

Identity, fear and faith: how the letter to the Hebrews counsels its audience through a retelling

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Introduction:

...pay close attention to two matters:

First, the kind of identity struggle...

Doubt destabilizes people, causing them to be “in two minds,” so that they alternate between an outlook shaped by faith and an unbelieving perspective.¹ If unresolved doubts fester and multiply, we may enter into such a state that we question the veracity of deeply held core beliefs. This state may be occasioned by something we experience that feels incongruent with our underlying beliefs. Sociologists like Peter Berger, identify this state of internal dividedness as “cognitive dissonance.”²

how does the Epistle of Hebrews engage the audience’s spiritual struggle?

Our second area of focus expands on this: asking what is Hebrews is actually **doing**. Notice how each of my 3 points expand on what I believe Hebrews is doing, namely, counselling its audience.

Retelling involves helping struggling people make sense of their experience in the light of what God is doing with the aim of reorientating their hearts toward God ... Retelling aims to offer fresh vision that builds hope, enabling the CE to see their struggle with new eyes and to discern what change and growth looks like in their current situation.

I. How are they Stuck? They are Disengaged & Unable to Deliberate Well because of Cognitive Dissonance

If we are to understand the audience’s struggle their experience of cognitive dissonance, we need an awareness of the more pivotal moments in their story. (see Heb. 2:4 and 10:32-35)...

The audience is also struggling with doubt. **Their doubt appears to relate to a perceived incongruity between their belief that Christ has been enthroned as King overall and the**

¹ Cf. Os Guinness, *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond the Shadow of Doubt*, chs. 1-2.

² Cf. Peter Berger, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic* (31-36) and *The Many Alters of Modernity* (2-6) observes the importance of understanding role of structures of plausibility in bringing about cognitive dissonance; cf. also William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion*, 59-63. While we don’t have time to explore this here, structures of plausibility are a significant contributing factor to the dissonance felt by the audience of Hebrews.

apparent power of their enemies to prevail over God's people by persecution. Heb. 5:11 describes them as "dull of hearing"...

The **doubt of wonderment** is a healthy form since it drives us back to God's Word and to arriving at an acceptance of the limits of our knowledge in regard to difficult "why" questions, whereas the **doubt of judgment** is marked by a suspicion that God is not reliable or that he is not good. In effect, it stands over and accuses God.³...

II. The Feedback Loop that Accompanies Sinful Fear, Doubt, and Disappointment and How it is Driven by Unbelief in the Heart

The audience is struggling with crippling fear and disappointment at their situation...

how does the author appeal to an underlying "felt" need of the audience in a way that offers hope while also addressing potential root issues caused by sin's deceitfulness in the audience's hearts?

The author needs first, to speak to the **confusion**...

Regarding the first objective (i.e. to engage their confusion)...

The author pursues his **second objective (i.e., to address root issues)**, by presenting case studies from the OT to contrast the dynamics of unbelief embodied in models of failure...

In a moment despair, they angrily accused God (see Num 14:2-4 and Num. 13:32-33)⁴ ...

Heb. 4:1-2 says, "***Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it...***"²

The wilderness generation's **failure and anger at God** forms the backdrop for the exhortation... **See to it... that no 'root of bitterness' springs up...** (Heb. 12:15)...

III. The Call to Respond from a Faith-filled Vision Based on What God has Done in Christ and What He is "Up To" in their Current Situation

How does Hebrews offer vision to this fearful group?...

The exodus-journey narrative is an **identity story** because...

The inner conflict causing the audience's doubt is addressed by two related truths regarding their present and their future. **First**, Heb. 2:8b says... **Second**, Heb 9:28 says.

How are the listeners to take hold of this hope? **The promise brings with it a call to respond with faith...** What would a response of faith look like?

³ Paul Tripp discusses these two forms of doubt in his book, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*, ch. 6.

⁴ Cf. Ed Welch, *What Do You Think Of Me? Why Do I Care?*, 30, 31.

A. Turning to their Heavenly Advocate for Mercy and Grace

...Hebrews indicates that it was necessary that Christ ***“be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted”*** (2:17-18)...

B. Reenvisioning their Struggle through the Lens of Christ as Perfect Model of Faith

What might it look like for the listeners to be motivated by faith and courage amid their trial?...

Heb. 12:1 says, ***“Let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”***

How should they run the race of faith?...

Heb. 12:2: ***“Fixing our eyes upon Jesus, the champion in the exercise of faith and the one who brought faith to complete expression.”***⁵....

C. Commit to Gathering Regularly for Corporate Worship and to Encourage and Exhort One Another toward Growth in Love, Courage, and Discernment

Conclusion

By approaching the book of Hebrews as a case study, we gain insight into how the author counsels an audience who are overcome by paralyzing fear, plagued by doubt and disappointed with what they perceive to be God's lack of responsiveness to their cries for deliverance...

⁵ William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary.