

on the road with

**Lisa Harper**

**HOLDING OUT**

*for a* **HERO**

*a new spin on Hebrews*



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*Holding Out for a Hero*

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## Danger Ahead

Jewish Christians living in the first century didn't have to zoom around on Harleys to stick out like sore thumbs: everything they did was contrary to their culture. They were monotheistic—they believed in one God, Jehovah—while the religious climate of their day was much less discriminating. When Paul said, “Gentlemen, I can see that you are very religious,” he wasn't exaggerating.

*So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”*

Acts 17:22-23

**Monotheism**  
the belief in one God

**Polytheism**  
the belief in more than one god or theology

**Syncretism**  
adhering to multiple creeds

This passage in Acts was written at about the same time as Hebrews. It highlights the culture of the day, which was polytheistic (multiple theologies) and syncretistic (multiple creeds). Greeks and Romans weren't antireligious—they were enthusiastic participants in every conceivable kind of religion. For instance, when Greece or Rome conquered another civilization, they just added that belief system to the ever-growing list. Rome had more than two hundred *god* statues on street corners, a diminutive “deity” guarding virtually every fork in the road.

## did you know?

Although emperor worship was commonly practiced in the first century, history does reveal that most emperors didn't really believe they were literal gods. Few actually forced their subjects to adhere to emperor worship which included offering incense and prayers on their behalf. The whole incense thing was mostly political pomp and circumstance, not altogether different from the bumper sticker bonanza that happens every four years prior to presidential elections in America. But there were a few loony rulers who took the matter very seriously!

Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) was as nutty as a fruitcake. He was so captivated by the idea that he was actually a god, he ordered people killed if they didn't call him “Lord.” Nuttier still was the egomaniacal emperor Caligula (AD 37–41). Caligula insisted he was supernatural to the extent that he ordered soldiers to place his image inside the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews objected to his audacious heresy and staged a revolt. As a protest, they refused to farm their land, effectively demonstrating that they'd rather starve than worship him alongside Jehovah. Of course, this caused long lines in the grocery store—making all the housewives mad—and Caligula responded by decreeing that all Jews be put to death (brings to mind another nut named Hitler, doesn't it?). Fortunately, he was overthrown before his murderous scheme could be carried out.<sup>1</sup>

**Read Acts 17:22-34 for the full account of Paul’s discussion with the hedonistic Greeks in Athens. What can you pick up about their culture in light of Paul’s clarifications? Do you know anyone who worships an “unknown” god?**

Even Jewish religious leaders gorged themselves at the counterfeit faith buffet, with some priests officiating at several different types of religious ceremonies. Can you imagine if a pastor preached at your church on Sunday morning—espousing biblically sound doctrine—then put on a robe and sashayed over to the Islamic center on Friday night to preside over their services?

Another interesting ingredient of this religious smorgasbord was emperor worship. All Roman citizens were legally required to show loyalty to the current political leader several times a year by putting a pinch of incense on an altar and praying to or for the emperor.<sup>2</sup> We’ve observed a modern spectacle of emperor worship on our TV news in the past few years through the plethora of billboards, statues, and buildings dedicated to Saddam Hussein. Much like those ancient taxpayers, some Middle Easterners still find it personally beneficial—even necessary—to affirm that their dictator is also a “god.”

### **Something Old, Something New**

In spite of the challenges of the day, Judaism was still largely tolerated throughout the Roman Empire in the first century—perhaps because there were 3 to 4 million Jews, most of whom were religious and

believed that Jehovah was the one, true God, but *didn't* believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah the Old Testament spoke of—and it would have been a political nightmare to prohibit them from worshipping. Also, the Jews were rarely civilly disobedient; they didn't really bother anyone. And lastly, Judaism was an ancient religion, and the Romans were enamored with old things.

But Jews who had embraced Christianity were a whole new ball game.

Christianity was suspicious because it was brand-new. Plus it was growing like wildfire, which made it even more dubious. It was considered dangerous because its followers were intolerant of other religions, insisting that some guy named Jesus was the only liaison to the one true God. And to make matters much worse, there had been a huge misunderstanding about the sacraments. When Christian converts talked about “eating His body and drinking His blood,” people thought they were practicing cannibalism. Neighbors of confessing Christians started eyeing them with suspicion and panicked every time a Jewish believer invited them to a barbecue!

