

Jen Wilkin

Better

A Study of Hebrews

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About the Author

Jen Wilkin is an author and Bible teacher from Dallas, Texas. She has organized and led studies for women in home, church, and parachurch contexts. Her passion is to see others become articulate and committed followers of Christ, with a clear understanding of why they believe what they believe, grounded in the Word of God. Jen is the author of *Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds*, *None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different From Us (and Why That's a Good Thing)*, *In His Image: 10 Ways God Calls Us to Reflect His Character*, *God of Creation Bible study*, *God of Covenant Bible study*, *Sermon on the Mount Bible study*, and *1 Peter: A Living Hope in Christ Bible study*. You can find her at JenWilkin.net.

Foreword: How Should We Approach God's Word?

OUR PURPOSE

The Bible study you are about to begin will teach you an important passage of the Bible in a way that will stay with you for years to come. It will challenge you to move beyond loving God with just your heart, to loving Him with your mind. It will focus on answering the question, “What does the Bible say about God?” It will aid you in the worthy task of God-discovery.

You see, the Bible is not a book about self-discovery; it is a book about God-discovery. The Bible is God’s declared intent to make Himself known to us. In learning about the character of God in Scripture, we will experience self-discovery, but it must not be the object of our study. The object must be God Himself.

This focus changes the way we study. We look first for what a passage can teach us about the character of God, allowing self-discovery to be the by-product of God-discovery. This is a much better approach because there can be no true knowledge of self apart from knowledge of God. So when I read the account of Jonah, I see first that God is just and faithful to His Word—He is faithful to proclaim His message to Nineveh no matter what. I see second that I, by contrast (and much like Jonah), am unjust to my fellow man and unfaithful to God’s Word. Thus, knowledge of God leads to true knowledge of self, which leads to repentance and transformation. So are confirmed Paul’s words in Romans 12:2 that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Most of us are good at loving God with our hearts. We are good at employing our emotions in our pursuit of God. But the God who

commands us to love with the totality of our hearts, souls, and strength also commands us to love Him with all of our minds. Because He only commands what He also enables His children to do, it must be possible for us to love Him well with our minds or He would not command it. I know you will bring your emotions to your study of God's Word, and that is good and right. But it is your mind that I am jealous for. God intends for you to be a good student, renewing your mind and thus transforming your heart.

OUR PROCESS

Being a good student entails following good study habits. When we sit down to read, most of us like to read through a particular passage and then find a way to apply it to our everyday lives. We may read through an entire book of the Bible over a period of time, or we may jump around from place to place. I want to suggest a different approach, one that may not always yield immediate application, comfort, or peace, but one that builds over time a cumulative understanding of the message of Scripture.

READING IN CONTEXT AND REPETITIVELY

Imagine yourself receiving a letter in the mail. The envelope is handwritten, but you don't glance at the return address. Instead you tear open the envelope, flip to the second page, read two paragraphs near the bottom, and set the letter aside. Knowing that if someone bothered to send it to you, you should act on its contents in some way, you spend a few minutes trying to figure out how to respond to what the section you just read had to say. What are the odds you will be successful?

No one would read a letter this way. But this is precisely the way many of us read our Bibles. We skip past reading the "envelope"—Who wrote this? To whom is it written? When was it written? Where was it written?—and then try to determine the purpose of its contents from a portion of the whole. What if we took time to read the envelope? What if, after determining the context for its writing, we started at the beginning and read to the end? Wouldn't that make infinitely more sense?

In our study, we will take this approach to Scripture. We will begin by placing our text in its historical and cultural context. We will “read the envelope.” Then we will read through the entire text multiple times, so that we can better determine what it wants to say to us. We will read repetitively so that we might move through three critical stages of understanding: comprehension, interpretation, and application.

STAGE 1: COMPREHENSION

Remember the reading comprehension section on the SAT? Remember those long reading passages followed by questions to test your knowledge of what you had just read? The objective was to force you to read for detail. We are going to apply the same method to our study of God’s Word. When we read for comprehension we ask ourselves, “What does it say?” This is hard work. A person who *comprehends* the account of the six days of creation can tell you specifically what happened on each day. This is the first step toward being able to interpret and apply the story of creation to our lives.

STAGE 2: INTERPRETATION

While comprehension asks, “What does it say?,” interpretation asks, “What does it mean?” Once we have read a passage enough times to know what it says, we are ready to look into its meaning. A person who *interprets* the creation story can tell you why God created in a particular order or way. She is able to imply things from the text beyond what it says.

STAGE 3: APPLICATION

After doing the work to understand what the text says and what the text means, we are finally ready to ask, “How should it change me?” Here is where we draw on our God-centered perspective to ask three supporting questions:

- What does this passage teach me about God?
- How does this aspect of God’s character change my view of self?
- What should I do in response?

