



Hebrews

THE NEARNESS OF KING JESUS



LISA HARPER

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Nashville, Tennessee

LOVINGLY DEDICATED to the B3 sisterhood:
Rachel Beavers, Christy Dismukes, Judy Flaherty,
Paige Greene, Paige Hill, Katie Holliday, Melanie
Jeansonne, Carissa Pereira, B. K. Steib and
Heather Whittaker. There is no other group of
girls I'd rather vault over comfort zones and
charge up mountains with—B3s forever, baby!

Also dedicated to Kelley Beaman, an honorary
B3 who refused to tote a backpack for fifty
miles, but prayed for us every step of the
way, fed us when we returned from the battle
of the blisters, and graciously opened up
her lake house to film some of this Hebrews
study, including our watery leap of faith!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rarely are the terms “hilarious storyteller” and “theological scholar” used in the same sentence, much less used to describe the same person, but Lisa Harper is anything but stereotypical. She is a master storyteller, whose writing and speaking overflows with colorful pop culture references that connect the dots between the Bible and modern life.

Her vocational resume includes six years as the director of Focus on the Family’s national women’s ministry, followed by six years as the women’s ministry director at a large church. Her academic resume includes a master’s in theological studies with honors from Covenant Seminary. Now a sought-after Bible teacher and speaker, Lisa is currently featured on the national Women of Faith tour and speaks at many other large multi-denominational events—such as Kathy Troccoli’s Among Friends, LifeWay’s Abundance, and Women of Joy conferences—as well as at hundreds of churches all over the world. She’s been on numerous syndicated radio and television programs and was featured on the cover of *Today’s Christian Woman*.

She’s written 10 books, including *Stumbling Into Grace: Confessions of a Sometimes Spiritually Clumsy Woman* and *A Perfect Mess: Why You Don’t Have to Worry about Being Good Enough for God*. In spite of her credentials, the most noticeable thing about Lisa Harper is her authenticity. “I’m so grateful for the opportunities God’s given me,” Lisa says, “but don’t forget: He often uses donkeys and rocks!”

INTRODUCTION & GROUP SUGGESTIONS

Mindy, one of my friends at The Next Door (a six-month residential addiction recovery program where I volunteer) plopped down on a couch beside me with an exaggerated sigh and said, “This stuff is *hard*, Lisa.”

I gave Mindy’s shoulders a squeeze and asked, “What’s hard, Sweetie?”

She leaned back as far as the couch would allow and replied, “EVERY. THING. Everything here is hard.” Then she launched into her daily routine at TND:

Wake up at 5:00 a.m. to get ready for work.
Walk to the bus stop—regardless of the weather—to catch the 6:15 cross-town bus.
Ride bus to Krystal, then fry burgers/deal with irate customers/clean toilets for 8 hours.
Catch the bus back to The Next Door.
Eat a quick dinner.
Help clean up the kitchen.
Attend a mandatory community meeting and/or devotional.
Attend a mandatory AA meeting.
Take a shower and go to bed, while showing grace to a noisy roommate.
Start all over again the following morning.

With a partial smile on her face and tears in her eyes, she lamented, “I’m not used to working this hard, Lisa. I mean, good night, I just got here from prison a few weeks ago, and all I had to do there was lay around and watch cable. I promise, I’m trying as hard as I can and I don’t wanna get kicked out of the program, but it’s dang hard to go from not working at all for six years to busting my tail overnight!”

I couldn’t help but think of Mindy’s bumpy transition when I flipped through this Hebrews workbook. I couldn’t help think about the precious it’s-been-a-while-since-I’ve-been-in-church or the I’ve-never-been-in-a-small-group-and-didn’t-know-crop-pants-were-required girls who will also flip

through these pages and then probably break out in a cold sweat. Because it's all new to them and, at first glance, being in a Bible study sounds like hard work! Especially if they aren't familiar with Scripture and they're afraid one of us with a dog-eared Bible and a Vera Bradley tote full of highlighters will turn up our nose or, worse still, feel led to expose her inexperience.

So let's agree to make Hebrews an easy place to engage with God. A place where every woman feels like it's OK to ask questions about Him, share the highs and lows of her story, and ultimately lean further into the nearness of King Jesus. Therefore, it's not necessary to choose a single leader for this study (I can almost hear the audible gasps from the type A's reading this!), and may be more beneficial to choose a couple of friendly chicks to co-lead, which will help the environment be less personality-driven and more participation-driven.

A FEW TIPS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY INVOLVEMENT:

- Establish a no-monopoly chat zone. Encourage everyone to answer at least one question rather than having one big-talker answer all of them.
- Allow for "silence cushions" between questions to give introverts time to formulate their thoughts and participate.
- Throw spitballs at anyone who responds to a question with a basic yes-or-no answer. OK, maybe spitballs are a tad punitive, but encourage real responses!
- Be quick to listen and slow to give advice or attempt to fix the other chicks' problems in your circle. Just say no to Dr. Phil wannabes!
- Make your best effort to begin and end on time.
- Don't focus on moving through all the material each time you get together; instead, focus on how your small-group tribe is moving toward Jesus.

