

The Letter to the Hebrews and to Us



Week One

inTro



Read This Week's Passage:
Hebrews 10:23–39

ONE COMPLETE SERMON

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to hear Jesus or one of the apostles preach? We possess written excerpts and summaries of some of their sermons, but these provide only a limited idea of what it was like to hear them. God preserved in the Scriptures at least one complete sermon for us, however: Paul's letter to the Hebrews.

Paul, the author of Hebrews, referred to his own work as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22). This expression was used to identify sermons both at the synagogue (Acts 13:15) and at Christian worship (1 Tim. 4:13). Thus, it has been argued that Hebrews is the earliest “complete Christian sermon” that we have. Hebrews was addressed to believers who accepted Jesus but then experienced difficulties. Some were publicly shamed and persecuted (Heb. 10:32–34). Others faced financial problems (Heb. 13:5, 6). Many were tired and had begun to question their faith (Heb. 3:12, 13). Can any of us today relate?

The apostle Paul, in a stirring sermon, challenged them (and, by extension, us) to persevere in faith in Jesus and to fix their eyes upon Him who is now in the heavenly sanctuary.



inScribe

Write out Hebrews 10:23–39 from the translation of your choice. If you're pressed for time, write out Hebrews 10:34–39. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.

inGest



Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you



Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases

What special insights do your marks seem overall to point to?

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Memorize your favorite verse in Hebrews 10:23–39. Write it out multiple times to help memorization.

What does it mean to suffer for Christ's sake?

How much suffering that we face is for Christ's sake, and how much is brought about by our own poor choices?



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BETWEEN MIRACLES AND PERSECUTION

Hebrews 2:3, 4 implies that the audience of Hebrews had not heard Jesus Himself preach; instead, they had received the gospel from other evangelists who had announced to them the news of salvation.

Paul also says that the evangelists had “confirmed” the message to the audience and that God Himself had borne “witness both with signs and wonders.” This means that God had provided experiential confirmation of the gospel by signs and other powerful deeds—among them the distribution of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament relates that signs such as miraculous healings, exorcisms, and the outpouring of spiritual gifts often accompanied the preaching of the gospel in new places.

At the beginning of the Christian church, God poured His Spirit upon the apostles in Jerusalem so that they were able to announce the gospel in languages previously unknown to them and to perform miracles (Acts 2, 3). Philip performed similar wonders in Samaria (Acts 8), Peter in Joppa and Caesarea (Acts 9, 10), and Paul throughout his ministry in Asia Minor and Europe (Acts 13–28). These powerful deeds were experiential evidence that confirmed the message of salvation—the establishment of the kingdom of God and a salvation from condemnation and freedom from evil powers (Heb. 12:25–29).

The Spirit gave early Christian believers the conviction that their sins had been forgiven; thus, they were not fearful of judgment, and as a result their prayers were bold and confident, and their religious experience was joyful (Acts 2:37–47). The Spirit also delivered those who were enslaved to evil powers, which was compelling evidence of the superiority of the power of God over the forces of evil and revealed that the kingdom of God had been established in their lives.

When believers confessed their faith in Christ and joined the church, however, they set a boundary marker that distinguished them from the rest of society. Unfortunately, this became a source for conflict, because it implicitly passed a negative judgment on their community and its values.

It is very likely that the readers of Hebrews suffered verbally and physically at the hands of mobs stirred up by opponents (e.g., Acts 16:19–22, 17:1–9). They were also imprisoned, and it is possible that they were beaten as well, because officials had the power of authorizing punishment and incarceration, often without following appropriate judicial norms, while they gathered evidence (e.g., Acts 16:22, 23).

To “bear the reproach of Christ” (1 Peter 4:14–16) simply meant to identify oneself with Christ and endure the shame and abuse that this association implied. Public animosity against Christians was the result of their distinctive religious commitments. People can get offended by religious practices that they don’t understand or by people whose lifestyle and morals could make them feel guilty or shamed. By the middle of the first century AD, Tacitus considered Christians to be guilty of “hatred against mankind.” (Josephus Tacitus, “Annals,” in *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Moses Hadas, trans. Alfred J. Church and William J. Brodribb (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), 15.44.1.) Whatever the exact reason for that charge, although certainly false, many early Christians, such as the ones that Paul had written this letter to, were suffering for their faith.

