

Faith Foundations Study Guides

God Revealed in the Son

A Journey of Discovery in the Book of Hebrews

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How to Use This Book

Welcome to the Faith Foundations study guide on Hebrews! Whether you are just beginning your new life with Christ, or have been a Christian for many years, this study guide is for you. It is designed to help you discover, through personal study and group discussion, the incredible riches of God's Word, and to help you grow in your walk with God by applying what you learn. This book is divided into 26 lessons, each of which contains the full NIV text of the Scripture passage, several study and discussion questions, and a verse-by-verse commentary. So, together with a Bible to look up cross-references, you have everything you need for your "journey of discovery" in Hebrews.

Why Small Groups?

These materials can be used profitably in personal study or in an adult Sunday School class. But their value will be best realized when they are used in small groups, meeting either at church during the Sunday School hour or in homes during the week. There are several reasons for this.

First, no one has perfect insight into every passage of Scripture; we can all benefit from hearing the perspectives of other believers as we seek to understand and apply the Bible. A small group gathering, using the discussion questions included in this book, is an ideal way to stimulate a sharing of observations and ideas.

Second, a small group provides a community of fellow travelers who, along with us, are seeking to follow Christ in the midst of family responsibilities, job pressures, and personal struggles. In today's fragmented and mobile society, the natural networks of neighborhoods and family no longer provide the support they once did. We need some way of making connections with others for mutual support, people with whom we can share our joys and sorrows—people who will listen, who will pray with us, who will offer a helping hand and a word of encouragement, and who will confront us in love when we've gotten off track.

Finally, a small group combines the benefits of Biblical insight and community support by keeping us accountable. If we only study the Scriptures alone, or listen to them taught in a large group, it's easy to let them go "in one ear and out the other". But when a small group of people are learning the same things at the same time, they can help one another to apply the things they are learning.

How Are the Groups Organized?

The groups should be composed of 6-14 people: if they are smaller, any absences can make it difficult to maintain the discussion; if they are larger, not everyone can participate. You can meet from two to four times a month; if the group meets less than twice a month, the members aren't spending enough time together to build relationships. Some groups find that meeting three times a month during the school year, with a break during the summer, provides a good rhythm of involvement and time off.

You may choose to include a mix of married and

single, older and younger members, or you may organize your groups by age or marital status. There are benefits to homogeneous groups in which the members are going through similar life experiences, but there are also benefits of a diverse group in which the younger members can benefit from the experience of the older.

Each group needs to have a recognized leader, preferably one selected and trained by the pastor or church leadership. This person's role during the meeting is not primarily to teach (although preparation of the lesson is a must), but to guide the discussion and keep the group from getting bogged down on side issues. He or she does not need to be the host; in fact, it is preferable that group responsibilities, such as providing a home in which to meet and organizing refreshments, be shared among the members.

Finally, membership in the group should be based on three commitments: To prepare for each meeting by completing the lesson in advance, which takes from 1/2 to 2 hours (but come to the meeting even if you haven't done the lesson); to place a high priority on regular attendance and come to the meetings except in case of emergency; and to keep confidential anything of a personal nature which is shared during the meetings (except when it is necessary to communicate concerns to the pastor).

What Is the Group Meeting Like?

Each group meeting should last from 1 1/2 to 2 hours, and provide time for discussion of the lesson, prayer, and fellowship. A problem in many groups is for the lesson to take up most of the time, with only a few minutes left over for prayer and fellowship. This must be avoided for the goal of building relationships to be achieved.

Here is a suggested schedule:

15 minutes:	Gathering
30-45 minutes:	Discussion of the lesson
20-30 minutes:	Prayer
15-30 minutes:	Refreshments

As for child care, experience has shown that in order to receive the maximum benefit from time spent in the meeting, all members of the group need to be free to focus on the discussion, rather than caring for children. Therefore, with the possible exception of infants under one year, parents should make arrangements for child care during the meetings. Some options include "trading" child care with parents whose group meets on a different night, having a baby sitter care for children in another room during the meeting, or providing child care for all the groups at the church.

Introduction to Hebrews

Author

The author of this letter is not identified. From the time of the early church fathers until the Reformation, Hebrews was generally considered to be the work of the apostle Paul, although with reservations. Origen (c. 185-254), noting the differences between the elegant Greek of Hebrews and the less polished style of Paul's writings, wrote that *"the thoughts are the apostle's, but ... the style and composition belong to one who called to mind the apostle's teachings and, as it were, made short notes of what his master said."*

Today, Pauline authorship of Hebrews is almost universally rejected. The style of Hebrews is that of a master rhetorician, while Paul acknowledges that he is "untrained as a speaker" (2 Cor. 11:6). The vocabulary of Hebrews is distinctly non-Pauline: there are over 150 words in Hebrews which occur nowhere in Paul's writings. In addition, Heb. 2:3 states that the author received the gospel indirectly from "those who heard him [i.e. Christ]", while Paul claims to have received it directly "by revelation from Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:12).

From the letter itself, we know that the author was acquainted with Timothy (13:23), and thus presumably one of Paul's associates. From his familiarity with the Jewish traditions and sacrificial system, we conclude that he was a Jew; his skillful use of language indicates that he was an educated Greek. Theories as to his identity vary. Martin Luther proposed Apollos, described in Acts 18:24 as a "learned man"; Barnabas, Peter, and several others have also been suggested. However, in the end we must concur with Origen, who concluded that *"who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows."*

Date and Place of Origin

We have clues to the date of Hebrews in the author's references to his readers' past sufferings, in which they were "publicly exposed to insult and persecution" (10:32-34), and in his remark that they had "not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4). It is reasonable to suggest that the letter was written to those who had suffered under the expulsion of Jewish Christians from Rome by the emperor Claudius in A.D. 49, and who were fearful of the more severe persecution which the Christian community in Rome was experiencing at the end of Nero's reign, A.D. 64-68.

As to the place from which the letter was written, we have no firm internal or external evidence.

Destination and Recipients

Hebrews 13:24, which states that "those from Italy send you their greetings," could mean that the letter was written from Italy. More likely, it indicates that the author is in fellowship with Christians who had left Italy, perhaps as a result of persecution, and

that he is relaying the greetings of these Italian expatriates to their countrymen. The most likely destination in Italy would be Rome, the location of the most important church in that area.

Several factors indicate that the recipients of this letter were predominately, if not exclusively, of Jewish background. The author assumes that they share his familiarity with the Old Testament and with extra-biblical Jewish tradition. His insistence on the superiority of the new covenant over the old, and of the sacrifice and priesthood of Christ over those of the Jewish ritual system, makes more sense as being addressed to Jewish Christians tempted to revert to Judaism than Gentile Christians tempted to revert to paganism.

It is probable also that this letter was written, not to an entire church, but to a smaller fellowship, such as a house-church. They are characterized as having been Christians for some time (5:12), which argues against the likelihood that they were a large group composed of both newer and more experienced Christians. The author's request that they greet "all the Lord's people" (13:24) also suggests a wider local community outside this group.

Occasion and Purpose

This letter is occasioned by a deep crisis of faith in a fellowship of believers with whom the author is personally acquainted (13:19) and for whom he feels a pastoral concern and responsibility.

Although in the past they had maintained their confession in the midst of suffering (10:32-34), they are now being tempted to retreat from their commitment to Christ; some of them have already done so (3:12, 10:25). Whether the cause of their spiritual malaise is the prospect of renewed suffering or just the strain of maintaining their faith in a hostile environment (12:3-7, 13:13), they are in danger of drifting away. They have become inattentive to the Scriptures (2:1, 5:11, 12:25), they are weary and disheartened (12:3, 12) and their hope is waning (3:6, 6:18-19, 10:23, 11:1).

The author's purpose is to encourage, strengthen, and exhort these people to remain faithful to Christ, in light of the great spiritual resources which they possess in Him, the rich rewards of persevering, and the terrible consequences of shrinking back.

Summary

The author begins by establishing the supremacy of God's self-revelation in his Son, who became a man in order to bring "many sons and daughters to glory" (2:10). He then demonstrates the supremacy of Christ's priesthood, ministry, and sacrifice to those of the old covenant. Interspersed with these themes, and concluding the epistle, the author warns his readers of the consequences of inattention and unbelief. He calls them to persevere by fixing their gaze on Christ, imitating the great faith heroes of former times, and willingly enduring suffering, for the sake of the joy to come.

Unit 1 – The Son, God's Ultimate Word

Hebrews 1:1-4

Text

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Open

- ☐ What activities do you enjoy as an outlet for your creativity?

Discover

1. As we begin studying Hebrews, it is helpful to have an idea of who it was written to and why it was written. From the passages below, what can we learn about the recipients of this letter?

vv. 3:1; 6:9-10

vv. 2:1; 5:11-12

vv. 10:32-34

2. What does the author tell them which helps to reveal his purpose in writing?

vv. 2:18; 4:14-16

vv. 3:6-15; 4:11

vv. 6:11-12; 12:1-3

3. In your own words, summarize what you think was the author's purpose in writing Hebrews.

4. This passage compares two kinds of revelation. How are they different?

5. How are they similar? (cf. Luke 24:25-27; John 1:45)

6. Why is it significant that Hebrews refers to God's revelation as being "spoken"? (cf. 4:12; 12:25)

7. This passage contains at least ten truths about the Son (Jesus Christ). List as many as you can identify:

8. Paraphrase this statement in your own words: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

9. How did the Son provide "purification for sins"? (v. 3; see 9:25-26)

10. Does your life show that you consider Christ to be superior to everything and everyone else? If your actions show that you regard other things more highly, what are they?

Close

☐ What is the main point the author is trying to communicate in these verses?

☐ What did it cost God to reveal himself to mankind? Why did he do it?

☐ Which of the statements about Christ in this passage mean the most to you?

Commentary

As we begin to study Hebrews, the first thing we notice is that it opens differently than the other New Testament letters. The author does not identify himself or the group to whom he is writing, nor does he offer a prayer for "grace and peace" or give thanks and praise to God.

In fact, Hebrews is not written in the form of an ancient letter at all, but is structured more like a sermon in writing. This judgment is supported by the author's reference to the book as a "word of exhortation" (13:22), a standard expression in his time for a sermon. This is the same phrase which the synagogue rulers in Pisidian Antioch use when inviting Paul and Barnabas to speak to the people (Acts 13:15, translated "message of encouragement"), and which Paul uses when he exhorts Timothy to "the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching" (1Tim. 4:13).

Other factors which identify the form of this book as a sermon are: (1) a personal tone, as if the author were addressing his readers directly; e.g., using the inclusive "we" and addressing them as "brothers and sisters" (3:1,12; 10:19; 13:22); (2) references to speaking and hearing, rather than writing and reading (2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32), and (3) the author's form of reasoning, in which he presents a biblical quotation or example, explains it, and applies it to his audience (e.g. 3:7-11; 3:12-4:13; 4:14-16).

One rhetorical device the author employs is the use of verbal clues to help the reader follow the flow of the argument. An example of this is the "announcement of the subject", in which each major division of the book is preceded by a brief paragraph identifying the theme of that section. Here, verses 1:1-4 introduce the theme of the larger division, 1:1-2:18, which is the revelation of God through His Son; specifically, the supremacy of that revelation to all previous forms of divine self-disclosure.

Another device the author uses is chiasmic parallelism, in which the first and last thoughts in a passage are parallel, the second and next-to-last are parallel, and so on. Thus, we can diagram vv. 1-4 as follows:

Christ superior to the human messengers
of God's word (1-2a)

Christ appointed heir of all things (2b)

The Son the creator of all things (2c)

*The Son the "radiance of God's
glory" (3a)*

*The Son the "exact representation
of his being" (3b)*

The Son the sustainer of all things (3c)

Christ enthroned at God's right hand (3d)

Christ superior to the angelic messengers
of God's word (4; see 2:2)

vv. 1-2 "In the past God spoke . . . at many times and in various ways"

The implication here is that although the revelation given through the prophets was truly from God, and in spite of the fact that it spanned several millennia and took many different forms, it was still incomplete. Only the Son could fully communicate God to man.

However, the revelation of God in the person of his Son is not completely distinct from that given previously, because the implicit subject of that revelation was Jesus himself (Lk. 24:25-27; Jn. 1:45). Just as the revelation given through the prophets was a preparation for God's final self-disclosure in his Son, so the revelation given in the Son was a fulfillment of that previously given through the prophets.

Throughout Hebrews, the author emphasizes the immediacy of God's word by referring to it as being spoken rather than written; it is His voice which we hear in the Scriptures (1:5-13; 3:7; 4:7-8; 5:5-6; 7:21; 10:15-17). His word is not something which belongs to the past, but is even now "living and active" (4:12). Thus, we cannot ignore it, but must respond to it as God's message for us today (2:1; 3:7; 12:5, 25).

"in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son"

The contrast between the "past" and "these last days" speaks of a change in eras, and gives us a hint of the eschatological, or future-looking, viewpoint of Hebrews. The death, resurrection, and glorification of the Son have set in motion a series of events which will lead ultimately to the consummation of all things, so that we are even now in the "last days". The giving of God's final word, His Son, has inaugurated the final act of history.

This knowledge helps us to persevere in the midst of trials, knowing that, as Paul wrote, "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Thus, we see repeated references in Hebrews to the things to come (2:5; 6:20; 10:1,36-37; 11:40), and exhortations to hold on until the end (3:14; 4:1; 6:11; 10:23; 12:1).

When the author tells us that God has spoken to us "by his Son" he is not speaking merely of Jesus' words or teachings, but to all that he is and does. Jesus reveals God by every aspect of his existence: his person and character, his words and works.

"whom he appointed heir of all things"

This is an allusion to Ps. 2:8, in which God promises his Son, his Anointed One and King, that he will grant him "the nations" as his inheritance. Here, the investiture is expanded to include, not only the nations, but all of creation (cf. Mt. 11:27; 28:18).

"through whom also he made the universe" The author now identifies the Son as the agent of creation (cf. John 1:3; 1Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16). Since he is the one by whom the world was brought into existence, he is uniquely qualified to act as God's messenger to that world.

Another perspective is found in Prov. 8:30, in which God's wisdom is spoken of as the craftsman at his side during the creation of the world. The joining of these perspectives implies an identification of Christ as the personification of the wisdom of God. This connection can also be seen in 1 Cor. 1:24, in which Christ is referred to as "the power of God and the wisdom of God," and in Lk. 11:49 and Mt. 23:34, in which statements attributed to the "wisdom of God" in Luke (ESV) are attributed to Jesus in Matthew (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3).

vs. 3 **"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being"** These two phrases are parallel. They express the same idea, that the Son perfectly communicates God's essential nature, so that to see and know him is to see and know the Father (Jn. 12:44-45; cf. Jn. 8:19; 14:6-11). This is what Paul meant when he wrote that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15; cf. Jn 1:14, 18; 2 Cor. 4:4).

When compared with other New Testament writings, we see that this statement reflects the fundamental unity of God the Father and God the Son, and thus the Son's deity and eternal co-existence with the Father. So, for example, Paul testifies that Christ is "in very nature God" (Phlp.2:6), and Jesus explicitly declares that "I and the Father are one," (Jn. 10:30; cf. Jn. 1:1-2; 17:11, 21-22).

The glory of which the Son is the radiance corresponds to the shekinah glory which signified the presence of the Lord in the Old Testament (Ex. 24:15-17; 40:34-38). This description of Christ echoes John's reference to him as the "light of the world" (Jn. 8:12) and also Jesus' own statements concerning the glory he shares with the Father (Jn.17:5, 24). This is the glory which was revealed in the transfiguration, when Christ's "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt.17:2), and which was also seen by Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts9:3).

"sustaining all things by his powerful word" Having created the universe, the Son continues to govern and uphold it. The witness which the creation bears to its Creator (Acts 14:15-17; Rom. 1:19-20) is therefore a revelation of God by the Son.

The identification of the Son's "powerful word" as the means by which he sustains the creation links the activity of providence with the original creation, in which God spoke all things into being (Gen. 1:1-31).

"After he had provided purification for sins" In contrast to the symbolic cleansing provided by the ongoing daily sacrifices of the old covenant, the true cleansing from sin accomplished by Christ is a single act in the past, which will never be repeated (cf. 7:27; 9:12, 25-28).

The sacrifice which Christ provided was his own life, given voluntarily for his people (Jn. 10:14-18). His death on the cross can be viewed in several different ways, e.g. as appeasing the wrath of God or making payment for sins. Here, it is seen as removing the defilement of sin. Christ's sacrifice is thus the fulfillment of the blood sacrifices of the old covenant, which symbolically purged the Israelites of sin in anticipation of the true sacrifice to come (cf. Lev. 16:19, 30; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 10:1-4; 1 Jn. 1:7).

"he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" This is an allusion to Psalm 110:1, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet," and refers to the heavenly enthronement of Christ at the position of supreme glory, honor, and power after his resurrection and ascension (cf. Matt. 26:64; Eph. 1:20; Phlp. 2:9; Col. 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 5:11-14; also Heb. 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

This is the fulfillment of God's promise to David that he would place one of his descendants upon the throne, and would grant him an everlasting kingdom (cf. Acts 2:29-36).

vs. 4 **"So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs."** This verse serves as a transition into the body of the first major section of Hebrews; 1:5-2:18, in which the superiority of the Son over the angelic host is demonstrated. The purpose of this comparison is not to combat heretical teachings concerning the worship of angels (cf. Col. 2:18), but to establish the main idea of the section, that the new covenant, mediated through Christ, is superior to the old covenant, mediated through angels.

The traditional Jewish belief that the law was given by angels is shared by the author of Hebrews (Heb. 2:2). It is alluded to in the Old Testament (Dt. 33:2) and is mentioned in Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:53) and in Paul's letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:19).

It seems clear from verse 5 that the better "name" which Christ inherited is that of "Son" (cf. notes on v. 5).

Finally, note that in vv. 1-4, the Son is portrayed as fulfilling all three functions of his Messianic office: the prophet through whom God's final word has come (vv. 2-3), the priest who made purification of sins (v.3), and the king seated at God's right hand (v. 4).

Unit 2 - The Son Superior to Angels

Hebrews 1:5-14

Text

⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say,

*"You are my Son;
today I have become your Father"^a?*

Or again,

*"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"^b?*

⁶ And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him."^c

⁷ In speaking of the angels he says,

*"He makes his angels spirits,
and his servants flames of fire."^d*

⁸ But about the Son he says,

*"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and
ever,
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of
your kingdom.*

⁹ *You have loved righteousness and hated
wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you
above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy."^e*

¹⁰ He also says,

*"In the beginning, Lord, you laid the
foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your
hands.*

¹¹ *They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.*

¹² *You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end."^f*

¹³ To which of the angels did God ever say,

*"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet"^g?*

¹⁴ *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to
serve those who will inherit salvation?*

^a 1:5 Psalm 2:7

^b 1:5 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13

^c 1:6 Deut. 32:43 (see Dead Sea Scrolls and Septuagint)

^d 1:7 Psalm 104:4

^e 1:9 Psalm 45:6,7

^f 1:12 Psalm 102:25-27

^g 1:13 Psalm 110:1

Open

- ☐ Are you a handyman (or woman), a "do-it yourself"-er? Or do you have trouble remembering which end of the hammer to hold on to?

Discover

1. To prepare for this study, it will help to have an understanding of angels. In the space below, summarize what these passages teach about them:

Their origin (Psalm 148:2-5; Colossians 1:16)

Their powers (Revelation 7:1; 14:18; 16:5)

Their limitations (Daniel 9:21-23; 1 Pet. 1:10-12)

The two kinds of angels (1 Tim. 5:21; 2 Pet. 2:4)

The activity of evil angels (Eph. 6:10-12;
1 Pet. 5:8)

The activity of elect angels:

- Psalm 103:20-21; Revelation 5:11-12

- Psalm 91:9-13; Hebrews 1:14

- Luke 1:26-38, 2:8-14; 24:23

- Genesis 19:1, 12-13; Revelation chs. 8-9

The attitude we should have toward angels
(Colossians 2:18; Revelation 22:9)

-
2. When Old Testament passages are quoted in Hebrews, the human author is usually not identified (compare Hebrews 1:5-13 with Romans 10:16-21). Why do you think this is?

3. Why is Jesus' superiority over angels so important to the author's argument? (see 1:1-2; 2:1-3)

4. In what way is Jesus shown to be superior to angels in each of these passages?

vv. 5-6

vv. 7-12

vv. 13-14

5. In verse 5, Jesus is referred to as God's "Son." Read the Old Testament passages from which these quotes are taken (Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7). What is the main idea of those passages? How do they help us understand what verse 5 is saying about Christ?

6. What characteristics of the Son are emphasized in vv. 8-12? How he is being contrasted with the angels (v. 7)?

7. What does verse 13 reveal about the time when all the enemies of Christ will be made subject to him? (see also 1 Cor. 15:20-28)

8. What part do angels play in salvation? (v. 14) What do you think this means?

Close

- ☐ What about Christ impresses you the most in this passage? How does it affect your motivation to serve and follow him?

Commentary

Having introduced the theme of the Son's superiority to angels in vv. 1-4, the author now develops it in vv. 5-14 by appealing to seven passages from the Old Testament, each of which is interpreted with reference to Christ. This *exposition*, or explanation of Scripture, is followed in 2:1-4 by *exhortation*, in which the author applies the Scripture to his readers and appeals to them to respond in faith and obedience.

This is the first example of a pattern of alternating exposition and exhortation which is found throughout Hebrews, and which reveals the primarily pastoral concerns of its author.

We can discern another pattern by comparing the statements made about the Son in vv. 2-3 of the previous passage with those in vv. 4-15. This pattern is the device of *synthetic parallelism*, in which two passages present the same or similar ideas in the same sequence. The purpose of this device is to reinforce the repeated ideas in the mind of the reader or hearer. Thus, we have Christ's appointment as Son and royal heir in both 2b and 5-9; his role as mediator of creation in 2c and 10; his eternity and unchanging divine nature in 3a-3b and 11-12; and his exaltation to the right hand of God in 3d and 13.

- v. 5 **"For to which of the angels did God ever say . . ."** The wording of this introductory phrase is identical to that of v. 13. Such a repetition, which signals the beginning and end of a literary unit, is called an *inclusio*.

It is notable that the author of Hebrews does not cite the sources of his quotations. In contrast to other New Testament writers (cf. Rom. 9:15, 25, 27; 10:16, 19, 20; 11:9), he does not identify the human authors or prophets through whom the Scriptures were given. Rather, with few exceptions (e.g., Heb. 4:7; 9:20), he presents the Scriptures as proceeding from God Himself. By doing so, he emphasizes the fact that the authority of the Scriptures derives from their divine origin, and is not enhanced in any way by the stature of the men God used as His instruments.

"You are my Son; today I have become your Father." The two quotations in this verse are chosen to support the assertion that Christ is superior to angels because of the unique relationship he enjoys with the Father, that of "Son".

The first quote is from Psalm 2, in a context in which the Lord, speaking of his "anointed one," states (vs. 6),

*"I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy mountain,"*

and promises him (vs. 8),

*"I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession."*

Psalm 2 was regarded by the Jews of Jesus' day as anticipating the reign of the Messiah ("Messiah" means, literally, "anointed one").

The second quote,

"I will be his Father, and he will be my Son,"

is from 2 Sam. 7:14 (1 Chr. 17:13), a passage in which the prophet Nathan reveals to king David that God would raise up a successor from his own line, and "establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13). The immediate referent of the prophecy was David's son Solomon, but the Jews expected that it would ultimately be fulfilled in the reign of the Messiah (cf. Jn. 7:42).

The author of Hebrews combines these Messianic prophecies and applies them to Jesus Christ. The original contexts of the verses quoted show that the title "Son" is not being used here to refer to the eternal relationship between the members of the Trinity (as in Heb. 5:8). Rather, it is a coronation title which refers to Jesus' exaltation and ascension to the throne of David, and his continuing role as king, under God the Father, over all creation.

- v. 6 **"again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'"** There are several ways in which this could be understood. Some interpreters see "again" as modifying "brings," and understand this verse as referring to another bringing of Christ into the world; i.e., his future second coming. However, "again" is often used in Hebrews as a connective to string together quotes (1:5; 2:13; 4:5; 10:30), and it is likely that this is its function here as well.

Many have suggested that this refers to Jesus' birth (cf. Lk. 2:8-14). However, in Hebrews, the incarnation is not seen as the time of Jesus' exaltation, but of his humiliation, his being made "lower than the angels" (2:7-9; see Phlp. 2:7-10).

Therefore, it is most likely that this verse refers to Christ's triumphal entry into heaven after his resurrection and ascension (vv. 3-4). The "world," then, is not the world of men, but the heavenly world, the realm in which God's will is perfectly carried out (Mt. 6:10). This is made clear in 2:5, where the author refers to the world "about which we are speaking" as "the world to come."

The Scripture quoted is from the "Hymn of Moses" in the Septuagint version of Deut. 32:43. The Septuagint (or LXX) was the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use at the time of Christ. The LXX differs in some places from the Masoretic Text (or MT), which was written in Hebrew and is the basis of our English translations.

In the original context of this verse, the angels are being commanded to worship God; thus its application to Christ is an implicit recognition of his deity (cf. vs. 8).

- v. 7 This quote from Psalm 104:4 also reflects the author's use of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. In the MT, the verse reads "He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants," emphasizing God's sovereign control over the forces of nature. But in the LXX, and here in Hebrews, the verse reads **"He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire."** This version emphasizes the fact that angels, being spirits, can take on different forms, and at God's direction can even manifest themselves in the form of such ephemeral elements as wind and fire.

The purpose of this verse is to continue the theme of the angels' inferiority to the Son by contrasting their changeable nature, their *mutability*, with his eternal, unchanging nature, his *immutability*, which is described in vv. 8-12.

- vv. 8-9 **"But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever'"** In contrast to the angels, who are changeable, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The eternal character of the Son's kingdom and priesthood (cf. 7:21, 24, 28) attest to the eternal and unchanging character of the Son himself (cf. v. 12).

In Jewish theology, the passage quoted here, Psalm 45:6-7, was viewed as a messianic prophecy, and was linked with 2 Samuel 7, in which the eternity of the Davidic dynasty is foretold: "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever," (7:13); "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (7:16).

The second part of the quote, "'therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions'," is included as another indication of Christ's superiority over his "companions," the angelic host. He was exalted because he was willing to die so that righteousness might triumph over evil, completely and eternally (cf. 2:9).

- vv. 10-12 These verses continue the proof of the Son's superiority over angels. While in verses 7-9 the Son is compared directly with angels, in verses 10-12 (quoting

Ps. 102:25-27) he is compared with the created order to which angels belong.

First, the author shows that the Son stands outside and above the cosmos; he is distinct from the heavens and earth which he created. Although the angels were present at the creation of the world (cf. Job 38:7), it was the Son who brought all things into existence (Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16), and he is the one who will bring all things to their conclusion (v. 12).

The author then goes on to contrast the unchangeability and eternality of the Son with the impermanence of created things. The description of the heavens and earth as "wearing out" and being changed "like a garment" emphasizes their transitory character. From God's viewpoint, they can be changed as easily as one changes a garment, and will wear out as quickly as a piece of clothing (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8-13).

- v. 13 This quote from Psalm 110:1 is introduced in the form of a rhetorical question, with the phrase, **"To which of the angels did God ever say."** The answer to this question, parallel to that in verse five, is obviously "none;" none of the angels share Christ's unique position of power and authority, granted to him by the Father.

This quote also fills out in more detail what was mentioned briefly in 1:3: we see that the Son's ascension to the "right hand" of the Father was by invitation; he did not take hold of this place of honor, but was elevated to it by the Father (cf. Acts 2:33-36; Phlp. 2:9). We also see that although the victory over sin and death was won at the cross and is therefore assured, the effects of that victory have not yet been fully realized (cf. 2:8, 14-15; also 1 Cor. 15:24-28, 54-57).

- v. 14 **"Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"** This is an interpretation of Psalm 104:4 (quoted in v. 7). The Greek words translated "ministering" and "spirits" are the same as those rendered in v. 7 as "servants" and "winds".

The phrasing of this question makes clear that a positive answer is expected: the mission of angels is to serve the people of God, as directed by Him. Examples of the ministry of angels include announcing Jesus' birth and resurrection (Lk. 2:8-15; 24:1-8), releasing the apostles from jail (Acts 5:18-20), sending Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26) and Peter to the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:3 ff.), and speaking to Paul in a dream (Acts 27:21-24). Examples could also be given from the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 18-19).

Unit 3 - The Humiliation and Exaltation of the Son

Hebrews 2:1-9

Text

¹ We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ² For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. ⁵ It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified:

*"What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
⁷ You made them a little^a lower than the angels;*

*you crowned them with glory and honor⁸
and put everything under their feet."*^{b c}

In putting everything under them,^d God left nothing that is not subject to them. ^e Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. ^f ⁹ But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

^a 2:7 Or *them for a little while*

^b 2:8 Psalm 8:4-6

^c 2:8 Or ⁷ *You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor/⁸ and put everything under his feet."*

^d 2:8 Or *him*

^e 2:8 Or *him*

^f 2:8 Or *him*

Open

☐ Do you have a long attention span, or are you easily distracted?

☐ What person in your family is best able to concentrate for long periods of time?

Discover

1. Read through verses 1-4. What do you think the author is trying to accomplish in this passage?

2. How does the argument of 1:1-14 support the conclusion that "we must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard" (v. 1)?

3. What are the consequences of not paying close attention to the message of salvation through Christ? (see 3:12-15, 19)

4. What does the caution to not "drift away" (v. 1) imply about the spiritual condition of those to whom the letter was addressed? (see 3:6; 3:14; 10:23; 12:12)

5. What is the "message spoken through angels" in verse 2? (see Acts 7:37-38; Galatians 3:19)

6. Paraphrase (write in your own words) the warning given in verses 2-3.

7. Identify the witnesses who testify to the truth of the gospel (vv. 3-4).

8. What contrast is being drawn between Christ and angels in verses 5-8? What is the "world to come" (see 12:28; 13:14)

9. How does the quotation from Psalm 8 support the author's argument? (vv. 6-8)

10. What difficulty concerning the doctrine of Christ's authority does the author mention in verse 8? How can this be resolved?

11. What was the purpose of Jesus' incarnation, his being made "lower than the angels"? (vv. 9-10)

12. Do you feel that you are paying "careful attention" to the message of salvation through Christ? What are some things you can do this week to guard against spiritual lukewarmness?

Close

☐ How should we respond to other believers who seem indifferent to spiritual things, given the warnings in this passage?

☐ Do you ever feel that you are in danger of "drifting away" from Christ? What are the causes of this condition? The symptoms? The treatment?

Commentary

Having established the superiority of the Son in 1:1-14, the author pauses in 2:1-4 to draw a conclusion and apply it to his readers: The Son's superiority over the angels implies that the message he delivered is superior to the message brought by angels as well. In fact, his message is as much superior to theirs as his glory surpasses theirs. Therefore, we ought to pay close attention to the word of salvation which came through him, rather than neglecting it as some are doing.

This alternation between exposition (explaining the Scriptures) and exhortation (urging the reader to respond in faith and obedience) is seen throughout Hebrews (3:12-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29), and is consistent with the author's description of the letter as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). One indication of the author's purpose is the use of rhetorical devices, such as his choice of colorful, idiomatic language. For example, the word translated "pay attention" (Gr. *prosechein*) is a nautical term which refers to holding a ship on course toward port. Thus, it is quite striking when he states that if we fail to do so, we will "drift away," like a ship which has been left to the prevailing currents. Alliteration (beginning words with the same letter) is also used here, as in the phrase "every violation and disobedience" (Gr. *pasa parabasis kai parakon*). And the author employs a rhetorical question ("how shall we escape?") to elicit a mental response from his audience. All of these devices are designed to gain the attention of the reader (or hearer), so that the message can penetrate the mind and heart.

- v. 1 **"We must pay the most careful attention, therefore"** The word "therefore" links this imperative statement with the preceding exposition (1:1-14). From the surpassing greatness of the Son, it follows logically that the message he delivered deserves the closest attention. This is echoed by later appeals to "hold firmly" (3:6), "hold . . . firmly to the very the end" (3:14), and "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess" (10:23). It implies that the community to which the letter is addressed has become indifferent to the gospel and weak in their resolve to follow Christ (cf. 12:12). From the author's description of them as being ready to "drift away," it appears that they are not rejecting Christ in open apostasy, but rather are becoming lukewarm toward him, their commitment slipping away little by little. Through carelessness, they have become complacent and insensitive to spiritual things (cf. 5:11). The danger is that by failing to hold firmly to their confession of Christ, they will show that they have never come to share in him at all (cf. 3:14).

- v. 2 **"For since the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment"** The "message" referred to here is the law, which God gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Although there is no mention of angels in Exodus 19-20, Deuteronomy tells us that when the law was given, God "came with myriads of holy ones" (Dt. 33:2). The Septuagint adds that "angels were with him at his right hand." Paul states that "the law was given through angels" (Gal. 3:19), and Stephen also refers to this (Acts 7:38).

The fact that the law is in view here is supported by use of legal terms: "binding," "violation and disobedience," "punishment." The author's point is that inattention to the revelation given by angels had serious consequences. There was no tolerance for failing to heed this communication of God's will, for every disobedience was punished, whether due to overt rebellion or mere carelessness. Thus, the consequences of disregarding the even greater revelation which came through Christ must be just as certain, and even more serious.

- vv. 3-4 **"how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?"** There is only one possible response to this rhetorical question: that escaping God's judgment, after rejecting the incomparable message of salvation given through his Son, would be impossible. With greater privilege comes greater responsibility, and a greater punishment for failing to obey (cf. 10:28-31; 12:25). Thus, while the most severe punishment for violating the Mosaic law was death, the punishment for rejecting Christ is far greater eternal damnation (cf. Mt. 10:28).