To make Hebrews user-friendly, we've created a workbook/journal geared toward participation instead of intimidation. We've also segmented the workbook into chunks instead of days, so you can complete the questions when you

have time—when your baby’s sleeping, when your husband’s glued to a football game, or when you’re finally home from work and have changed into a pair of comfy sweatpants. The last thing we want is to make the homework so difficult and time-consuming that your group dwindles down to nonexistent.

Each week starts with a two-page viewing and group guide. For the first session, you’ll just watch the video and get to know each other. Then, during the following week, complete your first week’s study. When you gather for the second week, discuss the week 1 study and watch the second week’s video.

Your format can depend on your group’s size. If your group has few members, discuss the previous week’s study first and then watch the video, allowing for some time to discuss the video’s questions afterward. If you have a large group, watch the video first and then combine the discussion of video questions and the previous week’s work.

Now, may I encourage you to breathe deeply, smile genuinely (even if it’s just to yourself), and turn the page? Then doodle wildly in the margins. Be as honest as possible in every response. And fire away with your thoughts, since few questions have right or wrong answers. Feel free to throw this workbook on the floor with gusto if something I’ve written steps on one of your emotional bruises ... or hug it close to your chest when Jesus whispers how valuable you are to Him while you’re perusing a passage.

My deep hope and fervent prayer is that the King of all kings will woo us closer to Himself than ever this season. That God’s Spirit—our Comforter and Counselor—will cause us to long for a more intimate relationship with our Redeemer and compel us to share more compassion with the poor, lost, and marginalized world around us. I want to love bigger, fear less, and run headlong into the arms of Jesus every single day as a result of hiking through Hebrews with you. I really can’t wait to see how God shows up in this adventure!

Warmest Regards,

Lisa

As an extra feature of Hebrews, we have included six articles excerpted from *Biblical Illustrator* magazine. Feel free to ignore the articles or to do the extra study. For the complete version of the articles and nine additional articles on Hebrews, you may purchase the downloadable set from *Biblical Illustrator*. Look for “Hebrews: The Nearness of King Jesus Biblical Illustrator Bundle” on lifeway.com/hebrews. *Biblical Illustrator* is a great enrichment magazine for Bible teachers and students. It delves into archeology and biblical history with photos and insights that help bring Scripture to life.

OPTIONAL BONUS

You will find two bonus videos in the Hebrews leader kit: a panel discussion of the difficult issues in the Book of Hebrews and a guest teaching segment with Mandisa on Hebrews 12:1-2. You might choose to have an extra session to view and discuss these segments or you could use them for a celebration to end the study.

If you're on social media, please share what you're learning at #nearJesus.

The Book of Hebrews covers two key Christological concepts: the _____ and the _____ of Jesus.

Hebrews was written sometime between A.D. _____ and _____, approximately three to four decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hebrews was written to a small group of _____ Christians, who were living in either _____ or _____.

Monotheistic: *pledging one's allegiance to _____ God*

Polytheistic: *pledging one's allegiance to a plethora of little "g" gods*

Nero confused the _____.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

HEBREWS 1:1-4 (ESV)

*What are four of the “many ways” (polytropos)
God used to speak to His people long ago?*

1. *the _____*
2. *_____ and _____*
3. *_____*
4. *_____ and _____*

The “latter days” or “last days” refers to the time period on the continuum of progressive revelation between the _____ and _____ coming of Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. *How has Hebrews ministered to you in the past?*
2. *What has been your steepest climb in the past? How has Jesus helped you to keep on?*
3. *What climb do you face now? What would you like to get from this group and study?*

WEEK 1

ANGELS
ROCK BUT
JESUS RULES

WALK A MILE IN HEBREW SHOES

I rarely feel like I'm about to burst with excitement when I'm on a plane. At Starbucks, yes. Pottery Barn, yes. Anywhere that serves tableside guacamole and free chip refills, most definitely. But in a motorized aluminum tube? Probably not. Since I travel about two hundred days a year, my mindset on planes is more eye-rolling resignation than wide-eyed enthusiasm. The seats are configured to a supermodel's bottom. And I often end up in a middle seat, squashed between two NFL linemen-sized guys with questionable hygiene. To add insult to injury, they inevitably hog the armrests. Needless to say, the travel part of my job can be a tad unpleasant, as well as claustrophobic.

