

# IN<sup>↑</sup> NEXT LEVEL

**Hebrews**  
Chad Ragsdale



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## One: Deserts

### *Introduction:*

- Before studying the book, it might be good to talk about what you already know about the book. If you are studying in a group setting, this is a good way of identifying the familiarity that already may or may not exist about the book.

### *Identifying the benefit of the book of Hebrews for us today:*

“The preacher is not preaching into a vacuum; he is addressing a real and urgent pastoral problem, one that seems astonishingly contemporary. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak, attendance is down at the church, and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.” – Tom Long

- The book of Hebrews was written to weary Christians who were thinking about abandoning Jesus for their old life. The book was written to inspire *perseverance*.

### *Exercise:*

- Go through scripture and make a list of all of those people who went through some difficult time in deserted places. Talk about what patterns emerge from their example.

### *How to persevere according to Hebrews:*

Hebrews 3:1 – Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.

- *Know who you are.* What does this verse say about our *identity*? Why does it matter?
- *Know whose you are.* What does this verse say about *Jesus*? Why does it matter?

### *Application:*

- Discuss moments where you’ve been in the desert. What sent you into the desert? What has helped you to persevere?
- Discuss practical ways that you can “fix your thoughts on Jesus.”
- Read through the entire book of Hebrews in one setting. Take on notes on the major themes and important questions that you have after reading the book.

*A Note on the Author and Audience of Hebrews:*

**Author:** We can't be sure who the author of Hebrews was. Church tradition held for a long time that Paul was the author, but even prominent believers in the early Christian centuries were unclear about who wrote this letter. Today few scholars believe that Paul was the author. We can know several things about the author just from reading the letter. He apparently had received the gospel secondhand (2:3-4). He knew Timothy, and we can assume that he knew Paul as well (13:23). The author is clearly well educated in rhetoric, philosophy, and the Hebrew scriptures. It is also likely that the author is a Hellenized Jew meaning that he wasn't from Jerusalem. Even though the letter is anonymous, it also seems clear that he knew this audience well. Various names have been put forward as potential authors. I've become convinced that Martin Luther's suggestion of Apollos makes some sense, but it is impossible to know for sure.

**Audience:** It is also unclear who the intended audience of the letter was. We can be sure that they were likely second generation Christians who were mostly former Jews and were considering going back to their Jewish beliefs and practices. This letter was also likely written to a sub-group of Christians within a larger church unlike most of the other letters in the New Testament. This group had a history of faithfulness, but they were now being tested. Some of them had lost property or even their freedom, but they hadn't yet resisted to the point of bloodshed (12:4). I believe that there is good reason to believe this letter was written to a group of Jewish Christians who had been kicked out of Rome by the emperor Claudius in the year 49 (see Acts 18). Many of these Jewish Christians had made their way back to Rome by the early 60's. They were feeling alienated in their faith even as they were facing the prospect of renewed persecution (bloody this time) by the emperor Nero. Hebrews was written so that they may persevere in their faith.

## Two: Big

### *Introduction:*

- What are some of the pictures that come to your mind when you think of Jesus?
- What are some of the ways that Jesus is popularly understood within our culture?
- After discussing these first two questions, read Hebrews 1:1-3 (I would also recommend reading Colossians 1:15-20 and John 1:1-14). Make a list of all of the things that these verses say about Jesus and then compare that list to the answers you gave to the previous two questions. How are the answers similar/different?

*Understanding the Structure of Hebrews:* Hebrews is a comparative study from beginning to end showing us over and over that Jesus is better.

### 1) **Jesus is a Better Message and Messenger (1-4)**

- a) Better than the Prophets (1:1-3)
- b) Better than the Angels (1:4-2:18)
- c) Better than Moses (3:1-19)
- d) Better than Joshua (4:1-13)

### 2) **Jesus is a Better Sacrifice and High Priest (5-10)**

- a) Better than the earthly High Priests (4:14-7:28)
- b) Mediates a better covenant in a better sanctuary with a better sacrifice (8:1-10:18)

### 3) **Jesus Demands Better Faith (11-13)**

- a) A Call to Faith (10:19-25)
- b) Examples of Faith (11-12:3)
- c) A Call for a Disciplined Faith (12:4-29)
- d) Faith in action (13)

*The dominant idea from Hebrews 1 is that Jesus is God's superior self-revelation. He is greater than the prophets and the angels, and he is big enough for us to trust in him.*

Hebrews 1 emphasizes three things about Jesus.