OVERCOMING MALAISE

The readers of Hebrews were successful in keeping their faith and commitment to Christ despite rejection and persecution. The conflict, however, took a toll in the long run. They fought a good fight and came out victorious but also weary.

Hebrews tells us that the readers continued to experience difficulties. Verbal and probably other kinds of attacks against their honor continued (Heb. 13:13). Some believers were still in prison (Heb. 13:3)—something that may have drained the church financially and psychologically. They were tired (Heb. 12:12, 13) and could easily “lose heart” (Heb. 12:3, NIV).

It is usual among persons and communities that after the thrill of victory passes, psychological and other kinds of defenses are relaxed, and they become more vulnerable to the counterattack of their enemies. The strength that a person or community mobilizes to face an impending threat is more difficult to summon a second time.

What did the apostle advise the readers to do in view of their situation? What can we learn from Hebrews for our own benefit?

The story of God’s dealings with Elijah after Carmel is fascinating because it shows the tender care and wisdom with which God ministers to those who are under distress and who struggle to regain faith. God did several things for Elijah. First, He cared for his physical needs. He provided food and let him rest. Then, in the cave, He kindly reproved him—“What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19: 9, 13, NKJV)—and helped him gain a deeper understanding of how He works and fulfills His purposes. God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in a still, small voice. Then, God gave Elijah a work to do and reassured him.

Throughout Hebrews we can find several instructions that the apostle gave the readers to help them recover their original strength and faith. One aspect that the author emphasizes is to take care of the physical needs of their fellow believers. He suggests that they should practice hospitality and visit those in prison, which implied providing for their needs. The apostle exhorts the readers to be generous, remembering that God will not abandon them (Heb. 13:1–6). Paul also reproved them and encouraged them. He warned them to not gradually “drift away” (Heb. 2:1, ESV) and to not have “an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12), and he encouraged them to grow in their understanding of the faith (Heb. 5:11–6:3). He also remarked about the importance of consistent attendance at church meetings (Heb. 10:25). In summary, he suggested that they press together, encourage one another, and stir up love and good works; but he also lifted up Jesus and His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary in their behalf (Heb. 8:1, 2; 12:1–4).



inTerpret

After looking at your scribed and annotated text, what special insights do your marks seem to point to overall?



What questions emerge after studying all of Hebrews 10:23–39? What parts are difficult?

What other principles and conclusions do you find?

Think about those times when you have failed in your Christian life and try to understand the circumstances and factors that contributed to the collapse. What could you have done differently?



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What relationship do the following verses have with the background of the letter to the Hebrews?

- 1 Peter 4:14, 16
- Hebrews 13:1–9, 13
- 1 Kings 19:1–18
- Hebrews 3:12–14
- Numbers 13, 14, 24, 25



What other verses come to mind in connection with Hebrews 10:23–39?

Review your memorized verse from Hebrews 10:23–39.

JESUS TARRIES NOT

A very important element, which the apostle emphasizes, adds urgency to his exhortation: the readers are living in the very “last days” (Heb. 1:2), and the promises are about to be fulfilled (Heb. 10:36–38). It is interesting, as we will see, that throughout the document Paul compares his audience with the desert generation that stood right before the border of Canaan, ready to enter into the Promised Land. He reminds them, “For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry” (Heb. 10:37). And then he encourages them: “We are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul” (Heb. 10:39). This last exhortation reminds the readers, and us, about the dangers that the people of God have historically experienced right before the fulfillment of the promises of God.

The book of Numbers talks about this very thing. The biblical record says that two different times, right before entering the Promised Land, Israel suffered important defeats. The first time, recorded in Numbers 13 and 14, tells us about the doubts that several leaders spread through the congregation and caused the faith of Israel to fail. As a result, the congregation decided to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt, just at the moment when they were about to enter Canaan.