On this particular transatlantic flight, however, I didn't mind being crammed or even having Cran-Apple juice accidentally sloshed in my lap. I was going to Hillsong Church in London—the top entry on my church bucket list. I've been singing along with their worship CDs since the '90s and have listened to scads of Hillsong sermons online, so to visit one of their main campuses was a dream come true for me. Plus, I was traveling with my dear friend, Christine Caine, who's one of my favorite chicks in the universe and just happens to be part of Hillsong's international teaching team. It was like being en route to the chocolate factory with Willy Wonka himself!

We spent four whirlwind days in London, watching God do amazing things. Hundreds of people put their hope in Jesus, the worship music was so anointed that I wept the whole time we were singing, plus I got mocha lattes between all four services, making the whole experience even more heavenly.

The only less-than-wonderful moment in London happened at a dinner the Hillsong pastors had arranged with some new members at their gorgeous home in a very chic neighborhood. Christine mentioned there would be several interesting people at the dinner—a runway model, an incredibly successful venture capitalist, and some other European bigwigs—so I knew to dress up, but I'd run out of appropriate things to wear. It snowed the whole time we were there, and I hadn't packed accordingly. So, with about an hour to get ready, I decided to race to a few stores and buy a new outfit.

I had completely forgotten how much smaller UK sizing is from our generously proportioned American clothes. After forty-five minutes of berating myself for too much chips-and-guacamole consumption (because I couldn't find pants that would fit over my thighs or a jacket that didn't give me sausage arms), I had only fifteen minutes to buy something, jog back to the hotel, change, reapply makeup, and fluff my hair. At that very moment, I passed the Anthropologie store window and noticed a pretty peach mohair sweater on the mannequin. *That'll go perfectly with my dark jeans and the long strand of pearls I packed*, I thought. So I barreled into the store, bought the sweater without trying it on, and hustled back to the hotel.

As soon as I glanced at the full-length mirror in my room, I knew I was in trouble. I resembled a horror-movie-sized fuzzy lollipop—not unlike the Michelin Man in the first *Ghostbusters* movie. What in the world compelled me to think a bright orange-yellow, hairy sweater would look good stretched across my not-exactly-petite top half? Of course, by then I had about 90 seconds to meet our group in the lobby, so I had no choice but to spritz perfume on my furry, sorbet-colored self, square my shoulders, and walk downstairs with my head held high.

The situation escalated into an even greater opportunity in humility when our driver dropped us at our dinner engagement. Our host, who met us at the door, was exactly eye-level with my bottom rib, since I had worn really high heels that night in an attempt to elongate and slenderize my appearance. In reality, I just made myself unnaturally tall. My pastel largeness may have alarmed the wee host because his greeting was brief. Then he swung the front door wide open to his mansion.

That is when I noticed EVERY. SINGLE. PERSON. In the room was dressed from head to toe in black. And not fuddy-duddy, funereal black either—they were clad in butter-soft black leather ensembles, flowing black silk dresses, and effortlessly elegant black tailored jackets. Furthermore, EVERY. SINGLE. PERSON. Looked like they ate approximately four carrot sticks and one vitamin-that-makes-your-hair-shiny per day.

To their credit, those lean Londoners did not gasp out loud when I—a woolly, brightly hued American—lumbered into their sophisticated midst. A few eyes might've initially widened in surprise; however, after just a second's hesitation, they all moved forward and enveloped me like incredibly gracious swans making a protective circle around a fashion-challenged duckling.

I won't trouble you with further details about my total-opposite-of-a-Cinderella evening, except to say that after making lots of small talk and nibbling on foie gras (what in the world is wrong with pigs in a blanket as an appetizer?), I had humiliation further etched into my soul while walking across a glass ceiling during a tour of the lovely home. The architect thought a solid glass ceiling smack dab in the middle of six other floors would be an interesting feature, our host explained. While everyone else marveled over the architect's brilliance, I secretly plotted to toilet paper his home, because he obviously didn't factor in non-waifish Yanks in high heels who would be forced to take mincing steps across his crystal-clear masterpiece, terrified of crashing through said ceiling and accidentally squishing a former Vogue model. After which, the Yank would be indicted on accidental homicide charges and never, ever get to return to her homeland where people wear brightly colorful outfits and the average woman's size is twelve (two points better than a perfect ten, if you ask me).

The next time you're at a dinner party with church friends, casually throw out the phrase "ontological equality," which basically means that the three members of the Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are equal in value but different in their function.¹ It'll make you sound smart, and, more important, it'll help you remember the doctrinal concrete the writer of Hebrews used for his church members' theological foundation.

THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND

In Psalm 137:4 the singer asked, "How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" I sure didn't feel like singing at that London party, but I suspect we've all felt out of place at one time or another. So now it's your turn. I'd love to hear your story as well. If I could be there with you, we could laugh together or at least commiserate.

When was the last time you were aware of not fitting in at a social, work, or church setting?

What do you think it was/is about you that didn't gel with those surroundings?