- His unique *authority*
- His unique *identity*
- His unique *power*

### *Application:*

- Go through Hebrews 1 and write down specific things that the author says about Jesus' authority, identity, and power.
- This text challenges us to be careful about making Jesus too small. It is also a warning about allowing anyone or anything else to become bigger than Jesus.

How does this chapter encourage you?

### Three: Close

*Introduction:* Read Hebrews 1 and 2 together. How do they present a contrasting and complementary picture of Jesus?

#### *The Problem: Visibility*

- Chapter 1 ends by reminding us that angels are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation.” This means that angels serve *us*.
- Chapter 2 continues in this same thought in verse 5 by saying “It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking.” This verse articulates Christian hope. We hope for our final salvation which will result in a restoration of what was lost all the way back in Genesis. BUT what we currently see and experience doesn’t yet match that hope as he expresses in verse 8.

#### *The Solution: Vision*

- Into this problem, Jesus has come. We *do* see Jesus with eyes of faith made a little lower than the angels and now crowned with glory. Even though our hope may be challenged by the things we see (our visibility), our faith tells us to fix our eyes on the victory of Jesus (our vision).
- This Jesus who has come near has now become the pioneer of our salvation (2:10).

*A portrait of Jesus:* Chapter 1 presents us with a big Jesus. Chapter 2 presents us with a much more intimate and close picture of Jesus.

- He is our **hero** bringing us to glory.
- He is our **liberator** freeing us from the bondage of the *fear* of death.
- He is our **high priest** making atonement for our sins.

#### *Application:*

- Look back over 2:10-18. Discuss everything that this section tells us about the nature of our relationship with Jesus.
- How does chapter 2 help us to know how to persevere in our faith? Are there situations in your life right now where your visibility is challenging your vision?

## Four: Rest

### *Introduction:*

- We live very restless ways. We are almost chronically busy. Discuss what your ideal day of rest would consist of. What are the things that get in the way of experiencing true rest?

### *In the wilderness on our way to Canaan:*

- Structure:
  - o Hebrews 1-2 compare Jesus to the prophets and the angels. The emphasis is that Jesus is God's superior representative and messenger.
  - o Hebrews 3-4 compare Jesus to Moses and Joshua. The emphasis is that Jesus is God's superior deliverer bringing about a superior rest.
- Hebrews 3 – Don't rebel in the desert. Hebrews quotes Psalm 95 at length in order to remind his audience to not commit the same error that Israel committed when they were in the desert. They were rescued. They were given a promise. But when times got difficult, they rebelled against God's promises and God's messenger (Moses).
- Hebrews 4 – Enter into God's rest. Just like Israel, we have been promised rest. He basis this promise on several observations:
  - o God's rest is woven into the fabric of creation. *You were designed for rest.*
  - o The rest established by Joshua was incomplete.
  - o God was still promising rest at the time that Psalm 95 was written which shows that the need for rest is timeless.

### *Some important notes about rest:*

- It is *God's* rest, which means that true, lasting rest only comes from God through Jesus. Any other rest will ultimately lack fulfillment.
- It is an urgent rest. Notice the emphasis on the word "Today" in this section.
- It is also a rest that we still wait for. We enter rest in Jesus even as we wait for perfect rest in hopeful expectation. (Compare Matthew 11:29 and Revelation 14:13.)
- True rest includes body and spirit.

### *Application:*

- Return to the conversation you started with. What are the things right now that are keeping you from experiencing rest?
- Read Hebrews 3:12-14. How are we "hardened by sin's deceitfulness?" What are some ways that you need to encourage others who are at risk of falling in the desert?

## Five: Warning

### *Introduction:*

- Talk about a time when you (or someone you know) were saved by paying attention to an important warning sign.
- Hebrews is a book full of warning signs. There are real dangers that we need to be aware of. Read the following passages. Discuss what each passage has in common with the others: Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:6; 3:12-14; 4:11; 10:26-27; 12:16

### *The most difficult passage in Hebrews: Hebrews 5:11-6:12*

- The imminent danger here is stunted growth. Stunted spiritual growth has left them vulnerable.
- The potential danger here is falling away.
- The consequence of falling away is becoming so hardened that repentance is impossible.
- The alternative to stunted growth is diligence. The alternative to falling away is hope.

### *A note on "falling away:"*

- It is important to remember to balance this passage with other scripture like Luke 15 (Prodigal Son). God is not unwilling to forgive. The danger lies in the hardness of our hearts.
- Falling away is no "ordinary sin." It is a willful and permanent rejection of Christ. This is different from the type of sin where we fail to live up to Christ's will for our lives. This is also different from experiencing temporary challenges, setbacks, and even doubts in your faith. Every doubt does not add up to a rejection of God.
- Falling away is typically a gradual process not a dramatic choice. It happens incrementally over time which is why Hebrews is so insistent that we "pay attention" and keep growing.

