

Bridging the Gap

A sermon series on the book of Hebrews

No one knows who wrote it, nor exactly who it was written to. The book of Hebrews reads as a sermon but concludes as a letter. It finds its place towards the end of the New Testament but quotes the Old extensively, showing how, as Luther put it, 'Jesus is the man to whom it applies, every bit of it.' Hebrews shows us how Jesus bridges the gap between Old Testament and New, between heaven and earth, between God and human beings. Each week during this series, there will be extra readings and reflection questions to assist with personal, family or small group study. I hope you enjoy delving into Hebrews with me in the coming weeks.

Sunday	Text	Theme	Extra Reading
October 3 Pentecost 19	Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12	The Last Word	Chapters 1-2
October 10 Pentecost 20	Hebrews 4:12-16	The Living Word	Chapters 3-4
October 17 Pentecost 21	Hebrews 5:1-10	The Perfect Priest	Chapters 5-6
October 24 Pentecost 22	Hebrews 7:23-28	The Permanent Priest	Chapter 7
October 31 Reformation	Hebrews 9:11-14	The Cleansing Blood	Chapter 8:1-9:14
November 7 All Saints	Hebrews 9:24-28	The Once for all Sacrifice	Chapter 9:15-10:10
November 14 Pentecost 25	Hebrews 10:11-25	The New and Living Way	Chapter 10:11-13:25

Week 1 Study

Read Hebrews 1-2, or the shorter version 1:1-4, 2:5-12, and the following sermon before reflecting on the questions below.

1. What did you already know about Hebrews? What have learned?
2. Reflect on a favourite author and what makes them a favourite. Who is the author of Hebrews? Who is the audience?
3. What titles and images are used to describe Jesus? Children may be able to think of other names for Jesus in the Bible. How do these descriptions engage our imaginations and what do they tell us about him?
4. What do you notice about the way the Old Testament is used in Hebrews?
5. In what sense is Jesus the 'last word' from God? How can we give him the last word in our own lives?
6. You could also watch the following introduction to Hebrews from the Bible Project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fNWTZZwgbs>. What stands out to you and why?

Close in prayer

Gracious Father, we thank you for being a God who speaks to us, first through your prophets at many times and in various ways, and in these last days through your Son, Jesus, your word made flesh. Help us to receive, listen and see what you say to us, to trust your word and be led by it, to know your grace in Christ, and live in response to all he has done for us. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

St Mark's Lutheran Church
Pentecost 19
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-13
Pastor Ben Pfeiffer

Greeting

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. Today we begin a series of sermons on the book of Hebrews, this mysterious book of the New Testament, that shows us how Jesus, as God's Son, bridges the gap between the Old Testament and New, between heaven and earth, between God and us. Our focus for today is on Jesus as the Last Word of God. Let's pray.

Words of God

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe (1:1). The opening words of Hebrews are very rich, very poetic and very decisive in terms of what they say about God and us.

They are also interesting in terms of what they don't say! There is no mention of the author's name, nor the audience to whom they write. There have been many educated guesses but as Origen said in the second century, really 'only God knows,' who wrote Hebrews. We do know that the writer has links to the apostles, and that what they write is consistent with the rest of Scripture. Those two facts satisfy most critics that this book belongs in the Bible.

But I would go even further and suggest that the author's shyness about their identity and those to whom they write may be intentional, or at least, a hidden blessing. It makes us ponder: Who is the author of Hebrews? Who is the book written for? In one sense, those questions are answered in the opening verses. *In the past God spoke! In these last days, God has spoken to us.* The author is God. The audience is us. There are many interesting and intervening people and points of history along the way but the book builds a bridge between God and us. The words are his. The blessing is ours.

The last word in these last days is Jesus himself. The prophets spoke in a preliminary way but Jesus comes as the final, complete, perfect, summation and revelation of God himself, *the word made flesh*. So, the author of Hebrews wants to draw us into a conversation with the author of life.

All of this has implications for our lives. Who is the author of Hebrews? God. Who is the author of our world? God. Who has the first and last word? God. So, who is the author of your life and mine? Who gets the last word in our decision-making, our planning, our relationships and our priorities? I'll leave you to ponder that, while we look at some other aspects of these words of God in Hebrews.

Words for the Imagination

First, how they engage the imagination. As we work through this book, keep an eye out for the very vivid picture language that meets us at every turn. Hebrews is not a book of dry doctrine, although it is doctrinal. It doesn't just speak to our human emotions, although it does engage those too. But it also a book that helps to awaken our spiritual imagination. Let me show you what I mean.

Verse 3 says, *'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.'* On the surface it sounds like nice words about Jesus, but it's even more than that. The radiance of God's glory is his intense brightness, what Paul calls his unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). God is depicted like the sun but infinitely brighter. Jesus is depicted as the light that radiates out from the source. Not just a reflection of it but the light itself, the rays that come down to give warmth and visibility and life to the world. All the brightness and beauty and blessing of God, which would otherwise overwhelm us, becomes close and accessible in Christ.

The second picture calls Jesus *the exact representation of God's being*. The imagery here is an imprint, like a wax seal from signet ring or a metal coin punch. The original leaves an imprint which reflects its image. In the days of Jesus, Roman coins bearing the imprint of the emperor were very common. So, by calling Jesus *the exact representation of God's being*, the author elevates Jesus above every other power and authority. This constant picture language in Hebrews encourages us not just to think about Christ or reflect on how we feel about Christ, but to also see Christ in our mind's eye, to see him as God's radiance, to see him as God's imprint, to see him sitting on his throne, ruling us and loving us, drawing us and directing us, commanding us and comforting us.

Words from the Old Testament

Now, the other thing that meets us at every turn in the book of Hebrews is the Old Testament. You might even assume it was an Old Testament book by its name, but this is because the original audience were likely Jewish Christians. So, the author is constantly quoting and alluding to the Old Testament, especially the Psalms.

In the first chapter alone, there is something like seven Old Testament quotes, which pick up references to God's Son, including his superiority to angels and world leaders. Then we get a warning to pay careful attention to these words, lest we drift away, because if the message brought by angels demanded attention, how much more the message brought by God's Son.

Then there is reference to Psalm 8, "*What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour and put everything under their feet.*" The author is showing how every part of the Old Testament, every book, every word, every iota, finds its fulfilment in Christ. Through him, we discover a God who is mindful of us and cares deeply for his adopted sons and daughters. So, keep an eye out for these references as we go through and if you have time at home, look them up and reflect on the connections that are being made.

Words of Finality

Finally, these early words of Hebrews are words of finality, the first and last words, in the sense of the definitive words. *In these last days God has spoken to us by a Son... he made purification for sins... he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone... in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God... should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered* (selected verses).

Jesus was already perfect but through his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, his life was brought to its goal, its ultimate purpose and fulfilment, and so too is ours. Through him, we are purified. Through him we are forgiven. Through him we find our goal, our purpose and our fulfilment. Through him, we find a bridge between heaven and earth, between God and us.

We like to have the last word, don't we, in a discussion, a decision, an argument. The book of Hebrews tells us from the start that Jesus will have the last word in the end, so we should listen to him ahead of time! When he says, you are his, you are his. When he says repent, repent, turn back, it's never too late. When he says, he forgives you, he forgives you. When he says, he loves you, he loves you. When he says, he cares about you, he is not ashamed to call you his brothers and sisters, he will be with you always to the very close of the age, you can stake your life on it. Let's pray.