

**Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews
PW/Horizons Bible Study, 2017–2018**

By Melissa Bane Sevier

Suggestions for Leaders by Sung Hee Chang

Main Points and Lesson Summaries

By Susan Jackson Dowd

Before Starting

Several sources were used in compiling these notes. When a page number in parenthesis appears, that information is from *Cloud of Witnesses* by Melissa Bane Sevier. If there is a name, year, and/or page number in the parenthesis, that information is from one of the sources listed in the references at the end of these notes.

General

Cloud of Witnesses: Melissa’s Approach

- Thematic—community
- Lessons begin and end with a hymn and a prayer, called “Opening Worship.”
- Lessons provide discussion questions to enhance readers’ community experience.
- So Great a Cloud of Witnesses stories follow each lesson. These stories are written by Presbyterian women about Presbyterian women.

Suggestions for Leaders: Sung Hee’s Approach

- Makes use of Melissa’s prayers, hymns, questions in each lesson.
- Provides an excellent summary of each lesson in her Theme sections.
- Suggests using the community Bible study method for this study—shifts leadership style from person-centered to process-centered (leader as facilitator, not expert, which helps everyone learn together as a community of faith)
- Provides instructions for Suggestions for Leaders on page 6 of the study.

About the Art: Irene Kordalis Pedersen’s Approach

- Transcribes text through multilayered, three-dimensional paintings.
- Provides a symbolic connection to the content of each lesson. Laura Lee, PW’s art director, chose which of Irene’s pieces to place with each lesson.

Lesson Summary Chart (see the free download, *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews Workshop of Leaders*, for a chart that includes suggested hymns)

#	Title	Scripture	Key Idea
1	In Community with Jesus Christ	Genesis 13:24; Genesis 1:26–27; Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:14–5:10; Genesis 14:18–20; Hebrews 7:26–28	Lesson One focuses on Hebrews’ emphasis throughout the book that <i>Jesus, the Christ, is the basis of all our faith and action, individually and as a faith community.</i>

2	In Community with the Living God	Hebrews 1:1–4; Exodus 3:1–7; Exodus 19:16–25; Hebrews 12:18–24; 8:10; Jeremiah 31:31–34	Lesson Two reminds us that <i>God lives both in us and among us</i> , and that this living God supports who we are and how we live.
3	In Community with the Living Word	Hebrews 1:1–3a; Genesis 1:1–5; Ezekiel 37:1–14; John 1:1–5, 14; Hebrews 4:12–13	Lesson Three points out that Hebrews describes <i>God’s word as both living and active</i> . God’s word challenges, supports, and encourages us to look inward and live the most faithful lives we can.
4	In Community with God’s Messengers	Genesis 28:10–22; Daniel 3:8–30; Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:5–17, 1:26–38, 2:8–14; Hebrews 1:3–14; 13:1–2	Lesson Four takes us on a tour of angelic messengers in the Bible, and reminds us that <i>we never know when an encounter may bring us God’s messages of love and support</i> .
5	In Community with the Tradition of the Past	Hebrews 3:1–6; 11	Lesson Five helps us remember the things our ancestors in the faith have bequeathed to us. <i>The faith tradition supports us</i> by showing us both the successes and stumbles of biblical characters. We also have our own <i>Book of Confessions</i> that guides us in our Reformed tradition.
6	In Community with the Reality of the Present	Hebrews 2:10–18 and 10:34–35; Mark 8:31–38	Lesson Six considers how <i>communities of faith support each other during troubled times</i> . Hebrews was written to a people suffering under persecution.
7	In Community with the Hope of the Future	Hebrews 11:1–3; 3:1–19; Psalm 95; Hebrews 4:1–11 and 6:9–12	Lesson Seven centers our attention on <i>God’s Sabbath rest, where we find hope and support for the future, as well as our current situation</i> .
8	In Community with the Household of Faith	Hebrews 3:1–6; Numbers 12:7; Hebrews 13:1–6; James 2:1–4; Psalm 127:1–2	Lesson Eight examines the <i>household of faith that reminds us of our supportive home with each other in God</i> .
9	In Community with All the Saints	Hebrews 6:9–12; 13:24–25; 12:1–2; 11:35–40	Lesson Nine highlights the <i>great cloud of witnesses from the past and present</i> who show us how to live in faith and who support us in faithful living.

What to Do First

For the whole study

1. Read Hebrews or listen to an audio version (or both!). Be sure to read the introduction to Hebrews in your Bible.
2. Read page 88 of the study for an overview.
3. Read through the whole study, answering the questions in the text as you go.
4. Focus on the Theme section of each Suggestions for Leaders.
5. Consider how to use the “So Great a Cloud of Witnesses” features with your group.