What kind of emotion did your sticking-out-like-a-sore-thumb experience stir up in your heart?

My awkward London debut reminded me of what it feels like to be a square peg in a round hole. Or a donkey at the Kentucky Derby. My feelings, however, probably only represent a tiny taste of the unease our Jewish Christian friends felt in the second half of the first century, because they completely clashed with their culture too. Remember, Hebrews believed in one true God, while their Roman neighbors believed in a smorgasbord of false gods (they even adopted the gods of people they defeated in battle, just to cover all their bases).

| HEBREW PRACTICE | ROMAN PRACTICE |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Try to live holy, righteous lives. | If it feels good, do it. |
| Choose marriage and family. | Have multiple partners and kinky proclivities and abandon female infants on the side of the road like trash. |

Although I doubt they had to tiptoe across glass ceilings, these Jewish Christians did have to walk through each day not knowing if they were going to make it home for dinner. Not knowing if one of the emperor's Christian-hating cohorts would snatch them off the street and set them on fire for sport—which is a million times worse than being the only peach bobbing in a sea of cool black.

When has your faith in Jesus caused you to feel awkward or not fit in?

When you don't fit in because of your faith, how do you feel?

What's the worst persecution you've faced from being a Christian?

Have you ever felt physically threatened or unsafe because of your belief in Jesus? If so, describe that situation.

Talk with your group about how we, who have mostly been safe, can identify with and support those who are physically persecuted for their faith in other parts of the world.

LEAN INTO THE STORY

Before we dig into the rich soil of this text, I want to remind you for the umpteenth time that the Hebrews were living in uber-scary times. Their businesses were being ransacked, their kids were being bullied, and some of their Christian friends had been martyred for their faith. I doubt many of us have experienced the level of persecution they did in their everyday lives, but I bet most of us can identify with being at least a little afraid.

STOP AND THINK ABOUT IT FOR A MINUTE.

Have you ever been climbing up or down a steep staircase and felt like you were going to fall? yes no

Have you ever been a passenger in another person's speeding car and felt like you were going to crash? yes no

Have you ever ridden a roller coaster at an amusement park and felt like you were going to become one with the earth below? yes no

If you said yes to any of those situations, how did you react? You grabbed the banister or the handle above the car window or the metal crossbar—which, along with gravity, was the only thing keeping you in that stupid roller coaster, right? When we're frightened, it's human nature to reach for something solid, something that will anchor us to safety, something that will keep us from tumbling into Scary Town.

Jesus is the only thing we can hang onto that will actually support us in tough times. So the pastor of Hebrews keeps reminding his anxious parishioners about Jesus' better-than-anything-else nature.

In this second part of his sermon, the pastor of the Hebrews makes the case for the Son's supremacy to angels. Hebrews 1:5-14 is a treasure chest of theological booty, but we'll examine just two of the brightest jewels. The first is the author's use of multiple quotations from the Old Testament to contrast Jesus and angels.

We've set aside the entire next page to show some of the quotations and allusions the pastor uses in verses 5-14. But before you examine them, consider the following details about how the New Testament writers used Scripture.

How the New Testament Writers Use the Old Testament

You will note as you study Hebrews that almost everything the pastor said was either a direct quote of the Old Testament or an allusion to it. However, you may struggle with the wording for several reasons.

First, the people of Bible times had no experience with our modern idea of exact quotations. Remember, they lived in an world of oral learners. They spoke the Word. They learned it by hearing it. Books were far too rare for people to have their own copies. They lived and breathed the Scripture to such a degree that we sometimes cannot determine exactly which Old Testament passage was being referenced. The writer/speaker might weave multiple passages together.

Second, note that the Greek Septuagint was the Bible most in use in the first century. It was a translation of the Hebrew manuscripts. Any translation results in some degree of paraphrasing because human languages never match perfectly. We live in an unbelievably blessed time because thousands of scholars have spent their entire working lives comparing manuscripts and seeking the most accurate original documents of Scripture. Therefore we have multiple excellent translations to compare and study.

Finally, we must recognize that the writers of the New Testament wrote under unique inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For example, in Hebrews 10:20 the pastor said Jesus opened a new and living way to God's presence. The pastor said Jesus' crucified body was the torn veil in the temple. God inspired the writer of Hebrews to make such a claim, but today, we cannot produce new ideas that equal God-breathed Scripture. We seek to understand the completed message God has given us, not to add novel teachings to it.

Hebrews 1:5 cites Psalm 2:7: “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’” And 2 Samuel 7:14: “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men.”

Hebrews 1:6 cites Deuteronomy 32:43: “Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people’s land.”

Hebrews 1:7 cites Psalm 104:4: “He makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.”

Hebrews 1:8 cites Psalm 45:6-7: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

Hebrews 1:9 cites Isaiah 61:1,3: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

Hebrews 1:10 cites Psalm 102:25-27: “Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.”

Hebrews 1:13 cites Psalm 110:1: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

In Hebrew, the Book of Psalms is titled Tehillim, which means “songs of praise.”² And since each psalm was originally crafted as a song, that makes Psalms the first collective hymnal of the Israelites—kind of like God’s iPod!

When David began Psalm 110 with “The LORD says,” he established the lyrics that follow as an oracle—a direct statement from God. It’s also clear that David intended this song to be messianic in nature because of the way he describes God as speaking to his future king: “The LORD says to *my Lord*” (emphasis mine).³

Keep in mind that these believers were practicing Jews before they understood the Paul Harvey part of their faith and put their hope in Jesus. It’s safe to say they were very familiar with the Old Testament—it was their Bible. Most of them had been listening to *Tanakh* (the Jewish Bible) readings and singing psalms since before they relinquished their pacifiers. So their pastor connects the dots and proves God’s new revelation by citing the old revelation, illuminating the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. The pastor’s many allusions to Scripture also underscore the truth that we can always mine jewels from our past, even if the only beauty they provide is the reminder of what God has rescued us from.

Which of those messianic “song lyrics” (Psalm 2:7; 45:6-7; 102:25-27; 104:4; and 110:1) would you be most prone to sing?

Why do those particular words resonate with you?

In royal courts, a king extended his scepter toward a subject when he wanted them to approach his throne—when he wanted them to come closer (Psalm 45:6-7). How have you experienced King Jesus beckoning you nearer to His throne recently?

The Jewish Bible is also known as the Tanakh. Tanakh is not a word but an acronym, T-N-K, based on the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible—Torah (the Law), Nevi'im (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings).⁴

The second jewel we're going to examine is the way the pastor proclaims the superiority of Jesus over angels:

Jesus is God's Son; therefore His name is superior to angels: "[H]aving become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'? Or again, 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son?'" (Hebrews 1:4-5)

Jesus is God's Son; therefore His position is superior to angels: "And, again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" (Hebrews 1:6)

Angels worship Jesus; therefore His nature is superior to theirs: "Of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.'" (Hebrews 1:7)

Jesus' reign is forever; therefore His role is superior to angels: "But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.'" (Hebrews 1:8)

Jesus created the world; therefore His work is superior to angels: "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.'" (Hebrews 1:10-12)

Jesus sits at God's right hand; therefore His destiny is superior to angels/ministering spirits: "And to which of the angels has he ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'? Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:13-14)

At this point, you might be tempted to feel sorry for angels because it does seem like the pastor-author is being a bit harsh. I mean, good night, it's OK to casually note Christ's superiority, but this kind of diatribe could send Gabriel and his flying homies to counseling for a few millennia. So let me digress and review something we recently discussed.

Touched by an Angel was a dramatic television series that premiered on CBS in 1994 and ran for nine seasons. Viewers were engaged (and continue to be through syndication) by more than 200 wholesome episodes about heavenly messengers who bring comfort, healing, and various life lessons to humans, especially to people in crisis. The series followed the earthly adventures of an angel named Monica (portrayed by Roma Downey) and her celestial supervisor, Tess (portrayed by the indomitable Della Reese). The reason I listed this silly television trivia in our serious Hebrews Bible study is because I've had the privilege of hanging out with Roma Downey several times recently, so I can honestly say, "I've been touched by an angel!" (For those of you who've misplaced your sense of humor, please feel free to send fussy emails directly to my editor at LifeWay.)

Remember the Roman smorgasbord of gods and fake faiths? It included the heresy of dualism, which essentially proposed that the physical world—everything we can touch, taste, see, or feel—was unholy, while the spiritual or intangible world had greater value. Sleazy dualism salesmen argued that angels were therefore higher on the "divine ladder" that led to God because they didn't inhabit human bodies or rub shoulders with "filthy" people like lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors.

Unfortunately, some of the Jewish converts had bought into this hogwash-peddled-as-higher-learning, probably because angels had always been important in Jewish history. For example, when Moses gave the Israelites his last blessing, he lauded the angels who'd accompanied Yahweh during the miracle on Mt. Sinai:

The Lord came from Mount Sinai
and rose like the sun from Edom;
he showed his greatness from Mount Paran.
He came with thousands of angels
from the southern mountains.

DEUTERONOMY 33:2 (NCV)

So it's no wonder the Hebrews got all Abbott-and-Costello-ish, becoming confused about Who was on first and needing to be set straight.

Good teachers will flat straighten out a student if she misunderstands an important concept. For goodness' sake, if they didn't, can you imagine how many goggle-wearing ninth graders would accidentally set their desks on fire during chemistry class? How much more important it was for the spiritual teachers of the early believer—the one on whose shoulders the New Testament church was built—to rectify any Christological confusion.