**Have you ever been in one of those matching-purse-and-shoes Christian settings where you felt that you stuck out like a sore thumb? How did you respond?**

And these cheeky Christians didn't capitulate in order to go with the cultural flow. Their morals made it nearly impossible to live an under-the-



radar existence. They believed in the concept of family—marriage between a man and a woman, and if they were blessed, a house filled with children. But in Greco-Roman society, husbands and wives were like the pants in my closet that actually fit: few and far between! Not many people got married in those days—usually only the wealthy, for reasons of property disbursement. Fewer still practiced monogamy.

While abortion was frowned on (Greek mysticism gave them a healthy fear of homicide), babies were often abandoned. Especially little girls. Infants were set on the side of the road like trash. The surviving girls usually became cult prostitutes, and the boys ended up in gladiatorial schools, where they were trained to fight. Archaeologists have uncovered the ruins of massive coliseums where hundreds of gladiators in a single day would fight to the death for the purpose of “entertainment.”<sup>3</sup>

But Christians didn't buy tickets to the kill-or-be-killed championships. They didn't party at the local bars. They swam against the tide and got married. They cherished their children. They didn't discard their daughters. They even rescued other people's babies from the edge of the interstate. They delivered chicken soup to pagans with the flu. They were the last in line and the first to serve. The Jewish Christians were quickly becoming the flies in their world's amoral ointment.

**It's been said that Hebrews is like an eccentric millionaire: rich but puzzling. What questions have already formed in your mind about this bewildering book?**

## When the Going Gets Tough

*Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.*

Hebrews 10:32–34

This passage makes it clear that it wasn't the first time these converts had faced an angry mob of

### did you know?

Nero reigned from AD 54 to 68. Most scholars agree that Hebrews was written between the years 60 and 70, before the destruction of the second Temple, based on historical documents and textual references to the Temple and the sacrificial system. Remember there were technically two Jewish Temples: God gave David the vision for the first one, which was eventually built by his son, Solomon, around 960 BC. But that magnificent Temple was destroyed by one of Israel's enemies, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, in 587 BC. Jewish exiles attempted to rebuild the Temple when they returned from captivity in Babylon (516 BC), but their restoration project fell woefully short of the Temple's original splendor.

Construction of the "second" Temple—also a major remodeling project—began in 20 BC and was completed in 26 AD. The forty-six-year Temple reconstruction project was commissioned by King Herod for political reasons and was considered the greatest building and engineering achievement of his reign. But that Temple was ultimately demolished as well. It was ransacked, razed, and set ablaze by Roman emperor Titus and his troops in AD 70 in their attempt to systematically destroy Jerusalem. Religious Jews still cling to the belief that when their messiah comes, he will literally build another glorious Temple in Jerusalem.



former friends and neighbors. They had been bullied before for not fitting in. They'd been arrested for their faith in Jesus Christ, had their businesses ransacked and their property stolen, and their kids had been beaten up on the way home from school.

And while we've already painted a pretty grim picture of these ancient believers' lives, there's one more bit of bad news. Things were going to get even worse, and Nero was to blame.

Any portrait of Christianity in the first century that doesn't include Nero isn't complete, because it's not bleak enough. Nero was the Darth Vader of early Christendom.

Remember the old saying about Nero fiddling while Rome burned? Well, it's not far from the truth. Nero was sliding south in the polls, so many historians think he was the mastermind behind the great fire that destroyed Rome in AD 64. Nero believed he could recapture the people's loyalty by riding in on a white horse after the tragedy and rebuilding the city to its former glory. But his plan backfired—no pun intended—and instead of returning to cheers, Nero rode back into Rome facing innuendos and jeers. Rumors circulated that he was to blame, that his soldiers started the blaze, and that the emperor had “fiddled” while their beloved city burned to the ground. So Nero desperately needed someone else to pin the blame on. He found the perfect scapegoat in those “intolerant, monotheistic, cannibalistic” Christians.<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrews had to learn how to stand firm in the face of persecution. And their first lesson was a

tough one. Their teacher, the writer of Hebrews, made it clear that the days ahead would be more dangerous than anything they had walked through before.

*In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

Hebrews 12:4

Gulp. A bruised ego, black eye, or broken window is bearable. But bloodshed is something altogether different. The Hebrews didn't know martyrdom was part of the deal, and they weren't sure they could handle it.