For one lesson

1. Read or listen to the whole book of Hebrews, including any introductory information in your Bible.
2. Read page 88 of the study for an overview.
3. Read the Introduction to the study.
4. Study the Theme section in the Suggestions for Leaders that follows the lesson.
5. Consider which questions and suggestions you will use during the lesson, or create something of your own.

Concepts and Definitions

The Relationship Between Christianity and Judaism in Hebrews

Hebrews has historically been read in denigrating ways for the Jewish faith tradition and people. Scholars now understand that “Hebrews reflects a period in the early church’s life when Christians and Jews had not reached a parting of the ways and when Christians were in the midst of a process of self-definition and differentiation” (Gench, 1996, p. 9). Statements of the superiority of Christianity appear in the expository sections of Hebrews rather than in the exhortations. Gench adds, “in the exhortations, which get down to the practical matters and apply the author’s christological insights to realities facing the life of the congregation, there appears to be no differentiation between the two faiths and no effort to dissuade people of the attractions of Judaism” (for more information on exposition and exhortation, which reflect the way Hebrews is structured, see Format on page 5 of these notes).

Supersessionism

Scholar Pam Eisenbaum writes, “Because Hebrews argues for Jesus’ superiority over all else, Hebrews can be read as supersessionist.” Supersessionism is the idea that the new covenant brought to the people by God through Jesus replaced, or superseded, the old covenant given by God through Moses. Eisenbaum adds, “Drawing on Jeremiah’s reference (31:31) to a ‘new covenant,’ the author calls Mosaic Law ‘only a shadow of the good things to come’ (10:1) and insists that ‘in speaking of the new covenant, he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear’ (8:13). Such language helped foster the view that Judaism was an inferior religion, a temporary guide prior to Christ. In recent years, scholars have made efforts to address the problem of anti-Judaism in Hebrews and have attempted to offer alternative understandings of these key verses* (Eisenbaum, 2011, p. 407).

These new efforts have led many scholars to understand that the writer of Hebrews was most likely not anti-Jewish or supersessionist because of the historical and cultural context at the time of writing. Unfortunately, the texts have been interpreted to promote these ideologies over time, which has led to Hebrews often being perceived as the most anti-Jewish New Testament text.

Old and New

The concepts of old and new, and how they work together, must be redefined when studying scripture. Contemporary culture tells us that what is old is outmoded and perhaps inferior. What is new is positive, more desirable. In scripture, new and old have a different meaning. Isaiah 43:19 tells us that there is a “new thing” God is about to do. This does not negate what has gone before, but is a fulfillment of divine promises. Third Isaiah looks forward to a “new heaven and a new earth” where God’s righteousness dwells (Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22). God is not abandoning what has been created, but bringing fulfillment. Paul writes about a “new creation” in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), and John pictures ultimate salvation in a new Jerusalem (Revelation 3:12; 21:2). Jerusalem continues, but an alternate path is envisioned. The old is not abandoned, replaced or **superseded** in biblical thought, but renewed (Boring, 2012, pp. 3–4).

Covenant (in terms of a better covenant, referred to in Hebrews)

An agreement between two parties. This term has significant meaning in both Jewish and Christian faiths, indicating a relationship between God and people (p. 20). Some entail promises from God, others obligations between people. The following definitions are from McKim (1996).

New Covenant

The anticipated action of God in establishing a personal relationship with people (Jer. 31:31–34), and seen in Christianity as fulfilled by Jesus Christ. The term is used by Jesus in relation to his death (Luke 22:20–1; 1 Cor. 11:25) and in the New Testament for the effects Jesus Christ brings (Heb. 8:8–13; 10:16–17, 12:24).

Old Covenant

Theologically from a Christian perspective, the old covenant, denoting God’s covenantal relationship with Israel as the people of God, contrasts with and prepares for God’s new covenant in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:14; Heb. 8:6–7).

Judaism

Judaism is often defined as the religion and culture of the Jewish people. There are many expressions of Judaism across the world. Judaism is the smallest of the monotheistic faith traditions at approximately .2 percent of world population. Important to note when studying scripture is that the religion of the ancient Israelites and the Judaism that ultimately emerged has a deep and varied history. Scholars define three periods:

1. Premonarchial—the beginning of Israel to the rise of David in 1000 BC

2. Monarchial—from the rise of David in 1000 BC to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC
3. Postmonarchial—after 587 BC, which encompasses the exile and the recovery from exile that led to the formation of Judaism and, over time, to the beginning of Christianity (Brueggemann & Linafelt, 2003, p. 5).