In describing angels as wind and fire (Hebrews 1:7), the author is emphasizing that God created angels to execute His will. What adjectives or metaphors would you use to describe angels?

Read the following passages about angels (all in HCSB). Mark the responsibilities that describe what an angel does.

1 Kings 19:5: “Then he lay down and slept under the broom tree. Suddenly, an angel touched him. The angel told him, ‘Get up and eat.’”

Isaiah 6:6-7: “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed and your sin is atoned for.’”

Ezekiel 9:1: “Then He called to me directly with a loud voice, ‘Come near, executioners of the city, each of you with a destructive weapon in his hand.’”

Daniel 8:18-19: “While he was speaking to me, I fell into a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me, made me stand up, and said, ‘I am here to tell you what will happen at the conclusion of the time of wrath, because it refers to the appointed time of the end.’”

Matthew 18:10: “See that you don’t look down on one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of My Father in heaven.”

Mark 13:27: “He will send out the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky.”

Acts 7:53: “You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it.”

Galatians 3:19: “Why then was the law given? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise was made would come. The law was put into effect through angels by means of a mediator.”

In light of these verses, what responsibilities would you include as part of an angel’s job description?

Did any of these tasks come as a surprise to you? If so, which one(s)?

Have you personally been ministered to by angels in one of the ways mentioned in the verses? If so, describe your experience.

Why do you think modern-day Christians are often hesitant to engage in conversations about angels?

SCOOT YOUR CHAIR A LITTLE CLOSER TO JESUS

One of my favorite movies of all times is *To Kill A Mockingbird* (based on Harper Lee's classic novel, published in 1960). The storyline is based on a tough-on-the-outside-tender-on-the-inside attorney by the name of Atticus Finch (played by Gregory Peck). Atticus is limping gruffly through life—with his two young children skipping carefully behind him—in the aftermath of his wife's untimely death. But then he makes a life-changing choice that ultimately galvanizes his fractured little family. He decides to become the defense attorney for an innocent black man named Tom, who's been framed for raping a white girl in their small, Southern, segregated town.

My favorite scene in the film takes place soon after Tom is convicted, even though everyone in the courtroom knows he's not guilty—especially after the excellent, impassioned defense Atticus has presented. Nonetheless, the all-white jury chooses tradition over truth and unfairly hands down a guilty verdict. Prejudiced rednecks whoop with glee when the verdict is read, while all the black people in the balcony (because the main floor of the courthouse was for whites only) react in stunned silence. The bottom floor of the courtroom quickly empties as white men file out, slapping each other on the back in congratulations.

Throughout all the downstairs commotion, the blacks in the balcony remained seated, shocked and deeply disappointed that Tom—now a symbol for anyone with brown skin in their community—was unfairly accused and convicted simply because of his race. Then the camera pans to Atticus. To the only white man who'd behaved honorably that day by insisting that all people deserve to be treated with fairness and dignity regardless of their color or creed. It's obvious by the sag of his shoulders that he's brokenhearted over the verdict. He methodically gathers his papers from the defendant's table, puts them into his briefcase, then turns to walk out of the courtroom. And that's when people in the balcony began standing up. First one by one. Then dozens of them.

A kindly old black pastor taps Atticus's precocious seven-year-old daughter, Jean Louise (nicknamed "Scout"), on the shoulder. Scout has chosen to sit up in the balcony throughout the trial and in that particular moment is plopped on the floor with her tomboyish legs dangling through the balusters. The pastor instructs her firmly but warmly, "Miss Jean Louis, stand up. Your father's passing." She glances up to question him but once she realizes the entire balcony is standing in deference to her father, her countenance transforms from that of a wary little girl to one whose heart has begun to

beat for her daddy. She scrambles quickly to her feet and stretches as tall as she can so as to show her esteem for her father.

I cry every time I watch that scene. Partly because I can so identify with having a gruff, distant dad whom I longed to be close to. And partly because it's such a poignant reminder of how Christians should effectively stand in deference to King Jesus, whom Hebrews depicts as sitting at the right hand of Yahweh:

And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?

HEBREWS 1:13

In the context of a royal court, "sitting at the right hand" means Jesus sits in the seat of distinction, designating His kingly authority. His seated position also implies that everyone else surrounding the throne is standing in honor of His crown. He is Immanuel—God with Us. He condescended to live in a human body with all of its limitations: He got thirsty in the desert, He cried when His friend Lazarus died, and He bled when soldiers scourged Him with a whip embedded with shards of glass. But let's not forget that Jesus rules alongside God the Father. He is the King of all kings. Therefore, it would behoove us to get up off our rear ends for our reigning Redeemer!

Out of all the psalms quoted in the New Testament, Psalm 110:1 is the most commonly cited. Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43; Acts 2:34-35 and Hebrews 1:13 all reference the verse. Plus, Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Luke 22:69; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; and Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12 all allude to Psalm 110:1.

