

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a paved path lined with large trees. The ground is covered in fallen autumn leaves in shades of orange, yellow, and brown. Sunlight filters through the dense canopy of green and yellowing leaves, creating a bright, hazy glow at the end of the path. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

# The Journey Ahead A Spiritual Pathway for Modern Pilgrims

Volume I  
The Epistle of Hebrews  
Dr. Bill McDowell



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*“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country ... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly...”*

**Hebrews 11:13-16**

*“Consider well the highway, the road by which you went.”*

**Jeremiah 31:21**

## DEDICATION

To Bob Dozier, a great Barnabas, a “son of encouragement,”  
who as my dear friend, walks and shows me the way -

*“...my fellow citizens and pilgrims,  
some who have gone before,  
some who follow after,  
and some who are my companions in this life.”*

-Augustine, Confessions (X.iv)

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In the present no proper acknowledgment can be given without thanking Dr. Jeff Garrett and the Shepherds of Norway Avenue: Paul Durst, Bruce Johnson, Mike Shepherd and Bill Wright. I must also acknowledge the encouragement, support and friendship of the members of the congregation, especially those who have purchased my books and those who have been members of the classes that use my books to aid in studying the Bible. My deep appreciation is given to Bob and Janet Dozier for their constancy. Janet's skillful editing of my books and Bob's labor over the companion student study guide, is beyond mere thanks. I remain indebted always to my dear friend Albert Simon of Marshall University's Learning Resources Center for the design, production, and publication in bringing about the finished product. And always to "Sis", my sister Loretta Tetrick, for her careful reading, comments, and suggestions to the text. And finally, though certainly not least to my lovely wife Marie for her patience and longsuffering of my time and energy toward these endeavors.





## **PREFACE**

### **Dr. Janet Dozier**

Several years ago I was invited to a luncheon on the campus of the university where I work. I was seated next to a colleague that I had never really gotten to know and was soon to retire. As we visited over lunch that day, I came to realize that I was sitting next to one of the most scholarly, grounded Christians I had met in recent years. That man was none other than Dr. Bill McDowell.

Since that chance (or God planned) meeting, I have had the privilege of reading four of his books. In my humble opinion, Dr. McDowell's work on Hebrews is his crowning glory. It is well researched, grounded in the faith and inspirational. This book is **NOT** a fluffy book of religious platitudes. This is a challenging look at the book of Hebrews, why it was written, to whom, it's message in that first century and its relevance to today's Christians.

The book of Hebrews itself is a look at God's unfolding grace as God reveals the Old Testament promises and prophecies through Jesus the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hebrews is central to understanding the Lordship of Jesus. It is an unveiling of what God had in mind historically. Hebrews is a peek at glory and the victory of the Christian to the end.

I challenge you to take the time to sit and absorb what Dr. McDowell has written. You may not always agree with him, but he makes you think! After all, modern pilgrims are on a journey not at a destination.

Hats off to Bill and this endeavor.

Dr. Janet Dozier



# INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME ONE

## A SUMMONS TO THE JOURNEY

As I am writing it is shortly before Thanksgiving Day. So when I wrote the word pilgrims for the title my thoughts naturally conjured up black-clad English Puritans at Plymouth on the edge of Massachusetts Bay in December 1620. Plymouth was not the destination the pilgrims sought. Their journey goal was Virginia but being the pilgrims they were, they accepted this destination as God's will. With the help of local Indians they survived the hard winter and so originated our annual holiday. One of my first adult experiences with pilgrims was reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, struggling through Middle English revealing a medieval group of men and women making their way on horseback from London to Canterbury Cathedral under a lapis lazuli sky. But it wasn't until I was taking a survey course in English Literature at David Lipscomb College that I read John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1) and embarked on a fuller Christian connotation of pilgrims with its central character of Christian, an everyman character seeking to find his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. His journey was not easy but fraught with countless obstacles along the way. He is directed to find the Wicket Gate (the entrance to Jesus' "narrow way") but is led astray by Mr. Worldly Wiseman and Mr. Legality and his son Civility, inhabitants of the village of Morality. But finally Christian finds his Wicket Gate and is granted a vision of Jesus himself.

Bunyan's book helped me to more fully understand how the word *pilgrimage* could be used in a metaphorical sense: every life without exception a nonstop pilgrimage from womb to tomb could be a successful pilgrimage from this world to the world to come. In fact the Christian life is a journey looking to Jesus, a wandering progression of perfecting faith as we follow him who is the Pioneer of our faith. If there is no progress, apostasy results. As the Hebrew writer exhorts:

“ . . . 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.” (Hebrews 12:2 NIV)

The books in the last third of the New Testament, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, speak of the church as a pilgrim people. There

are at least two ways to get at the message of these books. One way of trying to consider them is to treat each one individually. Here we seek to determine the setting and objective of each writing as a key to understanding what the authors intended to communicate. We also focus on the literary character of each book, noting the overall structure and ways the parts fit into the whole of each writing. This way of reading these books help us capture some sense of each book's distinctive message and is certainly a worthwhile endeavor.

Another way to get the message of these books – from Hebrews to Revelation - is to consider the books as a canonical unit. That is, we can look at them as a group that forms a distinctive part of the New Testament. They can be viewed in terms of their different plays on a common theme, the idea of pilgrimage. We have, as it were, a symphony of movements playing this theme from a variety of perspectives. The letter to the Hebrews speaks glowingly of God speaking through Scripture in time past, but insists that now, at last, God has spoken through his own Son (1:1-2). True authority belongs to God himself and is delegated to Jesus Christ. Here is the fundamental believe that the music of God has one composer/conductor, who knows specifically how the music should sound. The musicians (writers) are not robots but write as moved by the Spirit. True authority belongs to God expressed through many inspired voices; but it is he who has composed every line, groomed, practiced, and taught each musician, working every experience to shape the final presentation. Each book, like each instrumental line, is wonderful and beautiful as each voice is blended and understood as one unity, with point and counterpoint making the true message understood.

In a sense, each work picks up the theme, the tune, and adds its own distinctive interpretation of the main theme. By listening to the different movements of these volumes, we gain a much fuller sense of the larger theme of pilgrimage. And, by understanding each work is a part of a larger whole, we gain a richer perspective for reading each book.

Scott Nash <sup>(2)</sup> suggests following the full title of John Bunyan's classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as a guide. Bunyan's extended title was *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is To Come, Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream, Wherein Is Discovered the Manner of His Setting Out, His Dangerous Journey, and Safe Arrival in the Desired Country*. The last part of this title suggests three dimensions of the pilgrim life: (1) The Manner of Setting Out,



(2) The Dangerous Journey, and (3) The Safe Arrival in the Desired Country. We have, then, a beginning, a middle, and an end to the adventure of pilgrimage.

The journey for the first-century follower of Jesus was dangerous because of persecution and false doctrine. Persecution took place both within the Land of Israel and also among the Jewish believers of the Diaspora or dispersion of Jews who live outside the Land of Israel. To deal with the problem of persecution in the Land of Israel, the book of Hebrews was written. To deal with persecution among scattered believers, both Jew and Gentile, the epistle of James and I Peter were also written.

To deal with the second problem, false doctrine, we have 2 Peter and Jude. Second Peter was written from one part of the Diaspora to believers in another part of the Diaspora. Jude was written from the Land to Jewish/Gentile believers in the dispersion. Revelation offers a glorious vision of the destination for pilgrims.

The book of Hebrews, which appears first in this group, focuses on the beginning of the journey. While Hebrews deals with many subjects, its central theme is a call to and strength for the pilgrimage; a summons to begin the journey. The book of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John and Jude all focus on the middle part, the journey itself. They struggle with many of the dangers experienced along the way. The last book in this group, Revelation, focuses on the end. It gives a grand vision of the final destination and offers strength and encouragement for safe arrival in the desired country.

Some journeys are forced upon us because of our departure from God. The Israelites endured forced exile because of their rebellion against God. Their time in the wilderness journey had as its final destination a land “*flowing with milk and honey*.” Deuteronomy (29-30) warned that if Israel disobeyed YHWH, he would send his people into exile, but if they then repented he would bring them back. When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and took the people into exile, prophets such as Jeremiah interpreted this as the fulfillment of this prophesy, and made further promises about how long exile would last (70 years, according to Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10). Sure enough, exiles began to return in the late sixth century (Ezra 1:1). However, the post-exilic period was largely a disappointment, since the people were still enslaved by the Syrians. Daniel 9:2, 24 spoke of the “real” exile lasting not for 70 years but for 70 weeks of years, i.e., 490 years. Longing for the “return from exile,” when the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. would be fulfilled, and redemption from pagan oppression accomplished, continued to

characterize many Jewish movements, and was a major theme in Jesus' proclamation and summons to repentance.

Journeys are beset with difficulties from the inertia to begin to the commitment and strength to complete them. The journey of the Israelites in their exile demonstrates such pitfalls. Theologically, Jonah's experience in the great fish is analogous to Israel's experience in exile. It is God's judgment but for the sake of mercy and salvation. Like Israel in the exile, God sent Jonah on a journey to Sheol to reorient his life. In our journey to follow Jesus some pitfalls may come from without in terms of wrong turns or dangerous terrain. Some pitfalls may come from within in terms of disagreement about directions or dissension among travelers, or lack of strength and will; Pilgrims, even near the end, may despair of ever reaching it. Any journey worth making is seldom easy.

You are in fact beginning a journey in the reading of these books. In comparison to other New Testament books, they have been sorely neglected. Far more commentaries and sermons exist on the rest of the New Testament than on these writings. Part of this neglect has been due to the sense the writings do not address the central facets of the Christian message. Their very presence in the canon involved a difficult beginning. While the Gospels, Acts, and the Letters of Paul early on received wide recognition among the churches, these writings were much disputed, some more than others. Questions were often raised about authorship. Who wrote Hebrews? Did Peter really write 2 Peter? Which "John" wrote Revelation? Questions were also raised about their messages. Does Hebrews teach apostasy? Does it exclude backsliders from readmission to the church? Does James have a truly Christian message, or does it actually promote a more Jewish lifestyle with a thin veneer of Christianity? Does Revelation encourage dangerous fanaticism about the Second Coming?

These kinds of concerns about these books from Hebrews to Revelation led many Christians and churches to reject them outright or to use them only with extreme caution. As late as the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the legitimacy of some of these books in the canon was seriously debated.

## **The Bible as Story**

Even when these books have been firmly accepted as valid scripture, the difficulty of reading them has not been resolved. Thankfully, we have these books in the canon, and to ignore them or avoid them is to miss an important part of the total

New Testament story. The power of a biblical story is what it reveals about God. Even when a biblical story does not name God (as in the case of Esther), it is still about God. As such, God is the subject of every biblical story, and that story says something about God's identity and character.

Biblical stories reveal God's goodness as well as God's holiness. We see God's faithfulness, a divine commitment to the divine goal among God's people. We see God's transcendence but also God's immanence; we see God's Holy Otherness but also God's deep involvement in the world. As we read these books we ask: what does this book (story) tell us about who God is and what God is doing in the world?

The power of these books is also what they reveal about the human condition. As we locate ourselves in the human condition; we find ourselves in the story. We see our own frailty, weakness, and unbelief in the story. We also see courage, strength, and faith in the story. When we indwell the story we so live inside it that it becomes *our* story. I would suggest this means living with the text in such a way that we can come to experience the story as fundamentally about us. *We* are the people whom God liberated from Egypt and led through the Red Sea; *We* are the people languishing in exile and crying out for release; *We* are the disciples whom Jesus rebuked from misunderstanding his mission and to whom he appeared after his resurrection; *We* are the newly formed church who received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

## **Entering the story**

These books mark that point in the story where we, pilgrims and readers, take up the challenge to enter the story ourselves. We experience Jesus as our shepherd, our general, our pilot, our guide, our one true, final friend and judge. He will always have gone on ahead, leaving the print of his feet on the path to follow. We are the ones who stopped for a bite to eat that evening at Emmaus. Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Rahab, Sarah are our brothers and sisters because like them, we all must live in faith, as the great Hebrew chapter puts it honestly, "*not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar.*" The country we see and do not yet find is the heavenly country and homeland. The biblical writers from Hebrews to Revelation alert us to our own struggles on the way and show us ways we can confront the dangers of pilgrimage. And Christ is there with us as surely as the way itself is there that brought us to this place.

To take the time to read and understand these books is to respond faithfully to our own call to be pilgrims. I humbly summon you to take part on a journey that will lead you into the extraordinary new world where you can discover Jesus, the Pioneer and Pilgrim of our Faith.

These proposed studies are divided into six separate books: This is **Volume 1 – Hebrews. Be sure to study the separate Guidebook for the opportunity to gain the most from this book.**

## ENDNOTES

1. Shirley du Boulay, *The Road to Canterbury: A Modern Pilgrimage* (London: Morehouse Group, 1995).
2. Scott Nash, *The Church as a Pilgrim People* (Macon Georgia: Smith & Helwys Pub. Inc, 2001).
3. William Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Westminster, 1988), 15-26.
4. One way of understanding the biblical canon is to see it as a narrative with a beginning rooted in the creation stories of Genesis 1-2 and an ending anchored in the city of God and the wedding invitation in Revelation 21-22. And like all narrative it needs a problem (evil), a climax (Jesus), and a resolution (evil is overcome) with the tying up of any loose ends (the wedding invitation). Unlike narratives as we generally conceive them, the biblical text was not written by one author at a particular time nor even all the same language and so the narrative is formed by a canon that has served as a structure for interpretation of the biblical text since the early centuries of the church.

For more on the biblical narrative see Hart, *Faith Thinking*, especially chs. 5 and 6. Also helpful is Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, e.g. chs. 5-7.

# THE EPISTLE OF HEBREWS

## Overview

*“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ...”(1:1, 2)).*

C.S. Lewis memorably portrayed the growing Christian experience of an ever-changing Christ in the Chronicles of Narnia. Lucy, caught up in her spiritual quest, saw the lion Aslan – Christ – shining white and huge in the moonlight. In a burst of emotion Lucy rushed to him, burying her face in the rich silkiness of his mane, whereupon the great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half-sitting and half-lying between his front paws. He bent forward and touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath was all around her. She gazed up into the large, wise face.

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger?” (1)

Expanding souls encounter an expanding Christ! And this is why I am enthused about this study, volume 1 on the book of Hebrews, for this epistle has a double dose of growth-producing power – first, because it presents the greatness of Christ as no other New Testament writing does, and second, because it repeatedly demands a response from the reader. Seriously considered, Hebrews will make us grow and find a bigger Christ. (2)

The writer of Hebrews was writing to admonish and encourage. His balanced homily exposition and exhortation portrays Christ as the cause of their salvation (2:10; 5:9; 9:14) and the model for their behavior (12:1-2). The exhortation has two aspects expressed in the recurring motifs. On the one hand the homilist urges his addresses to “*hold fast*” to what they have, their confession, their partnership with Christ, the virtues that are appropriate to that partnership with Christ who can



be for them a source of aid and comfort, or “out” to “endure” a world that challenges their commitments and confession (13:13). Warnings alternate with hopeful assurance based on Christ’s presence as a sympathetic mediator (4:14-16; 7:23-24). Covenant fidelity requires faith, hope, and charity (10:22-23), but also specific virtues (13:1-17).

The introduction to Hebrews by *The Message* is right on target:

It seems odd to have say so, but too much religion is a bad thing. We can’t get too much faith and obedience, can’t get too much love and worship. But *religion* – the well-intentioned efforts we make to “get it all together” for God – can very well get in the way of what God is doing for us. The main and central action is everywhere and always *what God has done, is doing, and will do for us*. Jesus is the revelation of that action. Our main and central task is to live in responsive obedience to God’s action revealed in Jesus. Our part in the action is the act of faith.

But more often than not we become impatiently self-important along the way and decide to improve matters with our two cents’ worth. We add on, we supplement, we embellish. But instead of improving on the purity and simplicity of Jesus, we dilute the purity, clutter the simplicity. We become fussily religious, or anxiously religious. We get in the way.

That’s when it’s time to read and pray our way through the letter to the Hebrews again, written for “too religious” Christians, for “Jesus and” Christians. In the letter, it is Jesus-and-angels, or Jesus-and-Moses, or Jesus-and-priesthood. In our time it is more likely to be Jesus-and-politics, or Jesus-and- education, or even Jesus-and-Buddha. This letter deletes the hyphens, the add-ons. The focus becomes clear and sharp again: God’s action in Jesus. And we are free once more for the act of faith, the one human action in which we don’t get in the way but on the Way.

## ENDNOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (London: Fontana Books, 1980), pp. 122-24.
2. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p. lii writes:  

The purpose of our author's exegesis of Old Testament scripture, as of his general argument, is to establish the finality of the gospel by contrast with all that went before it (more particularly, by contrast with the Levitical cultus), as the way of perfection, the way which alone leads men to God without any barrier or interruption of access. He establishes the finality of Christianity by establishing the supremacy of Christ, in His person and in His work.

Also see Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p.36.
3. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, (NavPress: Colorado Springs, 2002) p. 869.



## **STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY**

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCING HEBREWS**

### **The Call to Pilgrimage**

Different parts of the Bible gather, sometimes unfairly, stereotyped images to themselves. We type Jeremiah as gloomy; the Sermon on the Mount as the simple essence of Christianity; Romans as heavy-going theology; the book of Revelation either finds a man “mad” or leaves him so; and Hebrews really belongs to the Old Testament. I fear one of the reasons Hebrews doesn’t get much reading time today is that the title itself makes us think the book and all its references to life in Israel doesn’t have much relevance to us. Or we’ve tried to read it and become confused by references to strange people like Melchizedek and strange stories about the tabernacle and the whole sacrificial system of Judaism. There are of course difficulties in Hebrews, as in other ancient writing or any book of the Bible. But this does not render the “letter” meaningless or irrelevant. In fact, its major purpose serves a perpetual need. When faced with the hardships of life (whatever their origin), we all need encouragement. We all need to be challenged to persevere and hang on to our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, it probably helps to clarify a few things about the background before looking at the text itself. No New Testament book has had more background research than Hebrews, and none has spawned a greater diversity of opinion. There are so many “unknowns” about the “Letter to the Hebrews” that the best we can do is surmise its context and audience from the actual document itself. It is a book of mysterious origin. The title itself is not original to the work. The author of the document is anonymous (we will refer often to him as the preacher) and its intended audience is unidentified. For so many questions, we must honestly answer, “We don’t know.”

There is, of course, broad agreement about several of the most important things. Virtually all agree that the grand theme of this epistle is the supremacy and finality of Christ. A consensus also exists regarding the general identity of the recipients: they were a group of Jewish Christians who have never seen Jesus in person, yet they believed. Their conversion has brought them hardship and persecution.

We have persisted in calling it a “letter.” But although we often call it an epistle, important features or the form of an ancient letter are lacking. When we expose ourselves to Hebrews we are exposing ourselves to early Christian preaching. This impression is confirmed by the writer himself. In 13:18-25 he says, “*Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you only briefly*” (13:22). <sup>(1)</sup>

But even it was not a letter but a sermon, there are indications it was intended for a restricted circle of readers and not the general public or even the general Christian public. I agree with this view of the epistle:

Its fundamental description of Christian believers as a pilgrim people with a sure guide in Jesus Christ and a definite goal in the heavenly city, in need of faith for the journey they undertake, rings true in every generation where discouragement and distractions threaten such faithfulness. <sup>(2)</sup>

We stand in need of strength for the journey. The ancient audience is not essentially different from our own – of all believers in time and space. The book of Hebrews contributes much to the church’s understanding of who Christ is and what it means to follow him. The sermon points us to the finality of Jesus Christ as the revelation and work of God. It offers Jesus as the author of hope, which is rooted in the faithfulness of God and God’s gracious intent in the world. Whether one is wearied by the trials of life or excited by a recent experience of divine redemption, this letter grounds faith, encourages hope and testifies to God’s faithfulness.

## **Author**

There is universal agreement the identity of the author of Hebrews is not known. As Origen commented, “only God knows certainly,” who wrote the letter. Allusions in Clement of Rome’s letter to the Corinthians attest to the authoritative status of Hebrews before the end of the first century. Presumably Clement knew who the author was. Later, questions regarding the authorship of the letter contributed to the general neglect it suffered in Western or Latin Christianity. Although ultimately we do not know who wrote Hebrews, most probably the best educated guess is Apollos, but others have been suggested as well (from Paul to Priscilla, including Luke, Barnabas, and Silas).

While we do not know who the author is, we do know some particulars about him (the author uses the masculine gender to refer to himself in 11:32). There is



agreement he was a magnificent stylist with an immense vocabulary and a vast knowledge of the Greek Old Testament. His Greek is perhaps the finest in the New Testament and his use of rhetoric (specific oratory forms and structures) reflects a classical education.

He is well acquainted with his audience. He plans to visit them again in the near future (13:19) and they have mutual friends (including Timothy; cf. 13:23). We may assume he lived and ministered among them for a period of time. He speaks of this community with passion and urgency.

He was not one of the original “hearers” of Jesus, but learned the message himself from others (Hebrews 2:3-4). His language, style and theological conceptions indicate he was familiar with Judaism in its Hellenistic expressions. It seems likely he was not a Palestinian, but one who was at home in the Jewish world of the synagogues scattered across the Mediterranean basin.

## **Date and Geographical Setting**

While traditionally it was believed Hebrews was addressed to Palestinian Jews in Jerusalem most now believe it was intended for the Christian community in Rome.  
(3) There are several reasons for this.

The author sends greetings to his audience from a group who was lately from Italy (See Hebrews 13:24; cf. Acts 18:2 for the same Greek expression). Presumably, then, he is addressing a group in Italy. Further, Hebrews was first known and used (as far as surviving documents go) in Rome. Indeed, it is quoted extensively in a letter the Roman leader Clement wrote to Corinth in 96 A.D. (*I Clement*). Also, the visions and the theology of the Shepherd Hermas, a prophet in Rome in the early second century, is dependent upon Hebrews. In addition, the term Hebrews uses for its “leaders” (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24) is what both Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas use to describe leaders in the Roman church.

The respected New Testament authority William Lane, employing the thesis that the letter was written to a small-house-church of beleaguered Jewish Christians living in Rome in the mid-sixties, has proposed a brilliant historical reconstruction which accords with the internal pastoral concern of the letter and makes it come alive. Hebrews, he notes, was written to a group of Jewish Christians whose world was falling apart. The writer of Hebrews was writing to admonish and encourage his friends, a small group of Jewish Christians who were scared stiff! Some had

begun to avoid contact with outsiders. Some had even withdrawn from the worshipping community altogether (10:25). The tiny house-church was asking some hard questions: Did God know what was going on? If so, how could this be happening to them? Did he care? Only God could protect them, but where was he? Why did he not answer? Why the silence of God?

Each of us reads the world through his or her own lenses! And we occasionally need help to see things from a broader, fuller perspective. We certainly do it with one another. We have our peculiar reads on the same event. Each of us tends to interpret the world far too narrowly – if not altogether egocentrically! Here are some first-century Christians who were giving a flawed reading to their life situation in relation to God’s activity among them. That narrow view was about to put some of them in a spiritually precarious situation. Some of them were already in trouble, others were on the verge of serious jeopardy. They had started a spiritual journey with Jesus and were getting discouraged. Some had turned back, others were looking over their shoulders.

When the letter arrived, the word was sent out. The congregation gathered. Perhaps no more than fifteen or twenty were seated or standing around the house. All were quiet. The reader began what has been called “the most sonorous piece of Greek in the whole New Testament.” <sup>(4)</sup> The “letter” is not dated, of course. The mention of Timothy locates the document in the second half of the first century, and most would date it 60-90 A.D. As stated it could not be later than *I Clement* (ca. 96 A.D.) since that letter depends on Hebrews. If this is a Roman audience, then 60-64 seems the most likely date since it was written at a time when the Roman church had not yet experienced “blood” (martyrdom; cf. Hebrews 12:4).

## **Social Setting of the Audience**

The social setting of the audience is probably the most important point to appreciate as we read Hebrews. The document is anonymous and undated, but it addresses a particular community of believers whose social context has endangered their faith. Their Christianity had not been a worldly advantage. Rather, it set them up for persecution and the loss of property and privilege, and now could possibly even cost them their lives.

We know they had already paid a price for their initial commitment for Christ. As the writer recalls in 10:32-34:

*“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times, you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.”*

The Roman church had experienced an earlier persecution in 49 A.D. In that year, the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome due to riots that were instigated by one named “Chrestus” probably “Christus” (a common misspelling), and Suetonius probably refers to Jewish-Christian riots in Rome. This would not be surprising since the introduction of Christianity in Asia Minor had similar effects (e.g., Ephesus in Acts 19). Hebrews 10:32-34 probably refers to this time of persecution or expulsion.

Some fifteen years later the Roman Christian community is about to experience another persecution. However, this one will be more severe and result in martyrdom for many believers. This is the renowned persecution instigated by Nero (64-65 A.D.). The historian Tacitus records that Nero made the Christians scapegoats to remove suspicion from himself (*Annals of Rome* 15:44). Lane concludes, “In the year A.D. 64 martyrdom became an aspect of the Christian experience in Rome. There were several house-churches in the city, and the group addressed in Hebrews had not yet been affected by the emperor’s actions. But the threat of death and arrest was real.” <sup>(5)</sup>

The Roman church, as Romans 16 indicates, consisted of many “house” churches scattered throughout the city. Archeological evidence points us to areas of town where merchants lived in tenement housing. The ground floor was their shop and the upper two or three floors were living quarters. We might imagine groups of 30-50 Christians gathering in these upper floors in various places throughout the city, just as they did in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5).

The Roman church was originally Jewish in character, but the expulsion of the Jews in 49 A.D. and the emergence of a Gentile leadership in the intervening years before the return of the Jews meant it became a mixed group in Rome. Consequently, one of the major issues in Paul’s letter to the Romans was how Jews and Gentiles might worship together as one people of God (Romans 14-15).

No doubt some of that tension still remained, but the primary tension reflected in the letter to the Hebrews is the external pressure the church felt. While they

weathered the expulsion in A.D.49 well, the constant social hostility and antagonism – which was no doubt reaching a crescendo – was creating apathy, neglect and discouragement in the church.

It is unlikely that the Christians in Rome were considering a return to Judaism (though this is possible for some). It is more likely they were quitting the God of Israel altogether as the result of pressure from their pagan Roman neighbors. Many perhaps feared the coming persecution. Perhaps many were simply fed up with the persistent haranguing of their neighbors. Perhaps many were fearful of occasional mob action against them (as we see perhaps in 1 Peter).

If the problem is not a return to Judaism, how do we understand all the references to the tabernacle (note –the temple is never mentioned, only the tabernacle) and the priestly ministry in Hebrews? These are used to point us to Christ, the final revelation of God. The point is not, “Don’t go back to Judaism” (though that is certainly implied), but rather “The reality has come in Christ; he is the heir – if you lose him, you have nothing.” <sup>(6)</sup>

## **Genre of the Document**

This “letter” was probably intended to speak to the whole Roman church as the house churches shared it with each other. Indeed, the writer identifies his document as a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22). The only other time that expression is used in the New Testament it refers to a synagogue sermon (Acts 13:15).

The language of the document reflects this homiletical or sermonic form. The writer never refers to what he is writing, but only to what he is saying (2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5) or what they are hearing (2:1). He does not refer to his lack of space, but his lack of time (11:32).

Consequently, the form is oral, though it is written. It was intended to be heard. It was an exhortation to encourage and provoke a response, not a theological treatise to be debated. It is exhortation, not systematic, rigorous theological debate.

It is an exhortation to persevere; to keep the faith; to hang on despite the trials and tribulations.

## Structure of the Sermon

Thus Hebrews is preaching via writing. Other New Testament letters, even Philemon and 3 John, are an extension of oral preaching ministry and point to God's living, speaking presence among his people. Holy Scripture is primarily God's message to his church. See the separate *Guidebook* document, which contains an outline of Hebrews. The outline of Guthrie (see endnote),<sup>(7)</sup> who has earned some respect among scholars for his work on the structure of Hebrews is given. I would differ from his outline in that I think Hebrews 10:19:12-29 is Part III rather than an overlap of Part II. Hopefully, both will be helpful to you in some way.

In general, I think Hebrews has three major "thesis" statements: Hebrews 1:1-4; 4:14-16; and 10:19-25. This breaks Hebrews into a three-point sermon, which is a unique idea! The material following each thesis is support for the thesis and an exhortation to action based upon the thesis. I also tend to think that chapter 13 is the epistolary addition to the sermon, that is, something added to the original sermon as it was sent as a letter to the Roman Christians. Consequently, the sermon is basically 1:1-12:29.

I think the argument of the sermon proceeds something like this. *Part I* grounds confidence and boldness in the finality of God's act of revelation through his Son. The Son is God's final "prophet"; he is the climatic revelation. He is the revelation of God in the last days. This is ultimately expressed in the incarnational presence of God in the last days. *Part II* grounds confidence and boldness in the reality of God's act of redemption through his Son. He is God's final "high priest;" he is the climatic act of atonement and redemption. This is ultimately expressed by our entrance into the presence of God through the curtain of the Son's flesh (the cross). *Part III* is the preacher's exhortation based upon our privilege of entrance into the throneroom of God. Since we have fellowship with God, we should not give up. He encourages them by their own past experience, past witnesses of faith, the model of Jesus himself and the fact they have come to the city of God itself by the blood of Jesus.

## The Old Testament Background

The author of Hebrews builds on a number of theological examples from the Old Testament. From Genesis, he chooses Esau as an example of one who made an irrevocable decision and, once having made it, there was no turning back. Indeed,



Esau lost out on temporal blessings and nothing would change that history. Similarly, the readers of the book of Hebrews are also in danger of making an irrevocable decision and, if they make it, there will be no turning back for them either.

From Exodus, the author selects two items as examples: the Tabernacle and the Priesthood. From the Tabernacle, he draws a lesson from the means of access to God. From the Priesthood, he derives the concept of a mediator between God and Man.

The author also picks two examples from the Book of Leviticus: the blood sacrifices of chapters 1-7 and the Day of Atonement sacrifice of chapter 16. From the former, he teaches animal blood only covered sins; it did not take sin away. Animal blood only accomplished ritual cleansing. From the latter, he points out that this was a day of national atonement. The sin sacrifice for the occasion was unique in that the priest could not partake of this sin sacrifice although he could partake of all the other sin sacrifices. The portion of the Day of Atonement sacrifice was not burned on the altar but was taken outside the camp and burned there. The author makes a comparison between burning the sacrifice outside the camp to the crucifixion of Jesus outside the gate.

From the Book of Numbers, the author again picks out two items as examples. The first item is the description of Moses as found in chapter 12. Moses was faithful, but the Messiah is greater in faithfulness than Moses. A one-time defection took place under faithful Moses (chapter 14); now a greater-than-Moses has come. Will there be another defection?

The second item the author takes from the Book of Numbers is the sin of Kadesh Barnea found in chapters 13-14. Here, too, is the issue of making an irrevocable decision. Israel had finally arrived at the border of the Promised Land. From that oasis, Moses sent out twelve spies who came back forty days later. They all agreed on one thing – the Land was all God said it was – a land flowing with milk and honey. The spies then came to a crucial point of disagreement. Only two of the spies believed the Land could be taken with the help of God. The other ten declared that due to the numerical superiority and the military might of the Canaanites, there was no possibility of taking the Land. The people made the common mistake of believing the majority was always right and rebelled against the authority of Moses and Aaron. The two were almost killed by the mob before God intervened. That was the Israelites' tenth act of rebellion since Exodus began, and, at that

point, God proclaimed judgment on the Exodus generation. God decreed they would not enter the Promised Land but would wander in the desert until forty years passed. During that time, all who came out of Egypt would die except for the two righteous spies and those Israelites presently younger than the age of twenty. The Exodus generation had reached a point of no return. They had made an irrevocable decision and lost out on the blessing of the Promised Land.

In God's dealings with his covenant nation, once a generation reaches a point of no return and makes an irrevocable decision, no amount of repentance can change the fact of coming physical judgment. In fact, the passage states the people repented, and Numbers 14:20 states God forgave the sin. This did not affect anyone's individual salvation, but they still have to pay the physical consequence of their irrevocable decision. The physical consequence was physical death outside the Land. Thus, the Promised Land was withdrawn from the Exodus generation and was later reoffered to the Wilderness generation.

The consequence of their irrevocable decision did not mean they had to return to Egypt and become slaves again. They remained a physically redeemed people, but it meant they would not progress to the Promised Land. They were under divine discipline and it resulted in their physical death outside the Land. The application to the readers is they, too, are in danger of making an irrevocable decision. While it does not mean they are in danger of losing their salvation, it does mean they are in danger of failing to progress to spiritual maturity, which in turn will bring on divine physical discipline in this life and loss of reward for the messianic kingdom.

Another key example taken from the Old Testament is Melchizedek. The author builds a large theological comparison based on the limited information about Melchizedek as recorded in Genesis 14:18-20 and the prophecy found in Psalm 110:4 that the Messiah will be a priest after the Order of Melchizedek.

The Law of Moses is another example the author uses as a background. The main thing he notes is the fact that while there were blood sacrifices available for some sins, there were no sacrifices available for others. For certain sins there was only physical death.

The last item used from the Old Testament is the distinction the prophet made between the remnant and the non-remnant. In the Old Testament, the two groups were distinguished from one another in that the remnant believed what God revealed through Moses and the Prophets but the non-remnant did not believe and pursued idolatry. In the New Testament, the point of division was the remnant

believed in the messiahship of Jesus but the non-remnant rejected him. The readers of the epistles were members of the remnant of that day.

The importance of the Old Testament is noted by Gleason:

“The author’s use of the Old Testament in the Epistle to the Hebrews is indispensable to understanding the warning in Hebrews 6:4-8. He used the Exodus generation and particularly the events of Kadesh-barnea to exhort Jewish Christians who had retrogressed in their spiritual life and were considering a return to the rituals of Judaism to avoid persecution from the Jews. Pressure from their Jewish countrymen arose from the growing patriotism resulting in the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66. The author’s allusions to Kadesh-barnea show that the sin of “falling away” refers to a final decision to return to Judaism and to remain in a state of spiritual retrogression. Once they made that choice, they, like the Exodus generation, would be beyond repentance and would face the inevitable judgment of God resulting in the forfeiture of blessings and ultimately the loss of physical life.

In an age of spiritual apathy and moral compromise within the church, and often among its leadership, this passage delivers a severe warning to all who take their commitment to Christ lightly.”<sup>(8)</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. This descriptive phrase occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Acts 13:15, where the context is important. Paul and Barnabas are conducting a mission at Antioch of Pisidia in Galatia. They have taken their place in the synagogue on the evening of the Sabbath. At a certain point in the service an invitation is extended to them to address the congregation. “After reading of the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to Paul and Barnabas saying, ‘Brothers if you have a word of exhortation for the people please deliver it now.’” In this context “word of exhortation” is clearly a descriptive term for the sermon following the reading from the Law and the Prophets in the synagogue service. Consequently, when the writer of Hebrews says to the congregation he addressed, “I ask you to listen to the word of exhortation I have prepared for you,” he uses the normal designation for a sermon.
2. Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p. 465.
3. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment*, p. 24
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-26.

5. Ibid.
6. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).
7. George H. Guthrie *The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan Pub.: Grand Rapids, MI: 1998), p. 46.
8. Gleason, Randall, "The Old Testament Background of the warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March, 1988, 91.



## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 2

#### *Hebrews 1:1-4*

### GOD MUST REALLY LOVE US

*“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 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. 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. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”*

The sermon, which our New Testament calls “Hebrews,” begins with a powerful single sentence in the original language, filled with alliteration and other stylistic devices designed to grab the audience’s attention. While English translations tend to divide it into several sentences, Hebrews 1:1-4 is actually one long, beautifully constructed sentence.

The sentence has rhetorical flare. Verse one, for example, uses alliteration as five key words begin with the Greek letter “pi” (or, p – in English, they are the words “many times,” “many ways,” “past,” “fathers,” and “prophets”). But it also has tremendous theological substance. It is fundamentally the announcement that God has spoken completely and finally through his Son.

The writer of Hebrews reads texts through the lens of God’s revelation of himself in Jesus. All of the texts sooner or later are intended to point us to Jesus or are to be read and heard through the advent of Jesus. Hebrews is introduced in terms of the Jesus-focus that will characterize all that is to follow. The theme of this initial sermon is that God’s loving activity for his human offspring has come into focus in the work Christ has done and is doing for his people. The writer believes that what God has now revealed in Jesus changes everything in Scripture, just as it changes everything in our lives. It is that theological foundation and that lens for reading Scripture that empowers his exhortations to faithfulness on the journey.

The basic sentence in the text is: “*God has spoken through his Son whose name is superior to the angels.*” Everything else in the sentence serves this theological affirmation.

The amazing eloquence of God is substantially the same as described in the chain of thought in John 1, which begins, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1). Jesus here, of course, is “the Word” and though much more can be said about this term because of its rich history in Greek literature, its main significance here is that *Christ has always sought to reveal himself*. An interpretative paraphrase could well read, “In the beginning was the Communication.” From eternity, Christ the Word has always longed to communicate himself.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

### **1. Hebrews 1:1-2a**

The opening language (Hebrews 1:1-2a) is a powerful conceptual parallelism contrasting four areas “the revelation, the recipients, the agents, and the ways in which the revelation was manifested.” <sup>(1)</sup> Guthrie calls attention to this, but I would add one further contrast (Times).

<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>PAST</b>	<b>PRESENT</b>
<b>Era</b>	In the past	In these last days
<b>Recipients</b>	To our forefathers	To us
<b>Agents</b>	Through the prophets	By his Son
<b>Ways</b>	In various ways	In one way (implied)
<b>Times</b>	In various times	At one time (implied)

The preacher does not have in mind one particular Old Testament revelation or a particular form of revelation. Rather, he is thinking of the whole continuity of God’s revelation of himself from creation to the present. In many ways (theophanies, dreams, visions, miracles, etc.), at many times (through the whole

history of the world and Israel) and through many people [prophets] (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), God spoke to those who preceded us. However, now – in these last days – God has spoken through his Son.

The “last days” is another way of saying “the final age.” Jesus appeared at the “consummation of the ages” (9:26), and a new age has dawned. The future has broken into the present and human experience has shifted. We now experience the “age to come” through the Spirit (6:4-5). Jesus is the spokesperson for this new age as he is the inaugurator of the new age. He has pioneered it for us and is leading us to the city of God where we will experience the fullness of the divine presence. We look to Jesus because God has spoken through him.

Consequently, there is an implied finality and completeness of this revelation through the Son. It is final because it is God’s climatic revelation in the “last days.” It is complete because of who the Son is (which is the topic of Hebrews 1:2b-3).

## **2. Hebrews 1:2b-3a.**

When the preacher names the “Son” in verse 2, he follows it with four descriptive phrases that reflect language that was common among Hellenistic Jews. The language described Divine Wisdom, but here the preacher applies this language to the **Son as**: (1) appointed heir to all things; (2) the agent of creation; (3) the radiance of God’s glory; and (4) the sustainer of the cosmos by his powerful word.

*First*, the Son was appointed the heir of all things (cf. Psalm 2:8 as a background). The linkage between “name” and “inheritance” is important. The Son’s name means that he is heir. Because he is Son, he is heir. The importance of “heir” in Hebrew theology cannot be overestimated. Abram was renamed Abraham because he was appointed the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5). The Son is the heir of the cosmos, of “all things” – not just “many nations.” Thus, the text articulates the cosmic status of the Son. He is no mere human inheritor, or human king, or even angel. He is the royal heir of the cosmos.

*Second*, the Son was the agent of creation. This language reflects the wisdom tradition of Proverbs 8:22-31. Jesus is the divine Son (wisdom) through whom God created the world (cf. John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:6). This affirms the pre-existence of the Son. He is before creation and the agent of God’s creative work. The Son is unlike any human prophet.



*Third*, the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his nature. This language identifies the Son with God. "Glory" and "nature" refer to the same point – divine glory is divine nature. To radiate the divine glory (as light radiates from the sun) is to share the divine nature (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6). The term "exact representation" is a lofty claim for the Son. It is the Greek term "character". One Hellenistic Jewish writer (Philo, *The Unchangeableness of God*, 55) said no one could exhibit the character of God. But this is exactly what our preacher claims here. Jesus is the visible representation – the stamped image of God. The term character was often used to refer to an impressed seal, and thus an "exact representation." As such, the Son is the revelation of God himself and thus the ultimate vehicle through whom God speaks.

*Fourth*, the Son sustains the cosmos by his powerful word. The Son of God is also the providential agent in the world. He maintains the universe by his power. The Son is not only the agent of creation, but is also at work within the cosmos to sustain it. The cosmic work of the Son is ongoing. It is not merely a past act, but a present activity.

Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking, who has been called "the most brilliant theoretical physicist since Einstein," says in best-selling *A Brief History of Time* that our galaxy is an average-sized spiral galaxy that looks to other galaxies like a swirl in a pastry roll and that it is over 100,000 light years across <sup>(2)</sup> – about six hundred trillion miles. He says, "We now know that our galaxy is only one of some hundred thousand million that can be seen using modern telescopes, each galaxy itself containing some hundred thousand million stars." <sup>(3)</sup> It is commonly held the average distance between these hundred thousand million galaxies (each six hundred trillion miles across and containing one hundred thousand million stars) is three million light-years! On top of that, the work of Edwin Hubble, based on the Doppler Effect, has shown that all red-spectrumed galaxies are moving away from us – and that nearly all are red. Thus, the universe is constantly expanding. <sup>(4)</sup> Some estimates say the most distant galaxy is eight billion light-years away – and racing away at two hundred million miles an hour. Finally, the fact of the expanding universe demands a beginning, though Hawking now doubts that a Big Bang was its beginning. <sup>(5)</sup>

We have recited all this to emphasize the stupendous creative power of Christ. He created every speck of dust in the hundred thousand million galaxies of the universe. He created every atom – the sub-microscopic solar systems with their

whimsically named quarks (from James Joyce's *Three Quarks for Master Mark*) and peptones (the same Greek word used for the widow's mite) and electrons and neutrinos ("little neutral ones") – all of which have no measurable size.

This stupendous reality is richly corroborated by other cosmic statements in the New Testament (John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Romans 11:36; Colossians 1:16). Everything was created by him – everything corporeal, all things incorporeal, everything substantial, all things insubstantial.

Furthermore, he is not only the Creator, he is also Sustainer. – "*he upholds the universe by the word of his power*" (v. 3c).

### **3. Hebrews 1:3b-4**

The exaltation of the Son, however, is not simply in light of his pre-existent status. As William Lane points out, <sup>(6)</sup> while the Son described in the categories of Jewish Hellenism's perception of Divine Wisdom, the preacher breaks with that tradition to also identify the exaltation of the Son with his high priestly function. The Son is exalted because he is humiliated, that is, the Son is exalted because through his incarnation as a human being he became a high priest who was both priest and victim. He is exalted because he shared the human experience even though he was a participant in the divine reality.

The language of "purification" anticipates a major theme in Hebrews. We have been all over the universe with the cosmic Son, and then suddenly he is introduced as the priestly Purifier who paid for our sins with his own blood. It anticipates the priestly and sacrificial themes of chapters 7-10. The Son atoned for sin. Consequently, his exaltation to the "right hand" of God was not simply in light of his agency in creation or cosmic status, but was also the result of his human act of priestly self-sacrifice for the sake of cleansing his fellow-humans from sin. The reference to purification, therefore, is inclusive of his incarnation, death and priestly work.

Jesus colossal work underlines the utter blasphemy of the thought that we can pay for our own sins with works of righteousness. There is only one way to purity, and that is the blood of Christ. The only way to justification is by faith in his blood (Romans 3:25; 5:9). Paul says, "*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to*

*it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”*  
(Romans 3:21, 22).

Lastly, there is the *ultimate* significance of Jesus’ sitting down at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven – and that is his ruling exaltation! The enthronement of the Son, indeed, is the most extensively elaborated theme in Hebrews 1:1-4. The preacher will link almost everything to this exaltation to the right hand of God. The reference to the “right hand” – the place of highest honor - is inclusive of his resurrection, ascension, and enthronement where he continues as priest to intercede for his people (cf. Hebrews 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). In this capacity, the Son receives his inheritance – a name that is above every name. It is a “better” (a term used 13 times in Hebrews) name than the angels. <sup>(7)</sup>

### ***Theological Summary***

Essentially this text portrays the Son in three specific ways.

*First*, the Son of God’s final and climatic revelation of himself. The Son is God’s “final” prophet in that the Son is now the reference point for all revelation of God. While the revelation of God in the past was partial and scattered, the revelation of God through the Son is complete, focused and final. This revelation is final in a way that the law mediated by angels was not. It is complete in a way that could not be said of the prophet Moses.

*Second*, the Son is described as Divine Wisdom. While “wisdom” does not appear in these verses, the descriptors in verses 2-3 are drawn from the language of Jewish Hellenism. They are common descriptions of divine wisdom based on Proverbs 8:22-31 (as, for example, in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-27). This language exalts the Son above the angels and connects the Son directly with God as one who shares the reality of God’s own wisdom. This language testifies that the Son shares the divine reality and experience. The Son participates in the divine reality and thus is superior to the angels.

*Third*, The Son’s incarnation and high priestly participation in human experience is assumed. The Son is exalted to the right hand because he made purification for sin. The Son is the high priest who made atonement for his people. Consequently, the incarnation is assumed here. The Son’s incarnational act also testifies to his superiority over the angels because he was made lower than them to identify with

humanity in order to bring others to glory. The Son became a brother of humanity in order to make them “sons” of glory. This is the point of Hebrews 2:5-18.

Three theological points, therefore, emerge out of the fundamental declaration that God has spoken through his Son: (1) The finality of God’s revelation through the Son; (2) the shared reality of the Son with God; and (3) the shared reality of the Son with humanity. Or, the Son, who is both divine and human, is God’s final and complete revelation of himself.

This theological beginning has a tremendous pastoral point. These discouraged Roman Christians need stability and boldness. They need the kind of theological grounding that can anchor their faith. If Jesus is the final and complete revelation of God, then there is no other hope or ground for faith beyond Jesus or exclusive of Jesus. To give up Jesus is to give up God. God has spoken through Jesus, and his promises are secure in him. The hope of discouraged believers is that God has spoken.

The theological substance is important for us. A theologically mature understanding of who Jesus is grounds our faith and gives substance to our faith. It stabilizes faith. It anchors our hope and encourages our perseverance.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

Notice three central points. *First*, is the affirmation that then and now *God is at work in this world* – appearances to the contrary notwithstanding! Much like our own times, the writer of Hebrews and his audience are not accustomed to daily miraculous experiences that make God’s presence in our world glaringly obvious. These people are not first-generation followers. None of them saw Jesus; apparently they are not accustomed to the miracle-working of the early apostles and leaders. Like us, the activity of God in their world is apparently more subtle. When the social world around them seems to be doing just fine without God or when they seem to be suffering and ridiculed and excluded from the materialistic successes around them, they could decide that God really isn’t active. Their faith costs them a great deal in the social setting in which they live. They could decide to just blend back in, find their identity in the social structures and the material world around them. Or they could believe God has acted in Christ in ways that have eternal import for their lives.

*Second*, see how quickly the preacher got to Jesus in introducing his sermon. How does God work in our world? *Through Jesus!* Yes, he has always cared about and paid attention to our needs. He has desired to be in communication with us from the start. He spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He talked to Abraham through angels and in bodily form. He came to Joseph and Daniel in dreams. Oh, and he even raised us a string of prophets to give a more general word to people – Moses, Deborah, Isaiah, Amos, but we weren't getting his point. We were garbling the message. We were fighting over words and their interpretation. So heaven pulled out all the stops and God chose to enflesh his message in his Son. Love became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The preacher-writer can't say enough about Jesus! He strings together a series of seven descriptors for him that anticipate the all-important, incomparable role assigned to him in this sermon-epistle. In fact, the writer actually breaks into song in the latter part of verse two as he describes Jesus. Listen again to the words: "He has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed *heir of all things*, through whom *he also created the world*. He is the *reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being*, and he *sustains all things* by his powerful word. When he had *made purification for sins*, he *sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*, having become as much *superior to angels* as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs."

In the mind of the unnamed writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus is the final and unanswerable proof that God not only knows about our human plight but cares for us with love that knows no boundaries. The author wants them to be aware the Creator of the Universe is actively involved in their world and their lives, contrary to what all their detractors are telling them. Specifically, God has acted in Jesus Christ to bring about their ultimate revelation for any other temporary identity or quick fix to their suffering.

He is determined we should see everything coming together in the Son. So the author of Hebrews spends far less time defending – even identifying – himself as qualified to address the problems of that time and place or in analyzing and solving their faith dilemmas as in getting their minds off themselves and onto Jesus. What a strategy for our time as well!

"So, tenderly, lovingly, with great pastoral concern and care, the writer of Hebrews brings his readers face to face with the central issue: Is Jesus the Son of God or is he not? Is he the great Antitype of all Jewish ritual and sacrifice and the high-priestly Mediator of the new covenant whom the

prophets had predicted? Or is he only a man? The choice is plainly stated in 10:39: “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.” (8)

I don’t even know how to name – much less evaluate and fix – what is wrong with our world, with you, or with me, but I do know Jesus. Because of him, the struggle is bearable. The same Holy Spirit who raised him from the dead lives in us and will raise us at the last day. And if we can just keep our too-easily distracted hearts fixed on him. That is the third point I want to make from Hebrews: God is still at work in his church today. Scripture – all of Scripture – is still the tool of the preacher/teacher for helping God’s people to identify divine activity in our world and in our lives.

The writer believes his audience needs to return to Jesus. If they understand how God has acted in Jesus for their benefit, they will not become disillusioned or simply slip out the back door never to return. No more looking around at what other people have or don’t have in their lives or churches or backgrounds. No more apathy or fear that somehow God isn’t paying attention to their losses of honor and identity and place. No more consternation because other people seem to be getting away with it while they suffer unjustly.

I get the impression the preacher-writer behind this piece of literature wanted his hearers-readers to believe God really, really did love them – and there was both a point to their struggle and strength for their journey. Yes, life was hard for them. Yes, their faith was being challenged. Yes, the thought of going back to a more-familiar and less-demanding lifestyle (i.e., pre-Christian or non-Christian lifestyle) had occurred to them. But if he could convince them that God truly loved them, that Christ’s life and ministry had been for them, and the beleaguered community of faith was where the Holy Spirit was pouring out his presence and power still, he believed he could give those people hope for holding on. They could find strength for the journey. I think it was Philip Yancey who said something about finding it much easier to accept the fact of God incarnating in Jesus of Nazareth than in the people who attended his church and in himself. Yet, he pondered, that is what we are asked to believe; that is how we are asked to live. (9)

## ENDNOTES

1. Guthrie, p. 46.
2. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1990), p. 37.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp. 38, 39.
5. Ibid., p. 50.
6. Lane, p. 33.
7. Theologically, though the Son was the agent of creation itself and the exact image of the Father, he humbled himself to serve as a high priest among humans for the sake of their salvation. Out of this humble service, God exalted him and enthroned him as a royal priest to secure eternal redemption for his people. This is why the Son is God's final, climatic and complete spokesperson. This is the picture Paul gives in Philippians 2:5-11, though for different purposes and in different language.
8. Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), p. 13.
9. See Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: 2000).

## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 3

#### *Hebrews 1:5-2:18*

### FASCINATED BY ANGELS

At no time more than in recent memory, we seem to be fascinated by angels and dream of perhaps being touched by an angel's presence. Some situations are so frustrating that such a dream is understandable, but the one working on our behalf is so much greater!

This huge block of material proceeds with a central thought: the comparison of the Son with the angels. While it is obvious the theological point is the Son is greater (superior) to the angels, the rationale is a bit surprising in the second half of the material. He is greater because he is incarnate and thus able to help in ways angels cannot help.

This section is packed full of theologically meaningful and significant points. There are just too many to cover for the purposes of this book. Nevertheless, the central point lends itself to many applications and a focused theological point.

In general, I would see this block in three sections: (1) The Son is greater than the angels because he shares the reality of God [1:5-14] (2) Therefore, do not neglect the word of God that comes through the Son [2:1-4]; and (3) The Son was made lower than the angels for our sake [2:5-18]. Indeed, part of the greatness of the Son is not simply his divine nature, but that he was willing to share our humanity and suffering in order to atone for sin and deliver us from Satan's death hold on us. The Son is greater than the angels because he was willing to be one of us at his own expense and for our sake. The selfless humiliation of the Son is a dimension of his greatness.

Yet, it might puzzle us why the preacher spends so much time on the relationship of the Son to angels. Some have thought it was because his audience was pre-disposed to worship angels, or they were consumed with speculation about angels, or they believed Jesus was some kind of angel. There may be some truth in all of these points, but it seems Hebrews 2:1-4 gives us the focus for understanding why this discussion about angels is so important. It is the comparison between the word



that comes through the Son and the word that came through angels. If the word that came through angels was mighty and authoritative, then the word that comes through the Son is even more so!

### ***Exegesis of Text***

Let me offer some brief ideas on the three major sections of this block of material.

#### **1. Hebrews 1:5-14**

William Lane in *Call to Commitment* (1) offers a brief summary of the argument of this section:

#### **THE SON IS GREATER THAN THE ANGELS**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>THEOLOGICAL POINT</b>	<b>HEBREWS</b>	<b>OT QUOTE</b>
<b>Name</b>	His name is “Son”	1:5	Psalms 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14
<b>Dignity</b>	Even the angels worship the Son	1:6	Psalms 97:7
<b>Nature</b>	The Son is eternal	1:7-9	Psalms 45:6-7
<b>Function</b>	The Son reigns as angels serve	1:13-14	Psalms 110:1

This chart summarizes the point of each section and how the preacher uses an Old Testament citation to support his theological point.

The preacher uses Scripture, which is his Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Today we refer to this as the Septuagint (LXX). This was the Bible of the early church, and the preacher assumes its authority and place in the Christian community.

His use of Scripture is Christological, that is, he reads the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus, the lens of God’s word through the Son. He assumes the messianic character of each of these texts, which he quotes. He does not think of “messianic” in the sense of predictive prophecy, but of the relationship of the Father, Son and angels. It is a theological use of the Old Testament rather than a

predictive. These texts do not predict the Messiah but they do speak about the Son or to the Son.

- a. **Hebrews 1:5.** The preacher is interested in the “name” – Son. Both Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 were regarded as messianic in early Judaism (Qumran documents [Dead Sea Scrolls material] indicate this). But the preacher’s point is the name “Son” belongs to Jesus, not to angels. They are not sons, but Jesus has been named Son. The preacher uses “Son” to refer to the pre-existent one (e.g., “*though he were a Son . . .*” in Hebrews 5:8), but also uses “Son” to refer to the exalted one. “Today” may be an allusion to the exaltation of Jesus. The Son is son both by virtue of his divine nature and his obedient submission.

Jesus was always God’s Son, and God was his Father. But the phrase, “*today I have begotten you*” evidently refers to Christ’s exaltation and enthronement as Son subsequent to the resurrection, because Romans 1:4 says Jesus was “*declared to the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.*” And in Acts 13:32, 33 Paul specifically proclaims the resurrection fulfilled Psalm 2:7: “*And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’*” (cf. Ephesians 1:20). “Son” is Jesus’ eternal name that was given exalted declaration in his resurrection and exaltation. No angel ever had that!

- b. **Hebrews 1:6.** The next point in the author’s argument for Christ’s superiority over angels is that he is worshiped by angels. While quoting Psalm 97:7 to support the worship of the Son by the angels, the preacher also alludes to Psalm 89:27 in reference to the Son as “firstborn.” “*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’*” (v. 6). Firstborn is a term of rank and honor. It is a covenantal term and refers to the enthronement of the Son at the right hand of God as God’s royal representative (just as David was in Psalm 89). The reference to the “world” is probably not connected to his incarnation (coming into the human world), but his entrance into the heavenly world (cosmos). But here he uses a term which we could translate “inhabited world” and is a term used to describe the “world to come” in Hebrews 2:5. His entrance into the heavenly world is his exaltation above the angels so they respond with worship (as we see in Revelation 5, for example).

- c. **Hebrews 1:7-12.** Next the writer demonstrates the superiority of Christ to angels by contrasting their statuses: the angels are servants, but the Son is sovereign. The angels are servants whose form is dependent upon the will of God. They are transformed in various ways to serve God's purposes – sometimes wind, sometimes fire, etc. The Hebrew of Psalm 104:4 says, "*He makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.*" However, the Son is unchanging because his throne is eternal. The writer quotes Psalm 45:6, 7, a nuptial Psalm addressed originally to a Hebrew king, but phrased in language that could only be fulfilled by the ultimate Davidic king, the Son: <sup>(2)</sup>

*"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,  
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.  
You have loved righteousness, and hated wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions"* (vv. 8, 9)

His throne is an eternal throne, and his nature remains the same (it never grows old). The creation is subject to change, but the Son is not. Thus, the Son is addressed as "God" in this text. This is one of the few texts in the New Testament where the Greek term *theos* (God) is applied to Jesus (e.g., John 1:1; John 20:28). The point, however, is to ground the faithfulness and reign of Jesus in his eternal nature. We should not read "unchanging" as "unresponsive," but rather as faithful, stable and unswerving in his righteousness and covenantal commitments.

- d. **Hebrews 1:13-14.** Notice that the rhetoric of 1:13 is the same as 1:5, that is, "*to which of the angels did God say. . .*" The preacher rounds out his point. Jesus is the eternally enthroned, sceptered, anointed sovereign. The Son is the reigning king who sits at the right hand of God, but angels are servants who, at God's bidding minister to the saints.

In respect to Christ's angelic superiority, all angels had been sent by him as "*ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.*" The force of the original Greek is they are perpetually being sent out to help God's people – one after another. <sup>(3)</sup>

On a dark night about a hundred years ago, a Scottish missionary couple found themselves surrounded by cannibals' intent on taking their lives. That terror-filled night they fell to their knees and prayed that God would protect

them. Intermittent with their prayers, the missionaries heard the cries of the savages and expected them to come through the door at any moment. But as the sun began to rise, to their astonishment they found that the natives were retreating into the forest. The couple's hearts soared to God. It was a day of rejoicing!

The missionaries bravely continued their work. A year later the chieftain of that tribe became a Christian. As the missionary spoke with him, he remembered the horror of that night. He asked the chieftain why he and his men had not killed them. The chief replied, "Who were all those men who were with you?" The missionary answered, "Why, there were no men with us. There were just my wife and myself." The chieftain began to argue with him, saying, "There were hundreds of tall men in shining garments with drawn swords circling about your house, so we could not attack you." The story, recorded in Billy Graham's book *Angels*, <sup>(4)</sup> is one of the great tales of missionary history. The missionary was the "legendary" John G. Paton of the New Hebrides. <sup>(5)</sup>

The message to the harried, trembling church of the writer's day, and to the church universal, is this: Our superior Christ has assigned his angels to minister to us. And if he wills, he can deliver us anytime and anywhere he wishes. Christ is superior to everything. He is adequate in our hour of need. We must believe it and trust him with all we are and have.

## **2. Hebrews 2:1-4**

One of the ancient symbols for the church is a ship. The idea originated in the Gospel accounts, which tell how Jesus compelled his disciples to board a ship and sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:22-33; John 6:16-21). That night, when they were some distance from shore, a perilous storm arose so they tossed like a cork on the waves – until Jesus came walking across the tempest in the night. Ancient art typically pictures the Twelve crowded into a stylized, tubby little boat with their wide-eyed faces visible above the gunwales – like apprehensive children in a bathtub.

This is a most fitting picture of the church sailing the contrary seas of this world. It is a particularly appropriate symbol of the church to which the book of Hebrews was written, for all agree it was under stormy siege. Moreover, if our thesis is correct – that this church is a tiny house-church somewhere in Italy, possibly in or

around Rome – then we can imagine the huge waves that were poised above their little boat in the imminent Neronian persecution. Some in the church were also in danger of being blown away from their moorings and drifting away from the truth of Christ and back into “the Dead Sea of Judaism.” (6)

The point of this paragraph is quite focused and difficult to miss. It is an exhortation and warning. Notice the connectedness to the previous section: “*therefore . . . . .*” On the one hand, we have the word delivered through angels. On the other hand, we have the word delivered through the Son and confirmed by divine miracles. If one was punished for disobeying the former, then surely those who neglect the latter will be punished as well.

We learn something about the audience in this section. The preacher uses two words that seem to reflect the gradual movement of believers away from the faith. They are “drifting” (like the unmoored ship) and they are “neglecting” the salvation provided by the Son. Their movement away from faith was not a single defiant act of rebellion, but arose out of apathy and neglect. But the result is yet an act of rebellion as they reject the Son and God’s work in him.

The punishment envisioned here is not a punishment for weaknesses of faith, but for the rejection of the faith (as we will see later; e.g., in chapter 3).

### **3. Hebrews 2:5-18**

There is an ironic little pastoral epigram that is often used to capsulize the task of preaching. It goes like this: The job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

This is pretty good advice, because a preacher should be given to both for a balanced ministry.

This certainly summarized the task of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews as he saw it, for his emphasis alternates between extended passages of comfort and brief sections of affliction or disturbing exhortation throughout the entire book. Thus far he has comforted the afflicted in the storm-tossed little church with a ranging summary of the superiority of Christ in chapter 1 that asserts his prophetic, cosmic, Levitical, and angelic supremacy (1:1-14). This grand vision of Christ was meant to be a firm anchor in the storms of persecution.

Correspondingly, in the beginning of chapter 2 he has afflicted the comfortable whose anchors have begun to lift from Christ, issuing a challenge that contains the ringing warning, “*How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*” (2:2-4).

Now, in the passage before us, the emphasis returns back to comforting the afflicted. The smallness of the tiny house-church, the immensity of the hostile sea around them, and the mounting breakers of Neronian persecution left them feeling lonely and insignificant – like a forgotten cork in the tide. This seeming insignificance is countered by the writer in verses 5-9 as he shows how Christ, through his superiority, gives them massive significance in his ultimate intention for them. The author introduces the subject of God’s ultimate intention for believers with an implicit reference to the biblical reality that angels co-minister the present world under God’s direction. This is what Jacob’s vision of the ladder was all about, because as he looked at the ladder he saw angels going up to Heaven and coming down (Genesis 28:10-17). The message was clear: there is angelic commerce between heaven and earth on behalf of God’s people. apparently the administration is organized so that the angel-princes – for example, the archangel Michael – preside over ordered ranks who administer God’s will and combat evil spirits (cf. Daniel 10:20, 21; 12:1; Ephesians 6:12).

In this section the Son takes up the cosmic task of setting the world aright by sharing the humanity of his people. The angels are still under consideration in this section as indicated by 2:5 and 2:16. The contrast continues, and verse 18 identifies Jesus as the real helper of humanity, not the angels. Jesus is qualified to help humanity because he took up humanity in his own person and life. Since he shared our humanity, he is able to help humans in ways that angels cannot. Consequently, Jesus is superior to the angels in his function of “helping” because he became incarnate (e.g., he was enfleshed).

The fact of death – and for most the fear of death – is a relentless reality. The more our minds struggle to escape it, the more it comes against us. The more we fear it, the more dreadful it becomes. Those who try to forget it have their memories filled with it. Those who try to shun it meet nothing else. Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave this fear chilling expression in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* through the image of a man being stalked on an empty road:

*Like one that on a lonesome road*

*Doeth walk in fear and dread,*

*And having once turn'd round, walks on,*

*And turns no more his head;*

*Because he knows a frightful fiend*

*Doth close behind him tread. (7)*

“Death” is a primary term in this section. It dominates humanity; it rules humanity. Humanity is enslaved to it, and fears it. No doubt the prospect of martyrdom might have enhanced this anxiety in the Roman church. Yet, the Son comes to deal with death – he tastes death and redeems us from death. He sets the world back right, as it was in the beginning. He paths a path for us through suffering so that we might again have the glory that is after suffering.

This block of material may be divided into two sections: (a) The Cosmic Task [Hebrews 2:5-9] and (b) Solidarity with Humanity [Hebrews 2:10-18].

### **a. The Cosmic Task - Hebrews 2:5-9.**

The preacher quotes Psalm 8:4-6 in Hebrews 2:6b-8a. The Psalm envisions the original creation of humanity. God created them as co-regents with him. He crowned them with glory and honor as his royal representatives, his images on the earth. He gave them benevolent authority over the earth.

However, something happened; something changed. The original intent was frustrated by the loss of authority, dominion and power. What was originally subjected to humanity is now no longer subject to it. Death now reigns over humanity whereas it did not previously.

The solution to this cosmic problem is that Jesus became incarnate (made lower than the angels) and took up the task God had given to humanity. He is now at work to subject everything (including death) to himself. For this reason he tasted death so that he might conquer it. As a result of his obedience, he is crowned with the glory and honor. That was God’s original intent in creation itself. The glory and honor that humanity lost when they sinned, Jesus has regained by his obedient suffering for us. In an allusion to Psalm 110:1, the Son will reign until every enemy (including death) is put under his feet.

### **b. Solidarity with Humanity - Hebrews 2:10-18.**

Death is a primary point in this section. The Son has come to bring other sons to glory as he redeems us from death and the fear of it. Yet, the Son does this through

suffering. He does not escape suffering, but endures it for the sake of the greater goal. Thus, the Son is our champion, our pioneer, who goes before us and conquers for us. He does this as our brother – one who shares our humanity with us.

While the Son is unique, yet he brings us into relationship with God as “sons” too. The Son enables us to be sons (children) of God. He does this as our *archegon*! This is a difficult Greek word to translate because it has a broad range of meaning in Hellenistic Judaism. Suggested possibilities are leader, pioneer, author, pathfinder, trailblazer and guide. Lane, in his commentary (and Guthrie agrees) suggests the background is the “divine hero” of Hellenism, such as Hercules who is called both an archegon and “savior” in the literature. He suggests the translation “champion,” just as Hercules wrestled with Death. Jesus faced death and conquered it; he cleared a path for us so that death would not ultimately claim us. This assurance is important in the light of the prospects of martyrdom the Roman church faced.

Yet, Jesus faced death through suffering. He was “*perfected*” in his suffering. This does not mean something in him erroneous or faulty was corrected through his suffering, but that he was completed or “made whole” by his suffering. He finished the race and carried out his task. This will be an important theme in Hebrews.

The “shared brotherhood” of Jesus with humanity is important to the preacher. If he is to be a “champion,” he must share their reality in some sense. He joins humanity in order to win their place, to return humanity to its original glory in creation. The quotations in Hebrews 2:12-13 are intended to support the “shared” condition of Jesus and humanity as children (brothers) of God. The quotes are from Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17-18. The first quotation locates Jesus among his brothers as a redeemed community in which he testifies about the greatness of God. The second quotation expresses the trust that Jesus had in God and shares with his brothers. Jesus, too, depended upon the greatness and faithfulness of God so that in his suffering he cried to him and trusted him. The third quotation shifts the metaphor. Now Jesus is the head of a family – he has children. God has given Jesus children thorough his suffering and exaltation. Whether Jesus is regarded as leader of the family or as brother to the family, it suggests a shared relationship, a familial relationship. Intimacy is the point.

**Verses 14- 15** speak directly to the point about death. This was the object of the Son’s work – to destroy death by breaking the power of Satan and to destroy the fear of death that lurked in the hearts of believers. The reference to Satan and the



fear of death suits the situation of a persecuted community, but it also suits the condition of humanity at large. Satan held the power of death until it was wrestled away from by Jesus' own suffering, and the fear of death is the common plight of humanity. Jesus, however, inaugurates a new death. We do not fear death because an angel will rescue us, but we do not fear death because Jesus has conquered the one who holds death. Jesus now has the keys of Hades.

**Verse 17**, in a summary way, identifies why the suffering of the Son dealt with death. The Son became human so that he might share humanity and act as high priest. But he became a high priest in order to make atonement. His act, as a faithful high priest, made "propitiation" for the sins of the people. This is a much-debated word, and it has been variously translated (e.g., "to make atonement," "to make atoning sacrifice"). "Propitiation" means to avert wrath or anger. In the best sense of the word, the suffering of the Son offered himself as the object of the divine punishment for sin. In this way, God propitiated himself through the Son instead of punishing us with the punishment we deserved.

The final point of the text in **verse 18** is, I think, climatic. Who will help believers in their struggles, trials and temptations? Will angels help? Well, yes, but only the Son can provide the kind of empathetic help that overcomes the struggle against sin, temptation and death. Ultimately, the Son is our helper; not the angels. This is connected to his "faithfulness" (he preserved in his obedience to the Father, even to the point of death) and "compassion" (perhaps a reference to his empathy as a human being). He models and is able to help those who are suffering because he has experienced suffering. He is a champion of endurance because he endured.

### ***Theological Summary***

1. *The text affirms the reality and ministry of angels.* We do not want to undermine the significance of angelic ministry. They do minister to God's saints. However, angels are not the focus of the text. Angels are discussed only to point to the dignity and exaltation of the Son. Angels always have a secondary focus in Scripture. They are messengers. They are never the main characters in the story. When we focus on angels to the distraction of the main point, or we focus on angels so they supplant God or detract from the dignity of the Son, then we undermine the very function of angels. For all the concern people have for "guardian angels" and seeking the touch of an angel, the people of God should be more focused on the "guardian God" and the touch of God. God may use angels, but it is

God who is at work through his Son by his Spirit. We should never lose sight of the Son when we think about angels. It is the Son who is the real “helper” of humanity – he atoned and even now helps his people (Hebrews 2:18).

2. *The text affirms the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the Son of God.* It appears the preacher uses “Son” to describe the divinity (chapter 10) and when he turns his attention to his humanity, he utilizes the name “Jesus” (chapter 2). However, the unity between Son and Jesus is clear. Jesus is the Son of God through whom God created the world but also through whom God made atonement through the suffering of Jesus. Hebrews 1-2 is a confession of the divinity and humanity of the one we call “Savior.” As divine, he is eternal and unchanging in his righteousness and covenantal commitment. As human, he is the one who shared our humanity in order to redeem us from death by tasting death for us. As the pre-existent one who became human, he has been exalted to the right hand of God because his work for our sake. The same one through whom God created the world is the same one who was made a little lower than the angels – Jesus, the Son of God.

3. *The hearers gain confidence from the dignity and obedience of the Son.* Discouraged believers are reassured of the faithfulness of the Son and they are moved by the Son’s voluntary humiliation. They gain strength from the work of the Son to destroy death and atone for the sin, and they are encouraged by the Son’s role as helper in our times of testing and trial. The Son is the unchanging, committed one who seeks to bring other sons to glory, redeem them from death and help them through their trials.

## ***Reflections and Exhortations***

What comes to your mind when the word *angels* is used? How do you visualize angels? What do you know about angels?

Angels are referred to in thirty-four of the Bible’s sixty-six books, being mentioned 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament. *They are real and must be important in God’s sovereign plan for the achievement of his will.* To deny their existence ultimately seems to entail a physicalistic world-view that rejects the reality of a spiritual realm altogether (cf. Acts 23:8).

If I asked you to specify the three angels whose names are contained in Scripture, I hope you would not refer to the TV series, *Touched by an Angel* characters and say Tess, Monica, and Andrew! Yet I would not be surprised to find that most of us

have some ideas about angels that have come more from *It's a Wonderful Life* or the New Age Movement than from the Bible. Here's a brief summary of the few things I think I know about angels.

## A Few Things about Angels

The Greek term *angelos* (Hebrew *mal'ak*) simply means “messenger,” and sometimes ordinary human beings are angel-messengers in the Bible. John the Baptist was an angel-messenger who carried word of the Messiah's soon arrival (Malachi 3:1). Indeed, John once sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus a question, and the Greek text uses a form of the word *angelos* (*NIV*, “messengers”) of them at Luke 7:24.

Typically, however, we understand the word to refer to an order of heavenly beings who are superior to humans in power and intelligence. It seems clear they are not glorified human beings; later the Hebrews preacher will speak of two separate groups who inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem – “*thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly*” and “*spirits of righteous men made perfect*” (12:22-24). They were created sometime prior to the creation of the physical cosmos to serve God and “*all the angels shouted for joy*” when it was created (Job 38:4-7). In their normal state, angels are “*ministering spirits*” (Hebrews 1:14) who do not have flesh-and-bone bodies (cf. Luke 24:37-39). They are normally invisible to humans, even when they may be present in huge numbers to minister on our behalf. But do you remember Elisha's prayer for his servant to see the armies of angels surrounding them? “*Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha*” (2 Kings 6:17b).

At a time before the world was created, angels appear to have had a period of testing during which they had to make the choice between faith and unbelief – the same choice we are having to make now. Those who chose not to live under God's authority – following the lead of one of their own named Satan – were cast down to hell and are more commonly known as “demons” from that point on in Scripture (Matthew 25:41; cf. 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). Those who chose to live in obedience to God have continued to give him glory, reveal divine purposes to human beings, and otherwise work on behalf of the salvation of their earthly counterparts. Sometimes they take bodily form – without wings! – as in the days of Abraham (Genesis 18:1ff); more often they appear in the dazzling brilliance of their spirit forms – as when they announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds in the field (Luke 2:8ff).

One thing is for sure, the angels in biblical accounts are not cute, chubby infants with wings! They are always full-grown, powerful, awe-inspiring creatures. The typical response of any human being who ever saw one – from the shepherds to John on Patmos (Revelation 19:10) – was to fall down in absolute terror. To say the least, nobody ever reached out his hand to chuck on an angel's chin!

Now I'll bet you have a dozen questions you'd like to ask about angels at this point. Am I right? Please don't be offended or miss the point I'm going to make here. But I've "set you up" to try to make the point I think our writer was pursuing in this long section of Hebrews. *Are you fascinated by angels? Get over it. They can't do enough to meet your needs. Instead, pay attention to Jesus. He's the Real Thing – as much superior to the angels as Heaven is greater than Earth!*

## **Fascination with Angels**

So why do you think we are captivated by thoughts of angels? Was it Frank Peretti's that got our attention? Was it Billy Graham's best-selling *Angels*? Was it the New Age Movement? Has the CBS program *Touched by an Angel* caused some people to think and talk about angels for the first time since childhood? All these things – and a dozen more that you might name – have played their role in getting angel-talk going in our culture. But I think there is something more fundamental still.

Things don't happen in a vacuum. People don't talk about angels, crystals, UFO's or channeling for any sustained period of time unless they are seeking something transcendent and spiritual to give meaning to their lives. For a decade or more now, talk of such things has been commonplace in TV shows, newsmagazines, and radio-talk shows. People want to believe in something – something grand, something powerful, something spectacular.

What people don't want to believe is that it is in the everyday drudgery of their lives that God is working out his will for them. What they don't want to believe is they must prepare for suffering over glory, persecution over triumph. What you and I don't want to believe is we are going to have to keep experiencing our dull jobs, troubled marriages, crowded hospitals, and busy funeral homes. We want a health-and-wealth gospel with quick fixes for all our trouble. If we just had Tess or Gabriel or, who knows, maybe even Satan himself to whom we could "sell our souls" and then barter, some people would embrace it. Anything is better than the

slow and painful pace at which some of us are having to travel in our faith. Give me an angel, a dazzling flash of light, and swift victory!

If the Hebrews sermon was preached originally to a Jewish audience, some of his hearers were weary of being without families, being shunned by old friends, being unwelcome at the synagogue. They were tired of being haunted for their faith in a crucified Messiah.

If the Hebrews letter was written originally to a Gentile community (or at least reached them), some of them were frustrated Christianity hadn't made their lives easy either. They were being made fun of by their old pagan buddies for "not enjoying the good times" with them anymore. They were being vilified for believing in a Savior who was Jewish himself instead of Gentile, a backwoods preacher rather than a sophisticated philosopher, a Nazarene instead of an Athenian or Roman.

If the Hebrews material is being heard or read for the first time by a 21<sup>st</sup> century American, he or she will probably think one of the popular books on angels is more interesting. It tells this jaded, burned-out-on-materialism, and turned-off-by-humanism person that crystal, meditation, and angel-guides are the sure-fire answer to all their personal and family business and career problems. Just buy our \$39.95 book or attend our three-day workshop for \$279.99 – and find out how easy it is to re-focus, re-energize, and re-juvenate your life.

Don't you wish – some days at least- that it was that easy? To lose weight? To learn French? To get rid of your debts? To have a good marriage? To have stable, secure children? To establish yourself in a new career? To have a solid spiritual life?

For all I can tell, this preacher's insistence that Jesus is superior to angels' could be his reaction to angel-worship. It could be a corrective to some doctrine that interpreted Jesus as an angel rather than the Son of God. (Jehovah's Witnesses teach this unorthodox doctrine in our own time and claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the angel Michael come in human form.) A negative reaction to either of those views certainly would be justified.

But what if he was reacting against either the superstitious longing for powerful angelic intervention to rescue them from suffering or the still-common tendency to seek certain sorts of ecstatic religious experience (i.e. entrancing worship of the sort angels experience around the throne) in these verses? What if he is not

deprecating angels but trying to help his hearers envision Jesus' non-glamorous, non-ecstatic route of *perfection through suffering* as superior to their shallow, sure-to-fail expectation of a quick fix to their problems?

## The Theme

Why did our writer throw all this angel business into a letter designed to give strength for the journey of faith? Instead of being “thrown in” what if it is central to his theme? What if he opens Hebrews with the magnificent truth that disciples are not greater than their Teacher – and that we must find strength *by means* of suffering and, like Jesus, be made spiritually whole *by means* of faithfulness under pressure?

Why, that's it! Dazzling angels aren't the role model for faith; Jesus' life is our paradigm. Powerful angels – whether with or without wings – didn't purchase our redemption; Jesus did. Glorious angels with amazing powers aren't our hope; humble, faithful Jesus is our hope. Angels with impervious spiritual bodies make us envy them when we get cancer, bleed, cry, and die; flesh-and-blood Jesus knows our frailties and will stand with us when we suffer from frailty or persecution. Angels aren't our solution; Jesus is our everything!

“The weary congregation of Hebrews longed for a gospel without a cross, a redemption without sacrifice, a faith without pain – something pristine and holy, something that does not exhaust the faith which calls to put one foot in front of the other in daily obedience, something beautiful like an image of God in an unspoiled heaven surrounded by lovely angels singing untroubled hymns. Anything but a weeping, suffering Jesus marching through tragic history with his head bowed and his face bloodied.

But the Preacher will not compromise the gospel, will not reduce it to the power of positive thinking.” (8)

With this theme in view, the point of all things said about angels becomes clearer. Try it for yourself. See if it makes the reading more plausible in context.

Suppose for a moment the Christians who first received this word of exhortation had been hearing the message that a truly divine Jesus would fix all your problems – not someday in heaven but now, right now, on earth. “But he *can't* sustain you through these dark days is clear from the fact that he couldn't even escape in-

justice, betrayal, suffering, and death himself!” they could have said. “Why, a divine being would not endure such humiliation. If Jesus had been as powerful as, say, even an *angel*, he would have been impervious to suffering. So he can’t be divine. Give it up!”

So our preacher-writer responds by giving a litany of seven reasons why Jesus is superior to angels – and, thus, why Christians should continue not only to believe in him but to expect their faith to entail suffering. God’s love for you in Jesus won’t exempt you from suffering, but it will sustain you in suffering.

We must not be misled or deceived by the present situation. Indeed, he was briefly and by his own choice “*made a little lower than the angels ... so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone*” (2:9), but that was not forced on him. He volunteered.

Yet, says this writer in what must be the understatement of the ages, *we do not yet see everything subject to him*. No, there are many things fallen humans cannot control: the weather, the seasons, the instincts of animals, natural disasters, and on and on. The increasing pollution of the planet, the spread of famines and wars, the toll taken by drugs, accidents and disease, all tell the story of a lost destiny.

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But almost with a shout the author cries, *But we see Jesus!* He is the last hope of a dying race. And that hope lies both in his death and his humanity. He alone, as a human being, managed to fulfill what was intended for us from the beginning . . . He is the Last Adam, living and acting as God intended us to act when he made us in the beginning.” <sup>(9)</sup>

Because of Jesus’ triumph, the Father has declared that all things in the redeemed world that are going to be shared by all his children will be ideal for humanity and subjected to the Son in all its details.

## Conclusion

This section of Hebrews finally makes sense to me. It isn't an invitation to angelology. It isn't an "excursus" in which the speaker forgot his theme, only to return after a couple of chapters. It is central to the thesis of the epistle. *You can't follow Christ without suffering, but your suffering has a point. It is perfecting you as a disciple, just as Jesus' suffering perfected him as the trailblazer for your future.* So don't despair. Instead, draw closer to him to receive strength for your journey. Don't wait to be touched by an angel, for you have already been touched, claimed, and vouchsafed victory over the worst Satan could think to bring against you. If Jesus was refined and completed by the things he endured by faith in the Father, know for sure that your own brief agonies will achieve the same for you. Your God is faithful.

"Jesus bears the scars of the cross, the scars of human suffering and death, and "he was tested by what he suffered" (2:18). For all of us who must still face suffering, for all of us who must still trudge to the cemetery I sorrow, we are not without comfort and help, for the great high priest who sits on the throne of glory has been there, too. He bears the scars of his testing, and he "is able to help those who are tested" (2:18). (10)

Salvation is a process, not any one event along the way. And the process cannot be complete without struggle. So your crisis is not lack of God's love. Neither is it the sign of your failure as a disciple. It is the grinding stone of human experience that polishes heaven's precious jewels. It is simply your signal to draw near to Jesus and to take heart from his experience with suffering.

When you finally see the God of the Universe, he will not ask about your diplomas or degrees. He will not inspect you for medals or ribbons. He will look for things about you that resemble his One Perfect Son. Your kindness to those closest to you. Your love for strangers. Your faithfulness in hard times. And yes, your scars.



## ENDNOTES

1. Lane, p. 35.
2. Bruce, pp. 19, 20 who explains:  
This is not the only place in the Old Testament where a king, especially of the Davidic line, is addressed in language which could only be described as the characteristic hyperbole of oriental court style if interpreted solely of the individual so addressed. But to Hebrew poets and prophets a prince of the house of David was the vicegerent of Israel's God; he belonged to a dynasty to which God had made special promises bound up with the accomplishment of His purpose in the world. Besides, what was only partially true of any of the historic rulers of David's line, or even of David himself, would be realized in its fullness when that son of David appeared in whom all the promises and ideals associated with that dynasty would be embodied.
3. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 50:  
"The present tense of the Greek participle implies that angels are perpetually being sent out on service. Their task is concerned not with the natural order, but with the work of redemption. Their mission is for those who are to inherit salvation, that is, for the people of God.
4. Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents* (Waco, TX:Word, 1986, pp. 16, 17).
5. Raymond Brown, *The Message of the Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 45 quotes M. Monsen, *A Present Help* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), pp. 37, 38.
6. Bruce, p. 61.
7. James Hastings, ed. *The Speaker's Bible*, vol. 17 (Grand Rapids, MI:Baker, 1971), p. 44 quotes Maurice Maeterlinck, *Our Eternity* (London: Methuen, 1913), p. 4.
8. Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 22.
9. Steadman, p. 39
10. Although some would mistakenly call this view Platonism, there is nothing of this in the writings of Plato. Neo-Platonism either reinterpreted or misinterpreted Plato's cosmology to the point they regarded matter as deficient and only "pure spirit" to be untainted by it. The implications of doctrines still current in Christian thought have been profoundly negative.
11. Long, p. 45.

## **STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY**

### **CHAPTER 4**

#### ***Hebrews 3:1-19***

### **IN AWE OF MOSES**

I have always loved books. I am sure my great love began as a child as my mother read me Bible stories. My favorites were Joseph and his coat of many colors, Samson and his riddle, and Daniel in the Lion's Den. They were my heroes. The greatest narrative stories in all literature – from Noah and the Ark to Baby Moses in the Basket to Jesus and Little Children – are found in Holy Scripture.

Children need heroes. And celebrity superstars are often anything but heroes. Madonna is a celebrity; Rosa Parks is a hero. Shaq is a sports superstar; Martin Luther King, Jr. is a hero. Eminem is a celebrity; Todd Beamer is a hero. Nero was a celebrity; Paul was a hero. You get the picture, right? What better heroes than the ones in the Bible? Look at them: Obedient Noah, Faithful Abraham, Devoted Ruth, Triumphant David, and Humble, submissive Mary. And is there a better story in all the Scripture than the Moses story?

It is difficult for those unfamiliar with Jewish history to appreciate the awesome reverence accorded Moses to his people, and it is particularly difficult today amidst the revisionist, iconoclastic spirit of our century; but Moses was revered as the greatest of all Hebrews, and indeed the greatest man of history. We must understand this first if we are to get anything of the Holy Spirit's message to us in Hebrews 3.

Moses was not only the protected baby in the basket, he was also the favored prince who messed up royally, only to have to flee Egypt for his life. Then – after a time of discipline and maturity in the desert – God called him to go to Pharaoh! The action sequence is astounding from that point forward: confrontation, flight, deliverance, leadership, setbacks, discouragement, victories. The Lord Almighty revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. What a story! Yes, your children would love it – and need to know it. Even Steven Spielberg was so impressed with it he recently made it into a major motion picture, as Cecil B. DeMille had a generation or so earlier. But . . .