Christology

The study of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church’s understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done grew and developed through the centuries. Early church councils produced Christological statements.

Eschatology

Study of the “last things” or the end of the world. Theological dimensions include the second coming of Jesus Christ and the last judgment. An eschatological parable deals with the end of the world. There are many ways to study eschatology, including individual, collective, future, and others. For more information, see McKim, pp. 92–93).

Hebrews in a Nutshell

Author	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not Paul! • Who wrote the letter to the Hebrews only God knows for certain”—Origen • Anonymous, but probably someone who had heard Jesus • Author background is most likely Greek and Jewish • Probably a great teacher • Paul’s name was assigned to it to ensure it would make it into the canon
Date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probably 60–90 AD (though some scholars date it as late as AD 190) • Timing based on persecutions of Christians, after Nero (AD 64) and before Domitian (AD 85). • The audience is at risk of persecution (goods have been pillaged, 10:32–34), but have not yet shed blood (12:4) • Destruction of the Temple is also a factor (AD 70)
Format	<p>Sermon (closes like a letter—epistolary conclusion) Pattern: Exposition, Exhortation “Word of Exhortation” (13:22)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not drift away; do not neglect (2:1–4). 2. Do not harden your hearts in unbelief (3:7–19). 3. Hold fast the confession (4:14–16). 4. Do not become sluggish, but go on to complete the course to the very end (6:1–12). 5. Hold fast the confession without wavering (10:19–39). 6. Run with endurance the race set before us (12:1–17).

	<p>7. Concluding exhortations (12:25—13:17). Hear God, give thanks, offer acceptable worship, let mutual love continue, show hospitality, visit those in prison, honor marriage, do not love money, be content with what you have, remember your leaders, do not be carried away by strange teachings, bear the abuse Jesus endured, offer a sacrifice of praise to God, do not neglect to do good and offer what you have, obey your leaders and submit to them, pray for the author and his companions.</p>
<p>Audience What we can discover from the book itself From Barclay, William, <i>The Letter to the Hebrews</i>, rev. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 6–7.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not Hebrews! • Second generation Christians (2:3) • Long-established church (5:12) • Had suffered persecution (10:32–34) • Church had great days and leaders (13:7) • Church was not directly founded by the Apostles (2:3) • Church was generous and liberal (6:10) • Probably written to a church in Rome because of greetings “to Italy” (13:24) • Little group or college of Christians. Most likely written by a scholar to a scholarly group (under instruction to become teachers, well-versed in the Hebrew scriptures [5:12])
<p>Outline/Structure From Boring, 2012, p. 422. Scholars organize the sermon in several ways: 1:5–2:18. Son and Angels 3:1–5:10. Christ the Faithful and Merciful High Priest 5:11–6:20. Preparation for the Difficult Discussion 7:1–10:39. The Difficult Discussion on the Priestly Ministry of Christ 11:1–12:17. Call to Fidelity and Mutuality 12:18–12:19. Final Exhortations 13:20–13:25. Benediction and Greetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:1–4 Introductory Statement of Faith and Preview of the Argument • 1:5–2:18 Christ Superior to Angels <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2:1–4 Exhortation: Do Not Drift Away, do not neglect. ○ 2:5–9 The Cosmic Christological Drama as Model ○ 2:10–18 “Perfection” • 3:1–6 Christ Superior to Moses • 3:7–19 Exhortation: Do not harden your hearts in unbelief. • 4:1–13 “A Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God.” • 4:4–16 Exhortation: Hold fast the confession. • 5:1–10 The Main Topic Introduced: Christ the Superior High Priest • 5:11–6:20 A Digression in Preparation for the “Difficult Discussion” • 6:1–2 Exhortation: Do not become sluggish, but go on to complete the course to the very end. • 6:13–20 The Christian Hope Anchored in Christ • 7:1—10:18 The Main Topic Developed: Christ the Superior High Priest Who Mediates a Superior Covenant • 7:1–28 Melchizedek • 8:1—10:18 The New Covenant • 10:19–39 Exhortation: Hold fast the confession without warning. • 11:1–40 The Endurance by Faith of the People of God • 12:1–17 Exhortation: Run with endurance the race set before us. • 12:18–24 The Superiority of the Believer’s Present Status

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12:25—13:19 Concluding Exhortations • 13:20–21 Benediction • 13:22–25 Epistolary Conclusion (similar to a letter)
<p>Structure From Barclay, William, <i>The Letter to the Hebrews</i>, rev. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976).</p>	<p>Four Parts</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1.1–4.13: Explore the Word of God spoken through the Son 2. 4.14–10.31: Interpret Jesus as the eternal high priest against the background of the Israelite priesthood 3. 10.32–12:29: Describes faith as insight into heavenly world of reality 4. 13: Practical advice and greetings

Old Testament Scriptures Used Frequently in Hebrews

Jeremiah 31:31–34

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalms 2: God’s Promise to His Anointed

¹ Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?

² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,

³ “Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us.”

⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.

⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶ “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”

⁷ I will tell of the decree of the LORD:

**He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have begotten you.**

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

¹⁰Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹¹Serve the LORD with fear,
with trembling ¹²kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Happy are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 95: A Call to Worship and Obedience

¹O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

³For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.

⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

⁶O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!

⁸**Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,**

⁹**when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.**

¹⁰**For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."**

¹¹**Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest."**

Psalm 110: Assurance of Victory for God's Priest-King

The LORD says to my lord,
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool."

- ²The LORD sends out from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.
- ³Your people will offer themselves willingly
on the day you lead your forces
on the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning,
like dew, your youth will come to you.
- ⁴**The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”**
- ⁵The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
- ⁶He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter heads
over the wide earth.
- ⁷He will drink from the stream by the path;
therefore he will lift up his head.

Introduction

- Melissa uses a dry-stack stone fence or wall as a metaphor for the **support** believers have in the community of faith. This support is people, traditions, scripture, confessions, practices and beliefs.
- Note on community: The author of Hebrews addresses women and men when speaking to the community addressed in the sermon: brothers and sisters (2:11, 12, 17). This is an inclusive approach. The author stresses the idea of partnership to pull the community together: partners with Christ in the human condition (2:14); partners in a heavenly calling (2:10).
- Cloud is the metaphor for being surrounded or enveloped by God’s community. This embrace provides protection, encouragement, strength, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future.

Lesson 1: In Community with Jesus Christ

Jesus, the Christ, is the basis of all our faith and action

Theme: Jesus Christ

- Jesus is
 - The reflection of God’s Glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being (1:2)
 - Merciful and faithful high priest (2:17)
 - Able for all time to save those who approach God through him (7:25)
 - The apostle (3:1)
 - Pioneer and perfecter of our faith (12:2)
- The central message of Hebrews is Jesus Christ.

- The sermon addresses the marginalized community of faith and encourages faithfulness amid uncertainty and persecution.

Introduction

- Stone wall and cloud are used as metaphors for the themes in Hebrews.
- The foundation of the wall is Jesus.
- Communities have something in common—a foundation.
- The Book of Hebrews is about Jesus, the Christ. The sermon opens declaring that God has spoken in many ways throughout time, but has spoken now through a Son, “whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom [God] also created the worlds” (1:2).

Who Wrote Hebrews?

- Origen said, “only God knows.” There is no strong evidence for anyone. See chart above.
- Some guesses have included Paul, Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Priscilla, and Aquilla.
- Scholars agree that Paul is not the author; it is easier for scholars to understand who did not write than who did.

When Was Hebrews Written?

- Around the end of the first century (see chart above).

To What Community Was Hebrews Addressed?

- Perhaps a group in Italy: “Those from Italy greet you” (13:24).
- Could be of Jewish or Gentile background, or Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus.
- Group that needs encouragement to stay faithful, even in the face of persecution.

The Style of Hebrews

- One of the books of the 66-book canon.
- Letter because of “epistolary” closing.
- Sermon or theological treatise.

The Importance of Community

- Hebrews was read to the gathered community—people heard it together, processed it together, remembered and acted on it together.

The Centrality of Christ as the Message of Hebrews

- Author ensures audience hears that Jesus is the message of the sermon: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son . . .” (1:1–4).
 - Jesus tied to the Jewish faith tradition (spiritual ancestors and prophets)
 - Jesus tied to eternal God
- The Son is the “exact imprint of God’s very being.”
- Jesus is divinity and humanity in one person.
- Jesus “sustains all things by his powerful word.”
- Everything in the world can shift—Jesus is the solid rock, the firm foundation.

Jesus the Great High Priest

- Jesus is more than the high priest in the Hebrew tradition—he is sinless.
- There is only one priest in the Hebrew scriptures who compares: Melchizedek.

Who the Heck Was Melchizedek? (4:14–5:10; 7:26–28)

- Mentioned twice in the Hebrew scriptures: Genesis 14:18–20 and Psalm 110:4.
- There are some references in Midrash (recorded oral tradition) and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

- Melchizedek, King of Righteousness, is the exemplar of what a high priest should be.
- The author sermonizes about the characteristics of Jesus Christ as the great high priest whose origins were with God, who brought peace, and who lived a life of righteousness.
- Jesus as great high priest brings believers into the presence of God.