A person who *applies* the creation story can tell us that because God creates in an orderly fashion, we, too, should live well-ordered lives. Knowledge of God gleaned through comprehension of the text and interpretation of its meaning can now be applied to my life in a way that challenges me to be different.

SOME GUIDELINES

It is vital to the learning process that you allow yourself to move through the three stages of understanding on your own, without the aid of commentaries or study notes. The first several times you read a passage, you will probably be confused. In our study together, not all the homework questions will have answers that are immediately clear to you. This is actually a good thing. If you are unsure of an answer, give it your best shot. Allow yourself to feel lost, to dwell in the “I don’t know.” It will make the moment of discovery stick. We’ll also expand our understanding in the small group discussion and teaching time.

Nobody likes to feel lost or confused, but it is an important step in the acquisition and retention of understanding. Because of this, I have a few guidelines to lay out for you as you go through this study:

1. **Avoid all commentaries** until *comprehension* and *interpretation* have been earnestly attempted on your own. In other words, wait to read commentaries until after you have done the homework, attended small-group time, and listened to the teaching. And then, consult commentaries you can trust. Ask a pastor or Bible teacher at your church for suggested authors. I used the following commentaries in creating this study: *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 1–8 and Hebrews 9–13* by William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* by F. F. Bruce, and *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Hebrews* by Peter O’Brien.

2. For the purposes of this study, **get a Bible without study notes**. Come on, it's just too easy to look at them. You know I'm right.

3. Though commentaries are initially off-limits, here are some **tools you should use**:

- **Cross-references.** These are the Scripture references in the margin or at the bottom of the page in your Bible. They point you to other passages that deal with the same topic or theme.
- **An English dictionary** to look up unfamiliar words. A good online dictionary is: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
- **Other translations of the Bible.** We will use the English Standard Version (ESV) as a starting point, but you can easily consult other versions online. I recommend the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), New International Version (NIV), New American Standard Version (NASB), or the New King James Version (NKJV). Reading more than one translation can expand your understanding of the meaning of a passage. Note: a paraphrase, such as The Message, can be useful but should be regarded as a commentary rather than a translation. They are best consulted after careful study of an actual translation.
- **A printed copy of the text**, double-spaced, so you can mark repeated words, phrases, or ideas. On page 167 of your Bible study book you will find a printed copy of the Book of Hebrews. You will need it to complete your homework each week. You will also need a set of colored pens or pencils. We will be marking key words or phrases, as well as looking up some words in the dictionary.

STORING UP TREASURE

Approaching God's Word with a God-centered perspective, with context, and with care takes effort and commitment. It is study for the long-term. Some days your study may not move you emotionally or speak to an immediate need. You may not be able to apply a passage at all. But what if ten years from now, in a dark night of the soul, that passage suddenly opens up to you because of the work you have done today? Wouldn't your long-term investment be worth it?

In Matthew 13 we see Jesus begin to teach in parables. He tells seven deceptively simple stories that leave His disciples struggling for understanding—dwelling in the “I don't know,” if you will. After the last parable, He turns to them and asks, “Have you understood all these things?” (v. 51a). Despite their apparent confusion, they answer out of their earnest desire with, “Yes” (v. 51b). Jesus tells them that their newfound understanding makes them “like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (13:52, NIV).

A storeroom, as Jesus indicates, is a place for keeping valuables over a long period of time for use when needed. Faithful study of God's Word is a means for filling our spiritual storerooms with truth, so that in our hour of need we can bring forth both the old and the new as a source of rich provision. I pray that this study would be for you a source of much treasure and that you would labor well to obtain it.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jen Wilkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Jen Wilkin

How to Use This Study

This Bible study book is designed to be used in a specific way. The homework in the Bible study book will start you in the process of comprehension, interpretation, and application. However, it was designed to dovetail with small-group discussion time and the teaching sessions. You can use the Bible study book by itself, but you are likely to find yourself with some unresolved questions. The teaching sessions are intended to resolve most, if not all, of your unanswered questions from the homework and discussion time. With this in mind, consider using the materials as follows:

- If you are going through the study **on your own**, first work through the homework, and then watch or listen to the corresponding teaching for that week.
- If you are going through the study **in a group**, first do your homework, and then discuss the questions your group decides to cover. Then watch or listen to the teaching. Some groups watch or listen to the teaching before they meet, which can also work if that format fits best for everyone.

Note: For Week One, there is no homework. The study begins with an audio or video introduction. You will find a Viewer Guide on pages 14–15 that you can use as you watch or listen to the introductory material.

How to Use the Leader Guide

At the end of each week's homework you will find a leader guide intended to help facilitate discussion in small groups. Each guide begins with an introductory question to help group members get to know each other and feel comfortable contributing their voices to the discussion. These questions may prove to be most helpful during the early weeks of the

study, but as the group grows more familiar with one another, group leaders may decide to skip them to allow more time for the questions covering the lesson.