"This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord" The superiority of the message of salvation is shown by the superiority of the Son through whom it was given. He communicated the gospel not only through his words, but also through his person and works (see notes on 1:2).

After the initial revelation of the gospel through Christ, it continued to be proclaimed by human witnesses, and was validated by God through "signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." Through these manifestations of divine power, God himself attested to the authenticity of the message. Thus, to neglect it means ignoring not only human testimony, but the combined testimony of the Trinity: God the Father (v. 4), God the Son (v. 3), and God the Holy Spirit (v. 4). To do so is evidence, not merely of carelessness, but of a hardened heart (cf. 3:7-8, 12, 15; 4:7).

Having concluded the exhortation of 2:1-4, the author now resumes his exposition of the Son's superiority over the angels. Verse five begins a new section, 2:5-18, in which the Son's superiority to the angels is shown to be completely consistent with His incarnation and humanity. The section is divided into two parts: the first, vv. 5-9, deals with the humiliation and exaltation of the Son; the second, vv. 10-18, considers the Son's solidarity with the human race.

The entire section is bounded by an *inclusio*, a literary device in which the beginning and end of a unit are indicated by the repetition of a similar phrase or idea. In this case, the two negative references to angels, "It is not to angels that he has subjected" (v. 5) and "For surely it is not angels he helps" (v. 16) signal the endpoints of the section.

- v. 5 **"It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come"** This verse looks back to 1:8, in which the Son is described as ruling over an eternal kingdom, and ahead to 2:8, which tells us that God "put everything under his feet" (see text note). It contrasts the angels, who are servants of God and of His people (1:7, 14), with Jesus, who possesses supreme authority over the new heaven and new earth (Mt. 28:18; Eph. 1:21). Christ is superior to angels because he, not they, rules over the world to come.

This verse may also imply a contrast between the original authority of angels in this world and their lack of authority in the next one. In some manuscripts, Deut. 32:8 indicates that when the Lord divided up the nations of the earth, He appointed angelic rulers over them:

*When the Most High gave the nations
their inheritance,
when he divided all mankind,
he set up boundaries for the peoples
according to the number of the
sons of God [NIV "sons of Israel"]*

In other words, although God delegated authority over human affairs in this world to angels, He will not do so in the next (cf. also Ps. 82:6-7; Dan. 10:13, 20, 12:1).

"the world to come" Another name for this "world" is the kingdom of God. It is the domain, both physical and spiritual, over which God exercises dominion. The "coming" of this world is the time of Christ's return, when the moral will of God will be perfectly obeyed in all of creation, even as it is now in heaven (Matt. 6:10). This is the world Jesus entered after his ascension (see notes on 1:6), the world whose powers we experience through the Holy Spirit (6:5), the world which we look forward to as an enduring city (13:14), "a kingdom which cannot be shaken" (12:28).

vv. 6-8a **"What is mankind that you are mindful of them"** This quote is from Psalm 8:4-6, in which the Psalmist marvels at the fact that the Creator of the universe not only cares for man but has even made him ruler over His creation. The relevance of Psalm 8 here is that the Son fulfills the command which God gave to Adam, that mankind should subdue the earth and rule over it (Gen. 1:26-28). Although man is unable, because of sin and death, to fully carry out this purpose, it is ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ, the second Adam (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45). He is the One under whose feet everything has been placed (v. 8; cf. 1:13). Thus, He is superior to the angels, who possess no such authority.

- v. 8 **"In putting everything under them/him, God left nothing that is not subject to them/him"** Although the NIV reads "them"; i.e. mankind, the notes on the text suggest "him" as an alternate translation, and this better accords with the context, which refers to Christ. The comprehensiveness of the words used ("everything", "nothing"), as well as the double negative ("nothing that is not subject") emphasize the completeness of Christ's rule and authority. Not only all of creation, but even the world to come (v. 5) are under his sovereign control.

"Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them/him" Although Jesus has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18), his rule is not yet completely evident. He is still allowing sin and death to run their course until the appointed time, when every knee will bow before Him "and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phlp. 2:10-11). The victory has been won: Jesus has triumphed over the powers and authorities of this world by the cross (Col. 2:15). But the results of that victory have not yet been fully realized (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28).

- v. 9 **"Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while"** The phrase "lower for a little while" could also be translated "a little lower". But the author is contrasting Jesus' previous state of humiliation with his present state of exaltation ("now crowned with glory and honor"), and so the NIV's "for a little while" is more likely.

"so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" This clause modifies "who was made lower than the angels," indicating that the purpose of the incarnation was that Christ might suffer death on behalf of "everyone," i.e. all people of faith: the "many sons and daughters" whom he brings to glory (v. 10), those who are "made holy," his "brothers and sisters" (v. 11), "Abraham's descendants" (v. 16; cf. Rom. 4:16), and those for whose sins he makes atonement (v. 17).

Unit 4 - Jesus Made Like His Brothers

Hebrews 2:10-18

Text

¹⁰ In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹ Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ^a ¹² He says,

"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises." ^b

¹³ And again,

"I will put my trust in him." ^c

And again he says,

"Here am I, and the children God has given me." ^d

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death

he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, ^e fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

^a 2:11 The Greek word for *brothers and sisters* (*adelphoi*) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family; also in verse 12; and in 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22.

^b 2:12 Psalm 22:22

^c 2:13 Isaiah 8:17

^d 2:13 Isaiah 8:17

^e 2:17 Or *like his brothers*

Open

☐ How are you and your brothers or sisters alike? Different?

☐ If you could be more like one of your brothers or sisters, who would it be? Why?

Discover

1. Read the passage through a few times. What main idea is the author trying to communicate, or what question is he trying to answer?

2. How could it be "fitting" for Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, to suffer and die? (v. 10; see Heb. 9:22; Romans 3:25-26; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)

3. What are the two aspects of the holiness, or sanctification, which Jesus Christ produces in believers? (v. 11; see Heb. 10:10, 14; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

4. How are they related to one another? (see Heb. 12:14; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; 1 John 3:10)

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5. What words or phrases are used in this passage to describe the people of God? Which of these is most significant to you, and why?

6. In the space below, note all the things in the passage that are done **to** or **for** these people, and **by whom**.

7. How does this passage describe the purpose(s) for which Christ suffered and died? How do you think these are related to one another?

8. To what extent did Jesus become like his "brothers and sisters"? What did this include or not include? (vv. 14-15, 17; see Heb. 4:15; Philippians 2:7)

9. Why is this important?

10. Who are the descendants of Abraham whom Jesus helps? (v. 16; see Romans 4:13-16; 9:6-8; Galatians 3:7, 16, 29)

Close

- ☐ Think about all the things that Jesus has done for you, if you are a believer in Him. How does this make you feel? What would be an appropriate response to Him? How has your life this week demonstrated an appreciation of His work on your behalf?

- ☐ What does the phrase "brothers and sisters" communicate to you about your relationship with Christ?

Commentary

This section concludes the first major section of the book, 1:1-2:18, in which the superiority of Christ over the angels is demonstrated. Here, the author develops more fully the subject introduced in verse 9: why Jesus, who is higher than the angels, was willing to be lowered through His incarnation, even to the point of enduring suffering and death. The answer is that it was necessary for Christ to identify with His people to the fullest extent possible, so that He could act as their substitute and intermediary, propitiating God's wrath toward them and serving as their high priest.

Structurally, this section revolves around three Old Testament passages (vv. 12-13). The citation and exposition of these verses, a form of teaching known as "homiletical midrash," lends the passage a sense of immediacy, as if the author were speaking to his audience rather than writing.

- v. 10 **"In bringing many sons and daughters to glory"** The "many sons and daughters" in this phrase defines the scope of the "everyone" for whom Christ tasted death (v. 9). God will inevitably bring to glory all of those for whom Christ died (John 10:15, 28; Rom. 8:28-30); His glorification (vv. 7, 9) assures us that we who are united with Him through faith will also be glorified when He returns (2 Cor. 4:14, 17; Col. 3:3-4; 2 Tim. 2:11-12).

"it was fitting" Lest we think that it was somehow wrong for Jesus to suffer death in place of his people, this phrase makes clear that Jesus' vicarious suffering was not only acceptable, but completely appropriate. His death was consistent both with God's mercy and His justice (Rom. 3:21-26), and it represented the outworking of God's sovereign and eternal purposes (Acts 2:23; Acts 4:27-28; Eph. 3:11; 1 Pet. 1:18-20). His death was also appropriate to the goal God had in view, the redemption of sinful people, since "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22).

"for whom and through whom everything exists" This points to God as the creator and sustainer of all things, and reinforces the statement that his actions with regard to Christ's death were "fitting". Since he is sovereign over all, he acts not out of some externally imposed necessity, but according to His own good pleasure (Ps. 115:3; 135:6); thus, He always accomplishes his good and wise purposes (Job 42:2).

"should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered" The perfection in view here is not moral or spiritual perfection. Being fully divine, Jesus already possessed all the perfections of deity. Rather, the idea is one of becoming qualified or equipped for an office. The Greek word used here is also

used in the *Septuagint* (the Greek version of the Old Testament used in Jesus' day) to describe those who are being ordained as priests. The meaning is that through Christ's sufferings, he became fully qualified to act as our high priest (v. 17).

- v. 11 **"Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy"** The "one who makes people holy" by his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross is Jesus (Heb. 9:12; 10:10; 10:14; 13:12).

The word translated "made holy" can also be rendered "sanctified." Sanctification has both a one-time and a progressive aspect. It is a completed past event, in which we have been consecrated, or set apart to God (Heb. 10:10), and it is also a continuing process of becoming more like Christ in our experience (Heb. 10:14; see also 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:3). These two aspects of sanctification are inseparable (see Heb. 12:14; 1 Cor. 6:9-20; 1 Thess. 4:3-4; 1 Jn. 2:4-6, 29; 3:10).

"of the same family" In the original Greek, the phrase translated "of the same family" has no object; literally, it reads "all of one." Several possibilities have been proposed for what Christ and His people share, such as the same family, a common humanity, or a common ancestor (Adam or Abraham). However, the NASB rendering, "all from one Father," is preferable, since God is implicitly identified in v. 10 as the Father of the "many sons and daughters" whom He is bringing to glory, and these are the same people whom Jesus here calls "brothers and sisters".

"So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." The idea of shame likely has eschatological (future) overtones here, as it does elsewhere in the New Testament. When Christ returns, those who have not known and obeyed Him will be ashamed (i.e., they will experience subjective feelings of shame and will be objectively condemned); and Christ will likewise be ashamed of them (Heb. 10:36-39; 11:16; Mk. 8:36-38; Luke 9:25-26; Rom. 9:30-33; 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Jn. 2:28).

- v. 12 **"He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters'"** This quote is from Psalm 22. In verses 1-21 of the Psalm, David laments his affliction at the hands of evil men and beseeches the Lord to deliver him. Beginning in verse 22 (quoted here), he rejoices that the Lord has listened to his cry for help, and he leads the congregation in a hymn of praise.

In the context of Hebrews, this quote reveals the joy of the resurrected Jesus (see Acts 2:24-28), and looks forward to the "world to come" (Heb. 2:5) when He will lead all the company of the saved, his "brothers and sisters," in worship to God the Father.

This Psalm is presented as being spoken by Christ because it was written by David, an Old Testament *type*, or picture, of Christ, whose life experiences foreshadowed those of Jesus. Another example from Psalm 22 is v.1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which expresses David's feelings of abandonment and also foreshadows Christ's cry on the cross (Mt. 27:46; see Ps. 22:8 / Mt. 27:43 and Ps. 22:18 / Jn. 19:24)

- v. 13 These quotes are from Isa. 8:17-18. In the same way as Isaiah, Jesus suffered and was rejected by men, but continued to trust in His Father. Because of this, he is able to identify with his people, who need to trust God in the midst of suffering (see Heb. 2:18; 3:6; 4:15; 10:32-34; 12:3-13)

"the children God has given me" For additional references to the people of God being "given" to Christ in salvation, see Jn. 10:27-29; 17:2, 6, 24.

- vv. 14-15 **"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity"**

Here the author makes explicit the radical nature of Jesus' identification with his people; it extended even to his taking on "flesh and blood"; i.e., full humanity. Verse 17 emphasizes the completeness of His assumption of human nature; he became like his brothers "in every way" (see Rom. 8:3; Phlp. 2:7), yet without the blemish of indwelling sin (Heb. 4:15).

Note the tenses of the verbs: while the children "have" flesh and blood, Jesus "shared" it. In other words, while human nature is common to men at all times, there was a specific point in time—the incarnation—when the eternal second Person of the Godhead took on humanity.

In the early history of the church, the person of Christ was one of the central doctrinal controversies. In Gnosticism and Docetism, Jesus was viewed as divine (or quasi-divine), but not fully human; he either inhabited a human body temporarily, or merely assumed a human appearance. In Arianism and Adoptionism, on the other hand, Jesus was a created being; he was not co-equal with God the Father. These heresies were condemned by the church councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon (A.D. 325, 381, and 451).

"so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Here we have one of the primary purposes of the incarnation: the defeat of Satan and the emancipation of his captives through the death of Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-57; 2Tim. 1:10; 1 Jn. 3:8).

This theme, of God as a champion who wages war to free his people from a tyrant, is seen also in Luke 11:14-22, where Jesus depicts the devil as a "strong man" who must be attacked and overpowered before his possessions can be plundered. That passage, likewise, echoes Isaiah 49:24-26, in which the Lord promises to rescue "captives" and restore "plunder", a promise ultimately fulfilled through Christ.

The application to the Hebrews is clear: since Christ has broken Satan's power, they need no longer fear death. Therefore, they can face persecution with courage, even to the point of losing their lives.

- v. 16 **"for surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham's descendants"** This verse is an allusion to Isa. 41:8-10, in which the Lord encourages the "descendants of Abraham" not to fear, promising "I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Abraham's "descendants" (literally, "seed") are not his physical offspring, ethnic Jews. They are his spiritual heirs, the people of faith, both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 4:13-16; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:7, 16, 29).

Although the comparison to angels may seem out of place, it establishes the end of this section of the book, which deals with Christ's superiority to angels.

- v. 17 **"For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way"** This verse reveals why the doctrine of Jesus' full humanity is so critical. It was absolutely essential that He become one of us in order to act as our representative; only then could he break the curse of death hanging over us, intercede for us before God, and make atonement for our sins.

"that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest" This serves as a transition by introducing the theme to be developed in chs. 3-10: Christ as high priest *par excellence*.

"that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" The best translation here is debated; the NIV's "make atonement" (make an acceptable payment for sin), is rendered in other translations (see ESV) as "make propitiation" (i.e., turn away God's wrath by an offering) or "make expiation" (i.e., cancel or take away sin).

- v. 18 **"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."** Because Jesus experienced the greatest possible suffering and temptation in enduring the cross, He knows what we are going through in every trial. He knows exactly what we need, and is able to comfort and strengthen us so that we can persevere (Heb. 4:14-16; 12:3).

Unit 5 - Jesus Greater Than Moses

Hebrews 3:1-6

Text

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. ² He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ³ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. ⁴ For every house is built by someone, but

God is the builder of everything. ⁵ "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,"^a bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

^a 3:5 Num. 12:7

Open

☐ What kinds of things do you like to build?

☐ Describe what kind of builder you are. Slow and precise, or quick and dirty? Big picture or detail work?

Discover

1. Read this passage over a few times. What main idea do you think the author is trying to get across?

2. In verse 1, the writer addresses his readers as "brothers and sisters". Whose brothers and sisters are they, and why? (see 2:11-17; Matthew 12:48-50).

3. What is the "calling" that they share in? In what sense(s) is it "heavenly"? (see 11:16; 1 Timothy 6:12)

4. What does the author mean when he asks his readers to fix their thoughts on Jesus (v. 1)?

Why is this important? Why would it have been especially important to the recipients of this letter?

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5. What does it mean when the author calls Jesus an "apostle"? (see John 5:24-36; 8:26-29, 42)

How is His apostleship similar to that of the Twelve and Paul? How is it different? (see John 8:42; 13:20; 17:18; 20:21; Acts 10:38-44)

6. How was Jesus' faithfulness demonstrated?

7. Why would it have been important for the original readers of this letter to fully appreciate the faithfulness of Christ? Why is it important for us?

8. What is the "house" being referred to in verse 2? (see 8:8-10; 10:21) What does it mean in verse 6 when it says that Jesus is "over" it? (see 10:21; Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:16-18)

9. In what sense could Jesus be viewed as the "builder" in verse 3? (Mat. 16:18; Zech. 6:12-13; Eph. 2:20-23)

10. What distinction is the author making between Moses and Jesus in verses 5-6?

11. How did Moses testify to "what would be spoken by God in the future"? (Luke 24:27; John 5:46; Acts 26:22-23)

12. Why is it important for us to understand the complete supremacy of Christ over Moses?

Close

☐ What in your life are you tempted to place above Christ, or treat as having a higher value than Christ?

☐ Have you been "fixing your thoughts on Jesus" lately? What has been the result?

Commentary

We now begin the second major section of the book, in which the theme of Jesus as high priest is developed. This theme was introduced in 2:17, where He is described as a *"merciful and faithful high priest."* In this section, 3:1-5:10, the author examines these two aspects of Jesus' ministry, but in inverted order, so that his faithfulness, and the necessity for his people to remain faithful, is presented in 3:1-4:14, while his mercy is presented in 4:15-5:10.

The limits of the first subsection, 3:1-4:14, are defined by the literary device of *inclusio*. This device uses "bookends" of similar words or ideas to mark the beginning and end of a unit of thought. Here, the *inclusio* is found in the repeated use in 3:1 and 4:14 of the words *Jesus*, *high priest*, and *confess/profess*.

In addition, the first subsection exhibits an internal unity in its repeated use of words highlighting the theme of faith and faithfulness, e.g., *faithful*, 3:2, 5, 6; *faith*, 4:2, 14; *believe*, 4:3; *unbelief*, 3:12, 19; *disobey/disobedience*, 3:18, 4:6, 11 (i.e., the disobedience which consists of unbelief, see Rom. 1:5). All of these terms share the same Greek root—*pistis*, or faith.

In the second subsection, 4:15-5:10, Jesus' character as a merciful high priest is developed by references to his own experiences of temptation and suffering, which enable him to identify with the trials of his people (4:15-16; 5:7-8). This echoes the close of the previous section (2:17-18).

Finally, the sermonic character of Hebrews is seen here once again, as the author moves from exposition (3:1-6) to exhortation (3:7-4:14) and back again (4:15-5:10), alternately instructing his hearers in the Scriptures and pleading with them to heed them.

Looking at the paragraph which is the subject of this lesson, 3:1-6, we see that it has its own internal structure (following Lane's outline, as we do throughout):

- vv. 1-2 Introduction of the comparison between Jesus and Moses;
- v. 3 assertion of Jesus' superiority to Moses;
- vv. 4-6a explanation for this assertion;
- v. 6b relevance for the congregation.

In some Jewish traditions, Moses was seen as having a higher rank than angels. Therefore, it would be logical for the author of Hebrews to first show that Jesus was higher than the angels (1:1-2:16), and then to show that He is higher than Moses, who was viewed as their superior.

The assertion in this paragraph of Jesus' superiority over Moses is closely tied to a larger theme in Hebrews—the superiority of the new covenant and the new type of worship introduced by Jesus over the old covenant and sacrificial system which were given through Moses.

v. 1 **"Therefore, holy brothers and sisters"**

In addressing his readers as "brothers and sisters", the author is not only alluding to his own spiritual unity with them as brothers in Christ. He is also identifying them as brothers of Christ, as members of the company he has been describing: the "brothers" of whom Christ is not ashamed (2:11, 12, 17; see Mt. 12:48-50; 25:40).

They are "holy," in the sense of having been set apart, or consecrated to God, because Jesus, acting in his role as priest, has made them such (see notes on 2:11).

"who share in the heavenly calling"

There are two ways in which this call is "heavenly." First, it is heavenly in its origin, in that it issues from God (see Rom. 1:6-7, 1 Cor. 1:9, 24). Second, it is heavenly in its object, in that what we are being called to is the glory of heaven itself (Heb. 2:10, 4:6, 9:15, 11:16, 12:22; see Eph. 1:3, 2:6; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:18; 1 Pet. 5:10).

There are two senses in which the New Testament refers to God as "calling" people to faith. The first is the *general or external* call, in which all men are invited to repent and believe the gospel in order that they may be saved. The second, which is in view in this verse, is the *effectual* (effective) or *internal* call, by which the Holy Spirit speaks to the hearts of individuals, issuing a personal summons to those whom God has chosen (Rom. 8:28-30; Gal. 1:15; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 9:15). This second call is always successful in bringing about the salvation of those who receive it; moreover, none will respond affirmatively to the general call who do not also receive this internal call (Mt. 11:25-27, 22:14; John 6:37, 44, 65).

"ouë apostle and high priest" The term "apostle" literally means "sent one". Its primary use in the New Testament is to designate those who were uniquely commissioned by Christ and sent into the world as His representatives to preach the gospel. In this sense, it is used of the Twelve (Jn. 17:18; 20:21; Acts 10:40-42), and also of Paul (Gal. 1:1, 15-17; see 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:3-8).

Jesus is explicitly referred to as an apostle only here; however, the theme of his being sent into the world as God's emissary is common in the gospels, especially John (Jn. 5:24, 30, 36; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42). One of the key ideas associated with Christ's apostleship, that acceptance or rejection of Him constitutes acceptance or rejection of His Father (Jn. 8:42; 13:20), is echoed in Hebrews in the warnings not to reject the message of salvation which comes through Christ (2:2-3; 7:7-12).

Christ's complementary roles of apostle and high priest are both mediatorial: in the first, He brings God's word to men; in the second, He intercedes for men before God.

v. 2 **"He was faithful to the one who appointed him"** Jesus' faithfulness as an apostle is seen in His perfect obedience to God's will (Jn. 4:34; 5:30; 6:38), which demonstrated that He had truly been sent by the Father (Jn. 5:36).

The depth of His submission is seen in His willingly dying on the cross to redeem His people from sin (2:14, 17; Mt. 26:39; Jn. 6:39; Rom. 5:19; Phlp. 2:8). In so doing, He completed the work which His Father had given Him to do (Jn. 17:4; 19:30).

"just as Moses was" Most scholars see in this verse, as in v. 5, a reference to Numbers 12:7-8. There, Moses' authority is challenged by Miriam and Aaron. God responds by affirming Moses' uniqueness among men and his superiority even to the prophets, citing Moses' faithfulness "in all my house" and the fact that He spoke with Moses "face to face". In alluding to this passage, the author is highlighting a key point of similarity between Moses and Christ—their faithfulness—and is acknowledging Moses' greatness among men. The author's approach is not to demonstrate Christ's superiority over Moses by minimizing Moses, or attempting to reduce the esteem in which he was held. Rather, he shows that, as great as Moses truly was, he is still far excelled by Christ.

Some scholars also see here an allusion to 1 Chr. 17:14, in which the prophet Nathan tells David that God would establish an eternal dynasty from his offspring, taking one of David's sons and setting him "over my house and my kingdom forever."

"in all God's house" The "house" referred to here is the people of God, those of both the Old and New covenants who have faith in Him (v. 6; see 8:8, 10; 10:21; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5).

vv. 3-4 In these verses, the author uses an analogy of proportion to argue that Jesus' superiority over Moses is evidenced by the greater glory which He received from God (see 2 Cor. 3:7-11). He begins with a simple truth: the builder of a house is honored more than the structures he creates. Likewise, God is honored more than the universe he "built" (v. 4). It is in the same proportion of relative honor that Christ's glory exceeds that of Moses.

The interpretive question here is whether the author intends the "builder" and the "house" in this analogy to represent Christ and the church, or whether he is simply using a common relationship (that of builders and buildings) to shine light on the relationship between Christ and Moses.

If the author does intend the "builder" to represent Christ, then he is saying two things: first, that Jesus' glory is superior to that of Moses in the same degree as a builder's glory exceeds the glory of his

buildings; and second, that this superiority is due to the fact that Jesus is the builder, while Moses is a part of the building.

This fuller meaning, identifying Jesus as the "builder", would agree with His vow to build the church (Mt. 16:18). It would also agree with Zechariah's prophecy that Christ would "build the temple of the Lord" (Zech. 6:12-13; see 1 Chron. 17:12), since God's true temple, or dwelling-place, is the church (Heb. 11:10; 1 Cor. 3:9, 16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:5).

vv. 5-6 **"Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, . . . But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house"**

The author now proceeds to another distinction between Moses and Christ, one which turns on their relative positions with regard to God's "house," the people of God. Both were faithful, but Moses was faithful as a servant **in** the house, while Christ was faithful as the Son **over** the house.

Many first-century homes had one or more household servants. Some of these servants might have significant authority. But everyone would understand that the householder's own son had a higher position in the home than even the most honored and trusted servant. In the same way, Jesus Christ, God's own Son, although He is a servant (Mt. 12:18-21; 20:28; Luke 22:27; Phlp. 2:7), is also the head of the church (Heb. 10:21; Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18), and thus has a higher position with regard to the people of God than does Moses, a servant in God's house (Num. 12:7; see Ex. 14:31; Num. 11:11; Dt. 3:24).

"bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future." The things which "would be spoken by God in the future" are the words of Christ, who is the prophet like Moses that God had promised to raise up (Dt. 18:15, 18; see Acts 3:22), and who spoke only what the Father told Him (Jn. 7:16; 8:26, 28; 12:49; 14:10, 24).

The Scriptures tell us that the writings of Moses and the prophets pointed to Christ (Lk. 24:27, 44; Jn. 1:45; 5:39, 46; Acts 10:43; 26:22-23; 28:23), just as did the law and the sacrificial system which were inaugurated through Moses (Heb. 10:1). Thus, Moses' life and ministry were a foreshadowing, a "testimony" of the gospel which was to be revealed through Christ.

"if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence" This appeal to persevere in faith is repeated throughout the book (4:11, 14; 6:11; 10:23). The implications of the conditional phrase, "if indeed we hold fast" are discussed in the notes on 3:14; suffice it to say here that the author considers continuation in Christ, even when under trial, as evidence of the authenticity of one's faith (see Jn. 8:31).

Unit 6 - Warning Against Unbelief

Hebrews 3:7-19

Text

⁷So, as the Holy Spirit says:
8 "Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
9 during the time of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested and tried me
though for forty years they saw what I did.
10 That is why I was angry with that generation,
I said, 'Their hearts are always going
astray,
and they have not known my ways.'
11 So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'"^a

¹²See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's

deceitfulness. ¹⁴We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. ¹⁵As has just been said:

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion."^b

¹⁶Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

^a 3:11 Psalm 95:7-11

^b 3:15 Psalm 95:7,8

Open

☐ How far back can you trace your ancestry? Any heroes or villains in the list?

☐ What is your spiritual heritage?

Discover

1. Read through the passage. In your own words, what is the author trying to say? What is his main idea?

2. To gain an understanding of the historical background of this passage, read chapters 13 and 14 of Numbers. In the space below, list the key events in that narrative:

3. The word 'today' is used three times in this passage. Why is this a significant term for the argument?

4. How did the Israelites 'test' and 'try' God? (v. 9; see Exodus 17:17; Numbers chs. 13, 14, 16, 20, 21, 25)

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5. What do you think it means to "turn away from the living God" (v. 12)? What kind of spiritual condition would bring this about? What would be the result?

6. Look up the following verses which speak of the need for us to keep vigilance over the state of our souls. Summarize their message in your own words: Hebrews 3:12; 2 Corinthians 13:5; 2 Peter 1:10.

7. How can we gain assurance that our faith is genuine? (Hebrews 3:6, 14; see 2 Peter 1:5-11; 1 John 2:3-6; 3:10, 3:14; 5:1-2, 5:13)

Why isn't it enough just to believe that we have believed? (Heb. 3:13; see Matthew 7:21-23; Jeremiah 17:9)

8. Why is it important for us to "encourage one another daily"? (v. 13; see 1 Thessalonians 5:14)

List some ways that you could do this in the coming week. Circle one that you plan to do.

9. What are the consequences of repeatedly rejecting Christ?

10. What do you think it means to "hold our original conviction firmly to the very end"? What does it reveal about us if we do this? If we fail to do it? (see v. 6; also John 8:31; 15:7-8; 1 John 2:19; 2 John 9).

Close

- ☐ Do you "test" or "try" God? If so, how?
- ☐ If you were on trial for being a follower of Christ, would you be found guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt"? Why or why not?

- ☐ Whose voice(s) are you "hearing"? Is God's voice the one you hear most clearly?
- ☐ How has this lesson caused you to reflect on your own spiritual condition?

Commentary

This passage takes the form of a quote from the Old Testament (vv. 7-11), followed by a commentary (vv. 12-19). It exhibits several stylistic features which give it the feel of a speech or sermon rather than a letter. One of these is *inclusio*; repeated words or ideas which mark the beginning and end of a unit of thought (note the references to "seeing" and to unbelief in both verses 12 and 19).

Another rhetorical device is the repeated use of words which have the same initial 'a' sound in Greek, such as *apistias* ("unbelieving") and *apostēnai* ("turn away") in v. 12. Still another is the rapid series of questions and answers in vv. 16-18. This heightens the impact of the speaker's words by demanding a response, as if the hearer were being interrogated.

vv. 7-11 These verses are from Psalm 95:7-11, in which David calls the Israelites of his own generation not to repeat the error of their ancestors, who failed to enter the promised land due to unbelief.

The historical background to Psalm 95 is found in Numbers 13-14, the account of the Exodus generation's failure to enter the land of Canaan. They refused to take possession of the land when all but two of the scouts who were sent ahead to explore it came back with a discouraging report about the strength of the people living there. The consequence of Israel's defiance was that none of them except Joshua and Caleb ever entered the land. Instead, they wandered in the desert for forty years, and Israel did not go into Canaan until every adult of that generation had died. [See also Dt. 1:19-46]

Psalm 95 also contains a reference to the later rebellions at Massah and Meribah, where the people quarreled with Moses over the lack of water (Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:2-13).

v. 7 **"So,"** This word establishes a link with the idea expressed in verse 6b, that the authenticity of our faith is demonstrated by our continuance in faith.

"as the Holy Spirit says" Here, as elsewhere in Hebrews (4:3, 7; 5:5; 9:8; 10:15), the Old Testament quote is attributed not to its human author, but to its divine author, the Holy Spirit. This is done in order to emphasize the Scripture's complete authority, and thus the seriousness with which the readers must treat its warnings. This view of Scripture as both a human and a divine work is echoed in 2 Pet. 1:21: *"prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"* (see also 2 Tim. 3:16).

Note the immediacy of the present tense, "says": not only did the Holy Spirit speak in the past, but He is speaking to us now through the Scriptures.

"if you hear his voice" The Hebrew word for "hear" has the sense of "give heed to" or "obey". [See Num. 14:22, where the phrase which the NASB renders *"have not listened to my voice,"* is translated by the NIV as *"disobeyed me"*]. Thus, the readers are being called, not merely to listen to what God has to say, but to respond to His words in faith and obedience.

v. 9 **"Where your ancestors tested and tried me"** The forty years of wandering in the desert were a time of God's judgment (v. 17). But as this verse reflects, they were also a time when God continued to act in the midst of the people, performing works of preservation and blessing.

In Deut. 8, when the people are finally preparing to go into the land, Moses reminds them of all God's mercies to them over those years: feeding them with manna, providing water from the rock, preventing their clothes from wearing out, and protecting them from snakes and scorpions. Others include granting them military victory over their enemies (Num. 21-24; 31). But in spite of the bitter lesson of their previous folly, and in spite of God's goodness to them, they continued to test God, thus confirming their unrepentant hardness of heart (Num. 16; 20:1-13; 21:4-9; 25:1-9).

The repeated demands for signs of God's presence and power did not end in the desert with the Exodus generation. Christ condemned them in His own day as manifestations of unbelief: "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!" (Mt. 12:39; see Mt. 16:4; 1 Cor. 1:22)

v. 10 **"Their hearts are always going astray"** This verse makes clear that God's judgment upon Israel was not provoked by a single act of defiance, but by a repeated pattern of disobedience, rooted in a basic heart attitude of unbelief (see Num. 14:11, "How long will these people treat me with contempt?"; also Ps. 78:40-41).

v. 11 **"They shall never enter my rest."** As the author makes explicit in chapter 4, this earthly, physical, and military rest in Canaan was a *type*, or picture, of the eternal rest which awaits believers.

v. 12 **"See to it . . . that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart"** The author now warns his readers not to repeat the error of their ancestors. The sin he warns them against is apostasy, the rejection of Christ by one who has professed faith. Apostasy differs from the unbelief of those who have never claimed to be Christians, because it involves abandoning the faith, turning away from God (v. 12), failing to hold firmly to the very end (v. 14).

Since an apostate is one who has a "sinful, unbelieving heart," how can the author of Hebrews refer to his readers as brothers and sisters? The answer is that while he addresses the congregation as a whole in this way, he realizes that there may be tares among the wheat (Mt. 13:24-30); those who appear to be Christians but who in reality have not been converted. Thus, his call that they examine the reality of their faith refers to individuals within the group, i.e. *"lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart"* (3:12 ESV; see 3:13; 4:1, 11).

This warning against spiritual complacency is echoed by Paul, who commands the Corinthians: *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves"* (2 Cor. 13:5).

Likewise, Peter instructs us to *"be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choice of you"* (2 Peter 1:10, NASB). Jesus also tells us that in the day of judgment there will be many who expect to enter heaven but are refused: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"* (Mt. 7:21-23; see Lk. 13:23-27).

These verses reveal several truths:

First, it is possible to be deceived about our spiritual condition. Even our own heart can mislead us (v. 13; see Jer. 17:9; 1 Cor. 4:4). Second, the validity of our faith is not self-evident; it requires examination. Third, we can have assurance of salvation, but obtaining it requires diligence.