Lesson 2: In Community with the Living God

God lives both in us and among us.

Theme: The Living God

- God is the powerful “living God” (3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22).
- All things exist for and through God (2:10), who supports who we are and how we live.
- God is active and caring, calling people to light instead of darkness.
- God wants to be in relationship with people, and enters covenants (p. 22).
- The living covenant is inscribed on the heart.

Introduction

- The author connects Christ to the Living God; the connection supports the faith community.
- “From images of strength, love, invitation, security, and covenant, we draw a picture of how we can be in community with each other and with the living God” (p. 19).

Community with the Living God, Understood through New Imagery

- Hebrews “reaches back to some of the most important texts of the Jewish faith, and brings them forward with new interpretations for a first-century Christian audience” (p. 19).
- “These ancient texts in both testaments relate to our modern faith communities” (p. 19).
- The author of Hebrews compares images of God in the burning bush story (Exodus 3:1–7) and Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai before the Ten Commandments are given (Exodus 19:16–25) with a description of God in Hebrews 12:18–24. In Hebrews, life with God is described as life in community, in the heavenly city of Jerusalem. Note here that God of the burning bush came to Moses because of God’s compassion for the people of Israel to lead them out of bondage.

The Meaning of Community with the Living God

- The concept of the living God is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The phrase “living God” is first used in Deuteronomy 5:26 and then in Joshua 3:10. In this instance, the term expresses the vitality of God. It is used later in Psalms 42.2 and 84.3, and refers to God’s power (Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*, TANAKH Translation, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). The term is first used in the New Testament in Matthew 16:16.
- “The writer of Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus and his followers continue the traditions of the past, while bringing new hope and meaning on top of the tradition” (p. 21).
- The Hebrews author emphasizes that God is calling followers away from the dark pressures of society and **into relationship** with an active, caring God. God is with the people and preparing a celebration for their future.
- Life in community with God is supportive and encouraging.
- The Hebrew author “wants us to know that there is security to be known and experienced in a covenantal life with our strong, living, and loving God” p. 23).

What Is the New Covenant Spoken of in Hebrews and How Does It Relate to Community?

- The author of Hebrews stresses the idea of a new covenant (8:10), and references Jeremiah 31:31–34. Jeremiah was suggesting that the Torah would be renewed after the Babylonian exile by being implanted in people’s hearts and minds so they would instinctively observe it, no longer sin, and no longer face exile. The Hebrews author is interpreting this scripture for his time, reminding followers that God is a God of covenant and intends to be in relationship.
- “The idea of a new covenant doesn’t mean that the “old” ones that God made with Israel are no longer valid . . . ‘God’s covenants with humanity as a whole (Noah), with Israel (Sinai), and in Jesus Christ (Eucharist) are not related in linear, historical form but in concentric, expansive form. They are all promises of engagement and relationship, and they build one upon the other” (p. 22).

Lesson 3: In Community with the Living Word

God’s word is both living and active.

Theme: The Living Word

- Hebrews gives marginalized and minority people a sense of security (p. 27).
- Jesus “sustains all things by his powerful word” (1:3), which is living and active.
- “God’s word is not a collection of dead words in a dusty scroll. God’s word engenders life” (p. 31) and “we should not ignore letting the word of God in all its forms work its good in us, and help us to see who and what we really are” (p. 32).
- *Dabar* is Hebrew for “word,” but means “word-event.” The *dabar* is the event plus the word used to describe the event.

Introduction

- The Hebrews writer connects with theology of the past, and also focuses on what Jesus brings in his person.
- The author addresses the situation of the people he serves.
- “The sturdiness of the word of God is seen as a supportive element in the life of the faithful community” (p. 27).

Community with the Living Word, Understood through Ancient Jewish and Christian Thought

- The son “sustains all things through his powerful word” (p. 27).
- The power of “word” is immediately evident in scripture. Genesis opens with God saying “let there be light.” Light came into being and God was pleased (Genesis 1:1–5). God speaks creation into being.
- God’s word is “living and active,” as evidenced in the *Book of Order*, “The Church bears witness in word and work that in Christ the new creation has begun” (F-1.0302d).
- The power of God’s word is shown when Ezekiel preaches to the dry bones (people of Israel) so they will be resurrected with new life and new hope (Ezekiel 37:11–14).
- John 1:1–5 reads, “in the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Word refers to the concept of the eternal Christ, at one with God.
- Logos (Greek for word) is an ancient theological and philosophical concept. Heraclitus used it to mean wisdom or reason in 500 BC.