The remainder of the leader guide includes questions to help group members compare what they have learned from their homework on Days Two through Five. These questions are either pulled directly from the homework, or they summarize a concept or theme that the homework covered. Each two-part question covers content from a particular day of the homework, first asking group members to reflect and then asking them to apply. The reflection questions typically ask group members to report a finding or flesh out an interpretation. The application questions challenge them to move beyond intellectual understanding and to identify ways to live differently in light of what they have learned.

As a small group leader, you will want to review these questions before you meet with your group, thinking through your own answers, marking where they occur in the homework, and noting if there are any additional questions that you might want to reference to help the flow of the discussion. These questions are suggestions only, intended to help you cover as much ground as you can in a 45-minute discussion time. They should not be seen as requirements or limitations, but as guidelines to help you prepare your group for the teaching time by allowing them to process collectively what they have learned during their homework.

As a facilitator of discussion rather than a teacher, you are allowed and encouraged to be a colearner with your group members. This means you yourself may not always feel confident of your answer to a given question, and that is perfectly OK. Because we are studying for the long-term, we are allowed to leave some questions partially answered or unresolved, trusting for clarity at a later time. In most cases, the teaching time should address any lingering questions that are not resolved in the homework or the small-group discussion time.

Week One:

Hebrews Introduction

Who wrote the Book of Hebrews?

When was it written?

To whom was it written?

In what style was it written?

What is the central theme of the book?

Week Two:

*Better Than
Angels*

As we discussed in our introduction, repetitive reading of a book of the Bible helps you learn and retain its message. Hopefully, you have taken the opportunity to read through Hebrews already to get a high-level view of what we will be studying. Make an effort to continue to read the entire letter repetitively throughout the course of the study. Try to do so at least five times. As you read, think about what you learned in the introductory lesson. Think about the “archaeological questions” we answered about the letter. To read through Hebrews five times during the course of the study, try reading half of it each week. You could alternate reading chapters 1–6 on even weeks and chapters 7–13 on odd weeks.

Your weekly homework will focus in on a particular passage to see what it has to say and how it fits into the greater context of the letter as a whole. The homework is designed to help you take a closer look at what you are reading.

Let’s get started.

DAY ONE

READ THIS WEEK'S PASSAGE: HEBREWS 1:1–2:18.

1. In 2–3 sentences, summarize the main ideas of the passage.
2. According to this week's passage, who or what is Jesus Christ better than?
3. Mark every occurrence of the word *angels* in this week's section of the text with a red A. How many occurrences did you find?

DAY TWO

NOW LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT HEBREWS 1:1-4.

4. Based on these opening verses, what do you think the author's first concern was in writing his letter? What did he want to establish first and foremost in the minds of his hearers?

5. In the space below, note everything you learn about Christ in these first four verses.

WHO HE IS	WHERE HE IS	WHAT HE DOES/ HAS DONE

6. What contrast did the author paint in 1:1-2? Pay attention to repeated words to help you answer.

Rewrite 1:1-2 below in your own words to capture what he was saying.

7. What are some of the “many ways” God spoke to His people in the past (1:1)? Look up the following verses and note what you find.

Genesis 28:10-15

Exodus 3:1-6

Exodus 20:1-21

Numbers 22:28,32

2 Peter 1:21

8. What time period do you think the author was noting with the phrase “in these last days” (1:2a)?
9. In 1:3-4 the author set up the contrast he would explore in the rest of chapters 1 and 2. Why might a contrast between Christ and angels have been necessary and helpful for his original hearers? Look up the following verses to help with your answer.

Colossians 2:18 • Revelation 22:8-9

10. **APPLY:** Choose the description of Christ in 1:1-4 that is most surprising or impactful to you. Write it below.

How should the statement you chose above impact your perspective on how to live “in these last days” as one of Christ’s followers?

DAY THREE

NOW LOOK AT HEBREWS 1:5-14.

11. The author used seven different Old Testament passages to illustrate Christ's superiority to the angels (Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 97:7; Ps. 104:4; Ps. 45:6-7; Ps. 102:25-27; Ps. 110:1). Based on what you know about his audience, why would this have been an effective strategy?

What does his effective use of these passages tell you about the author?

12. On the chart below, note the comparison between Christ and the angels in the verses indicated (some are stated explicitly and others are implied).

	CHRIST	THE ANGELS
1:5		
1:5		
1:7-9		
1:10-12		
1:13-14		

13. **APPLY:** How can modern believers be guilty of giving misplaced attention—even worship—to the spiritual realm instead of to Christ? Why is it tempting to do so? Why is it dangerous?

DAY FOUR

NOW LOOK AT HEBREWS 2:1-4.