How then, can we obtain assurance?

By practicing righteousness and growing in godly character (Phlp. 2:12-13; Heb. 6:11-12; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). As James tells us, a "faith" that produces no change in our behavior is not true faith at all, but only intellectual agreement. It is dead and useless, and is no better than the kind of "faith" that demons have (James 2:14-17, 20, 26). On the other hand, true faith produces obedience and brotherly love (1 Jn. 2:3-6; 3:10, 14; 5:1-2, 13). Although we are not saved by works (Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:5-6; Gal 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9), salvation inevitably produces in us good works as evidence of its reality.

- v. 13 ***"But encourage one another daily"*** God has promised to safeguard the souls of true believers so that they do not fall away (Jn. 6:39; 10:28-29; Rom. 8:35-39; Jude 24). However, He accomplishes this through means, and one of the means He uses is the fellowship of other believers. Through their "encouragement" (which includes warning and correction; 1 Thess. 5:14), we are spurred on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24) and kept from apostasy.

"as long as it is called 'Today'" Although the Lord is patient (2 Pet. 3:9), the time during which we are given the choice of faith or unbelief, of obedience or disobedience, will not last forever. Each of us will die with no further opportunity for repentance (9:27), and the history of the human race will come to a close when Christ returns (10:37). At that time, He will judge with finality, and those who have delayed repentance will be lost forever (Mt. 25:1-13; 2 Pet. 3:10).

Not only that, but the longer we continue in unbelief the more resistant we become. The eventual result is that we become so ***"hardened by sin's deceitfulness,"*** and especially the sin of rejecting Christ, that we become totally insensitive to the gospel.

- v. 14 ***"We have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end."*** Together with verse 6, this makes clear that our perseverance in faith does not determine whether we keep or lose our salvation; rather, it reveals whether we ever had salvation in the first place. The author does not say that if we persevere we will share in Christ, as if the state of our souls would not be determined until the end. Rather, he says that if we persevere we have come to share in Christ. In other words, our perseverance will be evidence of something that has happened in the past; it will reveal that we were really Christians all along. As the apostle John writes, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."* (1 Jn. 2:19; see Jn. 8:31; 15:7-8; 2 Jn. 9).

- vv. 16-19 In these verses, the author again looks back to the Exodus generation, driving home the point that their identity as the visible people of God did not shelter them from His wrath. In spite of their privileged position as the people to whom the word of God came, they were still judged for their unbelief.

This reminder of the judgment which came upon Israel leads to the application in chapter 4, that hearing God's word is not enough to save us. The hearing of the word must be combined with faith and obedience to be of any benefit to us (see 4:1-2); the word which is heard and rejected only brings judgment.

Israel was a nation which was chosen by God as His own. Its people experienced a great deliverance and saw great miracles. But they were still judged by God for their unbelief. In the same way, our participation in the life of a Christian community, and our experience of great blessings and even miraculous signs, will not save us if our hearts are disobedient and unbelieving.

Unit 7 - A Sabbath-Rest for the People of God

Hebrews 4:1-11

Text

¹ Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ^a ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

“So I declared on oath in my anger,
‘They shall never enter my rest.’”^b

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.”^c ⁵ And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”

⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷ God again set a

certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”^d

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, ^e just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

^a 4:2 Some manuscripts because those who heard did not combine it with faith

^b 4:3 Psalm 95:11; also in verse 5

^c 4:4 Gen. 2:2

^d 4:7 Psalm 95:7,8

^e 4:10 Or labor

Open

☐ What do you think of when you hear the word “rest”?

☐ When do you feel most at rest?

Discover

1. Read the passage over a few times. In your own words, state the author's main idea or ideas.

2. To whom was the promise of ‘rest’ first made? To whom is the offer of rest made today?

3. What is God's rest? What must we do to enter it?

Have you entered God's rest? How do you know?

4. What does it mean to rest from our own work (v. 10)? Are you doing this?

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5. What kind of rest did Joshua give the Israelites? How do we know that this wasn't all the rest that God had in mind? (v. 8; see Joshua 21:43-45)

6. Read the following verses and summarize what they teach concerning God's promises: Hebrews 11:39-40; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Galatians 3:16 and 4:28

7. What is the "Sabbath-rest" which believers enjoy (v. 9)?

8. What can you observe about the relationship between God's rest and ours? (see verses 3-4)

9. In what sense do we enjoy God's rest now? How will we enjoy it throughout eternity?

10. What was the good news ("gospel") which was preached to the Israelites under the Old Covenant? (see Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 15:1-8; Exodus 6:2-8)

11. What is the good news of the New Covenant? How are the two covenants related? (see Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:11-18)

12. What groups of people are covered by the two covenants? (see 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; Galatians 3:8-29)

Close

- ☐ What kind of rest are you seeking after? How are you going about it?
- ☐ What kind of rest do non-Christians seek after? How do they go about seeking it?

- ☐ What is the hope which we can glean from this passage?
- ☐ What is the negative example to be avoided in this passage?

Commentary

The author now continues his discourse on Psalm 95. The repeated use of the term "rest" clearly signals the theme of the passage. This theme is seen in the parallel exhortations which begin and end the passage (vv. 1, 11), that we be "careful" not to fall short of entering God's rest and that we "make every effort" to enter it.

- v. 1 **"let us be careful"** The Greek word used here is *phobeomai*, from which comes our English word phobia. Its literal meaning is to "fear" (see NASB). Thus, when the author uses this word, he is doing more than merely reminding his readers to "take precautions" or to "think these things through". He is strongly warning them to consider the terrible consequences of falling short of God's rest (see 10:26-31).

This kind of fear is not anxiety or worry (see Mt. 6:25-34; Phlp. 4:6). Rather it is an attitude of awe and reverence, a sober appreciation for the holiness, power, and majesty of God which results in obedience. Jesus speaks of this kind of fear when he warns, *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Mt. 10:28; see Lk. 12:4-5; Acts 9:31; Rom. 11:20-21; 2 Cor. 5:10-11, 7:1; Eph. 5:21; Phlp. 2:12; 1 Pet. 1:17; 2:17; Rev. 14:7).

"since the promise of entering his rest still stands" The promise of rest which God made to His people was fulfilled in Israel's history, as Joshua 21:43-45 makes clear:

"So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the Lord's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled."

However, this freedom from slavery and relief from military conflict did not exhaust the promise of God (v.8). It was only a *type*, or picture, of the ultimate fulfillment of the promise in Christ, just as all Old Testament promises and fulfillments ultimately point to Christ (Heb. 6:12, 17; 8:6; 9:15; 10:23, 36; 11:39-40; 2 Cor. 1:20; 7:1; Gal. 3:16; 4:28). Therefore, the promise of rest "still stands;" it remains in force.

This passage in Joshua also refutes the view that there must be a future millennial reign of Christ on the earth in order for the "land" promises to Israel to be literally fulfilled. As Joshua reveals, this fulfillment has already taken place. The fulfillment which remains is spiritual, heavenly, and eternal (see Heb. 11:13-16:12:22).

- v. 2 **"For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did"**

In the context of Numbers 14 / Psalm 95, the good news was the report which Joshua and Caleb brought back concerning the goodness of the land of Canaan and the Lord's promise to bring them into it. It was Israel's faithless response to this good news which made it of "no value" to them. For the people of Israel, the good news was contained in the promises of land, descendants, and blessing made to the patriarchs (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18; Ex. 6:2-8). And now, since the time of Christ, the good news, or "gospel", has been the free offer of eternal life and forgiveness of sins through faith in the atoning death and powerful resurrection of the Son of God. This distinction in the content of God's promises is one of the key features which distinguishes the Old and New Covenants.

However, although there are real distinctions between the covenants, there is also a strong continuity between them. In both, what God required of His people was faith and obedience. And while the promises given to God's people in the Old Covenant did refer to earthly and temporal blessings, those promises and their historical fulfillments pointed forward to a greater fulfillment in the New Covenant, one which would be eternal and spiritual (Heb. 8:6-13; 9:15; 2 Sam. 7:12-16 / Acts 2:29-36; Ps. 105:8-10; Jer. 31:31-34).

This new covenant both supersedes and completes the old, and it covers, not ethnic Israel, but all people, Jew and Gentile, who become children of Abraham through faith (2 Cor. 6:16-18; Gal. 3:8, 14, 29). It was inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Christ (Mt. 26:27-8), and will be fully consummated at His return.

- v. 3 **"Now we who have believed enter that rest"**

The verb "enter" could be a real present, or it could be a futuristic present, in which a future event is referred to in the present tense because it is certain to happen. Either is possible, because the rest which God gives His people has both a present and a future aspect. From the time we first trust in Christ, we enjoy freedom from slavery to sin. We can stop working at self-justification and rest in His righteousness. And when He returns, we will be able to rest from the need to strive against sin, in our world and in ourselves.

Note that the author refers to "that rest" (the rest which the Exodus generation failed to enter) as the rest which is entered by "we who have believed." This shows that the rest which God offered the Israelites was never intended to be understood only in earthly and temporal terms; that earthly rest was only the foreshadowing of the greater rest to come in Christ.

vv. 3-5 These verses link the rest of God that began on the seventh day of Creation with the rest which the Exodus generation failed to enter, and also the eternal rest which it foreshadows.

The precise nature of the connection between God's rest and ours is not obvious, but two observations can be made: First, the rest which believers experience is not merely something which God has prepared for us. Rather, it is God's rest, which He shares together with us (v. 10). Our rest, now and forever, involves a participation with God in His own rest (see Ps. 132:11-14; Jn. 17:20-26).

Second, the failure of the Israelites to enter God's rest was not due to its unavailability, since it had been ready since the last day of creation (v. 4). Note that the seventh day of creation is the only day which has no boundaries: the formula "And there was evening, and there was morning" is not used of it (Gen. 2:2-3). Thus, God's rest was not limited to that day, but continues to the present. Likewise, the availability of that rest for those who believe persists as long as it is "today" (v. 7; see 3:13).

But how can God be "resting," when Jesus tells us, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (Jn. 5:17; see 9:4; Heb. 4:12)? The answer is that the "rest" which God enjoys is not inactivity; it is the state of having completed His work of Creation. He continues to govern and sustain the world (Heb. 1:3), and He continues to draw His people to Himself and keep them from the evil one (Jn. 17:9-20). The purpose of the Creation was God's own rest and the rest of His people; in their redemption that dual purpose is fulfilled. So with respect to the Creation itself, God's work is finished, but with respect to His purpose of bringing His people into the enjoyment of that rest, He continues to labor.

vv. 6-7 **"It still remains for some to enter that rest"** The Exodus generation's failure to enter the Promised Land did not void the promise of God. He allowed their children to enter it, and more significantly, the promise of rest in its ultimate spiritual sense continued in force. It remained open four centuries later as a present reality ("Today") for those to whom David wrote (v. 7), and it is here reaffirmed to the readers of Hebrews.

v. 8 **"For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day."** The fact that God continues to offer rest in Psalm 95 show that the "rest" which Joshua gave to Israel by bringing them into Canaan (Josh. 21:44) fulfilled His promise in only a limited sense. The true rest would come through Christ (see notes on v. 1; also Jn. 6:32-33, 55).

vv. 9-10 **"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from His."**

The word translated "Sabbath-rest" may also suggest a Sabbath "celebration". This would indicate the joy and festivity which the people of God will experience as, having completed their work, they praise and worship God throughout eternity (Rev. 7:9-17; 14:13). This echoes the parable of the talents, in which the faithful slave is told, "'Well done . . . come and share your master's happiness!'" (Mt. 25:21).

The "Sabbath-rest" for the people of God which is referred to here is not a weekly day of rest from physical labor. It is a continual state of ceasing from our works of self-righteousness, and of resting upon Christ for our justification (v. 10; see Matt. 11:28-30). The weekly Sabbath day of the Old Covenant was a *type*, or picture, of this true Sabbath. Which raises a question: how should a Christian regard Sunday? Are we obligated to observe it as a day of worship and rest, except for works of charity and necessity? The commonly held view is that the fourth commandment's requirement of rest every seventh day is still valid as timeless "moral" law, while the specific identification of that day as Saturday no longer applies, since that aspect of the commandment is "ceremonial" law limited to Israel under the Old Covenant. Thus, Saturday has been replaced by its New Covenant equivalent, Sunday or the Lord's Day (i.e., the day of Christ's resurrection.)

However, there are difficulties with this view, which have led some to reject the idea of Sunday as a Christian Sabbath. First, there is a lack of Scriptures which speak of such a transfer from Saturday to Sunday. References to the "Lord's Day" (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), show that Sunday was a day on which early believers gathered for worship, but not that they viewed it as a Christian Sabbath. In fact, Paul explicitly rejects any elevation of one day over another as a requirement for believers. In Gal. 4:10, he chides the Galatians for observing "special days and months and seasons and years." In Rom. 14:5 he describes the practice of considering "one day more sacred than another" as a neutral preference which should not be a basis for judging one another. And in Col. 2:16-17 he instructs the Colossians, "*do not let anyone judge you . . . with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.*"

More fundamentally, those opposing the idea of Sunday as a Christian Sabbath note that the distinction between "civil," "moral," and "ceremonial" laws does not occur in the New Testament, and so using that framework to assess the continuing validity of various Old Testament laws is hermeneutically suspect.

Unit 8 - The Word of God

Hebrews 4:12-16

Text

¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, ^a Jesus the

Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

^a 14 Greek has gone through the heavens

Open

☐ Did your family have a dog or cat when you were growing up? Do you have one now? Why or why not?

☐ If you could have a conversation with someone from history, who would it be? What would you talk about?

Discover

1. In what way(s) is God's word "alive" and "active"? (v.12; see Isa. 55:11; Num. 23:19; Heb. 1:3, 11:3)

Have you experienced God's word as "alive and active" in your own life? If so, how?

2. The passage also describes God's word as "sharper than any double-edged sword". What is this metaphor intended to convey? (see Ps. 139:1-12; Acts 2:37)

Have you found this to be true in your own life? If so, how?

3. Why do people often try to conceal the truth? (see Jn. 3:19-21)

What means of concealment do they use? Are such attempts likely to be successful? (v.13; see also Jer. 23:24; 1 Cor. 4:5)

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4. Why does it matter that God sees and knows everything about us? (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10)

5. What aspects of Christ's priestly ministry provide hope as we consider our guilt and the coming judgment? (v. 14; see 10-12:14; also Rom. 8:33-34)

6. In what ways was Christ like us? In other words, what aspects of our humanity did he share? (v. 15; see 2:14-17)

Give some examples from the following verses:

Luke 24:39

Matthew 21:18

John 4:6

Mark 14:34

John 11:33-35

7. Why does it matter to us that Jesus shared fully in our humanity?

8. Why is it significant that Jesus was not guilty of any sin? (v. 15; see 7:26-27; 9:14)

9. If Jesus never sinned, was it possible for him to know the full power of temptation? Why or why not?

10. Why do you think the author refers to God's throne as a throne of "grace"? What can we expect if we approach Him? (v. 16)

Close

☐ Do you think of Jesus as someone who can understand the pressures and temptations you face?

☐ When do you most feel like hiding from God?

☐ When you come to God in prayer, how would you describe your attitude? Hopeful? Tentative? Bold? Businesslike? Distracted?

☐ What do you do to "hold firmly" to the faith?

Commentary

In 4:1-11, the author warned his readers not to fail in entering God's rest through lack of faith. Here he intensifies that warning by drawing his readers' attention to God's penetrating omniscience. Any failure of faith will surely be exposed by God's Word and will be seen by Him. However, we find encouragement in knowing that we have all the resources we need to persevere in faith, through Jesus the great High Priest, who understands our weaknesses and grants grace and mercy to those in need.

- v. 12 **"For the word of God is"** The conjunction "for" indicates a link between the previous section's warnings against unbelief and this description of the penetrating nature of the word of God. What is the connection? That faithlessness and disobedience constitute a rejection of God's word, a failure to "hear" (heed and obey) his voice (see 3:7, 15; 4:7). Those who disobey Him will surely suffer the consequences of their actions, because His word has the power to expose and judge them.

In the context of 4:1-11, the specific word of God which was violated by the Israelites was the command that they enter Canaan. Their refusal to do so resulted in God's judgment that they would never enter the land (Num. 14:21-23). This episode was followed immediately by a second instance of disobedience, as they attempted to enter Canaan presumptuously, ignoring God's command to turn back, and suffered a disastrous military defeat as a result (Num. 14:25-44). Just as the Israelites could not violate God's Word without punishment, neither can we (see Heb. 2:1-3).

Some have suggested that the "word" being referred to here is Christ, who is elsewhere spoken of as the word of God (Jn. 1:1; see Heb. 1:2). However, in this context it is better to view "word of God" in more general terms, as God's revelation to man of His will and purpose.

"alive and active" This description of God's word emphasizes its power and potency, and thereby God's unfailing ability to accomplish His purposes. He is completely sovereign, so that there is no discrepancy between His will to act, expressed in His words, and His power to act, displayed in His deeds. As Isaiah 55:11 declares,

*"so is my word that goes out from
my mouth:*

*It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for
which I sent it."*

Or as Numbers 23:19 puts it,

*"Does he speak and then not act?
Does he promise and not fulfill?"*

See also Gen. 1:3 ff.; Heb. 1:3; Heb. 11:3, which speak of the power of God's word in creation and providence.

"Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates" This description highlights the power of God's word to enter into our innermost being and reveal what is there. Just as a finely honed sword is able to cut through flesh, so the word of God, the "sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17), is able to cut through all emotional and intellectual resistance and expose our hidden thoughts, attitudes, motives and desires. Those aspects of our interior lives which we consider to be the most private are open before the word of God (see Ps. 139:1-12). This is true in the present age, as the Holy Spirit uses the Word to bring conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment (Jn. 16:8; 1 Cor. 14:24-25), and it will be true to the fullest extent on the last day, when *"God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ"* (Rom. 2:16; see Matt. 10:26).

Although the primary imagery here is that of penetration and exposure, the metaphor of the word as a sword also carries the connotation of judgment, and the destruction of those who are shown to be guilty (Isa. 49:2; Hos. 6:5).

- v. 13 **"Nothing in all creation is hidden"** The utter futility of trying to evade God's searching judgment is driven home by the absolute terms the author uses ("*nothing*," "*all*," "*everything*"), by the emphatic repetition ("*uncovered and laid bare*") and by the stark imagery of defenseless nakedness.

Throughout history, people have used various means to conceal their sins. Adam and Eve tried to cover themselves with fig leaves, and then hid from God behind the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:7-8); King David murdered Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, in order to cover up his sin of adultery (2 Sam. 11:27); and the list goes on and on. Frequently, the tools of concealment are falsehoods and lies, the grammar and syntax of Satan's native tongue (Jn. 8:44). But ultimately, all such attempts end in failure. As God warned the false prophets in Jeremiah's day (Jer. 23:24),

*Can anyone hide in secret places
so that I cannot see him?"*

declares the LORD.

"Do not I fill heaven and earth?"

declares the LORD.

Paul echoes this idea when he reminds the Corinthians that only God can see the heart; thus only God can judge rightly (see also 1 Sam. 16:7). The truth may remain hidden for a long time, but ultimately Christ will cause it to be known. When He comes,

*"He will bring to light what is hidden in
darkness and will expose the motives of
the heart." (1 Cor. 4:5).*

“him to whom we must give account.”

The theme that we are accountable to God for our actions, an idea so foreign to many people today, runs throughout Hebrews (4:12; 9:27; 10:26-31; 12:23; 13:4). All men, both unbelievers and believers, will answer to God. As Paul instructs the Corinthians, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10; see Rom. 14:10-12). For the believer, this is a judgment unto rewards (1 Cor. 3:12-15; Eph. 6:8), while for the unbeliever, it is a judgment unto condemnation.

- v. 14 **“Therefore, since we have a great high priest”** The “therefore” of this verse resumes the thought of 2:17-18, in which the theme of Jesus as high priest was introduced. What the priests of the Old Covenant could do only symbolically and provisionally (Heb. 10:1-4, 11), Christ has now done actually and finally. Shedding his own blood rather than the blood of bulls and goats, he made atonement for the sins of his people (Heb. 7:27; 9:12-14; 10:10, 14). As a result, he serves as priest, not in a man-made tabernacle, but a heavenly one (Heb. 8:1-2; 9:11, 24), and he is even now interceding on our behalf before God (Rom. 8:34).

The designation of Christ as the “great” (Gr. *megan*) high priest highlights his uniqueness; he is the high priest *par excellence*, whose ministry surpasses that of every other high priest throughout Israel’s history.

“Jesus the Son of God” In this phrase we can discern an allusion to Christ’s humanity and to his deity. As Jesus, born of Mary, he shares fully in our human nature (Heb. 2:14, 17), and so from his own experience knows what it means to face temptation (v. 15; see Mt. 4:1). As the Son of God, he is fully divine (Heb. 1:3) and is thus able to bridge the gap between God and man; fulfilling in his own person and works the mediatorial role that the ministry of the Old Covenant priest anticipated.

“let us hold firmly” The greatness of Christ’s priestly ministry on our behalf is no reason for spiritual complacency. On the contrary; as a strong foundation it undergirds our active commitment to the faith. Even as we “rest” (4:10) in Christ, we are also called to “make every effort” (4:11) to follow Him, lest we fall into disobedience.

As noted previously, the second major section of the book of Hebrews, 3:1-5:10, develops the theme of Jesus as high priest. This section is further divided into two subsections. In 3:1-4:14, the *faithfulness* of Christ as high priest (and the need for His people to remain faithful) was presented, while in 4:15-5:10 it is the *mercy* of Christ as high priest that is in view.

- v. 15 **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses”**

Christ understand us because he is one of us. His body was made of flesh and bones, just as ours is (Lk. 24:39), and he experienced the full range of human emotions. The Scriptures tell us that He was hungry (Mt. 21:18), that he grew tired (Jn. 4:6), that he knew sorrow and grief (Mk. 14:34; Jn. 11:33-35), and that he felt the pain of betrayal and abandonment (Mt. 26:21, 27:46). He understands our weaknesses, not as an outsider looking in (like an anthropologist conducting a field study), but as one who has shared those same weaknesses. His knowledge is not abstract or theoretical, but visceral and intuitive.

“tempted in every way . . . yet he did not sin.” Just as he shared in every aspect of human experience, Jesus likewise was subject to the full range of human temptations. In his encounter with Satan in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11) and in his final hours in Gethsemane (Lk. 22:39-46), the temptation he faced was to turn aside from the way of the cross, to refuse the cup of suffering that the Father had given him (Mt. 16:22-23; Jn. 18:11). But he remained faithful to the end (Heb. 3:2).

Christ’s sinlessness is attested to throughout the New Testament (Jn. 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5), and it was essential to his mission: only because he had no sin of his own to atone for was he able to atone for the sins of his people (Heb. 7:26-27). He was the spotless sacrificial lamb which was anticipated by the ceremonies of the Old Testament (Ex. 12:5; Jn. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19).

- v. 16 **“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence”** Under the old covenant, the privilege of entering into God’s immediate presence was granted only to the high priest, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2-34; see Heb. 9:7). Even a priest, if he approached God at the wrong time, or in the wrong manner, would die (Ex. 28:35, 43; 30:20-21; Lev. 10:1-2; 16:2, 13; 22:9; Num. 4:15, 19).

Because of the holiness of God, sinful man can not come near him, lest he be destroyed (see Ex. 19:10-12; 1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6-7). As a result, the attitude of the ancient Israelite was often one of abject fear (see Num. 17:12-13; Deut. 5:25-27). The prophet Isaiah, when he received a vision of God’s holiness, cried out, “Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, . . . and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty.” (Isa. 6:5).

But now, because Christ has atoned for our sin, we have the right to approach God in reverent boldness rather than in fear (Isa. 6:6-7; Eph. 3:12; Heb. 10:22), knowing that he will hear and answer our prayers.

Unit 9 - Jesus the Great High Priest

Hebrews 5:1-10

Text

¹Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

⁴And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

"You are my Son;
today I have become your Father." ^a

⁶And he says in another place,

"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek." ^b

⁷During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

^a 5:5 Psalm 2:7

^b 5:6 Psalm 110:4

Open

☐ Do Have you received any honors or awards in your life? If so, which one(s) are you most proud of?

☐ Is there anything in your family which has been passed down from father to son, or mother to daughter? How many generations does it go back?

Discover

1. What are some ways in which Jesus Christ is like the high priests of the Old Testament (Levitical) priesthood?

2. In what ways is Christ unlike them?

3. In what way(s) are the sacrifices of the Old Testament system like and unlike Christ's own sacrifice?

Like	Unlike

-
4. What do you find in this passage that would encourage you to pray concerning things you care deeply about? Do you do this? Why or why not?

5. Why was it so important for God to unequivocally affirm that he had chosen Aaron as high priest? (see Numbers 17:1-11) Why should it matter to us that Jesus was likewise called by God?

6. Look up these verses from the Gospel of John and summarize what they reveal about Jesus' relationship with God the Father: John 7:18; 8:42; 9:4; 10:18, 25; 12:28, 49; 14:13, 24, 31; 17:4

7. What do the preceding verses have to do with Jesus' death on the cross?

8. What do the following verses tell us about the extent to which Jesus shared our humanity? (Heb. 5:7; John 11:33-36; Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 26:38)

9. In what sense did Jesus "learn" obedience through suffering? (vs. 8) What was the result? (vs. 9)

10. How has the experience of suffering in your life affected your relationship with God?

Close

☐ Is there something in your life that you believe God is calling you to do? How are you responding to Him?

☐ When you see others who are struggling with sin or dealing with a spiritual issue, what is your attitude toward them?

Commentary

v.1 ***"Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people"*** The role of the high priest is fundamentally that of a surrogate. He comes before God on behalf of the people, and the "gifts and sacrifices" he offers are intended to be received as if they had come, not from himself alone, but from the community whom he represents.

The point here is that, in order to legitimately fill this position, the priest must himself be a member of the community. He can only represent those of his own kind, those with whom he is essentially linked. Thus in order for Christ to become our high priest, it was necessary for him to share fully in our humanity; to be made like us "in every way" (Heb. 2:14, 17).

The references to the high priest being "selected" and "appointed" foreshadow the argument of verses 4-6, i.e., that this is not a vocation which one chooses, or for which one may qualify by training or education. Only those whom God chooses and calls are eligible, and Christ met this requirement.

"to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins."

The focus of this passage is the priest's ministry on the Day of Atonement (Heb. 9:7-9; see Lev. 16). The offerings brought by the priest, including a bull, rams and goats, were intended to make *atonement*; that is, to render payment for sin and satisfy the demands of God's justice.

The value of such old covenant sacrifices were entirely anticipatory: they had no force or power in themselves, but were effective only as they looked forward to Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Heb. 7:27; 9:26). As Heb. 10:4 makes clear, *"it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."* (see 10:11)

v.2 ***"He is able to deal gently . . . since he himself is subject to weakness."*** This verse echoes 4:15: because he is subject to the same human frailties as those on whose behalf he ministers, and is likewise open to the same temptation to go astray from God (see Isa. 53:6), the high priest is able to offer not only absolution, but compassion as well. This calls to mind Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which he warns that even those who are spiritually mature need to take care when (gently) correcting the sins of others, lest they themselves be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

v.3 ***"This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins"*** The requirement that the high priest offer sacrifices for his own sins (Lev. 9:7; 16:6, 11; Heb. 9:7) is the point at which the *type* of the Old Testament priest diverges from its *antitype*, or fulfillment, in Christ. Like the former priests, Christ knew temptation (2:18); but unlike them, he never yielded to it (4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22).

v.4 ***"no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God"*** As seen throughout Hebrews, the relationship of Old Covenant shadows (Heb. 10:1; Col. 2:17) to New Covenant reality is one of both continuity and discontinuity; of similar and dissimilar elements. Here a point of similarity is highlighted: that a priest must be called and ordained by God, rather than arrogating to himself the honor of interceding between God and man. Only God's prior endorsement can invest the priest's ministry with authenticity and legitimacy.

Aaron and his sons were called and set apart in this way (Ex. 28:1; Nu. 3:10). They were to continue in their office for "all generations to come" (Ex. 40:15); Hebrews 10:1 tells us that their ministry continued "year after year". This underscores the fact that the priesthood was by God's election, since most of Aaron's descendants were not even in existence, and thus had no power to choose their vocation, when this appointment to the priesthood was given.

God's choice of Aaron was powerfully affirmed when Korah, Dathan and Abiram led a rebellion against him and against Moses, claiming that they had not been appointed by God, but instead had willfully elevated themselves over the assembly in order to lord it over them. The dramatic downfall of these rebels both silenced and refuted their accusations (Num. 16:1-35). The budding of Aaron's staff reinforced the same point (Num. 17:1-11).

v.5 ***"In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my son; today I have become your Father'"*** This quote is from Psalm 2:7. As noted in the commentary on Heb. 1:5, the designation "Son" does not here refer to the relationship between the members of the Trinity; it is a coronation title which accompanied Jesus' exaltation and ascension to the throne of David as our eternal King. The point is that, just as Aaron and his descendants were appointed by God to the priesthood, so also was Christ. As Jesus makes clear, he did not confer this glory upon himself, but received it from the Father as a consequence of his obedience (Jn. 8:50, 54; 13:31-32; 17:1; see Phlp. 2:6). This is consistent with Jesus' statements that his ministry, his words and works, were all accomplished in response to the Father's will, and in pursuance of the Father's glory (Jn. 7:18; 8:42; 9:4; 10:18, 25; 12:28, 49; 14:13, 24, 31; 17:4).

As the incarnation was the time when Jesus willingly humbled himself (Phlp. 2:7-8), so his resurrection and ascension were the time when God the Father exalted and glorified him (Heb. 2:9; 12:2; Mk. 16:19; Acts 2:32-36; 5:31; Phlp. 2:9-11).

v. 6 ***“And he says . . . You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”***
Although the manner of Christ’s appointment to the priesthood was like Aaron’s, his priesthood was not of the Aaronic order. Not only did he not meet the qualifications, being of the tribe of Judah rather than Levi, but his priesthood was of a different kind altogether, as will be more fully developed in chapter 7. However, it is the similarity, rather than the difference, which is in view here, and the point is the same as in the previous verse; that Christ’s priesthood came about by decree of the Father.

v. 7 ***“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth”***
In the preceding context (4:14; 5:5-6), the focus was on Jesus’ post-resurrection life and ministry; his ascension, glorification, and intercession in heaven. This phrase (literally, “in the days of his flesh”) indicates that the point of reference is now shifting back to the time prior to his death.

“he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears” The Greek word rendered “offered up” was a technical term used to describe the offering of sacrificial animals in Jewish ceremonies. By its use, a parallel is being drawn between the ministry of the Levitical priest and Christ’s sacrificial offering of his own sufferings and death (see 7:27).

The intensity of anguish expressed in these words validates the author’s point that in order to become our high priest, Christ entered fully into the human condition, not sparing himself even the depths of mental and emotional torment.

Is this a reference to a specific event, or is it a more general description of Jesus’ earthly ministry as a whole? Either is possible: Christ was “*deeply moved and troubled*” at the death of Lazarus (John 11:33-36), and he wept openly when he contemplated the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). However, in the context of Hebrews, in which the focus is on Christ’s supreme act of faithfulness on the cross, it is difficult not to read this as an allusion to the sufferings of his final days. Matthew tells us that in Gethsemane he declared “*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death*” (Mt. 26:38), and Luke writes that “*being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground*” (Lk. 22:44). Jesus’ cry on the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mk. 15:34), may also be in view.

“to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard” Here we have another interpretive question: was Jesus praying to be delivered *from* death (i.e., to escape physical death), or to be delivered *out of* death (i.e. to be resurrected)? Either

is grammatically possible, but since we are told that he was “heard,” indicating that his petition was granted, the second is more likely (see Jn. 12:27; Heb. 11:19, 35; 13:20).

v. 8 ***“Son though he was”*** The word “though” points to the fact that Christ, in spite of his divinity, willingly accepted the suffering and death required by obedience to the Father. The same thought is found in Philippians 2:6-8, which tells us that Christ Jesus, “*being in very nature God,*” nevertheless “*humbl[ed] himself by becoming obedient to death.*”

“he learned obedience from what he suffered” Here, the meaning of the verb “learned” is not that of acquiring new knowledge through instruction or observation. Rather, it signifies the act of appropriating truth by living it, bringing truth out of the realm of the abstract and into one’s own personal history and experience. A similar usage is found in 1 Tim. 5:4, in which Paul instructs that the children and grandchildren of widows “*should learn . . . to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family,*” indicating that they need not only to understand their obligations, but to carry them out as well (see Phlp. 4:11-12; Titus 3:14).

v. 9 ***“and, once made perfect”*** The word “perfect” here expresses the idea of completeness, or of reaching a goal. Throughout his life, and specifically in the events of the passion week, which culminated in his suffering on the cross, Jesus perfectly fulfilled Old Testament prophecy (Lk. 24:26-27), obeyed the word of God without exception, and accomplished all that the Father had called him to do; as Christ stated on the cross, “*It is finished!*” (Jn. 19:30). Therefore, he became fully qualified to serve as our savior and high priest (Heb. 2:10; 7:28).

“he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” The salvation which comes through Christ is everlasting, in contrast to the temporary passing over of sins which was accomplished through the Old Covenant sacrificial system (see Heb. 10:11-14).

The characterization of Christ’s followers as those who “obey” rather than those who “believe” is consistent with the purpose of this epistle, which is to warn those who consider themselves Christians not to drift away; not to cease walking in faithfulness to him (see 2:1). Possessing saving faith and persevering in active obedience are inseparable (Heb. 3:12-14; 5:11; 6:11-12).

Unit 10 - Warning Against Falling Away

Hebrews 5:11-6:8

Text

¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

¹ Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, ^a and of faith in God, ² instruction about cleansing rites, ^b the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And God permitting, we will do so.