There is a better story than the one about Moses. Oh, the one that is better has several parallels with the Moses story; but it is as much superior as builders are to houses, as sons are to servants. For the even better story than Moses' life and adventures is the story of Jesus. If Moses was Prince of Egypt, Jesus is King of Kings! And that is what our preacher-writer says in our text from Hebrews 3.

*Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of what we boast (Hebrews 3:16).*

*Fix your thoughts on Jesus . . . “*

No life is more intriguing and no ministry had more impact than Moses'. But he merely set the stage for the one whose life and ministry are for us.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

### **1. Hebrews 3:1-19**

This text draws an analogy between the present experience of the preacher's audience and the past experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. The preacher brings the events of Numbers 14 (as reflected in Psalm 95) into analogy with the present experience of discouraged believers in his day.

Israel followed Moses into the wilderness. While Moses was faithful, Israel was not. The church follows Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus was faithful, but the question remains whether the church will be faithful. Will the church follow Jesus or will they follow the example of Israel in the wilderness?

The wilderness experience of Israel resulted in faithlessness and unbelief. They did not enter the land of promise because they were unfaithful and disobedient. Their hearts were hardened, though Moses was their faithful leader. The wilderness

experience of the church in Rome is an open question. Will persecution, discouragement and apathy yield unbelief or will they remain faithful just as their high priest and apostle Jesus was faithful despite his own wilderness experience.

This section, then, is primarily exhortation. It calls the church to faithfulness based on the past experience of the people of God.

We should learn from the negative example of Israel and follow the positive example of Jesus. We can succeed where Israel failed because Jesus is our champion and he will provide strength for the journey if we do not harden our hearts in the wilderness.

### **a. Hebrews 3:1-6**

This section is fundamentally exhortation. It begins with the most basic exhortation and most foundational exhortation of the sermon: “*fix your thoughts on Jesus.*” It is an exhortation based upon the previous section (“*therefore*”). Because Jesus is the exalted Son who is greater than the angels but made himself lower than the angels, focus your attention on him. He is God’s faithful Son. He is further identified as an “apostle” as well as “high priest.” The idea of “one who was sent” (apostle) is closely connected to the “champion” or “leader” (2:10) where those who are sent are leaders in Numbers 13:2. The Son was sent as a leader, a champion among God’s people, among his brothers.

Despite their discouraged, drifting and fruitless condition (cf. Hebrews 6), the preacher addresses them as “*brothers*” (connecting with the previous section as well – Jesus is our brother and we are “brothers” together) who share a “*heavenly calling.*” I think “heavenly” identifies the destination of the call – we are called to the heavenly city (11:16; 12:22) and the heavenly sanctuary (8:5; 9:3).

The idea of “confession” is important in Hebrews. We are exhorted to hold on to our confession (4:14; 10:23), and it seems to be a definite expression of faith in the role of the Son as our high priest and redeemer.

In 3:2-6, the faithfulness of Jesus and Moses is compared. They were both “faithful” through their time of testing. Moses was tested, and by faith, chose to cast his lot with the Hebrews and lead the people of God (Numbers 12:7). Jesus was tested (2:18:5:8) in the wilderness as well and chose the way of suffering as the high priest of God’s people. This is a contrast, however, with the people of Israel in the wilderness who, when they were tested, hardened their hearts. The

idea of a faithful leader is important in the Old Testament (see the statements about a royal heir in I Chronicles 17:4 and a priest in I Samuel 2:35).

## COMPARISON OF MOSES AND JESUS

Conclusion: We are his house if we prove faithful (Hebrews 3:6 b).

MOSES	JESUS
Faithful to God (v.2b)	Faithful to God (v. 2a)
Faithful as Servant (v. 5)	Son over God's house (v/6b)
Servant in God's House (v. 5a)	Faithful as Son (6a)

Lane, Call to Commitment, p. 60

The “*house*” of God, of course, is a reference to the people of God. Moses, for example, was a leader “*among my whole people*” (Numbers 12:7). “House” often refers to the people of God in the Old Testament (Exodus 16:31; Leviticus 10:6; Hosea 8:1; Jeremiah 12:7; cf. Hebrews 8:8).

We must be careful to remember the point is not to “put down” Moses, or denigrate Moses. Rather, Moses is highly regarded as a faithful servant. But the point is to exalt the Son. The contrast is between Son and servant (just as the angels were servants while Jesus was Son). Moses bore witness to the Son; he is not the ground of salvation but a witness to the work of God in Jesus Christ. Just as the disciples bore witness to Jesus after the fact, Moses bore witness before the fact.

### b. Hebrews 3:7-19.

This section is an exhortation based upon Psalm 95:7b-11. The text is quoted in Hebrews 3:7b-11 and Hebrews 3:15. After each citation, the preacher exhorts his readers in Hebrews 3:12-14 and Hebrews 3:16-19. Thus, we have the pattern of Scripture followed by exhortation.

The preacher sees the potential problem among his hearers is “unbelief.” The first exhortation begins with “*See . . . that no one among you has an evil heart of unbelief*” (3:12) and ends with “*We see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief*” (3:19). The issue is faith or the lack thereof. Will the discouraged believers of these Roman house-churches continue to believe or have the seeds

of unbelief already been sown in their hearts? The question of Numbers 14:11 rings in the background: “*How long will they refuse to believe me?*” The “*unbelief*” here is a refusal to believe God’s promises and trust he will accomplish them. It is not a weakness of faith, but a rebellious rejection.

## **2. Psalm 95 as Basic Text.**

To set forth his concern, the writer did what preachers often do – he appropriated a passage of Scripture that eloquently framed his thoughts – Psalm 95:7-11. Every Jew knew this passage by heart because its opening line served as a call to worship every Sabbath evening in the synagogue: “*Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker, for he is our Maker; for he is our God and we are his people of his pasture the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden our hearts...*” (vv. 6-8).

These words were intoned week after week, year after year as a call to carefully listen to the voice of God. (1) It is an exhortation to worship, and so it fits the hortatory style of the preacher in Hebrews. Worship is manifested in singing, shouting, music, bowing and kneeling. The substance of the worship is the proclamation that the Lord is, as sovereign King, creator of all (v. 3-5) and he is the God of Israel, who are the people of God (v. 7). God is worshipped because he is Creator of the Cosmos and because he is the Shepherd of Israel.

These two ideas of worship connect with Hebrews as well. Jesus is worshipped by the angels because he is the Son through whom God created the world and because he was the “champion” who led other sons to glory. However, the preacher of Hebrews does not make this explicit connection with Psalm 95.

Rather, the preacher focuses on the last half of Psalm 95. If we envision Hebrews as a sermon read to some Roman house-churches, then the exhortation of Psalm 95:7b is contextualized by the invitation to worship in Psalm 95:1-7a. As the church gathered to sing, eat and pray in the presence of God – to come before God with worship – the preacher knew they needed to hear a word of encouragement and a word of warning, just as Psalm 95 contains that word of warning.

Psalm 95:7b-11 invites the assembled people of God to hear the voice of God. They should listen and obey rather than test God by rejecting his word and hardening their hearts against it. The two names in the text (v. 8) – Meribah (which means quarrelling) and Massah (which means testing) – refer to places of rebellion

during the wilderness experience of Israel after the Exodus (cf. Exodus 17:7; cf. Deuteronomy 33:8). The quotation in verse 10 is from Numbers 14:11. So, the Psalm remembers two occasions of rebellion. One is the questioning of whether God is among them or not as they were on their way to Sinai in Exodus 17, and the other is the failure of the people to trust God's promises and possess the land in Numbers 14. As a result, the rebellious did not enter God's rest, that is, they did not possess the land of promise.

The action in Numbers 14 was no mere weakness of faith. Rather, it was an active rejecting of God's promises. In Numbers 14:9, Joshua and Caleb plead with Israel, "*Do not turn away from the Lord*" (Deuteronomy 1:28).

As the writer uses Psalm 95, he is convinced the warning of the opening line and the extended warning it introduces comes directly from the Holy Spirit to his hearers, and thus he introduces verse 7 by saying, "*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says ...*" He understands that originally the Holy Spirit had warned the psalmist's hearers with these words, and as he uses it one thousand years later, it is still the Holy Spirit speaking. As for us today, two thousand years after the use of it in Hebrews, it remains the Holy Spirit's message. There is a timeless urgency to the message. We must listen to the Holy Spirit's message today, for it is God's message for the church in this troubled age.

#### **a. First Citation of Psalm 95 and Exhortation (Hebrews 3:7-14).**

The preacher applies Psalm 95 to his hearers with a pointed exhortation in Hebrews 3:12-14. The message of Psalm 95 ("*Today*") is still alive for this preacher's hearers, just as it is still alive for us today. "*Today*" is an epochal day. It is "*today*" as long as the promise lasts; as long as the invitation is still open. It is always "*today*" as long as God invites and before the judgment arrives.

The problem is an evil heart of unbelief – a rebellious rejection of God's promises. Sin is subtle as well as overt; it is deceitful. The heart of unbelief is a deliberate turning away from God. The response of the community is to encourage each other as they continue their communal journey. Communal encouragement will hinder/prevent the hardening of the heart.

The danger in the Roman community is that outside pressures will discourage and plant seeds of unbelief in the hearts of the church. Through the deceitful attractiveness of sin, believers will harden their hearts and turn away from God. They will

refuse to believe God will keep his promises. It is the danger of apostasy; the willful rejection of God's Son.

To counteract this, the preacher encourages them to "daily" encourage each other, and to recognize they are partners with Christ. They partake of Christ's glory and share his journey. If they will remain faithful, just as Christ was faithful, they too will receive the promise and inherit the salvation that Christ won for them.

### ***b. Second Citation of Psalm 95 and Exhortation (Hebrews 3:15-19).***

This exhortation is negative in character. It looks back to the rebellion (*"the sin"*) of Numbers 14. They heard the word of promise, but refused to believe it. They "sinned." This sin is no mere act of weakness, but is rather a resolute rejection and opposition to the promise of God. The rebellious will not enter into God's rest. They refused to obey and embrace "unbelief" as a way of life.

The rebellion to which Hebrews 3:16-19 alludes is found in Numbers 14. It was a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, but ultimately against God as well. The connection here with Hebrews 3:1-6 is obvious. If they refused to believe God's promise through Moses and thus could not enter the rest, how much more will they fail to enter the rest if they reject God's promise through Jesus who is God's faithful Son.

It is important to understand the nature of this "unbelief" in Hebrews 3. This is not a temporary lack of faith, or trust. It is not a moment of weakness. It is, rather, a willful rejection of God's promise. It is rebellion. The rebellious cannot enter God's rest.

### ***Theological Summary***

The contrast in this text is between the preserving faithfulness of Jesus (and Moses) and Israel's rebellion in the wilderness. Jesus preserved to the end and was faithful through his wilderness experience (suffering in human form). Israel, however, rebelled in their wilderness experience and rejected the promises of God. Faith preserved in Jesus, but unbelief reigned in Israel.

The believing community the preacher addresses in Hebrews is in a weakened, immature state. They are drifting and in danger of neglecting the salvation that



Jesus has won for them. The community has people within it that have already rejected Jesus and forsaken him. The exhortation in Hebrews 3 is intended to prevent defections due to unbelief.

Theologically, I think we must distinguish between weakness and rebellion. All of us sin – which is no excuse for sin, but the origin of our sin is also significant. A person with a heart of faith still sins and due to weaknesses of one kind or another fails to be all that God intends them to be. We are weak, and therefore we sin. However, rebellion is a different matter. Rebellion is the deliberate rejection of God. It is an assertion of unbelief by action or confession. It is a heart of unbelief.

Believers who sin out of weakness are still believers. But the rebellious act out of unbelief. Believers, despite their sinful weakness, are assured of God's grace because their faith is directed toward God's promises in his Son. But the rebellious have no faith and thus no assurance.

What the preacher condemns and warns about is a persistent heart of rebellion; a heart of unbelief that rejects God's promises. That kind of heart will not enter God's rest.

However, he encourages believers who are struggling with their weaknesses to continue their journey. They are “partners” with Christ, and he will provide strength for the journey. They should not be discouraged by their weaknesses, but turn toward each other – encourage each other and preserve in their faith. Jesus is their “champion” and he will lead them into the promised rest.

Every community of faith with the reality that some in their midst give up their faith, reject God's promises and refuse to obey. The community shrinks by attrition.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

There's a story about a skydiver who drifted over a hundred miles off course and landed in a dense forest. Strung up in a tree, tangled, and terrified of the fast-approaching night, he began to yell for help. After a few minutes, a man who was out for a walk chanced upon the skydiver.

“Hello! I need help! Where am I?” called the man in the tree.

“You’re stuck in a tree, with no way out. You’re surrounded by a forest, and it’s getting dark,” the other man replied.

“Of all my luck,” said the skydiver to him, I get stuck with a preacher as a rescuer!”

Hearing this, the passerby wondered aloud how the distressed man knew about his occupation as a religious teacher.

“Well,” the man in the tree said, “I just assumed you must be a preacher, as what you’ve said is both utterly true and absolutely useless in helping me.”

When preachers hear this story, they usually get a chuckle out of it – in part because they can detect the grain of truth it holds. So much of our conversations about spiritual things, while perhaps good and even spot-on, are nearly devoid of relevant impact. It’s not only Christianity that gets targeted by this critique – most academic or philosophical movements also struggle to reach us where we really live.

The preacher/teacher of Hebrews knew he had a beaten-up, bedraggled, discouraged audience on his hands. So, as any preacher or teacher worth his salt knows, he needed to say something that would inspire them. He needed to give them hope. He wanted to say something that would make a difference.

In the first two chapters of Hebrews, he has reminded them that God’s work across human history has come to fullness now in the Son, Jesus Christ (1:1-3). Against their temptation either to look for a quick fix to their distress by angelic power or perhaps even to worship and pray to those heavenly messengers (1:4-14), he has pleaded with them not to “drift away” from the gospel message that had been preached and confirmed to them through the apostles (2:1-4). That gospel message affirms the Eternal God who made the angels was made lower than the angels for our sake – sharing our humanity both to conquer Satan and to rescue us from his clutches on the one hand and to set an example for us in how to be perfected (not destroyed) through suffering (2:5-14).

Yes, this skilled author-homiletician knew what his sisters and brothers were facing. And he was desperate to say what they needed to hear that would give them hope. So he pleaded for this: “*Fix your thoughts on Jesus!*” Not on your troubles, but on what you know about Jesus. Not on your tormentors, but on what you have been told about Jesus. Not on what might yet happen, but on what you know about Jesus.

Most of us live not only for just the moment but on the basis of what we see going on immediately around us. Christians are supposed to be different! We must live not for the moment but for eternity, not on the basis of what we see but on the basis of what God has told us. Remember this verse from Paul: “*We live by faith, not by sight*”? (2 Corinthians 5:7). Or this one: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*”? (Romans 12:2a).

If believers don’t fix our minds on Jesus, we can be distracted by worldly things. If we don’t fix our minds on Jesus, we will be overwhelmed by Satan’s devices. If we don’t fix our minds on Jesus and keep his experiences in this world as the reference point for our own, we can fall away and be lost!

Remember Jesus is Superior to Moses!

To achieve this goal of giving his audience strength for their journey, this exceptional teacher drew on the Bible stories *they* knew. And whether they were Gentiles or Jews, one story they would all know from the Bible they studied in their assemblies – remembering that that would be our Old Testament – was the story of its central character, Moses. They were all in awe of it. It is an enthralling story of a far-less-than-perfect man being called by God, led by God, sustained by God, and ultimately saved by God. The preacher likely knew – perhaps had preached the sermon himself – that they had been exhorted to be faithful under their stresses as Moses had been under his.

He retells the Moses story ever so skillfully in order to make them realize they had someone greater than Moses to follow now. They had someone superior to Moses as their high priest and apostle. It was God’s *Own Son* who guaranteed their success in following the heavenly call, if they would only “*hold fast till the end the confidence [they] had at first*” (Hebrews 3:14b). He doesn’t bring up Moses to put him down! Not in the least. He tells the wonderful story of a great man in order, as somebody put it, “*not to cast a shadow on Moses but to shine a light on Jesus.*”

Just notice how he begins: “*Moses was faithful in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future*” (3:5). Even when the people he was leading through the wilderness were hardening their hearts (3:8) and making God angry with their unfaithfulness (3:10), Moses didn’t give up. Oh, he had his low moments. He even had episodes of failure. But failure isn’t the same as unbelief and rebellion; God is merciful with his still-making-an-effort servants but is unyielding with rebellion. And even though Moses died at 120, without entering

earthly Canaan, does anybody think this faithful servant failed to enter the heavenly “rest” God gives his own?

This is what we are supposed to learn from that story: If Moses was a servant to God and faithful in God’s house, Jesus is the Son is over God’s house (3:2-6a) – and, hold your breath now – “*we are [God’s] house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast*” (3:6b). The hope of which Christians boast is not ourselves but Christ, not our faith but his grace (cf. I Corinthians 1:31). We are God’s family, his dearly loved children. And although appearances would have us believe it is not worth it to remain steadfast on this Christian journey that has the world set against us, we have God’s promises to spur us on. We listen to those promises and walk by faith in them. Knowing that his word never fails, we can even be courageous in the face of trials and opposition. This was the message the preacher’s friends needed then. It is the message many of my friends need now.

*“See to it brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first”* (Hebrews 3:12-140).

## **You’ll Need Encouragement Too**

The original readers of this material are going to be described later as having “*feeble arms and weak knees*” (Hebrews 12:12). I suppose so, for some among them had been forced to suffer for their faith. “*Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated,*” he will explain (Hebrews 10:33). Some of them had had their property confiscated (Hebrews 10:34a). Here is how they had shown courage in that earlier time: “*You knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions*” (Hebrews 10:34b). Back then, they had walked by faith over sight!

But the opposition had continued, and it was getting worse. Indeed, they expected it was going to get far worse before it got better – and the preacher was in no position to tell them otherwise. So they were discouraged and fearful. They were hurt and confused. They were saying things like “How much of this does God think I can stand?” or “Why is God doing this to me?”, and some were pulling away already.

Things are very different for us today though – or are they? Some Christians in places other than West Virginia and North America are in jail because they have confessed Christ. Others have had their property confiscated. What they see says it isn't worth it, but what they *hear* in the gospel says it is. Can they walk by faith in what they have heard? Or might some of them be tempted to give in?

Things aren't all that different for the teens of our churches. Their culture tells them that sex is their right, mind-altering chemicals are their passport to fun, and lies to parents are cool. That's what they see on MTV and the big screen. But they *hear* the message from their church community that it is worth it to wait, abstain, and follow Christ. Can you walk by faith in what you have heard from Scripture? Or will you go with what is right in front of you every day?

Adults get discouraged too. Shooting and drugs seem to be in every neighborhood. The economy while improving is uncertain. Jobs have been lost and lifestyles compromised. What we see has made many a person cynical enough to lose heart. Can you hold to the gospel you have *heard* and keep going in this church, with your family, and in your personal faith?

I heard a man by the name of Wayne Sinclair was at work as a civilian employee in his first-floor office at the Pentagon when American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the building. He was hurt badly enough that he wound up spending three weeks in a Washington hospital. He would have died but for one thing, one person. Sinclair was so badly injured and dazed that he was frozen in place as the building around him was being enveloped with fire and smoke. He was waiting to die. Then he heard a voice. "If you can hear me, head toward my voice," somebody was shouting. "If you can hear me, head toward my voice." According to Sinclair's account of that horrible day, the sound of the voice of a Pentagon police officer – toward which he and some others in his office blindly made their way – saved him.

We're in a similar situation. I can see no other way out, but I have heard the voice of Jesus. He has called me with a heavenly calling. I took the first steps to follow him years ago. I confessed him and was baptized. There have been detours, setbacks, and failures along the way. I'm stronger now than at the start, but I still have my weak moments. The following poem speaks to this desire:

*When my eyes fail to see  
The beauty You provide,  
And I seem to lose my way  
With anguish and foolish pride:*

*My Father, awaken my soul  
If I've fallen asleep  
For I want to awaken  
To repent and weep.*

*You came not to condemn  
But to save my soul.  
Yet only half my heart I gave  
Now I pray to make it whole.*

*This is not my time to slumber,  
My walk is by faith and not by sight.  
I am here to win this battle  
With godly armor and willing to fight.*

Loretta Tetrack (2)

Do you want to know something? Everything in this world says I'm wrong to keep listening to his voice. Some of the things I see around me make me think I could write my own script and adopt an easier, more lucrative, and much trendier route than meets the eye; and I choose to listen to that voice which, as yet, has no face for me, to move toward that voice, to believe walking by faith in that voice is right and preferable to giving in to what is closest and clearer in my line of sight.

Until the matter is thoroughly settled in your heart, each day will be a new challenge to faith over sight. Each temptation will seem to say sight is better and offers you more. In this little faith community, we remind one another of Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, and David – that their journey of faith was worth every sacrifice

along the way. And Moses. But above all, Jesus. So we keep telling each other his story. Reading it to our children. Reminding one another we're in this together – come what may

*“So, my dear Christian friends, companions in following this call to the heights, take a good hard look at Jesus. He’s the centerpiece of everything we believe . . . So watch your step, friends. Make sure there’s no evil unbelief lying around that will trip you up and throw you off course, diverting you from the living God. For as long as it’s still God’s Today, keep each other on your toes so sin doesn’t slow down your reflexes. If we can only keep our grip on the sure thing we started out with, we’re in this with Christ for the long haul” (Hebrews 3:1, 12-14, The Message).*

## ENDNOTES

1. Lane, pp. 61, 62.
2. Single poem from my sister Loretta Tetrick.

## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 5

#### *Hebrews 4:1-13*

#### AWED BY JOSHUA

As Christians, we understand there is no rest for the soul apart from Christ. St Augustine, in the fourth century, gave this truth its eloquent, classic expression in his *Confessions*: “Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee” (Book 1.1.1) <sup>(1)</sup> Blaise Pascal, perhaps the greatest of French minds, wrote even more explicitly in his *Pensees*:

“What is it, then, that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once a man of true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God himself. (VII, para. 425) <sup>(2)</sup>

How our souls answer to the words of Augustine and Pascal! When we came to God in Christ, it was like pulling into a snug harbor from a stormy sea. There is no rest for the heart apart from Christ.

Do you ever have those “heart to heart” moments with yourself when you suddenly feel not just inadequate but almost fraudulent in your existence? It’s not just that you got up on the wrong side of the bed and you’re irritable or you messed up on the job or said something you regret to a family member. It’s a wave of self-reflection that rolls over you and suddenly you feel absolutely helpless. Or worse you feel completely compromised as a person because you don’t know who the real you is anymore. Perhaps it is one of those moments when it seems the “outside” – the side you work so hard to get other people to accept, the image that others have of you – seems completely foreign to the person you believe is living inside your body. Or a moment when the world around you has one image of you that, deep inside your soul (perhaps because of secret sin) you know to be false.



I have those moments – moments when all of my education and credentials and history and longevity in church meet my fear of failure and inadequacy and ignorance. When all of the surface measures and spiritual understanding and social acceptance come face to face with deeper longings. When I have a moment that seems, on the one hand, to be a moment of clarity in the midst of all my doing and busyness. The more I depend on me, the less I am depending on my Heavenly Father. The harder I try, the more likely I am to frustrate the Holy Spirit. The longer I tolerate the false notion that my smarts or my moral strength or my good works will get me by, the longer I am denying the biblical truth that Jesus Christ must be my everything.

Augustine (354-430) said it this way: “O God, you made me for yourself, and my heart is anxious until it finds itself in you.” Even better is the prayer of Edward Pusey (1800-1882):

“Lift up our souls, O Lord, to the pure, serene light of thy presence; that we may breathe freely, there repose in thy love, there may be *at rest from ourselves*, and from thence return, arrayed in thy peace, to do and bear what shall please thee, for thy holy name’s sake.”<sup>(3)</sup>

Our ancient preacher to the Hebrews knew all about the divided self when he wrote his sermon. His audience is also caught in a series of circumstances in which they have these waves of inadequacy, even fraudulence, that sweep over them. You see they are caught between the social world that surrounds them – the world that gave them place and identity and structure and meaning to their lives at one time – and the new spiritual world of faith they have been drawn to in Christ. The Christian commitments are costing them dearly in the social world around them. They feel trapped in the two worlds, living with divided lives. One world promises to maintain their inner self. The preacher calls it “*rest*.” It is ability to live such a faith relationship with Creator God that one can trust God to provide in any circumstance. It is an overwhelming sense of peace of Creator God himself. It is the peace experienced by God himself when he looked at all that he created and knew it was good. It is not at all the temporal rest, the escapist rest found in what we call vacation and recreation, not the temporal “time-outs” of entertainment, or momentary escape from the fears and failures of life. It is the “rest” of the inner- self at long last back in harmony with its created image.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

### **1. Hebrews 4:1-13**

God raises up the right person for the right time. When all seemed lost for Israel because that nation's great lawgiver and leader could not complete his task, Yahweh selected Joshua to carry through. Jesus has been raised up at just the right time in history (cf. Galatians 4:4) and in your personal crises. He is superior to Joshua!

The preacher is still in exhortation mode. He warned them about unbelief with the example of Israel in the wilderness. The disobedient and faithless cannot enter God's promised rest (Hebrews 3:16-19). But he hopes his hearers are more predisposed to faith than the Israelites in the wilderness. Indeed, as we will see in chapter six, he is confident they are.

The basic exhortation of this section is for believers to enter the promised rest through faith. Twice, once in Hebrews 4:1 (*"let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it"*) and a second time in Hebrews 4:11 (*"Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest"*), the preacher urges his hearers to persevere and continue their journey toward God's promised rest.

As we have noted, the writer of Hebrews is a very sophisticated man with an immense knowledge of the Greek Old Testament, and he was writing to knowledgeable Jewish Christians. So sometimes the meaning, which was obvious to the hearers, is lost on us. Here in verses 3-5 the writer describes the nature of rest in cryptic terms that will take some decoding. He writes:

*"Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.' And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.' And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest'"*

"Rest" is the dominant idea in this exhortation. The noun or verb is used eleven times in eleven verses. The idea is occasioned by the use of the term in Psalm 9:11, which is quoted in Hebrews 3:11 (and in this section at Hebrews 4:3, 5). The "rest" which Israel in the wilderness failed to enjoy was the land of promise because they refused to trust God's work for them in a conquering land. The hearers of this sermon also have the prospect of a "rest," and the question remains whether they

will be like Israel and fail to enter that rest or whether they will persevere in faith so as to enter that rest.

To catch something of the idea here, imagine yourself invited by Prince Charles to enjoy his “rest.” You are picked up by the Royal limo at Heathrow and whisked into London and through the gates of Windsor Palace where you are shown its glories. Then the two of you motor north in his 1968 Aston Martin to Balmoral Castle where you relax before a fire, scratch the ears of the royal hounds, and don a kilt and explore the royal trout streams. You are sharing what Prince Charles calls “my rest” – his personal rest.

The sublime fact that we share God’s personal rest, the rest he enjoys, ought to set our hearts racing. It means that when we are given rest by him, it is not simply a relaxation of tension but a rest that is qualitatively the same rest God enjoys – his personal rest that he shares with us!

This section naturally divides into three parts. Hebrews 4:1-5 begins and ends with the notion of “entering God’s rest,” while Hebrews 4:6-11 begins and ends with the idea of “failure to enter because of disobedience.” Hebrews 4:12-13 offers the ground of God’s penetrating perception of human hearts – the Word of God pierces through the heart and judges its faith or faithlessness. The first section, then, explains the idea of rest, and the second applies the negative example of Israel to the situation of the hearers of this sermon. The third section reminds the readers they cannot escape God’s judgment, which penetrates the heart.

### **a. Hebrews 4:1-5**

Psalm 95 exhorts worshippers to persevere in faith so they might enjoy God’s rest. Consequently, the preacher concludes there is yet a rest that remains for the people of God. It is a rest into which we can still enter. The promise has not disappeared, but rather it is constantly renewed as each generation seeks God. The Word of God promises a rest. It is good news (gospel). The gospel is the promise of sharing God’s rest. Yet, the gospel must be heard (embraced) with faith. We must trust God’s promise of rest and persevere in that faith though the wilderness in order to enter God’s rest. Without faith, the promise is of no avail. Without faith, we fall short and cannot enter the rest.

The preacher elaborates the idea of “rest” by combining Psalm 95:11 with Genesis 2:2. The “rest” is “God’s rest,” and God’s rest is his creation rest. He rested on the seventh day after creating the cosmos. When God rested on the seventh day and

ceased his work, this does not mean that God ceased all activity and became a spectator of the human drama. Rather, the idea of “rest” here is the experience of peace and shalom. It is the delight of community. It is the absence of conflict, pain and sorrow. God invites us into this rest, to share life with him in community, and to experience shalom.

However, I think Guthrie is correct to see this “rest” is a present experience, which anticipates an eternal future. We who have believed have already entered this rest, though there is yet a fuller experience of that rest in the future when the new heaven and new earth appear.

### **b. Hebrews 4:6-11**

The preacher closes this section with a challenge to his church. *“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”* This “rest” is available to the people of God, but it is available through faith. The disobedient cannot experience or enjoy that “rest”. No doubt the believers whom the preacher addressed have experienced a state of “restlessness.” They lived in a hostile environment. They were discouraged. The preacher challenges them to persevere in faith despite the wilderness. There is a rest, the preacher announces; even today.”

Our passage suggests three things:

First, we must do our utmost to focus on the rest. We must strive to comprehend that it is a *divine rest* – the rest that God personally enjoys – “*my rest*” (vv. 3-5), as he calls it. It is joyous, satisfying, and productive. We must do our utmost to grasp this. There is no room for mental laziness. Think with all you have on God’s rest as described by the Holy Spirit and as offered to you in this passage.

Second, we must do our utmost to combine the hearing of the good news of the offered rest with genuine faith – that is, *belief plus trust*. <sup>(3)</sup> In the midst of life’s uneven seas, we are called, as was the early church to *believe* in the mighty God of the Exodus, he who parted seas, brought forth water from the rock, and fed his people with manna. Even more, we are to believe in the Bread of Heaven who gave his life for us and rose from the dead and ascended to God in mighty power. Do we believe our God is such a God? Do we really believe it with all our heart? We must make every effort to do so!

Finally, can we add to this belief *trust*? This was the bottom line for the wavering church. Could they trust God to take care of them? There is no rest in this life without trust.

“*Today*” rings loudly here. The “rest” is not simply a moment in past history when Israel entered the land under Joshua. <sup>(4)</sup> “Rest” is a much larger and more pregnant notion. It is not simply rest in the land of Canaan. Rather, it is an eternal “Sabbath-rest” for the people of God. It has cosmic proportions. The “rest” is ultimately the restoration of creation; it is renewal of all things. It is a new heaven and a new earth where the old has passed away and everything has become new. It is that heavenly city toward which we journey.

We experience this rest today as we enjoy communion with God among the people of God. This is our “Sabbath.” However, the day of rest so prominent in Israel is rooted in creation (Genesis 2:2) and is part of the Ten Commandments (the fourth commandment). It bears witness to a principle of “rest” – rest within a workweek that is given to enjoying God’s communion and peace. It is a principle that find its ultimate fulfillment in the new heaven and new earth where God’s people will enjoy God’s own rest.

The preacher’s exhortation is to “make every effort to enter that rest.” Do not follow the negative example of Israel in the wilderness, but rather follow Jesus (our Joshua!). Remember that Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. We have a Joshua who will lead us into the Promised Land. He is our high priest, Jesus. He is our champion who has paved the way for us. Consequently, the exhortation is “follow Jesus” and enter the rest.

## **2. Hebrews 4: 12-13**

The relationship between this section and the previous exhortation is found in the word “*for*” that begins Hebrews 4:12. Don’t follow the negative example of disobedience and make every effort to enter the rest, because the Word of God is alive. It is no dead word. It is active and at work. It is not a dead letter.

On the contrary, the Word of God (the word of promise; the good news; the judgment of disobedience) is a judging sword that discerns the heart. It opens up the heart as in surgery, or it cuts through the heart like a sword that penetrates the body. It unveils the heart. The heart language is important in this section, as the quotation from Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3:7 reminds us.

The Word of God, therefore, as it comes to us as a word of promise about the rest, will judge the heart's faith or faithlessness. It will uncover what lies at the bottom of the heart. When the heart of God confronts us, it will discern whether we harbor a heart of unbelief or whether our heart believes the gospel (good news). The heart will give an account of itself before the light of God's Word.

### ***Theological Summary***

"Rest" and the perseverance of faith that is necessary for entering that "rest" are the key theological themes in this section of the homily. The familiarity of our preacher with the Old Testament is especially evident in this section because "rest" is a theological theme that runs throughout the whole biblical story. And this is the story to which the original hearers of the sermon belong and to which we also belong. "Rest" is God's restoration of relationship with his people and their enjoyment of God's peace and community.

Significantly, the "rest" is God's rest. In his experience; his enjoyment of peace and harmony. It is "shalom." It was about what God created, and the preacher takes us back to creation to understand this shalom. After God had created, God rested (Hebrews 4:4; Genesis 2:2). "Rest" reflects the harmony and peace of creation and God's relationship with it. God lived in community with his people, walked among them and enjoyed the mutual love they shared. This is rest; it is life without conflict, without pain and without suffering.

But the entrance of sin into the world disturbed this "rest." Wilderness invaded the Garden. Sin transformed the Garden into Wilderness. But God still sought to give his people "rest." God called Israel into a being a holy community in which he would dwell with his people. He would "rest" among them, and they would "rest" every seventh day (Sabbath; cf. Exodus 20:11; 31:17). The preacher remembers the "Sabbath" as part of the rest into which God had called his people (Hebrews 4:9) uses Sabbath terminology though it is transformed into something more than a seventh day.

He called them to a land where he would give them "rest;" where they would have peace from their enemies and live together in harmony as God dwelled in their midst (cf. Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 12:10; Joshua 1:13-15). This was the "rest" that wilderness Israel was called to enter, but they could not because of their unbelief and disobedience, that is, because of their rebellion. It is also the "rest"

that Israel would experience in its history at a time when peace reigned (cf. 1 Chronicles 22:9, 18; 23:25; 28:2; 2 Chronicles 14:7; 15:15; 20:30). God himself “rested” in Israel as he reigned with joy and delight among his people (2 Chronicles 6:41; 1 Chronicles 28:2).

Psalm 95 evidences a belief that there was yet a “rest” that the original worshippers who heard Psalm 95 could embrace and enter. Even though they possessed the land, there was a “rest” they were to embrace rather than hardening their hearts as Israel did in the wilderness. There is the yearning in the heart to “find rest” in God as we experience the wilderness of life (cf. Psalm 62:1, 5).

The preacher of Hebrews envisions a “rest” which believers can embrace and toward which they journey. It is primarily future in the sense that believers are on a journey toward the heavenly city, but it is also present in the sense that by faith we participate in the city already. It is future in the sense that we wait for fullness of God’s glory and shalom upon the earth, but it is present in the sense we enjoy God’s presence now and experience the peace of God thorough the reconciliation achieved by the suffering and exaltation of our high priest. It was experienced in Israel through Sabbath rest as well as inner peace. The preacher speaks to his hearers in the wilderness and exhorts them to persevere so as to enter God’s rest. It is a rest they can experience now by faith, but is also a hope in the promise of God for the restoration of shalom to the cosmos on that final day when Jesus comes again.

Christians have a “Sabbath rest.” Though it is not a seventh day as in Israel, we may experience a day of rest that is focused on enjoying God’s communal life and community (his people). It is the experience of living in relationship (community) with God. We have peace as we trek through the wilderness because God is with us and our champion leads us toward the joy of eternal rest. We live in hope of an eternal “Sabbath rest” because of the eternal redemption that Christ has won for us. We can endure the wilderness because Jesus leads us and because the wilderness is not eternal. One day the wilderness will pass away and the Garden of God will once again appear and we will enter God’s eternal rest.

Jesus invites us to come to him and he will give us “rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). When we come to Jesus, we experience “rest,” but when we are rebellious and disobedient – when we have a heart of disbelief – there is no “rest.”

## **Reflections and Exhortations**

This preacher wanted people to understand the divine promise of rest – whether to Israelites in the wilderness, to them, or to us – requires faith in order to become a reality.

*“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. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith (Hebrews 4:1-2).*

He has already made this point in the closing verses of the previous chapter. The sin and disobedience of the generation delivered from Egypt is what caused Yahweh to turn them back into the desert for 40 years. They were not given rest because of their unbelieving hearts. Yet, he points out, there is a promise of rest that “still stands” for us. And we must be wise enough to learn from the experience of Israel under Moses and Joshua.

And what is the “rest” we can have? Don’t think too quickly of heaven at the end of our pilgrimage, for the writer of Hebrews sees it as a present reality which both his original readers and we can experience.

As with so many things our preacher will say are mere “shadows” of some greater reality, the Canaan-rest for Israel pointed to something beyond itself. Just as the tabernacle, sacrifices, and priests of the old system pointed to a completeness and comprehensiveness that Christ himself would supply, so too with the Sabbath.

If you know anything about the religion of the Israelites, you have heard about the Sabbath. In their Promised Land, the Jews were to honor the seventh day (i.e. Saturday) as a day of Sabbath-rest to Yahweh. Business as usual was to cease. The people were to observe the divine pattern from creation week by working six days and resting on the seventh. They were to be together in families and as a worship-ping community. They were to focus on the Lord and one another, not on their animals and crops.

Just as first-century Christians saw the fulfillment of tabernacles, sacrifices, and priesthood in the work of Jesus, they saw the fulfillment of Sabbath in him. Seventh-day observance gave way to first-day assemblies for worship and exhortation observance. Saturday gave way to Sunday. It was Paul who said the legal demand of Sabbath observance ended at the cross.



He specifically wrote this: *“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new Moon celebration of a Sabbath day. These are shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however is found in Christ”* (Colossians 3:16-17).

And it is technically incorrect to call Sunday “the Christian Sabbath,” for Sabbath is Saturday and always has been. Since Pentecost Day of A.D. 30, the first day of the week (i.e., Sunday) has been the primary day of corporate worship by the church. Sunday quickly came to be called “the Lord’s Day” (cf. Revelation 1:10). It is shadow-life and legalism either to fall back to Sabbath life or to impose the Sabbath rules on the first day of the week.

## **Take a Break from Turmoil**

So what did seventh-day rest foreshadow in Christ? What did Canaan signify to those who would come later in God’s plan? What is the “rest” we are supposed to be experiencing here and now? The preacher-writer of our material does not leave us to wonder.

*“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience”* (4:8-11).

Verse 10 is the key text here: *“Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work.”* Unlike Peterson’s rendering *“at the end of the journey we’ll surely rest with God”* in *The Message*, this isn’t something that comes to Christians at the end, in heaven. Verse 3 says we have already entered it by believing in Christ. Yes, heaven is a promise of future, perfect rest for the redeemed. But the rest of this text has a “Today” dimension. It is available right now to those who turn their back on unbelief, hardness of heart, and disobedience.

Divine rest is God’s present-day gift to those who will put their full faith and trust in Jesus. Rest from turmoil, and believe in him. Cease your feverish striving. Park your ego. Banish the foolish notion that you can make things work the way they should in your personality, with your family, or in life’s uncertain ways. You’ll only frustrate yourself – and burn out. *Rest from your efforts; trust his on your behalf.*

For your salvation, don't rely on your dogmatism and good deeds. Rest. Trust Jesus.

When you are wronged, don't try to get even. Rest. Trust Jesus. When you are struggling with alcohol, don't lie and deny. Trust Jesus. When you are trapped in sexual sin, don't excuse immorality. Rest. Trust Jesus. When flesh, pride, and unbelief threaten, don't fight them in your strength. Rest. Trust Jesus.

But can it really be that easy? Just believe that Jesus will fix it? *If you're thinking that right now, you just don't get it! There will be nothing "easy" about it!*

This isn't about couch-potato rest. It is the rest that comes from relying on God's promises, trusting him for outcomes, and surrendering your will to his. God will have to take you into his spiritual hospital, put you on a surgical table, and cut you to the core of your spiritual being. You will have to submit to his laying you wide open for a heart transplant. Then you will have to rehab in the unit that completely renews your mind, reorients your behaviors, and teaches you to walk all over again – not by sight this time, but by faith.

*"For the word of God is living 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. 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 (Hebrews 4:12-13).*

Nobody can do it by herself. You're no match for Satan and his temptations. You can't stand up under the withering assault of life's burdens. You don't know enough to see what's coming up ahead. You'll fail and die in your own wilderness – unless you give up trying to do it yourself and trust in the work of Jesus on your behalf.

Jesus himself didn't do it without help. *"It is the Father,"* he said, *"living in me, who is doing his work"* (John 14:10). This is what Paul wrote: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"* (Galatians 2:20). And this is the secret for you and me: *"It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose"* (Philippians 4:13).

Now maybe you can understand why I began with a confession. I know what this preacher says is true! The only way I can live well, honor God, and rise above my petty anxieties is to trust Jesus. To know that God is God – and I'm not! My pride hates that. My unbelief that still lurks around the edges of my faith resists it. I need

to learn to “rest from myself” in order to experience and appreciate God’s Sabbath-rest that has become a reality in Jesus.

My strong-in-his-gentleness Savior comes to me and says, “Rest! Let me do it. Let me be your partner. I’ll carry the load and support you along the way.” But my arrogance insists on shouldering my own load. Fixing my own mess. Generating my own outcomes. *What stupidity!*

Then he speaks again to all of us who are beset with this problem of unbelief: “*Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light*” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Why does a weary, burdened soul volunteer to come under a yoke? What would lead anybody to think there is “rest” in that arrangement? He is the Strong One. He carried the burden of your sin to Calvary. He rescues me from the unbelief of thinking I can fix what is wrong with my life by working harder. He supports me when I stumble. And he will not stop until you are home safely with your Father, his Father.

Yes, I’m impressed that Joshua – by God’s strength – brought the Israelites into Canaan for rest. Yes, I’m intrigued that even God himself rested after six days of finished creation and required the Israelites to observe Sabbath-rest as a shadow of something yet to come. But I am absolutely in awe of the Christ who has saved us by a finished work at Golgotha – and daily carries us thorough this present wilderness by his great power at work in our weakness.

*O God, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are anxious until they find rest in you.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Philip Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. J.G. Pilkington (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 43.
2. Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 33, *Pascal*, trans. W.F. Trotter (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p. 244.