14. What important transitional word do you find at the beginning of 2:1?

Mark it in your copy of the text with a purple capital T and underline.

How does the message of 2:1 follow logically from what has just come before?

15. What is “the message declared by angels” referenced in 2:2? Look up the following verses to help with your answer.

Deuteronomy 33:2 • Acts 7:53 • Galatians 3:19

16. In 2:2 the author meant to stir the Old Testament memories of his Jewish Christian hearers. Based on your knowledge of the Old Testament, give two examples of times that disobedience received a just retribution.

How do these examples prove the reliability of the message the angels declared (God’s law)?

17. What three reasons are given in 2:3-4 to establish the credibility of our salvation? Write them below. Next to each one, note what New Testament event or occurrence they likely describe.

1.

2.

3.

18. **APPLY:** In what ways are modern believers prone to drift away or neglect the truth we know? What regular practices might help us “pay much closer attention to what we have heard” (2:1a)?

DAY FIVE

NOW LOOK AT HEBREWS 2:5-18.

19. In 2:5-9 the author quoted and discussed Psalm 8:4-6, the section of the psalm describing humanity. Why do you think the author of Hebrews applied this psalm to Jesus in particular? What did he want us to understand? Compare Hebrews 2:9 to 1 Corinthians 15:22 to help with your answer.

20. Look at 2:10. In what way was Christ “made perfect through suffering”? Give your best answer. If you are unsure, start by thinking through what the phrase cannot mean, based on what you know is true about God.

21. In 2:10-18 mark every occurrence of a *familial term* (sons, brothers, children) with a blue underline. (Note: the term *sons* connotes *sons and daughters* and the term *brothers* connotes *brothers and sisters*. They can be properly read with no gendered connotation.)

Why is it important for us to understand our salvation in family terms?

22. What reason is given for the death of Jesus in 2:14-15? Summarize these two verses below.

23. In 2:16 who does God help?

Look up Romans 9:6-8 and Galatians 3:7 to clarify to whom this phrase is referring.

24. How does 2:16 contrast believers to angels? Are angels part of the family of God?

25. In 2:17-18 the author introduced the theme of Jesus as High Priest. He would develop this theme at length in later chapters. For now, look up the word *propitiation* in a dictionary or thesaurus, and write a definition for it below that best fits with the context of 2:17-18. Check the NIV Bible translation as well to see what word it uses.

PROPITIATION: (Hint: look up *propitiate* and modify the definition to a noun form, or look up *propitiatory* in the thesaurus.)

26. **APPLY:** Reread 2:8. How much does Jesus, who calls you part of His family, control?

What area of your life feels most out of control? What news headline scares you the most? What sin feels unconquerable to you?

How does the truth in 2:7-9 speak peace to your greatest fears?

WRAP-UP

What aspect of God's character has this week's passage of Hebrews shown you more clearly?

Fill in the following statement:

Knowing that God is _____ shows me that
I am _____.

What one step can you take this week to better live in light of this truth?

WEEK TWO | GROUP DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTORY QUESTION: What is your favorite book or movie about angels?

1. OBSERVE: (question 5, p. 19) Note everything you learn about Christ in the first four verses of Hebrews.

APPLY: (question 10, p. 21) Choose the description of Christ in 1:1-4 that is most surprising or impactful to you. How should the statement you chose impact your perspective on how to live “in these last days” as one of Christ’s followers?

2. OBSERVE: (question 11, p. 22) The author used seven different Old Testament passages to illustrate Christ’s superiority to the angels. Based on what you know about his audience, why would this have been an effective strategy? What does his effective use of these passages tell you about the author?

APPLY: (question 13, p. 23) How can modern believers be guilty of giving misplaced attention—even worship—to the spiritual realm instead of to Christ? Why is it tempting to do so? Why is it dangerous?

3. OBSERVE: (question 17, p. 25) What three reasons are given in 2:3-4 to establish the credibility of our salvation? Note what New Testament event or occurrence they likely describe.

APPLY: (question 18, p. 25) In what ways are modern believers prone to drift away or neglect the truth we know? What regular practices might help us “pay much closer attention to what we have heard” (2:1a)?

4. OBSERVE: (question 21, p. 26) Why is it important for us to understand our salvation in family terms?

APPLY: (question 26, p. 27–28) Reread 2:8. How much does Jesus, who calls you part of His family, control? What area of your life feels most out of control? What news headline scares you the most? What sin feels unconquerable to you? How does the truth in 2:7-9 speak peace to your greatest fears?

5. WRAP-UP: (p. 28) What aspect of God’s character has this week’s passage of Hebrews shown you more clearly?

Fill in the following statement:

Knowing that God is _____ shows me that
I am _____.

What one step can you take this week to better live in light
of this truth?

WEEK TWO | VIEWER GUIDE NOTES