⁴ It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ and who have fallen ^c away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ⁷ Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

^a 6:1 Or from useless rituals

^b 6:2 Or about baptisms

^c 6:6 Or age, ⁶ if they fall

Open

☐ What teachers from high school or college had a significant influence on you?

☐ Are you (or is someone in your family) a gardener? What do you cultivate?

Discover

1. How does the author of Hebrews contrast the actual spiritual condition of his readers with what it ought to be? (vv.11-14)

What it is	What it should be

2. Has their spiritual condition changed? If so, how? (see 10:32-34)

3. Compare this passage with Philippians 3:12-16 and Ephesians 4:13-14. Taken together, what do they tell us about the trajectory of a "normal" Christian life?

How does your own life compare to this pattern?

4. Doctrine of Perseverance. The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. In preparation for understanding vv. 6:4-8, what do these passages tell us about the believer's continuation in the faith?

John 6:37-40

Philippians 1:6

John 10:28-29

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Romans 8:35-39

2 Timothy 4:18

1 Corinthians 1:8-9

1 John 5:18

In summary, what do these passages tell us about:

- whose will and initiative brings us to faith
- whose power our continuation in the faith depends on
- the extent of God's commitment to keeping us in the faith
- the possibility that one who belongs to God will be eternally lost

5. How do the Scriptures explain the phenomena of those who, to all appearances, are committed members of the Christian community, but who at some point abandon the faith? (see Mt. 7:21-23; 1 Jn. 2:19; 2 Pet. 2:20-21)

6. In your own words, how would the phrases in vv. 4-5 be understood if they are taken as describing: (A) one who is definitely a believer, or (B) a member of the Christian community who may or may not have come to the point of saving faith:

(A)

(B)

7. Is there a point at which it becomes impossible for someone to repent and turn to Christ? (vv. 4-6)

8. What will happen to those who receive good things from God, but who continually fail to produce good fruit? (v. 8; see Jn. 15:5-6; Heb. 10:26-27, 12:29)

Close

☐ Are you passing on to other believers your knowledge of Christ and your experience of him? If not, how can you begin?

☐ Does it cause you concern to know that those who had previously been a part of the Christian community, and who professed Christ, could fall away? Why or why not?

Commentary

This passage begins the third major division of Hebrews, 5:11-10:39, in which the central theme of Jesus' priesthood is developed. It is composed of three units: introduction (5:11-6:20), doctrinal teaching (chs. 7-9), and application (10:1-18). The first unit, 5:11-6:20, can be further divided into two sections: In 5:11-6:8, the community is reproved for their lack of maturity and warned of the consequences of falling away; in the second section, 6:9-20, the focus shifts to the rewards of persevering in faith.

- v. 11 ***"We have much to say about this"*** The "this" referred to here is Christ's priesthood in the order of Melchizedek, a theme which the author will return to in chapter 7.

"but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand." The word translated "hard to make clear" is used in Greek literature to describe matters that are inherently complex or obscure, such as the colors of light or the interpretation of dreams. Here it indicates that the readers' lack of receptivity to the truth is making an advanced topic even more difficult to communicate.

The phrase translated "you no longer try to understand" (ESV, "*you have become dull of hearing*") implies that there has been a change from their previous condition, when they eagerly attended to God's word and put it into practice (see 10:32-34). These are not first-time hearers of the gospel who have never responded; they are men and women who were once ardent followers of Christ, but whose initial fervor has cooled. This puts them in a spiritually precarious position; in the imagery of the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:18-23), they are in danger of showing themselves to be the seed which "sprang up quickly," but which eventually withered under the hot sun because it had no root.

- v. 12 ***"though by this time you ought to be teachers"*** A formal teaching position or office is not in view here; rather, the assumption is that those who are further along in the faith have a responsibility to pass their knowledge and experience on to others (see Rom. 15:4; Col. 3:16). This implies that growth and positive change are the normative experience of the believer; choosing to remain in a state of doctrinal and spiritual infancy is not a legitimate option.

"you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again." This assessment is ironic, not literal. They are not actually in need of basic instruction, but are behaving as if they were. If they truly needed a refresher in fundamental principles, the author of Hebrews presumably would have given them one; instead, he explicitly does the opposite (see 6:1, 3).

- vv. 13-14 ***"not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness"*** The meaning of the phrase, "*the teaching about righteousness*" (literally, "the word of righteousness") is unclear. "Righteousness" could refer to right standing; i.e., the positional righteousness which believers have through Christ, our high priest and perfect sacrifice (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; see Heb. 10:10, 14; 11:7). Or, it could refer to right conduct; i.e. behavior which is morally, ethically, and spiritually mature (see 12:11). The second interpretation would be consistent with the idea that the practice of making distinctions between good and evil is characteristic of mature believers (v. 14). Note that this capacity is one which requires training and development, highlighting again that the Christian life is one of continuing change and growth (see v. 12). Or perhaps *the word of righteousness* is simply shorthand for the complete body of Christian doctrine.

- vv. 1-2 ***"Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings . . . not laying again the foundation"*** The author is not advising his readers to abandon or disregard the foundational doctrines of the faith; rather, he is urging them to regard those truths as just that: a foundation upon which to build. The basics having been established, they should press onward and not be content with what they have already learned and practiced (compare with Paul's statement of this principle in Philp. 3:12-16; see also Eph. 4:13-14).

"teachings about Christ" In the Greek, this phrase is literally, "teachings of Christ". Grammatically, then, it could refer to Christ's own words as recorded in the gospels, and also to his teaching as mediated by the Spirit of Christ through the New Testament authors (see Jn. 16:12-15; also Lk. 6:47-48). If, on the other hand, the phrase is translated as here in the NIV, it would refer to the Christian message in general, since all Christian doctrine is ultimately about Christ (1 Cor. 3:11).

Note that the elements of this fundamental set of teachings as listed here can be grouped into three pairs: inner transformation (repentance and faith), church practices (baptism and laying on of hands), and matters concerning the future (resurrection and judgment). This may reflect the traditional grouping of topics for the instruction of new believers in this faith community.

The phrase "cleansing rites" could also be translated "baptisms" (see text note). The use of the plural has generated much discussion; the most likely reference is to the baptisms of John and Jesus, or perhaps to the difference between Christian baptism and Jewish proselyte baptism.

vv. 4-8 This portion of Scripture touches on a question of keen spiritual interest: can a believer, once saved, fall away from the faith and be eternally lost? The theological and Biblical context for this passage is the doctrine of *perseverance*. Just as spiritual regeneration and saving faith are the works of God, not man, so also our continuance in the faith depends ultimately not on our own strength, but on God's power. In Hebrews, this is reflected in the teaching that our hope of complete and permanent salvation is based on Jesus' continuing intercession on our behalf (7:24-25), and by the assertion that Christ's one sacrifice "*has made perfect forever those who are being made holy*" (10:14; see 10:10).

Likewise, in John's gospel we find assurances that God's people will be kept by the power of Christ, so that they cannot fall away (Jn. 6:37-40; 10:28-29). Paul's writings contain similar statements (Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Cor. 1:8-9; Phlp. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 2 Tim. 4:18; see also 1 Jn. 5:18).

vv. 4-7 ***"those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age."*** The key question here is what persons are in view. To many interpreters, these phrases are self-evidently descriptions of the "experience of personal salvation" (Lane). However, others see in them a description of those who were members of the Christian community, who had been taught the Word, who had seen and experienced the work of the Spirit in the midst of that community, but who may not have been personally regenerate.

As difficult as it is for us to reconcile these descriptions with a person whose heart condition is one of separation from God, we need to remember that this was exactly the position of Judas Iscariot. For three years, he was one of the Twelve, Jesus' inner circle. He saw and experienced the miracles first hand; he heard Jesus' teaching and observed his life as closely as anyone possibly could. None of the others suspected him of having a false heart; to all appearances, he was one of them (see Jn. 13:21-22). And yet, Jesus called him a "devil" (Jn. 6:70) and referred to him as "lost" and "doomed to destruction" (Jn. 17:12).

Similarly, John writes of those who had abandoned the fellowship that,

"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."
(1 Jn. 2:19).

In other words, their departure did not indicate that a change had taken place; rather, it brought to light what their true condition had always been.

In the same way, Jesus says that he will respond to those who call him "Lord," but who do not live in obedience to him, "*I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!*" (Mt. 7:21-23) Note that these are persons who had prophesied in Christ's name, had driven out demons, and had even performed miracles. Yet they are described, not as those who had separated from Christ, but as those who had never known him in the first place.

"It is impossible for those . . . who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance" Concerning those who were at one time members of the Christian community but who subsequently make a decisive break with the faith, there is a point beyond which repentance cannot be attained. A person who sins against light with full knowledge of the truth, who abandons any attempt to walk with Christ and who reverts back to their former way of life, can harden their heart beyond the possibility of change. As Peter writes, such a person's true nature will eventually reassert itself:

"It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: 'A dog returns to its vomit,' and, 'A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.'" (2 Pet. 2:21-22)

"To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

By first claiming the name of Christ and then renouncing him (either explicitly, or by virtue of their dissolute lives), they bring his name into disrepute, in effect aligning themselves with those who rejected his Lordship and clamored for his death (Mt. 27:22).

v. 8 ***"But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned."***

This is reminiscent of Jesus' warning in John 15:5-6. Those whose lives produce, not righteousness, but habitual sin, will be judged by God on the last day and "destroyed" (Heb. 10:39). Such are those who,

"deliberately keep on sinning after [having] received the knowledge of the truth,"

and for whom,

"no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Heb. 10:26-27; see 12:29).

Unit 11 - The Certainty of God's Promise

Hebrews 6:9-20

Text

⁹ Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation.

¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

¹³ When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.”^a

¹⁵ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. ¹⁸ God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. ¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

^a6:14 Gen. 22:17

Open

☐ Do you consider yourself to be a patient person? Why or why not?

☐ Tell about a time that you waited a long time for something, and finally obtained it.

Discover

1. Of what is the author “confident” concerning those to whom he is writing? Why?

2. Prior to this point in the letter, would his readers have had reasons to doubt his assessment of them? Why or why not?

3. How do you explain the author’s seeming shift in attitude toward his readers?

4. What do these passages tell us about the link between love and service?

Matthew 10:40-42

1 John 3:10, 3:14, 3:17-19, 4:7

1 Thessalonians 1:3

-
5. Why do you think the author includes the example of Abraham? In other words, how does this example advance his purpose in writing the letter?

6. What do these verses tell us about God's truthfulness?

Numbers 23:19

John 17:17

John 7:28

1 John 5:20

John 8:13-18

Revelation 6:10

Given this, why would it be necessary for God to swear an oath to affirm his promise?

7. What does it mean to "flee" to God? (v. 18) Are you fleeing to God or away from Him? Why?

8. In what sense was Abraham patient? What did he receive as the reward for his patience?

9. How do you understand the term "hope" in this passage? What does it represent?

10. How is Christ the guarantor of our hope? (See Heb. 4:14, 6:20, 9:12)

11. How is he the content, or object, of our hope? (See 1 Tim. 1:1; see also 2 Cor. 1:20, 1 Pet. 1:3-5)

Close

☐ What do you find most encouraging about this passage? If you truly took these things to heart, how would it change your life?

☐ How do the promises of God act as an "anchor" in your life?

Commentary

Having warned of the consequences of falling away, the author now adopts a more encouraging tone, portraying God's promises as reliable and certain, and thus worthy of our persevering faith.

- v. 9 ***"Even though we speak like this, dear friends"*** Although it was necessary for the author to warn them severely of the consequences of apostasy (since they had lately exhibited worrisome signs of spiritual lassitude; 5:11), his words are not the indictment of a prosecutor, nor the condemnation of a judge, but rather the loving rebuke of a faithful friend who earnestly desires their welfare (vv. 11-12).

"we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation." The "better things" of which the author is confident on their behalf, i.e., salvation and eternal blessing, are those just mentioned in v. 7 (see also v. 12).

We might be tempted here to accuse the author of schizophrenia. Does he consider his readers to be in Christ, or not? The reason for this seeming inconsistency is the ambiguity of the evidence. He is ultimately persuaded in his own mind that they are indeed believers, for the reasons he refers to in verse 10. However, their current behavior is not characteristic of regenerate persons, and so a warning is justified.

We would do well similarly to exercise restraint in pronouncing judgment, either favorably or unfavorably, on the spiritual condition of professing believers. Only God knows the heart.

- v. 10 ***"he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people"*** Their faithful service to the people of God was a demonstration of the genuineness of their love, not only for one another, but for God Himself (see 1 Jn. 3:10, 14, 17-19, 4:7; also 1 Thess. 1:3). Their love revealed that they were among those who had come to share in Christ and would thus share in His blessings. This echoes the teaching of Jesus:

"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. . . . And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."
(Matthew 10:40-42)

This love was clearly seen when they ministered to those of their number who were persecuted for the faith (10:32-34), as in so doing they publicly identified themselves as belonging to Christ.

- v. 11 ***"We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end"*** The appeal to "each of you" is a reminder that it is not enough to belong to a faith community; the responsibility to walk with God is an individual one. Each one of us is accountable for his or her own actions.

Likewise, the phrase "to the very end" warns us that beginning well is not sufficient. We must also continue and end well, lest we suffer the fate of the ancient Israelites, who left to Egypt on a journey toward Canaan, but who ultimately failed to enter it due to their lack of persevering faith and obedience (Heb. 3:12-19; 4:6; see also Mk. 13:13).

"so that what you hope for may be fully realized." This could refer to an *objective* certainty; i.e. that by faithful diligence their hope would come to fulfillment. This would be consistent with 10:36, *"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."* Alternatively, it could refer to a *subjective* certainty; that is, an inner conviction of belonging to Christ that is buttressed by the external evidence of a faithful life (see 1 Jn. 1:3).

- v. 12 ***"imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."*** In the immediate context of vv. 13-15, as well as the larger context of Hebrews (e.g., chapter 11), the reference here is to the Old Testament patriarchs and matriarchs, whose lives are examples of continued faith and obedience in the face of disappointment and suffering. As God was faithful to keep his promises to them, so also will he be faithful to keep his promises to us as we follow in their spiritual footsteps.

In the verses which follow, Abraham's experience is presented as the example *par excellence* of this principle.

- vv. 13-14 ***"When God made his promise to Abraham"*** The reference here is to Genesis 22:16-17. After Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice Isaac, only to have God provide a sacrificial ram to offer in his place, God made a promise to Abraham, emphasizing it with an oath.

What is the significance of God's oath? First, it affirmed that his resolve to do what he promised was absolute and irrevocable, thus serving as an encouragement to faith (see v. 18). In swearing by himself, God linked the fulfillment of his promise to his character, his essential nature as one who is true and the source of truth (Nu. 23:19; Jn. 7:28, 17:17; 1 Jn. 5:20, Rev. 6:10).

In addition, the oath satisfied the later requirement of the Law that there be two witnesses in order to establish any fact (Dt. 17:6, see Heb. 10:28). In this case, the two witnesses would be the promise itself and the oath which affirmed it.

v. 15 The implicit assumption here is that, although there are significant distinctions between the old and new covenants, and although the details of our specific circumstances vary greatly, there is nevertheless a fundamental consistency in how God deals with his people throughout the ages. Therefore, from the example of how God dealt with the Abraham eons ago, we can legitimately draw spiritual insight for our lives today (see Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11).

One lesson which the author wishes us to draw is that God's greatest blessings often come after a long period of waiting, suffering, perseverance, and repeated disappointments, during which our faith is severely tested, and throughout which we must continually look to God to sustain our hope. Seldom do we know how long we must endure; all we know for certain is that we cannot do it in our own strength, and that the reward will be worth the struggle, as God will certainly do what He has said.

"And so after waiting patiently" The conclusion ("and so") could refer back to v. 13, in which case the meaning would be that, "God swore an oath, and thus his promise came to pass," or it could refer back to v. 12, in which case the meaning would be that, "Abraham persevered in faith, and thus the promise was fulfilled."

Either is grammatically and contextually possible, and both are theologically defensible, since the outcome could be attributed either to God or to Abraham depending on the sense; i.e., the ultimate reason for the fulfillment of God's promises is His own sovereign power in bringing them to pass; however, the faith and obedience of His people is the primary means through which He does so. It may be that both meanings are implied here.

The "patience" of Abraham could refer either to his perseverance in faith throughout the specific trial referenced in Gen. 22, i.e., the command to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering; or more generally, to his patience while waiting for the promise of descendants to be fulfilled. Note that it was twenty-five years after the initial promise before Isaac was born (Gen. 12:2, 4; 21:5), and it would be sixty more years before the births of Esau and Jacob (Gn. 25:26).

"Abraham received what was promised." There are three possible meanings for this clause. First, instead of being translated, *"Abraham received what was promised,"* it could be rendered, *"Abraham received the promise,"* i.e. that as a reward for his faithfulness, Abraham was granted a reaffirmation of the promise he first received in Gen. 12:2. However, in the context of the passage, this seems unlikely, as the author's point is that God can be relied upon to fulfill his promises.

Another possibility is that Abraham "received" what was promised, in the sense that he looked ahead to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises in Christ. This would be supported by John 8:56, *"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."* (see also Gal. 3:8, Heb. 11:13).

However, in the context, the most plausible meaning is that Abraham's faith in God was vindicated by the increase of his physical descendants, just as God had promised. The fulfillment of God's other promises (e.g., the "land" promises), or the greater fulfillment which came later under the new covenant, are likely not in view here.

v. 16 **"People swear . . . and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument."** God accommodated Himself to the common practice of mankind by adding an oath to His promise—although none was necessary, as the word of God stands on its own and does not require corroboration (see Jn. 8:13-18, 17:17; note also Mk. 14:63).

vv. 17-18 **"to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised"** The oath was for our benefit. It was not to bind God, as if otherwise he might default on his promises (for *"it is impossible for God to lie"*); rather, it was to reassure us, who are to receive what was promised, and who are therefore relying on Him for fulfillment, that they cannot fail.

Implicit in these verses is the understanding that such encouragement is truly needed; in other words, that our own emotional, intellectual, and physical resources are not in themselves sufficient to carry us through times of trial. Thus, the promises of God are not merely an aid to faith; they are essential to the Christian life.

vv. 19-20 **"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul"** This hope is not merely a subjective attitude or emotional state; it is not optimism or a vague confidence that somehow everything will work out. Rather, this "hope" is the objective content of God's promises to his people. It is the certainty of these future blessings which keeps us firmly committed to Christ throughout life's storms, regardless of how we feel from day to day.

"It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain" Not only is Christ the *guarantee* of our hope, having suffered for us (5:9) and having preceded us into heaven, where we shall someday follow (4:14, 6:20, 9:12); but He is Himself the *content* of our hope (1 Tim. 1:1; see also 2 Cor. 1:20, 1 Pet. 1:3-5). Thus, everything for which we hope is summed up in the person of Christ, who now stands in the immediate presence of God, ministering on our behalf.

Unit 12 - Melchizedek the Priest

Hebrews 7:1-10

Text

¹ This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, ² and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” ³ Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

⁴ Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! ⁵ Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from

the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸ In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. ⁹ One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, ¹⁰ because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

Open

☐ Can you name a great man or woman who influenced you? What made them “great”?

☐ Do you aspire to greatness? Why or why not?

Discover

1. In your own words, state the main idea(s) of this passage:

2. Read the account of Melchizedek’s encounter with Abraham in the context of Genesis chapter 14. List at least five observations about Melchizedek from this passage

3. Why is it significant that Melchizedek was “without father or mother” and “without genealogy” (v. 3)?

What do these terms mean if taken literally? If taken figuratively?

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4. Why is it significant that Melchizedek was “without beginning of days or end of life”?

What does this phrase mean if taken literally? If taken figuratively?

5. From the descriptions of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:1-10, do you conclude that he was a human being, an angel, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, or something else? Why?

Is this question central to the author's point? Why or why not?

6. What evidence does the author provide as to the greatness of Melchizedek?

In what sense was Melchizedek “great”? Why does his greatness matter?

7. In what way(s) was the priesthood of Melchizedek different than that of the Levitical priests?

8. How is the priesthood of Christ like that of Melchizedek? (see Psalms 110:4)

Close

☐ Think of the person you respect most highly (living or dead). Do you think of Christ as being greater than they, even in the area that you respect them the most?

☐ How would it affect your life if you truly regarded Christ as being the greatest man who ever lived; the one person most worthy of respect, honor, and imitation?

Commentary

The third major division of Hebrews, 5:11-10:39, which considers the theme of Jesus' priesthood, is composed of three units: introduction (5:11-6:20), doctrinal teaching (chs. 7-9), and application (10:1-39).

In chapter 7, the first section of the present unit, an analogy between the nature of Christ's priesthood and that of Melchizedek is developed through the use of *homiletical midrash*. This is a form of sermonic exegesis which focuses on the details of an Old Testament text, seeking to interpret them in a way which is relevant to the readers' (or hearers') current situation.

One feature of midrash is verbal analogy ("*gezerah shawah*"), that is, making a connection between two passages based on the use of the same or similar terms. Here, the narrative of Gen. 14:17-20 is interpreted in light of the reference to Melchizedek in Ps. 110:4, with the point of connection being the name "Melchizedek". [Another example of *gezerah shawah* in Hebrews is Heb. 1:13 / Heb. 2:8, in which the interpretation of Ps. 110:1 and Ps. 8:6 are linked by the terms "footstool / feet".]

The purpose of this passage is to explore the characteristics of the priesthood of Melchizedek, displayed in Gen. 14:17-20, as these are also the characteristics of the priesthood of Christ, which is of the same order (Ps. 110:4). In 7:11-19 the author will carry this argument forward to demonstrate that Christ's new covenant priesthood is therefore superior to the old covenant Levitical priesthood.

The form of the passage is a *chiasm* (so named because when diagrammed, it resembles the Greek letter chi, or "X"). The structure is as follows:

- (v. 1a) The meeting
- (v. 1b) The blessing
- (v. 2) The tithe
- (v. 4b) The tithe
- (v. 6b) The blessing
- (v. 10b) The meeting

Note the similar statements in verses 1 and 10 that Abraham met Melchizedek; this repetition forms an *inclusio* which "bookends" the boundaries of the passage.

- vv. 1-3 The Melchizedek of Genesis 14 is an enigmatic figure. He appears suddenly in the narrative, interacts with the patriarch Abraham, and then disappears from the pages of Scripture as abruptly as he came. No mention is made of his lineage or family background; nor is any explanation given as to the origin of his priestly office. But as we shall see, it is the very silence of the Scriptures concerning these matters that the author of Hebrews appeals to in order to establish his argument.

"king of Salem" Melchizedek was not only a priest, but also a king, holding both the sacred and royal offices (unlike the kings of Israel and Judah). The city of "Salem" has traditionally been taken to refer to Jerusalem (see Ps. 76:2).

"and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything." More is said about this later; for now, we note that Abraham's response indicates that he acknowledged the validity of Melchizedek's priesthood.

Who was Melchizedek? One could take a literal interpretation of the statement that he was "*without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life*," and conclude that he was either an angel or a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ himself, a *theophany*. This interpretation would find support in the translation of the name "Melchizedek" as "king of righteousness" and in his identification as "king of Salem," which is translated "king of peace"; these phrases echo Messianic prophecy (see Isa. 9:7, 32:1; Ps. 45:6-7 / Heb. 1:8). Also, Melchizedek is described as one "who is declared to be living," in contrast to "men who die," i.e., the Levitical priests.

However, it may be that references to the lack of a genealogy for Melchizedek indicate, not that he actually had no parents or ancestors, but only that none were recorded in the Scriptures. Why would this be worthy of mention? Because the Levitical priesthood was transmitted by genealogical succession; one had to be born into the tribe of Levi in order to qualify (Num. 8:5-26). Thus, the lack of any recorded genealogy for Melchizedek would indicate that his priesthood, and by extension that of Christ, is of a different kind than theirs. In the same way, since he did not receive his priesthood by inheritance, he must have been appointed to office directly by God, as was Christ (see 5:4).

In this interpretation, the statement, "*without beginning of days or end of life*" would point to the fact that neither his birth nor death are recorded in Scripture, and that therefore, unlike the Levitical priests whose ministry ceased at the end of their life (7:23), there is no record of either his life or ministry having ended. He has no identified predecessor or successor, and thus, as far as the record of the Scriptures is concerned, he "*remains a priest forever*". Thus his ministry prefigures the priesthood of Christ, whose ministry is in fact eternal (7:24).

An alternate interpretation of the (admittedly difficult) second half of verse 3 is that, although he begins by describing the historical Melchizedek, the author then segues, without a clear transition, into a description of the one whose ministry the priesthood of Melchizedek anticipated; Christ the eternal Son of God.

- v. 4 Note that in vv. 4-10, it is clear that the author of Hebrews regards the events of Gen. 14:18-20 to be historical. The fact that these things actually happened, and that both Abraham and Melchizedek were real people and not mythological figures, is assumed throughout his argument.

This argument can be expressed as follows: (a) Christ's priesthood is of the same kind as that of Melchizedek; (b) Melchizedek was greater than Abraham; and therefore, (c) the priesthood of Christ is greater than the priesthood of Abraham's descendants, the Levites.

The line of reasoning expressed by (b) rests on two points: first, that Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek (and tithes are paid by the lesser to the greater), and second, that Melchizedek blessed Abraham (and blessings are given by the greater to the lesser).

The greatness of Melchizedek is further emphasized in two ways, first, by the explicit exhortation, "*Just think how great he was!*", and second, by the fact that the tithe Abraham paid was not merely a tenth, but by implication the best part, as seen by the Greek term used (*akrothiniōn*, which elsewhere in ancient literature is rendered "first fruits").

"the patriarch Abraham" The word order in Greek highlights Abraham's identity as patriarch, placing this designation at the end of the sentence for emphasis: literally, "*to whom a tenth Abraham gave of the plunder, the patriarch*". Abraham's patriarchy, his position as progenitor of all who followed, is central to the author's argument. For not only was Melchizedek superior to Abraham himself, but by extension, to all who were descended from him, including Levi and the priests of the Levitical order.

- vv. 5-6a These verses contain the first of two supporting pillars for the argument that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham; i.e., that Abraham paid him a tithe.

In contrast to the Levitical priests, whose authority to receive tithes rested on a specific provision of the Law (Nu. 18:21-24), Melchizedek's right to do so did not depend on any part of the Mosaic legal code. Not only was his priesthood of a different kind than theirs, but his ministry existed entirely outside the framework of Old Testament law.

Also the Levitical priests were "fellow Israelites" (ESV, "brothers") with those from whom they received tithes; therefore, both groups were genealogically subordinate to their common ancestor, Abraham. Melchizedek, however, was not descended from Abraham, nor did he receive the tithe from one of Abraham's descendants, but from Abraham himself.

- vv. 6b-7 The second support for the argument that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham (and therefore to his descendants, the Levitical priests) is that Melchizedek blessed him, since **"the lesser is blessed by the greater"** (see 11:20-21; for other examples, see Gen. 31:55; 32:29; 47:10; Lev. 9:22). The superiority in view here is that of status and honor, rather than age, wealth, or character.

The designation of Abraham as **"him who had the promises"** is significant. In the immediate context, it implies a contrast between the law, under which the Levitical priests ministered and received tithes, and the promises of God to Abraham, which preceded the law. In the overall context of Hebrews, the promises of God are seen as powerful and certain (6:13-18; 10:23), while the law is characterized as weak and ineffective (7:11, 18-19; compare Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:21).

- v. 8 This verse presents another contrast between the Levitical priests and Melchizedek, one that surely clinches the argument concerning which one is superior: while the first received tithes only as long as they lived (and their ministries were in fact all limited by death, 7:23), the second is **"declared to be living"** (i.e., by Scripture; specifically, Gen. 14:18-20 and Ps. 110:4). This is an argument from silence: the lack of any mention in Scripture of an end to the life and priesthood of Melchizedek is taken as a positive statement that his days and his ministry had no end.

This rather startling declaration can be taken in one of two ways. If taken literally, it would imply that Melchizedek was either an angel or Christ himself, or that he was a man who was spared death, as Enoch was. If taken figuratively, it would have the sense that *as far as we are told in the Scriptures*, there was never any end to the life or ministry of this person, so that within the boundaries of the Biblical record itself, they can be said to have had no end.

- vv. 9-10 **"One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham"** The line of reasoning here is that Abraham's act of offering the tithe, and its implicit recognition of the greater stature of Melchizedek, can be imputed to all of Abraham's descendants, including Levi. In other words, when he offered the tithe, Abraham represented, not only himself, but all who would be united with him through physical descent (see Rom. 5:12). Thus the Levites, who received tithes, can be said to have themselves offered a tithe to Melchizedek. And so, both they and Abraham are shown to be subordinate to Melchizedek, and by extension, to Christ.

Unit 13 - Jesus Like Melchizedek

Hebrews 7:11-28

Text

¹¹ If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. ¹³ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is declared:

*"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek."* ^a

¹⁸ The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

²⁰ And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

*"The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
'You are a priest forever.'"* ^b

²² Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

²³ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.

²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely ^c those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

²⁶ Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

^a 7:17 Psalm 110:4

^b 7:21 Psalm 110:4

^c 7:25 Psalm Or forever

Open

☐ If you could enact one law that everyone would have to obey, what would it be?

☐ Do you have a "life list" of things you would like to do before you die? What are some of the things on the list?

Discover

1. What is the author's main idea in this passage?

2. Why is it significant that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, and not Levi?

3. What does this passage tell us concerning the superiority of Christ's priesthood?

4. What do these passages tell us about the cleansing offered by the Law?

Hebrews 7:18-19

Hebrews 10:1-4

Hebrews 9:9-10

Romans 8:3

5. What do these passages reveal about the continuing validity of the Old Testament Law?

Hebrews 7:18

Ephesians 2:15

Colossians 2:14

6. What else does Hebrews 7:11-28 tell us about the Old Testament Law and priesthood?

7. What was Jesus' qualification for the priesthood (vv. 15-16)?

8. What do the following passages tell us about the power of Jesus' life?

Hebrews 7:24-25

1 Corinthians 15:26

Romans 6:9

1 Corinthians 15:54-55

Romans 8:38

2 Timothy 1:10

9. What did the sacrifice of Christ accomplish?

Hebrews 7:27

Colossians 1:22

Romans 5:10

2 Timothy 1:10

2 Corinthians 5:18

Close

☐ What are you relying on to make yourself acceptable to God? How well do you feel it is working?

☐ What does it mean to you to have Christ as your "priest"? What kind of priest do you need?

Commentary

Chapter 7 is composed of three paragraphs. The terms “perfection” and “perfect” in vv. 11 and 19, and the repetition of “law” in both verses, mark the beginning and end of the second paragraph. These terms also highlight the paragraph’s main theme, i.e., the utter inability of the Levitical priesthood and Old Testament Law to bring about the perfect righteousness that God requires (see Mt. 5:20; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-11).

In these verses, and continuing through the end of the chapter, the author bases his argument on a *typological* relationship between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Christ. A *type* is an Old Testament person or event which foreshadows, in a temporary and limited way, that which is later to come in the person of Christ and in the realities of the New Covenant. Here, the transitory and impotent nature of the Levitical priesthood is contrasted with the eternal and fully effective priesthood of Christ, which supersedes and replaces it.

- vv. 11-12 **“If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood . . . why was there still need for another priest to come”** The fact that the one whose coming was prophesied in Ps. 110:4 was not of the Levitical and Aaronic order is evidence that the first priesthood must have been faulty. For why else would a new priest need to be called from a different order, that of Melchizedek? Note that the failure of the Levitical priesthood was not merely one of execution, but of its essential character; in other words, the problem was not merely that the Levitical priesthood failed to achieve its purpose, but that it was by its very nature incapable of doing so (see Heb. 10:1, 4).

“the law given to the people established that priesthood” This phrase anticipates the principle asserted in v. 12, that “*when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.*” Here we see that the author’s purpose is more radical than merely proposing a change of priests. That would not be sufficient, for the Mosaic law and its priesthood (whose function was an inherent part of the legal and sacrificial system established by that law) are inextricably linked. Thus, if a change in either one is required, there must of necessity be a change in both.

Note that the author does not state that the *principle* of law has been abolished; only that a *change* of law has taken place. This verse, therefore, provides no support for *antinomianism*, the idea that Christians are not subject to the moral law of God. In fact, although the apostle Paul spoke of himself as “*not under the law*”, he was quick to clarify that he was “*not free from God’s law but . . . under Christ’s law*” (1 Cor. 9:20-21; see 1 Cor. 7:19).

- vv. 13-14 The fact that Christ has been called by God as high priest (4:14; 5:9-11), despite his not being descended from Levi, but rather from Judah (Mt. 1:2), demonstrates that the change of priesthood referred to in v. 12, and the associated change of law which it implies, have now taken place. Further, since the Old Testament law makes no reference to any descendants of Judah serving as priests, it is impossible to claim that the priesthood of Christ has anything to do with that law.

- vv. 15-16 **“who has become a priest . . . on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.”** The basis of Christ’s calling as high priest was not his lineage, a “regulation as to his ancestry”; rather, his qualification for priestly office was the power of his life, a power that could not be vanquished even by death, as proven by his resurrection and continuing ministry (Heb. 7:24-25; see Rom. 6:9; 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:26, 54-55; 2 Tim. 1:10).

- v. 17 The purpose of quoting Ps. 110:4 here is to emphasize the unending character of Christ’s life and priesthood; he is a priest “forever”.

- vv. 18 **“The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless”** The phrase “former regulation” does not refer to a specific command, as if only a part of the Old Testament law had been found wanting. Rather, it refers to the entire Mosaic legal and sacrificial system, with special emphasis on the Levitical priesthood. The whole edifice of laws and sacrifices had been found to be “weak and useless;” they were incapable of bridging the distance between sinful people and a holy God, because they could cleanse only the outward person and not the heart (Heb. 9:9-10; 10:1-4; see Rom. 8:3).