3. E.H. & F.H. *Prayers Gathered from the Writings of the Reverend Edward Bouverie Pusey* (Leopold Classic Library, 2015), p. 76.
4. Morris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, pp. 41, 42 writes: The reason the first group did not enter God's rest was "their disobedience." The word *apeitheia* "disobedience" is always used in the N.T. of disobeying God often with the thought of the gospel in mind, so it comes close to the meaning of disbelief (cf. v. 11, Romans 11:30).



**STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY****CHAPTER 6*****Hebrews 4:14-5:10*****OUR COMPASSIONATE HIGH PRIEST**

When I was growing up at the edge of the great dark cypress swamps of southeast Missouri, I entertained the fantasy belief of every little boy about his father. My daddy was the strongest man alive. My daddy was the best man in the world. My daddy was the wisest of men and knew the answer to any question my mind could frame to ask. But every little boy thinks that about his dad. Right? Then we grow up and find out . . .

It was different in my case. As I grew up, I came to realize there were men with more brute strength than my father. I met and studied under people who had more degrees and academic accomplishments than his fourth-grade schooling, and I met people who had far greater resources to do more good things that blessed people and made their lives better. But I will confess, I have never lost the sense that my dad really was the strongest, wisest, and best man I have ever known. He remains my ideal of godly manhood to this day. At my best, I'll never be half the man he was.

But do you want to know the best thing of all about Bill McDowell? *I lived in his house as a member of his family, his oldest son!* I held him in the highest regard, but I wasn't afraid of him. He was an incredibly hard-working man, but he was never too busy for me. His face would light up if I plopped down by him when he was relaxing at home. I not sure of his attention to my other two brothers or two sisters, but I know we all felt we had his heart. We never doubted it. Our relationship with him was different from anybody else's. We were his children. He loved us as he loved nobody else.

I sincerely believe that my relationship with that strong, wise, busy, good, and benevolent man has shaped my image of God immeasurably, and I got to tell my father that before he died! It has helped me understand the Creator God of the Universe is my Loving Heavenly Father who wants all his children to know that his face lights up when we seek him. It has helped me frame a vision of Jesus

Christ. My Redeemer, sovereign Lord, and Great High Priest is not distant, detached, and disinterested. He is the Son of God who was subjected to every weakness and frustration the rest of God's children experience – and who cares for, understands, and helps us in our weakness.

While Hebrews 1:4-13 has focused on the Sonship of Jesus as our faithful champion who leads us through the wilderness by his own suffering Hebrews 4:14-10:18 focuses on the high priesthood of the Son who redeems us from our sins through his suffering. Hebrews 4:14-16 is a transitional text that looks back to themes already introduced (priesthood, Sonship, suffering, temptation) but also forward to the major theme of the next section (empathetic high priest who provides grace and mercy).

Hebrews 2:17-18 heralded Jesus as a “*faithful and merciful high priest*.” Hebrews 3:1-4:13 emphasized the faithfulness of the Son. Hebrews 4:14-5:10 emphasizes the compassionate (merciful) character of the Son. Our high priest is both faithful and compassionate. He faithfully carried out his task as high priest as he suffered death for everyone, but he compassionately fulfilled his task as an empathetic priest who shared the experience of our suffering (death).

The theme that holds Hebrews 4:14-5:10 together is the compassion of Jesus as our high priest. This compassion enables perseverance as we boldly go before the throne of grace and mercy to receive help in our times of need. Just as the original hearers of this sermon needed grace and mercy in their wilderness and compassion for their weaknesses, so contemporary believers need that same grace and compassion from Jesus. This vision of Jesus as a compassionate high priest encourages us to “*hold firmly to the faith we profess*” (Hebrews 4:16) and “*approach the throne of grace with confidence*.” It encourages perseverance (endurance) and prayer. It emboldens faith with the knowledge that Jesus both cares about and is able to deal with our weaknesses because he himself has experienced those weaknesses.

### ***Exegesis of Text***

I have divided our text into three sections. The first contains the exhortation to perseverance and prayer on the basis of the high priestly function of the Son (Hebrews 4:14-16). The second describes the nature of the high priestly status (Hebrews 5:1-6). The third that applies this high priestly status to Jesus (Hebrews

5:7-10), through his high priesthood is Melchizedek rather than Levitical (Aaronic).

## 1. Hebrews 4:14-16

*“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the truth we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*

This is one of the most powerful texts in Hebrews, and one of the better-known ones. Its striking character is often lost on us because of its familiarity. The shocking nature of the assertion of the Son’s high priesthood is lost on us because it is so common for us to think in these terms. In particular, the Son of God shares our weakness! That is an incredible theological statement. If it were not so familiar to us, it would knock us off our feet. But despite its familiarity it has not stuck deeply into our hearts because we still tend to think of Jesus as the “Teflon” human – nothing sticks to him . . . he did not really hurt . . . he was not really tempted . . . he could not have sinned. Unfortunately, Jesus still remains somewhat distant and we seek substitutes for genuine empathy. Medieval Europe found more empathy in Mary than they did in Jesus!

This revolutionary theological truth is surrounded in the text by two exhortations. Hebrews 4:14 exhorts hearers to hold on to their confession of faith because we have a “great” (exalted – ascended into the heavens, sitting at the right hand of God) high priest. Hebrews 4:16 exhorts hearers to pray for help in their times of need. Thus, the preacher calls us to perseverance and prayer (boldness in prayer – “frank speech” or to speak openly). The centerpiece between the exhortations is the empathy of the Son of God with humanity as their high priest. Since we have a faithful and merciful high priest – a fellow human who was obedient through suffering (and thus faithful) and experienced our weaknesses (and thus merciful) – who has been exalted to the right hand of God believers should persevere and pray!

The central assertion is the Son of God is able to “sympathize” with our weaknesses. This was an incredible revelation in its ancient setting. Scholars have debated the exact nuance of the term “sympathize” here. Some have tended to think of it merely in terms of sympathy (to feel for others even though you may not have



experienced it yourself), but others have preferred something more along the lines of empathy (to share the same with another). The Stoics believed the primary attribute of God was *apatheia*, the inability to feel anything at all. They reasoned if he could feel, he could be controlled by others and therefore would be less than God. The Epicureans believed that God dwelled in *intermudia*, the spaces between the worlds, in complete detachment. The Jews, of course, had a far more accurate picture of God, but before Jesus came it was incomplete, for he revealed the revolutionary Fatherhood of God. The word has this range of meaning. Context must determine its meaning. I prefer empathy because it fits the context better and the word is more experiential than cognitive. It is not simply that Jesus knows about our weaknesses, but that he has experienced our weaknesses. He is empathetic because he, too, has been tempted in every way just as we have. He has shared the experience of temptation.

Jesus has shared our weaknesses in that he has been tempted in every way like we have. He has the shared experience of temptation, though without sin. Some have watered down this point by underestimating Jesus' own experience of temptation. "After all," it is thought, "he could not have experienced temptation as I have because he did not sin. If only he had been truly tempted, or experienced the exact same temptation I have, then he would have sinned . . . if he was really human." This misses the point. It is better to say that Jesus experienced temptation more deeply than we ever have. When we face temptation, we never feel its full power or pull because we give in too quickly. We say "uncle" and the temptation is over. But Jesus, who never said "uncle," experienced the full force of temptation as Satan pulled out all the stops. It is more correct to say that Jesus experienced temptation more deeply and more acutely than we ever have, and yet without sin. Jesus understands. Jesus does not just imagine how we feel – he *feels* it! (1)

He knows temptation. He knows weakness. Nevertheless, he was faithful. But with the experience, Jesus is more than "faithful." He is also compassionate; our "merciful" high priest who dispenses mercy and grace to those who cry out for help in times of need.

## 2. Hebrews 5:1-6

In order to appreciate this assertion that Jesus, the Son of God, is our faithful and merciful high priest, the preacher reminds his hearers about the Levitical high priesthood. In particular, he notes two aspects.

*First, high priests are human beings.* They share the human experience, including weaknesses. They are humans representing humans before God and to God. They represent humans authentically because they share the experience of humanity. They are humans. Consequently, they “deal gently” with sins of ignorance and weakness because they know the frailty of fallen humanity. Implied, of course, is the reality under the Mosaic covenant (and in the wilderness experience of Hebrews 3:16-19) that rebellion is not coddled but punished (cf. Numbers 15:30-31).

*Second, God calls high priests.* They are not self-appointed, but rather divinely appointed. Aaron was called as priest and began the Levitical order. The Son was also called to be a priest, just as “Jesus” or “Son” (which are normal terms up to this point). No doubt “Christ” emphasizes the “anointed” status of the Son. He is the “anointed one” – even anointed to be priest as God’s Messiah. The introduction of Aaron at this point means the preacher has now reminded his hearers of all the major figures at the beginning of the Mosaic covenant (angels, Moses and Aaron), and, at every point, the Son is superior because he is a Son.

Hebrews 5:5 recalls the language of Hebrews 1:5 (quotation of Psalm 2:7). Jesus is no mere high priest from among humanity. Rather, he is the Son of God. He is “Jesus, the Son of God” (Hebrews 4:14).

Moreover, he is not a Levitical priest. He is a priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:6; quoting Psalm 110:4 – the preacher had earlier quoted Psalm 110:1 in Hebrews 1:13). Thus, while the preacher introduces Aaron, he quickly notes how Jesus’ priesthood supersedes the Aaronic priesthood. The priesthood of Jesus is “forever” and it is from a different “order.”

However, at this point, the preacher does not belabor the superiority, as he will in Hebrews 7. Instead, he seeks to emphasize the “compassionate” or merciful character of Jesus as high priest through the shared experience of obedient suffering, even though he was a Son. He does, however, reiterate the Melchizedekian dignity of his priesthood in Hebrews 5:10 – and is ready to explain it except that his audience is not ready to hear it (Hebrews 5:11).

### 3. Hebrews 5:7-10

The empathetic Jesus offered prayers and petitions during his wilderness experience, during his days of suffering. These prayers and petitions were accompanied with loud cries and tears. This is the preacher's description of Gethsemane when the Son beseeched God to save him from death. The agony of Gethsemane was existential and subjective. It was inward. The inner person of Jesus agonized over the decision to obey the will of God.

Yet, though he was a Son, he obeyed. The text says he "*learned obedience*." He learned from what he suffered and learned through his suffering. This was a fairly common expression in Greek since "*suffering*" and "*learning*" invited a play on words due to their similar sounds. Particularly, for Jesus, the suffering under consideration here is his death. Consequently, the main point appears to be that Jesus, aided through the struggle by prayer, decided to obey the Father's will through suffering death on the cross. He decided to obey, and thus learned obedience. Obedience was not automatic; it was a decision. That decision perfected his obedience – his obedience went all the way. He completed his task and as a result he was exalted to the right hand of God as high priest. There he became our champion and the source of our salvation. He became our high priest who made atonement for sin and is now able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:17-18).

### ***Theological Summary***

Several theological themes emerge in this section, which are important for shaping our lives as the people of God.

*First*, the incarnate Son is an empathetic priest. Certainly he sympathizes with his people (he hurts when they hurt, just as we hurt when we see someone hurting), but more than that he empathizes. Empathy is about shared experience, as, for example, when two people share the experience of losing a child or a spouse. Empathy means that you have walked in another's moccasins. You have "been there, done that."

God did not look upon our suffering at a distance. Rather, God came near in Jesus. The Son learned obedience through suffering and through his humanity shared our experience and our suffering. God learned what it was like to hunger, thirst, be tempted and die. God experienced new realities through the incarnation. Of course,

God sympathized with humanity's suffering before the incarnation, and God even suffered empathetically before the incarnation as he grieved over his fallen world and experienced wounded love (his spouse left him, and his children rebelled). But in the incarnation God entered new experiences – temptation, hunger, thirst and death.

Jesus is an insider when it comes to our suffering. He was no mere sympathetic spectator. He suffered. He was tempted. He entered and shared the human experience with all its weaknesses and frailties. He knows the sting of death and the pull of temptation. He knows the hurts and pains of life in a fallen world.

This reality means Jesus is able to help us in our temptations/trials because he himself was tempted/tried (Hebrews 2:18). Our compassionate high priest understands us as an insider, not an outsider. Our high priest has shared our weaknesses, thus, we approach him with boldness because we know he is compassionate. We approach with the assurance of grace and mercy because he understands us.

*Second*, in the wilderness, prayer becomes our means of involving God in our situation. We cry out to God in the midst of our trials and hurts. We approach God in the wilderness with boldness, and we approach to receive grace and mercy. Our model is the Son himself.

The Son, who understands our weaknesses because he himself has experienced those weaknesses, knows lament within his own experience. The preacher's description of Gethsemane is vivid and striking. It reflects the agony of the experience of weakness. It involves "loud cries" and "tears" as we struggle to do the will of God and hope to be heard by God who seems sometimes so distant. The Son models lament and the struggle to obey, though he was Son, yet he learned to obey through suffering.

Just as the Son struggled through prayer, so the preacher exhorts us to go boldly to the throne of grace to receive the help we need in our own struggles. God heard his Son and answered his prayer. God's answer did not involve the avoidance of suffering and death, but the strength to endure it. In the same way, God hears our prayers and provides strength to endure it. We receive help, though it may not be the help we had desired (since we desire to avoid suffering). Rather, it is the help we need that empowers our endurance and perseverance. Jesus was heard, and so we will be heard as well.

I would not want to limit the “approach” to the throne of Grace to prayer. It certainly has liturgical and priestly overtones as well. It is the entrance into the “Holy of Holies” as we approach God liturgically as priests. It is to “draw near” (cf. Hebrews 10:22). The idea of “throne” also engenders a vision of a royal throne room that we approach to receive aid. The meshing of these images deepens the significance of this moment – priestly, royal, liturgical, and prayerful. It lifts us up to the sublime experience of divine presence.

*Third*, another key theme is submissive obedience. The Son was heard because he prayed out of a disposition of submissive obedience. The Son was perfected as the champion of our salvation because he was obedient. The Son saves those who obey.

It is significant, particularly in the light of the theme of “faithfulness” in Hebrews 3-4, which the high priest is compassionate and deals gently with those who sin ignorantly and go astray out of weakness. The high priest does not deal gently with the rebellious – they cannot enter the rest (Hebrews 3:16-19), and they are subject to severe punishment (Hebrews 2:1-4). There is a difference between sins of weakness and the sin of rebellion.

Faithfulness involves a disposition of obedience; it is submissive faith. It is a trust in God’s promises that seeks to follow Jesus as the champion of our faith. It is an obedient lifestyle. Yet, we recognized that weaknesses engender sin in our lives. Our high priest is compassionate regarding weakness and deals gently with it. An obedient lifestyle does not exclude weaknesses, but it does exclude rebellion.

The Son saves those who obey. We must not water down this term. It is about faithfulness. It is about following Jesus. Those who seek to enter the rest of God must hear the word of promise with faith, obey God and follow Jesus into the wilderness.

Our hope, however, is that just as Jesus obeyed in his wilderness experience (he was faithful), and consequently was exalted as God’s heir, so through our obedience (faithfulness) God will exalt us as fellow-heirs with his Son because the Son has pioneered a way for us.

In summary, our empathetic high priest was also a faithful priest who calls his people to faithful obedience as well. His empathy means that he compassionately deals with our weaknesses and is ready mercifully to help us when we turn to his throne of grace. We are called to perseverance and prayer because the Son himself

persevered through prayer as he decided to remain God's faithful Son in Gethsemane.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

The writer of Hebrews had an exalted view of Christ. He is superior to angels, greater than Moses, and far above Joshua. He is, after all, God's own Son who made purification for sins and is now seated at the right hand of God (1:1-3). He is a merciful and faithful high priest who made atonement for the sins of the people in service to God and has the ability to help us in our trials (2:17-18). He is the faithful Son over all God's house (3:6). He is the one alone who can give God's Sabbath-rest to those who believe in him (4:9-10).

If he is so high and holy, *can* he pay attention to our needs? Or is he like Aristotle's god who is absorbed in the perfection that is himself? If he is greater than and superior to all others, *would* he be moved by the plight of those to whom this preacher was speaking? Or is he able to look upon the frail human condition only with contempt and loathing? If we grant our high priest Jesus is *able* to help us, do we have any reason to think he is *disposed* to do so?

This preacher affirmed that the high-priestly ministry of Jesus was being performed with great compassion toward and with full understanding of the human condition. He believed that Christ's sympathy for us grows out of his experience in the Incarnation. So, to people who needed to be encouraged to hold on when they in fact felt like giving up, he gave a strong encouragement for them to hold fast to their Christian commitment and to know they would not be abandoned to or destroyed by their suffering. The temptation to turn back from one's commitments in the face of severe stress – even persecution – is something Jesus understands.

The Almighty God who is at the center of the cosmos wants us to “*approach the throne of grace*” where he is enthroned “*with confidence*.” Oh, how we would like to believe this! The One on the throne surely has the power to help us! Like Isaiah of old, we know we are unclean people with unclean lips (Isaiah 6:1ff). How dare we move in the direction of that holy space? How dare we dream of “storming the gates of heaven” with our pleas and prayers? Indeed. That is why the Lord created the intermediary role of high priest in Israel. On the annual Day of Atonement, he would go through the veil into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of sacrifice on the mercy seat. Once the blood was in place, mercy (i.e., sparing the

people from the punishment they deserved) could be extended. More than that, on the merits of sacrificial blood, grace (i.e., showering the people with blessings they could never deserve) could flow from the throne. It took a consecrated high priest with consecrated blood in hand to make these things possible.

The high priest of the Old Testament is impressive. The magnificent priestly garments prescribed in Exodus 28 for Aaron and all succeeding high priests endowed the position with immense dignity and spiritual significance. The high priest first donned a linen tunic as the foundation of his priestly vestments. Over this was placed a robe of blue. Attached to the robe's hem were pomegranates artistically woven from blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and placed intermittently between small golden bells that rang musically with his every movement. A richly woven multicolored sash held the robe in place.

Next, an apron-like ephod, woven of gold threads, finely twisted linen, and blue, purple, and scarlet yarns, was worn over the robe – a priestly apron. The shoulder-pieces of the ephod each bore a large onyx stone, set in gold filigree. The names of the twelve tribes were engraved on the stones, six on one stone and six on the other, in order of birth.

Then, fastened to the front of the ephod by golden chains, was the breastplate – a nine-inch-square tapestry of gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and linen that bore four rows of three stones – first, ruby, topaz, beryl; second, turquoise, sapphire, emerald; third, jacinth, agate, amethyst; fourth, chrysolite, onyx, jasper – twelve great stones each engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes – all twelve next to the priest's heart along with the mysterious Urim and Thummim.

Lastly, the priest was crowned with a turban of fine linen, bearing a plate of pure gold with the Hebrew inscription “Holy to the Lord” (Exodus 28:36).

What a sight the high priest must have been in the bright sunlight of Palestine as he approached the tabernacle – white linen, blue robe – the gold on his turban and chains and in the fabrics he wore, gleaming yellow in the sun – the gems on his shoulders and over his heart lit to their full colors – golden bells ringing musically with each step!

Even more, there was the profound spiritual significance of his vestments. He bore the weight of Israel on his shoulders and over his heart. The bells, says Exodus, were worn so that “*its sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the Lord, and when he comes out, so that he does not die*” (Exodus 28:35),

for there he was to be perpetually ministering. And, of course, the gold-etched “Holy to the Lord” was the summary of the High Priest’s great task.

The role of the high priest in the Old Testament is also impressive. In his special robes he intercedes with Yahweh on behalf of the nation. He functions with great ceremony and solemnity. The sight of the high priest on a holy day when you were feeling anything but holy could be daunting – unless you saw beneath the robe and ceremony a neighbor, a real human being like yourself, a friend, a kinsman.

That’s why I began by telling you about my father. Impressive and daunting as he was he didn’t scare me – for he was my father. It would have grieved him to think my childhood awe and respect for him made me see him as “too busy for me” or “too caught up in important things to care about my little stuff.” Every loving father feels that way about his children.

So we can be sure God wants us to come to his throne or grace. He is our Father! And by the good offices of his one perfect Son, our prayers will be made effective and powerful. As our high priest, Jesus has carried blood – not that of a sacrificial animal but his very own – to the mercy seat. He has presented himself to the very presence of God on our behalf to plead our case. He understands our case because he has lived our weaknesses and experienced the same trials and temptations we face. Our high priest is a real human being, our friend, our kinsman – yet without sin.

“Ah, but it is that ‘without sin’ business that bothers me,” someone says. “If he never yielded to sin, he doesn’t know how horrible sin *really* is. It is only when you sin and feel the despair, forsakenness, and anguish of what you have done that the real weight of guilt comes crashing on you!”

But, no. No! The power of Jesus to resist temptation means that Satan assaulted him with a ferocity you and I have never felt. When we yield, the pressure relents. For Jesus, the very endurance of temptation at the decibel-level it would have had in assaulting him would have involved suffering of a magnitude we cannot even imagine.

Then, in his experience on the cross, the one who had endured and resisted such terrible pressure nevertheless had the full weight of sin’s despair, forsakenness, and anguish focused on him in laser-beam fashion. The one Perfect Son of God who was utterly without sin was treated as if he were the very embodiment of sin (cf: 2 Corinthians 5:21). He tasted of hell that day and was subjected to a greater



terror and sense of loss than sin has ever brought one of us. He literally cried aloud, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!”* (Matthew 27:46).

## **The Credentials of our High Priest**

One cannot take the role of high priest to himself, it must be conferred. So the writer of Hebrews moves quickly to make it clear that the One seated on the throne has himself credentialed and ordained Jesus to his unique priesthood. When he ascended “through the heavens” after his bodily resurrection, he was paving the way for us. He was not only opening heaven’s door but was being declared in his very person. Hebrews 1:4-13 has focused on the Sonship of Jesus as our faithful champion who leads us through the wilderness by his own suffering (cf. John 14:6). Because this is so, we do not have to face down Satan ourselves. We simply *“hold firmly to the faith we profess”* in the Christ who has already defeated him for our sake.

Just as Aaron was selected and called to his role as Israel’s first high priest, so Jesus was selected and called to his high-priestly function. Yet, just as Jesus is greater than angels, Moses, and Joshua, he is also a greater high priest than Aaron. His priesthood is *“in the order of Melchizedek”* – a phrase that occurs no less than five times in Hebrews and so must be important. It is such an important fact that our preacher will treat the issue at some length later. For now, he simply tantalizes his readers-hearers by dropping the mysterious name. For now, he only hints at the “forever” significance to Christ’s high priesthood in this special order.

## **So Why the Distress?**

If God does know and care, why is life so hard? If the throne of mercy is open to us, why do so many of our prayers go unanswered? If Christ is our high priest, why aren’t our petitions getting through? If he really is sympathetic, why do the pressures of temptation and persecution still come against believers?

These are real rather than hypothetical questions for Christians in every generation. Somebody needs to make sense of this sort of thing for us! The preacher does just that by reminding us of Jesus’ own experiences when he was enfleshed among us.

In his physical limitations and with his human fears, Jesus *“offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.”*

Most scholars agree the reference here is to the Gethsemane ordeal. Jesus knew what lay ahead for him the next day. As he anticipated having what I we have called the “*full weight of sin*” come crushing down on him, he shuddered. As he anticipated the separation from his Beloved Father, he cringed! (Although some scholars debate whether Jesus could have *really* pulled back from his purpose at this late date, why question it? if pulling back was impossible, the tears and pleas were *mock*-tears and *pretend*-pleas. If here and elsewhere his temptations did not entail the authentic possibility of yielding, then it is simply false to say “*we have the one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.*”)

But doesn't the text say that Jesus “*was heard*” when he prayed those pitiful prayers? Yes, it does. *But he died the very next day! So why in the world would our preacher say God “heard” his petitions?*

God could have saved Jesus from death by either of two ways that occur to my mind: (1) *by sparing him the experience of death* on a Roman cross the next day or (2) *by saving him from bondage to death* as his everlasting fate. Jesus was certainly aware of these two possibilities for answering his prayer – and was praying, I think, for the former rather than the latter on that horrible night, but he ended his three times of intense prayer – so intense that sweat poured off his body as though he were bleeding – with reverent submission. By saying “*Not my will but yours be done,*” he was essentially committing to obey the Father even if his obedience meant still more anguish and suffering. And it did! Gethsemane gave way to Calvary.

If we go back to Hebrews 2:14-18 for a moment, the same thing has already been said in slightly different words. In his oneness with God's creatures who have flesh and blood, he faced the devil's ultimate threat to human beings – the fear of death. Like us, he trembled. Like us, he cried out for relief. Unlike some of us, however, he knew that the death of the body was reversible. He knew his Father could raise him from the dead and restore his life.

It seems to be that it wasn't really the fear of physical death that haunted Jesus in Gethsemane. He knew that flesh-and-blood is inferior to immortality in the Moses-and-Elijah-like glory that was seen on the Mount of Transfiguration. It was the anticipation of being separated from the fellowship of the Father that made him wince at the cross. He knew full well that “*Not my will but yours be done*” entailed the payment of the second-death penalty for sin that would bring anguish to his soul beyond anything that could be done to his fleshly body (Cf. Matthew 10:28).

God “heard” the cries of Jesus – both from Gethsemane’s garden and from Golgotha’s tree – and delivered him from the stranglehold of death. By raising his body from the tomb on Sunday morning, heaven signaled the human race need never again live as captives “*held in slavery by their fear of death.*”

Jesus learned obedience by trusting the Father to see him through that ordeal. His reverent submission perfected him for his role as trail-blazer and trail-paver for us. In his perfection, he has become the source of eternal salvation for all who ever follow him on the obedient path of reverent submission. Whether our preacher-writer and his hearers-readers in the first century or you and me, here is the offer: *Follow Jesus with the same reverent submission he showed the Father, and you will experience the same outcome.* Just as his faithful obedience under trial was part of the process that perfected him within God’s greater plan, so is our faithful obedience under trial part of the process of purification and refinement of our faith.

There is a critical distinction that needs to be made here. Torture and death for Jesus was *never* the will of his Father. His will was our salvation, and the only route to that end required Calvary as its means. We can also say that insecurity, illness, or persecution for faith is *never* the will of the Father for us. His will is our salvation from an environment that has been cursed by sin and redemption from our own personal experiences of sin. But the only route to that end requires obedience – obedience that sometimes promises only further pain of greater persecution – as its means.

This is a hard truth of the Christian religion. We would much prefer to pray from our fallen, selfish natures for things that will bring immediate pleasure, immediate relief from struggle (cf. James. 4:3). But we have committed to live for the long-term above the short-term, for spiritual above carnal, for the sake of fellowship with our Holy God who lies in unapproachable light above acceptance by those who are still captive to Satan and are living in darkness.

“*Because [Jesus] himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*” (Hebrews 2:18). So why would the preacher’s first-century hearers try to face their temptations in their own human strength? With their Melchizedekan high priest identified, ordained, and forever at their disposal, why would they struggle with their personal stresses or external tormentors without his aid? He was able to help them!

Before we get too critical of our first-century brothers and sisters, perhaps we should look at ourselves very carefully. Why would we try to face *our* temptations

in *our* limited human strength? I am grateful for physicians, lawyers, therapists, and teachers. I am especially grateful for them when they are compassionate and sensitive Christians. They can often fulfill the biblical duty of helping bear another's burdens (c. Galatians 6:2). These offices and functions – even when performed by the godliest of persons – must never be the alternative to strength, guidance, and compassion from the Great High Priest of our profession. They are not enough. They fail devastatingly short of the aid Christ can give and is eager to provide.

Christians are the only ones with a Great High Priest who sympathizes because he has been where we are. On the strength of his intercession and by the power of his blood, we go to the throne of mercy with boldness. We go with the knowledge in advance that we will be heard. Whether we are spared the trial altogether, rescued from its clutches when it is about to snuff out our physical lives, or raised from the dead in triumph over it, we have his promise that nothing can destroy us.

So let us hold firmly to the faith we have professed. After all, we are not homeless paupers seeking a loan at the bank. We are not bankrupt folk trying to buy a car. We are not supplicants applying for documents through a corrupt bureaucracy. And if everyone else sees us as bewildered souls in a King's Palace who need a Prime Minister or High Priest to get us a hearing at the throne, we know better. We are beloved-but-beleaguered children in our Father's house – with our Big Brother carrying us to him in his powerful, loving arms.

## ENDNOTES

1. Alexander McLaren, *Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), p. 305. See pp. 303-8 for an excellent discussion of faith as belief plus trust.



## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 7

#### ***Hebrews 5:11-6:20***

#### **WE ARE AT RISK!**

Let me back up for a moment. The watershed text of Hebrews was presented in Hebrews 5:8-10. Here are the words: “*Although [Jesus] was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be a high priest in the order of Melchizedek.*”

I think everything prior to those three verses which had claimed superiority for Jesus over angels, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron was a mere prelude to the great Christological confession of the perfection, saving power, and eternal high priest of the Lord Jesus Christ. The remainder of this sermon-epistle pulsates from this text in this chapter. Specifically, discouraged and weak believers were exhorted to take heart from their leader. Just as he was perfected through suffering, so would they have to follow his lead. They should not be surprised at stress, opposition, or persecution. To the contrary, they should expect it.

The “gospel of health and wealth” that so many people hear from Christian pulpits and televangelists today is foreign to the life of Jesus himself. The prophets of old would level a shotgun blast against the self-centered materialism that wants to substitute human success stories for the gospel.

The original recipients/hearers of this message were in a situation of challenge that put them at risk for their faithfulness to Jesus. The danger of falling away from him is made clear – against a background of confidence in the readers/hearers of this exhortation.

#### ***Exegesis of Text***

I have divided this section into four parts. The preacher identifies the problem (5:11-14), and then exhorts his hearers to move beyond the milk of the Word as he calls them to maturity (6:1-3). He follows this exhortation with a warning and an

encouraging word about how he expects they will grow (6:4-12). Lastly, the preacher recalls the ground of this confidence and the foundation for growth – it is the faithfulness of God (6:13-20).

## 1. Hebrews 5:11-14

As the preacher is about to compare Christ's ministry with Melchizedek's, he remembers that many of his hearers have not grown enough spiritually to grasp his explanation. Thus in verse 11 he turns aside to issue a warning to the spiritually immature, saying, "*We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.*" The NASB translates it "*dull of hearing.*"

This is a powerful indictment, especially when we see the form of the language. The word "*dull*" is only used here in the New Testament and means "sluggish" or "lethargic" (cf. Septuagint of Proverbs 22:29 and the apocryphal Sirach 4:29; 11:2). Literally, the phrase reads, "*you have become sluggish in the ears.*" Therefore we understand the problem was an *acquired* condition characterized by an inability to listen to spiritual truth. They were not naturally "dull," they were not intellectually deficient, but they had become spiritually lazy. They listened with the attentiveness of a slug. They had become unreceptive and closed. To such people it is "hard to explain" the deep, needful doctrines of the faith.

The Puritan Richard Baxter, in his "Direction for Profitably Hearing the Word Preached," gives advice for all Christians:

"Make it your work with diligence to apply the word as you are hearing it ... Cast not all upon the minister, as those that will go no further than they are carried as by force ... You have work to do as well as the preacher, and should all the time be as busy as he ... you must open your mouths, and digest it, for another cannot digest it for you ... therefore be all the while at work, and abhor an idle heart in hearing, as well as an idle minister." (1)

As we hear God's Word, we ought to keep our Bible open and follow the textual argument, look up the references mentioned, take notes, identify the theme, list the subpoints and applications, and ask God to help us see exactly where he wants us to apply the Scriptures being preached. Are we "sluggish in the ears"? If so, we are self-condemned to perpetual infancy.

The preacher's audience was spiritually immature. They were still babes who needed milk rather than adults who consumed solid food (5:12). The roots of this

problem are two-fold. First, he complains that these Christians had “*become dull of hearing*” (5:11). Instead of progressing in their faith, they had regressed. They had declined in health rather than growing into maturity. Their “dullness” reflects a mental or intellectual obtuseness that renders the slow, lazy, or sluggish. The preacher’s inability to explain the ground of their faith adequately was not due to the difficulty of the material or the ineptitude of the instructor. Rather, it is the result of their spiritual laziness that prefers milk to meat.

The second problem is the improper use of time. The preacher thinks that sufficient time has passed that they “ought” to have become teachers (5:12). This “oughtness” here implies normality, that is, this is what should have been expected of everyone who grows in Christ. Yet, because of their regression, not only are they not teachers, but they have a need to be re-taught themselves. They had regressed. They had so misused their time they needed to be re-taught the elementary principles. Here the author is most graphic because the Greek translated “*the basic principles*” actually means something like, “the ABC’s of the beginning words of God.” <sup>(2)</sup> These disciples needed to relearn their Christian ABCs.

At first the Hebrew believers had listened attentively to the main things and had learned them, at least as well as things are learned initially. It was real learning. However, it is sometimes well said, “use it or lose it” – and some had lost it. Recently, my memory fails me where, I heard a comedian bring the point home regarding our universal ability to forget what we have learned as he announced he was forming “The Five Minute University” where one could learn in five minutes all one will remember five years after graduating from college!

Humor aside, there was an important spiritual principle at work among the lazy minds of the Hebrew church, which is: *truth heard but not internalized and maintained will be lost to the hearer*. Jesus said regarding truth:

*“For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away ... Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them”* (Matthew 13:14, 15).



We must ask ourselves some frank questions: Do I know the elementary truths well enough to help others? Am I hard to teach because I have become “sluggish in the ears”? Am I a growing, learning Christian?

It is important to note the contrast between teachers and those who are in need of teaching. This is the preacher’s “theory of education”; milk belongs to babes, but solid food belongs to the mature (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:2). Milk is the only food for an infant without teeth. The point is clear: those who still need milk have not grown into maturity. Some in the tiny storm-tossed church should have become teachers (not necessarily preachers as such, but able to instruct others in the faith due the progress of their own faith), but they had tragically failed. They were losing their own grip on the truth to boot!

The result of this condition means they are unskilled to or “not accustomed to” the word of righteousness (5:13). The Greek term can have the sense of “inexperienced in” or “unacquainted with.” The “word of righteousness” is unknown to them. It is unfamiliar territory. This is the heartbeat of the reader’s problem because, in the context of Hebrews (note the “concerning him” in verse 1), the content of this “word of righteousness” refers to Christ’s priestly work. People who are ready for “solid food” are people “*skilled in the word of God’s justice*” (verse 13) people who have had their spiritual, intellectual, and emotional faculties trained by experience and practice to tell good from evil (verse 14). The word for “justice” is a tricky one wherever we meet it in the New Testament; it is often translated “righteousness,” but that gives people the impression it’s all about behaving yourself in a rather self-consciously religious fashion, which certainly isn’t what Hebrews (or other early Christians) had in mind. “Justice” doesn’t catch the full flavor, either, but at least it makes the point that the purposes of God in the gospel are focused on God’s longing to put the world to rights, and to put people to rights as part of that work. What the writer longs for is that people should become proficient in understanding and using the entire message of God’s healing, restoring, saving justice. He wants them to know their way around the whole message of scripture and of the gospel, to be able to handle this message in relation to their own lives, their communities and the wider world, and to see how all the different parts of God’s revelation fit together, apply to different situations and have the power to transform lives and situations.

It isn’t so much that the writer has as his principal aim a desire to get them to change their behavior. That is nowhere suggested in the letter. Rather, he is

highlighting this sign of maturity as a way of reminding them there is such a thing as maturity, that they should be seeking it, and that mature people normally need, and indeed prefer, solid food rather than a purely liquid diet. The message for us should be clear. If we find ourselves wanting to turn away from the challenge to think harder about our faith, we should ask ourselves whether we are really prepared to settle for permanent spiritual babyhood.

This is the basis of our boldness before God. Without this boldness there is no capacity to endure since it is being “*skilled in the word of God’s justice*” that provides steadfastness and assurance. It is this “*word of righteousness*” which the preacher cannot explain effectively because they are “dull of hearing” (5:11).

The apprehension of this “word” belongs to the mature, or those of full age (5:14). It is solid food. This is the goal of the Christian believer: maturation in the faith. Then term for “mature” is a common Greek term, which refers to perfection, completion or maturity. It is not ethical perfectionism. Rather, the mature Christian is the disciplined and instructed believer. The mature are those “who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” This is athletic terminology. Constant practice and training athletes are able to accomplish their goals. The believer, however, does not emphasize the training of the body, but of the “senses.” This Greek noun is a technical philosophical term for the faculty of perception, that is, the ability to make moral decisions. A well-trained moral sense, then, is able “*to discern good and evil*” (5:14). We derive our English term diacritical from the verb “discern” (as in “diacritical” markings). It means to judge thoroughly, discriminate, and differentiate or to divide between. The practice of moral discrimination is a sign of maturity.

The preacher’s theory of Christian development is clear. Infants need to be taught the elementary principles of the gospel (milk), and the mature need to be taught the word of righteousness (the priestly work of Christ). The following chart illustrates this “theory”: The text contains a series of contrasts.

### CONTRASTS

“First Principles”	“Word of Righteousness”
Infants	Adults (mature)
Milk	Solid Food
Those to Be Taught	Those who Teach

These contrasts are important. The preacher will not rebuild the foundation they should already have (i.e., the first principles, 6:1-3). Rather, he is going to proceed with his topic (i.e., the word of righteousness, 7:1-10:18). This will push the disciples on to maturity or perfection (6:1).

However, if one is to increasingly feed on the solid Word, there must be more than doctrinal understanding of righteousness – there must also be practical righteous living. These two together, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, enable one to feed more and more on the solid Word of God.

It respect to this truth, it is noteworthy that St. Augustine, the towering intellect of the early church, understood the knowledge of the deep mysteries of God's Word came not just through the mind but also through holy living. At one point in his essay on the Trinity, Augustine suggests a remedial program for those who struggle with the doctrine of the Incarnation. They will gain understanding of the mystery, he says, by purging their minds, abstaining from sin, doing good works, and engaging in passionate prayer (*De Trinitate* 4:21, 31). <sup>(4)</sup>

## 2. Hebrews 6:1-3

The preacher exhorts them to grow into the maturity of Christ (*“let us press on to maturity ...”*). The term *“maturity”* in 6:1 is from the same root as the word for *“mature”* in 5:14. Literally the text reads, *“let us be carried forward to maturity.”* The passivity of the verb indicates that it is God who will ultimately grant maturity if we will yield ourselves to his influence and teaching. Maturity is only reached as God carries us there. Of course this does not mean that we lack responsibility for failure. If we fail to grow it is our fault because God is willing to carry us. We are able, by the misuse of time and dullness of hearing, to thwart God's gracious aid and help.

While maturity is the goal, the *“elementary truths of God's word”* is the foundation. The preacher encourages them to *“leave it behind”* only in the sense of placing it under themselves. He is not encouraging them to forsake it. On the contrary, the *“elementary”* or *“beginning”* (5:12) teaching of Christ is the foundation for growth in Christ. This beginning word (the Greek noun is literally *“word”* in 6:1) is contrasted with the meaty word of righteousness in 5:13. The former is the mode of initial conversion (milk), and the other is the means of progressive sanctification and growth in Christ. This fundamental teaching is not a

reference to the Mosaic system, as some would argue, but a reference to that beginning word which forms the basis or foundation of Christianity. They are teachings “about” or “of” Christ. Consequently, they are Christian teachings, not Jewish.

The writer of Hebrews is working his way round to saying, “If you’re prepared to grow up to maturity, here’s some strong meat for you to get your teeth into!” As he prepares them for further teaching, he issues a stern warning about the impossibility of giving people a second start in Christian faith if they turn around the first time and trample on it. His main point is that when you’ve learned the ABCs of the Christian faith you must go on from there. You can’t go backwards, any more than you can set off on a bicycle and then, a minute later, cycle backwards to where you began and start off again. If you try to do that, you’ll fall off, which is more or less what verse 6 says.

The beginning word which belongs to Christ consists in six particulars, which are listed in 6:1b-2. Before discussing each of these, it is significant that the preacher considers these six items as the foundation of Christian experience. The preacher is not going to take the time to re-teach them about the first, beginning or basic principles of their conversion. On the contrary, he wants to build on that foundation instead of re-laying it. These five items, then, belong to the context of Christian initiation or the initial conversion experience. As support for this view, it is striking that the list of items lacks any reference to sanctification and growth.

First though, take a closer look in verses 4 and 5 at how he describes Christian beginnings and basic Christian teaching.

- (1) First, you are “enlightened.” You came to “see the light” with your mind’s eye, to recognize about God, the world, yourself, and your neighbor.
- (2) You “taste the heavenly gift.” You begin to experience the new kind of life and love which reaches out and embraces you, and you realize that this life and love come from heaven, from God himself.
- (3) You have a share in the Holy Spirit. This is a more personal way of speaking about how the one God comes to the individual and community, revealing truth, assuring us of love, awakening hope.
- (4) You “taste the good word of God.” You experience the Bible, and the message about Jesus, like a long cool drink on a hot day, or like solid food when you didn’t realize how hungry you were.

- (5) You also taste “the powers of the coming age.” The new creation which God will one day accomplish has already begun in Jesus, and a sense of newness steals over you, making you long both the new world will come to birth very soon and you will be made ready for it.

He assumes that, though they are only babies, needing milk not solid food, they would recognize all these. If, today, we don’t regard them as foundational for our Christian experience, what’s gone wrong?

Similar questions arise when we look at his description of four particulars of the Christian ABCs, the rudimentary teachings which he shouldn’t have to repeat. Here they are in verses 1 and 2.

- (1) **Repentance from dead works.** This refers both to the religious practices of paganism (the worship of idols and all that it involves) and the behavior characteristic of pagan society. In Hebrews, the phrase also hints at the continuation of the Jewish Temple rituals, which have become redundant with the achievement of Jesus.
- (2) **Faith towards God.** This is spelled out more fully in 11:1 and 11:6. It means, of course, belief and trust in the one true God as opposed to idols.
- (3) **Teaching about baptisms and laying on of hands.** This double action was from the earliest times, associated with admission into the Christian community. Jesus’ movement began with John’s baptism, and from the earliest days of the church new converts received baptism, followed by the laying on of hands, as a sign and means of their sharing in the new common life of the Christian family.
- (4) **The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment** (or perhaps we should translate it “the judgment of the coming age”). Again, from earliest times Christians were quite clear there would come a time when God would judge the whole world and usher in the age to come. No vague hope for “a better by and by”; no sense that, after death, one’s behavior in the present life won’t seem to matter so much. Rather, a very specific hope, solidly rooted in long-standing Jewish tradition and given fresh focus and impetus by Jesus’ own resurrection.

These are “the basics”! Surprised? The original early Christian ABCs? Most of our congregations don’t know much about them! Many in our churches today couldn’t tell you much about them! I fear there are many churches, as well as individual Christians, that need to go back to primary school. It’s not, I think, they’ve learned

the alphabet long ago and forgotten it. No: they haven't learned it in the first place. They are getting the spiritual equivalent of grunts and hand signals.

