



Hebrews

The New and Eternal Covenant

ANDREW SWAFFORD and JEFF CAVINS

The Church


ASCENSION

NOT FOR DUPLICATION



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West Chester, Pennsylvania

Hebrews: The New and Eternal Covenant is a resource of *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible Study Program*.

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Photo on front cover features the altar apse of the Sant'Antimo church in the Val d'Orcia (Tuscany, Italy).

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Welcome to *The Great Adventure*™



“To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek him, the greatest adventure.”
– St. Augustine of Hippo

The Bible is at the heart of our Catholic Faith—and our relationship with God. It is the living Word of God, where our Father meets with us and lovingly speaks to us. Reading the Bible should bring us closer to Christ, but understanding it is not always easy. Many people tell us they have tried time and again to prayerfully read Scripture, but they get frustrated because they “just don’t get it.”

The Great Adventure is designed so that anyone can make sense of the Bible and experience the life-changing power of God’s Word. At the core of *The Great Adventure* is the concept that there is a story running through the seventy-three books of the Bible that ties all of Scripture together and makes sense not just of the Bible, but of our lives as well.

That story is God’s plan as it has unfolded throughout salvation history and continues to unfold today. Once we grasp this “big picture,” the readings at Mass begin to make more sense, our Scripture reading and study come to life, and we see how our lives fit into God’s loving plan.

Hundreds of thousands of participants have discovered the riches of Scripture by experiencing one or more *Great Adventure* Bible studies. It is our prayer that you will gain a newfound understanding of God’s Word that will transform your life and bring you closer to Christ.

Jeff Cavins, creator and president, *The Great Adventure*
Sarah Christmyer, codeveloper and author, *The Great Adventure*

About *The Great Adventure* Catholic Bible Study Program

At the core of *The Great Adventure* is *The Bible Timeline*™ Learning System: a simple way to get the “big picture” of the Bible by focusing on the story that runs throughout Sacred Scripture. *The Great Adventure* Bible studies explore the biblical narrative in light of Catholic teaching and the historical, cultural, and literary context of the Scriptures to discover what Scripture reveals about God’s plan and our place within it. Studies of individual books of the Bible are supplemented by thematic and “life application” studies.

Every *Great Adventure* study is designed to foster:

- Familiarity with the Bible and ease of reading it
- Bible study habits consistent with the guidelines of the Catholic Church
- Personal engagement in the Word of God
- Faith-sharing based on the Word of God
- Growth in knowledge about Scripture and the Catholic Faith

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About *Hebrews: The New and Eternal Covenant*



Sant'Antimo Church Altar Apse

Hebrews is profoundly rich in its theology and spirituality. Although the human author remains a mystery, the writing itself is without a doubt inspired by the Holy Spirit. *Hebrews* illustrates how Christ as the New and Eternal High Priest, Prophet, and King inaugurates the New and Eternal Covenant, which is made present to us through the Liturgical and Sacramental life of the Church. *Hebrews: The New and Eternal Covenant* shows how remarkably Catholic this letter is and how its many insights illuminate the riches of our Catholic Faith.

Materials

Materials for *Hebrews: The New and Eternal Covenant* include

- **Workbook:** contains session summaries, home reading assignments, engaging study questions, responses to the questions, and talk notes for the video presentations. (You will need one workbook for every participant, study leader, and small-group facilitator.)
- **Video Presentations** (eight 30-minute sessions): presented by Andrew Swafford and Jeff Cavins, these eight video presentations provide comprehensive teaching and commentary on *Hebrews*. (You will need one DVD set.)

In addition, every participant, leader, and small-group facilitator should have a Catholic Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For this study, we recommend *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible*, an RSV-2CE Bible that incorporates the same color-coded *Bible Timeline* Learning System that is used throughout *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible* studies.

How the Study Works

Every *Great Adventure* study includes four essential steps, which are designed to fit together and build upon each other. Following these steps in order will help you to get the most out of each session.



STEP ONE: HOME PREPARATION

NOTE: There is no home preparation required for Session One.

Each session begins with personal study that involves reading Scripture and answering a series of questions that will help you understand and think more deeply about what you have read. Some questions will include additional reading from other parts of the Bible or from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to help you consider the passage in light of the bigger picture of salvation history and Catholic teaching.

We recommend that you allow at least 90 minutes to complete the reading and answer the questions for each session. We also suggest that home preparation be done in several sittings over the course of a week. This will help you create a habit of daily Bible reading and prayerful meditation.

STEP TWO: SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION

The small-group discussion is one of the most rewarding components of a *Great Adventure* Bible study. During this discussion, members of your small group will have an opportunity to share their insights into the Scripture reading. The goal of the small-group discussion is to help participants obtain a richer understanding of the readings and apply them to their lives. Trained facilitators guide the small-group discussion and keep it on track. To learn how to facilitate a small-group discussion, visit ascensionpress.com. Be sure to follow the “Ten Commandments of Small-Group Discussion” on page xi.

STEP THREE: VIDEO PRESENTATION

Andrew Swafford and Jeff Cavins wrap up each session with a video presentation that offers unique insights and profound connections to help you gain a deeper understanding of the Bible and its relationship to the Catholic Faith, with a special emphasis on ways to apply what you have learned to your life.

STEP FOUR: REVIEW OF RESPONSES

The final step—reviewing the responses at the back of this workbook—is done at home prior to beginning the reading for the next session. These responses will help you read the Scripture passages for the next session in the proper context.

For more information about how to plan and promote a Bible study and how to facilitate a small-group discussion, visit ascensionpress.com or call 1-800-376-0520.

For the most effective study experience, complete these steps in the following order: (1) Read and answer the questions, (2) discuss them in your small group, (3) view the video presentation, and (4) review the responses. During the discussion, your small-group facilitator will incorporate points found in the responses, but the richness that comes from individual insights can be lost when participants view the responses prior to the discussion.

Session Outline and Reading Guide

Each session in this workbook has the following sections.

1. Session Questions (used during Step 1: Home Preparation and Step 2: Small-Group Discussion)

- A. Establish the Context
- B. Read the Story
- C. Take a Deeper Look
- D. Application

2. Session Talk Notes (used during Step 3: Video Presentation)

3. Session Responses (used during Step 4: Review of Responses)

The following chart offers an overview of the home preparation readings assigned in each session of the study. The main reading is provided in **section B, Read the Story**, and should be read before you answer the session questions. Additional Bible readings and *Catechism* readings are provided in **section C, Take a Deeper Look**, and should be read as you answer the study questions for each session.

Session	Main Reading	Additional Bible Readings	Catechism (CCC) Readings
1. Introduction	—	—	—
2. Hebrews 1–2: Eternal Son and Royal High Priest	Hebrews 1–2	Genesis 3:19; Judges 17:9-10; 18:19; Psalm 8:4-9; Wisdom 2:23-24; Ezekiel 1:28; Matthew 23:9; John 1:1-4; 8:44; 15:13; 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 John 4:7-12; Revelation 1:17	457–460, 464, 469, 478
3. Hebrews 3–4: A New Wilderness Wandering	Hebrews 3–4	Exodus 25:9, 40; Numbers 12:1-8; 16:1-11; 20:1-9; 25:1-2; Joshua 4:19-24; 6:1-27; 1 Corinthians 10:1-12; Luke 24:27, 30	128–130, 131–133, 662, 1090, 1326
4. Hebrews 5–6: "You Are a Priest Forever"	Hebrews 5–6	Genesis 22:16, 18; Psalm 2:7; 110:4; Mark 12:35-37	480, 667, 1369
5. Hebrews 7: A Priest According to the Order of Melchizedek	Hebrews 7	Genesis 9:18-27; Exodus 32:29; Leviticus 7:11-15; 2 Samuel 6:16-19; Psalm 50:7-23; 110:1-4; 116:8-19; 1 Chronicles 16:7-36	—
6. Hebrews 8–9: A Priest in the Heavenly Sanctuary	Hebrews 8–9	Genesis 1:31–2:3; Exodus 34:23; 39:32, 42, 43; Exodus 40:34-35; 1 Kings 6:9, 14, 29-35, 38; 7:29, 36, 51; 8:10-11, 14, 27, 41-43, 55; 9:1; Isaiah 2:2-3; 56:3-7; 65:17-18; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-28, 35; 37:22, 24-27; 43:1-5; 47:1-12; Hebrews 5:1; Revelation 5:6	—
7. Hebrews 10–11: Old Testament Foreshadowing and Sacramental Fulfillment	Hebrews 10–11	2 Kings 23:1-25; 2 Maccabees 7:1-9, 20-23, 25-29, 32, 37-38; Jeremiah 20:1-2; Sirach 49:1-3; Daniel 3:16-18; Colossians 1:24	144–150, 153, 162-163, 586, 628, 694, 1084, 1127–1128, 1131
8. Hebrews 12–13: Entering the Heavenly Zion	Hebrews 12–13	Isaiah 25:6-8; 56:3-7; Jeremiah 7:3-11; 19:10-11; Matthew 21:12-13; John 6:53-58	1006–1011, 1169, 1359, 1523–1524

What to Do for Each Session

1. Welcome and Introduction (10 minutes)

2. Small-Group Discussion (40 minutes)

Note to Study Leaders: There is a short small-group discussion for the first week. Use the extra time to divide participants into small groups of eight to twelve people, ensure that everyone has the study materials, and explain how the study works. Each small group should be led by a trained facilitator.

3. Video Presentation (30 minutes)

4. Closing and Prayer (5 minutes)

Getting the Most out of This Study

This study will help you understand the Bible in a new way. The “head knowledge” you gain will help you grow in “heart knowledge” as you follow up on what you have learned. The Bible will always remain a mystery, though, and that is part of the beauty of it: We can never exhaust the treasures of Scripture. Fortunately for us, the Bible is not a subject to master; it is a place to encounter the living Word of God.

Whenever you open your Bible to read, *start with prayer*, and place yourself in God’s presence. You might take Samuel’s prayer as your own: “Speak, LORD, for your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:9). When you read, adopt an attitude of listening. Try not to treat Scripture as a text but as a personal message from God. What is he saying? What does it mean? What does it mean for my life? If you come to the Word focused on having an encounter with the Lord, he will speak to your heart, and you will be transformed.

An Important Note About the Responses to the Study Questions

Responses to the study questions are provided in the back of this workbook. These responses do not exhaust the meaning that can be found in the Scripture reading. People will have unique insights. The responses have two important functions:

1. The first purpose of the responses is to provide participants with a review of each session, which will help establish a context for the reading and questions in the following session. The best time to read the responses is just before starting on the next session.