As a result, that law is now “set aside” (Gr. *athétēsis*, variously translated as “cancellation” (Phillips), “abolition” (JB), “abrogation” (NRSV), or “annulling” (NKJV)). This is consistent with other New Testament passages which speak of the law of Moses as being “abolished” (Eph. 2:15), or “cancelled” (Col. 2:14).

- v. 19 **“for the law made nothing perfect”** The failure of the law, and of the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests under the law, to bring about moral and spiritual purity was absolute; there is not a single case in history of its ever succeeding in that task. Nor could it do so, for “*it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (10:4; see Rom. 3:20). In fact, the law had precisely the opposite effect! As Paul writes in Romans, sin used the law to increase sin and bring about death (Rom. 7:7-13). Thus the power of sin doomed the entire system to failure from the beginning.

“and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” Under the law, anyone (even a priest) who entered into God’s presence without first being ritually purified of sin would be put to death (see Ex. 30:20-21; Lev. 8:7; 19:12-13; 22:6, 9). This was due to the absolute holiness of God, and the separation between man and God resulting from our sin (Ex. 19:10-12; 1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6-7).

However, even that symbolic cleansing was temporary and ultimately ineffective; Job’s question, “*How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure?*” (Job 25:4) had still not been answered. But now we have a hope of cleansing from sin which is better than the hope offered under the Law. It is better because it is final and complete, not having to be repeated day after day, year after year (Heb. 7:27; 10:1). It is also better because it removes our guilt, not merely symbolically but actually, resulting in our being declared righteous in God’s sight (see Rom. 4:5-8; 5:17, 19; Gal. 2:16). As a result, we can enter God’s presence “*with confidence*” (Heb. 4:16; see 10:19-22), knowing that we will not be destroyed, but welcomed.

vv. 20-28 As the limits of the previous paragraph were marked by the terms “perfection” and “perfect,” the boundaries of this paragraph are identified by repetition of the term “oath”.

vv. 20-22 Psalm 110:4 is referenced once again to provide additional evidence of the superiority of Christ’s priesthood; i.e., that it was inaugurated with an oath, whereas the Levitical priesthood was not. God’s oath signifies that he has invested the priesthood of Christ with his own authority and power; therefore, Christ can guarantee completely the covenant of which he is now the mediator, a covenant which is superior to the one previously in effect.

The finality and absolute reliability of God’s commitment to Christ, and thus to the new covenant, is emphasized by the assurance that the Lord “**will not change his mind**” (see 6:16-18). The new covenant will never be superseded or abrogated; its promises and purposes cannot fail.

So far, the author has spoken of a change in priesthood and a change in law (7:12), but he now asserts for the first time a change in covenant, an alteration in the fundamental agreement governing the relationship between God and mankind. Note that over half of the New Testament occurrences of the Greek word *diathēkē*, “covenant,” are found in this epistle, underscoring its importance in Hebrews; this theme will be developed further in 8:6 and following.

vv. 23-25 The central idea of these verses is that Jesus, possessing an eternal priesthood, is able to convey to his people an eternal salvation. In contrast to the many priests of the old covenant whose ministries were inevitably limited by death, the new covenant requires only one priest; none other is needed, since Christ lives forever. The incompleteness and imperfection of priestly ministry under the old covenant is thus contrasted with the ministry of Christ, who has a permanent priesthood, and is “**able to save completely those who come to God through him**”.

The view of salvation in Hebrews is primarily *eschatological*; i.e. it is focused on our future deliverance from the judgment of God, and on our ultimate participation in the blessings of God in the eternal state (see 1:14; 4:9-11; 6:11-12, 18-20; 9:11, 15, 28; 10:35-39). However, the priestly ministry of Christ is not limited to the future; Christ “**always lives**,” both now and forever, to intercede on our behalf. He is our eternal advocate before God the Father, effectually pleading the case that we should not be condemned, as the sacrifice of his death has paid the price for our sin (Rom. 8:34).

Note that the phrase in v. 25 translated as “completely” in the NIV could also be rendered “forever” (see note **c** in the text). The first option emphasizes the qualitative extent of salvation; i.e., that it fully comprehends every aspect of our existence: mind, body, and spirit, leaving no part of us unredeemed or unacceptable to God. The alternate translation highlights the fact that salvation is temporally unlimited, i.e., that it has no end. This seems more consistent with the immediate context.

v. 26 The phrase translated here as “**meets our need**” carries the connotation of “fitting” or “appropriate”. Just as it was right and necessary for the Savior of mankind to share fully in human nature (2:14-18), so also is it completely appropriate, and also needful, that he be distinct from us in respect to sin (see v. 27; 4:15). Note that the ritual purity and physical wholeness required of the Levitical priests (Lev. 21:17) were only shadows which anticipated the true moral and spiritual perfection of Christ.

v. 27 The ultimate evidence of the superiority of Christ’s priesthood is seen in the sacrifice which lies at its center. Not the endless slaughtering of dumb animals, repeated time and time again, never accomplishing its purpose; but rather the voluntary offering up of God’s own Son, which reconciled mankind to God and annihilated death itself, in one never-to-be-repeated stroke (see Rom. 5:10; 6:9; 1 Cor. 15:26, 54-55; 2 Cor. 5:18; Col. 1:22; 2 Tim. 1:10).

Unit 14 - The High Priest of a New Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

Text

¹ Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.

³ Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. ⁴ If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵ They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."^a ⁶ But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said^b:

"The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

⁹ *It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.*

¹⁰ *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

¹¹ *No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*

¹² *For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*^c

¹³ *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*

^a 8:5 Exodus 25:40

^b 8:8 Some manuscripts may be translated *fault and said to the people.*

^c 8:12 Jer. 31:31-34

Open

☐ Do you like trying new things, or do you prefer the "tried and true"?

☐ Name a favorite possession you've had for years (not your spouse!). Why do you like it?

Discover

1. Verse 1 states that Christ is seated "at the right hand" of God's throne in heaven. What do these Old Testament references tell us about the meaning of this phrase?

Genesis 48:17-18

Psalms 63:8

Exodus 15:6

Psalms 108:6

Psalms 16:11

Psalms 138:7

Psalms 18:35

Isaiah 41:10

-
2. What do these New Testament passages teach about Christ's position at the right hand of God?

Acts 2:33

Romans 8:34

Acts 5:31

1 Peter 3:22

3. Compare the offerings brought into the earthly tabernacle by the Levitical priests to the offering brought into the heavenly sanctuary by Christ (vv. 3-4).

4. What does it mean to say that the sanctuary in which the Levitical priests ministered was a "copy and shadow" of what is in heaven? (v. 5; see Ex. 25:40)

5. Review these passages: Exodus chapter 26, Exodus 40:36-38, Numbers 33:1-49. What do they indicate about the relative permanence of the Old Testament tabernacle? Why is this significant?

6. How are the promises under the new covenant "superior" to those under the old covenant? (v. 6)

7. What does it mean for Christ to serve as a "mediator" (v. 6; 1 Tim. 2:5-6)? Why is a mediator needed?

8. What was wrong with the first covenant? (v. 7)

9. What does calling the new covenant "new" imply about the old covenant? (v. 13)

Close

☐ How would you describe the difference between a relationship with God that is based on law-keeping versus one that is from the heart?

☐ Have you ever found yourself trying to earn God's acceptance by keeping rules and regulations? What was the result?

Commentary

The third major division of Hebrews, 5:11-10:39, deals with Jesus' priesthood and is composed of three units: introduction (5:11-6:20), doctrinal teaching (chs. 7-9), and application (10:1-39). Chapters 8-9 form the second section of the doctrinal unit. The beginning and end of this section are marked by the related terms "offer" in 8:3 and "sacrificed" in 9:28 (rendered "offered" in ESV), forming an *inclusio*.

Within the section, a symmetrical arrangement of ideas can be seen, as the first sanctuary, ministry, covenant, and worship are contrasted with those of the present age (adapted from Lane):

(8:1-2) Introduction

(8:3-6) A. The earthly sanctuary and its ministry

(8:7-13) B. The old covenant

(9:1-10) C. Worship under the old covenant

(9:11-14) C'. Worship under the new covenant

(9:15-23) B'. The new covenant

(9:24-28) A'. The heavenly sanctuary and its ministry

Note that throughout this section, the distinction between old and new covenants is presented primarily in terms of *where* (earth/heaven) rather than *when* (then/now). This reflects a focus on the *cultic* (i.e., ceremonial and sacrificial) aspects of priestly ministry, which take place in a specific location.

In the first paragraph, 8:1-6, the author argues that Jesus, who has been called as a high priest, must be serving in heaven, since his ministry would not fit the pattern of an earthly priesthood.

vv. 1-2 **"The main point of what we are saying is this"** The author now returns to his main theme: the hope we have in Christ as our high priest, from which the previous chapter's detailed examination of Melchizedek, and the comparison of his ministry to that of Christ, was a necessary detour. Thus, vv. 1-2 summarize what went before, and also anticipate the argument which follows; i.e., that we have a high priest who is now seated at the right hand of God, one who ministers in a new and better sanctuary made by God.

But not only do these verses resume the thought of 6:19-20, they also hearken back to the very beginning of the epistle, in which we are told that the Son "*sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven*" after having "*provided purification for sins*" (1:3). And so the one previously known to us as God's Son is now revealed to be our high priest as well.

"who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven"

In the Old Testament, the right hand connotes strength, power, blessing and protection (see Gen. 48:17-18; Ex. 15:6; Ps. 16:11; 18:35; 20:6; 44:3-4; 60:5; 63:8; 89:13; 108:6; 118:15-16; 138:7; Isa. 41:10; 62:8). Thus, for Jesus to be seated at the right hand of God indicates that he has been exalted to a position of supreme honor and authority (see Ps. 110:1; Zech. 6:13; Heb. 10:12; 12:2). This is a common theme throughout the New Testament (Mt. 26:64; Mk. 14:62; 16:19; Lk. 20:42; 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:22).

"who serves in the sanctuary" Christ has been raised up to God's right hand, not only to receive praise and honor, but also to minister before God on our behalf (see 7:25). Although "seated," he is not passive or indolent, but active and working. Note that the sanctuary and tabernacle where Christ now ministers are identified in 9:24 as "heaven itself," rather than a distinct location within the heavenly realm.

"the true tabernacle set up by the Lord"

The tabernacle where Christ now serves is of divine, rather than human, construction (see 9:11, 24). It is "true" in the sense that it is lasting and eternal, and also in the sense that it is genuine and authentic; it is the archetype, the original.

In contrast, the earthly copy is by nature temporary and imperfect (v. 5). This man-made tabernacle was the tent which stood at the center of Israelite worship. It had to be repeatedly taken down, transported, and then pitched again during their forty years' sojourn in the wilderness (Ex. 40:36-38; Num. 33:1-49). Thus, it was designed for assembly and disassembly (see Ex. 26) and was of necessity a temporary structure.

vv. 3-4 **"Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices"** This is a restatement of 5:1 (the qualifier "for sins" in that verse is left unstated here). The author's point is that Christ, although ministering in a different realm (heaven vs. earth), is nevertheless performing a function which identifies him as a priest. Just as the Levitical priests sacrificed the lives of bulls and goats, offering them in an earthly tabernacle, so Christ brings into the heavenly sanctuary the offering of his own life (see 9:12-14).

This sacrifice was the fulfillment, or *antitype*, of the Levitical offerings required under the Old Covenant. Those sacrifices were only a "copy and shadow" of the true sacrifice to come (v. 5). They had no real power, and so were accepted by God only provisionally, in anticipation of Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross (see Rom. 3:24-26).

- v. 5 ***“They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.”*** The earthly tabernacle in which the Levitical priests ministered had no independent identity or significance. It was not an original creation, but was instead a representation of something else; it was entirely derivative.

This supports the author’s argument that the forms of worship prescribed under the Law—including the priestly order of the Levites, the animal sacrifices which they performed, and even the structure in which they carried out their duties—were all inferior and temporary. They were only approximations, “shadows” of the reality which was to come in Christ. And now, with his ascension into heaven and his taking up of the role of high priest serving in the heavenly sanctuary, all those things have become “obsolete” (v. 13).

“See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” The word “everything” in the verse quoted here emphasizes that every aspect of Old Covenant worship was designed to emulate the heavenly model. It is uncertain whether the version of the *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) that the author is quoting from actually contained this word in Ex. 25:40; the versions in use at that time varied. If not, then the reference would be a paraphrase of Ex. 25:40, or a summary of the relevant Exodus passages (Ex. 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8), rather than a word-for-word quote.

Note that the idea of an earthly tabernacle being patterned after heavenly realities is given a different significance here than in its original context in Exodus. There, the fact that the tabernacle and its instruments were constructed after a divine pattern was seen as evidence of the *superiority* of Israelite worship to that of all other nations; here, by contrast, it is presented as evidence of the *inferiority* of that worship to the worship now taking place in the heavenly tabernacle.

- v. 6 ***“But”*** This contrasting term looks back to verse 4; i.e., if Christ were on earth, he would not be serving as a priest; *however*, he is in fact now serving as a priest, not on earth but in heaven, and both his ministry, and the covenant under which he ministers, are superior to those of earthly priests.

“the covenant of which he is mediator” Under the Old Covenant, the role of intermediary between God and man was filled primarily by the Levitical priests, who presented gifts and sacrifices to God on behalf of His people (although their fitness to serve as mediators was compromised by their own sin, 7:27). In addition, the prophets served in such a role, speaking to

the people on behalf of God, and at times also the reverse (Isa. 33:2; 37:17-20; 64:9-12; Jer. 14:7-9; Dan. 9:16-19; Hab. 1:2; Joel 1:19; 3:11). The righteous kings of Israel and Judah also mediated between God and His people in an administrative sense, enforcing His laws and ruling over the people as His regents.

However, the ancient yearning for one who could fully bridge the gap between man and God (see Job 9:32-35) was met only in Christ; He is the “one mediator” who “gave himself as a ransom for all men” (1 Tim. 2:5-6) and who by doing so brought the new covenant into effect.

“established on better promises.” In the context, these “better promises” are the ones found in Jeremiah 31.

- v. 7 ***“For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant”*** This makes it clear that the need for a new covenant was not due merely to the failure of God’s people to adhere to the provisions of the old one. The previous covenant was itself faulty (i.e., inadequate), as it did not deal effectively with the problem of sin.

“no place would have been sought for another.” The sense of this verse is best understood as follows (Ellingworth):

“If the first covenant had not been defective, God would not have sought an occasion to establish a second.” This rendering puts the focus on God’s initiative in establishing the second covenant, an emphasis which is supported by the remainder of the chapter.

- vv. 8-12 These verses quote Jeremiah 31:31-34, which promises a relationship between God and His people that is fundamentally new (see Ezk. 36:26-27). The meaning of the new covenant is not developed here; for the author’s present purpose, it is sufficient to demonstrate from Scripture that it is “new,” and therefore superior to the old one.

- v. 13 ***“By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete”*** Under the principle that a new act of God supersedes what came before (see 4:8; 7:11, 28; 10:2), the identification of the promised covenant as “new” implicitly renders the prior one obsolete and inoperative.

“what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.” The author now makes his point in the form of a general principle. This description most naturally refers to the old covenant at the time of Jeremiah; that covenant began to lose its relevance as soon as its replacement came into prophetic view. When the new covenant was inaugurated in Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, the validity of the “obsolete and aging” old covenant finally came to an end.

Unit 15 - Worship in the Earthly Tabernacle

Hebrews 9:1-10

Text

¹Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. ²A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. ³Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, ⁴which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. ⁵Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

⁶When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to

carry on their ministry. ⁷But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. ⁸The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. ⁹This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. ¹⁰They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Open

☐ What sort of religious services did your family attend growing up – formal, with ritual and liturgy, or more informal? What do you remember about those services?

☐ Did your family observe any special dietary rules as part of their religious observance?

Discover

1. From this passage, identify the differences between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. (vv. 2-5)

Holy Place (outer room)	Most Holy Place (inner room)

2. What were the restrictions on entry into the Most Holy Place? (vv. 6-7)

3. What conclusions can you draw from the differences between these two partitions?

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4. What was the significance of the veil between the inner and outer room? (see Exodus 26:31-33; Leviticus 16:2, 16:12-13; Matthew 27:51)

5. Read the Old Testament description of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus chapter 16. Note anything in these accounts which seems significant to you.

6. How was Christ's sacrifice foreshadowed in the Day of Atonement?

7. According to the author of Hebrews, what did the Holy Spirit intend us to understand from the rules concerning the Day of Atonement? (v. 8)

8. What was the basic problem with the offerings and sacrifices under the old covenant? (vv. 9-10; see Colossians 2:20-23)

9. How was the earthly sanctuary inferior to one in which Christ now ministers? (see Hebrews 8:2-5; 9:9-11; 9:24)

Close

☐ Do you feel that: (a) God welcomes you into his presence with open arms, (b) he mostly just tolerates you, (c) he is either indifferent, or too busy to notice your attempts to get his attention, (d) he would prefer that you not bother him, or (e) he is warning you to stay away, or else!

☐ Do you feel that you have to "jump through hoops" to please God, or that he accepts you as you are?

Commentary

The author now focuses his attention on a key aspect of the old covenant, its “regulations for worship” within the “earthly sanctuary” (v.1). These two subjects are addressed (in reverse order) in vv. 2-5 and 6-10. Throughout the passage, the emphasis is on the inaccessibility of God under the prior dispensation, represented by the physical and procedural barriers which stood between the priest and the place of God’s presence.

In vv. 2-5, the distinction between the first and second room, and the curtain which separated them from one other, are in view. In vv. 6-10, the infrequency of access into the inner room, the restriction on who could enter, and the bloody qualifications for doing so, all highlight the fundamental separation between God and man, which the old covenant forms of worship were unable to bridge.

- v. 1 **“and also an earthly sanctuary.”** The Greek word translated “earthly” (*kosmikon*) is rendered “worldly” in Titus 2:12, referring to the spiritual corruption of this fallen world. However, that is not the meaning here. It is a negative term, but in the morally neutral sense of inferiority: the former tabernacle was man-made (9:24) rather than being constructed by God (8:2; 9:11); it was located on earth rather than in heaven (8:5); and its forms of worship dealt with external, superficial matters, rather than the deep issues of the heart (9:9-10).
- v. 2 **“In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread”** Detailed instructions for the fashioning of these items were given to Moses by God in Ex. 25:23-40; their actual construction is described in Ex. 37:10-24. The author does not pause to examine their significance (“we cannot discuss these things in detail now”, v. 5), as it is sufficient for his purpose to note a distinction between the furnishings of the outer and inner rooms.
- v. 3 **“Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place”** The curtain which covered the entrance into the Most Holy Place was woven of “blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled worker” (Ex. 26:31-33; see Lev. 16:2, 12; 21:23; 24:3). This curtain was dramatically ripped in two at the moment of Christ’s death (Mt. 27:51), signifying a radical opening of access to God for all people. No longer would the privilege of entering into God’s presence be limited to the high priest, or to the Levites, nor even to those of the Jewish race, but it would be available to “all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name” (Jn. 1:12).
- vv. 4-5 These verses describe the contents of the Most Holy Place, the inner room of the sanctuary. The first item, **“the golden altar**

of incense” (Ex. 30:1-6) presents a problem, because this altar is described in Ex. 30:6 as being “in front of the curtain that shields the ark of the covenant law,” i.e., just outside the Most Holy Place rather than within it (see also Ex. 40:26, Lev. 16:12-18).

Various attempts have been made to address this apparent discrepancy. One is to assert a contradiction between Hebrews and Exodus: either the author of Hebrews was relying on his (faulty) memory of Exodus 30, or he misunderstood the text of Exodus 30, or he was unconcerned with the precise placement of the tabernacle furniture. This approach will be rejected by those who hold that the inerrancy of Scripture extends to all statements of fact.

Lexically, it may not be the incense *altar* that is referred to here, but rather the pan on which incense was placed for burning, the *censer*, which was taken into the Most Holy Place (Lev. 16:12-18). This is possible due to ambiguity in the Greek terms for the two items; in fact, the term used in Hebrews is the one more commonly used for the censer, not the altar. However, the Exodus passages do not mention the censer.

Or it may be that the author is writing here from a functional, rather than a strictly positional, point of view. Thus, he would be saying that the Most Holy Place was associated with the incense altar, because the altar was used to prepare incense that was brought into the Most Holy Place.

“ark of the covenant” The ark was so named because it held the stone tablets on which God inscribed the ten commandments, the “words of the covenant” (Ex. 34:28; see Ex. 25:16; 31:7; 37:1-9; Dt. 4:13).

“the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff . . . and the stone tablets of the covenant.” That these items were placed into the ark is a detail attested only in Hebrews. Note that later, at the time of Solomon, the ark contained only the two tablets (1 Ki. 8:9; 2 Chr. 5:10).

“the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover.”

Descriptions of the ark’s cover, having two angelic beings with their wings outstretched over it, are found in Ex. 25:17-22; 37:6-9. Its name comes from the fact that it was sprinkled with the blood of a bull and goat as an offering for sin on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:14-15; see v. 7).

- v. 6 **“the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry.”** The activities of the priests included burning incense on the altar every morning and evening (Ex. 30:7-8), making animal and grain sacrifices twice a day (Ex. 29:38-43), and tending the oil lamps throughout each night (Ex. 27:21).

v. 7 This verse describes the actions of the high priest on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur* (Lev. 16). It was observed “only once a year,” in contrast to the daily sacrifices of the priests (v. 6); thus it prefigured the “once for all” self-offering of Christ (7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10).

The fact that only the high priest entered the inner room anticipated the unique and solitary nature of Christ’s work on the cross; only he could atone for the sins of mankind, and when he did so he was utterly alone (see Mt. 26:40, 56, 70; 27:46). That the high priest entered “*never without blood*” emphasizes the necessity of a life-for-life sacrifice, a substitutionary atonement, as cleansing from sin is available by no other means (9:22; 10:10; 13:12). Note that in contrast to Christ, the high priest was required to make an offering for his own sin before those made on behalf of the people (Lev. 16:6, 11; Heb. 5:1-3; 7:26-27).

“for the sins the people had committed in ignorance” The Old Testament law makes a distinction between sins which are overt and purposeful on the one hand, and those which are inadvertent, or due to a lack of knowledge on the other, with forgiveness being available for the latter kind (Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27; Lev. 5:14-19; Num. 15:22-36). However, the distinction is not as simple as intentional / unintentional, since some of the sins for which sacrifice and atonement were available are clearly intentional; it would be difficult, for example, to lie accidentally (see Lev. 6:1-6). Rather, the contrast is between common sins that are a natural result of moral imperfection, i.e. “any such sin that people may commit” (Lev. 6:3), and open and defiant sins which indicate a fundamental rejection of God’s authority (see Num. 15:30: NIV “defiantly,” NLT “brazenly,” ESV “with a high hand”).

The difficulty here is that while the Day of Atonement is described in comprehensive terms in Lev. 16 (“*because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been,*” v. 16; “*all their sins,*” vv. 21-22, 30), Heb. 9:7 appears to limit its extent only to those sins which arise from a lack of knowledge.

There are two ways in which this apparent discrepancy can be resolved. One is to take the term “ignorance” in Heb. 9:7 at face value, and to consider the extent of the Day of Atonement as being implicitly limited, by Num. 15:30-31 and by passages which require that those guilty of certain sins be “cut off,” i.e. summarily executed, with no possibility of forgiveness (Ex. 31:14; Lev. 7:27; Num. 9:13; 19:13). If this view is correct, the author is making a contrast between the incomplete and partial cleansing from sin available under the old covenant, and the complete forgiveness offered through Christ (see 7:25).

The other way to resolve this difficulty is to view the Day of Atonement as covering all sins, including those of open defiance, and to take the term “ignorance,” not as referring to one class of sins versus another, but as essentially a synonym for sinfulness. This is possible because the (relatively rare) Greek term translated here as “ignorance” is used in the Septuagint to indicate foolishness, error, or stubbornness (2 Chr. 16:9; 1 Sam. 26:21; Hos. 4:16).

v. 8 **“The Holy Spirit was showing by this”** The correspondence between the forms of old covenant worship and the realities of Christ’s heavenly ministry were not accidental, nor are they a fanciful creation from the mind of the author of Hebrews. They were intended by God to be seen and understood in this way, but such insight was not available until “the present time” (v. 9), which is the “time of the new order” (v. 10), i.e. the present era under the new covenant.

“the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed” Before Christ, there was no possibility of entering into God’s presence, of having direct fellowship with Him. This access was represented by the Most Holy Place, and under the old covenant, access was so limited as to render it effectively sealed shut. The sole exception, granted only to the high priest, on only one day per year, with all of its conditions and limitations, only served to reinforce its inaccessibility to all other persons at all other times.

“as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning” As long as the forms of worship under the old covenant remained in force, the way to God was hidden.

vv. 9-10 **“the gifts and sacrifices . . . were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.”** The rituals of old covenant worship could not penetrate into the inner man and address issues of the heart; they were mere “external regulations”. So every year, when the ceremony was over, the burden of sin and guilt remained just as heavy as before; in fact, the ceremony itself was a continuing reminder of sin (10:3). But all that has now changed with the coming of the “time of the new order” (literally “time of correction”); see Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22.

The reference to “*food and drink and various ceremonial washings*” extends the critique beyond the Day of Atonement specifically, to the regulations of the Mosaic Law in general (Lev. 11); both were equally ineffective in cleansing the heart from the defilement of sin (see Col. 2:20-23).

Unit 16 - The Blood of Christ

Hebrews 9:11-28

Text

¹¹ But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here,^a he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining^b eternal redemption. ¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death,^c so that we may serve the living God!

¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

¹⁶ In the case of a will,^d it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, ¹⁷ because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. ¹⁸ This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood.

¹⁹ When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. ²⁰ He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to

keep."^e ²¹ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. ²² In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

²³ It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

^a 9:11 Some early manuscripts are to come

^b 9:12 Or blood, having obtained

^c 9:14 Or from useless rituals

^d 9:16 Same Greek word as covenant; also in verse 17

^e 9:20 Exodus 24:8

Open

☐ What was your first paying job? What did you learn from it?

☐ What would your ideal job be, and why?

Discover

1. What can we learn from the repeated references to "blood" in this passage? (see also 9:7; 10:4)

v. 12

v. 13

v. 14

v. 18

v. 19

v. 20

v. 21

v. 22

v. 25

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2. What contrasts (either explicit or implied) can you identify in vv. 11-14?

What is the significance of these contrasts?

3. List below all the occurrences of the words “one” and “once” in this passage. What is the significance of these terms? (see Heb. 7:27; 10:10, 12, 14-18; also Rom. 6:5-10; 8:1-3; 1 Pet. 3:18)

4. According to the author, what requirement must be met in order for a covenant to take effect? Why?

How was this requirement fulfilled for (a) the Old Covenant, and (b) the New Covenant?

5. What does Christ accomplish by appearing “for us” in God’s presence (vv. 24-28)? See also 4:15; 7:25.

6. According to this passage, how will Christ’s second coming differ from his first? (v. 28)

Close

☐ Consider all the references to blood in this passage. Does this seem morbid, or macabre, to you? Why do you think God would choose blood as a cleansing agent?

☐ What do you think it means to have your conscience “cleansed”? How have you experienced this in your own life?

Commentary

In this passage, the author moves from a discussion of old covenant forms of worship to the central theme of the epistle, which is the unique power of Christ's blood to accomplish atonement for sin. To this end, he compares and contrasts the one sacrifice of Christ with the many which were offered under the old covenant, demonstrating how those sacrifices both looked forward to Christ and also fell short; i.e., how they anticipated the effectual sacrifice to come, while at the same time lacking any power in themselves to cleanse from sin. Throughout the passage, blood sacrifice is presented as the only means of purging the worshiper from the defilement of sin, and the one self-sacrifice of Christ is held up as the only truly effective example of such a sacrifice.

The formal literary elements which marked the structure of previous passages are lacking here; therefore, the outline must be based on the flow of the argument, as follows: (a) In vv. 11-14, the author establishes the basis for the conclusion of v. 15; that, because Christ entered the heavenly tabernacle by the agency of his own blood, thus cleansing our consciences from sin, he is qualified to be the mediator of a new covenant; (b) In vv. 15-22, the necessity of blood sacrifice (i.e., death) to establish a covenant is supported by appeals to common practice and old testament example; (c) In vv. 23-28, the superiority of the one sacrifice of Christ is demonstrated, over against the repeated and ineffective sacrifices of the former dispensation.

vv. 11-14 In this paragraph, the rituals of the Day of Atonement are presented as *types* which foreshadow the sacrificial ministry of Christ. This raises the issue of how closely the elements of old covenant *types* correspond with their new covenant *antitypes*. One example concerns the division of the former tabernacle into outer and inner rooms (see 9:1-10): Is heaven itself likewise divided into separate partitions? The statement that Christ "*went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle*" to enter "*the Most Holy Place*" would seem to indicate such a division; i.e., "that Christ passed through an outer heavenly realm to enter the immediate presence of God" (Ellingworth; see also Heb. 4:14; 2 Cor. 12:2).

Ultimately, however, this distinction is incidental to the author's primary concern, which is to demonstrate that the tabernacle in which Christ ministers (i.e., heaven) is superior to the old, as it is "*not made with human hands*" and "*not a part of this creation*".

These verses are dominated by *antithetical parallelism*, with the author contrasting: the old and new tabernacles, the blood of goats and bulls and the blood of Christ, the relative ineffectiveness of animal sacrifices as compared to the power of Christ's own

self-sacrifice, and external purification from ritual defilement versus internal cleansing from sin and guilt. These contrasts demonstrate the superiority of Christ's atoning death on the cross over the ancient rituals of the Day of Atonement; specifying how his priestly ministry both fulfills and transcends the ministry of the Levitical high priest on Yom Kippur (Lev. 16). That ancient ministry, which anticipated the work of Christ, has now been superseded by it.

v. 12 "***He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but . . . by his own blood***" The reference to Christ's blood indicates specifically his death on the cross. This sacrifice was inherently superior to the offering of animal blood and life under the old covenant, and resulted in Christ being granted access to a greater tabernacle (i.e., heaven). Of the contrasts which could be drawn between the two sacrifices, one of the clearest is that Christ's was a volitional act, an explicit choice to submit to God; it was a sacrifice "of himself" (9:26) rather than something done to him without his understanding or consent (see 10:5-10; also Mt. 26:39-42; Jn. 10:18).

"once for all . . . thus obtaining eternal redemption" The sacrifice of Christ was a unique event in history, never to be repeated. No repetition is needed, as it fully accomplished salvation for all who are united with him, both now and forever (see 7:27; 9:26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14-18; also Rom. 6:5-10; 8:1-3; 1 Pet. 3:18). Nor is any repetition possible, as Christ is to be "struck" only once (see 1 Cor. 10:1-4; Num. 20:7-12).

vv. 13-14 Here, the author employs an *a fortiori* argument, one which proceeds from lesser to greater. If relatively inferior elements—the blood of bulls and goats, ashes from a heifer—could cleanse outwardly (i.e., purge from ritual defilements, such as contact with a corpse), then certainly the far greater sacrifice of the blood of Christ can effect a deeper cleansing: purging the inner man of the defilement of sin which stains the conscience.

Note that the sacrifice of the red heifer did not belong to the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), but was part of a separate purification ritual (Num. 19).

"offered himself unblemished" Animals sacrificed under the old covenant were required to be free of any defect or imperfection (Lev. 22:21; Num. 6:14; 19:2). Their physical wholeness was a picture of the spiritual and moral perfection of Christ, who was a "*lamb without blemish or defect*" (1 Pet. 1:19). His life was one of absolute and complete obedience to the will of God, without sin or impurity of any kind (Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 10:5-10; see Jn. 8:29, 46; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5).

