under the first Covenant there were regulations for worship. In 12: 28, 29 we are again exhorted to “worship God acceptably.” In this final chapter the author explains what it means for us to have “come to the heavenly Mount Zion” (12: 22). Here he indicates areas in which we might engage in true worship, so that we might run the race to the end, in a way that brings joy to the Lord.

Appetisers...

1. In the Old Testament the Israelites were urged to be kind to “the stranger,” because they had been strangers in Egypt. Australia is a multi-cultural society; what is your experience with “entertaining strangers” (v. 1)?

Main Course...

2. What does it mean to honour marriage and to keep the marriage bed pure (v. 4)? What are some of the consequences if we don't?
3. Why is contentment (verse 5) so important in the context of the overall message of Hebrews (the danger of trusting in shadows and drifting away)?
4. Reread verses 5 – 8. What use can a Christian make of the Old Testament for encouragement and admonishment?
5. “Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever” (v. 8) is often quoted, but what does it mean in the context?
6. To the Hebrews, Christian service of God could seem a bit dull without the ritual of the Old Testament ceremonies (compare v. 9 “ceremonial foods”). In our church, do we have any rituals etc. that obscure the grace that we have in Christ? In what other ways do we hang on to shadows that appear to give more security than the reality in heaven?
7. How could the Hebrews (recipients of the letter) go to Jesus “outside the camp” (vv. 11 – 13)? What does this mean for us?

To Ruminare...

8. Leadership is a topic that comes up repeatedly in this chapter.
 - a. Apart from prayer, how can you remember your leaders (verse 7)?
 - b. In your church community, how can you help them so that, as one body, we can be more dedicated to glorifying God, edifying the church, and serving the world?
 - c. We are to show obedience and submission toward those put in authority over us (v. 17). How does this work out in practice in “a world of autonomy and emancipation”?
9. Today, what sort of sacrifices can we offer to God (compare verse 15)? What area do you need the most work on?
10. What has been the most significant thing that you have learnt from studying Hebrews together? How has this affected your personal life?

Fully Human & Fully God

Hebrews 2:5-18

Introduction:

One of the things that we as Christians believe is that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. We may not understand how that “works” but we do know that that is the way that God has revealed His Son to us.

Have a bit of a brainstorm about Jesus being human. Off the top of your head ...

- i. Why do you think that it is important that Jesus was human?
- ii. What benefits are there for us if he is human?

Having established in 1:1 – 2:4 that Jesus is far superior to the angels that his word is binding for us as Christians, the Writer now helps us to see how good it is that Jesus became a man.

Main Course

1. In verse 5 the Writer tells us that the world is not under the angels authority but another’s. What is the point he is making from Psalm 8?

The Writer doesn’t want us to think that Jesus stayed “a little lower” and wants us to be sure about his status now in spite of the appearances.

- i. At present what is Jesus doing? vv8-9
- ii. What do we now know about Jesus and why is it true? vv8-9
- iii. What did Jesus do for everyone? Are any excluded from this? v9

2. Jesus really did become a man. Explore the *evidence* that the Writer puts forward for us in vv10-18. (We’ll think through the implications in question 3.).

Summarise what v10, v11, v14 & v17 tell us. (remember that “perfecting is the idea of being made complete rather than a movement from imperfect to perfect.)

3. Jesus becoming a man has *consequences* for us.

- a. Why was it important that Jesus have flesh and blood and what did it achieve v14?
- b. What is added there about Jesus achievements? V15
- c. More reasons for becoming human are given in verse 17 & 18. What are they?

Application:

Now try and construct a picture of the human Jesus and what it means for us that he became a man.

- i. Summarise what you have discovered.
 - ii. Which of these qualities or achievements do you value the most? Why is this one particularly important for you? How does it make a difference to the way you
 - a. relate to your Heavenly Father?
 - b. relate to yourself?
 - c. relate to others?
 - iii. Which one has been the least significant? Why has this been the case? Do you need to change the way that you think/feel/act upon it? What needs to change? How will you bring those changes about?

Don't Harden your Heart

Hebrews 3:1-4:13

Introduction:

The writer to the Hebrews depicts the Christian life as a long journey with a goal at the end to reach...God's Rest.

1. What would you say to someone who says, "The Bible is a second best way of hearing God speak to us. What we need is to hear God speak directly to us?"
2. When do you find it difficult to listen to God?

Main Course

3. One of the goals of the writer to the Hebrews is to show how Jesus is 'better than' what was given in the O.T. So in chapters one and two, God spoke by the prophets, and now speaks by His Son. The Law was given through angels, and our great salvation is now through his Son. Looking closely at 3:1-6 what is the comparison made again between the Old and New Testament.
4. Say Psalm 95 together. Share with the group, the most significant part of this psalm for you.
5. Read Numbers 20 as a background to the psalm. What are some of the marks of Israel in the Wilderness?
6. Note how many times the writer repeats the phrase from Psalm 95:7. What do you think it means to harden your heart? Can you think of examples in the bible of this? Alternatively, what does it mean to have a soft heart to God?
7. *Today if you hear hear His voice.....*Think about how you actively hear God's voice both publicly and privately...share some of the ways you try and do this.
8. The writer talks a great deal about rest. What is your picture of rest? What is the Bible's picture of rest?
9. Read Hebrews 3:13, 4:11. Entering God's rest is a group activity. Who could you be encouraging in the Christian journey at this point in time?

