

# THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

By Frank Nelte

1) In the N.T. canon the Book of Hebrews is THE FIRST of the epistles of Paul. There is a reason for this! Paul's other epistles are all written either to specific congregations or to specific individuals. Hebrews is different in this regard, also for a reason.

2) Picture the N.T. Church by the late 50'ies A.D.:

- 5000 Jews had been baptized in 31 A.D.;
- perhaps another 500 - 1000 gentiles had come into the Church thereafter;
- most had by then been in the Church for over 20 years;
- all were well versed in the basic doctrines;
- hardly any left due to false doctrines;
- they were all deeply involved in doing "the work";
- they had a real zeal and fervency;

BUT ... unfortunately ...

- they expected Christ to return in THEIR lifetime;
- some had begun to set dates for Christ's return;
- THEN the ministry began to see and teach that Christ would not return when they had expected Him ...
- but the majority of the members didn't grasp this shift in emphasis ... just like today it is hard to shake people from previous wrong assumptions;
- so their expected "date" came and it went ... but Christ did not return;

AND THEN problems appeared ...

- some doubted Christ would return at all; they lost faith;
- others said: my Lord delays His coming ...;
- and people just LOST their zeal and interest and left the Church.

3) That is the story of the EPHESIAN ERA of God's Church. In the 90'ies A.D. Jesus Christ said to this era: "You HAVE LEFT your first love (Rev. 2:4).

Now exactly WHO was their first love? Answer: Jesus Christ!

They were the only era that was started by Christ in person. He had walked and talked with members of that era. It was His personal example that was instrumental in bringing so many of them into the Church. And when

it became clear that He wasn't coming back in their lifetime, they lost faith and felt let down by Jesus Christ. It was their conviction in His imminent return that had motivated them to make tremendous sacrifices ... and now they felt let down.

It wasn't that they disagreed with any doctrines. They just lost their zeal and commitment! Viewed as a whole entity, that era was overwhelmingly Jewish. Very likely over 80% of all Church members prior to 90 A.D. were ethnic Jews.

#### 4) NOW TO THE BOOK OF HEBREWS:

In the early 60'ies A.D. Paul could see this problem developing amongst especially the Jewish members of the Church. And so Paul wrote an epistle, not to any specific congregation, but to a whole Church era! That is why this epistle comes first in Paul's 14 letters ... it was really written to the whole era!

5) The message of the whole Book of Hebrews can be summed up as follows:

**REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST WHO WAS YOUR FIRST LOVE!**

6) While 1 Cor. may be the most corrective book in the N.T. as far as volume of correction is concerned, the Book of Hebrews is without doubt the most corrective book in the N.T. as far as INTENSITY of correction is concerned! It is this epistle, rather than any other, that discusses and warns about the unpardonable sin ... and it does so several times. The correction is EXTREMELY STRONG!

The correction mentioned to this era ("I will remove your candlestick out of his place") is only equalled or exceeded by the correction mentioned to the Laodicean era ("I will spue you out of My mouth").

7) Because his message is so corrective, Paul takes the approach of spreading out the correction between various explanatory chapters (or sections). This is intended to take a bit of the sting out of his corrective message.

8) Since they were losing faith in Jesus Christ, Paul explains firstly Christ's supreme position in God's plan and secondly Christ's PRESENT position and function ... THE REASON why He was not returning when they expected Him to return!

#### 9) A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MESSAGE:

Heb 1:1-3 = establishing Christ's supreme position and authority;

Heb 2:1-3 = THEREFORE DON'T NEGLECT ...

Heb 3:1, 6-19 = DON'T HARDEN YOUR HEARTS ...

Heb 4:1-13 = ...BECAUSE GOD IS A DISCERNER OF THE THOUGHTS.  
(Heb 3:12,19 introduces FAITH as essential; therefore chpt.11)  
(Heb 3:14 = "the beginning of our confidence" = FIRST LOVE!)  
(Heb 4:12 = a discerner of = because outward physical obedience, which they still had, is not enough!)  
Heb 5:8-12 = YOU ARE DULL OF HEARING (i.e. don't WANT to listen)  
Heb 6:4-8 = IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO RENEW AGAIN ...  
Heb 10:22-23 = DON'T SIN WILFULLY ...  
Heb 10:36-37 = YOU NEED PATIENCE (therefore what follows is the FAITH chapter, to explain this need for patience)  
Heb 12:1 = A LACK OF FAITH IS THE SIN "WHICH SO EASILY BESETS US"  
Heb 12:4-12 = I KNOW THIS CORRECTION I'M GIVING YOU ISN'T PLEASANT...BUT LOOK BEYOND IT TO WHAT IT WILL ACHIEVE!  
Heb 12:15-17 = AVOID A ROOT OF BITTERNESS ... AND DON'T BECOME PROFANE!