The second time, the Israelites got entangled with sensuality and false worship in Baal Peor (Numbers 24, 25). While Balaam was not able to bring a curse upon the Israelites, Satan used sexual temptations to lead Israel in false worship and sin, and to bring God’s displeasure upon them.

The apostle warns the readers of Hebrews against both dangers. First, he exhorts them to hold fast to the confession of their faith and to fix their eyes upon Jesus (Heb. 4:14; 10:23; 12:1–4). Second, he exhorts them against immorality and covetousness (Heb. 13:4–6). Finally, he exhorts them to observe and obey their leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17).



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Meditate on Hebrews 10:23–39 again and look for where Jesus is.



What is He saying to you through these texts?

Considering the biblical understanding of the state of the dead—and that as soon as we close our eyes in death, the next thing we know is the Second Coming—why can we say that all people have lived in the “last days”?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?



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The Letter to the Hebrews and to Us



Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your
life this week?

→
After this week's study of
the passage, what are some
decisions that must be in your
personal life?

What are some practical
decisions you must make in
your school, family, workplace,
and church?



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RECIPE FOR REFUGE

“Into the experience of all there come times of keen disappointment and utter discouragement—days when sorrow is the portion, and it is hard to believe that God is still the kind benefactor of His earthborn children; days when troubles harass the soul, till death seems preferable to life. It is then that many lose their hold on God and are brought into the slavery of doubt, the bondage of unbelief. Could we at such times discern with spiritual insight the meaning of God’s providences we should see angels seeking to save us from ourselves, striving to plant our feet upon a foundation more firm than the everlasting hills, and new faith, new life, would spring into being.”

“Hope and courage are essential to perfect service for God. These are the fruit of faith. Despondency is sinful and unreasonable. God is able and willing ‘more abundantly’ (Hebrews 6:17) to bestow upon His servants the strength they need for test and trial. The plans of the enemies of His work may seem to be well laid and firmly established, but God can overthrow the strongest of these. And this He does in His own time and way, when He sees that the faith of His servants has been sufficiently tested.

“For the disheartened there is a sure remedy—faith, prayer, work. Faith and activity will impart assurance and satisfaction that will increase day by day. Are you tempted to give way to feelings of anxious foreboding or utter despondency? In the darkest days, when appearances seem most forbidding, fear not. Have faith in God. He knows your need. He has all power. His infinite love and compassion never weary. Fear not that He will fail of fulfilling His promise. He is eternal truth. Never will He change the covenant He has made with those who love Him. And He will bestow upon His faithful servants the measure of efficiency that their need demands. The apostle Paul has testified: ‘He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. . . . Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.’ 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10.

“Did God forsake Elijah in his hour of trial? Oh, no! He loved His servant no less when Elijah felt himself forsaken of God and man than when, in answer to his prayer, fire flashed from heaven and illuminated the mountaintop. And now, as Elijah slept, a soft touch and a pleasant voice awoke him. He started up in terror, as if to flee, fearing that the enemy had discovered him. But the pitying face bending over him was not the face of an enemy, but of a friend. God had sent an angel from heaven with food for His servant. ‘Arise and eat,’ the angel said. ‘And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baked on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head.’

“After Elijah had partaken of the refreshment prepared for him, he slept again. A second time the angel came. Touching the exhausted man, he said with pitying tenderness, ‘Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.’ ‘And he arose, and did eat and drink;’ and in the strength of that food he was able to journey ‘forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God,’ where he found refuge in a cave.” (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: 1917), 162, 164–166.)



Share insights from this week's memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.



What are your expectations for this study on Hebrews?

What has been your experience with persecution thus far and how have you dealt with it?

What are the elements to remedy disheartened souls?

How can these elements be applied in your life in real time?

The word *exhortation* in the Bible can refer either to reproof or to encouragement. What care should we take in reproofing a person who is discouraged?

What similarities do you find between the experience of the readers of Hebrews and that of the Laodicean church of Revelation 3:14–22?

In what ways is our experience today, two thousand years later, similar to that of the early Christians, and what can we learn from the similarities?