

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

A Catholic Journey Through the Letter to the Hebrews

Session 1 · God Has Spoken by a Son · Hebrews 1:1–2:4

LEADER'S GUIDE · NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Part 1 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Hebrews opens not with an argument but with an overture: God, who spoke for centuries in fragments through the prophets, has said his final word, and the final word is not a message but a Son. The sevenfold portrait of 1:2–4 and the sevenfold catena of Scripture that follows set the Son above every angel, every mediator, and every previous speaking.

Catholic Touchstone. The fullness and finality of revelation in Christ. The Catechism teaches, in the words of St. John of the Cross, that in giving us his Son, God spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word, and has no more to say (CCC 65); there will be no further public revelation (CCC 66). Tonight's steelman meets the honest Protestant question this raises about Tradition and the Magisterium, and answers it from the same paragraphs.

What You Need to Know

What Hebrews is. It has no letter opening, no greeting, no named sender; it launches straight into one of the most magnificent sentences in the New Testament, and only at the very end signs off like a letter. It calls itself a “word of exhortation” (13:22), the exact phrase used for a synagogue homily (Acts 13:15). Hebrews is a sermon, very likely the earliest complete Christian homily we possess, built the way a great homily is built: Scripture opened, Christ preached, a drifting congregation summoned back. Your group is not studying a treatise; they are sitting in the first century's finest pews, and for twelve weeks the preacher has the pulpit.

Authorship, hedged honestly. The sermon is anonymous. The Christian East associated it with St. Paul from early on; the West hesitated for centuries, and the style differs from Paul's in ways ancient readers already noticed. Candidates proposed across the centuries include Barnabas (Tertullian's suggestion), Apollos, St. Luke, and St. Clement. Origen's verdict has never been improved upon: who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows. The Church has defined its inspiration and canonicity (the Council of Trent lists it among the sacred books), never its human author, and this study speaks of “the preacher” with untroubled confidence in the Holy Spirit who is the author that matters.

Audience and stakes. On the traditional reading, still the most widely held, the recipients are Jewish Christians under pressure: socially punished, materially plundered (10:32–34), and tempted not to renounce Christ outright but to drift quietly back to the synagogue and the venerable, tangible, legal worship of the old covenant. The sermon never names its readers or their city, so hold this reconstruction the way you hold the date: likely, not certain. The sermon's strategy is not to belittle the

old covenant but to out-glory it: everything Israel rightly loved (angels, Moses, priesthood, sacrifice, sanctuary, covenant) is honored and then surpassed in the Son. Many argue from the sermon's present-tense descriptions of sacrificial worship, and its silence about the temple's destruction, that it predates the year 70; it is a fair inference from silence, so hold it as likely rather than certain.

The sevenfold portrait and the seated Son. Verses 2–4 pile up seven glories: heir of all things; agent of creation; radiance (*apaugasma*) of God's glory; exact imprint (*charaktēr*, the die-stamp of a coin) of his nature; upholder of the universe by his word of power; maker of purification for sins; seated at the right hand of the Majesty. The radiance and imprint language is the New Testament's high-water mark of consubstantiality (the Catechism cites this very verse for the Son's divinity, CCC 241): as radiance is to light, so the Son is to the Father, distinct but never separate, and never younger. And one verb in the list should snag a careful reader: after making purification, he sat down. Take guesses in Question 3 and resolve nothing; the seated posture is a planted thread whose payoff belongs to a later session, and the sermon planted it here on purpose.

The catena and the method. Verses 5–13 string seven Old Testament quotations (Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Deuteronomy 32:43 with Psalm 97:7; Psalm 104:4; Psalm 45:6–7; Psalm 102:25–27; Psalm 110:1) into a chain, a rabbinic catena: Scripture arguing from Scripture. This is the sermon's method for twelve chapters, and it is aimed with pastoral genius: an audience tempted back toward the old books is shown that the old books themselves preach the Son. Two of the quotations do something audacious the group should discover live: Psalm 45 has God addressing the king as God, and Psalm 102's hymn to the unchanging Creator is applied without apology to Jesus.

Why angels, and the first warning. The comparison with angels is not academic. Jewish tradition held that the Torah was delivered through angels (2:2; compare Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:53), so the angels stand here for the entire glory of the Sinai revelation. The sermon's logic is the rabbis' own *qal wahomer*, the how-much-more: if the angel-delivered word was valid and every transgression punished, how much more binding is salvation declared by the Lord himself. Then the first of the sermon's warnings (2:1–4), and note its precise diagnosis: not rebellion, not denial, but drift; the verb *pararreō* evokes a boat slipping its moorings. Nobody in your group plans to abandon Christ; the sermon's whole pastoral fear is that nobody plans to. They neglect, and the current does the rest.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. The catena opens with coronation texts: the begotten Son of the royal psalm and the promised son of David's covenant. The resurrection and exaltation are presented as the enthronement these texts always awaited (compare Acts 13:33).