2. The second purpose of the responses is to provide guidelines for the small-group facilitators.

Facilitators: Complete the Scripture reading and answer the questions on your own before reading the responses in preparation for facilitating the small-group discussion.

Participants should not review the responses for each session until after the session is completed. Although it might be tempting to look at these responses in advance, it is important to wait for the following reasons:

1. Bible study is not about simply watching a video presentation or reading a Bible commentary. It is just as important to immerse yourself in the Word of God itself and engage it with your heart and mind. The questions in *The Great Adventure* studies are designed to draw you into the Scriptures so that the Word of God will be planted and grow in your heart. Reading a response written by someone else may satisfy your mind for a moment, but it will not result in the kind of growth that will occur if you attempt to answer the question on your own first.

2. The success of a small group depends on a good discussion. A group of participants who have spent time pondering the Scripture passages on their own will have more varied insights to discuss.

For these reasons, please wait to read the responses until after the session. When you follow the steps of this study as intended, you will explore the Word of God in different ways—in the reading, the small-group discussion, the video presentation, and, finally, in the responses. Follow these steps over time, and you will be more than fed—you will learn to feed yourself.

Ten Commandments of Small-Group Discussion

1. Enjoy yourself!
2. Speak with respect and charity.
3. Do not ridicule or dismiss what others say. Keep comments positive.
4. Come prepared.
5. If you were not able to prepare, let others speak first.
6. Stick to the topic and questions at hand.
7. Start and end on time.
8. Allow silence. Give people a chance to think.
9. Listen to others without interrupting.
10. Keep personal matters within the group.

Adapted from Thomas Smith's original "10 Commandments of a Small Group."

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Session One

Introduction



St. Peter Preaching by Masolino da Panicale

A. Establish the Context

Reading the letter to the Hebrews is a bit like taking a guided tour of the “Holy of Holies” of biblical theology. Nothing so thoroughly and comprehensively takes us through the movement from the Old Covenant to the New, from the earthly to the heavenly, from nature to grace, quite like Hebrews. Reading it is like stumbling upon an ancient apostolic meditation on the surpassing grandeur of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ—how all this was foreshadowed and promised beforehand and how Christians now participate in this glorious reality. For the New Covenant of which it speaks is not merely a text, like “the New Testament,” but a living reality. The New Covenant is our life in the family of God.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE READING—A LETTER OR SOMETHING ELSE?

We refer to this text as the “letter” to the Hebrews, but in truth it is probably not a letter in the traditional sense. It has none of the traditional earmarks of a letter, such as an opening greeting identifying the author and recipients, as is found, for example, in other Pauline letters: “Paul an apostle ... to the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:1-2); “Paul ... an apostle ... to the Church of God ... at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:1-2). In fact, the letter to the Hebrews does not name its author at all—it is formally anonymous—nor does it name its recipients with any kind of specificity.

All the books of the New Testament were accepted and embraced as canonical because the writings were “apostolic”—that is, they were written either by an apostle or by one of the apostles’ close associates, such as Luke, who was a disciple of Paul, or Mark, a disciple of Peter. Hebrews is certainly apostolic in this broader sense, but precisely who wrote it remains a mystery.

Before we go through the potential options for authorship, let’s say a word about the genre, since this might account for the formal anonymity. This “letter” to the Hebrews seems to be an ancient *homily* that was later passed along in written form, which would explain why there was no need to name its author—after all, a congregation can see their homilist. The early recipients of the written text also seem to have known the author.¹

Throughout Hebrews, the author makes numerous references to *speaking* (not writing) and hearing, as one would expect in an oral homily: “For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which *we are speaking*”

(Hebrews 2:5, emphasis added; see also 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32). By the end of the work, it is described as a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22), the same phrase used to describe St. Paul’s *preaching* in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (see Acts 13:15).²

Understanding Hebrews as first a homily explains why the text launches so immediately into its content, with no opening introduction or greeting. It also accounts for the vibrant movement back and forth between doctrine and exhortation, between teaching and a call to Christian perseverance.

WHO DELIVERED THIS MAJESTIC SERMON?

As to who wrote Hebrews, Origen (about AD 185–253) famously quipped, “Only God knows!”³ Proposals for its authorship are wide and varied. On the one hand, an ancient tradition stemming from the Christian East traces the text back to St. Paul. After all, as we’ll see, the author is clearly very familiar with the Old Testament and understands the majesty of Christ as its fulfillment—certainly St. Paul fits that bill. There are also significant thematic parallels between Hebrews and St. Paul’s other writings. These include:

- The ultimate inadequacy of Old Testament law (see Galatians 2:16; Hebrews 7:19; 10:1)
- Christ’s redemptive obedience (see Philippians 2:8; Hebrews 5:8-9)
- Christ’s divine glory (see 1 Corinthians 15:25-28; Ephesians 1:20-21; Hebrews 1:2-14)
- The expression of giving “milk” to beginners as opposed to “solid food” (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-2; Hebrews 5:12)

Thus, Hebrews certainly fits within a Pauline orbit and web of thought.

On the other hand, there are distinctive themes in Hebrews that we find nowhere else, most notably the extensive treatment of Christ as high priest.⁴ Further, some stereotypical Pauline phrases are curiously absent in Hebrews, such as “in Christ” (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 15:18), “Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24; 8:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2), and “Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:21). While there is some vocabulary overlap between St. Paul’s letters and Hebrews,⁵ there is no doubt that Hebrews charts its own path.