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- vv. 15-22 The central argument of this paragraph is that a valid covenant must be inaugurated with a purifying blood sacrifice. This thesis is supported by deductive logic in vv. 16-17 and by Old Testament example in vv. 18-21. The dual effect of Christ's sacrifice, as seen in this passage, was: (a) to make atonement for sin and obtain forgiveness for the elect ("*those who are called*," v. 15), and (b) to initiate the new covenant.
- v. 15 **"For this reason"** Because of his superior sacrifice, Christ has now come to serve as the mediator of a new covenant between man and God. He did this in order that his people, having been released from the guilt of sins committed under the old covenant, might receive the things promised by God, including eternal salvation (see 5:9). Note that the effects of Christ's sacrifice are *retrospective*; i.e., they encompass not only sins committed from that point forward, but also those committed prior to his death (see 11:39-40; also Acts 17:30; Rom. 3:25).
- vv. 16-17 The Greek word for "covenant", *diathēkē*, also has another meaning: "will" or "testament". Here the author plays on that double meaning, applying to the new *covenant* the key prerequisite that must be met before a *will* comes into force, i.e. the death of the one who made the will. A will cannot be executed until the one whose testament it is has died; likewise, it was necessary that both the old and new covenants be inaugurated with a death.
- vv. 18-19 The focus now shifts to the shedding of blood as a necessary element in the inauguration of the first covenant (see Ex. 24:3-8). The fact that no element of the covenant was exempt from the need to be consecrated with blood is underscored by the comprehensiveness of the adjectives used: v. 19, "*all* the people," v. 21, "the tabernacle and *everything* used in its ceremonies" and v. 22, "nearly *everything*".
- Some details of verse 19 are not found in Exodus 24, such as the mixture with water, the sprinkling of the scroll, and the use of scarlet wool and hyssop. This could represent the influence of extrabiblical traditional material, or it could reflect the inclusion of material from other Old Testament passages (see Lev. 14:1-9; Num. 10:1-10). Similarly, v. 21 refers to the consecration of the tabernacle and its implements, which is not attested in Ex. 24, but in Ex. 40 and Lev. 8.
- v. 20 This verse, a paraphrase of Ex. 24:8, makes explicit the indissoluble link between blood and covenant. Note the similarity with Christ's words in the upper room (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24) as he instituted the Lord's Supper.
- v. 22 **"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."** This states a general principle: that blood, and by extension the sacrificial death which it represents, is absolutely essential to the remission (forgiveness) of sins. Ultimately, even the blood of untold numbers of animals could not satisfy this requirement, but only the blood of Christ (see 10:4-10, 19).
- vv. 23-28 The key contrast here is between the many and the one; i.e., between the annual sacrifices of the high priest, never finally effectual and thus requiring repetition year after year, and the unique self-sacrifice of Christ, which needed to be made only once, having fully accomplished redemption.
- v. 23 **"but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these."** Did the heavenly things require purification? And if so, in what sense? One proposed explanation is that, since the people of God are spiritually present in heaven through their union with Christ, the cleansing of the "heavenly things" referred to here is the cleansing of the conscience previously referred to in 9:14 (see 12:22-24; Eph. 2:6). Others have suggested that heaven itself had been defiled by the sin of mankind, or that the expulsion of Satan is in view. However, it seems best, with Ellingworth, to conclude that the cleansing spoken of here does not imply any previous impurity, but only describes a rite of consecration for the heavenly precincts, in preparation for the ongoing ministry of Christ.
- The plural of "*better sacrifices*" does not imply that multiple sacrifices are needed in heaven; the author makes clear that Christ's sacrifice is not "again and again" (v. 25) but rather "once for all" (7:27; 9:26; note also the terms "one" and "once" in 9:27-28).
- vv. 24-28 **"now to appear for us in God's presence"** Christ's ascension into the heavenly realms had a twofold effect: initially, "*to do away with sin*" (v. 26; also v. 28, "*to take away the sins of many*"), which the author makes clear is a non-repeatable event. On an ongoing basis, it was to enable him to serve continually as our intercessor before God (4:15; 7:25).
- "he has appeared . . . at the culmination of the ages"** The author views the present era, inaugurated by the first advent of Christ and brought to an end by his future return (v. 28), as the last days, the "culmination of the ages" (see Heb. 1:2; also Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 10:11). The salvation which Christ will bring to his people at his second advent includes spiritual and physical transformation (see 1 Cor. 15:35-57); it is the consummation of his saving work in their lives, beginning with their calling and justification (see Rom. 8:28-30).

Unit 17 - Christ's Sacrifice Once for All

Hebrews 10:1-18

Text

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.

For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.

² *Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.* ³ *But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins.* ⁴ *It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

⁵ *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:*

"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;

⁶ *with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.*

⁷ *Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll —*

I have come to do your will, my God.'" ^a

⁸ First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law.

⁹ Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made

holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

¹⁶ *"This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord.*

I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." ^b

¹⁷ Then he adds:

"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." ^c

¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

^a 10:7 Psalm 40:6-8 (see Septuagint)

^b 10:16 Jer. 31:33

^c 10:17 Jer. 31:34

Open

☐ Are you forgetful, or do you have a memory like an elephant?

☐ What things do you find it easy to remember, and what do you tend to forget?

Discover

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word "shadow"? What is a shadow like? How does it differ from the real thing?

When the author uses the term "shadow" to compare the rituals and sacrifices of the law to the work of Christ, what do you think he is saying?

2. What does the repetition of the sacrifices under the law say about their power? (see 7:11, 18-19; 9:9)

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3. In what ways does Christ's sacrifice differ from the repeated sacrifices of the law?

4. What does the author mean by the phrase, "He sets aside the first to establish the second?" (v. 9). What are the "first" and "second"? What does being "set aside" mean?

5. Review Psalm 110. What does it mean for Christ's enemies "to be made his footstool" (v. 13)? When will this happen?

Who are the "enemies" who will experience this?

1 Cor. 15:26

Mt. 13:39; Lk. 10:19

1 Cor. 15:24

Lk. 19:27; Heb. 10:27, 31

6. According to this passage, is the work of Christ in our lives to make us "holy" (vv. 10, 14) a past, present, or future activity? What is the significance of this truth in your own life?

7. How does this passage contrast remembering and forgetting? Which is better?

8. Can you identify any religions which rely on mere repetition to gain God's favor? What would this passage say about those practices?

9. According to this passage, would a "re-sacrifice" of Christ be an appropriate worship practice for Christians? Why or why not?

Close

- ☐ What does it mean for God to put his law in our hearts, and to have it written on our minds? Have you experienced this? How can you tell?

Commentary

As noted previously, the third major division of Hebrews, 5:11-10:39, deals with Jesus' priesthood and is composed of three units: introduction (5:11-6:20), doctrinal teaching (chs. 7-9), and application (10:1-39). The present passage, 10:1-18, forms the first section of the third unit in this division. It can be separated into four paragraphs, as indicated by Ellingworth:

- vv. 1-4 the impotence of the Law
- vv. 5-10 the willing offering of Christ
- vv. 11-14 two kinds of priest
- vv. 15-18 the confirmation of scripture

Structural support for this arrangement is found in the symmetry of the paragraphs' conclusions: each ends with a reference to sacrifice as a means of cleansing from sin (see vv. 3, 10, 14, 18). This emphasizes the main theme of the epistle, which is the superiority of Christ's priesthood and self-sacrifice to those of the old covenant.

- v. 1 **"The law is only a shadow . . . not the realities themselves."** Here, as elsewhere in Hebrews, the primary referent of the "law" is not the legal code itself, but the cultic practices which were required by its statutes. The author is stating clearly that the old covenant sacrificial system, with all its rituals and sacrifices, had no value in and of itself. Its only value lay in the fact that it fore-"shadowed" the reality to come; i.e., that it anticipated the true sacrifice of Christ's atoning death, and the true cleansing from sin that would be its result.
- "the good things that are coming"** The key question here concerns temporal point of view. Were the "good things" still "coming" at the time of the writing of Hebrews, and thus still future for us as well? Or were they "coming" only from the point of view of the old testament "shadow," and thus a present reality both for the author of Hebrews and for us? The latter is more likely, given the emphasis in the remainder of the passage on the present benefits of Christ's sacrifice: "we have been made holy," v. 10; "he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy," v. 14; "we have confidence," v. 19; "let us draw near . . . having our hearts sprinkled . . . and having our bodies washed," v. 22. See 8:5; also Col. 2:17; "These are a shadow of the things that were to come".

"For this reason it can never . . . make perfect those who draw near" Because the Law is inherently insubstantial, having no more power or reality than a mere shadow, it cannot bring about the comprehensive and final cleansing of conscience that is needed, regardless of how many times

its rites and ceremonies are repeated. In fact, the need for them to be repeated, "*endlessly year after year*," is itself evidence of their ineffectiveness (v. 2; see 7:11, 18-19; 9:9).

- v. 3 **"those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins"** Note the contrast between the many sacrifices of the old covenant, which served only to bring sins into remembrance, and the one sacrifice of Christ, which causes them to be forgotten, i.e., to be remembered by God "no more" (see 8:12 and 10:17, quoting Jer. 31:34; also Isa. 43:25; 64:9). Under the new covenant, as far as our relationship with God is concerned, it is as though our sins had never happened.
- v. 4 **"it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."** These words permit no ambiguity. It is not that the sacrifices of the old covenant were ineffective due to some deficiency in their performance; on the contrary, they were by *their very nature* absolutely incapable of cleansing from sin.
- v. 5 **"when Christ came into the world, he said"** The words of the Psalmist are here attributed to Christ, as an affirmation of his submission to the will of the Father at the time of his incarnation. Coming "*into the world*" could be viewed as a reference to his birth, or to the entirety of his life on earth, from birth to death; see John 1:9; 6:14; 11:27. Christ's obedience to the Father was lived out in the world, as ours must be also (Mt. 26:39, 42; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42).
- vv. 5-7 In these verses, the author quotes Psalm 40:6-8 from the Septuagint (LXX)¹. This quote varies somewhat from the text of the primary LXX manuscript tradition; some of these variations may reflect differences between LXX versions, others likely represent the author's own interpretive paraphrase of the LXX.
- At least two features of this Psalm, as quoted by the author, are significant. First, the phrase "*a body you prepared for me*" emphasizes the superiority of Christ's human body as the substance of an acceptable sacrifice, in contrast to the burned flesh of bulls and goats, which God "*did not desire*" and with which he was "*not pleased*".
- Second, the phrase, "*I have come to do your will, my God*," emphasizes the volitional nature of Christ's sacrifice; the animals sacrificed under the old covenant had no understanding of what was happening (and certainly did not willingly consent), but Christ came to earth with the explicit intention of offering his life as an atonement for sin, in obedience to the will of God.

¹ The Septuagint, or LXX, is the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use at the time Hebrews was written. The LXX was originally translated from the Hebrew Bible as early as the 3rd century B.C. Just as there are variations among ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, there also exist such variations in manuscripts of the LXX.

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- vv. 8-9 The text of Psalm 40:6-8, quoted in the preceding verses, is here condensed and rearranged. This eliminates the poetic parallelism, but more clearly emphasizes the contrast between “sacrifice and offering”, “burnt offerings and sin offerings” and the obedient self-sacrifice of Christ. This author’s statement in vs. 9, that the first of these was set aside in order to “establish” the second, leaves no doubt as to the impermanence of the old covenant sacrificial system; it has been abolished (see 7:18-19; 8:13) and replaced by the new covenant sacrifice of God’s Son.
- The phrase “*though they were offered in accordance with the law*” presents some difficulty. How could God prescribe specific sacrificial rituals, and yet not desire them, nor be pleased with them? Some have suggested that the reference here is to sacrifices which were offered merely in a spirit of duty, without a heart attitude of worship and obedience. This is a recurring theme in the Old Testament (Isa. 29:13; see Am. 5:21-25; Isa. 1:10-17; Hos. 6:6; Jer. 6:20; 7:21-23; Mal. 1:10-14; 1 Sam. 15:22; Prov. 21:3)
- However, in Hebrews the focus is not on the spiritual condition of the worshiper, but on the relative merits of the old and new covenant sacrifices themselves. In this context, the old covenant sacrifices were unacceptable to God, not because they were (sometimes) offered with the wrong attitude, but because they were inherently incapable of cleansing from sin (see 10:4). And so, although they were ordained by God as part of his Law, they did not accomplish his purposes, and thus were not ultimately what he desired.
- v. 10 **“And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”** Several things can be noted in this concluding statement, as the author applies to himself and his readers the truths he has been developing. First, that our holiness has come about according to the will of God; i.e., that the determining factor in salvation is not our will, but God’s (see Jn. 1:13).
- Second, that our holiness is referred to in the past tense, as a reality made certain by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross; we have been irrevocably set apart by God as His own possession. Although we continue to struggle with sin as we grow in spiritual maturity, we know that when Christ returns, God will make us completely and eternally holy in our character and experience, even as we are now holy in our standing in Christ (see Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:22; 2 Tim. 2:21; 1 Jn. 3:2-3; Titus 2:11-14).
- Third, that we have been made holy and acceptable in God’s sight, not through our own effort or merit, but through the finished work of Christ on the cross (see Tit. 3:5).
- vv. 11-14 In these verses, the ministry of the Levitical priests is contrasted with the ministry of Christ. Their work was daily repeated and never ending, while the work of Christ was “*one sacrifice*” offered with finality, “*for all time*”. The old covenant priest “*stands*” as he performs his sacrificial duties, while Christ, having completed his, “*sat*” and now “*waits*”. The many sacrifices of the old covenant could “*never take away sins*,” while the one sacrifice of Christ was fully effective; it has “*made perfect forever those who are being made holy*”.
- v. 11 **“day after day . . . again and again”**
Note that the mere repetition of religious activities does not enhance their power or their acceptability to God (see Isa. 1:11; Mt. 6:7). In fact, here the opposite is true: no matter how many times the sacrifices of the old covenant were repeated, they could “*never*” take away sins.
- v. 12 The phrase “*for all time*” could be translated as modifying “*offered*”, in which case it would emphasize the eternal effects of Christ’s one act of atoning self-sacrifice (see v. 14); or, it could be taken as modifying “*sat*,” thus highlighting Christ’s eternal reign and Lordship (see v. 13)
- v. 13 The reference here is to Ps. 110:1, and it alludes to another consequence of Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension: the final destruction of the enemies of God. Among these who will be destroyed are death (1 Cor. 15:26), Satan (Mt. 13:39; Lk. 10:19), “*all dominion, authority, and power*” (1 Cor. 15:24), and those who refuse to submit to Christ (Lk. 19:27; Heb. 10:27, 31).
- v. 14 **“he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy”**. This verse highlights the tension between the “already” and “not yet” aspects of sanctification. As regards our standing in Christ, we have already been made perfect (v. 10). However, as a present reality, we are “being made” holy; that is, we continue to grow in holiness of life and character, by the power of the Holy Spirit, until Christ returns; at which time we will be finally and completely transformed into his likeness (1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:2).
- vv. 15-18 **“The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this”** The promise of Jeremiah 31:33-34, quoted here, is that of a new covenant which provides complete and everlasting forgiveness for sins, such that God will never remember them against us (v. 17), and no sacrifice for them will ever again be needed (v. 18). Those who enter into this relationship with God will be utterly transformed in the inner man, in both heart and mind (v. 16; see Jn. 7:38; Eph. 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:17). Note that Jeremiah’s prophecy is attributed, not to him, but to the Holy Spirit (see 2 Pet. 1:21).

Unit 18 - A Call to Persevere

Hebrews 10:19-31

Text

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

²⁶ If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,”^a and again, “The Lord will judge his people.”^b ³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

^a 10:30 Deut. 32:35

^b 10:30 Deut. 32:36; Psalm 135:14

Open

☐ What types of activities do you like to do with other people?

☐ Where do you feel most at comfortable and at ease?

Discover

1. In the first paragraph, vv. 19-25, the author calls on his readers to do three things. What are they?

2. What does it mean to enter “the Most Holy Place”? (vv. 19-22)

What gives us the right to do so? (see 3:6; 4:16; 10:35) What should be our attitude when we do so?

3. What does it mean to have our hearts “sprinkled”? (v. 22)

What is the other form of cleansing referred to in verse 22, and how is it related to this sprinkling? (see Acts 22:16; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21)

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4. What reason do we have for holding firmly onto our hope? (v. 23; see 6:13-18; 11:11)

5. What obligation do we have toward other believers? (v. 24; see Heb. 3:13; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess 5:11).

Why is this important?

In the space below, brainstorm: Write down some ideas as to how you could do this in the coming week.

Now pick one to actually do! Circle it and write a date next to it indicating when you will do it. At the next meeting, have everyone report back on this

6. Why is it important to meet together with other believers regularly? (v. 25) How have you found this to be true in your own life?

7. In your own words, describe the kind of person who is in view in vv. 26-31.

What will be their eventual fate?

Close

- ☐ What would you say to someone who is unconcerned about the need to obey Christ's commands or attend church, since they tell you that they have prayed to receive Christ and are now safe from God's judgment?

- ☐ What is the most important thing for you to do in response to this week's lesson?

Commentary

Beginning here and continuing through the remainder of chapter 10, the author of Hebrews concludes the central division of the book with a series of exhortations and warnings. This supports the sermon character of the letter, in which didactic (instructional) material alternates with appeals to personal application.

The first paragraph, vv. 19-25, contains three primary exhortations, to faith, hope and love; i.e. that we “draw near to God” (v. 22), “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,” (v. 23), and “consider how we may spur one another on” (v. 24). These exhortations are based on two key facts, developed in the preceding chapters and brought forward here: that we have “confidence to enter” God’s presence (v. 19), and have a “great priest” (v. 21).

v. 19 **“confidence to enter”** This translation emphasizes the *subjective* result of Christ’s sacrifice: i.e., that believers need not have any hesitation or reluctance in approaching God, since we know that our sin has been dealt with finally and completely (see 3:6; 4:16; 10:35). The Greek term *parrēsian* also carries an *objective* connotation, i.e. that because our sin, the barrier to fellowship with God and the reason for condemnation, has been forgiven, we now have the right to enter God’s presence; we have divine authorization to do so.

v. 20 **“a new and living way opened for us through the curtain”** The means of access to God which has now been made available to us is *new*, in contrast to the rituals of the old covenant (see 9:8). It is also *living*; i.e., it is a source of life to those who follow it (see Jn. 4:10, “living water,” Jn. 6:51, “living bread,” Acts 7:38, “living words,” 1 Pet. 2:4, “living Stone”).

“that is, his body” The question here is whether the author intends for the body of Christ to be linked with the “new and living way” or with “the curtain”. The first option is unlikely for grammatical reasons¹ (in spite of Christ’s identification of Himself as “the way” in Jn. 14:6). The second option, that “his body” refers to “the curtain”, raises its own difficulties. What comparison is the author making between Christ’s body and the veil of the temple? One likely connection is that, just as the veil of the temple was the avenue of access into the holy place under the old covenant, so Christ is the means of access to God under the new. As the priests formerly passed through the veil to enter the presence of God, so now all believers reach God through the crucified and risen Christ.

v. 21 **“since we have a great priest over the house of God”** This “house” is comprised of all true believers from all eras (3:6; see Eph. 2:19). These are the persons described in v. 22: those who have been cleansed from sin; who come to God in genuine and steadfast faith. They are sometimes called the church *invisible*, since they are known only to God, who alone sees the heart. This is not the same as the church *visible*, i.e., those who profess faith or participate in a faith community, but who may or may not have experienced the new birth (Mt. 7:21-23; 13:24-29, 36-43).

v. 22 **“having our hearts sprinkled . . . having our bodies washed with pure water.”** The first of these phrases refers to the interior cleansing from sin and guilt which a believer experiences. The term “sprinkled” is an allusion to the Old Covenant ritual of purification by the sprinkling of blood, which now is accomplished metaphorically and spiritually through the application of the blood of Christ (see 9:13-14, 19, 21; 12:24).

The second phrase is a reference to baptism. Baptism is the outward sign of an interior reality, in which bodily washing with water represents the removal of sin from the heart through faith (see Acts 22:16; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21).

v. 23 **“for he who promised is faithful.”** The grounds for our hope is the absolute certainty that God’s promises will be fulfilled; this conviction is based on God’s character as one who invariably keeps his word (see Heb. 6:13-18; 11:11; also Dt. 7:9; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:18; 1 Thess. 5:24).

vv. 24-25 **“And let us consider how we may spur one another on”** This exhortation reflects an awareness that the Christian life is not a solo flight; rather, our individual perseverance in faith is strongly influenced by our fellow believers. Therefore, we have an obligation to encourage one another; to help one another continue walking with God (see Heb. 3:13; Col 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:11). Note that this obligation cannot be fulfilled in a careless or offhand manner; it requires consideration, i.e., thought and attention.

This kind of mutual support requires that we have a knowledge of other believers and of their lives; we cannot effectively provoke to love and godly actions those whom we barely know. The author does not specify why some were absenting themselves from corporate worship; nor does it matter. Whether due to persecution, or busyness, or apathy, or interpersonal conflict, willfully abandoning the fellowship of other believers is not an option for the follower of Christ.

¹ In Hebrews, the phrase, “that is” usually links two nouns having the same case; in this verse, the words “way” and “body” do not have the same case. (In Greek, unlike English, nouns have a different form, or case, depending on how they are used in a sentence).

vv. 26-31 In the second paragraph of chapter ten, the author issues dire warnings of the consequences of willful apostasy, of failing to persevere in faith and obedience. This state is described elsewhere in the book as drifting away (2:1), turning “away from the living God” (3:12); failing to enter God’s rest (4:1, 11), and falling away (6:6).

Here, as in 6:4-8, the question arises as to the spiritual history of those whose terrifying fate is being described. Are they persons who had genuinely come to know Christ and had experienced the new birth, but who at some point lost their faith? Or are they counterfeit Christians, who to all appearance were authentic members of the community, but whose hearts remained unchanged and whose true nature eventually became evident? The student is encouraged to refer to the notes on 6:4-8 for the general Biblical and theological background; that background will be assumed in the commentary which follows.

v. 26 **“If we deliberately keep on sinning”**

These words reveal that the condition being described is one of intentional sin, carried on over an extended period of time. It reflects a heart that has no intention of living in obedience to Christ, but which is self-seeking and fundamentally rebellious (although it may appear for a time to be just the opposite). This is not the sincere Christian who, in seeking daily to follow Christ, stumbles and recovers, sins and repents. This is a person who has abandoned the effort to subject themselves to God, either because they never truly intended to do so, or because they made the attempt as an act of prideful self-righteousness and were therefore unable to sustain it (see Rom. 8:7). As Jesus taught, a tree will be known by its fruit (Mt. 7:15-23, 12:33; see also 2 Pet. 2:22).

Note that it is not the seriousness of the sin that is at issue, but the heart attitude behind it, and the length of time that it persists. Even the most heinous sins can be forgiven (Mt. 12:31; 1 Cor. 6:9-11).

“after we have received the knowledge of the truth” The sin of the apostate is not the result of ignorance; it is committed with full understanding that it is in violation of God’s requirements.

“no sacrifice for sins is left” The sole effective sacrifice is the one made by Christ; in rejecting him, the apostate abandons the only possible means of cleansing from sin.

v. 27 **“but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire.”** This is not the loving discipline with which God corrects his children (as in 1 Cor. 11:32; Heb. 12:5-11; Rev. 3:19), nor is the fire a means of testing or purification (as in 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 1 Pet. 1:7). Rather, this is a judgment of

condemnation, one which results in destruction for the **“enemies of God”**. This fate is the opposite of salvation (see 10:39; also Mt. 7:13, 10:28; Mk. 9:43; Gal. 6:8; Philp. 1:28, 3:19; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 1:7).

v. 28 **“Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died”** This rejection of the law is not merely the commission of a sin meriting the death penalty, such as murder (Num. 35:30). It is a direct repudiation of God’s authority as expressed in the Law; i.e., an overt sin against God himself, such as blasphemy (Lev. 24:14-16) or idolatry (Deut. 13:6-11; 17:2-6). Similarly, the apostate is guilty not merely of sin, but of rejecting Christ’s authority over his or her life.

v. 29 **“How much more severely”** This is an *a fortiori* argument, from lesser to greater. If those who violated the law given by Moses were summarily executed, would not a much greater judgment be expected for one who demonstrates utter contempt for the Son and the Spirit? In abandoning the faith he once professed, whether by overt disavowal or through apathy and inattention, the apostate is guilty of doing just that. There is a fate which is far worse than death, and it is reserved for such persons (see vv. 27, 31).

For many, the phrase **“the blood of the covenant that sanctified them”** makes the question of the apostate’s spiritual history an open-and-shut case, proving that he was previously saved, but has now decisively fallen from that state. However, we need to remember that the basic meaning of “sanctified” is to be “set apart”, and that its specific meaning depends on the context. In fact, Paul teaches that a person can be “sanctified” by marriage to a believer – while still remaining an unbeliever (see 1 Cor. 7:14). Here, the sanctification in view is not that which accompanies personal salvation, but is the state of being in union with the people of God; being a member of a “set apart” community.

vv. 30-31 These verses support from scripture (Deut. 32:35-36) the basic premise, applied in the previous verses, that God is not only a God of love; he is also a God of judgment. And his judgment is especially harsh toward those who identify with his people, but later repudiate that profession, whether by word or deed (2 Pet. 2:20-22; see Mk. 14:21).

A terrible day of reckoning awaits those who will not submit to God. As Jesus taught,

“ . . . do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”

(Luke 12:4-5)

Unit 19 - A Call to Remember

Hebrews 10:32-39

Text

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷ For,

*"In just a little while,
he who is coming will come and will not
delay."*^a

³⁸ And,

*"But my righteous^b one will live by faith.
And I take no pleasure
in the one who shrinks back."*^c

³⁹ But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

^a 10:37 Isaiah 26:20; Hab. 2:3

^b 10:38 Some early manuscripts *But the righteous*

^c 10:38 Hab. 2:4 (see Septuagint)

Open

☐ What is one "beginning" that you remember; for example: first date, wedding day, birth of a child, first day of school, first day of work, trusting in Christ?

☐ Name a time when you had to persevere in a difficult situation. What helped you to get through it?

Discover

1. In this passage, the author urges his readers to "remember"; to look back and reflect on their spiritual journey. In the space below, take some time to record the key events of your own spiritual journey and reflect on how God has been working in your life.

My spiritual journey so far:

How I would describe where I am today spiritually:

What I anticipate as I look toward the future:

-
2. How might recalling your spiritual history help you in the present?

Have you found that to be the case in your own life? Why or why not?

3. Try to put yourself in the place of these believers. What kinds of abuse do you think they likely suffered as Christians? (vv. 33-34)

How would you feel if you experienced this? Or, if you have experienced it, how did you feel?

What would be the natural reaction to such treatment?

How did they react?

What enabled them to respond in this way?

4. What incentive does the author give to encourage his readers to persevere in following Christ?

Close

☐ What helps you most to continue in following Christ? The promise of future rewards? The conviction that God loves you and is working all things for your good? Something else?

☐ Have you ever been tempted to walk away from Christ, or to withdraw from his people? Why? What was the result?

Commentary

After the warnings of the previous passage, the author now concludes the central division of the book on a more encouraging note. This is consistent with his purpose throughout, which is not to shock or frighten his readers, but to awaken them to the seriousness of their spiritual peril, and direct them to the safety of refuge in Christ.

This paragraph can be divided into two parts. The first, vv. 32-35, reminds the readers of their steadfast faith in earlier times; while the second, vv. 36-39, looks ahead to the future, exhorting them to maintain the same faithful endurance in the days to come.

- v. 32 ***“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured”*** The author now moves away from the general “we” form of address and becomes more direct and personal: “You” received the light, “you” endured, “you” were insulted and persecuted, etc. Like a good preacher, he is not satisfied that his readers merely receive the truth; they need to apply it to themselves.

That process of application begins with recalling their own spiritual journey, and especially the early days of their new life in Christ. This call to remembrance occurs over and over again in Scripture (Rom. 6:20; 1 Cor. 1:26; 6:11; 12:2; 2 Cor. 7:9, 15; 8:10; Gal. 4:8; 5:7; Eph. 2:12; Col. 1:21; 1 Thess. 1:4-10; 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 2:25).

Such recalling of the past has the power to influence us in the present, because each of our lives has a narrative arc, a “plot” that gives it meaning and coherence; one which places our present circumstances into the context of a story with a past, a present, and a future. Not only that, but our individual lives are part of a much greater story: God’s plan to bring into existence a people for himself and to bless them eternally. If we understand the story our life clearly, that is, according the truth of Scripture, we will grasp its underlying unity and purpose, even though we do not see how each individual piece fits into the whole. However, if we reject the narrative of Scripture, then our story becomes a jumble, lacking any rhyme or reason. As Shakespeare’s tragic figure Macbeth puts it,

*“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor
player
That struts and frets his hour upon the
stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”*

Much of contemporary art, literature, and music reflects this world view, and it is the ardent desire of our enemy, Satan, that we would adopt it also (Rom 12:2; 1 Pet. 5:8).

The author’s purpose in exhorting his readers to recall the past is to persuade them of at least two things. First, that at one time they considered the gospel to be a matter of supreme value and importance, worthy of any degree of loss, privation, or suffering, and nothing has changed since then to make that conviction any less valid. Second, that they had previously endured great hardship, and therefore they can do so again if necessary.

“in a great conflict” The Greek word translated “conflict” is *athlēsín*; the comparison is to the struggles of an *athletic* contest (see Heb. 12:1-3; also 1 Cor. 9:4; Phil. 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7)

- vv. 33-34 ***“you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution”*** The author here reminds his readers of the kinds of suffering they had previously endured. The Greek term rendered “insult” carries a broad connotation of various types of verbal abuse, such as reproach, reviling, slander, contempt, shaming, dishonor, and ridicule. The call to endure such suffering in 13:13 indicates that this experience was not wholly in the past, but was a continuing source of mental and emotional pain for them; one can only imagine the vile epithets and angry accusations that were hurled against these believers on a daily basis.

The Greek term for “persecution” strongly implies that physical abuse was another component of an overall pattern of mistreatment. The recipients of this letter were apparently not those who had suffered martyrdom under the Roman emperors, most notably Nero (see 12:4); however, the “public” aspect of their suffering implies that it was sponsored, or at least tolerated, by the Roman government. Beyond that, it is not possible to identify historically the specific persecution being referenced.

Note that they previously ***“stood side by side”*** with those suffering persecution; the commitment to one another for which the author appeals in 10:24-25 was evident among them. The sympathy mentioned in v. 34 implies verbal encouragement as well as more concrete forms of support, such as bringing food or clothing to those in prison (see 13:3; also Mt. 25:36; Phil. 1:7; 2:25; 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:13).

“You . . . accepted the confiscation of your property” This could have been the result of an official decree (compare Esther 3:12-13), or it could have been due to attacks by anti-Christian individuals or groups which were encouraged or tolerated by the authorities. Notably, the response of the believers to the loss of their goods had been, not stoic resignation, or helpless rage, or vows of revenge, but joy (see Mt. 5:12; Luke 6:22; Acts 5:41; 1 Pet. 4:13).

“because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.”

Their acceptance of what would be, to most people, a great personal catastrophe was not due to a lack of awareness of the worldly consequences of such loss. They were not in denial. Nor were they buoyed by a vague assurance that somehow it “would all work out for the best”. Instead, their attitude flowed from a different perspective on what is real, and true, and valuable. In their minds, what they had lost was temporary and relatively trivial, while what they had gained was eternal and monumental (see Mt. 13:44-45). The loss of the first only served to heighten their anticipation of, and hope for, the latter. As the martyred 20th century missionary Jim Elliot wrote in his journal, *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”*

Conversely, possession of great worldly wealth can blunt the appetite for heavenly treasures (Mt. 6:19-21; Lk. 12:34).

v. 35 ***“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.”***

The verb translated “throw away” could be rendered actively, as here, carrying the idea of intentional abandonment; it could also be translated with a more passive tint, i.e., to lose or let go of, due to inattention or indifference. In either case, the author is advocating its opposite, actively holding firm to faith in Christ (Heb. 3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23). The reward for doing so will be glorious beyond imagination (Rom. 8:18; Eph. 3:20; Phil. 3:8).

v. 36 ***“You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.”***

The promises of God are received only by those who continue walking in faith and obedience; the apostate does not receive partial credit for his initial profession of faith.

Here, as throughout Hebrews, the emphasis is on the responsibility of the believer to remain faithful; such exhortations to personal striving and disciplined effort are common in the New Testament (Rom. 2:7; 12:11; 1 Cor. 15:10; Eph. 4:3; 1 Tim. 4:9-11; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; Jude 1:21; Rev. 14:12). At the same time, there are many passages which emphasize God’s commitment to keeping us in the faith (Jn. 6:39; 10:28-29; 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6; 1 Jn. 5:18; Jude 1:24). And so, while we are responsible to work, the ability and the will to do so come from God. As the apostle Paul writes:

“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed . . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

- Philippians 2:12-13

vv. 37-38 This reference is a composite of Isaiah 26:20 (which supplies the phrase *“in just a very little while”*) and Habakkuk 2:3-4. The author rearranges freely the order of the phrases, and uses as his source the LXX (*Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament), rather than the MT (*Masoretic Text*, the Old Testament in the original Hebrew language), as can be seen by comparing Heb. 10:37-38 with the LXX and MT of Habakkuk.

The key point of contact between the prophecy of Habakkuk and the message of Hebrews is that the day of God’s coming, the time when the faithful will be rewarded and the unfaithful punished, is certain to arrive (see v. 25; 1 Cor 3:13; also Mt. 10:15; Acts 17:31; 1 Cor 1:8; 1 Thess. 5:2-4; 2 Thess 1:7-10; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8; 1 Jn. 4:17; 2 Pet. 3:10; Jude 1:6). In light of that knowledge, we must continue in faith rather than abandoning our commitment to Christ.

Note that Paul also refers to Habakkuk 2:4 in Gal. 3:11 and Rom. 1:17; although to support a different point than the author of Hebrews is making here.

v. 39 ***“But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who believe and are saved.”*** Taken at face value, this statement would seem to negate all the warnings which have been issued up to this point. However, it should be read, not as an omniscient and comprehensive judgment on their spiritual condition, but as a statement of hope and confidence. It is similar to 6:9, in which, immediately following a harsh warning, the author states, *“Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation.”*

Note that there are only two choices, with two associated outcomes. To falter and fall away from Christ is to embark on a path of ultimate destruction; to continue in faith and obedience is to walk the narrow road toward salvation (Mt. 7:13-14; Lk. 13:24). There are no other options.

Unit 20 - By Faith—Abel to Noah

Hebrews 11:1-7

Text

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
² This is what the ancients were commended for.
³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.
⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.
⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not

be found, because God had taken him away."^a For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

^a 11:5 Gen. 5:24

Open

☐ Do you tend to assume the best about everyone until proven otherwise? Or do you take the opposite approach?

☐ Do you need lots of data and information before making a decision? Or do you operate more on gut instinct?

Discover

1. Having "faith" means different things to different people. What are some ways that people understand it?

2. According to this passage, what are the characteristics of true faith?

3. Hebrews 11 gives us several examples of godly faith. In the space below, list some examples of your own. These can be family members, friends, or others whose example of faith you admire. What is it about their lives that reflects this characteristic?

4. Verse 6 tells us that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him." What do you think this means? Have you seen this proven true in your own life?

5. What do those who have faith believe concerning the creation of the world?

Why do you think these particular convictions are held up as characteristic of faith?

What beliefs do people today have about the origins of the universe?

Circle the ones which are consistent with Hebrews 11:3.