Psalm 45:6–7. A royal wedding psalm in which God addresses the king: “Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever... therefore God, your God, has anointed you.” God calls someone else God, and anoints him. Hebrews reads the address to the Son, and the group should be allowed to trip over the pronouns themselves in Question 5: the seeds of Trinitarian grammar were already in Israel's hymnal.

Psalm 102:25–27. A hymn to the LORD who laid the earth's foundations and outlasts the heavens like a discarded cloak. Hebrews 1:10–12 applies it, without a blush, to the Son: he is the unchanging Creator. For a drifting congregation the pastoral point rides with the dogmatic one: everything else wears out; “thou art the same, and thy years will never end.”

Psalm 110:1. The catena's crown: "Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet." The most-quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament, and this sermon's obsession. Tonight the group reads verse 1 of the psalm and only verse 1. The psalm has a second oracle further down, and the entire architecture of this study depends on the group not reading it yet. Enforce this with good humor and total resolve; the sealed guess on Take-Home 1 aims their curiosity exactly where you want it.

Voices of the Church

St. Clement of Rome *Letter to the Corinthians*

Writing from Rome within roughly a generation of this sermon, St. Clement quotes its opening almost verbatim: Christ the radiance of God's majesty, greater than the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent. One of the earliest surviving Christian documents outside the New Testament (1 Clement 36) already treasures Hebrews chapter 1, which tells you how quickly the Church was reading, echoing, and trusting this sermon; formal recognition of its place in the canon, especially in the West, took longer.

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews*

The great preacher, whose homilies remain the classic patristic commentary on this book, observes that the sermon heaps up the glories of the Son at the very threshold to lift the drooping spirits of a persecuted people: souls tempted to look back are healed by being made to look up. The medicine for drift, from the first sentence, is the sheer magnitude of Christ.

St. John of the Cross *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*

In giving us his Son, his only Word, God has said everything to us at once in this sole Word, and he has no more to say: what he spoke before in parts to the prophets, he has spoken in the Son whole and entire. The Doctor of Carmel, quoted by the Catechism itself (CCC 65), is expounding tonight's first two verses.

Catechism Connection

CCC 65–66. Christ the Father's one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word: in him God has said everything, and no new public revelation is to be expected before his return. Yet, the Catechism adds with precision the steelman will need: even if revelation is complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for faith to grasp its full significance over the centuries.

CCC 102. Through all the words of Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one utterance in whom he expresses himself completely. The catena's method as doctrine: seven psalms, one Word.

CCC 241. The Church's confession of the Son as consubstantial cites tonight's very verse: the radiance of the Father's glory, the exact imprint of his nature. Nicaea was already sitting in Hebrews 1:3.

CCC 331–332. The angels: Christ's angels, mightily present through salvation history, and, exactly as 1:14 says, ministering spirits in service of the heirs of salvation. Honored rightly, and outranked infinitely.

Thread Watch

THREAD 1 · PSALM 110 (LEADER ONLY)

The sermon's engine is one psalm, and it shows its hand twice tonight: “sat down at the right hand” (1:3) and the full quotation of Psalm 110:1 (1:13). The group reads verse 1 of the psalm and nothing further; the psalm's second oracle, four verses down, detonates in Session 6, and the sealed guess depends on the fuse staying unlit. If anyone has read the whole psalm (some will), deputize them into silence with a smile.

THE SEALED GUESS (TAKE-HOME 1)

Tonight's Take-Home carries the My Guess box: Hebrews will spend three chapters on a man named Melchizedek who appears in three verses of Genesis and one verse of a psalm. Participants seal a written guess: who was he, and why would he matter more to Jesus' story than Aaron and all the priests of Israel? Collect or confirm the sealed slips next week; they open, unrevised, in Session 6.

THREAD 2 · THE BETTER TALLY (PUBLIC, STARTS TONIGHT)

Unlike this study's hidden threads, the Better Tally is played in the open. Hebrews' favorite adjective is kreittōn, “better,” and it appears tonight at 1:4, where the RSV2CE renders it “superior”: the Son become as much superior to the angels. Start a visible scoreboard (poster or shared page); tell the group the tally tracks this one Greek word, which their Bibles render sometimes “better” and sometimes “superior,” add every catch across the study, and total it in Session 12. Let them compete; the tally is quietly teaching the sermon's whole argument.