For this reason, while Hebrews is often connected to Paul in some sense, it was seen early on as being in a category of its own. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, following Clement of Alexandria (about AD 150–215), believed that Paul wrote Hebrews but originally in the Hebrew language, which Luke later translated to the Greek text we now have.⁶

Other potential candidates for authorship include Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Clement, Priscilla, and Silas.⁷ Since Hebrews shows extensive interest in priesthood, and since Paul’s companion Barnabas was from the priestly tribe of Levi (see Acts 4:36), renowned Hebrews specialist Albert Cardinal Vanhoye favors Barnabas as the source of this homily, a suggestion supported by Tertullian in the early Church.⁸

Perhaps the most common suggestion today is Apollos, since he was known for being eloquent (matching the sophisticated Greek of Hebrews), well versed in the Old Testament, and familiar to Paul (see Acts 18:24). This description is certainly consistent with what can be gleaned about the author from a close reading of the text.⁹ However, there is no testimony from the early Church attesting to Apollos’ authorship of Hebrews, so we should proceed with caution here.¹⁰

We will take the approach that “the author clearly was not Paul, though presumably he moved within the Pauline circle ... and expected to travel with Timothy (Hebrews 13:23).”¹¹ Cardinal Vanhoye believes that Barnabas composed the homily but that Paul added the epistolary ending in Hebrews 13:19, 22-25, as a way of vouching for the contents of the written homily. He notes that this small section of the text is strikingly Pauline in flavor.¹²

For Vanhoye, this position would explain the ancient Pauline connection to the text while still accounting for its apparent uniqueness among the Pauline letters.¹³

WHO ARE THE HEARERS?

Though it is labeled as being “to the Hebrews,” we have already noted the text’s sophisticated Greek. For this reason, the audience probably has a Jewish Christian background, perhaps from somewhere in the diaspora—that is, most likely not from Jerusalem or the Holy Land. This would explain Hebrews’ extended use of the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament.

At the same time, the homily makes it clear that the listeners are in danger of lapsing back into Judaizing tendencies and of clinging to the Old Covenant, the Temple, and its sacrifices (see Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:28-29). For this reason, some commentators have traditionally understood the hearers to be in Jerusalem, on the assumption that such a temptation would be stronger for those who are closer to the Temple.¹⁴

Some have proposed that the Jewish Christian community in Rome is the likely audience, a view supported partly by the fact that Clement, the early first-century bishop of Rome, knew of the text.¹⁵ In this view, the past persecution referred to in Hebrews 10:32-36 may have been Emperor Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews (and Jewish Christians) in AD 49 (see Acts 18:1-2). The persecution on the near horizon could then be that of Emperor Nero in the mid-sixties, which claimed the lives of Peter and Paul.¹⁶

Other evidence may come from the greeting at the end of the document, which gives a geographic reference: “Those who come *from Italy* send you greetings” (Hebrews 13:24, emphasis added). The meaning of the phrase “from Italy,” however, remains unspecific: the Greek (*apo tes Italias*) also appears in Acts 18:2, which describes Aquila and Priscilla, who were then living in Corinth, as having come “from Italy.” Thus, the phrase “from Italy” could simply denote a place of origin, not necessarily physical whereabouts at the present time.

For these reasons, the location of the original audience cannot be known with certainty. What is clear is that the author and audience are at home with Jewish Scripture and the meaning of the Jewish Tabernacle and Temple.¹⁷ Wherever they are located, the issue at play is the relation between the Old and New Covenants and the ultimate superiority of the New. Therefore, the audience is clearly from a Jewish Christian background or one deeply influenced by that perspective.

As noted, there is a sense of both recent and imminent persecution (see Hebrews 10:32-36). While the Roman Emperor Nero leveled the first major Roman persecution against the Christians in the mid-sixties, the first wave of persecution against the early Church came earlier, at the hands of Jewish leaders such as Saul of Tarsus. This was the case in both the Holy Land and the diaspora (see Acts 6:8-8:3; 9:1-2; 14:19; 18:12; 2 Corinthians 11:24). Such Jewish persecution likely played into the temptation for early Jewish Christians to slide back into the Old Covenant, turning back to its traditional symbols of the Temple, the Torah, Levitical sacrifices, the priesthood, and so on. In the face of this temptation, there is an urgent call to faithfulness and perseverance, taking Jesus Christ as the model of faithful obedience to the very end (see Hebrews 11:1-12:2-3).¹⁸

WHEN DID THIS PREACHING TAKE PLACE?

In terms of dates, the author (or speaker) could have made his point no more strongly than by pointing to the Temple’s destruction in AD 70—if it had already been destroyed. The fact that he does not do so is telling. In addition, the author speaks as if the Temple sacrifices are still going on (see Hebrews 10:1-2). Indeed, there is a clear sense that the Temple and the Old Covenant it embodies have not yet passed away but are likely to do so soon: “In speaking of a new covenant he [Christ] treats the first as obsolete. *And what is becoming obsolete and*

growing old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13, emphasis added). For this reason, a date in the mid- to late sixties is likely, when the destruction of the Temple was imminent but had not yet occurred.¹⁹

The fall of the Temple quite literally signaled the end of the Old Covenant and the ushering in of the New. It signaled the end of the Levitical priesthood and the sacrifices that were at the heart of the Mosaic age. As we’ll see, the period between AD 30 and 70 constitutes a covenantal transition period, a sort of new wandering in the wilderness. The question was whether the early Christians would embrace the heavenly New Covenant or cling to the earthly covenant, embodied in the earthly Temple and its sacrifices.

In Hebrews, clinging to the earthly Jerusalem is considered akin to what their forefathers did when they came out of Egypt but did not make it to the Promised Land, ultimately because of their lack of faith (see Hebrews 3:19).

EMBRACING HEAVEN ON EARTH AND PERSEVERING TO THE END

While Hebrews emphasizes the unique grandeur of Jesus Christ and the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old, we shouldn’t think of this as a contrast between the bad and the good. Rather, it is a movement from the *good* to the *gloriously better*. In this movement from the Old to the New, we see Jesus as one who is greater than Moses, a high priest greater than the high priests descended from Aaron. The priesthood of Jesus and the liturgy he enacts through his paschal mystery unite heaven and earth. Indeed, Jesus has brought his sacrifice into heaven itself and has *taken us with him*. For those with the eyes of faith to see it, we participate *now* in this glorious and heavenly reality of the New Covenant.

Embracing the heavenly now requires faith and perseverance, both for the ancient Church and for us today. This teaching and these lessons remain vital for us. For we, too, are wandering in our own “wilderness” as we journey as pilgrims to our ultimate homeland, heaven itself. Though we share in this reality now, we still see through a glass darkly. But one day, we will see the Lord face to face (see 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

B. Read the Story

Read Acts 10 together, which is the story of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert. Consider how difficult it probably was for Jewish converts to come to grips with the New Covenant—especially how it welcomed the Gentiles and left aside certain familiar aspects of the Old Covenant, such as the food laws and animal sacrifices.

C. Take a Deeper Look

These discussion questions will prepare you to understand Hebrews and its message better. If you do not understand something, bring it up in the discussion.

1. Covenants are living, family realities, which include liturgical rites (by which we enter and renew our life in the covenant) as well as codes of law.
 - a. What liturgical rites are important to our communal life in the New Covenant? What role does law or moral expectation play in a family?

- b.** What rituals and traditions do we regularly celebrate that are key to our family identity?
 - c.** While these traditions are important at the natural level, how are they enhanced when animated and elevated by supernatural faith?
- 2.** Sometimes we are tempted to think of the Scriptures as ancient *texts*, and so forget that the early Church was a living reality, a covenant family. What does it mean to think of the text of Hebrews as an impassioned *homily*, most likely given in the context of a Eucharistic celebration?
- 3.** Sometimes we romanticize the early Church, drawing inspiration only from its heroism. What do you make of the fact that the early community that first received this homily was challenged and even gently reprimanded (see Hebrews 5:12)? How are they similar to us?

D. Application

The following exercises will help you apply the key themes of this session to your life.

REFLECT

Reflect on the challenges there would have been for someone embracing Christ in the first century, especially someone coming from a Jewish background in the years leading up to AD 70 (when this homily was likely delivered and written). Think of a hard decision you've had to make in your life: Was it hard to stick to it? Is there a spiritual example from your own life, either in a conversion experience or perhaps at a time when you sincerely tried to renew your commitment to put Christ at the center of your life?

COMMIT

Make a commitment to recall past times when you made hard decisions. Recall what went well (perhaps you were able to stay committed and stick to it) as well as what may not have gone so well. This intentional recollection both fortifies the vigor of our past commitments and gives us a chance to learn from them, helping us to make (and stick to) good decisions in the future.

PRAY

Pray this prayer before an examination of conscience. (Only the first part of the prayer is given here.)²⁰ The prayer refers to the times we have been ungrateful to God and helps us overcome the temptation to be indifferent or apathetic to him.

*Most merciful God,
Father in heaven,
relying on Thy goodness and mercy,
I come to Thee with filial confidence
to confess my sins and to implore Thy forgiveness.
Thou wilt not despise a contrite and humble heart.
Bless me and receive me again into Thy favor;
I acknowledge that I have been most ungrateful to Thee,
but I sincerely repent and detest the wrong I have done,
and I desire henceforth to walk in the way of perfection
in accordance with Thy holy will.*

SESSION ONE TALK NOTES

Introduction

- I. Divine intimacy**
- II. Liturgical document (homily)**
- III. Heaven on earth**
 - A.** From imitation to participation
 - B.** How the Incarnation changed everything
 - 1.** Old Covenant mediators
 - 2.** The problem of the “heart”
- IV. Who wrote this?**
 - A.** Paul?
 - B.** Someone quite fluent in Greek
 - C.** Someone who knew the Old Testament extremely well
- V. When was it written?**
 - A.** Temple sacrifices still going on
 - B.** Written before destruction of Temple in AD 70
- VI. What did the Temple mean?**
- VII. Call to hope and perseverance**—temptation to cling to the Old Covenant

NOT FOR DUPLICATION

Session Two

Hebrews 1–2: Eternal Son and Royal High Priest

A. Establish the Context

Do we appreciate the grandeur of the New Covenant, the true sublimity of God’s revelation and work in and through Jesus Christ? Do we realize how profoundly the prophet Isaiah, for example, would have longed to see what we see—how he would have yearned to experience what we experience in every Mass?

We stand on the other side of the veil, in the absolute fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. Do we appreciate the magnitude of this gift?

THE HEAVENLY AMONG US

The opening verse of Hebrews sets the tone for revealing this majestic fullness in Jesus Christ: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these *last days* he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1, emphasis added).