Why do you think Psalm 110:1 was such a favorite among New Testament writers?

How would you paraphrase Psalm 110:1 into book or movie title?

What is your favorite angel story in the Bible and why? It can involve a single angel like when Gabriel appears in Daniel 8:15-26; 9:21-27; and Luke 1:11-38 or it might involve a big ol' angel army like the one depicted in Revelation 5:11.

Based on all you've read so far about angels, draw one. Artistic gifts or a lack thereof don't matter because this rendering doesn't have to go on the wall or the refrigerator, unless you want it to.

Note that 1 Corinthians 15:25 describes Christ's present activity slightly differently than all the "seated" references: "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." What might you conclude from the difference?

I'm a firm believer that God created women to be different from the men we all know and love. And since He's sovereign in everything He does and everything He creates, our plentiful emotions and sensory orientation (Have you ever met a chick who didn't care about the thermostat?) are divinely wired. Which means it's not just OK that we tend to cry during Hallmark movies, have important sticky notes adhered to pages throughout our Bibles, keep mementos from prom stored in a shoebox in the closet, and get misty-eyed at the mere mention of a glue gun—it's quite possibly ordained!

Since we're different, we're going to finish each session of *Hebrews: The Nearness of King Jesus* with some engage-your-heart homework that will hopefully help us hang onto the divine truths of Hebrews and apply them to our lives. Because our goal isn't to simply accumulate biblical knowledge; it's to start living the gospel—the "good news" of Jesus Christ—out loud!

LIVE THE STORY OUT LOUD

1. *Rent the movie To Kill a Mockingbird and watch it with your small group, family, friends, or by yourself sometime between now and week 2 of this Bible study.*
2. *Wherever you're watching the movie, during the courtroom scene in which Scout stands up with her friends to honor Atticus, stand up when they do.*
3. *Make a mental note of how it feels—besides a tad awkward—when you rise to show respect (even though it's only a movie, so you're really just playacting).*
4. *When the movie ends, spend some time in prayer, alone or with whomever you watched To Kill a Mockingbird, asking God to give you wisdom in showing Jesus more honor and respect.*
5. *Afterward, write out Psalm 110:1 (in your preferred translation) on an index card and draw a crown above the verse. Put the card on your bathroom mirror, the dashboard of your car, or your computer monitor at work (better still, make several cards and post them in multiple places).*
6. *At least once this week, intentionally add the greeting "Dear King Jesus" or the conclusion "Thank You, King Jesus" out loud as you pray.*

EXTRA CREDIT QUESTION FOR BIBLE NERDS:

The Old Testament quotations in Hebrews 1:5,13 are bracketed by three rhetorical questions:

- 1. For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”?*
- 2. Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”?*
- 3. And to which of the angels has he ever said, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?*

In verse 14, he ends with a final rhetorical question: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”

Why do you think he used rhetorical questions to make his point?

If you had to distill your faith in Jesus into one rhetorical question, what would it be?

Introducing the Book of Hebrews

Hebrews is an important but often neglected book. We can't be dogmatic about the author, the setting, the date, the readers, or the author's intent because the evidence is sparse. Unlike the other letters in the New Testament, the author does not identify himself or greet his readers. Obviously, the readers knew the author (13:18-25), but neither the text nor tradition of the early church identify him.

The earliest tradition favors Paul as author, but the evidence is neither early nor consistent. Clement of Alexandria said Paul wrote the letter in Hebrew for the Jews and Luke translated it. He thought Paul omitted his name to avoid prejudicing his argument due to opposition to him by the Jews.¹ The problem with this testimony is that Hebrews does not seem to be translation Greek, as Clement proposes, but original Greek. In fact, the writer seems to be accomplished in composing and writing in Greek. Clement may have been speculating on the authorship in an attempt to explain the letter's uncertain origin.

Origen noted the style and grammar of the book was not Paul's, but the thoughts were "not inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle." Origen thought the writer of Hebrews took notes on Paul's teaching and wrote the letter. While some thought Clement of Rome and others thought Luke wrote it, according to Origen, "Who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows."²

The church in the western part of the empire was much slower to recognize Hebrews and to attribute it to Paul. The earliest western testimony concerning authorship comes from Tertullian, and he attributed the book to Barnabas.³

The evidence from the text does not favor Paul. He identified himself in the text of all his letters, and personal references in the letters referred to his associates. In Hebrews, no identification appears and Timothy is the only personal reference in the book (13:23). Most likely, Paul would not have referred to himself as one who received the word about Jesus from "those who heard" (2:3), because in Galatians he insisted that his calling and his gospel came directly from Jesus. In addition, Paul's style and grammar in his letters are different from the style and grammar of Hebrews. Paul's influence on the book probably can be explained best by his influence on the author rather than by his direct influence in the writing.