**Read Hebrews 13:22 and Acts 13:15. There is a phrase in both of these verses that is translated from the Greek word *parakaleō*, which is used in association with speaking, not writing. This causes many Bible scholars to believe that Hebrews was first spoken as a sermon. Are you prone to pay closer attention when listening to a dramatic sermon or reading a good book?**

**Read Hebrews 5:11; 6:9; and 11:32. List some of the reasons that the style of Hebrews seems to be sermonic. How might they affect the way you'll read it?**

Have you been there? Have you ever gotten to the point of wanting to walk away from God because walking with Him is so hard? Or maybe you've pondered being a little less committed . . .



taking a few steps back from His demanding presence to the sure footing of mediocrity.

If you have, you're certainly not alone. From the beginning of history, God's people have found that following Him can be very difficult. Abraham decided God was taking too long to fulfill His audacious promise about his heirs outnumbering the stars, so he gave in to Sarah's Jerry Springer scheme for starting a family. Moses balked at the burning bush and stuttered in fear when God told him to go home and escort the Israelites out of Egypt. Elijah cried and uttered a halfhearted suicide threat—right after witnessing God's power and glory on Mount Carmel—when evil Queen Jezebel harassed him. And the disciples wilted, deserting Jesus when the Cross became reality instead of rhetoric. We all have a habit of retreating when the going gets tough.

### More Info

Want to know more about the struggles Abraham, Moses, and Elijah faced? You can find Abraham's story in Genesis 16. The story of Moses is found in Exodus 3, and Elijah's tale is told in 1 Kings 19.

## Devil in a Blue Dress

Several years ago I was invited to teach at a national Christian women's conference in Chattanooga. I was excited about the opportunity because I really liked the other women on the program and I had a lot of respect for the ministry sponsor. Little did I know that what was shaping up to be a wonderful weekend would also include verbal fist-cuffs.

Almost everything went smoothly during the conference. The worship was engaging and Christ-centered, and the audience was gracious and atten-

tive—except for this one woman in the front row who kept disrupting the program with loud comments, gestures, and strange gyrations that I assume were her idea of dancing before the Lord. Needless to say, our upfront dancer was very distracting, but we all tried to be polite and ignore her outbursts.

At the end of the day I was asked to facilitate a time of confession and commitment, which is one of my favorite things to do. It's incredible watching people's faces transform with the belief that God actually loves them and the relief that He's forgiven all the dark secrets from their past. Anyway, when the time of commitment ended and everyone began to leave the sanctuary, the gyrating woman from the front row approached me. I stepped toward her, thinking maybe she wanted to talk or pray. Instead, she leaned in too close for comfort and let me have it.

She angrily declared that God would never bless me as long as I dressed like a harlot, which was really confusing since I was wearing an ankle-length skirt, boots, a turtleneck, and a sweater. I could have understood her outrage if I was instructing in a tube top, but the only skin not covered was on my hands. And I've never been accused of having provocative wrists or fingers, so I'm not sure what was so offensive about my outfit! She went on to call me several more colorful names, then stopped abruptly, smiled, and walked away.

That day I really wanted to quit teaching altogether. Traveling to and from conferences thirty



weekends a year is demanding enough; dealing with the one or two or ten oddballs who seem to infect such events is absolutely *exhausting*. I was tired of wearing a bull's-eye simply because I stood behind a podium. I didn't want to deal with the bruises that come from bumping up against others in the body of Christ anymore.

The life we're called to lead as followers of Christ can be very difficult. We're often faced with trouble from those who don't understand our faith. Rather than being appreciated for our commitment to godly behavior, we're criticized—even demonized by those who don't understand our faith—as being judgmental and narrow-minded. We're ridiculed for trusting in an invisible God. We're scorned for calling God “loving” while also believing He will condemn unrepentant sinners. And the difficult people we have to deal with aren't always *outside* our faith. Other Christians are sometimes odd and obnoxious; it can be embarrassing to even be associated with people the Bible defines as our close relatives.

**People in Rome first thought Jews and Christians were synonymous, until the Jews let them know they didn't want to be associated with those “strange believers in Jesus Christ.” Has someone ever assumed you believed in something you didn't or lumped you in with a religious group you disagreed with? How did you respond?**



In light of all these issues, it's easy to see why most of us have pondered throwing in the prover-

bial towel at one time or another. Have you ever wondered about how good it would feel to sleep late on a Sunday, to cuss in traffic with no guilty conscience, to never be persecuted for your beliefs again?

It makes perfect sense that the frightened Hebrews, young in the faith, facing impossible odds, would also consider quitting.



**Read Isaiah 40:28-31. The “sermon” of Hebrews was given to a group of absolutely exhausted believers who epitomized weariness. When was the last time you were so spiritually exhausted that you didn’t think you could go any further? How did God encourage you to keep going?**