### *Application:*

- What are some steps that you can take right now as individuals or as a group to heed the warnings of Hebrews? What can we do to keep from drifting away?
- In contrast to falling away, we are called to live in hope. Hope is one of the indispensable qualities of a Christian life. How does Hebrews 6 describe hope? What does it look like to live in hope? How does hope change our lives?

## Six: Bridge

### *Introduction:*

- One of the big ideas that runs throughout the entire book is that Jesus serves as our great high priest. This is not an image of Jesus that is common through the rest of the New Testament. What thoughts first come to mind when you think of Jesus as a high priest?

### *Making sense of the high priest:*

- The job of the Jewish high priest was to mediate the covenant by offering sacrifices in the sanctuary. Hebrews sets out to show that Jesus is greater than the Jewish high priest because he mediates a greater covenant by offering a greater sacrifice in a greater sanctuary.
- The priest was a bridge between God and his people. Everything including the way a priest dressed was intended to communicate this fact.

The priest's ephod and breastplate are both made from the same material used to make the tabernacle itself. Both use blue, purple and scarlet thread and employ the use of gold clasps or rings (Ex. 26:1, 6, 32, 37; 28:5, 23). The priest's garments are also made of the same material as the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, so he is the walking embodiment of the tabernacle as well as the access point to the presence of God. It is particularly interesting that Hebrews calls Jesus' own body the curtain opening the way to the Most Holy Place (10:20).

The breastplate of the high priest was also symbolic of his role as a bridge between God and the people. On each shoulder there was an onyx stone with the names of the tribes of Israel engraved. In this way, the priest "bears the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the Lord" (Ex. 28:12). He also had 12 precious stones on the breastplate each containing the name of one of the tribes. So the weight of the tribes was on his shoulders and the responsibility of representing them was on his heart. As he went before God, he symbolically carried the tribes with him.

- *The point that Hebrews makes is that whatever the high priests came to symbolize was reality in Jesus.*

### *Making sense of Melchizedek:*

- Commenting on Psalm 110, Hebrews says that Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek. Read Genesis 14:18-20 and Hebrews 7. What do we learn about Melchizedek in these passages?
- How does the author use Melchizedek to talk about Jesus' unique priesthood?

### *Application:*

- In the video I referenced the example of Job, a man who was crying out for a mediator between himself and God. Have you ever felt like Job?
- Focus on Hebrews 4:14-16 and 7:23-28. How does the priesthood of Jesus help us to persevere?

***Jesus, the High Priest of God***

(Summary Observations from chapters 5-10)

| Jesus                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | The Earthly High Priest                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| His Ancestry: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- From the tribe of Judah</li><li>- In the order of Melchizedek</li><li>- He is a priest forever</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | His Ancestry: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- From the tribe of Levi.</li><li>- In the order of Aaron</li><li>- Subject to death</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| His Nature: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- He was tempted in every way, yet was without sin.</li><li>- A son appointed by God.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | His Nature: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Subject to sin, and therefore he had to offer sacrifices for himself.</li><li>- A mere man called by God.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| His Ministry: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- He <i>continually</i> serves in the true tabernacle in heaven.</li><li>- His <i>voluntary</i> sacrifice of <i>himself</i> has removed sins once for all. He is the <i>source</i> of our salvation and saves us <i>completely</i>.</li><li>- He is the mediator and <i>guarantee</i> of a superior covenant relationship with God.</li><li>- He has granted us intimacy with God. He meets our needs.</li></ul> | His Ministry: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- He serves only once a year in a man-made tabernacle that is merely a copy of heaven.</li><li>- He sacrifices bulls and goats year after year which can never completely remove sin.</li><li>- He is the mediator of an obsolete covenant that is passing away.</li><li>- His ministry leaves us wanting.</li></ul> |

## Seven: Blood

### *Introduction:*

- What does it mean to say, “Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship?” When discussing this, talk about what you mean by *religion* and *relationship*.