THREAD 3 · THE WE-HAVE INVENTORY (LEADER ONLY)

Beginning in Session 4 the sermon starts declaring what Christians have: a great high priest, a hope like an anchor, confidence to enter. Keep a private list from then on; its final entry, and the study's last discovery, is 13:10. Nothing to log tonight; just know the drawer exists.

Session Goals

1. The two speakings of 1:1–2 land: God's final word is a Person, and the difference between a message and a Son is felt, not just noted.
2. The group inventories the sevenfold portrait themselves and meets the divinity claims of radiance and imprint.
3. The Psalm 45 and Psalm 102 live discoveries fire: Israel's own hymnal calls the Son God and Creator.

4. Psalm 110 is planted, verse 1 only; the sealed guesses are written; the Better Tally opens at one.
5. The drift warning is received as diagnosis, not threat, and each participant names a drift vector and an anchor line.

Time Note

Built for 75 to 90 minutes. If the night runs short, compress Question 6 (Psalm 102) into a single reading with one observation, and cut the Dig Deeper box, in that order. Do not cut the two-speakings opening (Question 1), the Psalm 45 discovery (Question 5), the Psalm 110 planting (Question 7), or the drift close (Question 9). Two pacing guards: cap Question 10 at fifteen minutes flat (it could happily eat the evening; give the objection a fair answer, name the parking lot, and move), and remember that no ANSWER box in this guide is a script: digest each one in preparation and share it conversationally, in your own voice, after the group has done its digging.

Part 2 · Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Father, in many and various ways you spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, and in these last days you have spoken to us by a Son. Speak that Word to us tonight. Where our attention has drifted, moor us; where our picture of Christ has grown small, enlarge it beyond the angels; and give us ears for the sermon your Spirit preached to a tired Church, because we are one. Through the same Christ our Lord, the radiance of your glory. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

W1. When has someone's presence said more than any message could: someone who showed up instead of texting? What did the showing up communicate that words never had?

W2. Think of the last thing you truly neglected until it quietly became a problem: a friendship, a car, your health. How does neglect actually work? Nobody decides it, so what happens instead?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 1:1–4 (RSV2CE), twice: once for the sweep, once slowly.

1. Verse 1 against verse 2: chart the contrast. How did God speak of old (to whom, through whom, in what manner), and how has he spoken now? What is the difference between receiving a message from someone and receiving the person himself?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Of old: to the fathers, by the prophets, in many and various ways: fragments, installments, a revelation in pieces because no piece could hold it all. Now: to us, by a Son: not another installment but the whole; not a message about God but God's own self-expression in person. A message informs you; a person meets you. The prophets carried words; the Son is the Word. Everything else this sermon will say for thirteen chapters unfolds from this one contrast.

2. Now inventory verses 2 through 4 on paper: list everything said about this Son, item by item. How many do you count, and which one is the most staggering claim?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Seven: appointed heir of all things; through whom God created the world; the radiance (apaugasma) of God's glory; the exact imprint (charaktēr, the die-stamp on a coin) of God's nature; upholding the universe by his word of power; having made purification for sins; seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Linger on the middle pair: as radiance is to light, the Son is to the Father: distinct, inseparable, and exactly as eternal, for light was never without its shining. The Church's confession of the Son as consubstantial cites this very verse (CCC 241). Nicaea did not invent this; it defended it.

3. One verb in the portrait should snag you. After “making purification for sins,” the Son “sat down.” Priests in Israel performed their service standing. Why might this preacher, of all preachers, tell us the posture? Take guesses only; we are not resolving this tonight.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Collect the guesses warmly and confirm nothing. Say only: “Write the question down. The sermon put that verb there on purpose, and it is not done with it.” LEADER: the payoff belongs to chapter 10 and the session that reads it; the seated Son is a planted thread. Log the guesses mentally; the best ones will get their vindication in a few weeks.

SPOILER GUARD: Do not explain the seated posture tonight, and do not contrast it with the standing priests of 10:11 aloud. The observation is planted; the resolution is scheduled.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 1:5–14

4. Count the Old Testament quotations in verses 5 through 13. What is the preacher's method of argument, and why is that method perfectly aimed at this particular audience?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Seven quotations: a catena, a chain of Scripture interpreting Scripture, the classic method of the synagogue homily. And the aim is pastoral genius: these are Jewish Christians tempted to drift back to the old books and the old worship, and the preacher's answer is to open the old books and let them preach the Son. He never asks them to love the Scriptures less; he shows them what the Scriptures were always saying. That will be this study's method too.