5. What do we know about Abel and his faith, from this passage and Genesis 4:4-5?

6. What do we know about Enoch and his faith, from this passage and Genesis 5:24?

7. What do we know about Noah and his faith, from this passage and Genesis 5:32-8:22?

Close

☐ What would you say is more important in pleasing God: a heart attitude of faith, or obedient actions?

☐ Do you think you have the kind of faith described in this passage? Why or why not?

Commentary

This passage begins the fourth major division of Hebrews, 11:1-12:13. It is divided into two sections: a celebration of faith (11:1-40) and a call to endurance (12:1-13). The beginning and end of the first section are marked by an *inclusio*, the repetition in verses 1-2 and 39 of the statement that the ancients were commended for their faith. Within this section, the boundaries of the first paragraph, vv. 1-7, are also marked by an *inclusio*, the repetition in vv. 1 and 7 of the reference to things unseen.

In both form and content, chapter 11 is distinct from the rest of the book, although the theme of faith links it to the conclusion of the preceding passage (10:38-39), and also to 6:12-15. [One example of such uniqueness is the use of *anaphora*, a rhetorical device involving repetition of a single word (here, "faith") at the beginning of successive clauses to give a passage unity and rhythm.] As a result, many have speculated that this material was drawn from another, independent source, either a previous sermon of the author, or some other traditional material known to him. Although this is plausible, it cannot be proven; no record of such a text exists, nor have any versions of Hebrews without chapter 11 come down to us.

Lists of examples used to motivate the reader or hearer to a virtuous life were common in Greek literature, including other Jewish and early Christian writings; likewise, recitals of historical events and people are found elsewhere in Scripture (Josh 24:2-13; 1 Sam. 12:6-15; Neh. 9:5-37; Ps. 78; 135; 136; Acts 7:2-53). The author's purpose in presenting this list of Old Testament men and women is to demonstrate from their lives that, although faith may require perseverance in the midst of suffering and disappointment, it will ultimately result in receiving praise from God and gaining what was promised. Therefore, we should imitate their faith and endurance so that we will, like them, inherit the promises. The key to such persevering faith is *hope*, the conviction that God will certainly bring to pass all that he has said he would do.

Note that the faith we are being called to emulate is not only a general confidence in God and in his word, but also a specific trust in the elements of Christian hope which we share with Old Testament believers, such as a heavenly country (11:16), and a "better resurrection" (11:35).

Note also that the faith being described in this chapter is focused on the future; on things "not yet seen" (v. 7), or things seen "from a distance" (v. 13). Although Abraham left home without knowledge of where he was going (v. 8), he was "looking forward" to a city designed and built by God (v. 10).

One interesting feature of the list in chapter 11 is that none of these persons or events are cited as examples of faith in their original Old Testament context. Perhaps from this we can draw the lesson that faith is the foundation for every act of obedience to God, even when it is not specifically identified as such.

v. 1 ***"faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."*** Much could be said about faith that is not reflected in this short statement. It is not a comprehensive definition of faith, nor is it intended to be. Rather, it presents the essential characteristics of faith which underlie the author's argument, in this chapter and in the book as a whole.

The two aspects of faith identified here have to do with (a) attaining the things one desires, and (b) grasping realities which are not available to the senses. Examples of the first include, among others: Noah, who obtains salvation from the flood (v. 7); Abraham, who receives a place of inheritance and descendants (vv. 8-12); and the people of Israel, who are granted deliverance from Pharaoh's army (v. 29).

Examples of the second aspect can be found in the references to matters hidden from ordinary perception, such as the past creation of the world (v. 3); the existence and nature of God (v. 6); the coming flood (v. 7); the heavenly city (v. 10); and "him who is invisible" (v. 27). This view, of things that can be seen only with the eyes of faith, is what gives the people of God strength to endure suffering and persecution, and which supplies the power to actively seek after what has been promised.

"assurance" The Greek term here is difficult to interpret. It can be taken subjectively, to describe the inner conviction possessed by the person of faith; thus "assurance" or "confidence". This is the most common approach; however, there are no examples in the Bible or in other ancient Greek writings of the word having this meaning.

It could also be interpreted objectively; for example, as "guarantee" or "surety", indicating that faith is what makes certain the receiving of God's promised blessings.

Another possibility would be to translate the term as "substance" (see KJV) or "essence". This meaning for *hypóstasis* refers to the fundamental reality underlying something, as in Heb. 1:3 (*"exact representation"*). Here, it could indicate that faith is the necessary means by which the promises of God are made real in our experience; i.e., that having faith in the promise is essential to receiving the promise. Or, in other words, that faith being exercised and the promise being fulfilled are inseparable; two sides of the same coin, each a part of the other.

v. 2 ***"This is what the ancients were commended for."*** This transitional verse sets the stage for the remainder of the chapter. The nature of true faith, stated in the previous verse, will now be validated by the examples of Old Testament saints whose lives exhibited this quality.

v. 3 ***"By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command"*** Unlike what follows, the subjects here are not the men and women of ages past, but "we", i.e., all persons of true faith, past and present. This statement supports the definition of faith as a certainty regarding what is unseen: the only witnesses to the creation were Christ, "*through whom also he made the universe*" (Heb. 1:2; Col. 1:16) and the angelic host (Job 38:7), and yet we accept the Biblical account of this event as true, without requiring the confirmation of cosmologists or astrophysicists. Paul makes a related point in Rom. 1:20.

This teaches also that the universe is not eternal, but had a beginning (and an end; see 12:27; Ps. 102:25-26). It affirms that the universe is not a self-existent or independent entity, but that it is now, and has been from the beginning, dependent on the will and activity of God (see Gen. 1:1-2:3; Isa. 42:5; 45:18; Jn. 1:1-3; Acts 4:24; Eph. 3:9; Rev. 4:11; 10:6). God is not a part of creation, nor dependent on it in any way; he is *transcendent*. These things the faithful also accept as true.

"so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." The verse as translated here supports the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, i.e. "out of nothing"; this is the traditional interpretation. God's act of creation was not merely a rearranging or reconfiguring of pre-existing materials; it was a true creation (see Rom. 4:17). Thus the statement that it was formed "*at God's command*," i.e. by the mere force of his spoken will (see Ps. 33:9; 148:5; note the repeated phrase "*And God said*" in Gen. 1).

It is also grammatically possible to associate the "not" with "visible" instead of "made", making this a positive assertion that the universe was formed out of what was not visible; i.e. that it was formed out of something other than visible matter. In either case, the author's point is that the origins of the material world are unseen by us, and therefore must be received by faith and not sight.

v. 4 ***"By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did."*** Here, the author apparently draws on traditional material beyond the Scriptural account, asserting, first, that Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's, and second, that it was made as an expression of faith.

Why was Abel's offering preferable? Many possibilities have been suggested. Perhaps it was because Abel's offering was of animal life, rather than vegetables, and thus prefigured the sacrifice of Christ. Or perhaps it was better, not because of any inherent superiority, but only because it was offered in faith. The Biblical account does not say. Nor does it tell us whether Abel and Cain were acting with regard to a previous command concerning sacrifices. All we are told is that "*The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor*" (Gen 4:4-5). However, in the end, these questions are beside the point; what matters to the author of Hebrews is that the faith which undergirded Abel's sacrifice obtained God's favor.

vv. 5-6 ***"By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death."*** Again, the Old Testament data is sparse; all we are told is that "*Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away*" (Gen. 5:24). This is traditionally taken to mean that Enoch was taken into heaven; i.e., that he passed from this life into eternity without experiencing death. The implication here in Hebrews is that Enoch's *translation* was a reward for his faith, which pleased God.

"And without faith it is impossible to please God" A mere external compliance with the requirements of the law would not obtain God's favor, even if such were possible. Coming to God in worship and obedience must be motivated by faith in order to receive his approval. Such faith includes a conviction: (1) that God exists (see Ex. 3:14), and (2) that he rewards those who seek him (see Dt. 4:29; 1 Sam. 26:23; Ps. 34:10). Note that although these elements of faith are *necessary*, they are not *sufficient*; they do not exhaust the content of a true saving faith.

v. 7 ***"By faith Noah . . . built an ark to save his family"*** Again, the faith for which Noah is commended concerns matters which are invisible; here, they are unseen due to the fact that they are still future.

The "holy fear" in which Noah is said to act is not fear of the flood, but is rather a reverence for God and a strong aversion to displeasing him.

In what sense did Noah "***condemn the world***"? It is difficult to say. Perhaps this indicates that his righteousness implicitly condemned the sinfulness of the rest of mankind. It could also be a reference to Noah acting as a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5), whose warnings of impending catastrophe went unheeded.

Unit 21 - By Faith— Abraham to Joseph

Hebrews 11:8-22

Text

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she ^a considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were

longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” ^b ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

²² By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

^a 11:11 Or By faith Abraham, even though he was too old to have children—and Sarah herself was not able to conceive—was enabled to become a father because he

^b 11:18 Gen. 21:12

Open

☐ When you were growing up, name something you wanted very much (i.e., for Christmas or your birthday) and eventually received.

☐ What place, or places (in this world) do you consider “home”?

Discover

1. Why did Abraham leave his home country? What was the result?

2. Have you ever left a place of security in order to follow God? What was the result? Were you ever tempted to return?

3. What was remarkable about the birth of Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac?

4. Read Genesis 22:1-19. What are some reasons that Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac required faith?

5. How did Abraham reconcile God's command to sacrifice Isaac with the promises God had given him of many descendants through Isaac (v. 19)? Was he right?

What conclusion do you draw from this?

6. In what sense were the people in this passage "foreigners and strangers on earth"?

Do you consider yourself to be a "foreigner" or a "stranger"? If so, how does that affect your life?

7. What were the people in this passage looking forward to? Would you say that you are looking forward to the same thing? Why or why not?

8. This passage tells us that the patriarchs did not receive what was promised (v. 13). In what sense is this a true statement? Doesn't this undercut the author's goal of promoting faith in God's promises?

Close

☐ Is there a step of faith that God is prompting you to take now, or a place of safety and security that he may be asking you to leave?

☐ If you could attempt one thing right now, and know with certainty it would be successful, what would it be?

Commentary

The author's essay in praise of faith now continues with an extended study of the patriarch Abraham as one of its primary exemplars.

- v. 8 ***"By faith Abraham, when called"*** Two elements of Abraham's faith are highlighted here. First, that when Abraham was called by God, he ***"obeyed and went"*** (see Gen. 12:1-4). The text gives no indication of reluctance or delay on Abraham's part, nor of any dialogue between God and Abraham, such as occurred in the calling of Moses (see Ex. 3:1-4:17). Abraham did not reject God's call, as did Jonah, nor did he resist it, as did Moses. He simply obeyed. Similarly, when Noah was called by God to build the ark, we read that *"Noah did everything just as God commanded him"* (Gen. 6:22). We also see this in the gospels, in the response to Christ of the brothers Simon and Andrew, who when called by him, left their nets *"at once"* and followed (Mt. 4:18-20). Faith not only obeys, but obeys immediately.
- Abraham's faith is also demonstrated in that he obeyed God without a specific promise concerning his future home; the Lord's command was that he go *"to the land I will show you"* (Gen. 12:1). Abraham did not demand details or guarantees, because his faith was not based on the gifts themselves, but on the giver. He did not know what kind of land the Lord would give him; he knew only that God would provide for his needs. And on the basis of that confidence, he obeyed without hesitation.
- v. 9 ***"he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country"*** Abraham lived a nomadic existence in Canaan, dwelling in tents rather than fixed structures, and he established no permanent population centers, no towns or cities (see Gen. 17:8; 23:4). His mode of life spoke clearly of the temporary nature of his attachment to the land; his ultimate goal and vision was not to inhabit Canaan, but to enter the city of God (v. 10). As Christians, we also share this status of being "aliens and strangers" in the world (1 Pet. 2:11; see Heb. 11:13; Phil. 3:20).
- v. 10 ***"he was looking forward to the city with foundations"*** Although Canaan was the land that God had promised to Abraham, his possession of it did not exhaust the promise, and Abraham knew this. Even as he was living in the land and enjoying its fruits, he was looking to the future, to a heavenly city (see vv. 13, 16; also 13:14), elsewhere described as the "heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22; see Gal. 4:26; Rev. 2:12; 3:12; 21:10). This city has permanent foundations; in contrast to the things of this world, it cannot be shaken (see 12:27-28; Ps. 125:1; Isa. 33:20).

- v. 11 ***"by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children"*** The syntax of this verse is difficult, leading to various translations. One approach, as in the note on the NIV text, would be to translate the verse thus: *"By faith Abraham, even though he was too old to have children—and Sarah herself was not able to conceive—was enabled to become a father."* This rendering highlights the fact that Sarah, like Abraham, was past the age of having children (see Rom. 4:19). A second option is to translate the phrase as, *"By faith Abraham, together with Sarah, even though he was past age . . ."* This leaves the focus on Abraham's faith and his advanced age, and acknowledges Sarah's accompanying role in the act of procreation.
- A third option makes Sarah the subject of the sentence, as in the NIV; however, this is less likely, as the phrase "enabled to bear children" is literally, "received power to deposit seed," a standard Greek formula for the male role in procreation. In addition, the subject throughout vv. 8-19 is Abraham, and a temporary shift in focus to Sarah would be stylistically awkward.
- In any case, the ability of Abraham and Sarah to conceive and bear children is attributed to faith in God as the one whose promises can be relied upon.
- v. 12 ***"And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky"*** This observation concerning the great number of Abraham's progeny echoes Gen. 22:17. The reference in the preceding verse to overcoming the limitations of advanced age indicates that it is the physical descendants of Abraham who are in view here, rather than his spiritual offspring (see Rom. 4:11, 16-17; 9:8; Gal. 3:7).
- The theme of life arising out of death, and the contrast between the one and the many, has a parallel in Romans 5:15-19, in which the death of one man, Jesus Christ, results in life and salvation for the many.
- v. 13 ***"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised"*** The theme of life triumphing over death, explicit in v. 12, is here implicitly repeated. The patriarchs died without having received the promises, which to all appearance rendered those promises worthless and void. However, through resurrection, those who were faithful unto death will surely see every promise fulfilled.

This verse raises the issue of what it means for a promise to be fulfilled. On the one hand, some passages indicate that God's promises to the patriarchs *were* fulfilled. In Hebrews 6:15, we read that "*Abraham received what was promised*". Likewise, in Joshua's final address to the people of Israel, he states that "*not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.*" (Josh. 23:14). However, here and in 11:39, we read that the original recipients of the promises did not live to see them fulfilled. How can this apparent discrepancy be resolved?

The answer is that there are two senses of "fulfillment" in view here. From a physical, earthly perspective, the men and women of the Old Testament did in fact see the promises of God fulfilled. Abraham was granted a son, Isaac, and a multitude of physical descendants. The people of Israel did take possession of the land of Canaan, and were greatly blessed by God. But this did not bring to completion God's work on behalf of his people. The promises remained in effect, to be fulfilled in a fuller and deeper way through Christ. Thus there remains a fulfillment to come, which we and they will share together (11:40).

"admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth." This is likely a reference to Abraham's confession in Gen. 23:4 (see also Lev. 25:23; 1 Chron. 29:15; Ps. 39:12; 105:12; 119:19). As Abraham was a resident alien among the Hittites, a "wandering Aramean" (Dt. 26:5), so also the people of God are strangers and aliens in this world (1 Pet. 2:11). It is not our true home, but only the temporary place of our sojourning. Therefore, we should not adopt its values and practices; rather, we ought to live as those who are citizens of another country (Phil. 3:20), while eagerly awaiting our repatriation. Like the ancients, we should be "*longing for a better country—a heavenly one*" (v. 16).

vv. 14-16 **"People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own."** Did the Old Testament believers understand that there was more to God's promise than the physical land of Canaan? Yes. As verse 15 points out, if they were seeking only an earthly homeland, they could have returned to the place of their origin: Ur of the Chaldeans, or Haran (Gen. 11:28-31). But their gaze was fixed on the future, not the past or the present. The country they were looking for was not earthly, but heavenly and thus far better. As a result, "*God is not ashamed to be called their God,*" because their desires correspond to the plans and purposes he has for them. In fact, the place for which they yearn has already been prepared (v. 16; see Mt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 2:9).

vv. 17-19 **"By faith Abraham . . . offered Isaac as a sacrifice."** Several features of this brief reference to Gen. 22:1-19 are worth noting. First, the theme of victory over death continues, as the imminent death of Isaac is averted, and the promise of God is thus upheld.

Second, we find that Abraham's faith was not diminished by his inability to predict how God would work. Abraham believed that God would find a way to keep his promise of many descendants through Isaac, even though the command to sacrifice Isaac seemed completely at odds with that outcome. And he was right. However, Abraham's expectation of how God would accomplish this – by allowing Isaac to be killed and then bringing him back to life – was incorrect. No matter. Abraham's conviction that God would be faithful to his promise, and the act of obedience that flowed from this conviction, were pleasing to God.

In the same way, we often attempt to understand the ways of God, to reconcile our knowledge of Him with our life experiences. Undoubtedly we are often wrong in our construal of "why" God did this or that. But that doesn't matter. What matters, and what pleases God, is that we trust and obey Him, even when we don't understand his purposes, or when our attempts to decipher the details of his plans turn out to be wrong. Thankfully, our ability to walk in faith does not depend on being able to correctly reason out what God is doing in any given situation.

Third, the reference to Isaac as Abraham's "*one and only son*" brings to mind the typological relationship between this incident and the sacrifice of Christ, God's "*one and only son*" (Jn. 3:16). As Abraham was prepared to do, God in fact did, sacrificing his only son, Jesus Christ. However, the picture, or *type*, of Christ in the Genesis narrative is not Isaac, but the ram which God provided, and which Abraham sacrificed "*instead of his son*" (Gen. 22:13). Rather than requiring that Isaac be killed, God ultimately provided a substitute to die in his place.

vv. 20-22 In each of these examples, the faith of the patriarch is expressed in an action that looks to the future. Thus Isaac "*blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future*", Jacob blessed Joseph's sons as he was dying (Gen. 48:8-22), and Joseph at the end of his life gave instructions concerning the transportation of his remains out of Egypt into Canaan (Gen. 50:24-25). Even at the point of death, not having seen the promises fulfilled in their lifetimes, Jacob and Joseph still anticipated the day when the promised blessings would come to pass. Similarly, the author desires that the Hebrews (and we) continue trusting God, no matter how long we must wait for his promises to be fulfilled.

Unit 22 - By Faith—Moses to the Prophets

Hebrews 11:23-40

Text

²³ By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

³¹ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. ^a

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the

prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; ^b they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

^a 11:31 Or unbelieving

^b 11:37 Some early manuscripts stoning; they were put to the test;

Open

☐ What are some memorable answers to prayer that you have received?

☐ Have you ever prayed for something you were confident was God's will, and not received it?

Discover

1. **Moses' life of faith (vv. 23-29).** In the space below, list the acts of faith from Moses' life (identified by the phrase "by faith") and why, in your view, each of those acts required faith.

Act of faith from Moses' life	Why this required faith
v. 23	
v. 24	
v. 27	
v. 28	

-
2. This passage lists many faith “victories”. In the space below, choose some of these and indicate which Bible character is being referred to (vv. 29-35).

Bible character	Faith victory

3. The author also lists several examples of those who suffered for their faith. Record these (who and what) in the space below. (vv. 35-39)

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4. How do you account for the fact that some men and women of faith saw great victories and deliverance, while others did not?

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5. This passage tells us that the faithful “gained what was promised” (v. 33), and also that “none of them received what had been promised” (v. 39)? In what sense can both of these statements be true?

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6. What do you think it means that “God had planned something better for us”. What is the author referring to? How is it “better”? (vv. 39-40)

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7. From this passage, would you say that the kind of faith needed to see great victories, or to persevere in the midst of suffering, is limited to a few special individuals? Why or why not? (see also James 5:17)

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Close

☐ What faith victories have you seen in your life?

☐ What times of struggle or suffering have you experienced as a result of your faith? How did you respond?

Commentary

vv. 23-31 This portion of chapter 11 focuses on the faith of Moses. An interesting structural similarity can be observed between this passage and the previous one, vv. 8-22, which deals with the faith of Abraham. In both cases, seven examples of faith are presented, introduced with the formula "by faith". The first four of these concern the primary figure (Abraham or Moses); while the last three highlight the faith of supporting characters.

Another similarity in both passages is the central part played by the journey of the main character: a decision to leave what was safe and familiar in order to follow the call of God; then tests and trials along the way; and finally, victory and reward, not only for the "hero," but also for his people. This kind of journey narrative is found in the traditions of many cultures, which present the exploits of their founders or leaders in this way. Whether the events related are factual (as here) or fictional, they gain rhetorical force from this form of narrative structure.

v. 23 In response to the growth of the Hebrew population, and the perceived threat which this posed to their Egyptians masters, Pharaoh decreed that all male children should be killed at birth (see Ex. 1:15-2:2). The refusal of Moses' parents to do so, likely at risk of their lives, is here attributed to their faith, which kept them from fearing Pharaoh's command. Thus we see that faith in God is an antidote to the fear of man.

Likewise, we are told that the midwives feared God, and so did not follow the decree. This reminds us that although believers are required to submit to those in authority (Rom. 13:1), this obligation is not absolute (Dan. 3:1-18; Acts 4:29).

vv. 24-26 These verses concern Moses' choice to renounce his position as an Egyptian of great royal privilege, in order to identify with the people of God. We are not told, here or in Exodus, precisely how Moses came to this point of decision, or when and how he communicated it to his adoptive mother and the royal family. We know only the actions which gave evidence of his choice: that he slew an Egyptian slave master and was forced to flee to Midian as a result (Ex. 2:11-15), and that he later returned to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage (Ex. 4:19-20).

"He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God" Suffering is the common experience of those who are faithful to God's call on their lives (see 10:32-34; 13:12-13; also Jn. 15:20; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12). This suffering is an identification with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

"rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" The temporary rewards

offered by this world are here implicitly contrasted with eternal salvation (see 5:9; 9:12, 15; 13:20). It is worth noting that the earthly pleasures abandoned by Moses were the greatest imaginable in the ancient world: virtually unlimited wealth, power, freedom, and glory; the ability to do great works and command armies. Thus king Solomon was able to declare, *"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure."* (Eccl. 2:10). And yet Moses chose mistreatment and "disgrace", because the reward he sought was far greater (v. 26; see Rom. 8:17-18; also Eph. 2:7; 3:16; Rom. 9:23).

"He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value" In what sense did Moses suffer "for the sake of Christ"? One possibility is that the author has in mind a general identification of Moses with the people of God, which constitutes an identification with Christ himself (Mt. 10:40; 25:40; Mk. 9:37; Lk. 10:16; Jn. 13:20). Another possibility is that Moses had a prophetic understanding of the future Messiah, and was looking ahead to his coming. Support for the second interpretation comes from the fact that such foresight is also attributed to the patriarch Abraham by Christ (Jn. 8:56).

v. 27 **"By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger"** If this verse refers to Moses' flight to Midian, it could be seen as contradicting Ex. 2:14-15, which states that Moses "was afraid" (although not specifically of Pharaoh) when he realized that his attack on the Egyptian had become known. Alternatively, it may refer to the later Exodus, when Moses courageously led the nation out of Egypt despite the wrath of Pharaoh (see Ex. 14:10-13). If Moses' view of "*him who is invisible*" is understood to refer to his vision of God in the burning bush, when he was commissioned to that task (Ex. 3:1-6), then the case for the second option is strengthened. Note that other passages also speak of Moses as a man who spoke to God "face to face" (Ex. 33:11; Num. 12:8; Dt. 4:10).

v. 29 This verse contrasts the outwardly similar actions of the Israelites in crossing the Red Sea, and the attempt by the Egyptian army to do the same thing: the first was by faith, in response to a command of God, resulting in salvation; the second was an act of presumption, done in opposition to God, and brought disaster and death (compare Num. 14:39-45).

v. 31 Note that although Rahab was not an Israelite, nor a person of exemplary moral character, she was saved from death by her faith, demonstrated by her treatment of God's people (see Josh. 2:18-13; 6:25).

vv. 32-40 This paragraph differs in style from the first part of chapter 11. The introductory phrase “by faith” is now replaced with “through faith”, signaling the beginning and end of the unit (vv. 33, 39). Rather than focusing individually on one person, the author names six heroes from Israel’s history following the entry into Canaan, followed by a catalog of achievements attributed to their faith and the faith of others. In addition, the tone of the passage shifts; presenting not only their accomplishments and victories, but also the challenges, struggles, and temporal defeats they experienced while remaining faithful. Such prevailing faith was required of this epistle’s original recipients, and is needed by us as well.

v. 32 This listing of faithful men includes judges: Gideon (Judg. 6–8), Barak (Judg. 4–5), Samson (Judg. 13–16), and Jephtha (Judg. 11–12); a king, David (1 Sam. 16–1 Chron. 29); and a prophet, Samuel (1 Sam. 1–25). Unlike previously in this chapter, the order here is not chronological. This may be due to the more important person in each pair of names (Gideon-Barak, Samson-Jephtha, David-Samuel) being placed first. Or, it may indicate a shift in emphasis from individuals to the larger community of the faithful, the “great cloud of witnesses” (12:1). Not only are the great men and women of history examples for us to follow (which might imply that only extraordinary persons are capable of such faith); but also the lesser-known and unknown, whose names never appear in Scripture. Prevailing faith is not limited to a special few (see Jam. 5:17).

vv. 33-34 These verses are composed of three groups of three clauses each, which together detail the results of faith in these men’s lives. The first group highlights political accomplishments; the second, deliverance from peril; and the third, strength and victory in battle.

In the first group, the administration of justice likely refers primarily to David’s reign over Israel (2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Chron. 18:14). David was also a conqueror of kingdoms (1 Sam. 18:5; 2 Sam. 8:1-15), as were the judges. The assertion that these men “*gained what was promised*” seems in conflict with the statement, just six verses later, that “*none of them received what had been promised*” (v. 39). Although they did receive many things that were promised, and were many times delivered from danger, they did not live to see the full and final fulfillment of God’s promises to his people, which awaits the return of Christ (see 4:1; 11:40; also, notes on 11:13).

In the second group, both Samson and David triumphed over lions (Judg. 14:5-6; 1 Sam. 17:34-37). However, it was most notably the prophet Daniel and his companions who were victorious over lions and escaped flames (Dan. 3:1-30; 6:1-27).

Several in this list escaped death (“*the edge of the sword*”), including David, who avoided Saul’s attempts to kill him on several occasions (1 Sam. 19:1-17; 23:7-24:22; 26:1-25), Elijah, who was marked for death by Jezebel (1 Ki. 19:2), and Elisha, who was delivered from the king of Aram (2 Ki. 6:12-23).

In the third group, those “*whose weakness was turned to strength*” refers to physical power, since the result was victory in battle. Examples include Samson, who regained strength to slaughter the Philistines (Judg. 16:1-30), Gideon, who defeated the Midianite army with only 300 men (Judg. 6:15, 7:1-6), and David, who defeated the warrior Goliath while still a youth (1 Sam. 17:14, 33, 50).

v. 35 “***Women received back their dead, raised to life again.***” A reference to the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman, whose sons were restored to life by Elijah and Elisha (1 Ki. 17:17-24; 2 Ki. 4:18-37).

“***so that they might gain an even better resurrection.***” Again, we see that the hope of the ancients was not limited to earthly blessings, but their hopes were fixed on the future and life everlasting (see 11:16).

vv. 35-37 In these verses, the tone shifts from celebration of victory and deliverance to praise for steadfastness in the midst of suffering and death. As the previous verses demonstrate, God is able to save his people, and he will ultimately do so, utterly and completely. However, he does not always deliver his people from trials in this life, including even extreme suffering, as the examples here remind us. But faith continues to trust and obey God, even unto death (see Job 13:15; Dan. 3:16-18).

v. 37 “***They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two***” The only Old Testament reference to death by stoning is that of Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:21); Jesus indicated that others had met this fate as well (Mt. 23:37). There is no account in Scripture of death by sawing in two; however, tradition indicates that the prophet Isaiah died in this manner.

vv. 39 “***These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.***” See notes on 11:13. This verse clearly refutes the insidious teaching of some so-called “health and wealth” teachers, that a failure to obtain what one seeks, including deliverance from suffering, is always due to lack of faith.

v. 40 “***God had planned something better . . . so that only together with us would they be made perfect.***” All of God’s people, from every age, will be transformed at the same time, at the coming of Christ (1 Cor. 15:12-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Unit 23 - God Disciplines His Sons

Hebrews 12:1-13

Text

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

⁴ In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

*"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,*

⁶ *because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."* ^a

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ "Make level paths for your feet," ^b so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

^a 12:6 Prov. 3:11,12 (see Septuagint)

^b 12:13 Prov. 4:26

Open

☐ How were you disciplined as a child? What was the result?

☐ Do you participate in any sports? How do you train for them?

Discover

1. Who are the "witnesses" of verse 1? How are they significant to us as we run our race of faith?

2. What are some ways in which the Christian life is like a footrace? How is it **unlike** a race?

Like

Unlike

-
3. We are encouraged here to fix our eyes on Jesus (v. 2) and “consider him” (v. 3). How do we do that?

What will be the result?

4. What does it mean when hardship and suffering come into our lives? (see Deut. 8:5; Job 5:17; Ps. 94:12; 119:71; 1 Cor. 11:32; Rev. 3:19)

How should we respond? Why?

5. What is the ultimate goal of God's discipline?

6. How is God's discipline like or unlike that of a human father?

7. What does Proverbs have to say about the value of parental discipline? See Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15-17.

Close

☐ How do you tend to respond when you experience hardship or mistreatment? How do you need to respond differently?

☐ How can you help those around you who are having difficulty in running the race, to strengthen and encourage them?

Commentary

This passage concludes the fourth major division of Hebrews, 11:1–12:13, which is divided into two sections: a celebration of faith and a call to endurance. In this section, 12:1–13, the author resumes his exhortation to persevere in faith, while shifting the focus from Old Testament believers to Jesus, as the one whose example we are to follow.

- v. 1 ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses”*** The word “witness” (Gr. *martyrōn*) can mean simply “observer”. That sense is likely implied here, the imagery being that of a stadium full of spectators cheering on an athletic contest. The athletes in this metaphor are the recipients of the letter, who are being exhorted to *“run with perseverance,”* while those watching are the faithful men and women of chapter 11.

However, the more technical meaning of the term, “martyr,” i.e., one who is a faithful witness even unto death (Acts 22:20; Rev. 2:13; 17:6), is likely also intended, again in reference to the Old Testament believers who suffered martyrdom for their unyielding obedience to God. Their steadfast faithfulness, at the cost of their lives, and in spite of persecution and suffering along the way, is an inspiration to us as we run our own race. Most of us cannot know whether the finish line will appear around the next turn or far into the future, nor do we know what trials and sorrows may come, but we can and must *“run with perseverance”* until our race is over (see 1 Cor. 9:24; Gal. 2:2; 5:7; 2 Tim. 4:7).

“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”

The word “entangles”, modifying “sin”, could also be translated as “dangerous,” “besetting,” or “easily surrounding”. In any case, the exhortation is to rid ourselves of all that would impede us in following wholeheartedly after Christ, just as the participants in a race discard their warm-up clothes before the gun goes off. No one would begin a marathon carrying a fifty-pound backpack, or attempt to run a hundred-meter dash wearing a robe! In fact, in the ancient Olympics, the athletes typically competed with no clothing at all, and so the imagery here of stripping oneself bare of all encumbrances, and especially of sin, is quite stark (see also Mt. 18:8-9; Col. 3:8; Jam. 1:21; 1 Pet. 2:1).

“the race marked out for us.” This is a brief reminder that ultimately, the one who determines the course of our lives is not we ourselves, but God (Prov. 16:9; 20:24; Jer. 10:23). He decides whether the course will be long or short; whether it will be steep or level, scenic or barren, pleasant or tortuous. Our responsibility is not to run someone else’s race, but our own, the one God has assigned to us.

- v. 2 ***“fixing our eyes on Jesus”*** Reflecting on the lives of the ancients is helpful in strengthening our resolve, but our true focus must be on Jesus. His life of perfect faith and obedience is the supreme example which transcends all others. He alone is worthy of following and imitating in every respect, while others are reliable guides only as they themselves are being guided by him (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6).

“the pioneer and perfecter of faith” The term rendered “pioneer” (Gr. *archēgon*) carries connotations of “leader” and “initiator”. Jesus is the first person to attain the object which faith seeks, having entered into heaven as our forerunner (2:10; 6:19-20). Therefore, he is our leader, the one whose example of faith in God we must follow as we run the race. He is also the initiator of our faith, in that his saving work on our behalf is what makes our faith possible (5:9; see Mt. 11:27; Jn. 17:1-8).

“For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame” Like Moses, who was willing to endure hardship and disgrace because of his hope in future blessings (11:24-26), Christ suffered willingly in order to bring about glory and joy, not only for himself, but for his people (2:9-10; 5:9; 9:28). Rather than shrinking back from the curse of the cross (Gal. 3:13), he accepted it and humbled himself, and was exalted by God (Phil. 2:7-9).

- v. 3 ***“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”***

The hostility against Jesus which finally resulted in his arrest and crucifixion expressed itself throughout his ministry as verbal hostility; i.e., reproach, slander, lies, angry accusations, and other forms of spoken abuse. The Hebrews are under similar attack (10:32-34); as a result, they are becoming mentally and emotionally exhausted and are in danger of becoming spiritually apathetic. The remedy is not to focus on their circumstances or on their own resources, but on their Savior, drawing from his example the strength to persevere.

- v. 4 ***“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”*** With the term “struggle”, the athletic imagery shifts from a foot race to a boxing or wrestling match (compare 1 Cor. 9:24-26). Note that these are contests in which injury is more likely. With the phrase “not yet”, the author may be warning the Hebrews that their future trials could involve physical suffering and death, perhaps in the coming time when all earthly things will be “shaken” (12:25-27).