### *A covenant kind of relationship:*

- A biblical covenant is...
  - o A sacred bond – A covenant is a unique type of bonding relationship is established between two parties. In scripture God calls the nation of Israel his “treasured possession” (*segullah* – Deut. 7:6-8), and he keeps his covenant with resolute faithfulness (*hesed* – “covenant loyalty” – Deut. 7:9). A covenant is a **sacred relationship**.
  - o Made in blood – The Hebrew word *berith* can literally mean “to cut a covenant.” A covenant requires **sacrifice**. (see Hebrews 9:18-20)
  - o Sovereignly initiated – The Greek word for covenant in Hebrews (*diatheke*) meant an imposed rather than a negotiated treaty or arrangement (*syntheke*, a 50-50 agreement). A covenant is the result of **God’s love for man**.
- Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews 8 to contrast the Old Covenant that had been made with Israel and the New Covenant that has now been made through Christ. They are different in the following ways:
  - o The new covenant is *inward*. It is not written on stone, it is written on the human heart. Our hearts are recreated by the covenant. Our nature is changed. We have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:20).
  - o The new covenant is *intimate*. All of God’s people will know the Lord intimately. We are able to know and be known by God. The Old Covenant separated the people from God. The consistent theme in Hebrews is that we now enjoy intimacy with God because of the new covenant (see Hebrews 4:14-16).
  - o The new covenant is *absolute*. As opposed to the OC where sacrifices had to be continually offered and served to only remind the people of sin, sins are forgiven and remembered no more under the new covenant. Our sin problem has been finally dealt with.
  - o The new covenant is *assured*. It is assured because it is bound to Christ—the perfect mediator and guarantor. We do not earn the covenant. Christ has assured the terms of the covenant.

### *The point:*

- We have an abiding, intimate covenantal relationship with God because of the blood of Jesus. The old covenant and its regulations were insufficient and limited. The new covenant is sufficient and unlimited.

### *Application:*

- One of the applications of this idea is that our relationship with God is not earned or based on sentiment. Our relationship is assured because of the sacrifice of Jesus. Our religion *is* a relationship – but it is unlike any other relationship. What does it look like to live as new covenant people? Do we ever live in the futility of a religion without the relationship of the new covenant?

### ***A Biblical Theology of Blood***

Lev. 17:11 – For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

“The appearance of blood is never a good sign. While blood is natural, the sight of it is not. To the ancients its red color, along with its mystical connection with life and death, made it a powerful and ominous symbol of violence and wrong, guilt and coming punishment. Only in the framework of sacrifice could blood portend good news.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Blood is often used as a figure of speech (synecdoche) in scripture representing human mortality. Oftentimes it is used in a pair with “flesh” (John 1:13; Gal. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:50; Heb. 2:14). Blood is used as a substitution for the life of an individual – particularly in the context of their life being in peril (see 2 Sam. 23:17; 1 Chron. 11:19; Job 16:18)
2. Blood is often associated with death and violence (Ezek 5:17; Hab 2:17; martyrdom – Rev. 19:2; child sacrifice – Ezek 23:37, 45; suicide – Mt 27:8; Acts 1:18-19; divine wrath – Is 63:6).
3. Closely connected with number 2, the shedding of human blood is an abomination (Hos 1:4; 6:8; Is 1:15; esp. Gen 9:6) which calls for punishment and divine vengeance (Gen 4:10 [compare with Heb 12:24]; 2 Sam 16:8; Rev 6:10; 19:2; see also Mt 27:24-25 – “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”).
4. Blood is used in prophetic and apocalyptic literature as an omen of approaching judgment. The Nile is turned to blood (Ex 4:9; 7:17; see also 2 Kings 3:22). This same image is employed in Revelation (9:8; 16:4). A common picture in apocalyptic is of the moon being turned to blood (Joel 2:30–31; Acts 2:19; Rev 6:12).
5. Blood leads to impurity in scripture. Human blood – especially that shed in violence – led to defilement (Ps 106:38; Is 59:3; Lam 4:14). Even the bleeding of a woman required purity laws (Lev 12). When contrasting the righteousness of God with human attempts at purity, Isaiah compares our righteous deeds to menstrual rags (Is 64:6).
6. Blood establishes the covenant (Gen. 15:1-21; Ex 24:8; Zech 9:11; see also Heb 9:18-20). In Exodus 24, the blood of the covenant is sprinkled both on the sacred altar and on the people serving as a powerful reminder to God and the people of the covenant relationship they enjoyed. In addition, the rite of circumcision was the personal mark of the covenant in blood for every Jewish male.
7. Blood has purifying power. The shedding of blood mediated the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Lev 16:11-19; 17:11). Shed blood has a substitutionary force where the life of sacrificer is identified with the life of the sacrificed. Blood was required for forgiveness (Heb 9:22). The blood provides cleansing, atonement (cover), and protection (see Ex 12:23). Blood was sprinkled on the altar for its cleansing (Lev 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 13; etc.). Blood was also used to consecrate the priests of the covenant (Ex 29).
8. Christ's blood is far superior.
  - a. The blood of Christ has now established a far superior covenant (Mt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 10:29; 12:24; 13:20). Life is in the blood, so “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). His blood has rendered the old covenant obsolete and useless (Heb 8:13).
  - b. He is both the radiance of God's glory (Heb 1:3) and flesh and blood (Heb 2:14), tempted, yet sinless (Heb 4:15), so the blood of Christ has the ultimate cleansing power. His blood has cleansed the true heavenly sanctuary (Heb 9:20-26). It has covered us completely, cleansing even our conscience and need only be offered “once for all” (Heb 9:11-15; 10:11-12; also Rom 5:9). The OT sacrificial system was merely a foreshadowing of the work of Christ (Heb 9:9, *parable*). His sacrifice is for our atonement and also for the sins “committed beforehand” (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:15).