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find and read Psalm 45:6–7, slowly, watching the pronouns.

5. In the psalm, who is speaking, and who is being addressed as “O God” whose throne is for ever? And then verse 7: “therefore God, your God, has anointed you.” Work out the pronouns. What is Israel's own hymnal doing, and what does Hebrews 1:8–9 say about who this address belongs to?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God addresses someone as God, and then anoints him. Work the pronouns to their end and the mystery clarifies: the Father addresses the Son as God, one divine person speaking to another, which is exactly how Hebrews frames the quotation: “of the Son he says.” The psalmist composed a royal wedding song, and the Holy Spirit intended in it depths the human author did not fully grasp: two divine persons in the hymnal Israel sang for a thousand years, visible now in the retrospect the Son's coming provides. The seeds of the Trinity's grammar were not imported into the Old Testament; they were harvested from it. (And note the anointing: the word Christ means the Anointed One; the psalm even names the oil, “the oil of gladness.”)

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find and read Psalm 102:25–27.

6. Who is Psalm 102 about, on its face: who laid the foundations of the earth, and who remains when the heavens wear out like clothing? Now hear Hebrews 1:10–12 apply every word of it to the Son. What is being claimed, and why might “thou art the same, and thy years will never end” be exactly the medicine a drifting congregation needs?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The psalm is a hymn to the LORD, the Creator who outlasts his own cosmos as a man outlasts a cloak. Hebrews hands the whole hymn to Jesus: the Son is the unchanging Creator of Genesis 1. And the pastoral edge: everything the drifting Hebrews were tempted to lean on (the city, the temple, the familiar) would in time wear out like a garment, and everything your group leans on ages too. “Thou art the same” is dogma and consolation in one breath; the sermon will ring the same bell at its end: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and for ever.

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find Psalm 110 and read verse 1. Verse 1 only.

7. The catena saves its crown for last (1:13). What is this Son invited to do that no angel was ever told to do, and what does sharing the throne mean? (And notice: we have now met this psalm twice tonight; verse 3 of our chapter quietly quoted it before verse 13 named it.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

“Sit at my right hand”: not stand in attendance like the ministering spirits, but sit, enthroned, sharing the seat of the Majesty until every enemy is a footstool. Angels serve the throne; the Son occupies it. This single verse of Psalm 110 is the Old Testament text the New Testament quotes more than any other, and this sermon is its greatest devotee. LEADER: close the psalm here, visibly. Say: “That psalm has more to say, and we are not reading it yet. If you have read ahead, keep the secret; your Take-Home sheet tonight will ask you to make a sealed prediction about where it is going.”

SPOILER GUARD: Psalm 110 stops at verse 1 tonight. Do not read, summarize, or allude to the psalm's later oracle, and do not let a well-read participant do it either. Session 6 is built on this floor.

8. So why angels at all? Two clues: Hebrews 2:2 calls the Sinai revelation “the message declared by angels” (compare Galatians 3:19), and 1:14 defines what angels are for. What do the angels stand for in this comparison, and what is the sermon's how-much-more logic building toward? And before we outrank them, what does 1:14 say the angels are doing right now, for whom?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The angels stand for the whole glory of the old revelation: Jewish tradition held that the Torah itself was delivered through angelic mediation, so “better than the angels” means better than the entire apparatus of Sinai, honored and surpassed. The logic is the rabbis' own qal wahomer: if the angel-borne word was binding, how much more the word spoken by the Lord in person: and 2:1–4 is about to cash it. But do not rush past 1:14's tenderness: the angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation.” That is your group. The beings the old world venerated are, by God's design, in service of the people in this room (CCC 331–332). Honored

rightly; outranked infinitely; and on our side.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 2:1–4

9. The sermon's first warning, and notice its precise diagnosis. What is the danger named in 2:1: is it rebellion, denial, apostasy? The Greek verb paints a boat slipping its moorings. Why does the preacher fear drift more than defiance, and what does drift actually look like in a life like yours: name its mechanics.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The danger is drift: *pararreō*, to be carried past, to slip anchorage. Nobody in the congregation was planning to abandon Christ, and that was exactly the problem: defiance announces itself and can be fought; drift is silent, cumulative, and always feels reasonable at each step. Its mechanics are neglect: the skipped prayer that becomes a skipped week, the Mass that becomes optional under one busy season, “such a great salvation” still believed and no longer attended to. The remedy in 2:1 is equally precise: “we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard.” Attention is the anchor line. Let the group sit with the diagnostic question personally; the Send will return to it.