Notice that the author (or homilist) sees himself as standing in the “last days.” This is not a mistaken reference to a supposed early Christian expectation of the imminent end of the world. Rather, the “last days” refers to the *end of the Old Covenant* and the “in-breaking” of the messianic age (see Micah 4:1-2). Ancient Jews frequently thought in terms of two ages—*this age* and *the age to come*.²¹ Jesus inaugurates the age to come; the new creation has dawned in and through his resurrection. Christians straddle, as it were, the middle of a Venn diagram—living after the age to come has been inaugurated yet still experiencing the effects of the former age—namely, sin and death. For this reason, St. Peter likewise speaks of the “last days” at Pentecost, because the descent of the Holy Spirit has signaled the dawn of the new age (see Acts 2:17, citing Joel 2:28).

For ancient Jews, the hope of the prophets was that God would one day return to his people in a definitive and manifest way, at which time the following realities would be fulfilled:

- The Davidic kingdom would be restored, once again restoring all twelve tribes.
- A new (and heavenly) Temple would be built.
- A new (and heavenly) Jerusalem would be established.

- Creation itself would be renewed (see Isaiah 65:17-18).
- Israel and the nations would join together in one family, worshiping the God of Israel (see Isaiah 2:2-3).
- God would dwell among his people in a new and unsurpassed way through the indwelling gift of the Spirit (see Ezekiel 36:26-28; 37:26-27).²²

The expectation and hope for a “new covenant” comprises all of this (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

All those who are now “in Christ” stand on the other side of this veil and share in the new creation, as St. Paul states emphatically: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). To share in the risen life of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit is to live this heavenly life *now* (see Romans 6:3-11). While there is an “already, not yet” dimension to it, since we still experience concupiscence and death, we should not underappreciate the heavenly dimension already present among us (see Romans 8:14-17, 19).²³ Salvation is not just about the future—it is very much a reality *now*, as we already share in the glorious life of God in the present.

THE FULLNESS OF GOD’S WORD

While the prophets spoke God’s truth partially, God speaks fully and most completely through his Son (see CCC 65). Hebrews is very clear that Jesus is no mere prophet, but rather shares in the fullness of divinity of the Creator God, “through whom also he [Jesus] created the ages. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power” (Hebrews 1:2-3). Notice that the Son clearly has a role in Creation, just as we profess in the Nicene Creed: “Through him all things were made.” The same teaching is found in the Gospel of John: “All things were made through him” (John 1:3; see also 1 Corinthians 8:6).

What was revealed in the opening chapter of Genesis as Creation through God’s spoken *word* (“Let there be light”) and later as Creation through God’s *wisdom* is now fully revealed as Creation through his *Son*—through the *Eternal Word* who became flesh (see Psalm 33:6; Proverbs 3:19; John 1:14).

JESUS: THE INCARNATE WISDOM OF GOD

Where the text says that Jesus “reflects” the glory of God, the Greek word for “reflects” is *apaugasma* (Hebrews 1:3). This word occurs in only one other place in the Bible, namely, in Wisdom of Solomon 7:26, where the text refers to wisdom as a “reflection of eternal light.” This text is related to ancient Israel’s understanding of wisdom and its personified role in Creation (see Proverbs 8:22-31), almost to the point of seeing wisdom as a separate Person from the Father. In God’s providence, this ancient Jewish reflection marked a step toward revealing the mystery of the Godhead—paving the way for God’s revelation of his triune identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Sirach continues this reflection but adds to it by seeing God’s wisdom as ultimately embodied in the Torah given to Moses (see Sirach 24:1, 8-11, 23). Similarly, Isaiah draws a parallel, a virtual equivalence, between God’s “law” and his “word” (see Isaiah 2:3b).

All of this is background for fully appreciating John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made through him. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 3, 14).

Jesus is functionally prophet and redeemer, but his deepest identity is that of the Eternal Son, with an utterly unique relationship to the Father: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27).

This sublime uniqueness is a relation to the Father that the heavenly New Covenant enables us to participate in, *making us sons and daughters in the Son* and through the Spirit.

THE OLD TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD AND THE GOLDEN CALF

Moving from the unique revelation of the Son, the author of Hebrews now combines a number of key Davidic texts, drawing together Israel’s understanding of not only David’s *kingship* but also his status as *son* of God and *priest* as well (see Hebrews 1:5, citing Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14; and Hebrews 1:13, citing Psalm 110:1).²⁴

These three roles—*son*, *priest*, and *king*—have a deep biblical connection, going back to Adam and the patriarchs of Genesis as well as Israel’s early identity as a nation freed from Egypt.²⁵ The patriarchs act as spiritual and temporal heads of their families—that is, they function as *royal priests*, offering sacrifices, building altars, and giving the blessing (see, for example, Genesis 8:20; 12:7, 8; 26:25; 28:18). The ideal is for this royal and priestly status to be handed on to the firstborn son as the heir apparent, but the irony in Genesis is that this almost never happens.²⁶

The biblical connection between sonship, priesthood, and kingship continues in Exodus, in the description of Israel as God’s “firstborn son” who is called to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 4:22; 19:6). This royal priestly role is forfeited when Israel turns away from God to worship the golden calf, and the description of Israel as a “kingdom of priests” is never referred to again in the Old Testament. The phrase next appears in the New Testament, where it is used of the New Covenant Church (see 1 Peter 2:9).