10) When all this correction is read back-to-back, it becomes clear how strong it is. ALL of it refers to "attitude". NONE of it refers to "false doctrines" ... just like Revelation 2:1-6. And Revelation 2:1-6 didn't typify the gentile Corinthians in the Church (who had all kinds of doctrinal problems), or the Romans or the Galatians ... Revelation 2 really identifies the JEWS in that era! And Rev. 2:1-6 really summarizes the whole message of the Book of Hebrews.

When you read just the actual message Paul had in mind (this extremely strong warning) and leave out all the explanatory material (the sugar to make the bitter medicine go down), then you can get a feel for what was really on Paul's mind (see Romans 9:3).

11) Sprinkled throughout this letter we find: "remember from whence you are fallen and do the first works"

- Heb 4:14-16 = Christ understands ...
- Heb 6:9-10 = God doesn't forget your works of love ...
- Heb 10:34-35 = don't throw it all away now ...
- Heb 12:25 = please listen ...
- Heb 13:8 = Christ is totally dependable ...
- Heb 13:22 = so once again: please listen ...!

12) A BRIEF LOOK AT EACH CHAPTER OF HEBREWS:

Chpt 1: Christ's supreme position in God's plan: as a Spirit Being He is vastly higher than the angels.

Chpt 2: The PURPOSE of Christ's ministry is touched on: for God to build a Family (verses 6-10).

Chpt 3: As a Lawgiver Christ's position is also vastly higher than Moses (whom the Jews in the Church esteemed highly).

Chpt 4: In addition, Christ is also our HIGH PRIEST (a new thought).

Chpt 5: As a High Priest Christ's position is also vastly higher than Aaron.

Chpt 6: A warning against committing the unpardonable sin!

Chpts 7-10 = a thorough discussion of Christ's Highpriesthood. This takes some of the pressure off the correction Paul has been giving and there is no correction in this section. Also, this explains WHY Christ was not returning when they thought He should return.

Chpt 7: This shows Christ's Highpriesthood is higher than the Levitical one by means of two examples: bestowing blessings (the greater blesses the less) and tithing (the greater receives tithes from the less). Also the change-over from the one priesthood to the other is discussed.

Chpt 8: THE REASON for the change-over in priesthods is explained. It is so that God can bring in "the New Covenant" (see especially verse 6).

Chpt 9: The New Covenant involves a totally different set of priesthood duties ... the Melchizedek priesthood does NOT bring animal sacrifices.

Chpt 10: THE RESULTS or CONSEQUENCES of the sacrifices brought by both priesthods are examined and compared, ending with a stern warning and the need for patience.

Chpt 11: This logically leads to a thorough discussion of faith! Each example carries exactly the same lesson ... one the Ephesian era should have kept in mind. The lesson is: you have not yet received the reward ... (verse 13,39).

Chpt 12: YOUR RESPONSE TO CORRECTION shows whether you have learned anything from these O.T. examples of faith.

Chpt 13: A conclusion with various general admonitions.

That's a brief overview of the whole book.

13) In the 60'ies A.D. Paul saw a problem developing among his own countrymen in the Church. They were taking offence at Jesus Christ, while outwardly still maintaining a mechanical obedience. In coming into the Church they had sacrificed everything they had had; when Christ didn't come back in their lifetime, some became turned-off. So Paul wrote this epistle to the whole era with this message: PLEASE DON'T TURN AWAY FROM JESUS CHRIST, YOUR FIRST LOVE!

Then Paul died. But the trend continued ... and 30 years later God inspired John to write to that same era: you HAVE LEFT your first love. Sadly, Paul's epistle did not reverse the trend.

14) LESSONS FOR US TODAY: When considering the 7 messages in Rev. 2-3, only the penalty mentioned to Laodicea approaches the severity of the penalty mentioned to Ephesus. Both of those eras have problems with ATTITUDES (for Laodicea it is an attitude of COMPROMISING). A wrong attitude is a far more serious problem than a wrong doctrine! Compared to a wrong attitude, our wrong doctrine in the 60'ies of keeping Pentecost on a Monday was only a minor problem.

The penalties for eras with wrong doctrines (Pergamos and Thyatira) are less severe than the penalty for an era with the right doctrines but a wrong attitude (Ephesus).

15) The Book of Hebrews carries a message which has a very clear application in our time. We too are anticipating the return of Jesus Christ, as did the "Hebrews". We need to guard against the attitude of "My Lord delays His coming".