These items, then, form the foundation of the Christian conversion experience. Faith and repentance involve an understanding of baptism, the blessing of salvation, resurrection from the dead and eternal judgment. These points are the foundation for maturity. They are the starting-point of the Christian life. From this basis, the writer encourages his readers grow (6:3): "*and this we shall do, if God permits.*" The antecedent of the verb "do" is "*go on to maturity*" in 6:1. If God wills or permits (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:7), the preacher expects his readers to grow into mature disciples. There are, however, some who cannot progress because they have fallen away (6:4-8). But the preacher encourages his readers to progress in the faith rather than continue their regression and backsliding which leads to apostasy (6:9-12).

### **3. Hebrews 6:4-12**

Though the preacher is disappointed with their present state of spiritual maturity, he has not given up on them. He retains the hope and expectation they will press forward in their maturing process. He says he is *not* going to go back over all this ground again; rather, he wants to go deeper, to teach them more developed and wide-ranging truths. *Hebrews 6:4-8 suggests that if they do not reverse their downward spiral, they will fall into an apostate condition.* It is possible, the preacher testifies that as infants in Christ you could fall away from the one who redeemed you from your sins. It is possible that you could crucify the Son of God again. If your Christian life yields thorns and thistles rather than fruitful vegetation, it is a worthless and cursed life. However though this is a possibility, the preacher does not expect it concerning these Christians. Tactfully, the preacher does not leave his readers with a negative exhortation. On the contrary, he reassures them of his positive attitude toward them and their possibilities of faith.

### **4. Hebrews 6:13-20**

Growth and assurance have an interestingly reciprocal relationship. The more we grow in Christ the more assured we are. The more assured we are, the more we grow. It is because of this reciprocal relationship that the preacher now explains

the nature of hope as the basis upon which he encourages his readers to be diligent in their growth. Confident in hope, they will be diligent in their service to the Lord.

The nature of hope is illustrated by the example of Abraham. God had sworn to Abraham that he would multiply his seed beyond the number of stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. Abraham never saw the fulfillment of that promise, but he did obtain the promise (6:15). In what sense did Abraham receive the fulfillment of the promise? In one sense, he received it in the person of Isaac. He had patiently waited for the birth of his promised son, and it was through him that God would multiply Abraham's seed. In effect, then, when Isaac was born, he had received the promise because the presence of Isaac assured him of the future fulfillment of the promise itself. The future blessings were so sure that it was as if he already possessed them in Isaac.

The certainty of this promise rested upon two immutable factors. First, God had sworn by his own nature. As the preacher acknowledges in 6:17, when people make a promise they guarantee it by swearing their faithfulness by something greater than themselves. When God wants to show his reliability, he cannot swear by anything greater than himself, and consequently he swears by his own nature. God has "*interposed with an oath*" his promises (6:7). God has sworn to a thing, and he cannot change his oath.

Second, God has an immutable counsel. The Greek term for "counsel" refers to a legal contract that is incapable of reversal or annulment. As if the word itself were enough to convey the certainty of his promise, the preacher adds the word "immutable" (unchangeable). It is part of God's nature that when he decides to make a promise, or to make a covenant, he cannot reverse himself. God will keep his promises. Since it is impossible for God to lie, the believer can be certain of his hope as if he already possessed the thing for which he hopes.

The knowledge of God's oath and counsel is a strong confirmation of our hope. Hope, in the context of trial and persecution, has become a refuge for these early Christians. They "*fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us*" (6:18). Hope is our aide and comfort that we seize. The phrase "*laying hold of*" translates a word that means to take into one's own possession, to seize or, in the legal contexts, to arrest. This hope is set before us as the finish line is set before the participants in a race. It is the prize of victory. While we may not now actually possess that for which we hope, we have the certain expectation of receiving it. Hope, therefore, is not wishful thinking. It is an anchor for the soul. This confidence,

however, is based upon understanding Jesus, as our High Priest, has already entered heaven for us. As surely as Jesus continues his priestly work for us in heaven, so we are certain that one day we will return and join us unto himself. Our hope, then, presupposes that we understand Christ's work for us. He has preceded us only to insure our ultimate entrance into the presence of God with him.

### ***Theological Summary***

All Christians are at different stages of growth and development. There are newborn babes who need milk. There are others who have reached different levels of maturity who need meat. In either case, all believers need to pursue the goal of maturity (6:1), and bear with others who have not yet reached their own level of maturity. It is only within this maturing process that a Christian can become confident and assured about his hope and salvation. It is not a matter of becoming more saved now than one was before, but it is a growth in one's faith, hope, and understanding. One is no more saved today than they were yesterday. Yet, there is a process of maturation which is able to grasp the assurance of faith better today than it did yesterday. It is this assurance and boldness that grounds the faith of believers against the social and theological pressures which often engulf them. This maturing process can only occur, however, in the context of eating meat. Thus, the preacher is about to offer some meat to his audience (7:1-10:19).

The substance of this text is about spiritual growth and maturity. The mature Christian eats solid food, is able to discern between good and evil, and bears fruit in service to the Lord. The immature Christian only drinks milk, is unable to discern good and evil, and is fruitless in their ministry before the Lord. The mature Christian grows in confidence and assurance, but the immature Christian – especially one with a long history in the Christian community – is weak and uncertain.

The call to move on toward maturity is grounded in the faithfulness of God. It is grounded in God's own oath, and this oath has been sworn in his Son as our high priest. The word the preacher's audience needs to hear – the priestly work of Christ – is what will ground their assurance and future growth. Unfortunately, they are not ready to hear it because of their immaturity. Nevertheless, it is this "meat" or "solid food" which will bear the fruit of maturity if they will hear it.



God will move his community forward if that community will hear his Word and trust his grace. The community will bear the fruit of the “things that accompany salvation” as the redeemed community perseveres in faith and lives out that faith.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

I am reminded of some quotes I saw published some time back from comment cards turned in from hikers in the Teton National Forest of Wyoming. Remember now: This is a “wilderness” area. You would presume rough terrain, right? You would presume difficult hiking, right? Here’s what people wrote:

“Too many rocks in the mountains.”

“Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.”

“Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.”

“Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.”

“Chair-lifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.”

That last one sounds like some of us Christians whining to God about our spiritual growth! *God, we want you to get us to the mountain peaks without expecting us to climb – or sweat!* If there is a recurring reality in the life of the early church, it is not that life suddenly becomes free of pain and suffering upon accepting Christ. Rather, the expectation is his followers will share in his suffering.

In the ancient world there was a common saying: “To suffer is to learn.” Obviously the proverb can be reversed: “To learn is to suffer.” How do we get our heads around this concept? Maybe we need to post around our churches what is posted in many gyms: No pain, no gain! Even so, we may need to qualify even that. Pain doesn’t guarantee gain. It only gives the opportunity for it.

Pain is sometimes enough to make people quit. Give up. Indict God for his cruelty. Or to curse him. I can admire Job without wanting to live his experience of economic reversal, the death of his children, and excruciating physical suffering! Far be it from any one of us to be too arrogant in telling in advance how he or she should handle one or more of these awful blows. And far be it from us to be too quick to judge or censure someone whose knees buckle under pressure.

Our preacher knew this was a difficult lesson to grasp. So, in the first section of this text, he says:

*“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 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! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14).*

Our preacher becomes a scolding parent at this point, attempting to shame his audience into a better performance. Every parent must decide when to move his child from milk to solid food. Infants who have no teeth are not able to digest solid food, and therefore draw their strength from milk alone. However, there comes a point in the life of newborns when they must be fed with solid food in order to remain healthy. An adult cannot live on milk alone, and the child who receives only milk will never become an adult.

New converts are infants in Christ, and they need milk since they are incapable of digesting meat. However, there comes a time when each child of God is expected to become an adult. As adults they are expected to digest the meat of the word. This does not mean they no longer need the milk, but rather they must build on the foundation of the milk with meat. Apparently, these believers had failed to grow as is expected, and this is what the preacher rebukes. They are Christians who had embraced the faith, but who had remained immature in their understanding of it. Consequently, they were on the verge of losing what faith they already had.

It’s not unlike the coach whose players have just had a miserable first half and he wants to shake them out of their lethargy by telling them a grade school team could play better than that. The Hebrew writer’s concern is they should have become such a supportive community of faith they didn’t need him to tell them how to deal with their circumstances. They should be teaching one another at this point, but they still required teaching from the outside. They should be mature, complete in their spiritual support of one another, not still-nursing children. Their constancy with God and his Word mean constancy in their commitments rather than the wavering and doubt they are experiencing.

So here comes the challenge:

*“Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so” (Hebrews 6:1-3 NASB)*

Rather than wait for an escalator to take you to the high peaks of faith, start climbing. Instead of griping about the lack of a chair lift, imitate Jesus your leader. Instead of staying as an infant on milk for your entire Christian life, grow up – by chewing on solid food and exercising your spiritual muscles in Spirit-led discernment.

It is far too simplistic to say this is a challenge for Christians to advance beyond reading the Four Gospels and Acts so we are finally reading Hebrews, Romans, and Revelation. That isn’t what our teacher means by distinguishing “milk” from “meat.” We “leave the elementary teachings about Christ” only in the sense that we move beyond those initial doctrines about repentance and faith that called us to baptismal commitment and laying-on-of-hands blessing and commissioning to shoulder our burdens, bear the heat of the day, and hold firmly to our profession of faith in the face of whatever trials come to us. We have, in fact, been taught that we will someday be raised from the dead and rewarded for whatever sufferings we have had to endure at the final Great Day.

I think it is particularly interesting that our preacher does not entertain for a moment the idea this is a lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps philosophy. It has nothing to do with works righteousness or being worthy of salvation. It is simply following the normal and expected course of walking in the footstep of Jesus – and being perfected or matured in the process. The English reading is a bit misleading here, as we noted earlier. “*Let us go on to maturity*” is more literally “let us be *carried* to maturity.” In other words, creating Christlike character in a disciple is less our willpower than his Spirit-empowerment, less our strength than his, and less our accomplishment than his gift.

Anyone who doesn’t see the challenge of enduring, holding on, and being willing to suffer for Christ isn’t being realistic. That is why it is so false for people to leave the impression that being a Christian makes life easier. What we called health-and-wealth is false gospel that sets people up to be destroyed. We begin to believe that living the American dream of health, wealth, success, and long life are almost

owed to us because we're good church-goers. When it doesn't work that way – and it never does, even when it appears that way from a distance – then we begin to discover the importance of our faith and our community of faith.

Life isn't fair! Life is difficult! Not every faith story ends in quick victory. Not every Daniel who gets thrown into a den of lions gets out without a scratch. There are lots of bones in those dens! Every prayer for healing isn't answered the way we would like. Every desire for the perfect job isn't met. Job losses happen. Those we love die before we're ready. Yes, we celebrate the victories; we celebrate those obvious moments when tragedy is overcome, when addictions are beaten, when success is celebrated as a gift from God. We also recognize Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered, not through the success of his miracles.

The church is a place to voice frustrations and pains. So often we start believing only the good endings can be spoken in church. Only the completed success stories can be offered up to God, but that is the reality of *lament* in Scripture and in our lives, isn't it? This is precisely what the preacher of Hebrews wanted from his audience. He wanted them to tell one another their stories and then hold one another up; hold each other in accountability and commitment in the name of Jesus.

The preaching of the church is set in the context of your economic stress, your marital problems, your bereavements, your doubts – and must bring about a word from God to those situations. If the best way to help us through our life situations is not through Scripture, we'd just play tapes of Oprah and Dr. Phil on the screen! For whatever insights of value you can get from psychology, group support or a loving church, you ultimately need a word from God Almighty himself that will get you through.

And although the tradition of conservative churches such as ours is to stress the language of 6:4-12 about the possibility of spiritual apostasy, the thrust of this text is not negative. It does not seek to scare people about the fate they will suffer if they abandon Christ. This preacher's goal is positive. He believes the best about his friends and spiritual family – and wants them to be encouraged.

Sometimes we lift verses 4-8 out of context and become consumed with our modern question of whether or not saved people can be lost. But if you listen to the words in a larger context, he has no interest in any of his believing audience losing their salvation (compare also Romans 5-8). Yes, no one should neglect the great salvation that God has given in Jesus. Yes, if one rejects that salvation, either

initially or especially after already receiving it, there are no alternative means of entering into God's presence. If we reject Jesus as Lord and reject the participation of the Holy Spirit in our lives, God doesn't have any other avenues into his presence. The reminder is all for the purpose of reminding his audience of the gift they have received. Whatever the world around them may be saying about their newfound faith in Jesus, they need to trust God – not those empty voices. Listen to the preacher's assurances regarding his listening audience:

*Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation. 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. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (Hebrews 6:9-12).*

His focus is on the positive outcome of their communal commitments to Christ and to one another. This is a “ya’ll project,” not an individual endurance contest. The diligence and hope that sustain come through their communal efforts to support one another. And these strong words of encouragement are rooted in the history of God's dealings with humankind across the centuries. In Hebrews 11, our writer will tick off a long list of names. God kept his promise to every one of those people! Here he cites only one example – Abraham, the Father of all those who have faith in God.

Abraham's life was a series of winding treks from Ur to Egypt, through Sodom and Shur – and he died never having inherited Canaan. Along the way both he and Sarah laughed at the notion of a child in their old age. They even attempted a surrogate motherhood with Hagar. Oh, the heartache that started! It is was a long, tough, and painful journey, but Abraham was encouraged every step of the way, so our preacher says, by God's “promise” vouchsafed to him. That promise was rooted in two things. First, it was backed by God's very character, his “unchanging nature.” Second, it was confirmed to Abraham by a covenant “oath” that was passed from Abraham to his heirs.

Now God has done a similar thing with Christians: *“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 offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:18-19a).* The same God

who swore by his unchanging character to Abraham has made a covenant promise to all of us who have put our faith in Jesus Christ – and has further reinforced that covenant by making Jesus our eternal high priest who is even today functioning in the true Holy of Holies on our behalf (Hebrews 6:19b-20).

This is what this text means to us – the entire family of God – to all who ever feel like we’re losing it. It means we’re all in this together! It means we uphold one another precisely in the difficult times. To learn is to suffer; to suffer is to learn. Jesus grew back into his divine Sonship and was restored to the throne room of God in exactly the same way that God grows his divine nature in us and promises to bring us into that same heavenly realm. He does not leave us on our own, but calls us into God’s salvation – our repentance and baptism and our belief that Jesus really was raised from the dead – need to be remembered. But we also have to help each other get through the painful training that is shaping us for eternity. It is not easy. It is not fair. Much of it comes without warning or provocation, and we can’t survive it alone. Thus, Jesus himself endured it so that he could plead our cause before God even as we cry out to God and to one another.

## Conclusion

Let me close this chapter with a final observation about a play on words in the text. Our teacher opens at 5:11 with a tongue-in-cheek comment about how “slow” (Greek, *nuthros* = sluggish) some of his students seemed to be and returns to the same word and theme at 6:12. In the second reference, however, he is actually voicing his confidence they will not be “lazy” but faithful to their confession. What had stung them awake from their sluggishness? Suffering! It makes weak Christians see just how desperately we need the strength of the Holy Spirit. In our weakness, we are able to sense his power at work (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7ff); see James in part 2).

Again, however, I hasten to add that his strong confidence is not so much in them but in the certain promises God has made them. He is not about to abandon them in their crisis moments – even if there is no rescue from their suffering except through death and resurrection in a new heaven and earth. God will not abandon them to the enemy. He will not allow anything to destroy their spiritual security.

We are at risk because Satan is intent on seducing us into evil; if he cannot do that, he will try to deceive us with the false doctrine that the negative things that happen

in our lives are “acts of God.” We are at risk because life is hard; we sometimes cry out in our spiritual immaturity and indict God as a tormentor – something like Job, for example, refused to do. We are at risk because our faith is weak; we need to press on from the elementary teachings about Jesus into the lifestyle of trust, submission, and obedience he modeled for us – even though that lifestyle invites suffering for the sake of righteousness. We are at risk because there is so much about living as human beings that is simply mysterious and defies explanation within our limited theological frameworks or personal insights.

Because we are at risk, we must believe. *Believe* that God is still on his throne, in spite of the terrible things sin has introduced into his cosmos. *Believe* that the God who cannot lie will keep his promise of deliverance – even if that deliverance comes only in the resurrection. *Believe* that our Melchizedekan high priest who sympathizes with our predicament has secured our redemption by blood and is interceding for us constantly in faith that not only cannot destroy us but will serve to mature us, perfect us, and form the image of Christ in us.

No matter what is threatening you today, you are challenged to believe - To endure - To suffer in hope - To look beyond the temporal to the eternal - To share his triumph at his appearing and kingdom - To trust!

We are so confident of God’s ability to work in you – and of your demonstrated willingness to trust him through the dark circumstances of life on Planet Earth – that we believe the sort of steadfast faith that accompanies salvation will continue to be exhibited in the church. Our duty to one another is mutual support within this faith community, to be there for one another in trying times. God is not unjust, and he will not allow any of us to be tempted above what we can bear! No, he will help us as we help one another, you may be absolutely confident that he will see you through to the end. He will validate your hope with the elation of triumph – even if, as in the case of his Beloved Son, the triumph comes after apparent defeat! So don’t get lazy, sluggish, or careless in your faith – especially if things are going well for you today. Don’t think for a moment your time will not come. But know that God will be there in advance of your trial and will do for you what he did for Abraham, Joseph, and the thousands of others who persevered through faith. We will inherit all he has promised to those who love him. We have his word on it!

## ENDNOTES

1. J.I. Parker, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 257.
2. Leon Morris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), p. 52.
3. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 191, 192.
4. Philip Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 86 says: "And if this is understood with difficulty, the mind must be purged by faith, by more and more abstaining from sins, and by doing good works, and by praying with the groaning of holy desires; that is by profiting through the divine help, it may both understand and love."





**STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY****CHAPTER 8*****Hebrews 7:1-28*****JESUS: ETERNAL HIGH PRIEST  
OF THE MELCHIZEDEKAN ORDER**

On June 27, 1976, armed operatives for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine surprised the twelve crew members of an Air France jetliner and its ninety-one passengers, hijacking it to a destination unknown. The plane was tracked heading for Central Africa, where indeed it did land under the congenial auspices of Ugandan President Idi Amin. It remained apparently secure at Entebbe Airport where the hijackers spent the next seven days preparing for their next move. The hijackers were, by all estimations, in the driver's seat.

However, 2,500 miles away in Tel Aviv, three Israeli C-130 Hercules transports secretly boarded a deadly force of Israeli commandos, who within hours attacked Entebbe Airport under cover of darkness. In less than sixty minutes the commandos rushed the old terminal, gunned down the hijackers, and rescued 110 of the 113 hostages. The next day, July 4, Israel's Premier Yitzhak Rabin triumphantly declared the mission "will become a legend," which it surely has! Israel's resolve and stealth in liberating her people is admired by her friends and begrudged by her enemies.

Actually Israel's resolve is nothing new, because the same quality can be traced all the way back to the very beginning of the Hebrew nation in the prowess of their father Abraham. The kidnappers in his day were a coalition of four Canaanite kings headed by King Chedorlaomer who attacked the Transjordan, defeating the city-states of Sodom and her neighbors and carrying off a large number of hostages, including Abraham's nephew Lot (cf. Genesis 14:5-12).

Undaunted, Abraham recruited 318 trained men (Genesis 14:14) – proto-commandos! – from his own household and took off in hot pursuit until he closed in on the kidnappers somewhere close to Damascus. There, under the cover of night, he deployed his small forces in a surprise attack. His troops, riding bawling

camels and slaving horses, bore down on the hijackers, and their hostages. Deadly arrows flew in the night, and bloody swords were raised gleaming in the dusty moonlight – and the four kings were put to flight.

The Genesis account gives this Entebbe-like summary of Abraham's success: "*Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people*" (Genesis 14:16). Abraham could be formidable. It was not wise to mess with father Abraham!

So when Abraham returned to his home after the slaughter of the kings he was a hero, at the pinnacle of martial success. Can you see him proudly astride his lumbering camel, smeared with the dirt and blood of battle, leading his proud 318 men plus Lot and *all* the captives and *all* the plunder? If so, you have the feel necessary to begin to appreciate Abraham's strange, mystic encounter with a shadowy figure of immense grandeur – Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem. Genesis says:

*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine  
(He was priest of God Most High). And he blessed him and said,*

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,*

*Possessor of heaven and earth;*

*and blessed be God Most High,*

*who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"*

(Genesis 14:18-20)

So mysterious! And think of this – this is the *only* historical mention of Melchizedek in the Old Testament. What we have just read is all we know of him! Yet Abraham allowed Melchizedek to bless him and then gave him a tenth of every-thing.

This was around 2000 BC, and for a millennium there is no mention at all of Melchizedek, not even in retrospect. But in the tenth century BC, when the psalmist David was King of Israel, the Holy Spirit inspired him to write this prophetic word: "*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek'*" (Psalm 110:4). There God declared that he was going to do something *new*. His intention was to bring into history one who would be a both priest and king (cf. Psalm 110:1). Also, his priesthood would last forever.

And, like Melchizedek, he would be appointed directly by God. It was all divinely guaranteed: “*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.*” What an intriguing prophecy! God was going to establish a totally new priesthood.

Imagine for a moment that you the writer of Hebrews, writing to encourage the soon-to-be persecuted Jewish church. Also imagine yourself reflecting both on Melchizedek’s *history* and this *prophecy* – and then you make the connection! Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the prophecy! He is a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Further, you are the first person in history to make the connection. You begin to muse and pray – and everything falls into place. Now in Hebrews chapter 7 you present what you have learned as a means of encouragement to the storm-tossed church. There is no teaching like it anywhere. This is, as we sometimes say today, heavy!

*[Jesus] has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*

*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, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without a father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.*

*Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor (6:20b-7:10).*

Jesus has a unique high priestly role in the present scheme of things. How shall we make sense of that against the Aaronic priesthood? How can Jesus be a high priest at all? Our writer/exhorter makes a clever argument for the superiority of the high priesthood of Jesus over all others by tracing it to “mysterious” Melchizedek.

Who in the world is *Melchizedek*? The short answer is he is just one more character in the cast of history's billions who would have passed from the scene unnoticed and unheralded except for the link between him and Jesus. True, he would have been a creature of dignity and worth because of the image and likeness of God in him, but he would not have stood out. He would not have been particularly unique. His name would not have been written in such bold letters in Scripture by Spirit-led authors. His life would not be particularly insightful to our faith. We would not find strength in our own spiritual journey by knowing about him. By virtue of his connection to Jesus, however, he has great significance to the preacher-writer of Hebrews.

Why, that makes Melchizedek just like the rest of us! Except for my connection to Jesus, my name would not be written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Except for your link to him, your life would be essentially this: She was born, she lived a few years, and she died. Because of Jesus, however, you can have a share in eternal life. You can have a pardon for your past and support in your present struggles. You can have the guarantee of complete salvation, and your life can supply encouragement to others.

But that's just the short answer. The longer answer is given in Hebrews 7. This section of our preacher's manuscript fairly soars with assurance for his original hearers. They were discouraged, and their faithfulness was in question. By his skillful use of a couple of Old Testament texts, our writer supplies one more reason for them to take heart and hold on. If we can grasp his point, we will be encouraged too.

## Typology

There is a device used several times in Scripture called *typology* that figures into our ability to appreciate this chapter. It isn't to be confused with allegorizing a biblical text – a process that can lead to some bizarre and fanciful results. To the contrary, typology is rooted in a particular view of history as the arena of God's activity. Before I try to define it, let me illustrate it from a text in the Gospel of John.

In the famous night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the issue of how "earthly things" and "heavenly things" relate to one another came up. Jesus had used the earthly event of human birth to tell Nicodemus that he needed to be born from above (i.e., spiritually) in order to experience the kingdom of God. That is

one way earthly and heavenly things may be tied together; one can be used to illustrate the other. In the same conversation, Jesus went on to cite another way.

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life”* (John 3:14-15).

Numbers 21 tells us how the Israelites in the wilderness were bitten by deadly snakes. When they cried out for Yahweh to save them, Moses was ordered to make a bronze serpent, set it on a standard, and offer relief to the people. Anyone bitten by a deadly serpent was challenged to look at the brass snake to be healed – by the supernatural power of God. All who did so lived, and those who refused died. That Old Testament event was offered as a foreshadowing or prototype of our salvation by means of the crucifixion. Jesus would be *“lifted up”* in his death, and all those who are dying in our sin would be invited to look to him for life – eternal life.

That is a simple and clear case of typology. It is when an interpreter finds a correspondence in one or more respects between some person, thing, or event in the Old Testament and a person, thing, or event in his New Testament setting. There is first a type (i.e., fulfillment, thing symbolized). There are several instances of this de-vice in Christian literature. Our text is certainly a case in point. Melchizedek is taken by this preacher to be a type of Jesus, with the mysterious and unique priest-hood of the former anticipating the unique and perfect priesthood of the latter.

Typology works for a biblical writer such as ours because of his view of history and Scripture. History is not random events without meaning. It is the context of heaven’s deliberate activity to save humankind. Scripture is the Spirit-revealed meaning of history as seen through the eyes of God.

The theme of the redemption of sinful mankind through the workings of divine grace is traced from the Old Testament through the New Testament. So the New Testament writers see it as axiomatic that things which went before were only shadowy anticipations of what would become clear in Jesus. It goes without saying that the Platonic worldview of the New Testament era would be very congenial to such readings of Scripture. Just as Plato believed the events on Planet Earth were imperfect copies that amounted to nothing more than shadows of the true reality embodied in transcendent Forms, so did writers such as ours believe the people, things, and events of things before Jesus were only dim reflections designed to make us long for completion and fulfillment in the Son. It is from this perspective on history that Melchizedek becomes a type of Christ. He prefigured what would

be revealed in Jesus. He had some dim level of participation in the reality that Jesus would bring to light. The shadowy figure mentioned only in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110:4 is offered in Hebrews 7 as an Old Testament anticipation of Jesus.

Melchizedek didn't get his priestly appointments through family ties as a descendant of Aaron. Indeed, insofar as the biblical record itself goes, he has no ancestry! Of course he had parents, and he may have had children. But insofar as the biblical data on him, we have no family tree. He is "*without father or mother, without genealogy.*" Why, one could even go further to say that priest-king of Salem was "*without beginning of days or end of life*" – again, insofar as the record itself gives us no details – and thus "*remains a priest forever.*"

Although some have wanted to press these typological features far beyond what is reasonable or necessary in order to claim that Melchizedek was an Old Testament theophany of the Son of God, that doesn't fit our preacher's understanding. By virtue of the hermeneutical method he chose to use, Melchizedek was only "*like the Son of God*" in a typological reading of Scripture.

Furthermore, in keeping with the motif of the superiority of Jesus, he proceeds to demonstrate the preeminence of Jesus even to Father Abraham. Although strange to us, the Jewish people not only had a sense of community but of solidarity. So when Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, not only Abraham but all his descendants (i.e., those "still in the body of" Abraham") – including Aaron and the high priests descended from him – were granting the superiority of Salem's priest-king to Abraham. Thus if it can be shown that Christ's priesthood is of the Melchizedekan order, it will be proved – to our writer-preacher at least – that Jesus is superior both to Abraham and to the system of priests and offerings within Judaism.

Within the Hebrews material itself, we have already been prepared for the introduction of Jesus as high priest from this earlier text: "*For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers 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*" (2:17). From this groundwork statement in Hebrews, we will try to interpret the meaning of Jesus' role as a high priest of the Melchizedekan order. True to what I believe is going on in the Hebrews, we will be far less concerned to focus on the details of Melchizedek's life and career than on Jesus. Consequently, the three central points we should gain from this text (at least exegetically) is the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over the Levitical

priesthood and the eternal character of that priesthood. These three points serve a greater purpose, which will unfold in the argument contained in Hebrews 8:1-10:18. They serve even at this juncture to point us to the eternal character of our redemption obtained by a uniquely appointed priest who transcends genealogies, ancestry and human families. The eternal Son of God is our eternal high priest.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

### **1. Hebrews 7:1-10**

Melchizedek is a rather obscure figure in the Old Testament as we have seen. This section is an exposition of Genesis 14 in terms of the implications of the relationship of Melchizedek to Abraham and his descendants, but it is also a typological analogy between Melchizedek and Jesus, the Son of God.

The typology is present in Hebrews 7:3 when the preacher asserts that Melchizedek is like the Son of God in that he is “*without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.*” While some have taken this to mean that Melchizedek descended out of heaven or that he was a divine theophany or even the appearance of the Son in a different form in the Old Testament, this is not the point. He is like the Son, but he is not **the** Son. We should not press this language beyond its intended point, and the point is the legitimacy of priesthood.

However, Melchizedek also serves another significant point for the preacher. Hebrews 7:4-10 draws out the impact of this encounter with Abraham for the Levitical priesthood. Since Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek as a priest of God, so did Levi and the Aaronic priesthood.

The greater blessed the lesser and the lesser paid tithes to the greater! It affirms the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical order, also shockingly over Abraham. Since Melchizedek points us to the Son of God and the Son is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, it means the Son is greater than Abraham. He is not simply greater than Moses or Joshua, or even the angels, but even Abraham!

The next section will explain why the one priesthood is greater than the other.



## 2. Hebrews 7:11-25

Two key words explain why Melchizedek's priesthood is greater than Levi's: (1) perfection and (2) eternity ("*forever*"). In this section, the preacher applies Psalm 110 to the situation.

The consequence of this perfection and permanence is that we have something "better" now than was true of earlier generations in history. We have "*better hope*" (7:19) and a "*better covenant*" (7:22). Our hope because it is an eternal, permanent one, and the covenant is better because the redemption is eternal because an eternal priest secures it.

## 3. Hebrews 7:26-28

This is the preacher's summary of his argument. It is a climatic statement of the point and contains the fundamental contrasts between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Jesus. Our high priest is different from the Levitical high priests. The contrast is strong. While the Levitical priests die, our high priest lives "*exalted above the heaven.*" While the Levitical high priest is sinful, our high priest is holy and sinless. While the Levitical high priest sacrifices not only for the sins of others but also for his own sins, our high priest sacrifices for the sins of others. While the Levitical high priest is weak, our high priest has been perfected. While the law appointed the Levitical high priest, our high priest was appointed by an oath that came after the law was given.

### ***Theological Summary***

The central theological teaching of this text, which we must bring to bear in our own experience of Christianity, is the eternal priesthood of Jesus. His eternal priesthood means our eternal redemption. Somehow we need to translate this essential insight into something meaningful for our contemporary hearers.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

The Son is able to save – he saves completely because he lives forever. His life is indestructible and it is guaranteed by God's own sworn oath. This kind of high priest "*meets our need*" (7:26).

Jesus is alive forever and will never be replaced in his office, so we need never fear losing so favored a status!

The language that follows is the great assurance our preacher-writer wanted the discouraged believers of his time to embrace.

*Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

*Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. 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. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been perfect forever (Hebrews 7:23-28).*

What incredible language! “He is able to save *completely* those who come to God through him.” He doesn’t do a half-work of saving. He doesn’t, for example, forgive our past and then leave it to us to defeat Satan from now on. “*He always lives to intercede for them.*” He not only forgives but empowers, renews, and gives wisdom to enable us to live in a hostile world. “*Such a high priest meets our need.*” Indeed, he does! He is perfect – “*perfect forever*” as our guarantee of victory. And – well, I’m going to cheat here and sneak a look ahead in order to round out this incredible process of redemption – his gracious relationship with us makes us perfect in God’s eyes, even while we are stumbling and fumbling around down here! “*By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy*” (Hebrews 10:4).

The preacher-writer of our text wanted his desperate hearers-readers to know there was one place they could go in their distress. Don’t quit on faith. Don’t turn back. Don’t give in to the pressures. Let your distress drive you to Jesus! Isn’t it Lincoln who is supposed to have said, “I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction I had nowhere else to go”? Would that such despair guaranteed so positive an outcome, but it doesn’t. Many shake their fists in God’s face. Curse him. Abandon him forever.

In his little book *Jesus Loves Me*, Calvin Miller tells about a woman he knew who was severely challenged by cerebral palsy. In her mid-forties, she told him one day that more than anything she wanted to have a home, a husband, and children. But her awkward, distorted, and convulsive movements had relegated her to a very different fate. “All my life I have prayed for a home – and I know I would make a good wife and a good mother. But who would marry me?” After a pause, she continued “Do you know what bothers me the most? Not in all these years has anyone ever seen me as pretty.”

Miller confessed to the awkwardness of that moment for him. What was he supposed to say? What do you say to a woman who has expressed her deep longing to be seen as attractive? Desirable? He hadn’t thought what to say until the woman picked up her own conversation. “Still,” she continued, “the bright thing about my future is what remains the bright thing about each day: Jesus will never be an incidental luxury for me. I must have him or there is no sunrise and old age is impossible.”

The beleaguered saints to whom Hebrews is addressed had found themselves awkward, unlovely, and undesirable. They didn’t fit their past social environments. Their old friends weren’t friends anymore. For some, even family had cut them off. Yet all of us need to be wanted! So Jesus could never be an “incidental luxury” or occasional Sunday guest for them. They would need him as their one bright thing for each day – until he came again for them. And so do we!

## Conclusion

The eternal Son of God is our eternal high priest.

This text isn’t really about Melchizedek – any more than the previous ones have been about angels, Moses, Joshua, or Sabbath. They are all about Jesus. For this preacher, everything is about Jesus! Tying together 2:17 with 7:18, watch the three key terms he has used of him.

First, Jesus is *faithful*. Tested though he was, he not only survived but passed with flying colors. He is “holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens” in his unsoiled nature as Son of God. Second, he is *merciful*. Although “set apart” in his personal holiness, Jesus has chosen *not* to set himself apart as aloof and unavailable to us. He has shared our humanity, endured our unbelieving rejection, borne our vulnerabilities, and taken our sin debt on himself

at Calvary. Oh, he is merciful beyond comprehension. And finally, he is *perfect* for our situation of need. He forgives, empowers, disciplines, and reassures; at the end, he will raise us from the dead and transform us into the very likeness of his own indestructible, conquering, and glorious self.

His work will be finished only when our journeys are complete. Until then, he gives strength for the journey – and the assurance that we are loved and wanted by the God who created us.



**STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY****CHAPTER 9*****Hebrews 8:1-13*****LOOKING TO JESUS:  
A BETTER COVENANT**

In the children's story by C.S. Lewis, it was the magic of a wardrobe in an otherwise empty room. That's how Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy discovered the Land of Narnia. Lewis told those wonderful stories about the land of Narnia and all its surrounding countries by having the children leave behind the bombings of London during WWII and travel to the safety of the professor's house out in the country. There the children discovered the room with the wardrobe full of fur coats, but if you went into the wardrobe, there was no back wall. You came out the backside into the land of another dimension.

More recently there have been other writers with other means of getting the children into a different place at a different time. The "Polar Express" is a train that takes one to the magical world of the North Pole. Harry Potter also travels by train, but only after having passed through a brick wall from one train station into another of a different dimension.

For the lovers of science fiction, there is the Time Machine. Whether it was the original H.G. Wells story or its most recent remake, or one of those episodes of "Quantum Leap," the hero had the means of jumping through time and space, forward and backward. The movie "Stargate" featured some ancient ruins that, when pieced back together, allowed one to pass into a whole other world. There are countless episodes from the several "Star Trek" series, and a number of other tele-vision shows and movies in which the heroes must contend with a "disruption in the space/time continuum." The Enterprise would be flying along in space minding its own business when some space anomaly would send the ship into some odd predicament with its own past or future, often with the result the characters met themselves in an earlier or later time. In some of the more inventive programming there were even shape shifters, beings whose lives were not

necessarily eternal – but close to it – who could transform themselves into varieties of states of being. They had some superior powers of intellect, but their status as divine beings was always ambiguous.

I love the first movie in the “Back to the Future” series because the time machine is a DeLorean sports car. When the car gets to exactly 88 mph, the flux capacitor kicks in and they leap through time. Better yet is the way in which they carry those photographs around with them everywhere, and changes in their activity, either in the past or future, cause the characters in the photographs to fade in and out. By changing a moment in the past, they threaten to erase the future, or at least radically change it.

Breaks in the space/time continuum seem almost commonplace in the world of science fiction and fantasy, but we know that such stories are just that, don’t we? People don’t go from one time period to another. We send people into outer space and bring them back again; we may even figure out how to send them in space ships to the moon and calculate their travel so they come back again. Only in science fiction and fantasy can one participate in time travel. Only in science fiction and fantasy can one transverse from one dimension to another, from our universe to a multiverse. Only in the world of fantasy could one leap into the past or the future to encounter the love of one’s life, or prevent some catastrophe, or encounter strange wonderful creatures like Aslan.

Our preacher in Hebrews knows nothing about Narnia or the fourth quadrant of the universe, but he does know all about some version of the space/time continuum. He spends much of his sermon arguing a major break already has occurred. Creator God, the being beyond all time and space, has broken into it. Yes, before that in human history on this planet, he made himself known from time to time. He revealed himself to particular human beings; he called certain ones like Moses and the prophets to himself and gave them special instructions. But now, the preacher says, he has already broken through in the Son.

The revelation of Jesus Christ changes everything. A salvation has arrived among humans that must not be neglected. It is a salvation free from all of the restrictions humans otherwise face. In the midst of the often hectic, out-of-control lives that we humans live, in the midst of all the human-made distractions that keep us from focusing on anything but ourselves, in the midst of all that distracts us from the God who is beyond all time and space, God has offered rest to us through the in-breaking of the Son. What God has done in the Christ, the preacher argues, has

brought completion, maturity, perfection to God's offer of access and relationship with the humans created in his image. The Son, he says, is now seated in the throne room of God located out there – in some dimension of the heavens beyond our understanding – where he serves eternally as high priest in the order of Melchizedek. He is the pioneer, the author of this break in the space/time continuum that allows full access to the heavenlies for us earthlings.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

### **Hebrews 8**

Just as Plato talked about the material world being mere shadow or copy of the real, the true forms, the preacher uses these ideas to express the truth of God's new activity in Christ. The shadows and copies previously known to humans through the activity of Moses and the Levitical priesthood could give one glimpses of reality on the other side of the space/time continuum but they were all earth bound and time bound. Listen to his description in the opening verses of chapter eight:

*“Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain.’ But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises” (8:1-6).*

Here is where this whole space/time continuum thing gets very interesting with the preacher. Jesus, the Son of God, who made an appearance on this planet and became completely human just like the rest of us, is now seated in that other dimension of time and space. The one who couldn't even be a priest on earth offered a sacrifice on earth that actually serves as a gift on the altar in the other dimension.



The gift on the altar in that dimension serves as once-for-all time sacrifice in this dimension of earth and space.

In human form he was no priest because he was not a descendant of Aaron, but in the other dimension he is the high priest. Here on the earth side, in past and present times priests offer gifts according to the laws given by God to Moses. But they do so in a sanctuary that is just a sketch or shadow of the heavenly one. God allowed Moses to experience a pattern, a type of the sanctuary from the other side, but both the sanctuary and the promises attached to it suffered greatly from limitations of time and space in our world. Precisely because the promises and priesthood were bound by human capacities and limitations of earth time and space, their existence hinted of something better. Their shadowy character pointed toward that other dimension of reality that is better. More specifically:

## 1. Hebrews 8:1-2

The “high priestly” character of Jesus’ ministry has been established in Hebrews 7 and his ministry in the sanctuary is the topic of Hebrews 9:1-19-18. The preacher, then, succinctly states the critical point, which builds upon what he has previously said and what he will shortly elaborate.

In chapter 8, the preacher rehearses again what God did in the past when he initiated partial access to himself through Moses. Moses was called into the presence of God on top of a mountain. There God revealed to him specific instructions for creating sacred space through which humans might draw near to him. Creator God even made promises with humans by which they could live in harmony with the planet, with one another, and with God himself. As the preacher explains it and compares the circumstances on earth to those in the dimension of space where God dwells, everything on earth was a copy of the real thing which exists in that other dimension.

The “crowning affirmation” is Jesus is a high priest who ministers in the heavenly sanctuary. The term “*ministry*” in Greek is not the “*deacon*” work (*diaknonia*), but is a liturgical word. It is the Greek term from which we get the English word “liturgy” (worship ritual): Our high priest performs his worship- liturgical ritual – his priestly duties and services – in the presence of God himself, that is, in the “true tabernacle” or “true tent.” The point of “true” is not in terms of true vs. false, but in terms of reality vs. symbol, or type and antitype. The earthly tabernacle

pointed to the heavenly tabernacle. It was not a false tabernacle, but rather a copy, a reflection of a manifestation of the heavenly one. However, our high priest serves in the true or real tabernacle, not in the copy.

## **2. Hebrews 8:3-6**

The function of this text is to contrast the high priestly ministry of Jesus in 8:1-2 with the old covenant's priestly ministry. The old covenant regulated the Levitical priesthood and specified its rituals and sacrifices. Jesus could not be a priest in the Levitical system because he was from Judah, not Levi (Hebrews 7:12-13). But his priesthood does not depend on the Levitical system since he is a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The Levitical system was not legalistic, ritualistic, formalistic or contrary to God's own life/spirit/character. Sometimes we read this text as if those old covenant rituals were bad, evil, or part of a primitivism that we moderns have judged backwards. But those rituals formed the identity of God's people and brought them into the presence of God. They functioned to shape their identity and remind them of God's grace. Those rituals were the experience of God's grace.

The problem with the Levitical ritual was not that it was ritual or that it was legalistic. The problem was that it was not eternal and that it ministered in an earthly tabernacle that was a mere shadow or copy of the heavenly one. It was provisional rather than permanent. Their priesthood was generational, but the priesthood of Jesus is eternal.

The "pattern" Moses was shown was the heavenly tabernacle. The earthly tabernacle was built to correspond with the heavenly tabernacle. It was a copy of it. "Pattern" here is not about patternism but about inferior status of the earthly tabernacle. It is a copy; it is not the real ("true") thing. Rather, Jesus entered the true tabernacle, and there ministers on behalf of his people.

A new covenant was needed because Jesus could not be priest under the old covenant, and because the old covenant is inherently a copy (shadow) of the real (true). The reality came in Jesus. Reality means it is a better covenant; it is superior to the old covenant because it is real (the antitype) rather than the shadow (type).

### 3. Hebrews 8:7-13

The preacher thus looks to the prophet Jeremiah where he finds justification for his conviction that God intended to break through the space/time continuum in a more effective way. When the people of Israel were exiled from their homeland and lost even the shadowy access available through the sanctuary, God spoke of new possibilities – a new covenant less bounded by human time and space.