Extensive use of the details of the tabernacle and of Jewish history demonstrate that the writer of Hebrews was from a Jewish background, or at least familiar with Jewish history. The writer was likely of a Hellenistic background because he used only the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture, in his quotations from the Old Testament. Finally, the writer had a high concept of Jesus similar to Paul's, even though the writer of Hebrews used some titles for Jesus that Paul did not use.

One reference may indicate the location of the writer, but it is uncertain. In 13:24 (NASB)

the writer says, "Those from Italy greet you." The preposition "from" has the basic meaning of "away from," indicating the greeters were formerly in Italy. But the word could indicate that they were currently living in Italy.

If we could identify the writer, we could more easily speculate about his location because many early church leaders became associated with certain areas. Timothy is the only person mentioned in the epistle (13:23). We know from Acts and Paul's letters that Timothy was associated with Paul in the area of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Corinth. If he remained and was imprisoned there as the text implies, the writer may also have been in the area around the Aegean Sea. Lack of evidence from tradition and the text means questions about the writer's location go unanswered. Natural curiosity makes us want to make definite identities, but we cannot.

The date of Hebrews is limited on the late end by its apparent use in Clement's first letter to the Corinthians. He wrote during the latter part of the first century. If he used Hebrews, as seems apparent, then we must settle on a date before his writing. The major factor

in deciding on a date for Hebrews comes from the text itself. The writer referred to the sacrificial system in Judaism as though it were still going on. That system ceased in A.D. 70 at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans. The ending of the sacrificial system would have been a very strong argument to support Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice as superior to the Jewish system. A likely date is sometime between A.D. 65 and 70.

Scholars speculate much about the recipients of Hebrews. Their identity also reflects on the purpose of the writer. The use of the tabernacle as the background for the Jewish sacrifice and the use of the Septuagint by the writer argue against a Palestinian destination.

If Clement of Rome did quote Hebrews in his first letter to the Corinthians,⁴ we can conclude that Hebrews was available in Rome before the end of the first century. Our best guess would be that Hebrews was written to a congregation in Rome.

Information in the text gives some characteristics of the congregation and reveals the writer's purpose. He clearly addressed Christians in the book. The congregation was most likely Jewish in background. Some have speculated that the congregation was a mixture of Jews and Jewish Christians worshipping in a synagogue.⁵ The people may have been hanging on to Judaism and slow in their response to God's

leadership to grow as Christians. Throughout the book, the writer gave warnings about disobedience. We conclude that the purpose was to encourage a Christian congregation, probably in Rome, to move ahead in Christian maturity rather than lagging behind in attachment to Jewish heritage and worship.

The themes set forth by the writer of Hebrew are intermingled throughout the book. Two general themes predominate: the sufficiency of Jesus and the obligation of believers.

The sufficiency of Jesus emphasizes that He is greater than all who have gone before Him. The following passages speak of His greatness. He is greater revelation (1:1-3) than: angels (1:4-14; 2:5-18), Moses (3:2-6), Joshua (4:1-11), Aaron (5:1-10), Abraham (6:13-7:10), the Levitical priesthood and the law (7:11-28), the tabernacle and the old covenant (8:1-9:10), and the old sacrificial system (9:11-10:18). Because Jesus is superior, He provides a better ministry to believers. His once-for-all sacrifice makes Him the means for believers to enter God's presence.

Obligation means believers must: not drift (2:1-4), maintain confidence (3:6), not be unbelieving (3:12), hold their assurance (3:14), be diligent to enter God's rest (4:11), hold fast their confession (4:14), draw near with confidence (4:16), grow to maturity (5:11-6:20), draw near to the holy place (10:19-22), hold their confession without wavering (10:23), and stimulate one another to love and good deeds (10:24).

Chapter 11 is a reminder of those through the ages who have been faithful though they did not receive the promise believers have received in Jesus. Chapter 12 and chapter 13 continue the mixture of Jesus' sufficiency and exhortations to faithful obedience to God. The writer concluded with some general greetings in 13:18-25.

Adapted from "Introducing the Book of Hebrews" by Jimmy W. Dukes, Biblical Illustrator, summer 1996, 36-40. For further study, look for "Hebrews: The Nearness of King Jesus Biblical Illustrator Bundle" on lifeway.com/hebrews.

1. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 6.14.

2. Eusebius, 6.25.

3. See Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 3d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 685-98, for a thorough discussion of the early evidence for Hebrews and its authorship.

4. The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, 36:2-6.

5. For those interested in further study on this subject, all of the available New Testament introductions and many commentaries on Hebrews give detailed information on the various views about the identity of the congregations. See also the article, "Introduction to Hebrews," by Dr. R. E. Glaze and his book, No Easy Salvation (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966).