Hence, the episode of the golden calf marks the end of the patriarchal priesthood, which is now given over to the Levites, who become surrogate firstborn sons (see Exodus 32:29; Numbers 3:12, 41, 45; 8:18).²⁷

This becomes very significant later. The fact that the Levitical priesthood arises after (and because of) the golden calf episode explains why it eventually comes to an end—because it was part of the “law” that was “added because of transgression” (see Galatians 3:19). Jesus’ priesthood, as we will see, restores and elevates the earlier priesthood, from before the golden calf—namely, the priesthood of the patriarchs.

In the Davidic period, there is a slight shift—a return of sorts to the patriarchal setting, with David and Solomon acting as priest-kings (see 2 Samuel 6:14, 17–18; 1 Kings 8:54–55, 62–64; 1 Chronicles 21:28).²⁸ This, too, will be very significant, as the Abrahamic and Davidic periods together constitute key background for the New Covenant, whereas many aspects of the Mosaic covenant (e.g., the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices) are precisely what come to an end in Christ. This is one of the central teachings of Hebrews.

THE GRANDEUR OF THE NEW COVENANT GIFT

As we move into the second chapter of Hebrews, we begin to see a contrast between the Old and New Covenants. The author alludes to the deeply held Jewish belief that the covenant at Mount Sinai was mediated by *angels* (Hebrews 2:2; see also Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). This shows that Christ was clearly not an angel; otherwise, how would the New Covenant be greater than the Old, as it clearly is (see Hebrews 8:13; 9:15; Galatians 4:24–26)?

Importantly for the first hearers but perhaps even more so for us, the author cautions us against not just *rejecting* the glorious gift we have received in Christ, but *neglecting* it: “For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we *neglect* such a great salvation?” (Hebrews 2:2–3, emphasis added).²⁹ In other words, if unfaithfulness in the Old Covenant resulted in earthly curses, such as the Babylonian exile, what is the implication for spurning—or *neglecting*—something so much more glorious in the New Covenant?

In a marriage, mere complacency and indifference can be as devastating as outright hostility. The same is true of our relationship with God: not prioritizing it makes it wither and erode over time.

Perhaps one way to come to grips with hell is first to come to grips with the heavenly majesty of what God has offered us in Christ. In other words, to understand why hell is so devastating, we must first understand the sublimity of the invitation that those in hell have eternally forfeited.³⁰

JESUS' SUFFERING AND HIS UNIQUE PRIESTHOOD

The author of Hebrews begins to draw on additional Old Testament background, this time from Psalm 8, which is a meditation on the glory of human beings created in the image and likeness of God (see Hebrews 2:6-8; Genesis 1:26-28). Jesus, as the New Adam, is now “crowned with glory and honor”—he is exalted “*because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone*” (Hebrews 2:9, emphasis added).

The author then uses a phrase that he will return to on several occasions: Jesus is made “perfect through suffering” (*dia pathematon teleiosai*; Hebrews 2:10).

This phrase is a bit puzzling on its face. After all, Jesus is the Eternal Son: How can he be *made* perfect? Isn't he *already* perfect?

Two points help explain the meaning of this important statement. First, the perfection of the Eternal Son is lived out in and through his human nature, not just eternally but now. That is, the life of the Eternal Son—the perfect image of the God who *is* love (see Colossians 1:15; 1 John 4:8)—takes on a distinct hue in his human nature: *Jesus' perfect love in a fallen world takes the shape of the Cross* (see John 15:13). And as we will see, his act of redemption now empowers each and every one of us to do the same—to love fully in accord with the divine image in which we were created.³¹

Second, *teleiosai* (“made perfect”) is used in the Greek Old Testament for *priestly ordination*.³² This nuance is present here in Hebrews: Jesus is “made perfect” in that *he is consecrated as priest* in and through his priestly self-offering to the Father.³³

Thus, Jesus is “made perfect” in the sense that (a) he perfectly lives out divine love in and through his human nature—he lives out total divine love in his self-gift on the Cross; and (b) his self-offering on the Cross is the means by which he is consecrated as our everlasting priest. In fact, these two meanings are related, since in the Bible priestly sacrifice is ultimately an expression of *ritualized self-offering*; that is, the offering of various animals, for example, was a symbolic way for the ancient Israelites to express their own self-offering to God.³⁴ In Jesus, we have the most perfect union of priest and sacrifice, of what is offered and the person offering—since Jesus offers his very self in a total gift of love to the Father on our behalf.

Jesus' self-gift perfects human nature by infusing it with divine love. And this self-offering constitutes Jesus' “ordination,” as he becomes our high priest.

As both priest and victim, Jesus goes to the Cross as our head, ultimately sending the Spirit so that we can enter into his priestly sacrifice—which then becomes the offering of the entire Mystical Body, head and members, to the Father (see Romans 12:1).

GOD'S VICTORY OVER DEATH

Intriguingly, the author now cites Psalm 22, the famous psalm Jesus cited from the Cross—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, quoting Psalm 22:1). Though this psalm begins in a cry of abandonment, it quickly expresses hope and trust and ultimately praise. For example, this psalm continues, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not disappointed” (Psalm 22:3-5).

The very passage that Hebrews quotes is precisely where Psalm 22 most evidently turns to praise: “I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (Psalm 22:22, quoted in Hebrews 2:12). This psalm goes on to prophesy the reality of the New Covenant—when all the nations will enter the universal (“catholic”) family of God, worshipping the true God: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and

turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (Psalm 22:27).