*“For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. God finds fault with them when he says: ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.’ In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete and growing old will soon disappear” (8:7-13).*

The preacher grounds his understanding of a better or new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Part of the text is quoted again in Hebrews 10:16-17. His point is to emphasize the contrast between the old and new covenant. But before we emphasize the point, I would also like to point out the continuity between the old and new covenant that is embedded in this same text.

The two covenants have the same God (Yahweh), the same people (Israel), the same ethic (“the law” is not changed in terms of ethics – the same law that is written on stone is placed in the heart; cf. Matthew 5:17-20), and the same promise (that God would dwell among his people). The “newness” of the covenant is not about content, but about the manner of presentation.

The discontinuity is God dwelt among his people in a provisional way through an earthly tabernacle in the old covenant, but now God dwells among his people by the Spirit in the hearts of his people. We are now the temple of the living God in whom God dwells by his Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians

6:16). This indwelling is the sanctification of the human heart through forgiveness, reconciliation and atonement. It is the indwelling presence of God for the sake of transformation, that is, so we can be the kind of people God has called us to be. Thus, the “better” promise is the eternal character of our forgiveness in Christ rather than the provisional relationship the shadowy Levitical order provided. Because it was provisional and temporary, it has become obsolete with the fullness of the Christ’s ministry.

The preacher expounds the forgiveness dimension of this text and does not concentrate on the “law in the heart” concept. This is evident in his application in Hebrews 10:18.

### ***Theological Summary***

What was the problem with the old covenant? Why did it become obsolete in the light of Jesus, our high priest?

For some the problem with the old covenant is its antiquated or legalistic leanings, but this misreads the function and intent of the Mosaic covenant. It was never intended to be legalistic, any more than Christianity has that intent (though, of course, it did not prevent some from treating both as legalisms). The rituals were intended to shape the identity of the people and give concrete expressions to their faith, just as Christian rituals do (baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for example).

The problem with the old covenant was not its goal, intent and heart. Rather, the problem with the old covenant was that it could not absolutely secure forgiveness through the blood of animals. The problem was the nature of forgiveness and atonement. The preacher sees the point of contrast between the old and new as centered in the issue of sin, atonement and forgiveness.

It is not that the rituals were legalistic and formalistic. Rather, the rituals were inferior because the sacrifices were inferior and insufficient, but nevertheless the rituals pointed Israel to the one who provided the ground of forgiveness. The rituals were not bad or evil, just incomplete. They pointed to something beyond themselves – the pointed to Jesus who would secure our forgiveness through a new covenant.

The “*better promises*” which made necessary a “*better covenant*” is the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness was available and genuinely experienced in Israel (Psalm

32:51), but it was provisional and unsecured in terms of God's heavenly sanctuary. The ministry of Jesus provides the ground for the forgiveness of sins under the old covenant and in the present (cf. Romans 3:25-26; Hebrews 9:15). Old covenant sins were not forgiven (in an absolute sense) on the basis of Levitical sacrifices, but were forgiven on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus. His blood alone atones. God forgave sin under the old covenant because in his eyes those sacrifices were types or shadows of the sacrifice of Jesus.

"*Better*" relates to the Levitical order in contrast to the Messianic (Melchizedekian) order. Below is a chart that offers the contrasts that appear in Hebrews regarding a "*better hope*" (Hebrews 7:19, covenant (Hebrews 7:22), promises (Hebrews 8:6), priestly ministry (Hebrews 8:6, and sacrifices (Hebrews 9:23). This chart will help us visualize the argument of Hebrews 8:1-10:19.

TOPIC	MOSAIC COVENANT	MESSIANIC COVENANT
<b>Priesthood</b>	Weak	Powerful
	Temporal	Eternal
	Levitical	Melchizedek
	Sinful	Holy
<b>Sanctuary</b>	Copy, Shadow	Reality
	Earthly	Heavenly
	Infrequent Entrance	Frequent Entrance
	Only a Few	Universal
<b>Sacrifices</b>	Blood of Abel	Blood of Jesus
	Animal Life	Human Life
	External Cleansing	Full Cleansing
	Annual	Once for All

Theologically, Christians are encouraged by the finality and reality of Christ's priestly ministry. There is no other ministry beyond his. He is the fulfillment of the Levitical priesthood, and he is the mediator of a genuine, authentic and real relationship with God that is no longer in the shadows.

Laws are written not on the exterior but the interior of we humans. A covenant relationship less tied to the earthly contingencies. For the preacher who already believes the audience ought to be teaching one another, these words become exhortation. When this new reality is fully realized, they shall not need to teach one another or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for all will know the Lord. Even the distinctions of least and greatest will melt away when everyone knows God. The times of that old, shadowy existence are obsolete, and like those photographs in "Back to the Future," the images are fading away. A disruption in the space/time continuum has changed everything. When Jesus broke through space and time and became human like us in every way and then broke back through into that other dimension where he sits at the right hand of God, present/past/future all changed on this planet.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

As our high priest, there are several features of his ministry that make thoughtful believers confident of Jesus' ability to get us through discouraging times. The first is his invitation of a new, superior covenant under which he functions and by whose provisions we receive his grace. Consequently, the church is called to persevere because redemption has been secured.

There is no one else who stands at the right hand of God to redeem us and intercede for us. We draw near to God through the one who lives eternally in the presence of God for our sakes. The church perseveres because it experiences the presence of God through reconciliation (particularly, the forgiveness of sins).

We are not yet through hearing the preacher's unfolding story of this break in the space/time continuum. But we know this is a wardrobe we can walk through, a DeLorean going 88 mph in which we can sit. This is a promise offered not just to an audience sitting in Shadowland in the second half of the first century, but a promise extended to us as we sit in Shadowland this day. The preacher says we can have full access to the other dimension of time and space. The one who could not serve as priest on this planet now serves as high priest. While he could not offer

priestly sacrifice in this dimension, somehow he sacrificed himself in this dimension and that opens the wardrobe door for us to enter the other dimension. Salvation!

Our preacher already said what we needed to hear back in chapter two:

*“Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will” (2:1-4).*

The invitation to travel where one man has gone before. To explore space beyond the universe, to break the time barrier. To go beyond the twilight zone and the outer limits. To experience more than the shadows even now by the power of the Holy Spirit. The preacher says this is not magic or fantasy or science fiction – it’s REAL. The question is, are we true believers?

## **STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY**

### **CHAPTER 10**

#### ***Hebrews 9:1-10***

### **LOOKING TO JESUS:**

## **MINISTRY IN THE HEAVENLY TABERNACLE**

Imagine for a moment that as you drove into the parking lot at church you were greeted by a new roadside sign as you turned into the driveway. There are just two words on the sign: “Limited Access.” It’s the sort of sign you might see at the entrance of a gated community; or perhaps at some of our national parks or national recreation areas and wildlife preserves. Limited access in wilderness areas means when I put my backpack on and hike in, I’m not going to find a whole lot of people driving off-road SUV’s when I get there. It means some quiet and escape. What would you think about a church that had that sign? Would it be good news or bad news?

Obviously the sign needs a context to have meaning. There are certain circumstances where limited access seems not only appropriate but necessary. For example, many colleges and universities have established some limited access rules. Not everyone who applies gets accepted for admission. We obviously went through a time in this country when access was determined by racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries, and we are relieved such limits to access no longer exist for the most part. Yet, we also understand that sometimes no sign is needed to create the impression of limited access. Socio-economic barriers rarely come with a sign, but they do limit access.

There are times when I wish access to certain things would be more limited than it is. I don’t live in a gated community, but I’m not a big fan of door-to-door sales, particularly those that operate on the basis of making me feel guilty for not helping someone get off the streets. There were times when having an office door with limited access – where not just anybody could get in – seemed like a good idea to me. There are even times when I’m glad that someone else’s limited access screened me out! There’s less responsibility that way. Limited access means less involvement on my part.



Whether I am on the outside and can't get it, or I'm on the inside screening others out, there is a certain amount of power and control that comes my way. That's obviously so if I'm the insider screening out others, but within the limits of my access, that is, if I do have some access but not much, there is also some manageability and control that I have over circumstances.

Returning again to church, what would such a sign mean here? Limited access for certain groups of people? Limited access to God? Limited access to the building itself? Our preacher in Hebrews takes time out from his description of the heavenly throne room where Jesus now ministers as eternal high priest to reflect for a moment on the nature and circumstances of the shadow tabernacle ordained by God in the days of Moses. He sets up the contrasts that he will draw later (9:11-10:18). It is the beginning of that argument. Before he can make the argument that the work of Christ in the heavenly tabernacle is superior (better), he must lay the conceptual ground of revived memories of God's work through the Mosaic tabernacle.

He invokes the memories of his hearers/readers. It is helpful to remember the pleas of the people when they first encountered God on the mountain. As the earth quaked and the thunder rolled, as God delivered through Moses the ten commandments as they stood and witnessed the cloud of smoke and the noise and shaking, they told Moses they were happy to obey the voice of God, but from then on they would prefer that Moses speak to God and report back to them. They were quite certain they didn't want to be that close again. They clearly understood that they were in the presence of an all-powerful God, and a little distance was a good idea.

He asks them to remember the tabernacle, the tent of meeting. It is an exalted memory. It is not a memory of something bad, false or legalistic. It is the memory of the exalted ministry of Old Testament priests. It is the memory of God's dwelling place among his people. It is an appreciative memory of God's work in the tabernacle.

So, the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, was erected as a place where God could dwell in the midst of the people. It came with very specific instructions that the Hebrew preacher shares with his audience in the opening verses of chapter nine.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

### **1. Hebrews 9:1-5.**

The preacher creates an image for his audience, describing the tabernacle itself. As the preacher almost clinically describes the furniture, it is important to remember the theological significance that is assumed for each.

Remember, he is reaching into the stories of Exodus for his images. He is not talking about current day circumstances at a Temple in Jerusalem. Remember, the tabernacle was the dwelling place of God for Israel (Leviticus 26:11-12). First he describes a “Holy place,” a rectangle inside of which was a “Most Holy Place,” which was a square. It was holy because of the presence of God. The preacher reminds us that it was a place of special significance with the descriptions of “holy” and detailed enumeration of the furniture. It had very specific furniture: the lamp stand was the light of God in the tabernacle (cf. Exodus 25:31-40), symbolizing God lighting the darkness for his people. The Bread of Presence was a matter of table fellowship with God (Exodus 25:23-30). Eating the bread was eating in God’s presence and a matter of fellowship with God, it was a thank offering for God’s provision. The Golden Altar of Incense symbolized the people’s prayers and the smoke that filled the Holy Place symbolized God’s presence in our midst, symbolizing covenant relationship and identity as his chosen people (Exodus 30:1-10). The location of the altar is problematic. Exodus 30:6; 40:26 indicate it stood in the Holy Place in front of the curtain. Here seems to be a problem. In Hebrews 9:3-4 the writer in describing the same circumstance, stated that “*after [behind] the second veil*” there was a compartment “*called the holy of holies; having a golden altar of incense, and the Ark of the Covenant.*” Some critics (1) have not hesitated to declare that the author of Hebrews made a mistake. However a strong case can be made that the writer was not stressing the location of the altar of incense but emphasizing its theological connection with the most holy place of the tabernacle. One should not charge there is a contradiction between Exodus 30:6 and Hebrews 9:3-4. The most likely view is that the altar was described in a spatial sense in the Exodus passage, but in a theological sense in the context of Hebrews (2).

Inside the most Holy Place was the Ark of the Covenant, where God chose to center his presence among the people (Exodus 25:22), it was no mere symbol of God’s presence. The ark was God’s resting place (1 Chronicles 28:2; 2 Chronicles 6:40-42). The articles in the ark symbolized God’s covenant faithfulness with his

people. Hovering over the ark were the cherubim, angelic figures, statuesque copies of those surrounding God's throne. They testified to his presence. Indeed, the Ark of the Covenant is God's footstool. His feet sit on the ark as his presence fills the Most Holy Place and from there the whole earth.

The preacher specifies the atonement cover, which suits his ultimate purpose of discussing atonement in Hebrews 9-10 (Exodus 25:17-22). It is the traditional "mercy seat." The lid of the ark was sprinkled with blood on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:14-15).

But as the preacher goes on to explain, there were signs everywhere that said, "Limited access."

## **2. Hebrews 9:6-10.**

This section focuses on the priestly ministry in the tabernacle. Only the priests could enter daily into the holy place. And the Holy of Holies, the most holy place could be entered only once a year by only one person. Only the High Priest – remember the preacher already has described all of the human limitations of the high priest: appointed among humans, subject to constant change because all humans die and have to be replaced. The high priest entered on the Day of Atonement as a sacrifice for sin, including his own sin. The preacher very specifically mentions that the sins of the people were unintentional because there was no sense of indulgence here where a person said after the fashion of Mardi Gras today, "Let's sin today, for atonement comes tomorrow." The High Priest entered once a year bringing with him the cleansing and atoning element of blood as his means of limited access to God.

But this cleansing was external, according to the preacher. The blood of animals was only sufficient for an external cleansing. It did not cleanse the conscience. The preacher is not against external rituals, nor is he depreciating them. Rather, he is only recognizing that the tabernacle system was a copy of the original pattern (the heavenly tabernacle). He recognizes that animal sacrifices are not sufficient to cleanse people from their sins. Thus, the tabernacle ministry and regulations (including food, drink and regular immersions in water [the term "washing" is the term baptism, which refer to Levitical washings for ritual cleansing in the Mosaic system, (cf. Leviticus 14:8-9; 15:5-11, 13, 16, 18, 21-22, 27; 16:4, 24, 26, 28; 17:15; 22:6) served external functions. Literally, they could not "perfect" the human conscience.

## ***Theological Summary***

So you get the picture. The people have no access to the Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. Someone else has to go in their behalf. The people and the priests are denied access to the Most Holy Place. Only one person can fully enter the presence of God. He can enter only one time a year and this only with provisions of blood to atone for his own sins and the sins of the people.

But then our preacher explains one more huge limitation in the shadow sanctuary:

*“The 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. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (9:8-10).*

The preacher does not rehearse this point as a “put down” of the tabernacle. He does not denigrate the tabernacle ministry or treat it with contempt. Instead he honors it. He reminds us that it was a “Holy Place” with a “Most Holy Place.” It was the presence of God among the people. It was God’s gracious presence through atonement (“atonement cover”). Instead of lowering the meaning of the tabernacle, the preacher reminds them of its meaning and place. He gives it a high meaning in order to point to something higher!

God placed his presence among his people at the tabernacle (Leviticus 26:11-12). He dwelt among them, and the tabernacle was his dwelling place. As a holy place, it was approached with reverence and holiness. Consequently, it had worship regulations or liturgical rituals. These rituals conveyed the holiness of God and guided the approach of humans into God’s presence.

Americans do not understand the holiness of rituals. Our sitcoms constantly use the name of God as a synonym for “Wow!” as in “Oh, my God!” We do not understand holiness. Instead, we have made the holy mundane instead of making all of life holy.

However, by rehearsing these details for his audience, the preacher appeals to their sense of awe, reverence and holiness. The tabernacle was a mighty work of God among his people. It was his gracious presence.

Theologically, I would emphasize several points. One is the dwelling of God is now in the hearts of human beings (cf. “law in the heart” of Jeremiah 31 in the last chapter). God now dwells in his people; we are the temple of God (2 Corinthians 6:14-16 which quotes Leviticus 26:11-12). The function of the Mosaic tabernacle has now found fulfillment by God’s indwelling of us by the Spirit.

Also, the ritual regulations in the Mosaic tabernacle presented a barrier between God and his people. Only priests could enter the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place. God, though dwelling among his people, was still separated from them. There was a distance between God and his people. However, in Christ this distance has been overcome as we enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:9-25). We enter the throne room of God through prayer (Hebrews 4:16). The distance has been broken down. Nevertheless, we still wait to see God face to face when we will see him in the new heaven and new earth when God will fully dwell with his people (Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-6).

Third, though the Mosaic tabernacle was the presence of God among his people, the regulations (including animal sacrifices) were only copies and thus could not fully cleanse and perfect the people of God. However, the blood of Christ can, and this is the subject of chapter nine.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

Our high priest who is on duty both continuously and forever is ministering in the heavenly sanctuary. The earthly things of Aaron’s ministry in a perishable structure fade by comparison to the realities of Christ’s intercessory for his people now.

Remember, for the Hebrew preacher, Scripture is a Living Word revealing the will of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is revealing to his present day audience what all of that limited access means in their time. Access to the sanctuary, access to the presence of God, is not disclosed as long as the first tent is standing. As long as access is denied to all but the priests, the rest of us have no access. Here is the heart of the problem with limited access: those gifts and offerings and sacrifices being delivered on our behalf cannot cleanse the conscience of the worshipper. For the preacher in Hebrews, “*conscience*” is that combination of heart and mind that God promised to make whole in the new covenant spoken by Jeremiah. We heard those words in chapter eight:

*“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (8:10).*

Rather than the people living at a distance from God, where the rituals of the priests and the high priest of the tabernacle deal with us humans from the outside; where others perform on our behalf so that there never is more direct contact with living presence, the preacher believes a new day has dawned. That was his proclamation at the end of chapter nine: Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

As long as the first tent stands and we live in a shadow world of limited access, then we have forgiveness, but it's always one sin at a time, complete with rituals and practices that do indeed offer forgiveness but never that “inside-out” cleansing of the whole person of God. The world of limited access and performance by a few on behalf of the many is the world of *“food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.”* It's not difficult to see the preacher's point in this direction. Without doubt, the limited access provided in those days was better than no access at all. Having someone who could at least get close enough to God often enough to provide for some forgiveness was better than no forgiveness. The preacher is not against external rituals, nor is he depreciating them. Rather, he is only recognizing that the tabernacle system was a copy of the original pattern (the heavenly tabernacle). He recognizes that animal sacrifices are not sufficient to cleanse people from their sins. Thus, literally, they could not “perfect” the human conscience.

As long as the first tent stood we lived in a shadow world of limited access. As a matter of fact, there is some human satisfaction in the limited access approach. Other people deal with God for me, I don't have to do it myself. I have some formulaic prescriptions that, if I observe them I get the benefit of God's forgiveness on a periodic basis. I have a short list of activities that I can do that cover me, protect me from God's wrath most of the time at least. Forgiveness is all about my performance and the performance of the people who have a bit more access than I do. Experience a cleansing ritual like baptism, eat a ceremonial meal every now and then, go hang around the sanctuary regularly. That's about all that I can do.

I hope my satire is bleeding through here. I have a terrible fear that we humans often prefer limited access! We are in charge! We have limited responsibilities. Get

baptized, eat the right kind of bread, drink the right kind of drink, pray or get somebody else to pray for us, and that's about all we can do. Even with an umbrella of grace, we prefer that which we are in charge of, a limited set of rules and regulations and performances that we do that make us feel good about ourselves. Better yet – and this was true in the days of the Tabernacle and Temple as well – we know that our performance gets us closer than “those people.” Our access is not as limited as theirs. Our limited access gives us exclusive privileges. Our under-standings and practices, we think, makes us better than they are.

There is still the glaring problem, our preacher says, of the uncleansed conscience. “I think I’m going to heaven ... I hope so...if I live right and pray right...I’m pretty sure I’m going to heaven...” It’s not just the lack of assurance; it is also a false notion of God’s absence. I actually believe that God is only around me when I choose to be around him.

Without unlimited access God will not fully come to us and we cannot fully come to him. You see, that was the fatal thinking at times for Israel. It wasn’t just their limited access to God. It was a reversal of thought that believed limited access was somehow a two-way street. That God’s access to the thoughts and intents of their hearts was also limited.

The perfect high priest has entered the throne room on our behalf, the preacher says. There is now unlimited access! The question is, do we really want it ourselves? Do we really want the rest of humanity to share in it with us?

The preacher provides strength for the journey by pointing his hearers to something better. What Israel had was good – God was present in his Holy Place, but what God now provided is better. If we let go of this, there is nothing left. If we forsake Christ, there is no other sacrifice for sin. Jesus has brought us into the heavenly tabernacle and if we forsake the journey there is nowhere else to go.

## ENDNOTES

1. Moffatt, James, 1957. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Edinburgh: T.&T, Clark.
2. Patterson, R.D., 1988. *The Expositor’s Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan and Zahn, Theodor, 1973 reprint. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Vol. 2. Minneapolis, MN: Klock and Klock.

## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

## CHAPTER 11

### *Hebrews 9:11-10:18*

## LOOKING TO JESUS: THE PERFECT SACRIFICE

Once when I was a student I recall with uncommon vividness an English professor expressing amused horror at the lines of William Cowper's great hymn:

*"There is a fountain filled with blood  
 Drawn from Immanuel's veins;  
 And sinners, plunged beneath that blood,  
 Lose all their guilty stains:  
 Lose all their guilty stains,  
 Lose all their guilty stains;  
 And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
 Lose all their guilty stains."*

Then for a few minutes my professor condescendingly reflected on these primitive sentiments (swimming in a fountain of blood, dog-paddling among the clots!) which were still so prevalent in Restoration and Augustan English. The professor used such phrases as "slaughterhouse religion" and the "Bible thumpers." I could feel myself flushing as crimson at the despised fountain. But as an outsider (and the professor was definitely on the outside!), he did have a point. The Old Testament sacrificial system, which provides the pre-figurement for Christ's sacrifice, was a gory affair indeed! During the thousand plus years of the old covenant, there were more than a million animal sacrifices. So considering each bull's sacrifice spilled a gallon or two of blood, and each goat a quart, the old covenant truly rested on a sea of blood. During the Passover, for example, a trough was constructed from the temple down into the Kidron Valley for the disposal of blood – a sacrificial plumbing system!



Why the perpetual sea of blood? For one main reason – to teach sin demands the shedding of blood. This in no way suggests blood itself atones for sins *ex opera operato* (otherwise sacrifices would have been bled rather than killed), but it does demonstrate sin both brings and demands death. Steaming blood provided the sign – even the smell – of the old covenant.

Sin brings death ... sin brings death ... sin brings death.

The devout worshipper of the old covenant came with a definite awareness, first, that sin requires death – second, that such a sacrifice required a spirit of repentance – third, that he was pleading the mercy of God – and fourth, in some cases, that a great sin-bearer was coming (cf. Psalm 22; Isaiah 53).

Of course, the old covenant system was flawed in that, by design, it could only deal with sins of ignorance (9:7) and could never completely clear one's conscience (9:9). But then came Jesus with the new covenant in his own blood – a superior blood sacrifice that completely atoned for sins (9:12) and completely cleared the conscience (9:14). Jesus was no uncomprehending unwilling animal, but rather a perfect God-man who consciously set his will to atone for our sins. He is therefore a superior Savior and priest. The old priesthood was the shadow – he is the substance – cleansing both *sin* and *conscience*.

This understood, the logic of verse 15 and following becomes clear:

*“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 died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.”*

In Hebrews 9:11-10:18, the preacher reaches the climax of his argument concerning the high priesthood of Jesus. The argument intends to ground the faith and hope of the people of God as a means of providing strength for their journey to-ward the city of God. He grounds the faith of his people in the high priestly sacrifice of Jesus and his presentation of that sacrifice in the heavenly sanctuary.

## ***Exegesis of Text***

The Mosaic Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) is the immediate backdrop for the preacher's words. He intentionally describes the work of Christ as the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Some familiarity with Leviticus 16 would be helpful:

The day was dedicated to fasting and rest (Leviticus 23:32) and apparently announced with trumpets throughout the land (Leviticus 25:9), which reflected the people's sorrow and mourning for their sin. The high priest would immerse himself (wash his whole body) before he put on the sacred garments when on other days of ritual he would only wash his hands/feet (Leviticus 16:4 with Exodus 30:19-21). The special garments symbolized holiness.

The day involved two sets of sacrifices. For his own house (the Aaronic priesthood), he offered a young bull as a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering (Leviticus 16:3, 5). He offered these first. Two goats were prepared for the sins of the people. However, the priesthood had to be sanctified before it could offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

With a censer full of burning coals, the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place. He placed some incense on the coals, which created a smoke that filled the Most Holy Place. This smoke would prevent him from seeing the mercy seat (cf. Leviticus 16:3) for there was the presence of God himself (Leviticus 16:2). Once the smoke filled the room, he would bring the blood of the bull into the room and sprinkle it on the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:4). He would then go outside the tent to perform the "goat ritual."

One of the goats (chosen by lot) was sacrificed as a sin offering, but the other goat was released into the wilderness. The blood of the first goat was taken into the Most Holy Place. The High Priest thus entered twice into the Most Holy Place to sprinkle blood, but not on the same day. This purified the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 16:16). The goat released into the wilderness was sent with the sins of the people away from the dwelling-place of God and the people. The sins were laid on the goat through the laying on of hands (Leviticus 16:21-22). After this ritual, the High Priest again immersed himself and put on a new set of robes – his elaborate, ceremonial robes (Leviticus 16:24). Immersion rituals were important on this day, as you can see from Leviticus 16:26 and 28.

Once sin and defilement had been dealt with through the sin offerings and the scapegoat, the High Priest offered burnt offerings to dedicate the priesthood and the people to God once again (Leviticus 16:27).

### 1. Hebrews 9:11-14

William Lane calls this text the “heart of the preacher’s argument.” <sup>(1)</sup> Against the backdrop of the Mosaic tabernacle (described in 9:1-10), the preacher focuses his attention on Christ’s “Day of Atonement” (v. 11) when the High Priest enters the Most Holy Place with the blood of bulls and goats. These verses succinctly state the exalted view of the cross and his subsequent entrance into heaven (ascension) that the preacher wants to impress on his hearers.

Lane calls attention to the central continuity between Mosaic ritual and Christ and then outlines four points of discontinuity. The point of continuity is that Christ entered the Most Holy Place by means of blood to make atonement for the people. The points of discontinuity are: (1) Jesus entered a heavenly sanctuary rather than an earthly one; (2) Jesus approached God with his own blood rather than the blood of animals; (3) Jesus entered once for all rather than once a year; and (4) Jesus secured eternal redemption rather than annual cleansing. I would add one further discontinuity: Jesus cleanses the conscience rather than simply a function of external cleansing.

I think the purpose clause of verse 14 is particularly significant. We need cleansed consciences so that we might worship/serve the Living God. This is in contrast with Hebrews 9:9 where the worshipper is hindered by such. God effects atonement so that we might fully and intimately serve/worship him without restriction and restricted access. The “acts that lead to death” are the acts of sin (not Mosaic ritual; cf. Hebrews 6:2).

The reference to the “*eternal Spirit*” is a bit elusive. Some think it refers to Jesus’ own eternal spirit by which, by his eternal life, he offered his own death to the Father. However, since the word “Spirit” is used in Hebrews of the Holy Spirit and never in reference to Jesus’ own spirit, it is probably best to think of this in terms of the qualifying and empowering work of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the eternal Spirit of God, Jesus lives to offer himself to the Father and sit at his right hand. Eternal redemption is rooted in the eternal life of God whose Spirit is the power and agent of the work of the Son.

## 2. Hebrews 9:15-22

Eternal redemption secures an eternal inheritance. As the redemption and inheritance fulfill the Mosaic covenant and are the reality to which they point, there is a need for a new covenant. Jesus is the mediator of this new covenant – the real covenant, not the shadow.

The reality even is the reality that forgave the sins under the shadow. The preacher claims that the sins, which were forgiven in the Mosaic rituals, were actually forgiven on the basis of the reality, not the shadow. The people of Israel experienced real forgiveness (Psalm 32, 51), but their forgiveness was based on the reality of the work of Christ. The blood of Jesus also forgave sins under the old covenant (cf. Romans 3:25-26). Israel experienced that forgiveness through the shadow (through the rituals), but the reality of their forgiveness was not based on the shadow (blood of animals). Nevertheless, the reality of forgiveness is through a blood ritual, the blood of Jesus our high priestly victim. The new covenant is the reality to which the old covenant pointed.

The preacher digresses in verses 16:22 to explain why the death of Christ was necessary. It was necessary not only because of the need for a blood ritual, but also because a covenant (*will* - same word in Greek in this section) is placed into effect through death. The preacher uses the ambiguity of the Greek word for “covenant” to connect the death of Christ with both covenant-making by blood ritual and also “testament” (*will*) enactment after the death of the testator (the one who made the will). The new covenant is effected by a sacrificial death that makes a new covenant and which is put into effect (the reality is manifested and secured) after the death of the testator.

## 3. Hebrews 9:23-28

Just as the Mosaic covenant was enacted with blood, so the new covenant was enacted with blood precisely because the Mosaic action was a copy (shadow) of the true (real). Moses patterned his actions after the real, the reality is the death of Christ.

The preacher returns to his Day of Atonement analogy in terms of shadow and reality. Jesus entered the heavenly tabernacle – this is the reality. This is what secures redemption. The preacher focuses on the discontinuities of the old and new in order to exalt the new – he does not intend to denigrate the old. Rather, salvation

history has come to completion with the revelation and actualization of what is decisively redemptive – the work of Christ on the cross and in the presence of God.

That work is viewed in terms of past, present, and future – cross, now in the presence of God interceding for us, and coming again. The fullness of our redemption will only be revealed in the end – that will be the ultimate reality (salvation). The certainty of Christ’s work and ultimate victory in the second coming is as certain as death itself!

The beautiful truth of Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice of himself on our behalf is affirmed here. Jesus is both the one offering the sacrifice and the sacrifice that was offered.

William Lane divides this section into four parts – the last part responds to the first part, and the third part responds to the second part in a chiasmic fashion. He sees the following chiasmic relationship:

- A The inadequacy of the provisions of the Law for repeated sacrifices for sin (10:1-4).**
  - B The repeated sacrifices have been set aside by one sacrifice of Christ who did the will of God (10:5-10).**
  - B’ The Levitical priests have been set aside by the one priest enthroned at God’s right hand (10:11-14)**
- A’ The adequacy of the provisions of the new covenant: a sacrifice for sins is no longer necessary (10:15-18).**

This arrangement enables the reader to see the climatic point of how the preacher brings his argument about covenant, sacrifice and priesthood to final conclusion. The next section (10:19ff) is an exhortation or an encouragement based upon this extended argument (7:1-10- 10:18).

## **1. Hebrews 10:1-4**

The word the preacher uses to describe how “continuously” or “endlessly” the sacrifices are offered to purify worshippers is the same word that is used to describe the work or the intercession of Christ in Hebrews 10:12 and 10:14. The phrase “*for all time*” in 10:12 and the word “*forever*” in 10:14 are the same in

Greek. The theology of this connection is powerful. What the Law did continually in reminding us of sin, Jesus did “for all time” by one sacrifice so that we are “forever” perfected by that sacrifice. In contrast to an annual reminder of sin, we have, by virtue of Christ’s “for all time” sacrifice, the status of eternal (“forever”) perfection!

This perfection is the reality that Jesus accomplishes – it was what the Law foreshadowed but could not accomplish. The blood of bulls and goats (Day of Atonement) was not sufficient to dispel the memory of sin and guilt.

The preacher uses two words to describe the effect he wants to underscore – perfection (10:1) and memory (reminder; or “feelings of guilt” in 10:2). This is equivalent to the cleansed conscience of 9:14. But “*perfection*” is the word the preacher emphasizes in this section. The term “perfect” occurs again in 10:12 and 10:14. Thus, the term “perfect” and “endlessly” are connected in the same verses three times.

## 2. Hebrews 10:5-10

The preacher brings another Psalm into his argument. He quotes Psalm 40:6-8 in Hebrews 10:5-7, and then quotes parts of it again in Hebrews 10:8-9.

The context of Psalm 40 is important. It is a prayer for deliverance (Ps. 40:11, 14). In the prayer, the Psalmist recognizes God’s interest is primarily on transformed life, a heart of obedience. God is not interested in sacrifices, even though he commands them. God’s interest in ritual is how it mediates his presence through the heart of a person who seeks him. To obey is better than sacrifice (cf. 1 Samuel 15:22).

The preacher, however, picks up a phrase that is not in the Hebrew Old Testament, but is in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The word “*body*” in Hebrews 10:5 does not appear in Hebrew (the Hebrew reads: “*you have pierced my ears*” which refers to belonging to God as a servant). The preacher uses the word “*body*” to connect the Psalm to the theology of the incarnation. When Christ came into the world, he was given a body – a body through which to sacrifice himself, but – more importantly – a body through which to do the will of God as obedient Son. It is through the “body” of the Son that we have been “made holy.”

The body of Christ means our sanctification (holiness). We have been sanctified (made holy) by the sacrifice of the body, which is Christ's obedience to the will of God. The term "holy" will appear again in 10:14.

### **3. Hebrews 10:11-14**

The contrast between the Levitical priests and Jesus is strong in this text. While they continually sacrifice, Jesus has made an eternal sacrifice once for all and is now seated at the right hand of God. The priestly image is also shaped by a royal image – Jesus is seated as a royal figure who conquers enemies. He will sit there till all the enemies of God are destroyed.

In this context, the enemy is sin and guilt. The perfected one now sits at the right hand of God as he reigns over and intercedes for those who are being made holy. The word "holy" is a present passive – it indicates a process of transformation. The people of God have been made holy (10:10), but are also in the process of being made holy (10:14). It is both/and, not either/or. We are saints, but yet in the process of being sanctified. We are cleansed, but in the process of transformation. We are forgiven, but yet in the process of learning obedience just as the Son learned obedience. I see this as an allusion to the process of sanctification (contra Guthrie, p. 239).

### **4. Hebrews 10:15-18**

This section reintroduces the quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 which the preacher introduced in Hebrews 8:8-12. He does not quote the full text again, but emphasizes two aspects of the text.

The first emphasis is on the nature of the new life in the new covenant – it is a transformed life by virtue of the presence of God in our hearts. God has written his law on our hearts so that we might understand him and obey him. The second emphasis is on the nature of forgiveness – it is a decisive cleansing of the conscience so that even God no longer remembers our sin. If God no longer remembers it, then we need not remember it either. Sin is gone and life is transformed by the work of Christ.

## ***Theological Summary***

Theologically, it is important to remember the preacher does not think of the cross of Christ in isolation from his entrance into heaven. The cross, ascension (assumed resurrection), and presentation in the presence of God is one movement with three parts. We should think of this as a unified whole. The living Christ presents his own blood in the presence of God for our redemption. Too often evangelicals emphasize the death of Christ to the undervaluing of the redemptive significance of the resurrection and ascension.

The preacher believes the altar (sacrifice of the blood in the death of Christ) is useless without the presentation of that blood by the living priest in the heavenly sanctuary. The two must go together. It is one movement – it must be conceived holistically. Death and Resurrection are the gospel, and the preacher conceives the resurrection, at least in part, as the means for the living Christ to present his sacrifice to the Father through entrance into the Most Holy Place, the dwelling-place of God.

That living Christ presented his blood to the Father and remained at the side of the Father (at his right hand), and will remain there until he appears again at his second coming. The preacher reflects a grand vision of redemptive history: the Son comes, offers himself as a sacrificial victim, through resurrection life presents his own blood to the Father, remains at the right hand of the Father to intercede for his people, and then comes again to bring fullness of salvation. This is the preacher's understanding of salvation history.

The Mosaic covenant prefigured it. It was a shadow, a pointer to that reality. It led the people to that reality. But the reality is the work of the Son through incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession and second coming. Christology is his soteriology; it is the fulfillment of Mosaic yearnings, pointings and anticipations. It is the reality of salvation; the eternal Son brings eternal redemption through his eternal priesthood. The Son appeared at the “end of the ages” and his return will be the consummation of the age as we experience the fullness of salvation. We are in the “last days” anticipating the “last day” – the day of eternal salvation.

The theological significance is: This is a thorough cleansing – it cleanses the heart of guilty stains. Our defiled consciences hinder worship. They hinder relationship with God. Our guilt burdens us and prevents a full intimacy with God. However, the blood of Jesus cleanses those guilty stains as the hymn of William Cowper states.



Jewish sources tell us though the day begun with solemnity and penitence (fasting), it ended with joy and celebration in the recognition God had atoned their sins. Israel rejoiced at the re-emergence of the High Priest from the Most Holy Place – it was a dangerous journey into the presence of God that was concluded with great joy when he reappeared.

God's goal for his fallen creatures is to provide a "perfect cleansing" for their consciences. His goal is the perfection of his people, which involves both (1) a conscience cleansed of guilty stains – where there is no remembrance of sin, and (2) a heart upon which God has written his law so that life reflects God's holiness.

Theologically, Christ offered himself through the eternal Spirit to secure eternal redemption so that worshippers could enter God's presence with cleansed consciences (9:14). This once for all action meant Christ is seated at the right hand of God in God's presence for us (9:24) so we can approach God without guiltiness and without the hindrance of guilty memories. Annual sacrifices reminded worshippers of their guilt (10:4), but the work of Christ means guilt is no longer a factor. It has been decisively eradicated and the consciences of worshippers has been cleansed (forgiveness) and renewed (law written on the heart).

The theological center of this text is the obedience of Jesus. Twice the "*I have come to do your will*" text of Psalm 40 is quoted in reference to Jesus. This emphasis should not be overlooked. Jesus became the author of eternal salvation through obedience (Hebrews 5:8). This salvation, however, is for those who obey God, that is, who persevere in faith and follow their champion on his path of an obedient life (Hebrews 5:9).

The work of Christ makes us holy – he has perfected us through his sacrifice (10:14). This sacrifice means we are forgiven (no more memory of sin; no more guilty stains, 10:17) and that God's law is engraved on our hearts so we may obey (so we can persevere through the suffering; 10:16). The obedience of Christ (who does the will of God) is followed by our own obedience because of the work Christ has done and continues to do for us. Our obedience is rooted in his obedience. He has done the will of God so we can do the will of God. He obeyed so we can obey. He inaugurated a new covenant where the law of God is written on our hearts and our hearts are fully cleansed of guiltiness. Our obedience (perseverance in faith) does not arise out of a motive of guilt or fear. Rather, it arises out of a cleansed heart as God has worked in Christ to renew our hearts by his Spirit. He has written the law on our hearts, and our obedience arises out of that heart.

Because of renewed and forgiven hearts, we can persevere in faith. We can progress, grow and mature. Because of God's work in Christ, we can enter the presence of God with confidence and without fear or guilt. The work of Christ prepares, emboldens and reshapes our hearts for the journey. It strengthens us for the journey.

Perseverance requires two things, at least in this text: (1) it requires a cleansed conscience along with an understanding of what and how it is rooted in the work of Christ alone; and (2) it requires the resolve to do the will of God despite the suffering and problems of life, yet with an understanding the desire and obedience arises from God's work in our hearts. Perseverance is by obedient faith, but obedient faith is rooted in God's gracious work in Christ.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

*"I will remember their sins no more"* (verse 17). So, can an omniscient, all powerful God somehow mysteriously pull the plug on all he knows and not know some things anymore? For us creatures made in his image, he didn't make us that way. Sure, I forget incredible amounts of information every day. I forget appointments even when I put them on my phone; I forget to look at my phone! I've forgotten huge masses of information in the course of my life. I'm terrible with remembering people's names. Yes, there are those instances where whole memories are lost. Sometimes individuals suffer the trauma of amnesia; we know too well the memory losses that come with aging, senility and Alzheimer's.

But there are some things I wish I could forget, yet they always find a way of coming back to mind. There are images I wish I could forget; stories and circumstances that I try to forget. My sins are like that. Oh, I forget the minor stuff pretty fast – the slanderous thought about some driver that cuts me off in traffic – maybe it's not that I forget, it's that they happen so frequently I can't keep them straight! I forget most of the incidents in my life that I wished at the time I had behaved better or differently. But there are other experiences, the deep ones, the secret ones, the ones I need others not to know in the first place. I remember the sins of shame. I remember the really embarrassing ones that make me cringe inside whenever they come back to the surface again. Most of the time I can keep them buried, out of mind's sight. But then they reappear with crushing force.

I especially remember the recurring ones, the sins that were/are such a struggle to overcome. Some are like those nightmares I had when I was a very small child. I can't tell you any details about a single dream or nightmare I've had in the last 70 years; but I can still recall with vivid detail some recurring nightmares from early childhood (when I was 3 or 4 years old). I can still picture in my mind the awful, horrible monsters that would try to attack me at night.

For a second time in a lengthy section that began back in chapter seven, the preacher in Hebrews quotes these very affirming and comforting words from Jeremiah about the days of the new covenant. The day has arrived, he keeps claiming. In Jesus Messiah, God has decisively acted to put his laws on human hearts, to write them on human minds rather than on tablets of stone. Twice the preacher reiterates the promise of God, *"I will remember their sins no more."* The context of this assertion is the conclusion of an ongoing comparison the preacher has been making between the activity of priests and the high priest in service to the Tent of Meeting as described in chapters nine and ten, the preacher contrasts the forgiveness of sins God provided the people through sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement and the once-for-all-sacrifice of Jesus.

Their obstacles were not our obstacles. Theirs were borne out of suffering already being endured. Ours most often comes from false images we create for our material world, our earthly circumstances. I remember a lady having the honesty one time to tell me she had absolutely no desire to go to heaven or to pray, "Lord, come quickly," because she could not imagine any circumstance of existence being better than her current reality. She was happily married, had wonderful children, great friends, plenty of money, great house, great church experiences – it couldn't get any better than this. Three years later, when her husband had an affair and left her for the other woman, and her world crumbled around her in every possible way, and when church life disintegrated because they didn't tolerate divorce, she walked away from church and God – an angry, bitter woman.

The preacher knows his audience must believe the reality of full access to God is a journey from Shadowland to the heavenly realm. They must believe that any losses incurred in Shadowland are worth the glories of the heavenly realm. They must believe even when it does not seem so now, their access to God already is assured because of the once-for-all activity of Jesus. They must live as people with a perfected conscience, rather than as people constantly aware of their sins. The awareness of full access is not a get-out-of-jail free card. It is not a decision by

God to simply see Jesus every time he looks at us. Yes, I know the power of that image and it is absolutely true that our righteousness is his righteousness. It is not our own. We are the recipients of covenant promise through his death and resurrection and exaltation. Unlimited access has to do both with seeing and being seen. It is not a matter of me continuing to live and sin but it's okay now because God only sees Jesus. Sin still blocks my sight of God. The promise of a cleansed conscience means the power to see as well as be seen. And when our eyes are on God, when our eyes are fixed on Jesus, the one through whom we now can see God, there is indeed strength for the journey.

Consequently, don't give up the journey. Continue to persevere in faith. Your redemption is an eternal one; your inheritance is an eternal one. When Christ comes a second time, your salvation will be fully revealed and the kingdom of God (the fullness of reality) will be yours.