Lesson 4: In Community with God's Messengers

We never know when any encounter might bring us God's love and support.

Theme: God's Messengers and Hospitality

- Angels are “spiritual beings who cross the divide between heaven and earth” (p. 38).
- In Hebrew (*malak*) and Greek (*angelos*) languages, angels are messengers who bring God's people messages about “the nearness and presence of God” (p. 39).
- God sends messages through relationships and encounters, so it is important to pay attention.

Introduction

Biblical writers talked about angels in a way that appealed to original readers and hearers. This is true for all themes in the study.

What about Angels?

- Angels are a common fascination, across years and religions.
- Stories about angels in the Bible address a context and needs of the group in a certain time and place (exile, oppression, marginalization, care of the poor).
- “When stories are told and recorded for a particular community, they are stories that address that particular situation” (p. 38).
- Angel stories in the Old Testament: Genesis 28:10–22, Daniel 3:8–30

Angels Proclaim Important Biblical Messages

- New Testament angel stories: Matthew 1:18–25, Luke 1:5–17, 1:26–38, 2:8–14

Angels as Messengers

- Hebrew and Greek words for angel can be translated as messenger.
- Angels that move back and forth between heaven and earth (Jacob's story in Genesis) show the nearness of God to humanity.
- The angel in the furnace in Daniel shows God is present to those who are oppressed.
- Matthew and Luke angels bring messages: “a child is conceived (and born) who is God incarnate, who signifies the nearness and presence of God to oppressed peoples” (p. 39).

Angels in Hebrews

- Angels appear throughout Hebrews, but in theological and worship discourse rather than in stories.
- The point is Jesus the Christ is above the angels, in a class by himself.
- We do not worship angels because even the angels worship Jesus. We have that in common.

Angels and Hospitality

- Hebrews 13:1–2, entertaining angels unaware.
- This scripture brings out several themes about hospitality:
 - Community
 - Persecution
 - A strong and loving God
 - Jesus, the Christ
 - The living word
- Melissa asks how community will be expanded if we recognized those who are different from us as angelic. How does hospitality enrich and enlarge our communities (p. 42)?

Lesson 5: In Community with the Traditions of the Past

We are supported by our faith tradition.

Theme: The Confessions of Faith

- We are connected to the past, which forms our present faith and community.
- The family of faith hopes for the future while remembering the past.
- We are all products of our time, place and culture.
- The history of our faith tradition encompasses good and imperfect attempts at living the faith—we learn from “successes and errors.” The biblical story shows us the strengths and weakness of faith heroes.
- Theology is a community (communal) undertaking.

Introduction

- The faith tradition informs us and links us with believers in all times and places.
- The writer of Hebrews assumes that the audience is familiar with stories in the Hebrew scriptures—“it’s taken for granted that the reader/hearer can fill in the blanks from her or his own knowledge of the narratives” (p. 47).

What is the tradition of which we speak?

- The author of Hebrews has a deep respect for the stories, traditions, and heroes of the past yet teaches that the tradition points to the life and death of Jesus.
- Hebrews 3:1–6. The author of Hebrews links the story of Moses and who Moses is to who Jesus is. Moses is the servant in the house of the Lord, and Jesus is the son of the household (community) of faith. Moses serves in God’s house; Jesus is over God’s house.
- The role of Jesus is captured in two terms: apostle and high priest (3:1).
- Hebrews 11.
 - 11:1. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The author of Hebrews does not define faith here but links faith and hope—faith here has two dimensions: inward and outward. Faith in the inward sense is a “response to the trustworthiness of God.” Faith in the outward sense is the believer’s acting on faith. “Faith as an inward reality sings ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Faith as an outward reality marches at Selma” (Long, p. 113).
 - 11:4–40. The “honor roll” of faith brings home the point that believers are connected by a faith tradition. The Hebrews’ author lists some unexpected heroes, including those who lived imperfect lives. These heroes are in four categories:
 - ☛ Those who were righteous: Abel, Enoch, Noah (11:4–7)
 - ☛ Those who journeyed obediently in faith: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob (11:8–16).
 - ☛ Those who were tested by suffering: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses (11:17–28).
 - ☛ A host of witnesses (11:29–38).
- The author of Hebrews makes clear that these heroes did not “receive what was promised,” because God’s promise was still to come in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (11:39). But, these faithful people were made perfect through the community of believers: “so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect” (11:40).