The sin likely in view here is not their own (see v. 1), but that of the enemies of the gospel, with whom they are “struggling”.

vv. 5-6 **“And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement”** The passage referenced here is Prov. 3:11-12. The question, “Have you forgotten?” (or alternatively, read as a statement, “You have forgotten . . .”) carries a mild rebuke; however, encouragement comes from the fact that their suffering does not indicate they have fallen from God’s favor. In fact, the opposite is true; their suffering represents the discipline of a loving and wise father, who regards them as His legitimate sons. It is an expression of love and commitment, rather than rejection.

The appropriateness of personal application is emphasized by the phrase, *“that addresses you”*. In other words, they (and we) are completely justified in taking the words of this Proverb and applying them to ourselves.

The theme of God disciplining his people, as a father disciplines his children, is found throughout Scripture (Deut. 8:5; Job 5:17; Ps. 94:12; 119:71; Jer. 2:30; 1 Cor. 11:32; Rev. 3:19). Discipline may be corrective, designed to bring a wayward people back to God: this aspect is prominent in the Old Testament; for example, in the book of Judges. Discipline may also be formative, involving hardship as a means of training or preparation (see v. 11). But in either case, the goal is not punishment or justice; discipline is not for the purpose of bringing God’s retributive wrath upon the sinner. It is rather for the purpose of conforming God’s people to his own character and continually drawing them into relationship with Himself. It is a tool of redemption, not condemnation.

vv. 7-8 **“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.”** In contrast to our natural response to suffering, the response which is commended here is not to seek immediate escape from it, but to persevere in the midst of it.

Note that here and throughout Scripture, the appropriateness and necessity of parental discipline is assumed. Its lack is viewed as evidence, not of love or compassion, but of neglect or indifference, or even hatred (see Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17).

v. 9 This reasoning here is from lesser to greater: if the discipline of our human fathers merited respect, even more so does the discipline of our heavenly father deserve our willing submission. The result of yielding to God’s discipline is that we shall “live” (compare Prov. 6:23, *“the corrections of discipline are the way to life”*; also Prov. 19:18, 23:13-14). The life in view here is the life to come; we are not promised escape from suffering and death, but resurrection to eternal life (11:35-39).

“the Father of spirits” This could be a general reference to all spiritual beings, as in Heb. 1:14, where supernatural spirits are in view. Or it could refer to the spiritual part of human nature (see 12:23; also Num. 16:22; 27:16), which seems the more likely option in the context. In either case, the contrast is between the respect which is due to those who are our fathers according to the flesh, and the even greater submission we owe to the One who is our Father from a spiritual perspective (see John 3:6).

v. 10-11 These verses contrast the discipline of parents with the discipline of God, in order to demonstrate the superiority of God’s discipline and the greater necessity of submitting to it. First, our human fathers employed discipline **“as they thought best”**. The discipline of our parents was imperfect; it was subject to all the weaknesses of humanity and sin. If we are parents ourselves, we know that sometimes we make mistakes, are too lenient or too harsh, or correct our children with a wrong heart attitude. But God always disciplines us according to his perfect wisdom and knowledge, and always does so in love.

Second, God’s discipline has a higher purpose; he **“disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.”** This participation in the holiness of God is both temporal and eternal. In our present experience, discipline shapes the mind, emotions, and will, making us more and more like God in our character (Heb. 12:14; Rom. 6:22; 1 Thess. 4:7; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:15-16; 1 John 3:3). Discipline also protects us from the danger of wandering away from the faith, keeping us safe in Christ until the day when we will be fully conformed to His moral likeness, having no remaining stain of sin (Heb. 10:10, 14; 13:12; see Rom. 8:29; Eph. 5:27; 1 John 3:2). The result of discipline is therefore **righteousness and peace** for the believer, both at the present time and in the age to come.

vv. 12-13 **“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.”** The author concludes his essay on the value of discipline with a quote from Isaiah 35:3, calling for his readers individually to firm up their resolve, and as a community to support and strengthen one another (see 10:24-25), that they might renew their wholehearted devotion to Christ. The admonition to **“Make level paths for your feet”** is from Prov. 4:26. It indicates that the strong should help those who are weak in faith (the “lame”), in order that they be healed rather than become permanently disabled (i.e., turn aside from the faith in apostasy).

Unit 24 - Warning Against Refusing God

Hebrews 12:14-29

Text

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death."^a ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."^b

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the

firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

^c ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."^d

^a 12:20 Exodus 19:12,13

^b 12:21 See Deut. 9:19.

^c 12:26 Haggai 2:6

^d 12:29 Deut. 4:24

Open

☐ Do you have any phobias? What kinds of things frighten you?

☐ If you could plan a party with unlimited funds, what would it look like?

Discover

1. The author urges his readers to "live in peace" and to "be holy" (v.14). What is the relationship between these two actions? In other words, what does peace have to do with holiness, and vice versa?

2. What warning does the author give concerning Esau? How is Esau's story relevant to us today?

3. What comparison is the author making in vv. 18-24?

List the points of comparison and contrast below:

Mount Sinai	Mount Zion

4. What things will be “shaken”? What does this mean?

What things will not be shaken? What does this mean?

5. What does it mean to say that “without holiness no one will see the Lord”?

6. How would you state the warning of vs. 25 in your own words?

Close

☐ Do you tend to see God from the point of view of Mount Sinai, or Mount Zion?

☐ When the heavens and earth are “shaken”, what from your life will remain?

Commentary

In the fifth major division of the book of Hebrews (12:14–13:21), the author brings the letter to a close, issuing pastoral directives on living together in a world hostile to Christian faith. The purpose here is not to establish new truths, but to remind the readers of what they already know and urge them to faithful observance.

- v. 14 ***“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy”*** Exhortations to relational peace are found throughout the Scriptures (Mt. 5:9; Mk. 9:50; Rom. 12:18; 1 Thess. 5:13; 2 Cor. 13:11). Peace is not only something to be desired, but, as here, something to be actively pursued (see Ps. 34:14; Rom. 14:19; 1 Pet. 3:11).

The call to holiness, likewise, is found in both the Old and New Testaments (Lev. 19:12; 21:6; 1 Pet. 1:15–16). The holiness in view here is not positional sanctification, which is the state of having been set apart to God and dedicated to his service (Heb. 9:13; 10:10, 14; see 1 Cor. 6:11). Rather, it is an experiential, or active, sanctification, which consists of turning away from sin and living in accordance with the revealed will of God (see 1 Thess. 4:3–4; 5:23).

The two aspects are inextricably linked; those who are “sanctified in Christ Jesus” are also those who are “called to be his holy people” (1 Cor. 1:2; see 1 Pet. 1:2). One cannot be sanctified positionally, that is, cleansed by the blood of Christ through faith (Heb. 13:12), without the fruit of a holy life being the result. Conversely, the lack of a holy and obedient life is evidence of the lack of its root, the positional sanctification that comes through faith in Christ. Thus, ***“without holiness no one will see the Lord,”*** i.e., the unfaithful and disobedient will not stand in God’s presence in heaven, beholding and worshipping him (Mt. 5:8; Jn. 17:24; 1 Jn. 3:2; Rev. 22:4), because they have never truly come to know him (see Matt. 7:18–23).

- v. 15 ***“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God”*** This warning echoes similar cautions earlier in the letter (2:1; 3:12; 4:1). The grace in view could be that which is available to aid those who are struggling (Heb. 4:16). It could also refer to the result of God’s grace; i.e., salvation. In either case, to miss (literally, “fall short of”) this grace would be spiritually disastrous.

“and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” The reference here is to Deut. 29:18. The author is likely warning, not against bitterness per se, but against seemingly small or individual sins which, if allowed to continue growing, could produce bitter results. Such matters must be addressed, lest they threaten the peace and spiritual welfare of the entire community.

- vv. 16–17 These verses present Esau as a cautionary example, one who was sexually immoral and “godless”. The first phrase may refer to his marriages to non-Jews, in defiance of his parents (Gen. 28:1–9; see Gen. 26:34; 36:2). The second term is broader, encompassing many acts of rebellion and contempt, including the fateful exchange of his birthright as eldest son for a mere bowl of soup (Gen. 25:29–34). In both cases, a worldly set of values, and a priority put on the satisfaction of his physical desires, took precedence over obedience and submission to God.

The implied plea to the recipients of this letter is not to abandon their profession and practice of faith, merely in exchange for relief from persecution and poverty (Heb. 10:34). They must not allow their felt needs to overcome their devotion to Christ. If they do, they may reach a point, as Esau did (Gen. 27:30–40), when a change of course is no longer possible, with the result that their inheritance in Christ would be forfeit (see commentary on 6:4–7).

- v. 18 In this paragraph (vv. 18–24), the author contrasts the visual, aural (and even meteorological) signs of the old covenant with the sights and sounds that accompany the new. While the former provoked terror and threatened death, the latter is marked by joy, celebration and the promise of eternal life.

“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched” This refers to the events of Ex. 19:1–20:21, as described in Deut. 4:9–14; 5:1–32. The ancient Israelites confronted something tangible, something that (at least in principle) could be touched, in contrast to the heavenly realities of the new covenant, which as yet cannot be directly perceived.

The use of similar phrases in verses 18 and 22, ***“You have not come to”*** / ***“you have come to,”*** highlights an essential difference between the old and new covenants: the conditions for approaching God. Under the old, access (“coming to”) was tightly restricted. Only Moses could ascend the mountain to speak with God directly; the others were kept at a distance, prohibited even from touching it (Ex. 19:12–13). Under the new covenant, however, access to God is open to all who come through Christ (Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 10:22).

- vv. 19–21 The people’s response to the holiness of God, as expressed in the prohibition against coming near, was to beg that he no longer speak to them directly; his word filled them with fear (Ex. 20:19; Deut. 5:25). Even Moses, who stood fearlessly before Pharaoh (Heb. 11:27), trembled at the sight. Recall that Isaiah had a similarly awed and fearful response when he received a vision of God’s holiness (Isa. 6:1–5).

v. 22 ***“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”*** Topographically, Mt. Zion is the hill, or mountain, on which Jerusalem, the “city of David,” is constructed. The designation “Zion” also applied to the city itself (2 Sam. 5:6-9; 1 Ki. 8:1; Isa. 4:3; 33:20; 52:1) and to its inhabitants. From a spiritual point of view, since the temple was in Jerusalem, “Zion” came to indicate the sacred dwelling place of God, the focus of his ruling and redemptive activity (Ps. 9:11; 74:2; 132:13-14; Isa. 8:18; 24:23; Mic. 4:7).

In this verse, “Mount Zion” and “Jerusalem” are not the sites geographically located in Israel, but refer to the heavenly dwelling place of God (see Heb. 11:10). The contrast in this passage between Mount Sinai, representing the old covenant, and Mount Zion, “the Jerusalem that is above”, representing the new covenant, is seen also in Paul’s writings (Gal. 4:24-26).

v. 23 ***“to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.”*** The Greek word *ekklēsia*, rendered “church” is literally, “assembly” (see Heb. 2:12). The imagery is that of a great gathering of the people of God from all eras, who are individually known to Him, and whose claim to salvation is validated by the inclusion of their names in a heavenly registry (see Lk. 10:20).

Here, they are described as those who belong to, who are identified with, and who share in the inheritance of, the Firstborn, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:6; see 2:10-13). Christ bears this title because he is the first to be resurrected from the dead (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Rev. 1:5; see notes on Heb. 12:2).

The idea of a “book of life,” in which is recorded the names of all who truly belong to God and who will inherit eternal life, is found throughout the Scriptures (Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; 139:16; Dan. 12:1; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27).

“the spirits of the righteous made perfect” The vision here is of the final consummation, when both we and the people of God from earlier generations will be made perfect together (see 11:40).

As in 10:14, this transformation is spoken of as a present reality, although it will be fully realized only in the future (see 1 Cor. 13:10; 15:49; Phil. 3:12; 1 Jn. 3:2).

v. 24 ***“to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood”*** This verse recalls the key themes of the letter: Christ as the mediator of a new and better covenant, and the blood (i.e. death) of Christ as the essential requirement to establish that covenant (see 8:6; 9:11-22; 10:19-22). It is his sacrifice which makes possible our access to God in the heavenly Jerusalem, the inscription of our names in the book of life, and our sanctification, holiness, and perfection.

v. 25 These verses (vv. 25-29) contain a final word of warning, based on a “lesser to greater” argument concerning the means by which the old and new covenants were communicated. If the message delivered on earth had dire consequences for those who ignored it, how much more will the message that comes from heaven bring judgment on all who disregard it? In the context, it is clear that God is the one speaking in both cases, at Sinai (vv. 19, 26), and now, from heaven (vv. 25-26). Thus, the contrast is not between two different speakers (such as Moses and Christ), but between two different locations; i.e., earth and heaven.

For the Exodus generation, the tragic results of rejecting God’s word included exile from the promised land and continual rootless wandering in the barren desert of the Sinai peninsula, until every person of mature age at the time of the rebellion had died (Num. 14:20-35; see Heb. 3:16-18). But for those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, a far more terrifying and inescapable judgment awaits (Heb. 10:26-31; see 2:3).

v. 26-27 ***“but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ ”*** The reference is to Haggai 2:6-7, in which the LORD, speaking through the prophet, foretells a shaking of “the heavens and the earth”, as well as of “all nations”. At the time of the prophecy (520 B.C.), the people of Israel, having returned from exile in Babylon, were suffering from drought and economic hardship (Hag. 1:5-11), and the temple, recently rebuilt, suffered greatly by comparison to the glorious temple of Solomon, destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (Hag. 2:3). In spite of these things, Haggai assures them that, *“what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the LORD Almighty* (2:7).

The author of Hebrews views the fulfillment of this prophecy as yet future, and amplifies its meaning: the things to be removed will be all of creation; that is, the entire visible universe (Heb. 1:10-12; see Isa. 51:6; Mt. 24:35; 1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 21:1). Nothing will be left except that which is eternal, that which ***“cannot be shaken”*** (see Heb. 10:34; 11:10; 13:14).

Note that therefore, the “house” which is to be filled with glory according to Haggai’s prophecy cannot be the physical temple, but is rather the heavenly dwelling place of God (Heb. 8:1-5; 9:11-12, 24; see Rev. 7:15; 11:19; 15:8).

vv. 28-29 ***“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful”*** Although we have not yet fully entered into this kingdom, by virtue of our present union with Christ, our future possession of it is certain. Thus, we “are receiving” it. The appropriate response to this reality is gratitude, reverence, and worship.

Unit 25 - Concluding Exhortations

Hebrews 13:1-9

Text

¹ Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. ⁴ Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

*"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."*^a

⁶ So we say with confidence,

*"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?"*^b

⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so.

^a 13:5 Deut. 31:6
^b 13:6 Psalm 118:6,7

Open

☐ Do you consider yourself temperamentally more "conservative", or "progressive"? Which do you value more highly: stability or change?

☐ If you could change one thing about our society, what would it be?

Discover

1. This passage encourages us to "keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters" (v. 1). What attitudes and actions are characteristic of the relationship between members of the same human family?

How can those attitudes and actions be extended to those with whom you are not related by blood or marriage, but instead by a common faith in Christ? What are the challenges in doing so?

2. How might you obey the command to "show hospitality to strangers"? Why is this important?

What difficulties would you have to overcome in order to do so?

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3. Do you know of anyone who is in prison, or is being mistreated, because of their faith? How do you “remember” them?

4. What does it mean to honor marriage? Give some examples of conduct that would be consistent with an attitude that honors marriage.

How does our society (i.e., its culture and institutions) dishonor marriage? What implications does this have for Christians living in such a society?

5. How can you keep your life “free from the love of money”? What does this kind of life look like in practice?

6. What spiritual leaders do you consider to be worthy of following? How can you imitate their life and faith?

7. What does this passage tell us about the relative value of tradition versus innovation in Christian doctrine and practice? Can you think of any present-day applications?

8. Choose one of the commands in this passage to focus on in the coming week. In the space below, write out a plan to more fully obey God in this area. Make your plan specific, achievable (realistic), and measurable, and also give it a timeframe; e.g., “in the next month I will . . .”.

Close

☐ Which of the commands in this passage do you find relatively easy to obey? Which do you find more difficult to follow?

☐ Do you generally prefer the more theological portions of the New Testament, or the more practical ones? Which is more important?

Commentary

A point of scholarly dispute concerns the relationship of this chapter to the rest of the epistle; i.e., whether it forms an integral part of the author's argument, or whether it was tacked on at the end (by the author or someone else) merely to bring matters to a close, with little connection to what precedes.

Arguments that chapter thirteen forms a separate literary unit are based on the lack of a clear transition between 12:29 and 13:1, as well as differences of theme, language, and style. However, upon close examination, many similarities can be identified as well. In addition, there is no manuscript tradition in which the book of Hebrews ends after chapter 12. Therefore, attempts to bring its structural integrity into question must be regarded as speculative and unconvincing.

vv. 1-6 This paragraph has been analyzed in various ways by commentators. Attridge divides it into two parts: In vv. 1-3, the focus is on brotherly love, while in vv. 4-6, admonitions concerning personal morality are supported by the promise of divine presence and protection. The implicit connection between these elements is the relationship between private conduct and the spiritual welfare of the community. This link is stronger than is sometimes realized (see notes on 12:15).

v. 1 **"Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters"** This refers to love among members of the believing community, rather than a general benevolence toward mankind. Love for one another was identified by Christ as something which would clearly distinguish his followers (Jn. 13:35). Recall also that in Hebrews, love for God is demonstrated first by service to his people (Heb. 6:10).

The command to "keep on" loving is a reminder of the continuing nature of Christian fellowship. The bond we have in Christ is eternal, because our shared inheritance is unshakeable (12:27-28). Thus, our spiritual unity transcends even the temporal boundaries of this earthly life. The love which believers are to show one another is part of God's eternal redemptive plan, which extends from eternity past to eternity future (see 6:17). This truth is linked thematically with injunctions to "remember" (10:32), and with references to the things which remain and continue (1:11-12; 4:9; 7:3). The right response to that knowledge is a renewed resolve and commitment, both to one another and to Christ (our "brother"; see 2:11, 12, 17).

Note that the admonition to love one another "as brothers and sisters" does not mean "like brothers and sisters do," or "as if you were brothers and sisters," but rather, "as the brothers and sisters that you are". This relationship is just as real and true as any line on a genealogical chart (see Mt. 23:8).

v. 2 **"show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it"**

This refers to Sarah and Abraham's encounter with the "three men" who visited them on the way to Sodom (Gen. 18:1-16), but it could also include the experiences of Lot (Gen. 19:1-11), Gideon (Judg. 6:11-22); and Manoah (Judg. 13:2-22).

The practice of hospitality toward other believers is commanded in Scripture (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9). It is a distinguishing characteristic of a follower of Christ (Mt. 25:35, 40), and an essential qualification for church leadership (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8).

In the early days of the church, hospitality would have been especially important for apostles, missionaries, and itinerant preachers. Those traveling on behalf of the gospel would likely be carrying little money, and would thus be dependent (with apologies to Tennessee Williams) on "the kindness of strangers" (see Mt. 10:9-14; Mk. 6:7-10; Lk. 9:1-4). Jesus frequently enjoyed the hospitality of others, such as Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38-42), and the book of Acts provides many examples of Peter and Paul receiving hospitality during their travels (Acts 10:32, 48; 16:15; 21:4, 8, 16; 28:7).

v. 3 **"Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison"** This command implies a sense of identification and solidarity with other believers that goes beyond mere sympathy and expresses itself in practical works of mercy (see 10:32-34). In the same way, Christ chose to identify fully with us, even to the extent of bearing the punishment and suffering that was due us for our sin (2:14-17).

v. 4 **"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."** Sex and money, the topics of this moral injunction and the next (vv. 5-6), are sources of temptation in all eras. In both cases, the root of the transgression is not merely desire, but a lack of contentment with what one has, coupled with fear of loss. These attitudes represent a failure to gratefully acknowledge God as the source of all blessings (see Jam. 1:17), as well as a lack of confidence in His wisdom, love and goodness as our provider.

Coveting what one does not have, instead of giving thanks for what one has, stems from an unwillingness to accept boundaries, a desire to "be like God" (Gen. 3:5), that is, to exist without the limitations we experience as a result of being created rather than divine. Coveting is a rejection of the authority of the God who made us and who established those boundaries. It leads to violations of God's commands, which will not go unpunished (1 Thess. 4:3-7; Eph. 5:3-5).

The command to “honor” marriage uses a word which in other contexts refers to “costly” or “precious” stones (1 Cor. 3:12, Rev. 17:4, 21:19). Marriage is to be highly regarded, to be esteemed as having great value. Such an attitude is essential, in order to support the resolve of husbands and wives to keep themselves exclusive to one another, most notably in a sexual sense.

A prevalence of fornication, adultery, divorce and pornography in a society is an indication that marriage is lightly esteemed and little valued among that people. As Christians living in such a society, we need to be vigilant, lest we allow a low regard for marriage to seep into our minds and hearts, poisoning our relationships and weakening our commitment. Here’s a test: do you joke disparagingly about your husband or wife, or do you honor them with your speech? Do you complain about them (to yourself or others), or give thanks for them? Do you indulge in daydreams or fantasies about being with other people? Such seemingly harmless behaviors can produce bitter fruit.

- vv. 5-6 ***“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”*** How can we avoid covetousness and greed? By focusing, not on what we have or don’t have, but on our God, who has promised to care for us and to provide for our needs. The cure for greed is not to accumulate more money: as Solomon observes, *“Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.”* (Eccl. 5:10).
- To the extent that we are trusting in God to provide for our needs, we will be free from worry concerning our finances. We will also be free to give generously to those who are in need (see 2 Cor. 8:1-15; 9:6-15), rather than hoarding what we have for ourselves. The Hebrews had previously displayed such an attitude (10:34).

- v. 7 ***“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”*** Verses 7-9 contain a brief appeal to keep in mind the life and faith of the community’s early (perhaps founding) leaders, and to hold fast to the teachings received from them, rather than being led astray by religious innovators.

The “outcome” of their lives could refer in general to the beneficial results of their faith, as it was lived out in the community. The implicit principle would be that a life of godliness and integrity is a validation of the doctrine one professes. The term could also refer to the *ultimate* outcome of their lives; that is, their death, and even possibly their

martyrdom. Faith in Christ provides great comfort in the face of death (1 Cor. 15:55); thus, the conduct and state of mind of those who are approaching it provides evidence of the genuineness and power of the faith they profess. Those who, even *in extremis*, continue to cling to Christ as their only hope and assurance of eternal blessedness, give profound testimony to the gospel. They are able to say with Paul, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”* (2 Tim. 4:7; see Heb. 12:1).

The instruction to “imitate” the faith of their leaders echoes similar exhortations in Paul’s letters (Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:9). Such imitation must not be absolute, however; it can extend only so far as those leaders are themselves following Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), as he is our ultimate example and guide (Heb. 12:2). Therefore, each person must study the Scriptures, in order to judge for themselves whether the things being taught and practiced are consistent with the life and teachings of Christ (see Acts 17:11).

- v. 8 ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** The eternity and immutability (unchanging nature) of Christ is not a new theme in Hebrews; see 7:24, also 1:11-12, *“But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”* And since Christ himself does not change, the doctrines concerning him which were handed down from earlier teachers (v. 7) remain eternally true; any new “strange teachings” (v. 9) must therefore be rejected (see Gal. 1:6-9).

- v. 9 ***“Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.”*** In the two millennia since Christ, a multitude of false teachings have arisen, each claiming to be a valid extension, or clarification, or correction, of the gospel. But the *“faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people”* (Jude 1:3) has not need of alteration or improvement. It must not be adulterated with any such “isms”, and ‘asms’, and spasms”¹.

“It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so.” Here we see that the heretical teaching at issue concerned the use of food for religious purposes. But faith cannot be enhanced (“strengthened”) by consuming any kind of food, whether or not it has been ritually consecrated. And as previously indicated (Heb. 9:10), regulations concerning food and drink are useless in cleansing the conscience from sin. Nor are they effective in restraining sin (Col. 2:20-23). Thus, food simply has “no benefit” one way or the other with respect to spiritual vitality.

¹ This phrase from a sermon by Ray Stedman, “Have they not Heard?” www.raystedman.org/new-testament/romans/have-they-not-heard

Unit 26 - Benediction

Hebrews 13:10-25

Text

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

¹⁷ Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

¹⁸ Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. ¹⁹ I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²² Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.

²³ I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

²⁴ Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.

²⁵ Grace be with you all.

Open

☐ How independent are you? Do you tend to go along with the crowd, or march to a different drummer?

☐ What kind of work gives you pleasure?

Discover

1. Why is it significant that Jesus was crucified “outside the city gate”?

2. What does the author mean when he calls us to go to Christ “outside the camp”? (see Mt. 10:37-38; 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk 14:26-27; Jn. 15:18-20).

In your own life, what might it mean for you to do this? Give some examples.

3. What rationale does the author give for doing this? (v. 14).

4. What kind of sacrifices does God now desire?

5. What responsibility do church leaders have? Give some examples of how they might do this.

What is their incentive for seeking to do this well?

6. What responsibility do the members of the congregation have toward their leaders? Give some examples of how they might do this.

What is their incentive for seeking to do this well?

7. In what sense is God a “God of peace”? (v. 20)

8. In what sense is Jesus a “shepherd”? How have you seen this in your own life?

Close

☐ Congratulations on completing Hebrews!
As you look back over your study of the book, what new truths or personal insights do you regard as being significant?

☐ Has the study of Hebrews had a positive affect on your walk with God? If so, how?
☐ What’s next? How do you plan to keep growing and learning in Christ?

Commentary

- v. 10 ***"We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat."*** This verse is rather ambiguous, and has given rise to many interpretations. The referent of the "altar" has been variously identified, in a concrete sense, as: the table from which the eucharist is served; the cross of Christ; Christ himself; or a heavenly altar. In a spiritual sense, the altar has been taken to mean the eucharist itself (i.e. the act of taking communion); or, more generally, as the sacrifice of Christ and all that flows from it. This last interpretation is consistent with the use of the term "altar" (Gr. *thusiastērion*) in the writings of the early church fathers.

The key contrast in this verse is between what "we" (i.e. Christians) have, as a means of approaching God, and what "those who minister at the tabernacle" (i.e. the Levitical priests) have. Whatever their rights may have been under the old covenant, they have no corresponding privileges under the new. The two systems are entirely distinct; there is no continuity between them which would allow a transfer of authority from one to the other. Therefore, those who come to God must abandon any claims based on position or status under the prior dispensation, and must approach him solely through Christ, by means of the "altar" which is his sacrificial death on the cross.

- v. 11 ***"The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp."*** This is a reference to the annual Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (see Lev. 16:27). The bodies of a bull and a goat, whose blood was offered as a sacrifice for sin, were taken "outside the camp" to be burned. They were taken away from the altar and the tabernacle, and thus away from the place of sacrifice and atonement, the central point of reconciliation between God and man under the Levitical system. Likewise, Christ was taken "outside the city gate" to be crucified (v. 12). He was not sacrificed on the altar or in the sanctuary, but at a place separated from them. And in that separation, we can see a symbol of the break between the old and new covenants. Christ's death fulfilled what the Levitical sacrifices prefigured; but in doing so, it also superseded that system and replaced it.
- v. 12 ***"And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood."*** The fact that the place of Jesus' crucifixion, Golgotha, was "near the city" is found in John 19:20. As previously indicated (Heb. 9:14; 10:10), the purpose of Jesus' suffering and death was to make his people "holy"; that is, to set them apart to God, and to free them from the penalty, the power and (ultimately) the presence of sin.

- v. 13 ***"Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore."***

The call to go to Christ "outside the camp" has been interpreted by some as an appeal to make a definitive break with the traditions of Judaism, the religion from which the recipients of this letter had come. However, it is likely a more general invitation to leave behind what is politically and socially safe, i.e., what is respected by one's culture or subculture, and even one's family, in order to fully identify with Christ. For the Jew, this would mean (for example) ceasing participation in the rites of the Levitical sacrificial system; for others, the application would be different. But for all, it entails a willingness to become an outcast from one's own people, and to accept the "disgrace" of being rejected and reviled, as Christ was.

This is reminiscent of calls in the gospels to take up one's cross and follow Jesus (Mt. 10:37-38; 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk 14:26-27), and also of warnings that his disciples would be mistreated, just as he himself was (Jn. 15:18-20).

- v. 14 ***"For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come."*** The kind of voluntary alienation from the world to which we are called is not misanthropic or irrational, but is grounded in a fundamental reality: that the things we are called to leave are temporary (as are our sufferings, Rom. 8:18); while the things we are called to "go to" are permanent (Heb. 10:34; 12:26-28). Thus, even as the patriarchs did (11:8, 13-16), we must in our hearts leave the "country" with which we are familiar, and set our course for the land which is our true home.
- vv. 15-16 ***"let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name."*** In these verses, the author identifies two kinds of "sacrifices" which distinguish the old covenant from the new, just as the Christian "altar" is distinct from that of the Levitical priests (v. 10). No longer does an acceptable and pleasing sacrifice consist of bringing to God the blood and the burned bodies of dead animals; the death of Christ has forever rendered that practice obsolete and useless. Now, the offerings of the devout God-seeker include vocal expressions of praise and worship, and also good deeds and charity.

"And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." We see here again that a clear sign of one's love for God, and one which gives him pleasure, is to love and care for his people (Heb. 6:10; see 13:1). As Paul also affirms, while we are to do good to "all people," we have a special responsibility toward the "family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).

v. 17 ***“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.”*** In this verse, the complementary responsibilities of church leaders, and of those they lead, are briefly highlighted. For those entrusted with oversight, the obligation is to “keep watch” as shepherds (see v. 20); to remain vigilant in identifying and addressing threats to the spiritual welfare of the flock, both external and internal (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). For their stewardship of this role, they must “give an account,” i.e. they must answer to God on the day of judgment (see Jas. 3:1). Thus, the work cannot be done for personal gain or for any other base motive, but must be performed for the benefit and glory of God, whose church it is that they serve.

The members of the flock, likewise, have responsibilities for which they will answer when they stand before God (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 4:13). Among these is obedience and submission to church leadership (Phil. 2:12; 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12). This submission is not absolute; it has limits, as does all such responsibility toward human authority (e.g., that of citizens or subjects toward their government, or that which flows from hierarchy in marriage and family). Those limits, the appropriate boundaries of a pastor’s or elder’s authority, are not defined here. But the basic principle is nevertheless affirmed: that the members of a local body of Christ have an obligation to render to its leaders a willing compliance with their governance and spiritual oversight.

vv. 18-19 ***“Pray for us”***. The author’s desire for prayer that he be “restored to you soon” suggests that he was a member of the group to whom the letter was addressed. Perhaps he was an evangelist or church planter sent out by them to spread the gospel. His self-testimony concerning his “clear conscience” and his “desire to live honorably in every way” indicates that he numbers himself among those leaders whose lives are worthy of imitation (see 13:7), and whose teaching authority, as represented by the contents of this letter, should be respected (compare 2 Cor. 1:12).

vv. 20-21 These verses pronounce a final benediction upon the recipients of the letter. As Attridge (p. 404) notes, this is common in New Testament letters, as are other elements of this letter’s conclusion, including “a doxology (vs 21b), comments on the contents of the epistle (vs 22), personal news including travel plans (vs 23), greetings (vs 24) and a farewell wish (vs 25).”

“the God of peace” This phrase identifies God as the source of interpersonal peace; i.e., harmony in the Christian community and relationships characterized by love rather

than contention (see 12:14). Here as in the epistles of Paul (Rom. 5:1, Eph. 2:14) the term “peace” also indicates the reconciliation between God and man which has been accomplished by the death of Christ, through the ***“blood of the eternal covenant”*** (see Heb. 9:11-28; 12:24; Eph. 2:14-15).

“our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep” The imagery of the shepherd includes protection, loving care, faithfulness, perseverance, courage and fierceness in response to threats to the flock, attentiveness to the flock’s needs, and trustworthy leadership. King David, an Old Testament type of Christ (see Ezk. 34:23-24), was himself a shepherd who wrote Psalm 23. Likewise, Moses, who led the ancient Israelites out of Egypt and to the border of Canaan, is described as “the shepherd of his flock” (Isa. 63:11). God is spoken of as a shepherd (Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Ps. 28:9; 80:1; Isa. 40:11). Finally, Christ referred to himself as a shepherd (Jn. 10:11-16), and he will be our shepherd throughout eternity (Rev. 7:17). He is the “great” Shepherd, the shepherd *par excellence*.

“equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ” These two clauses describe a cycle of blessing that begins with God, flows to us and in us through Christ, and then returns to God as we make use of the resources and opportunities he provides to live obediently and faithfully, thereby bringing him pleasure and glory. Our sanctification, as an ongoing process of growth in spiritual maturity, is thus a cooperative work between God and ourselves. God provides the resources and the ability, but we must also respond in faith. As Paul puts it in Philippians 2:12-13:

“... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

vv. 22-25 These verses bring the letter to a close, as the author asks the reader’s forbearance for the word of exhortation he has given them (v. 22), provides news of Timothy’s welfare and of his own hope to see them soon (v. 23), sends greetings (v. 24, “those from Italy” indicating either that he was writing from Italy, or that his companions were Italian expatriates), and offers a final wish for God’s grace to be upon them (v. 25).

At this point, the student will be forgiven if she or he does not immediately concur with the author’s description of Hebrews as “only a short letter”! But hopefully, the appeal to “bear with” this word from God will nevertheless be heeded.

Acknowledgments

The primary commentary consulted in the preparation of these materials was the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vols. 47a and 47b, by William L. Lane. Others consulted were *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text (New International Greek Testament Commentary)* by Paul Ellingworth, and *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible)* by Harold W. Attridge and Helmut Koester.

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