Application:

10. Complete this sentence as a response to studying Hebrews 4:1-13. I should make sure that I enter God's rest by.....
11. Think back to the time you came to know Jesus. What were the encouragements and what were the warnings from the Bible you learned along the way. Spend some time as a group in prayer, thanking God for his warnings as well as his encouragements

Someone who understands

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Introduction:

1. 1. Imagine your church pastor called you up and said you ought to go and talk with another congregation member who was thinking of giving up on Christ. What - about Jesus - would you say to them to make them change their mind?

Main Course

2. Why do you think the writer puts the strong warning of 3:7-4:13 in between two passages that talk about Christ as our high priest. (3:1-6;4:14-5:10)

3. Circle any 'logic' or 'purpose' words which link verses together between 4:14-5:10 (eg: 'Therefore', 'since', 'for', 'then', 'for this reason' and 'so that')

4. The first reason why we ought to hold firmly to the faith we profess is because Jesus as our High Priest **understands** v15.
Think for a moment -

- What would 'not being able to sympathise' look like?
- What specific ways do you think Jesus might have been tempted as we are? Think specifically of his life circumstances as portrayed in the gospels.

5. The second reason for why we ought to hold firmly to the faith we profess is because Jesus as our High Priest: **represents us before God** Read ch 5:1-10
What is the implication for Jesus as our high priest? verse 1-4?

6. When did God declare Jesus to be his Son? (read Ps 2:7, Acts 13:32-33, Rom 1:1-4)

7. What, from verses 4-6, makes Jesus' high priesthood 'great'??

8. In what sense did the Son of God learn obedience through what he suffered? Read 5:7-10
Why did he have to? In what sense has Jesus been made perfect forever?

9. Given who Jesus is, why must we hold firmly to the faith we profess?

Application:

10. Practically, how does this passage help when Christian life is too hard?

11. Pray for those Christians you know who are finding the going tough.
Make a point of encouraging them with what you learnt today.

Making our hope sure

Hebrews 5:11-6:19

Introduction:

Has anyone ever given you a stern warning ? Was it justified? If so, what effect did it have on you?

What place do we ever give to warning each other as Christians? When?

Main Course

2. What is the problem and what is the solution? 5:11-6:3

3. Read Hebrews 6:4-8

Who is the writer speaking about in these verses?

Summarise the content of the warning.

4. Read Hebrews 6:9-12

Why do you think the writer first warns, then encourages his readers in these verses?

5. Read Hebrews 6:13-20

The writer now switches to the example of a man who refused to doubt. In the light of what has already been said, why is he used? Look carefully at verses 17-19.

In view of 6:4-6, we might have thought our hope very unsure. Then in verse 11, we're told to 'make our hope sure'. Now in verses 19-20, our hope is 'firm and secure'. on what basis is our hope now 'firm and secure'? Ultimately then, where does our assurance lie?

What is the point of warnings?

Application:

What warning or encouragement has God given you tonight?

How can you be sure that **you** won't fall away?

How would you help a friend who appears to show no evidence of turning back to God and no remorse over their sin? What have you learned from this passage about how to warn others?

A High Priest,... But Different

Hebrews 7: 1-28

After Hebr. 5: 11 to 6: 20 (a passage exhorting people not to get sluggish, 6: 12) the author proceeds with his theme “Jesus the greater High Priest.” The Levitical priesthood was such a fundamental concept of the Old Covenant, that any change in the priestly order of necessity meant a change in the ‘Law’ (Thora), indeed in the whole order of things, and thus of the Covenant, 7: 22.

Appetisers...

1. What types of modern-day covenant have you come across in your life? To what extent were they binding and unalterable?
2. What evidences do you see today of people using mediators in religion, in relationships, etc.?

Main Course...

3. Melchizedek is a somewhat mystical figure. With the help of a Bible Dictionary, find out who he was. What function did this man “without beginning of days or end of life” have? See also Gen. 14: 17-20 and Ps. 110: 4.
4. Why do you think Jesus Christ is compared with Melchizedek? What do they have in common and why is this Good News?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the fact that Melchizedek was *first* King of Righteousness, and *then* King of Peace? v. 2
6. In what ways were the ancient rules of the Jews “weak and useless”? vv. 18-19
7. How does Jesus guarantee our covenant with Him? vv. 22-25
8. Read vv. 11-28. Make a chart on a big sheet of paper under the headings: The Old Way: Inadequate; Jesus: Adequate. Fill in the chart according all the points you can find from these verses and distil what it is about Christ’s character and sacrifice that sets Him far above other earthly priests.

To Ruminare...

9. We have seen that the former priesthood for the Jews was “weak and useless” (v. 18). Have you come to the realisation of the utter bankruptcy of living a good life as a way please God (even if you use some sort of mediator)? In your life, where does this natural tendency to revert back to old ways creep in every so often?
10. How will you explain to friends that living a good life is not good enough? Compare with Lk. 18: 9-14.
11. Share together what have been the most important truths in this chapter about Jesus and about yourselves. Turn these thoughts into a time of prayer and praise.