- “We don’t exist to serve the past, but we do learn from it, its successes and its errors; it informs our present and our future” (p. 49).
- The *Book of Confessions* is a critical part of the Presbyterian faith tradition. Through confession, beliefs of forebears are confirmed and acknowledged, continuing the line of faith and maintaining community. Historical circumstances, events, and understandings are present in each confession, so the confessions do not always agree, but the overall message is consistent.
- This confessional legacy is repeated in ordination questions. The first three questions reflect the tradition in this order: “1) Jesus Christ is the head of the church; 2) the scriptures are the ‘unique and authoritative witness’ to that same Lord; 3) our confessions help us declare who we are, what we believe, and what we do together” (p. 50).
- “Theology is a deeply communal undertaking. We work out theology in conversation with each other, as well as in conversation with documents produced by some of those who came before us” (p. 52). The church engages the work of our “spiritual ancestors” to honor tradition and to be relevant in the present.
- The newest addition to the *Book of Confessions* is the Confession of Belhar, added in 2016. This confession from South Africa reminds us that God’s community is open to everyone equally.
- The basis of our tradition is the scriptures.

Lesson 6: In Community with the Reality of the Present

Communities of faith support each other during troubling times.

Theme: Suffering and Compassion

- “Suffering in the present is squarely dealt with in Hebrews in light of joy in the future: ‘For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross (12:2).’”
- Community means accompanying each other through chaos. The presence of community reminds us of the presence of God.

Introduction

- The present includes the beautiful and the tragic.
- Jesus participated in the full human condition, so suffering and joy were part of his earthly ministry.

What is the reality of the present in the book of Hebrews?

- Hebrews 2:10–18. The sermon moves from the exaltation of Christ to suffering. God made Jesus “perfect through sufferings” (v. 11). Jesus has experienced the highs and lows of being human (p. 57).
- Suffering and death are realities of life. Jesus shared in both.

Does suffering ever have a purpose?

- The Hebrews audience suffered because of their religious expression (13:3).
- In the U.S., we enjoy freedom of religious expression, though members of certain faith traditions often face discrimination.
- Religious persecution has always existed throughout the world, and shows no signs of going away. In some countries, Christians are the victims.
- All may not suffer religious persecution, but everyone suffers.

- Job and Psalms “struggle with the root causes and meaning of suffering” but neither answers why humans suffer (p. 59).
- When Jesus deals with the question in John 9 (story of the man born without sight), he concurs with the Hebrew sages: suffering just is. “God neither causes it nor is pleased by it” (p. 59).
- **What to do about suffering?** See Hebrews 10:34–35. There is something better and more lasting than the things we suffer over—faith. “**Faith** can sometimes bring joy in spite of suffering; faith can sometimes exist side-by-side with misery” (p. 59).
- Jesus makes it clear that neither he nor anyone else will avoid suffering (Mark 8:31–38). Painful experience should be acknowledged—we need to “cry out to God from the depths of our experiences” (p. 60).
- “Only a soulless religion thinks nothing bad will happen. A soulful religion has arms big enough to encompass suffering” (p. 60).
- Jesus stands with those who suffer. God does not turn away.
- “This is what community is all about—accompanying each other through chaos” (p. 61).

Lesson 7: In Community with the Hope of the Future

We find hope and support for the present and future in God’s Sabbath rest.

Theme: Sabbath Rest

- “Sabbath rest has a prominent place in the story of the creation of the universe, as well as in the story of the exodus of God’s pilgrim people (Chang, p. 72).
- The writer of Hebrews seems to place Sabbath rest at the heart of our tradition (p. 69). Rest is the reward for a race well run.
- Encouraging and embracing God’s Sabbath rest is “where we find hope and support for the future as well as our current situation” (Chang, p. 72).

Introduction

- Pain, trouble, suffering, and difficulty never have the last word.
- In Hebrews, hope includes avoiding the mistakes of the past and looking forward to future Sabbath rest.
- The author of Hebrews cites biblical stories from Genesis, Exodus, and the Psalms to encourage readers/listeners to accept or receive God’s gift of Sabbath rest.
- The Israelites were denied entrance into rest (the promised land) because they struggled with faithfulness and with their circumstances. The writer of Hebrews warns the audience not to fall into the same trap.
- The rest message in Hebrews is complex—we can rest in God in the present, and hope for “our eternal rest in God’s presence” (p. 65).

What is the basis for hope in the book of Hebrews?

- 11:1–3. “Now faith is the assurance of **things hoped for**, the conviction of **things not seen**.² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”
 - Though we do not see the things we hope for, with faith, we are assured and we believe in God’s active presence now and in the future.