In other words, rather than this psalm being merely about a cry of defeat, it ultimately echoes the hope of Israel and the definitive victory of God. By citing it in this fashion, Hebrews is announcing that the long-awaited “age to come” has been inaugurated in and through Jesus Christ.

This divine victory in Jesus is obviously not merely a matter of Israel’s physical return to the Promised Land and the removal of foreign subjugation; rather, the last enemy to be overcome is death (see 1 Corinthians 15:26; Genesis 3:19)—this is the definitive victory of God.

HOW IS JESUS “TEMPTED”?

Hebrews 2:18 states, “For because he himself has suffered and been tempted [*peirazo*], he is able to help those who are tempted [*peirazo*].” The verb *peirazo* (and its related noun *peirasmos*) can mean “to tempt” or “to test.” The meaning of this word can refer to a *temptation* or a *trial*, that is, to a time of *testing*. The Greek Old Testament uses this word to refer back to the testing of the Israelites in the wilderness (see Psalm 95:9; Exodus 17:7; Numbers 14:22). This is also the word used to describe Jesus’ “temptation” in the wilderness, as well as in the petition in the Our Father (“lead us not into *temptation*,” Matthew 6:13; also Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:2). While recognizing that Jesus enters into the entirety of the human predicament, it is helpful to acknowledge the flexibility of this word. When the text says that Jesus is “tempted,” we shouldn’t read into this that he was falling prey to sin. Rather, Jesus enters into the full *effects* of sin and comes out victorious—he is tested and tried in every way and yet is faithful to the end. Similarly, when we pray in the Our Father “lead us not into temptation,” we know God does not tempt us to sin. But he does allow temptations and trials to come our way, all of which in his providence provide opportunities for our transformation and sanctification.

B. Read the Story

Read Hebrews 1–2. As you go through the questions, you will read these verses more closely, but getting the context first will help you read with greater understanding.

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

1. Read Revelation 1:17 and Ezekiel 1:28.
 - a. What is the appropriate response to encountering Jesus, knowing that he is God incarnate?

- b.** Why is it important not to lose sight of the transcendence of Jesus (his sublime majesty) as well as his immanence (his nearness to us)?

2. Read CCC 464 and 469.

- a.** Is Jesus “part God” and “part man”?

- b.** Now read Hebrews 2:17-18 and CCC 478. In your own words, how is the Incarnation—both the divinity and humanity of Jesus—central to the Christian faith?

3. Read CCC 457–460. Why did the Eternal Son become flesh?

4. Read Hebrews 2:14-15, Genesis 3:19, Wisdom 2:23-24, and John 8:44. What is the connection between the Devil, sin, and death?

5. Read 1 John 4:7-12.

a. What is the connection between love and God's inner life?

b. Now read John 15:13. What is the connection between love and the Cross? What shape does the love of the Eternal Son take when he becomes man in a fallen world?

6. Read John 1:1-4 and Hebrews 1:1-2. We often associate the Father with Creation and the Son with redemption (and the Holy Spirit with sanctification). How does the New Testament also point to the Son's role in Creation?

7. Read Psalm 8:4-9, which is a reflection on the glory of Adam in Creation. Now read Hebrews 2:5-9. How is Jesus the “new” Adam?

8. Read Judges 17:9-10 and 18:19.

a. What connection do you see between the language of “be to me a *father* and a *priest*” and the priesthood exercised by the patriarchs in Genesis (also known as the “patriarchal priesthood”)?

b. Now read 1 Corinthians 4:15. How does this connection between priesthood and spiritual fatherhood continue in the New Covenant?

c. How would you reconcile St. Paul’s language here with that of Jesus in Matthew 23:9?

D. Application

The following exercises will help you apply one or more key themes of the session to your life.

REFLECT

Read the following passage from St. John of the Cross, about the Trinity's indwelling in the soul, which elevates us to share in God's divinity. Reflect on the majesty of God and the absolutely sublime and stupendous plans he has for you.

By His divine breath-like spiration, the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father, which is the Holy Spirit Himself, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation, in order to unite her to Himself. There would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed in the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity in an open and manifest degree. ...

One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God, through participation, as God breathes in her. For, granted that God favors her by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know, and love—or, better, that this be done in her—in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! Yet God accomplishes this in the soul through communication and participation. This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created her in His image and likeness that she might attain such resemblance.³⁵

COMMIT

Commit to spending some time this week before the Blessed Sacrament, with the intention of simply being in God's presence and contemplating the astounding plans he has for us—plans that take root here and continue for all eternity.

PRAY

Pray over the following lines from the *Catechism*, inspired by St. Augustine, about our thirst for God *and his thirst for us*:

Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. *God thirsts that we may thirst for him.* (CCC 2560, emphasis added)

SESSION TWO TALK NOTES

Hebrews 1–2: Eternal Son and Royal High Priest

- I. The glory of Jesus**—Jesus as the fullness
- II. Review of salvation history: Abraham, Sinai, and David**
 - A.** Three promises to Abraham—the patriarchal priesthood
 - B.** Rupture at Sinai—the golden calf
 - C.** Shift with David
- III. “Neglecting” salvation**
- IV. The “world to come”**
- V. “Made perfect through suffering”**
 - A.** Divine love in a fallen world
 - B.** Priestly ordination
- VI. Fear of death**