The Superior Ministry (1)

Hebrews 8

Jesus, the greater High Priest, provides a new and better: -

- a. covenant (Chapter 8); and
- b. sanctuary and sacrifice (9: 1 - 10: 18).

This radical change and its implications for His followers are explored in this rather large chunk, so we divide it into two studies.

Appetisers...

1. According to Chapter 8 the Old Mosaic Covenant has become obsolete. What is one thing in your life you wish was obsolete right now? Why?

Main Course...

2. Why would Jesus not have been a High Priest on earth? Compare 8: 3-4 and 7: 27.
3.
 - a. 'Covenant' is an important Biblical concept. To refresh your memory: in today's world, what is a covenant again? In what ways is God's Covenant with men different?
 - b. What was the Old Covenant that was administered by the priests? Compare Ex. 19: 5-6; 24: 1-8.
 - c. Why did Jesus' new ministry also call for a new covenant? 8: 7-9
 - d. What does a mediator (cf. v. 6) do in today's world?
 - e. What is the New Covenant mediated by Jesus? 8: 10-12
 - f. Why did Jesus' new ministry also call for a new covenant?
 - g. The Old and New Covenant are *essentially* one, but they differ in terms of administration. What became obsolete (8: 13)? Think of the ceremonial framework (bloody sacrifices, etc.), the way of works of the Law (Thora) and the sphere of influence (Israel).
4. Covenant and predestination are really two sides of the same issue. What is the relation between the two? Think of how the covenant with Abraham was worked out in history and organically (cf. the 2nd Commandment: "showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me..." – Ex. 20: 4).

To Ruminare...

5. What areas of your life look like you are still 'living under the Old Covenant'? How do you intend to change this?

The Superior Ministry (2)

Hebrews 9: 1 – 10: 18

We continue our study on Christ's superior ministry. In Chapter 8 the author talked about the framework of God's dealings with us: the New Covenant. He then proceeds by contrasting the High Priestly ministry in the Old and the New Covenant.

Appetisers...

1. Many people seek the sanctuary of a part of their homes to rest, reflect or escape. Do you have a "Most Holy Place" at home? If so, what is it?
2. Using a Bible Dictionary, draw a plan of the tabernacle on a big piece of paper.

Main Course...

3. What was the significance of each item in the Holy Place?
4. What was the significance of each item in the Most Holy Place?
5. Why were the gifts and sacrifices being offered not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper? vv. 8-10
6. How do we cleanse our consciences? v. 14. How does this take place in practice?
7. In 9: 15 the author writes about Jesus having died as a ransom. Who paid the ransom to whom?
8. What are the "heavenly things themselves," described in verse 23?
9. If the sacrifices were "merely a reminder of sins," how were the sins of those living under the Old Covenant taken away? Compare vv. 2, 3 and 11.

To Ruminare...

10. Thank God for Jesus' superior ministry. Be specific about the aspects of the Covenant, sanctuary and sacrifice that are new.
11. Discuss what are the *essential* elements of corporate worship. To what extent are they present in your congregation?
12. How could the things learnt in this passage prevent you from drifting away?

Receiving the Promise

Hebrews 10: 19 – 11: 40

The author's argument continues in this section, starting with a "therefore;" based on the fact that Christ is God's Son, Priest and sacrifice, he now exhorts his readers to live according to its implications.

Appetisers...

1. For Christians, is there any place for *self*-confidence?
2. In the movies, what does it take to be a hero(ine)?

Main Course...

3. How do verses 19 – 21 summarise Chapters 7 – 10?
4. What is the confidence to enter the Sanctuary based on? Notice the link between verse 19 and 21 (even more obvious in Greek): having a) confidence (19) and b) a great priest (21). Compare vv. 34 – 35.
5. In verses 37 and 38, Habakkuk 4: 3 – 4 is cited. This OT passage is not easy. How does Paul vest it with meaning in Gal. 3: 11 and Rom. 1: 17?
6. Is it possible, for *real* Christians, to shrink back and fall away from the faith? See 10: 39; 6: 4 – 6; John 10: 27 – 28, 1 John 2: 18 – 20, and other passages to do with apostasy.
7. Faith and hope are key notions in Hebrews. How would you describe them? (Don't be satisfied with quoting 11: 1. Dig a bit deeper.) Why is hope called an anchor of the soul (Hebr. 6: 19) and where is it moored?
8. Each of the men and women in Chapter 11 showed faith and hope. Go round the group and let each take one character and mention:
 - the uncertain present; and
 - the certain future.

To Ruminare...

9. In 10: 19 – 25 the exhortation "Let us..." sounds five times (NIV). How could you obey this more earnestly?
10. How does your trust in Christ's return affect your daily life? Compare 9: 28.
11. How were you positively encouraged to press on, having reflected on 10: 32 – 39?
12. When you face adversities and trials, what are some of the obstacles that prevent you from believing that God might have "planned something better" (11: 40)? How can you overcome this?