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<sup>1</sup>Ryken, Leland ; Wilhoit, Jim ; Longman, Tremper ; Duriez, Colin ; Penney, Douglas ; Reid, Daniel G.: *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998, S. 99

## Eight: Faith

### *Introduction:*

- Define *faith*. What are some popular misconceptions of faith?
- Read through Hebrews 11. How would the author of Hebrews define faith?
- Are there any examples of faith in Hebrews 11 that surprise you?

### *Our cloud of witnesses:*

- There is a Threefold Division of Hebrews 11 that takes us through the entire Old Testament...
  - o 11:3-7—Faith before the Flood.
  - o 11:8-31—Faith of the Pilgrims.
  - o 11:32-38—Faith in the Land.
- Some popular misconceptions about faith:
  - o Faith is merely intellectual.
  - o Faith is merely sentimental.
  - o Faith is “blind.”
  - o Faith is certain.
- How Hebrews 11 defines faith:
  - o Faith is about seeing with your ears. (11:13-16)
  - o Faith is an active trust.
  - o Faith is diverse in its applications and outcomes.
  - o Faith requires perseverance.

### *Fix your eyes on Jesus: Hebrews 12:1-3*

- Persevering in your faith will require...
  - o The proper discipline
  - o The proper mindset
  - o The proper focus

### *Application:*

- Talk about your legacy in faith. Who is in your “cloud of witnesses?” How do they motivate you to run your race?
- How does Hebrews 11 sharpen or change the way that you understand faith?
- Reflect on whether there are weights or sins that you need to cast off in order to run with perseverance.

## Nine: Mountains

### *Introduction:*

- Make a list of those things that you've learned that will help you in your perseverance. Identify both beliefs and habits from the book.

### *Summary thoughts on perseverance:*

- Beliefs:
  - o Jesus is GREATER.
  - o We must learn to "see with our ears."
  - o We have been initiated into a new covenantal relationship with God in Jesus.
  - o God is faithful to his promises especially when we are in the desert.
- Habits:
  - o Submission to the living and active word (4:12-13)
  - o Confident prayer (4:14-16)
  - o Sincere worship (10:19-25)
  - o Patient Discipline (12:1-13)
  - o Committed Community life (3:12-14 and 10:19-25)
- Is there anything else that you have learned from the book?

### *Mountains:*

### **Comparing the desert, the mountain, and the city...**

|                                                                      | <b>Desert</b>                           | <b>Mountain</b>                    | <b>City</b>                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <b>Spiritual Danger</b><br>(or, what happens when God is ignored)    | Rebellion<br>(Massah and Meribah)       | Idolatry<br>(Carmel)               | Pride<br>(Babel)                         |
| <b>Spiritual Blessing</b><br>(or, what happens when we wait for God) | Testing/Preparation                     | Presence                           | Security                                 |
| <b>Spiritual Need</b><br>(or, what is required of us)                | Faithfulness                            | Worship                            | Rest                                     |
| <b>Virtue Cultivated</b>                                             | Faith                                   | Love                               | Hope                                     |
| <b>In Hebrews</b>                                                    | 3:7-19                                  | 12:18-24                           | 11:13-16                                 |
| <b>Redeemed by God</b>                                               | Garden of Eden<br>(Is. 35; Rev. 22:1-3) | Zion<br>(Is. 2:1-5;<br>Rev. 21:10) | New Jerusalem<br>(Is. 65, Rev.<br>21:10) |

### *Application:*

- Read through chapter 13. As the closing of the book, he summarizes many of the ideas that have been presented in the book. What are some of the big ideas from this chapter that we need to remember?



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A person is silhouetted against a bright sunset over a body of water, holding a fishing rod. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm orange glow. Trees and reeds are visible in the foreground and background.

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