- Faith allowed spiritual ancestors, and it allows Hebrews readers and believers today, to persevere through life's circumstances.
- We can rest in God knowing the promise/hope of future rest with God.
- 3:7–19. Disobedience and lack of faith kept the Israelites out of the promised land/rest.
 - In Numbers 14:22, God says to Moses, “None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet tested me these 10 times and have not obeyed my voice shall see the land I swore to give their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it.”
 - The psalmist reiterates this theme in 95:8–11:
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.”
Therefore in my anger I swore,
“They shall not enter my rest.”
- “This psalm remembers that the exodus goal—rest from wandering—was not available to that generation because they did not follow God’s heart” (p. 67).
- “The Hebrews author warns readers/listeners against unfaithfulness and encourages the community to hold one another up in order that they all will achieve God’s current and future rest. Community then, is a critical component in hope for the future.
- Hebrews 3:6. “We are his house if we hold firm the confidence and pride we call hope.”

Lesson 8: In Community with the Household of Faith

The household of faith reminds us of our supportive home with each other and with God.

Theme: The Household of God

- Melissa writes that the house of God is primarily the house of Israel, meaning all God’s people (community of faith).
- God is the builder of the house, and believers are the stewards.
- The key issue is how to live together in faith.
- “We rely on God’s example in Christ to show us how to welcome each other home” (p. 79).

Introduction

- Lesson 8 looks at the house of God motif.
- “The letter to the Hebrews builds on the centrality and importance of Christ and encourages the community to participate in God’s house building” (p. 75).

God as the Great Builder

- The word house is used frequently in scripture and often carries deeper meaning than a physical shelter or structure.
- Hebrews 3:1–6. House is used seven times and means physical shelter, the people of God, the community of faith, tabernacle, or Temple.

- Characteristic of the Hebrews author, the Jewish tradition is used to interpret modern times. Moses is first honored and then compared to Jesus. Moses was the faithful servant in God’s house (tent/tabernacle as well as all God’s people, the community of faith). Jesus is the builder of the house as God’s son.
- “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1–2). House here is the Temple and the worshiping community.
- God in Christ is the builder of the house (communities of faith); members of the community are the stewards.
- Consider what destruction of the Temple (God’s house) meant to the people of Israel. Jewish communities kept their faith alive by depending on the community of believers lead by Pharisees (rabbis).
- For most at the time Hebrews was written, the faith community was the house of God. There were not many brick and mortar churches. Communities met in house churches when available.
- Hebrews 13:1–6 provides instructions on how to live together in faith.
- On several occasions, the Hebrews author addresses the community as brothers and sisters, which speaks to an inclusive community as well as a typical household.
- There were problems in the household of faith: class distinctions, favoritism, social status (see James 2:1–4).
- The Bible does not distinguish between house and home. We must be concerned with spiritual homes as well as physical shelter. Consider how we make houses homes.
- “We rely on God’s example in Christ to show us how to welcome each other home” (p. 79).

Lesson 9: In Community with All the Saints

The cloud of witnesses supports us and shows us how to live in faith.

Theme: A Great Cloud of Witnesses

Introduction

- Communities form us as individuals. They provide support, like the rock wall metaphor in the study, and they surround you, like a cloud.

For All the Saints

- The concept of saints appears in two Hebrews passages. 6:9–12 (“serving the saints” v. 10) and 13:24–25 (“Greet all your leaders and all the saints” v. 24).
- In the epistles, “saints” applies to every follower.

Loving and Serving

- The writer makes it clear that though some have fallen away (6:6–8), the recipients of this sermon will do better (6:9–12).
- The writer points out the benefits and responsibilities of being in community: loving and serving saints (6:10), imitating the saints who have inherited the promises (6:12).
- “The faith community is one of giving and receiving” (p. 85).

Imitating

- The writer of Hebrews encourages us to imitate members of the community whose behaviors arise from faith and patience.
- In turn, we should be those saints whom people want to imitate.

The Cloud of Witnesses

- 12:1–2. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a **cloud of witnesses**, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us . . .
- Sports metaphors are common in scripture. In this instance, the writer provides an image of a race, with crowds of supporters on the sidelines, cheering the runner on. The stumbling runner often gets the most support and inspiration.
- We are surrounded by saints from tradition, those referenced in our confessions, those still living. We rely on the community to support and surround us.
- “The very mission, the very reason, for having a faith community is to share the life that God has given us, in all is beauty and tragedy” (p. 87).
- “The witnesses who surround us are those beautiful people and God’s messengers, moments, memories, elements of our faith, scripture and tradition, God in Christ” (p. 88).

Note

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