

Dec 17-23

Week 51

First Peter, Hebrews, and 2 Timothy deal with suffering.

First Peter was sent to struggling believers in northwest Asia Minor to give them perspective on their troubles. Christ is our role model. We need to stay focused on God, not on ourselves and our struggles.

Hebrews, on the other hand, was probably written to Roman Christians just as persecution against believers was heating up in the mid-60s of the first century. In this early Christian sermon the author challenged the believers to persevere in the faith by embracing a clearer picture of Jesus and the gospel. Theology lays the foundation for Christian living. Notice the emphases on Jesus's exaltation, on Jesus's high priesthood and the decisiveness of his sacrifice for sins, and on responding positively to God's Word.

When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he was facing execution. He challenged Timothy to stay true to the gospel.

Second Peter and Jude address the problem of false teachers in the church.

Day 1

Read 1 Peter

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 39

The letter of 1 Peter was from the apostle Peter in Rome to the churches in northwest Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). This rich book was written down by Peter's secretary, Silvanus (see 5:12), probably in the mid-60s AD but perhaps much earlier. Notice especially three main themes in this book.

1. The believers in these far-flung provinces of the Roman Empire were being persecuted for their faith, and Peter wrote, in part, to put their suffering in perspective. Our rejection by the world follows the pattern of Christ's rejection. So we, as Christ followers, should understand what it means to suffer for his name. Suffering reminds us that this world is not our ultimate home; we are foreigners here.
2. In suffering, we as believers are to be profoundly God-centered, focusing on God, praying to him, and understanding that he rewards those who suffer for doing what is right. Notice how often Peter referred to God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
3. Suffering is not an excuse for sin. We are to live holy lives, loving one another, for we are a holy nation. We, with Christ as the cornerstone, are being built into a spiritual house to live as God's people before the world. In chapters 3–4 Peter gave specific instructions for living well in the face of suffering of various kinds.

Are you suffering for the name of Christ?

Are you responding to suffering in the ways outlined by Peter?

Day 2

Read Hebrews 1-4

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 40

Rather than a letter, Hebrews seems to have been crafted as an early Christian sermon, to which the author attached a letterlike ending (see 13:22-25) before sending it to this persecuted church. The book was probably written in the mid-60s AD, just before an escalation of Nero's persecution against believers in Rome. It is a beautiful, powerful book that has much to say to the church today. Notice the focus on Jesus.

In the first two chapters the author spoke of Jesus as compared to the angels. Having been exalted to the right hand of God after his resurrection, Jesus is at the highest position in the universe. Both in his person and work, no one can compare to him (see 1:5-14). Yet he became human to die for us and to become both our High Priest and sin sacrifice (see 2:10-18).

Watch for shifts between passages that teach about Jesus and those that challenge listeners to action (see 2:1-4; 3:1-4). The latter build on the former.

Are you in awe of Jesus today? Does his greatness motivate you to action?

Day 3

Read Hebrews 5-8

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 41

Hebrews 4:14-16, which we read yesterday, is the opening for the great central section of Hebrews (4:14–10:25) on the high priesthood and superior offering of Jesus.

Hebrews 5:1-10; 7:1-28 deals with the appointment of Jesus as a superior High Priest. The argument is a bit difficult to follow at points, but identify specific reasons the author said Jesus is a superior Priest. Notice how much he focused on Psalm 110:4.

Hebrews 5:11–6:20 presents us with another section of exhortation by which the author challenged the hearers with their need to respond to God's Word.

Hebrews 8:1-13 is somewhat transitional, turning to the topic of this superior Priest's superior new-covenant offering. As you read the twists and turns of the author's argument, focus on the parts that seem clearest to you. Perhaps use a good study Bible to investigate parts that seem obscure. Keep your focus on Jesus and what he has accomplished on our behalf.

Use Hebrews 8:7-13 to praise Jesus for the great blessings of the new covenant.

Day 4

Read Hebrews 9-13

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 42

Hebrews 9:1–10:18 shows that Jesus’s offering was superior because it involved his own death (the shedding of his blood) rather than the deaths of animals, he took his offering into heaven, and his sacrifice had to be made only one time.

Hebrews 10:19-25 both rounds out the central section of the book on the superiority of Jesus’s priesthood and launches a series of exhortations. Here we read positive and negative examples, warnings and promises, and straightforward words of encouragement and practical instruction.

Chapter 11 is an example list of overwhelming evidence that faith is the right way to live for God. Faith is trust in God based on what he has revealed as true about himself. The author challenged readers to trust God in the midst of their difficulties, to see who Jesus is and grasp the significance of what he had done on their behalf.

Do you really see who Jesus is? Is he the foundation for your life?

Day 5

Read 2 Timothy

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 43

The last of Paul's letters, 2 Timothy, was written in about AD 64, shortly before Paul was martyred for the faith. As in 1 Timothy, Paul wrote against false teachers, but much of the letter challenged Timothy to stay loyal to the gospel.

Notice Paul's concern for Timothy. Paul himself was in prison for the gospel and was expected to face execution. His circumstance shaped aspects of the letter. Watch especially for what he said about life and death.

In the face of difficult situations today, embrace the hope found in Christ's victory.

Day 6

Read 2 Peter; Jude

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 44

As with Paul in 2 Timothy, 2 Peter presents Peter as anticipating his own death (see 1:14). So the apostle pointed his readers to the true gospel, grounded in what God had revealed in Jesus, and he warned them about false teachers (see chap. 2). A warning against false teachers is also the message of the little book of Jude.

Notice parallels with false ideas that are very popular today. Peter encouraged believers to live in light of the coming of Christ on the day of the Lord, a theme we first saw in the Old Testament Prophets. In essence both Peter and Jude encouraged Christ followers to be on guard against wrong teachings and to grow in the faith.

How are you guarding yourself against wrong teachings? How are you growing in your faith?

Day 7

Reading Summary for Week 51

An interesting feature of most of this week's readings is their Jewish-Christian orientation. Hebrews showed the superiority of Jesus to all that God had previously done in Judaism. In particular, Jesus was (and is) a better priest who offered a better sacrifice than ever before. At the same time, Hebrews demonstrated that faith is the only way that anyone has ever come to God. The great heart of Peter near the end of his life is shown in his two letters.

Prayer/Meditation

Lord Jesus Christ, in these last days, God has spoken through you, his Son. I confess that you are the exact expression of God's nature and the heir of all things. God made the universe through you. I praise you that after making purification for sins, you sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Lord, thank you that with faith it is possible to please God. I believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Amen.