10. Now tonight's honest objection, at full strength, because our Protestant brothers and sisters raise it from these very verses: if God has spoken his final and complete word in the Son (1:1–2), and no new revelation is coming, then everything the apostles taught is preserved in Scripture, and Scripture is the only infallible norm left to us. The classical Protestant does not reject creeds, teachers, or tradition; he says they serve under Scripture and bind only insofar as they can be shown from it. So hasn't the Catholic Church gone further than God's finished speech allows, an infallible Magisterium, dogmas defined centuries later that the apostles never spelled out? Give that its full weight. Then press: what is the difference between adding to revelation and unfolding it, and who recognized that this anonymous sermon was God's word in the first place?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The objection guards a truth Catholics confess in identical words: revelation is complete in Christ; the Church expects no new public revelation, ever (CCC 66 says it as flatly as any Reformer). But the same paragraph continues: even though revelation is complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for faith to grasp its full significance over the centuries. Tradition and the Magisterium do not add a thirteenth chapter to God's speech; they carry, guard, and unfold the one Word (the apostles' teaching handed on, 2 Thessalonians 2:15), the way the Church spent three centuries unfolding what “radiance of his glory” requires and called it Nicaea. Development is the Word's depth surfacing, never new words arriving. And one quiet historical fact tonight's text carries: Hebrews is anonymous. No apostle's name authenticates it. And in historical fact, this sermon reached every Christian Bible, Protestant and Catholic alike, through the Church's Spirit-led discernment and canon: recognized, not conferred: the Church did not make Hebrews inspired, any more than a jeweler makes a diamond; she certified, with authority, what the Spirit had already breathed. The book that says God has fully spoken reached every one of our Bibles through the very

Tradition the objection doubts. That is not a gotcha; it is an invitation to gratitude.

DIG DEEPER

“In these last days” (1:2): when are the last days? Have someone find Acts 2:16–17: Peter, on Pentecost morning, declares Joel’s “last days” fulfilled “in the last days... I will pour out my Spirit.” The last days are not a future countdown; they began at the Incarnation and Pentecost, and every Christian generation, including yours, has lived inside them. The New Testament’s whole posture (urgency without panic) follows from that tense.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT THE DOOR

S1. God’s final word to you is not a text to manage but a Person to know. Where, honestly, have you been relating to your faith as information (books, arguments, content) more than as him? What is one way to address the Person this week?

S2. Name your drift vector out loud: the one practice that has quietly slipped its mooring this season. And name the anchor line: the single concrete re-tie you will make before we meet again.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Begin each morning with one sentence of prayer built from tonight’s first verses: “Father, today, speak to me in your Son.” Then give him thirty silent seconds to do it.
2. Re-tie the anchor line you named at S2: restore the one neglected practice, this week, and tell one person in the group so it is real.
3. Read Hebrews 2:5–18 before next session, and count: how many times does the passage insist that Jesus shared our flesh, our blood, our sufferings, our death? Bring the number.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

HEBREWS 1:1–2 (RSV2CE)

“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.”

CLOSING PRAYER

Radiance of the Father’s glory, exact imprint of his nature: you upheld the universe by your word while you hung on our cross, and having made purification for our sins, you sat down, your work complete. Hold fast what drifts in us. Tighten our attention to what we have heard, make Israel’s psalms sing to us of you, and bring us at last to the throne you share, where the angels who serve us see your face. Amen.

Part 3 · Leader Reference Card

Every passage used or assigned in Session 1, in order of appearance. Flag these before the group arrives.

PRIMARY TEXT

Hebrews 1:1–4 · 1:5–14 · 2:1–4

LIVE DISCOVERY PASSAGES

Psalm 45:6–7 (God addresses God) · Psalm 102:25–27 (the unchanging Creator) · Psalm 110:1, verse 1 only (the enthronement)

STEELMAN PASSAGES (QUESTION 10)

Hebrews 1:1–2 (the objection's text) · CCC 65–66 (complete, not completely explicit) · 2 Thessalonians 2:15 (Tradition handed on)

LEADER BACKGROUND

Acts 13:15 (word of exhortation) · Hebrews 13:22 · Galatians 3:19; Acts 7:53 (angel-mediated Torah) · Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Acts 13:33 (coronation texts) · Acts 2:16–17 (the last days) · Hebrews 10:32–34 (the audience's sufferings)

CATECHISM

CCC 65–66 · CCC 102 · CCC 241 · CCC 331–332

MEMORY VERSE

Hebrews 1:1–2

NEXT SESSION

Session 2 covers Hebrews 2:5–18: made like his brethren in every respect. Participants bring their flesh-and-blood count. The Better Tally board comes back every week; bring it.