Does God remember my sins? Somehow I don't think that Jeremiah or the preacher in Hebrews think, much like that little flashlight in the movie, "Men in Black," that whenever one flashes the light there is an instant mind-wipe that erases memories. It is not that memories of God or our own memories suddenly disappear, but they are transformed. Their power to separate us from God has forever been removed. Their power to haunt and frighten are destroyed. They become tools on the journey of faith and sight. Past failures are freed to become good teachers rather than shameful nightmares.

I can still see in my mind those monsters that used to attack me in my bedroom in the night. But I've learned they were only shadows, shadows cast by my own movements. Shadows that have no power to change anything they touch. Shadows that no longer hold any power to frighten or terrorize. Now I smile as I remember and I am so thankful to have moved on! Is it time for you to leave Shadowland as well?

## ENDNOTES

1. Lane, p. 120.
2. Ibid, p. 130



## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 12

#### *Hebrews 10:19-39*

#### SO WHAT?

This question, “So what?” was my doctoral professor’s favorite question to ask me at the end of any research study. So, he would say, “You have run the study, gathered the data, arrived at conclusions – So what?” It was an invaluable question. Though we do not know who the author of Hebrews was, we do know he was a preacher with flaming pastoral instincts. He did not do theology for theoretical ends, but rather for down-to-earth, practical purposes. So we come here to the great turning point in Hebrews where the writer turns from the explanation of the superiority of the person and work of Christ to the application of it in the lives of the storm-tossed church. The shift can be stated in various ways: from doctrine to duty, from creed to conduct, from precept to practice, from instruction to exhortation, all of which mean one thing – the writer becomes very explicit regarding how Christians ought to live.

In Pauline style, this section begins with a “*therefore*” of spiritual implication from the great doctrinal foundation that has been laid through 10:18. For one who embraces the superiority of Jesus over all that has gone before, the writer/preacher begins driving home the practical implications of this great truth for the life that is lived by faith.

The argument is now complete. Jesus is a better priest, a better sacrifice, a better mediator of a better covenant who secures for us eternal redemption and an eternal inheritance by virtue of his eternal priesthood. Our postmodern minds respond with the question, “so what”?

In this section the preacher brings the point home and applies the significance of Jesus to the lives of his original hearers. In particular, he articulates the theological significance of the priesthood of Jesus for the life of the Christian community. Specifically, he encourages his hearers to persevere in their faith as a community because of the significance of what Jesus has done for us.

Our section begins with the confidence of entering the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus and ends with an appeal for perseverance in faith. This confidence enables perseverance. Faith draws strength for the journey through recognition of what Jesus has done and from the communal experience of faith in the past and present.

### ***Exegesis of Text***

This section consists of four paragraphs. It moves the reader from the present situation of the community (10:19-25) with a warning about potential apostasy (10:26-31) to their past experience of faith (10:32-34) with an encouragement concerning their future (10:35-39).

#### **1. Hebrews 10:19-25**

This is perhaps one of the theologically richest (which is quite a claim considering how many there are in Hebrews) and also well most well-known texts in Hebrews. It is well known because it contains a favorite proof-text about assembling, but it is rich because it calls for communal worship in the divine presence in the context of a life dedicated to God.

We have confidence (boldness; cf. 3:6; 4-16; 10:35) to enter the Most Holy Place. It is not only the High Priest who now enters the Most Holy Place (the divine presence), but believers enter it as well. The body of Christ (10:14) has opened a new way for us – it has opened the curtain that separated God from his people. Now the people of God have immediate access to the Father through Jesus. We all enter the Most Holy Place.

Given this opening, this access, the preacher encourages his hearers to “draw near” to God. The term “*draw near*” is important (cf. Hebrews 4:16; 7:25; 10:1; 11:6; 12:18, 22). It is an Old Testament liturgical term that refers to the coming of a worshipper. It means to come before God (cf. Lev. 9:5, 7, 8; 10:4-5; 21:17, 18, 21, 23). We come into the presence of God through Jesus (Hebrews 7:25). To draw near is to experience divine presence as a worshipper.

This access is characterized by several phrases. Worshipers enter the presence of God with assured and sincere hearts as our hearts have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ and our bodies have been washed in baptism.

- A sincere (true, cf. Isaiah 38:3) heart, that is, no divided allegiance; we approach God with our hearts.
- In full assurance of faith, that is, without doubt but with confidence, it is an assurance that flows from faith.
- Hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience; a purged conscience (Hebrews 9:14; 10:2) through the sprinkled blood of Jesus (blood is sprinkled, not water; cf. 9:19-22; 12:24).
- Bodies washed with pure water; the term “*washed*” is used of Old Testament water immersions (cf. Lev. 8:6; 11:40; 14:8, 9; 15:5-8, etc.) as on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:4, 24, 26, 28). It is “pure water” in that it is water that is cleansing – it cleanses the body as the blood cleanses the soul. This is reference to Christian baptism.

The preacher also encourages two other actions. Not only to “*draw near*,” but also to “*hold unswervingly to our hope*” and to “*consider how we may spur one another to love and good works*.” The encouragement is to remain a community – to hold together around the hope and love of the community in the light of the confidence we have in Jesus. These encouragements must be read in the light of the community’s apathy, neglect and discouragement. The preacher’s encouragement is rooted in what Jesus has done, and this is the demonstration of God’s faithfulness. Because God is faithful and because God has acted in Jesus, we hold onto our hope without wavering.

The preacher encourages his hearers to pay attention to each other – to consider each other, to fix our eyes on each other. We are to provoke – stir the pot – each other to love and good works. The community is a source of encouragement rather than discouragement, and encouragement comes in the context of assembling together.

Hebrews 10:25 is one of those favorite proof-texts for assembling, as if to miss any assembly of the saints is to violate the point here. However, what concerns the preacher is the “habit” of some – the continual rejection and neglect of those who no longer assemble with the saints. To “*forsake*” the assembly is to give up meeting with the church all together. The term is a word for “apostasy” in Chronicles (cf. 2 Chr. 7:19, 22; 12:1, 5; 13:10, 11; 15:2; 21:10; 24:18, 20, 24, 25; 29:6; 32:21; 34:25). The term is used in Hebrews 13:5 as a promise that God will not forsake (abandon) his people. The preacher is referring to apostates here, not those who occasionally miss an assembly or simply never come to Wednesday evening.



What the preacher is concerned about is that assembling is something saints do more often because of the benefit of the assembling together in the presence of God (as we draw near) is encouragement. I imagine the preacher would likely like daily assemblies (cf. Hebrews 3:13).

Interestingly, 10:22-24 contains the triad of faith, hope, and love. We draw near with faith, preserve with hope and encourage each other with love. The community hangs together and gains strength for the journey.

## **2. Hebrews 10:26-31**

The warning against apostasy should be heard in the context of the whole sermon. It is occasioned by the habit of some to forsake the assembly, that is, their willful rejection of the assembly of God's people. The "sin" the preacher has in mind is not one act of missing an assembly, or a single act of sin, but the persistent habit of sin that arises out of a willful rejection of God's appointed time. This is the sin of one who has rejected the Christian faith as a whole. If one persists in this sin, then there is no other sacrifice; there is no hope.

The preacher uses the argument from lesser to greater to emphasize this point. If willful sinners did not escape punishment under the Mosaic Law, then they will certainly not escape punishment if they have rejected God's Son and Spirit. The words used here are quite vivid. They "*trample*" (cf. Isaiah 63:6, 18) the Son of God, that is, they treat him with contempt (which is in contrast with how the Father has exalted him) and regard his blood as "*unclean*" (NIV reads "*unholy*"). They "*insult*" the Spirit of grace, that is, their rebellion constitutes an affront, an offense. They insult the graciousness of God by rejecting the work of God in Christ.

The same context where God promises he will not forsake his people in Deuteronomy 31:6 (quoted in Hebrews 13:5) is also the same context in which God says he will judge and punish his people in Deuteronomy 32:36-36 (quoted in Hebrews 10:30-31). Those who forsake God, God will forsake. If we abandon the Christian faith and sin deliberately, then God will judge his people for their sins. Judgment is certain, and thus the text constitutes a warning against apostasy.

### **3. Hebrews 10:32-34**

Strength for the journey not only arises from present confidence, but also from past experience. Consequently, the preacher reminds his hearers of their past perseverance. They have previously endured suffering as we learned in our first chapter.

Indeed, their struggle began during the first days of their conversion (enlightenment). They were exposed to derision and they lost property. Some were imprisoned.

It was a time when the church endured this suffering joyfully. They were secure in their faith and hope. They persevered. However, times have changed. Now the church is weak and apathetic. Some have fallen away and no longer assemble with the saints. Some have hardened their hearts. Consequently, the preacher recalls the past in order to encourage the believers who remain.

### **4. Hebrews 10:35-39**

The preacher encourages endurance and perseverance on the basis of the future, that is, on the ground of what God has promised. Given the confidence we have in Christ (10:19), we should not give up what we have because the future will bring “reward” – it will bring the “Sabbath” (Hebrews 4) or the “city of God” (Hebrews 11). God has yet to fully work his will and we anticipate the future.

God has a work to do. The preacher quotes Habakkuk 2:3-4. Habakkuk experienced a time of tribulation, much like the preacher’s audience here. Habakkuk was told to wait for the destruction that would come upon evil (cf. Hab. 3:16-19). The preacher calls for the same patience in his hearers. They will have to wait for God’s full revelation of himself when Jesus returns. They must wait through faith.

The preacher calls for faith – a continued, persistent trust in the work of God. This faith is not only in God’s past work in Jesus (cross, exaltation), but also God’s future work through Jesus (the second coming).

## ***Theological Summary***

The basic exhortation is to continue to believe. Through faith, draw near to God and enter his presence with confidence. Through faith, wait for God to work his final work as he judges the wicked and redeems the righteous. Through faith, patiently endure the suffering of the present time in light of the hope that sustains us.

This faith, however, has a communal context (“*let us*”). It is faith within a faith community. The preacher – speaking to a group of assembled believers – urges them to approach God as a community with faith, hope, and love. They should remember their past, claim their confidence in the present, and hope for the future work of God as a community. In the chapters to follow, the preacher will point to past examples of faith (11:1-40), understanding of the present experience of tribulation as discipline (12:1-14), and the presence of the future in the kingdom of God (12:15-29). All of this, of course, is to give strength for the journey; to continue the journey of faith despite the hardships which community presently endures.

Their confidence, of course, is the very thing that the preacher has sought to unfold up to this point in Hebrews. Their confidence is Jesus who, as High Priest, pioneered their way into the presence of God. This is the ground of perseverance in the present and ground of their future hope.

The exhortation to draw near (approach God liturgically), hold fast and stir each other up are grounded in the work of Christ, both past (cross/resurrection), present (intercession; presence at the right hand of God) and future (his second coming).

## ***Reflections and Exhortations***

One of my favorite films is *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings*. *The Fellowship of the Rings* tells the mythical story of how a fellowship of nine Middle Earth dwellers is created to bear the burden of the Ring. It is the account of a complex struggle between good and evil – and retains many of the Christian motifs found even more emphatically in J.R.R. Tolkien’s beloved trilogy.

The Ring is a metaphor for greed and the lust for power. It holds the potential for corrupting anyone it touches. The best candidate for resisting its temptation and for eventually destroying it appears to be young Frodo, a Hobbit who is pure of heart.

In a brief but critical scene of less than a minute, the sympathetic wizard (Gandalf the Grey) who is guiding young Frodo explains a critical truth: One cannot choose the events of his life, but he can choose how to react when they happen.

In the wake of a terrible battle in which one of his party has died, Frodo reflects on his horrible responsibility. “I wish the ring had never come to me,” says Frodo. “I wish none of this had happened.”

“So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide” the voice of Gandalf answers in his mind – repeating the dialogue from an earlier scene. “All of you have to decide what to do with the time that is given to you.” (1)

Surely people of every generation have thought the same thing about their life challenges. And each has had to choose between faith and unbelief in the hard challenge of moving ahead with life. To be honest, I think this scene fits very well with what is happening in the Epistle of Hebrews.

When Chrysostom was brought before the Roman emperor, the emperor threatened him with banishment if he remained a Christian. Chrysostom replied:

“You can not banish me for this world is my father’s house.” “But I will slay you,” said the emperor. “No, you can not,” said the noble champion of the faith, “for my life is hid with Christ in God.” “I will take away your treasures,” “no, but you can not for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there.” “But I will drive you away from man and you shall have no friend left.” “No, you can not, for I have a friend in heaven from whom you can not separate me. I defy you, for there is nothing you can do to hurt me.” (2)

It is that call to decide how to live at the moment that is indeed at the heart of the preacher’s concerns. Come to think of it, much of the Bible contains moments and decisions like that.

I learned when I was taking a drama class the basic structure of film story-telling. All stories have some common ingredients, beyond characters and plot. Most follow a main character through a series of events. We meet that character in the ordinary world, but events begin to unfold that tell us trouble is coming. When trouble arrives, there is crisis. Only when things can’t get any worse, there is insight or rescue, which in turn leads to affirmation.

It is easy to follow that “formula” in the adventure movies of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. Every person in the Star Wars adventures comes to life in this

scheme. Biblical stories are also quite consistent. Thus telling the Moses story is a natural for Steven Spielberg. Think of the Abraham story, or Joseph, or even the nation of Israel as a whole.

The story of Jesus is told this way, although there clearly are surprises interjected from the beginning so we know Jesus is by no means ordinary. At the same time, there is development of the story in predictable ways. In the gospels are early predictions that trouble is coming. The garden scene obviously is one of those dark-cave, crisis moments. The happy ending of resurrection and his departure so the Holy Spirit can come both completes his story and begins new stories.

When someone is reading the great narratives of either the Old or New Testaments, they grab you early, hold your attention through the times of challenge, and bring you to a powerful conclusion. Even when the punch line of the story isn't a "happy ending" – as with the Solomon story or the Judas story – there is always a "punch." You leave the text with a story in which you can see the potential for your own life story. Sometimes inspired, sometimes made reflective, but always made to think – that is a good story.

Hebrews isn't narrative. It is a preacher's sermon based on the sweep of biblical narrative. It is a homily and exhortation in which our preacher-writer draws on the story line of Israel's history as it comes to function and reach fulfillment in Jesus. He both assumes and reminds his hearer-readers of various features of that story in order to draw them into the drama.

I think he wants them to see the story is ongoing and they are to see themselves as characters in it. For that matter, the lives of those people in his audience are also an underlying narrative that runs through the sermon. Remember all of the hints we have heard in the past about their circumstances. The preacher fears they are on the edge of drifting away, of neglecting the great salvation they have received in Jesus. By this time in the maturing of their faith, they should be teaching others, but they still need to be instructed themselves. They run the risk of not entering God's promised rest, if they continue on the path they have apparently chosen. They risk crucifying the Son of God afresh through their behavior.

In our text in this chapter we learn more, both about those who are currently at risk and those who have been strong and faithful through extraordinary suffering and persecution. Just so we don't lose the story line here, let's go back to the section that begins at 4:14. Our preacher focuses on the major sub-plot in his sermon – hinted at in the line about Jesus as a "*merciful and faithful high priest in service to*

God” back at 2:17 – to the effect that our Melchizedekan High Priest has made a covenant change in order to meet our need for a final, complete sacrifice for sin, to secure a definite cleansing of conscience for us, and to “*perfect forever those who are being made holy*” (10:14) through his ministry.

In everything we have read from Hebrews 1:1 through the last chapter about “*the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*” (10:10), laws written now in believer’s hearts and on their minds (10:16), and forgiveness so absolute that there is no more need for atonement sacrifices (10:18), our Hebrews teacher has been laying the groundwork for a therefore-section that starts at 10:19. A logician would say the premises have been offered and the conclusion is about to be drawn. Or, if we keep in our theme of great narrative, he has introduced his characters, laid out the story-line, and is ready now to deliver the punch. In view of all that has gone before in Hebrews, we are about to find out what we are expected to take from this preacher’s sermon! So what is his conclusion?

When we arrive at this powerful “so what” section, the preacher wants to bring all that he has been taking about in those last four chapters with us:

- Because Jesus is our perfect high priest,
- because he has entered into the most holy place before us,
- because he has unconditionally one time for all time removed every obstacle that would block our own journey into the throne room of God,
- we now are invited to “*draw near with full assurance.*” To be drawn into the presence of God can only mean one attitude of mind and heart – worship. To draw near to God is to enter into full-time praise and worship of the Creator who has loved us and redeemed us and revealed himself to us in Jesus.

The preacher uses that trio of words that are so familiar to us in Paul: faith, hope, and love. “*Let us draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith (v. 22) ... Let us hold fast our confession of hope without wavering (v. 23) ... Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds (v. 24).*”

Faith and hope can be considered as individual attitudes, but love demands interaction with one another. To “*consider how to provoke one another to love*” demands communal living, out of which comes the ability to know what to say, how to act in encouraging ways. It is living and acting around one another in ways that bring out the best in one another. The continual outcome of this lifestyle in a

faith community is “good deeds” – not the good deeds of seeking salvation but the good deeds that bear witness to his presence and power among the saved.

All of that is still in the context of what it means to draw near to God. This is what worship “*in the meantime*” looks like. While we already have been invited to follow Jesus into the throne room, we find ourselves still on this side of the space-time continuum. Our journey toward God in worship is now this shared journey of faith, hope, and acted out in love. That is the context for the famous verse (25) about not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some.

Some people in the preacher’s audience no longer felt it necessary to be involved in the community life, the assembly life of the church. From his perspective, such estrangement from the community sabotages the whole project of drawing near to God. It is in the setting of community assembly we encourage one another and keep our eyes collectively on the end-goal. “*Encourage one another even more,*” he says, “*as you see the Day drawing near.*” Realize there is a very important sequencing of ideas regarding our worship in this exhortation. Our assembling together is the result of the larger life of drawing near to God (worship) that we otherwise are living out on the journey. The assembly is derivative of our life of worship rather than being the beginning point of worship.

Let me try that again. Our assemblies are not times and places where we go to worship, where worship starts at 8:15 or 9:45 or 11:15 and then worship stops when each assembly is dismissed. Worship is the life project for people of faith, hope, and love who have been invited into the throne room through the redeeming activity of Jesus. Drawing near to God is our way of life. Our assembling together to encourage one another, to share in that praise together for a time, is part of the larger whole. This time gives us clues about one another and about life lived fully in the presence of God in eternity.

Back in the days when we had to make sure we got every detail of human performance right in the assembly, (many of you will remember those days, I’m sure!) we created a series of false definitions about worship and then turned our worship practices into our faith. We tried to generate the rest of our Christian duties out of doing the assembly right. We then used Hebrews 10:25 as a club to make sure everyone was “going to church.” We were worried church members were “skipping church.”

That is backwards to the Hebrews preacher’s intent. It is the activity of Jesus that has opened our way into the throne room. We draw near with our entire lives. We

live within that God-sight every minute of every day. (Remember the point from the last chapter that the vision goes both ways? God sees us through the blood of Jesus, but we also see God from the vantage point of Christ's redemptive work.)

Worship is life – or, if you prefer, life is worship – and our community time together is a means by which we come to know one another well enough to love and encourage and perform acts of living kindness towards one another in the name of Jesus.

Church isn't buildings, budgets, and big numbers. Church isn't nickels, numbers, and nails. Church isn't checklist righteousness. Not for our preacher-writer, at least! For him, church is the experience of a nurturing community whose life is rooted in faith, hope, and love. Church is a guild or fraternity or partnership – pick the metaphor that gives you the clearest picture – in which our identity and unifying factor is faith in the Son, our sustaining factor is confident hope in his/our promise-keeping Father, and our decision-making and performance factor is love empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

What happens if one were to turn back from this community? What is the result for anyone who makes a commitment to follow Christ only to renege on her word? What will become of the person who confesses Christ only to turn back when the journey gets hard? Goes uphill? Meets strong opposition?

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay,*" and again, "*The Lord will judge his people.*" It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10:26-31).

I see no reason to think our writer-preacher believes in the "probability of apostasy." Anyone who comes to God through his Son has a merciful and faithful High Priest who is interceding for him constantly. He is on duty perpetually – not one day a year. His once-for-all-sacrifice is a matter of record in the true Holy of Holies he entered by his resurrection. By the power of an indestructible life, he lives forever to confess the names of those who have confessed him.



But ... on the other hand ... the assurance of grace notwithstanding ... in spite of the great love by which we have been redeemed ... over against the fact that we are indwelt by the very Spirit of God ... BUT ... God will not be mocked.

Heaven's "amazing grace" is not "cheap grace." Liberty is not license. Divine love is not mere sentimentality that has neither eyes nor backbone. The Holy Spirit can be grieved, resisted, even quenched by human presumption!

This text isn't a stick with which to beat people about church attendance. It is a hair-raising observation by our writer-preacher that some of the believers whom he was exhorting were exposing their unbelief, apostasy, and willful rejection of Jesus by having become dropouts to Christian assemblies. Spotty church attendance isn't his issue here. It is apostasy – as indicated by their being AWOL from the church's corporate life. The interpretive key here is less verse 25 than the second half of verse 29: His warning is to one "*one who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace.*"

He doesn't believe in the probability of apostasy as indexed by occasional absenteeism on Sunday morning or non-participation in Wednesday-night Bible classes. He does believe in the possibility of apostasy – the root of which is the deliberate rejection of God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus. Sometimes still the most obvious presenting evidence of a person's apostasy is he or she just drops out and disappears. I can imagine other evidences of apostasy from people who would never miss an assembly. Things ranging from Christianity's far left where clergy deny the historicity of the resurrection and thus have no through-the-veil high priest atonement for sin, to Christianity's far right where legalistic hair-splitting imposes norms and judgments that eviscerate the gospel of grace and make redemption our own achievement through conformity and accomplishment. In another of those lesser-to greater arguments (cf. 9:14), we are warned of both the certainty and severity of judgment for those who reject the work of God on our behalf that has come to its fullness in Christ Jesus. He says, in effect, this: if you turn back from the commitment you have made to the Son, you have nowhere to go for salvation. If you shrink back from him because the going has gotten rough, you have no hope of finding a Savior anywhere else.

Just as in chapter six, after he raises the horrifying prospect of apostasy – of people turning their backs on the once-for-all sacrifice and thus losing the one possible door into the throne room – he reminds them of better days. "*Remember when you*

*first came to faith,” he says. Remember the hard struggle, the weighty context you once endured, the suffering and public shame and abuse and persecution. Remember when some of you were once imprisoned for your faith. Remember “when you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting” (10:34).*

Notice how he redefines happiness for those whose lives are connected with Christ. This is not how the world defines happiness. In fact, all of the markers of honor and happiness in the world were stripped away – plundered possessions, loss of freedom, verbal and physical abuse for their faith. These are all shameful outcomes in the world, but they are signs of true honor and even happiness for people of faith. What is needed in the current times, he says is endurance.

When the preacher used the word in verse 32, he told them to remember how they first endured a *“hard struggle.”* The term translated hard struggle comes from athletic contests. He frames the whole notion of their endurance not in terms of cruel hardships and unjust abuse and suffering. Rather they are to think in terms of the athletic contest. Endurance there has the end zone or the goal in mind. The physical punishment one takes in an athletic contest somehow makes sense to us. Just so, that kind of endurance is necessary and sustainable if we keep the end goal in mind. Much like the athletic team that never quits, never gives up, the preacher exhorts his audience: *“We are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.”*

Do you see now why I thought of that scene from the *Fellowship of the Rings* as a Hebrews scene? “I wish none of this had happened,” laments Frodo. Indeed! Those first-century believers could have wished to live at an easier time. Underground Christians in China or Saudi Arabia or Pakistan today could wish they were in America where freedom of religion is guaranteed to them. You may wish your life circumstances were very different – and that you could see God differently about Jesus, if only they were. That you would not be so angry or so addicted, so distant from your family or such a pain to everybody at work, so “entitled” to the affair or “justified” in your greed – if only God would fix this or give that or take away some difficulty.

No. these are self-deceptions. Nobody asks for challenges, setback, and pain. But those are not decisions for us to make! Gandalf was right in telling young Frodo.

“All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you.” That is my only choice as well. And yours.

The basic exhortation is to continue to believe. Through faith, draw near to God and enter his presence with confidence. Through faith, wait for God to work his final work as he judges the wicked and redeems the righteous. Through faith, patiently endure the suffering of the present time in light of the hope that sustains us.

We can believe, stay on the journey, and be saved. Or we can “shrink back” and be destroyed. *“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised”* (10:35-36).

## ENDNOTES

1. My only reference is a note to myself when I viewed this film. I believe it to be accurate to my memory.
2. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 10, Sermon 580, “God is with Us” (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1973), p. 407.

## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 13

#### *Hebrews 11:1-40*

### TAKE HEART FROM OTHERS' STORIES

As the story goes, a man despairing of life had climbed the railing of the Brooklyn Bridge and was about to leap into the river when a policeman caught him by the collar and pulled him back. The would-be suicide protested, “You don’t understand how miserable I am and how hopeless my life is. Please let me jump.”

The kindhearted officer reasoned with him and said, “I’ll make this proposition to you. Take five minutes and give your reasons why life is hopeless and not worth living, and then I’ll take five minutes and give my reasons why I think life is worth living, both for you and for me. If at the end of ten minutes you still feel like jumping from the bridge, I won’t stop you.” The man took his five minutes, and the officer took his five minutes. Then they stood up, joined hands, and jumped off the bridge!

Gallows humor to be sure, but it is painfully parabolic of today’s culture, which has abandoned its Christian roots for vacuous secularism. Indeed, if one factors God out of life’s equation and adopts the view that we are little more than cosmic-accidents, life, with its inevitable hardships and suffering, becomes hard to defend. In fact, suicide has been considered intellectually consistent, even stylish, by some existential intellectuals in recent years.

But for the Christian there is substantial reason for hope in this life and the life to come because of the promises of God’s Word. In fact, 1 Peter 1:3 tells us we have been “*born again to a living hope.*” The degree of our experience of hope is proportionate to the degree of our faith. The more profound our faith, the more profound our hope. A deeply intense faith spawns a deeply intense hope.

This was important to the writer of Hebrews because of the rising storm of persecution that was about to befall on the church. He knew the key to survival was solid faith and an attendant hope. This is why in 10:38 he quoted Habakkuk 2:4, “*But my righteous one shall live by faith.*” There is a spiritual axiom implicit here:

*faith* produces *hope*, and hope produces *perseverance*. Without faith one will inevitably shrink back.

As we have learned from Robert Coles, noted author and professor emeritus of Harvard University, and others, the power of stories to teach, inspire, and improve their hearers was already known to this Hebrews teacher. A litany of Old Testament stories underscores the meaning of faith/faithfulness to those who are discouraged, threatened, and beginning to weaken under the strain.

For those who have experienced hardship and tragedy in life, the call to perseverance in faith can often sound shallow. Those of us who have experienced deep hurt (death of a child, death of a spouse, divorce, etc.) hear those simply pithy though well-intended sayings (“Hang in there, it will get better,” or “trust God, he will deliver you,” or “have faith”) with a bit of skepticism and cynicism. What we are thinking usually, but what we won’t say is, “you don’t know what you are talking about; you have not been there.”

Our preacher understands the future hostility that his community will face. They will experience martyrdom on an unprecedented scale, presumably Nero’s persecution in Rome. They have not yet resisted to blood (Hebrews 12:4), but they will. Consequently, he knows they need more than a few theological ideas. They need something concrete; something real.

In Hebrews 10:19-39, the preacher brought them to a theological understanding of their confidence before God. He has reminded them of their own communal history when years ago they stood the test of persecution. He has affirmed their future reward and assured them God is coming (the Day will come). But this does not seem enough. He wants to encourage, motivate and strengthen the faith of his hearers. Consequently, he reminds them they are not the only ones who have endured through faith nor are they first to suffer because of faith.

Hear the verses at the beginning of what is perhaps the most famous chapter in Hebrews, that chapter many have called Faith’s Hall of Fame.

*“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see ... 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”* (Hebrews 11:1, 6).

The context for this famous description of faith and the series of examples that follows is the exhortation we studied in the previous chapter. In light of the once

for all sacrifice of Jesus and his entrance into the throne room of God on our behalf, having cleansed/perfected the conscience of those who believe, the writer invited his listeners to *“draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds”* (10:22-24). At the close of chapter 10 the writer placed the language of faith specifically in the sphere of endurance: *“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” “For yet (here the quote is from Habakkuk 2:3-4) in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteousness one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but those who have faith to the preserving of the soul”* (10:36-39 NASB).

Here in Hebrews 11 he provides models for and witnesses to the endurance of faith. What sufferers and strugglers need most is to know there are others who have gone before them. Others have suffered and endured. Others have struggled and won. Faith needs models in order to endure. Faith needs fellow travelers on the journey. It needs pioneers and champions.

Our greatest pioneer and champion, of course, is Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3). But there are others who have gone before as well throughout Scripture. Their stories are scattered throughout the Bible. The preacher draws on these stories to provide models of faith. We have examples of people who have “been there, done that.” They have experienced hardship, suffering and persecution, but they have endured! They remained faithful. They are the “witnesses” of Hebrews 11 (cf. Hebrews 12:1).

### ***Exegesis of Text***

Usually, in this section I divide the text into various sections with a few notes. However, the enormity of this text persuades me to use a different tactic. Rather I will treat the text more thematically and this will then segue into the theological section below. However, the text does fall into a nice historical picture of the biblical narrative – it is structured by history: Antediluvian (11:3-7);

Patriarchs (11:8-22); Moses and Conquest (11:23-31); and Varied Stories from Israel's History (11:32-38). These stories are bracketed by a description of faith (11:1-2) and the importance of faith (11:39-40).

## **1. The Description of faith (Hebrews 11:1-2).**

This famous description of faith is not a definition of faith, but rather a description that relates to the context of the preacher's intent. He describes faith in a way that connects with the situation of his hearers and the narratives to which he is about to point them. Faith in Hebrews 10:39 is a steadfast trust in God's promise.

Lane <sup>(1)</sup> offers this translation: *“Now faith celebrates the objective reality [of the blessings] for which we hope, the demonstration of events as yet unseen.”* I think this catches the heart of the point. Faith relies on the reality of hope – it banks on the future. Faith, thus gives present reality to something that is yet future. Faith is the experience of the future. When faith acts – when it endures, obeys, and lives out its way of life – it demonstrates the reality of what we do not yet see. It is the proof of that reality.

Faith is directed toward the future, but it is a present experience that gives future reality in the present. Faith grasps the future as if it is already here. Thus, faith endures because it is future-oriented and experiences that future in the present through faith. The future has not yet come, but its reality is demonstrated in the experience of faith. We see that demonstration in the lives of those who have endured hardship through faith. They claimed the promise even though it is yet future. They believed even though they had not yet received. They endured despite the hardships.

## **2. The Value of Faith (Hebrews 11:6).**

Through faith people received divine approval. God witnessed in their favor – he bore witness to their faith (Hebrews 11:2). God commended people for their faith, that is, God is pleased with faith.

Hebrews 11:6 is a critical summary text. It is a well-known text in Hebrews. It states in a summary way the fundamental orientation with which God is pleased. God is pleased as people seek him through faith. Seeking God is important Old Testament language. We might summarize the theology of Chronicles as “God

seeks seekers” (cf. 1 Chronicles 28:8-10; 29:17; 2 Chronicles 7:14; 15:2). God yearns for his people to seek him just as he seeks them. God seeks us (Psalm 119:174; John 4:24) and wants us to seek him (Psalm 119:2, 10; Hebrews 11:6).

God rewards those who seek him, which is the point of Hebrews 10:35. Don’t throw away your confidence; don’t throw away your faith because it will be rewarded. Again, the emphasis is future-oriented. God will reward those who seek him; God will reward those who endure through faith. The preacher again points his hearers toward the future and their hope.

### **3. The Endurance of Faith.**

The narrative stories, it seems to me, all have the point of endurance. Perhaps some are a bit more difficult to construe in this light (such as Abel), but the whole contributes to this point. Enoch may represent endurance since he is found in the context of Genesis 5 where the most common words are “*and he died.*” Death surrounded Enoch, but through faith he was delivered from death. There is hope in the midst of death. I wonder if Enoch is mentioned specifically because his was a victory over death – a hope that Roman hearers need.

Noah build an ark because of what he believed about the future. He persisted despite the hostility of his culture because he trusted in what God promised about the future. Abraham followed God’s call even though he did not know his destination, but he knew the promises of God. He lived oriented to the future (Hebrews 11:10) – a future city, but also a future son/descendants.

The preacher even interprets Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son in terms of his orientation to the future – he believed God would raise Isaac from the dead. Isaac gave a blessing about the future through faith. Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons concerning the future. Joseph’s faith was demonstrated by instructions about the future. Moses endured his identification with slaves and their experience because of what he believed about the future. He kept the Passover because he believed God’s promises about the future. The Red Sea and Conquest (Jericho and Rahab) experiences were based upon what Israel believed about the future.

The summary experiences are rooted in how faith gains what is promised – it succeeds, it wins, it endures because it receives what is promised. More particularly, they believed and endured through hostile opposition, through persecution and martyrdom (11:35b-38). This is the encouragement Roman Christians need.



They need to hear faith succeeds not when it wins by cultural or worldly or Roman standards, but when it endures, trusts the promises of God and receives the promises in the end. Faith wins when it endures.

#### **4. The Promise of Faith.**

Hebrews 11:13-16 is descriptive of the people of God in every generation. It is particularly a comment on the Patriarchs, but it applies to every generation of God's people in the history of redemption. It applies to Israel in the land of Palestine under a victorious Davidic king (cf. 1 Chronicles 29:15), and to Christians (1 Peter 1:2:11). We are pilgrims, or refugees, in this world. This world is not our home, because we hope for something better – the new heavens and the new earth Christ has promised.

We are the people of God and we wait for the “*heavenly city*” – the one which God has prepared for us. Thus, the people of God are oriented toward the future, and the road for that journey to the future is faith. It follows the path of many who have traveled it before us. They died in faith, yet hoping for the future. So, too, these Roman Christians will die in faith – just as we will, hoping for the future. But the future is demonstrated by the faith exercised in the present. The future is present through faith though it is not yet fully realized.

#### ***Theological Summary***

The point of these stories is not to provide models of obedient faith, though these believers did obey. Rather, they provide models for the endurance of faith. They continued the journey despite the hardships and problems. These are not proof-texts for obedient faith, but models for enduring faith.

They continued their journey because they sought God and trusted his promises. They endured through faith and their faith submitted to God's call to the journey and as they journeyed. Theologically, faith is oriented to both past and future. Because of God's work in the past (both in terms of his “word” to us and his actions), we trust God in the present. Consequently, our faith is oriented to the future beyond the present distress. We trust God's promises because we have reason to trust him – God has a track record.

Hebrews 11 teaches us faith also has a track record. When faith trusts God's word to us and looks to the future, it can endure the present. We have models of faith that confirm this. Faith, then, means embracing the hope; trusting what we hope for is real. It is trusting the journey has a goal and therefore the journey is worth the effort. Hebrews 11, then, can be seen as an illustration of the exhortation of Hebrews 10:35 – don't throw away your confidence because you know the promise is secure.

The future is the key, but faith is the present experience of that future. Nevertheless, the future is the hope that enables endurance. "This World Is Not My Home" is a song that reflects our pilgrim journey. We are not at home here, though we often feel at home because we are too shaped and turned into our culture. We are too comfortable here. Perhaps a little persecution would be helpful as faith must take center stage and orient us toward the future rather than settling into our present comforts.

Those who have experienced the tragic circumstances of this present world understand the yearning for the future. They live oriented to the future. Their joy is found in hope because the tragedies sap them of their strength. As one song by New Song reads, "Hope Changes Everything." Hope is only real by faith and faith celebrates the reality of hope; thus, faith endures.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

I have to confess to you I have preached this text in the past (in fact one of the first public sermons I ever preached at about 16 or 17 years of age) and I have known this description of faith and its corollary promise in verse 6 for most of my life, I found myself deeply troubled as I wrote this chapter and read the description and the stories that followed. Faith is a conviction concerning the unseen. It is an assurance about the future that is unknowable in the present otherwise. But don't you and I live in a world that constantly reminds us that sight is necessary, that the future really, truly, is unknown and unknowable until it happens? Assurance and conviction come with evidence in every other arena of life. We no longer live in a world that believes you can simply "take my word for it." We want to see contracts in writing. We believe science and empirical data are the support system for proof and authentication. We need facts in order to establish truth. We are a people who want to see for ourselves rather than accept the testimony of others. We may accept things without personal sight but only when we believe we can trust those who

have seen. And most of the time, even when we talk about faith, we immediately go in search of bridges and support systems because there is nothing worse than the idea of blind faith or a leap of faith. We marshal our evidence from archaeology and apologetics and logic and common sense reasoning so that faith can be something other than blind.

Apart from the description itself, and the promise that God rewards those who have faith and diligently seek him, there are the stories and examples in the text itself that puzzle and confuse. The description suggests faith is a means by which we can live in the present by anticipating the future. But the first illustration looks backward instead of forward. By faith we understand that God made all that is visible from the invisible. By faith, we believe in God's creation, he says – not logic or science. By faith we claim what we see in creation came from what was not seen. So now what is seen proves the reality of the not seen or the not yet seen? Make sense, so far?

Then come the human examples. Some of these stories I'm familiar with; others I had to go look up. The way the writer talks about many of them is strange to our ear. Abel was a great example of faith, he says, "*Through his faith, he still speaks*" seems an interpretation of Genesis 4:10 when God tells Cain that the blood of his dead brother is "*crying out from the ground.*"

The faith of Enoch I understand, even though Enoch is barely mentioned – just two verses in Genesis 5. The faith of Noah to build the ark is indeed commendable, but I remember the rest of the Noah story. I remember Noah after the flood, getting drunk and his son "*uncovering his nakedness*" – whatever that means – and his son and grandson and their heirs being forever cursed. Noah was the one who got drunk in the first place!

Then there are the Patriarchs Abraham and his wife Sarah, Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau. Without doubt the parts of the Abraham story that he tells are remarkable. Abraham does leave behind the city for a life of wandering without a home, and he does seem to take the news well when God tells him it will actually be more than 400 years before his descendants inherit the land. He and Sarah do have a son in their old age. But I remember the rest of the story. I remember Abraham being afraid for his life whenever he came across kings he didn't know and he would look at the king and look at his wife and say, "She's my sister." Yes, they were blessed with a son Isaac, but not before trying to fix the problem themselves with Hagar and Ishmael and not before falling to the ground in laughter when God told

him that at the ripe age of 99 he would have a son and his too-old-to-have-children wife would give birth. They both laughed.

Then there is Jacob and Esau in the midst of all the lying and cheating and stealing, where is the faith? Joseph certainly had his faithful moments, but there were others as well. He couldn't have been much fun to live with when he was having all of those dreams.

Then there was Moses, and I want to share this section because it's the most confusing to me of all: *"By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and he sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel"* (11:24-28). I don't know what to do with the line about Moses considering *"abuse suffered for the Christ."* It's possible the Hebrews writer is saying to his audience Moses suffered abuse that was like that suffered by Christ. It also seems possible he wants to suggest a straightforward link between Moses and Christ. But that's only part of the problem. The bigger problem is reading the story of Moses in Exodus 2:14f: *"Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'Surely the thing is known.'"* When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian."

I've read the story about Israel crossing the Red Sea. Yes, they passed through on dry ground but not before complaining bitterly that Moses and his God had brought them to the wilderness to die. I love the Rahab story, on the one hand, because she was not even an Israelite; but haven't you wondered why Israelite spies ended up at the house of a prostitute in the first place?

Neither the writer of Hebrews nor I have time to explore the stories of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. But I know too much about those stories as well. If faith does not require sight, why did Gideon keep throwing out that fleece so that God could prove himself? Barak is a rather obscure military general who indeed won a great victory over Sisera, but he refused to go to battle without a woman at his side! Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, but he

couldn't keep the one rule God stated over and over again in Torah – don't get involved with those pagan nations. He couldn't stay away from Philistine women. Jephthah is the one who made a vow and told God if the Lord would give him a military victory, he would offer up in sacrifice the first person who greeted him when he returned home. It was his daughter ...

David? Yes, he was the man after God's own heart; but he was also an adulterer, murderer, horrible father. Samuel? Surely there was a man of great faith, from his youth to his death – except for the fact that he too raised sons that had no respect for God or the people of Israel. It was because his sons were so evil the people of Israel asked for a king so they could be like the other nations around them.

The writer goes on to list both men and women who, in the name of faith, either enjoyed great victories or suffered horrible abuse and torture and death, people

*“who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 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. 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. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated - the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. (11:33-38 NIV).*

I like the victorious part; that second group doesn't sound so appealing. These are the great heroes of faith. They are the ones who received God's approval. These are the ones whose faith produced great endurance. They are the people who lived and died with an assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.

It occurs to me as I think about these people that perhaps my problems with all of these examples come not from the Hebrews writer failing to tell us the whole story, but with my own notions of what authentic faith looks like. Maybe the writer does indeed know all of the stories, not just the good parts. Maybe that is the point. Being faithful is not about being perfect! It's about getting up again when you're down. Being faithful is not about winning, it's about enduring whether you win or you lose! Being faithful guarantees no outcomes on this earth. Faith survives this life because it gives assurance and conviction to a reality yet to come.

That is the power of the last two verses in this chapter: *“These were all commended for their faith, yet not of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”* (11:39-40). All of the witnesses never actually received the promise they trusted, because God was waiting on us to join them before turning the faith into sight!

Even now, those whose testimonies of faith preceded us await our testimony, await our joining them at the finish line, await the outcomes of our part in the journey. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is not a guarantee of our faithfulness. Actually, rather than being troubled by these stories I should be excited about them because they reveal human beings that are just like us! So faithful one moment, such miserable failures of faith and love and life itself the next. The question for God’s faithful is not whether or not we can now be perfect – we can’t. The question is how faith endures when we fail! Will we keep our eyes on the goal? Will we look beyond all that is apparently real in this life and see the unseen that is yet to be?

All of these heroes of faith were flawed human beings. None of these witnesses received in their lifetimes what we have received. None of them experienced in their lifetimes the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus. It is our window into the throne-room that is given to us in Christ. It is the opening of the space-time continuum through which we are invited to see and believe/believe and see. It is the power to know a reality that has yet to be realized, to see what otherwise cannot be seen. It is the power to endure tragedy and triumph in this live because we long for more and we ultimately refuse to settle for less.

We hear once more the exhortation that began in chapter 10: *“Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching”* (10:19-25).

## ENDNOTES

1. Alan F. Johnson, *The Freedom Letter* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974, p. 136.
2. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 2:325.

## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 14

#### *Hebrews 12:1-13*

#### EYES ON JESUS

On August 7, 1954, during the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada, one of the greatest mile-run match-ups ever took place. It was touted as the “miracle mile” because Roger Bannister and John Landy were the only two sub-four-minute milers in the world. Bannister had been the first man ever to run a four-minute mile. Both runners were in peak condition.

Dr. Bannister strategized he would relax during the third lap and save everything for his finishing drive. But as they began the third lap, John Landy poured it on, stretching his already substantial lead. Immediately Bannister adjusted his strategy, increasing his pace and gaining on Landy. The lead was cut in half, and at the bell for the final lap they were even.

Landy began running even faster, and Bannister followed suit. He felt he was going to lose if Landy did not slow down. Then came the famous moment (replayed thousands of times in print and celluloid) as at the last stride before the home stretch the crowds roared. Landy could not hear Bannister’s footfall and thus compulsively looked back – a fatal lapse of concentration. Bannister launched his attack, and Landy did not see him until he lost the lead. Roger Bannister won the “miracle mile” that day by five yards.

Landy’s lapse serves as a modern visualization of what the writer of Hebrews implicitly warned against in his earlier charge to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith*” (Hebrews 12:1, 2 NASB). Those who look away from Christ – the end-goal of our race – will never finish well. This was exactly what was happening to some treading the stormy waters mounting around the early church. They had begun to take their eyes off Jesus and to fix them instead on the hardships challenging them.

When these Hebrew Christians first came to Christ, the Savior filled their lives from horizon to horizon. It was a delightful, joyous fixation. But that initial rush of joy began to be assaulted by hardships. Some of their lifelong friendships cooled to



estrangement. They were no longer welcome in the synagogue. Some had lost their jobs as they were squeezed out of the family business. Others were assaulted by domestic stress, as even husband and wife relationships became strained over the matter of Jesus. And to boot, their newfound faith did not shield them from the common vicissitudes of life – they suffered reversals, accidents, illness, and death just like everyone else.

As a result, not a few were distracted. Those increasingly longer looks away from Jesus left some off-stride. Others stumbled here and there, and tragically a few had quit altogether. They were, in fact, a microcosm of many in the modern church who have lost their focus through hardship – who say, “It all began so well; but I didn’t expect this. I had problems before I became a Christian, but nothing like this. Thanks for the offer of the abundant life, but I have an abundance of problems already! You go ahead. I think I’ll take a breather.”

Yes, we learn from the examples of those who have journeyed the faith-path before us. But ultimately we look to Jesus himself. By keeping his eye on the goal (i.e., “*joy set before him*”), he endured and triumphed. He has become the focal point for our own faith.

We might say the preacher really does get to the point now. He brings the witnesses of faith to the climatic example of Jesus, our priest. He points them to Jesus as the ultimate example of faith.

He also gets to the point by interpreting their present and anticipated suffering. He interprets the hardship, which they are about to endure as one in which God is active, God is involved. He is not disconnected from this suffering or an outsider to it. He is using it for his purposes.

This passage raises some important questions and perspectives for how Christians deal with suffering, even persecution (which is the context of our text). God uses suffering to discipline, train, and educate his people. He uses it to refine us, mature us and prepare us for holiness and the fuller experience of his own reality.

Consequently, this text creates some tension. How involved is God in the suffering of his people? Clearly, he involved himself in their suffering through the empathetic incarnation of Jesus who experienced temptation, testing and weaknesses alongside of his people. However, is God an agent in our suffering, in this Roman persecution? Does God have a goal, an intent? Is God active in our suffering?

Hebrews 12 addresses some of these questions and points to one matrix for interpreting suffering in the fallen world.

### ***Exegesis of Text***

The “*witnesses*” are not spectators in the arena, but rather those who have borne witness to the endurance of faith. They testify about faith. Their stories encourage present believers. They ran the race through perseverance and completed their journey. Now they are witness to the power of faith for the journey.

These witnesses call us to follow them. Consequently, the preacher appeals to his hearers to cast off “*the sin*” (notice how definite that is; it is not “sins,” but “the sin”) that hinders them from running. I think the “sin” is probably the sin of apostasy, which is the danger for the preacher’s audience. Rather than quitting and hanging back, continue the race and finish the journey.

However, the primary witness to faith is Jesus himself. He joined us in the race. He himself suffered and joined us in our suffering. He ran the race and he persevered through faith. He is our champion; our pioneer. Consequently, fix your eyes on him. Keep his example ever before you.

We must not undermine the example of Jesus by appealing to his divine character. When he joined the human race and entered the journey of faith, he became one of us and shared our reality. His temptations were real. The danger of apostasy was real for him. He could have been hindered by “*the sin*” as well. His humanity was full and real, and his hurt and shame was real and tempting. His suffering was like our suffering. Thus, he is a model for us. If we affirm anything that detracts or undermines the reality of the model for us, then we reflect a shallow understanding of the incarnation (that he became flesh and blood alongside us).

His endurance is directly related to the “*joy*” that was set before him. It is related to the goal or promise; that is, it was his faith. He knew joy was ahead of him; he knew the promise of God’s exaltation. Consequently, he was willing to endure the suffering and shame for the sake of the joy.

The situation of the preacher’s audience is clarified a bit in Hebrews 12:3-4 when Jesus’ suffering is placed in the context of opposition from sinful men and when the preacher notes they had not yet resisted evil unto blood. In other words, they can expect martyrdom. They will experience hostility and death from evil people,

just as Jesus did. The open question is whether they will run the race to the end just as Jesus did.

But how are we to understand the coming persecution? Why does God permit this persecution? Why did he permit the crucifixion and death of his own son? What purpose does God have in this permission of suffering? What purpose does God see in suffering at all?

The classic text for God's pedagogical purposes is discipline in Hebrews 12 (the Greek verbs and nouns for discipline are used eight times in verses 5-11). The writer of Hebrews draws upon an Old Testament understanding of discipline as he applies those principles to the situation in which his readers find themselves. The Old Testament principles of discipline are applicable to New Testament saints. The writer anticipates his readers will face another period of persecution as in the earlier days of their faith. He calls them to remember those early days when they "*stood [their] ground in a great contest in the face of suffering*" (Hebrews 10:32). They were publicly insulted and persecuted. Some were thrown in prison and others had their property confiscated (Hebrews 10:33-34). The believers' persevered then, and now they must expect another contest of suffering. The writer anticipates there will be a renewal of this persecution or some kind of struggle that may involve the death of some in their community. They have not yet had any martyrs, but there may be some in the future (Hebrews 12:4).

Whatever the nature of this coming struggle, the writer offers an interpretation of it. It does not come as some punishment for sin, nor does it come because God is angry with his people. Rather, it is a discipline that arises out of God's love. It is the kind of discipline that a father offers his child (Hebrews 12:7-10). The writer of Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 as a "*word of encouragement that addresses [them] as sons*" (Hebrews 12:5b-6).

The term translated "*punish*" is actually a verb, which means to "flog," just as Jesus was flogged and his disciples were told they would be flogged (Matthew 10:17; 20:19; 23:34; Mark 10:34; Luke 18:33; John 19:1). Indeed, some of the previous witnesses mentioned in chapter eleven had suffered flogging (Hebrews 11:36). The original readers of Hebrews could, perhaps, expect some of that themselves. The context here does not mean "punishment" as when God expresses his righteous judgment against a sinner, but rather refers to the infliction of pain which discipline involves. God chastises his people; he afflicts them with pain for the sake of a higher goal. The notion of "rebuke" is a similar idea. This rebuke does

not arise out of anger, but out of a desire for God's people to reach a higher level of maturity. God has a goal in mind, and he disciplines his people in view of that goal. He disciplines them according to the dictates of his love in the light of his goal for them – the future they cannot yet see.

To begin with, the truth of the Proverbs passage elicits a command:

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,  
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,  
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”*

Jesus “endured” (v. 2), and it is imperative that we “endure.”

Significantly, God's discipline of his children never involves his wrath. Every reference in the New Testament on the subject indicates God's wrath rests upon and is reserved for the unbelieving. <sup>(1)</sup> God has no such thought toward his own – no thoughts of calamity. Theodore Laetsch, the Old Testament scholar, makes a most perceptive comment regarding this:

*“His plans concerning his people are always thoughts of good, of blessing. Even if he is obligated to use the rod, it is the rod not of wrath, but the Father's rod of chastisement for their temporal and eternal welfare. There is not a single item of evil in his plans for his people, neither in their motive, nor in their conception, nor in their revelation, nor in their consummation.”* <sup>(2)</sup>

So the preacher to the Hebrews, who exhorts his flock to “endure” their hardships as “discipline,” is enjoining them to a most positive pursuit that has as its goal the very growth of their souls.

The readers, therefore, should not misinterpret this new wave of persecution as a sign of God's anger. They must understand it as a sign of his love. It is God's fatherly attention just as earthly fathers give attention to their children. They should be encouraged rather than discouraged by this new struggle. God seeks to train his people through this pain. God seeks to educate his people so they are equipped to share God's holiness and communion. In order to persevere through the struggle, believers need to keep their eye on the goal to which God has called them. This is the example of Jesus. He is the model of endurance, just as the heroes of faith are models in Hebrews 11. Jesus endured the cross with all its shame in

order to experience the joy that was set before him, and even now he sits at the right hand of God (Hebrews 11:2). Likewise, all the faithful who have gone before witness to the power of faith. Though their faith did not receive what it hoped for in this life, nevertheless it persevered because they sought a city whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:13-16; 39-40; 12:1). God used struggle in their life to strengthen their faith so that it might persevere.

It is important to see God's intent here. God disciplines and he chastises (causes pain, even flogs) for a reason. It is a reason that is more significant than the pain of the discipline. The pain has a purpose. The author writes (Hebrews 12:10b-11): what does God intend in discipline? He intends something that is for our own good. The good he intends is that we might share in his holiness. The discipline trains us in such a way that it produces righteousness and peace, and the effect of this discipline is that we share God's holiness. God uses suffering and pain to produce a fruit whose purpose is that we might share his holiness.

What does it mean to share God's holiness? It certainly includes the cultivation of fruit in our lives so when the harvest of righteousness and peace is produced, we reflect God's holiness. But there is an eschatological meaning here as well as the promise of God's current presence as we approach his throne (Hebrews 12:22ff). In order to enter into the eschatological presence of God, we must be holy. To be holy we must be sanctified by the work of Christ (Hebrews 10:14). To be sanctified by the blood of Christ we must persevere in faith. If perseverance means to endure suffering for the sake of the joy set before us, that is, the joy of God's presence, then suffering is worth the goal. If Jesus suffered for the sake of the joy set before him, and the faithful in chapter eleven struggled for the sake of the promise, then the present people of God must expect to suffer as well. It is the goal of faith that makes suffering worthwhile. If discipline is a means to joy, then discipline should be endured for the sake of the joy. The joy, however, is no earthly paradise. It is communion with God in the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem –the new heavens and new earth.

In this context, James makes sense. Just as the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to endure trials for the sake of discipline, so James encouraged his readers to *"consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance"* (James 1:2). And the one who *"perseveres under the trial, because he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him"* (James 1:12). We

do not rejoice because of the discipline, but we rejoice in the intent of the discipline. We rejoice in the light of its goal. The crown of life is worth the trials, and God disciplines us with that goal in mind. God acts, sometimes by inflicting pain, even floggings, so we might be trained and prepared to share his holiness. God intends good even when it seems painful and senseless to us.

### ***Reflections and Exhortations***

By insisting we focus on Jesus, instead of the name Christ, the writer is calling us to focus on Jesus' humanity as we saw it here on earth. Jonathan Edwards remarked beautifully concerning this that we are to "take notice of Christ's excellence which is a ...feast." <sup>(4)</sup> And so it is! We are to focus on him first as "founder" (*archegos* – literally, "pioneer") of our faith. Jesus is the pioneer and founder of all faith, in both the Old and New Testaments. He initiates all faith and bestows it (cf. Ephesians 2:8-10).

As a sufferer who has experienced tragedy in many forms (loss of child, loss of spouse, loss of parent, divorce), this is probably one of the more difficult texts in Hebrews to integrate experientially.

In one sense it is not difficult for sufferers. We live with suffering and we connect with fellow-sufferers. So, we feel with and understand as insiders to suffering what these Roman Christians were probably feeling. But it is difficult in another sense. What the text says is "hard" emotionally. We don't want to believe that God is involved in our suffering. We don't want to think of our suffering as pedagogical, refining, or maturing. We don't think it is fair that God would teach us through the suffering of another, which, in turn, causes our own suffering.

But the "hard" lesson of this text is God has intentions in his discipline. He has a goal. He is at work shaping his people, refining them, educating them and preparing them for the experience of holiness. He refines his people through the crucible of suffering in order to bear the fruit of righteousness in a world that needs to see righteousness. Through discipline, he produces a witness for faith and more righteousness in the world.

Along with this we ought to focus on Jesus' attitude – "*who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.*" Some people wrongly imagine because Jesus was a divine man, the physical and spiritual sufferings of

the cross were somehow less for him. What wrong-headed thinking as John Henry Newman so brilliantly explained:

“And as men are superior to animals, and are affected by pain more than they, by reason of the mind within them, which gives a substance to pain . . . so in like manner, our Lord felt pain of the body, with a consciousness, and therefore with a keenness and intensity, and with a unity of perception, which none of us can possibly fathom or compass, because His soul was so absolutely in His power, so simply free from the influence of distractions, so fully directed *upon* the pain, so utterly surrendered, so simply subjected to the suffering. And thus He may truly be said to have suffered the whole of His passion in every moment of it.” (5)

So we must let the full force of the text’s statement here in Hebrews – he “*endured the cross*” – sink into our souls. The physical pain he endured was absolute. But the spiritual pain was even greater because his pure soul, which knew no sin, became sin for us, inducing a heretofore unknown pain. And we must also absorb the fact he “*endured the cross, despising the shame*.” That is, he thought nothing of its shame – he dismissed it as nothing.

How and why could he do this? Because of “*the joy that was set before him*” – which was rooted in his coming super-exaltation, with all that it means for his people’s shalom and for the triumph of God’s purpose in the universe, was “*the joy set before him*.” We can list some specific aspects of his joy. There was the joy of his reunion, as it were, with the Father. What an exalted thought – heaven’s home-coming! Imagine the joy! David’s words suggest the idea: “*In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore*” (Psalm 16:11). Then there was the joy of being crowned with honor and glory and having all things put under his feet (2:6-8: cf. Psalm 8:1-6). There was also the joy before him of bringing many sons to glory – making us part of his joy (2:10).

Now on this matter of focus, understand this: even though the great gallery of past saints witnesses to us, our central focus must be Jesus – *sola Jesu!*

Too often we want to distant God from the suffering as if we are trying to protect him. The preacher does not point to Satan as the main figure in this discipline (persecution). He points to God as the one who is at work to shape his people.

As a sufferer I don’t like hearing that. But as a believer I take great comfort from knowing God is at work through my suffering for his purposes and his purposes

include shaping me into his image – to bear his righteousness and share his holiness.

This is no different from what God has done all through redemptive history, as even the preacher quotes Proverbs 3:11-12. Indeed, it is exactly what God did in Jesus. He perfected his Son through suffering, and even now, through suffering, he is perfecting us.

Ultimately, this text provides an interpretative matrix for our enduring suffering. We should interpret our suffering in the light of God's educational program. We interpret suffering as divine discipline (training) to share us into his image. We look through the suffering to see the divine goal of sharing his holiness and bearing witness to his righteousness by the fruit of our lives.

We bear witness to the power of faith. We follow Jesus who testifies to faith, and we follow the witnesses that surround us, and we become part of the group of witnesses who testify to the joy that faithful endurance brings.

## ENDNOTES

1. R. Kent Hughes *The Eschatological Use of 'OPH in the New Testament*, a thesis presented to Talbot Theological Seminary, June 1972, pp. 31-60.
2. Theodore Kaetsch, *Bible Commentary Jeremiah* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), pp. 234, 235.
3. John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Johnathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Powhatan, VA: Berea Publications, 1991), p.418,
4. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Kingdom Within (Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations)* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1984), pp. 328-329.





## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 15

#### *Hebrews 12:14-29*

### WHY EVEN THINK OF TURNING BACK?

Writer and sometimes marathoner Art Carey described in a memorable piece for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* his experience of “hitting the wall” and then going on to finish the Boston Marathon. We pick up his story mid-stride:

“By now, the rigors of having run nearly twenty miles are beginning to tell. My stride has shortened. My legs are tight. My breathing is shallow and fast. My joints are becoming raw and worn. My neck aches from all the jolts that have ricocheted up my spine. Half-dollar-size blisters sting the soles of my feet. I’m beginning to feel queasy and light-headed. I want to stop running. I have “hit the wall.”

Now the real battle begins. Up the first of many long inclines I start to climb – one-two, one-two, right-left, right-left. I keep watching my feet move, one after another, hypnotized by the rhythm, the passage of the asphalt below ... shoulder cramps, leaden legs, seething blisters, dry throat, empty stomach, stop – keep moving – must finish ... A radio-listening spectator reports that the race is over. Six miles away. Bill Rodgers has won again. His ordeal is done; the most intense of my own is about to begin.

“Heartbreak Hill” – the last, the longest and the steepest, a half-mile struggle against gravity designed to finish off the faint and faltering. Hundreds of people stand along the hill, watching ... [urging] the walkers to jog, the joggers to run, the runners to speed on to Boston ... Slowly, ever so slowly, the grade begins to level out ...

The last four miles are seemingly endless. Some runners, their eyes riveted catatonically to the ground, trudge along in their bare feet, holding in their hands the shoes that have blistered and bloodied their feet. Others team up with each other, limping along, arm-in-arm, like maimed and battle-weary soldiers returning from the front.

Finally, the distinctive profile of the Prudential Building looms on the horizon. I begin to step up my pace. Faster, faster ... smoother, smoother. Suppress the pain. Finish up strong. Careful – not too fast. Don't cramp ...

I can see the yellow stripe 50 yards, 20 yards ... cheers and clapping ... 10 yards ... finish line ... an explosion of euphoria ... I am clocked in at two hours, 50 minutes and 49 seconds. My place: 1, 176. I find the figure difficult to believe, but if they are accurate, then I have run the best marathon of my life.”

While times and places are important, and breaking a personal record is thrilling (especially as you grow older), the real joy of the Boston Marathon is just finishing ... doing what you have set out to do. <sup>(3)</sup> According to Holy Scripture, as we have in Hebrews 12, the marathoner's grit and finishing joy are metaphorical of what we Christians, ancient and modern, are called to in this life. The spiritual life is a long-distance run (vv. 1-3). Though we will “hit the wall” many times, we are called to “tough it out,” realizing the hardships we endure are disciplines that enable us to share in God's holiness (cf. vv. 4-11).

Now, stripped bare of any weights or sin and running with perseverance (v. 2), we are given the focus that will ensure our finishing well – and that is, of course, Jesus: “... *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith*” (v. 2a).

### ***Exegesis of Text***

I think Hebrews 13 is an epistolary addendum. In other words, Hebrews 12:14-29 is the conclusion of the sermon proper, but Hebrews 13 is the preacher's additions as it is sent off as a letter. He adds some epistolary features as he sends the sermon to his audience.

Consequently, I believe Hebrews 12:14-29 is the conclusion of the sermon. It is the final word; the final appeal. It is the preacher's final attempt to persuade his people they should not turn back from the path they have chosen. They should continue in faith and persevere in the race. They should follow Jesus to the end.

There is joy at the end. There is joy in the present. Consequently, his final appeal contains a grand picture of “eschatological joy.” Eschatological is one of those big words theologians like to use. But it is very useful. The term eschaton refers to the time when Jesus returns and gathers his people home. It refers to the goal. God is

at work to redeem a people for himself and gather them home with him so he might dwell with them forever. This is “eschatological joy.” It is the joy of dwelling with God – being in God’s presence forever.

The preacher uses this joy to persuade his people to hang on. They have not come to Sinai, but to the eschatological Assembly of God’s people in the presence of God. They have come to eschatological joy. They have come to the city of God. Even now, as they assemble together, they experience the joy of God’s eschatological presence. They experience the future in the present by faith. Therefore, worship God and be grateful!

This section divides nicely as a theological exposition (Hebrews 12:18-24) sandwiched between two strong exhortations with warnings of judgment (Hebrews 12:14-17 and 12:25-29). The warnings are the preacher’s last attempt to stave off apostasy in the community. His exposition is his last major attempt to encourage perseverance in faith by pointing the church to the reality that Christ has won for them.

## **1. Hebrews 12:14-17 – Exhortation**

Though the community will experience persecution, the preacher appeals to them to live in peace with everyone as much as they can. This is not simply peace within the community of believers, but also to seek peace with the hostile environment in which they live. Peace is the way to holiness, and the church must seek holiness, as it is the way it shares God’s life that is holy.

The author’s transcending desire is that his flock, and indeed the church universal, will finish well. So he expounds the metaphor further in verses 12-17 with specific advice on what to do (vv. 12-14) and what to guard against (vv. 15-17) in order to finish well.

First, run tough. The telltale signs of flagging energy are dropping arms, flopping hands, and wobbling knees that reduce the runner’s stride to a mincing gait. These signs were proverbial in biblical culture for mental and spiritual slowdown. Isaiah encouraged his despairing, stumbling people by saying, “*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come’*” (Isaiah 35:3, 4). Job was heartened by Eliphaz, the Temanite who reminded him, “*Behold ... you have*

*strengthened the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees” (Job 4:3, 4).*

So here the preacher, like an attentive coach, employs the proverbial exhortation, “*Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees*” (v. 12). The command to “strengthen” comes from the word from which we derive our English word *orthopedic*. The sense is, “make upright or straight” – or in modern coaching terms, “Straighten up! Get hands and feet up! Suck it up!”

Of course, he is not promoting a do-it-yourself, bootstrap Christian life. But Christians must will to tough it out by God’s grace. Life for the believer is full of repeated hardships that come as divine discipline. In fact, these disciplines are substantive signs that we are authentic sons and daughters (cf. vv. 7, 8). They still require grit every bit analogous to the determined marathoners. Muscular Christianity is a must! Run tough!

Specifically, the preacher is concerned that some will turn away and apostatize. They will trade their inheritance for the comfort of “peace” with their neighbors. We are always in danger of trading our future with God for comfort of the present (whether it is the comfort of materialism, or the comfort of “getting along” with those who oppose our values). The people of God have a tendency to compromise their values for the sake of comfort. We don’t want to seek peace with those around us in the wrong way – in a way that compromises our values or that creates bitterness with the community of God. Seek peace, but don’t compromise holiness. Seek peace, but don’t give up your eternal inheritance for temporary comforts here.

Esau is the preacher’s example of this. He compromised his birthright for the comfort of some food. He traded something of great value for something that was essentially nothing. He traded the eternal for the temporary. In the aftermath – with the recognition there was no changing what he had done – he sought the blessing with tears. I don’t think this is a reference to someone who wants to repent but cannot. Rather, it is an eternal perspective, an eschatological perspective. That is, the preacher appeals to his hearers not to reject their inheritance because when the blessing is bestowed and the inheritance is received, we will repent of our rejection and seek it with tears, but it will be too late, just as it was for Esau.

## 2. Hebrews 12:18-24 – Exposition of the Spiritual Reality

The exhortation is rooted in the nature of Christian experience – Christians experience the reality of God’s presence. They experience the future in the present. Hebrews 12:18-24 is a contrast between the experience of God’s presence at Sinai and the experience of God’s presence now. The description is “eschatological” in character, that is, it describes the experience of the saints through the eyes to the end. It is the presence of the future. Christians experience God as gathered in his throne room, and this foretaste of the future is experienced in the communal gathering of God’s people.

The description of the Sinaitic experience recalls Exodus 19 (which is quoted in Hebrews 12:20, citing Exodus 19:12-13). Deuteronomy 9:19 is quoted in Exodus 19:21 in relation to Moses’ experience of God on the mountain. It was a terrifying, holy and transcendent experience. God’s holiness excluded sin and sent fearful trembling throughout Israel – so much so they did not want God to speak directly to them.

This was the “day of assembly” in Israel when the people gathered in the presence of God at the foot of Sinai (Deuteronomy 10:4; 18:16). It is an assembly context. The presence of God is reflected in the thundering, shakings and lightning of the mountain. It is a holy mountain because God’s holy presence is there. But that holiness distances people from the mountain. They have limited access to the mountain. They could not touch the mountain.

A key word in the text is “*approach*” or “*draw near*” or “*come to*” (Hebrews 12:18, 22). It is the same term used in Hebrews 4:16, 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:16. It is a “worship” term; a liturgical term. It means to enter God’s presence. Israel entered God’s presence in a terrifying way at Sinai, but now the church has come to God with eschatological joy, a joy that experiences the fullness of God’s redemptive presence, that is, we experience the future of God’s promise to us in his presence. We come, as an assembly and in the assembly, to God, that is, we enter his presence with boldness and joy.

The new covenant through Jesus brings us to God himself. We enter the Most Holy Place, God’s own sanctuary. We come to where God lives (Mt. Zion or heavenly Jerusalem). This dwelling-place of God is described by its surroundings.

- Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly – angels surround the throne of God and live in his holy city. They worship God

and the Son as they celebrate the redemption God has accomplished through Jesus. Angels in the assembly surround us.

- To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven – to the assembly of God’s people that is the company of the redeemed. They have their names written in the book of life. This language is used in Old Testament and Jewish literature for God’s redeemed people. I think this term refers to those saints who still live on the earth. Literally, it reads: “assembly of the firstborn ones.” They are God’s firstborn, the elect ones of God. This is God’s people who are still running the race but are part of God’s election.
- To the spirits of righteous men made perfect – to saints who have received the perfection. They have been perfected by the blood of Jesus and through the suffering of life. The “spirits of righteous persons” was a well-known idiom for dead saints in Jewish intertestamental literature (cf. Jubilees 23:30-31; 1 Enoch 22:9; 102:4; 103:3-4; 2 Apoc. Baruch 30:2). They are righteous in the sense of having received divine approval and by faith (Hebrews 11:4, 7). They are “perfected” in their heavenly glory.

This describes the reality of heavenly glory, and the text affirms that believers on the earth are participants of that reality. We come (approach, draw near) and participate in the assembly of God’s people in his presence. We come to God by the blood of Jesus and we experience the fellowship of angels, dead saints and the church throughout the world.

### **3. Hebrews 12:25-29 – Exhortation**

God has spoken! He spoke at Sinai (Hebrews 12:19), but he also spoke through his Son (cf. Hebrews 12). God has spoken through the blood of Christ (Hebrews 12:24). If we refuse this divine speaking, there is nothing but judgment left. If Israel refused the Sinaitic divine speaking and did not escape judgment, how much less will the church escape God’s judgment if we refuse his speaking through his Son?

The preacher quotes Haggai 2:6 as a warning about judgment. God shook the earth, which is a metaphor for divine wrath and judgment. The preacher heightens the judgment by God’s promise to shake the heavens. Just as God brought the fullness of redemption through Christ, so also he will bring the fullness of judgment to those who reject Christ. He will shake everything – all of created reality, and by

that shaking reveal what is unshakeable. The unshakeable reality of the kingdom of God – the redeemed community in the presence of God that Christ has established through his blood.

The recognition that God is a “*consuming fire*” is a reflection of the reality of God’s righteous judgment. The preacher quotes Deuteronomy 4:24. We approach God with boldness, but with respect and awe. We approach him in full recognition of his holiness and in full recognition that if we reject him judgment awaits us. Nevertheless, we approach him in worship with boldness and gratitude. We do not fear his presence, but rejoice in it. Consequently, we experience his kingdom presence with the confidence God receives us graciously through the work of Christ.

### ***Reflections and Exhortation***

Hebrews 12 presents wisdom for living the Christian life by employing the metaphor of a long-distance race. Following Jesus of necessity involves enlisting in a lifelong spiritual marathon. Success in this great race is dependent on the careful cultivation of spiritual athleticism. Verses 1-3 presented the basics – we must run with perseverance divested of sin and hindrances and focused on “*Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.*” Verses 4-11 further advised us regarding how to endure the race’s hardships as spiritual discipline and make the most of it. Verses 12-17 instructed us positively on what to do and negatively on what to guard against if we wish to finish well.

The writer addresses such thinking in verses 18-24 by contrasting where his people have come from with where they have come to and are indeed going. The contrast is between Mount Sinai and Zion – the old and new covenants – terror and joy – distance and closeness.

The exhortations are fundamentally calls to perseverance. Don’t give up; don’t miss the grace of God; don’t refuse God’s gracious offer. When the offer is rejected, there is nothing else left but judgment. God is a consuming fire and when we lose our inheritance rights, we will experience God’s fire.

As we assemble to worship together I often envision our entrance into the throne-room of God. We are no longer here (on the earth, in the assembly room), but we are there (in the heavenly throne room).



This is the reality the preacher of Hebrews calls us to picture. He projects us into the throne room of God. We are in the Most Holy Place. We come – in our daily lives, but also in our assemblies – to Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. We come to God who is surrounded by his angels and the saints who previously died and now enjoy God's presence (as in Revelation 7:9-17). Furthermore, as we gather in God's presence, all the saints around the world are present there as well. We are not alone! We gather with thousands of angels, millions of saints – both on earth and in heaven.

This is what God has accomplished for us through Jesus Christ. He has invited us into his presence and given us access to the Most Holy Place. Even now we enjoy his eschatological presence with eschatological joy while we wait for Jesus to appear a second time. This encourages us to persevere. We don't give up because we enjoy the presence of God even now.

We are not alone. Moreover, we are not useless – we are God's witnesses. We bear witness to the faith, hope and love in a fallen world. We worship and we serve. We gather with saints, both dead and alive, in God's presence and in the presence of his angels. We, even in the midst of this great contest and struggle, experience the future through faith. We know eschatological joy through faith.

Have you ever seen "*Places in the Heart*" which stars Danny Glover and Sally Fields? During the movie several of the stars died, but at the end of the movie they reappear. They reappear in the final scene of the movie that is a communion service. In that final scene the camera pans the rows as each participant partakes and some of those who have already died are again on those pews drinking the communion cup. The scene portrays the eschatological reality we now experience. As we eat and drink together in the throne room of God with all of God's saints. As we gather around the table, the Spirit of God lifts us up into the throne room of God and we experience a foretaste of eschatological fellowship at the messianic table in the kingdom of God.

Given this vision of eschatological joy in festive assembly, the preacher exhorts his people to continue in their faith because they have already possessed the goal, that is, they already experience eschatological joy through faith. That is our hope and that is why we continue the journey. And because God has given us this gift through Jesus, that is why we praise him. So, "let us worship and be grateful."

## ENDNOTES

1. Art Carey, "Beating Agony and the Marathon," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (April 12, 1978).



## STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

# CHAPTER 16

## *Hebrews 13:1-25*

### A FINAL “WORD OF EXHORTATION”

In this chapter the preacher gives a series of practical guidelines for those who intend to take this teacher’s message seriously. The focus is that faith is not separate from the real world of everyday experience.

There is some debate about the relationship between Hebrews 12 and Hebrews 13. Some think it is an epistolary addendum to the sermon, but others think it is the conclusion to the sermon. Whatever its literary function, the theological point is relatively simple to discern.

Hebrews 10:19-12:29 has emphasized perseverance. As a motive and ground for perseverance, the preacher called his hearers to experience the present with a view toward the future. Indeed, the present experience of faith is the experience of the future. Nevertheless, the future has not yet arrived. We are pilgrims on a journey of faith. Even though we even now enter the throne room of God and experience the kingdom of God through faith, we have not yet fully reached the goal of the journey or enjoyed the “better possession” that yet awaits us.

Hebrews 13 is probably best construed as “instructions to pilgrims on the journey.” The particular instructions are occasioned by the situation in which these specific pilgrims find themselves. If the occasion of the letter described in lesson one is correct, then these are instructions for pilgrims in the hostile environment of the city of Rome as they are about to experience severe persecution. His instructions for these pilgrims are connected to their particular situation.

Why do you tell a group of people about life and community when their life is under hostile inspection and their community will soon encounter a brutal persecution? What do pilgrims in that situation need to hear? How can the preacher encourage them and call them to faithful perseverance?

## ***Exegesis of Text***

I have divided Hebrews 13 into three sections. The first section is advice for practical living (Hebrews 13:1-6). The second section encourages the communal life of the church (Hebrews 13:7-17). The third section is a collection of exhortations, prayers and requests. This final section makes the whole document look like a letter though it had proceeded as a sermon.

### **1. Hebrews 13:1-6 – Personal Ethics/Instructions for Pilgrim Living**

From the beginning to the end of Hebrews, the abiding concern of the author has been to so instruct the tiny Hebrew church that it would stay afloat on the increasingly hostile seas of first-century Roman culture. Their ship was a microscopic dot on the massive billows of the official pagan/secular enterprise – and eminently vulnerable. It appeared to outside eyes that the external forces could sink it all.

The author knew the internal threat to the church was far more deadly. In fact, he knew that it could ride out any storm if things were right on the inside. That is why, in verses 1-3, the preacher so strongly emphasized ecclesial ethics, instructing people on how to treat those on board the ship – the church. He first advised “*Keep on loving each other as brothers*” (as family). The term here is *Philadelphia*, brotherly love or familial love. The word points toward a family bonding more than simply a congenial attitude toward each other. The bonding is the root idea for the specific instructions that follow.

In verses 4-6, he becomes even more intimate in his advice, giving very personal directives about marriage, money, and one’s mind-set. He knows nothing will sink a church faster than moral wavering in respect to sex, materialism, or mental outlook. Here is intimate advice regarding how to keep our ship afloat. It is so essential that any church that ignores it will founder and possibly even sink.

The ground or basis for the practical instructions is found in Hebrews 13:5b-6. Ethical living – living out our pilgrim faith – is grounded in God’s presence. We are assured he will never leave or forsake us (13:5), quoting Psalm 118:6-7 which is something the Psalmist realized after he had been through a distressing time where he even despaired of his life in Psalm 118:10-18. Pilgrims need confidence and our confidence is rooted in God’s presence and help.

The preacher offers four specific practical instructions for living as pilgrims in the hostile environment in which they find themselves. First, they should show hospitality (13:2), that is, they should “love strangers” *philoxenia* from two Greek words meaning “love” [*philo*] and “strangers” [*xeno*]. Part of the motive is that some-times God sends angels among his people to experience that hospitality, as Abra-ham (Genesis 18), Gideon (Judges 6) and Manoah (Judges 13) did. Does God sometimes test our love of strangers? Or, are these occasions simply moments of revelation and encounter the preacher uses to link his exhortation with redemptive history? In either case, whether angel or human, God’s people are called to “love strangers.” Given the context of persecution and traveling Christians in the first century (there were few “inns” on the roads and usually people depended on strangers for lodging), there would have been ample opportunity to show this virtue.

Second, “*remembering*” prisoners’ means, of course, to take care of them. And the principle the preacher applies is they should treat them as if they were the prisoners. In other words, “*love your neighbor as yourself*.” Prison was a reality for these believers and many would endure it for their faith.

Third, sexual morality was important in the context of living in the ancient pagan world. It was a constant problem and temptation as they lived in a culture that was overtly sexual through art, statutes, temples, etc. Loving the family (brothers) means faithfulness to family, particularly one’s spouse.

Fourth, wealth and greed were a problem in the ancient world as well. The faithful will probably lose some of that wealth through persecution as they had earlier (Hebrews 10:32-34). Will they love “money” or will they love the brothers (family of God)? Will they remember the reward at the end of the journey (the “*better possession*” in Hebrews 10:34) through faithfulness or will they hang on to their present wealth through faithlessness?

Summary: The beginning sentence of this section calls for family bonding (13:1; brotherly love), and then the preacher articulates four practical applications of that call (13:2-5a). But the call is meaningless and the prospect of endurance is hopeless without the presence and help of God (13:5b-6).

## 2. Hebrews 13:7-17 – Instructions for Communal Living

This section begins and ends by talking about “*leaders*” (13:7, 17; also in 13:24). Jesus is the *great shepherd* (13:20) who will lead us, but he also leads us through “leaders” within the community of faith. They should “*remember*” their past leaders (13:7) and “*obey*” their present leaders (13:17). The former are witnesses to the endurance of faith and models for the present community. They function as a stabilizing influence in the community, just as Jesus himself is a stabilizing influence since he is always the same (Hebrews 13:8). The latter are present for the good of the community and accountable for the community. No doubt the hostile environment and loss of faith that some exhibited in the community created some tension between the leaders and the community. The preacher reminds them (and perhaps includes himself among the leaders; cf. Hebrews 13:8) that leaders are present for the advantage of the community.

Hebrews 13:9-16 is sandwiched between the two appeals to leaders. This material probably reflects some problem within the community itself, though it may be a general appeal that is based on the argument of the sermon.

The text may indicate there was some problem surrounding “foods” or ceremonial meals. Some think part of the community or perhaps even outsiders have attached too much significance to Jewish meals. We know that Jews even outside Palestine attached sacrificial/theological significance to their meals. More than likely, the preacher is simply reminding his hearers that old covenant meals – with their links to old covenant sacrifices – have been surpassed by the “altar” of the Christian faith, that is, the altar is the cross of Jesus or his sacrificial work. “*We have an altar*” is a confessional statement much like “*we have a great high priest*” (4:14). Those who participate in tabernacle meals based on tabernacle sacrifices do not benefit from the altar of Jesus. They are at the wrong altar; we now have a better High Priest with better sacrifices.

Hebrews 13:11-14 encourages pilgrims to continue their journey to the “*city that is to come*” (13:14; cf. 11:10, 14, 16), even though it means bearing disgrace, humiliation and persecution. Jesus bore the same disgrace through his altar as he was sacrificed. He bore the shame of the cross (cf. 12:2) and so now Christian pilgrims who follow Jesus must bear the disgrace their faith brings in a hostile environment.

But because Jesus has made us holy through his blood, we are priests who offer sacrifices. The sacrifices we offer to God through Jesus include the confession of our lips and the sharing of our lives (“share” is the Greek word *koinonia* which

often described financial and material sharing among believers; (cf. Romans 15:26-27; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Acts 2:42-45) through benevolence toward others (“*to do good*” is a Jewish expression for benevolence; cf. Galatians 6:10; James 4:17; Acts 10:38). Here is a succinct description of worship or our priestly service. This is the Christian liturgy – to confess/praise the name of God with our lips and to share our lives with others. Worship is more than Sunday morning; it is a sacrifice of our life just as Jesus sacrificed his life for us. We worship God through Jesus with our whole being – lips and ministry. The coming persecution, of course, would test whether these believers will “*confess*” and “*share*” in the midst of that hostility. Will they endure and continue their priestly ministry before God?

### 3. Hebrews 13:18-25 – Closing Prayer and Requests

The final section connects the community that received this “letter” with the larger Christian community throughout the Mediterranean basin. It requests prayers for the author and his companions (“*us*” in 13:18), gives them news about Timothy who is a mutual acquaintance (13:23), and exchanges greetings between friends (13:24). The latter two appear rather incidental (a piece of information about Timothy and the hope he would visit the community) and expected (greetings). But the appeal for prayers is more intriguing.

There is some discussion about who are the “*us*” and “*we*” of 13:18 because the preacher returns to the first person (“*I*”) in 13:9. Some believe that it is a further comment about the “*leaders*” in 13:17, while others think it refers to the preacher’s companions wherever he is. It depends on how close a connection one places between 13:17 and 13:18, that is, the preacher continuing his topic of leaders or moving to another topic? I tend to think the latter, but the apparent “*apologetic*” or defensive comment in 13:18 (“*we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way*”) may indeed be that there were some problematic rumors surrounding the preacher (including the leaders if we take the “*we*” in that fashion). Whatever the situation, the preacher wants them to keep praying for him and specifically to pray he might return to their community soon.

The preacher characterizes his document as a “*word of exhortation*” which was common language for a sermon in the first century (Acts 13:15; but also 1 Timothy 4:13 where Timothy is to devote himself to reading Scripture, teaching and “*exhortation*”). But exhortation is an extremely appropriate word as his letter has contained many exhortations (Hebrews 4:1, 14; 6:1; 10:22-24; 12:1 are just a few).



The nature of exhortation and the whole theology of the sermon is summarized wonderfully in the doxology of Hebrews 13:20-21. It is “wish-prayer” or blessing. The wish is that God would “equip” (furnish, complete) his hearers with “*everything good for doing*” *God’s will*.” This is the fundamental request. It acknowledges a dependence upon God as the equipper, supplier or power for holiness, maturation and growth. We “do” God’s will through the equipping ministry of God’s grace in our lives. It is God’s work in our lives that generates what is pleasing to him (e.g., “*pleasing sacrifices*” in Hebrews 13:15-16). This is the grace-centered focus of sanctification. Our holiness depends upon God’s work in us.

The wish is surrounded by theological allusions to the exhortation in Hebrews. The God of peace made peace through the blood of Jesus by an eternal covenant that is grounded in the eternal life of the Son. The reference to the resurrection connects us with the eternal life of our high priest who is exalted at the right hand of God. Even though he shed blood, yet he is no longer dead. God “*led out*” (literal meaning) Jesus from the dead, so he could lead us as Shepherd. God “*leads out*” – this is the language of Exodus, of redemption. God through Jesus leads his people to the Promised Land (cf. the allusion to Isaiah 63:11-14). Jesus is a “*great*” shepherd just as he is a “*great high priest*” (Hebrews 4:14; cf. 10:21).

### ***Theological Summary***

This is the most practical section in the whole of the letter, but the theological context of the sermon is not far from the preacher’s mind. Theologically, Jesus is still at the heart of what the preacher does in Hebrews 13.

Jesus is the eternal constant (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus bore disgrace for his people (Hebrews 13:11-14). Through Jesus we approach God as holy priests (Hebrews 13:15-16). Jesus is our great shepherd who redeemed us through his blood (Hebrews 13:22-23). We worship the Father through Jesus and God equips us and works in us through Jesus. God in Jesus will never leave/forsake us and he is always present to help. Jesus will always be there for us at the right hand of God because he has been led out of (redeemed) death.

In the context of this strong theological content, the preacher offers some practical applications for pilgrim journey: love of strangers, love each other through ministry to each other in prison, love your family, don’t love money and remember your

leaders, both past and present. It is important to relate all of these practical admonitions to both the circumstance of the sermon (persecution and external hostility) and the theological ground of the sermon's argument. This practical theology in the context of external pressure and theological grounding will give stability to the community of faith as it pilgrims through the wilderness of suffering. It draws the community together; the family bonds through the suffering in the light of what God has done in Jesus.

The preacher also wants to build on the bond he already has with them. He wants to return to them and bring Timothy along with him. He requests their prayers and exchanges greetings from friends. He subtly conveys to his hearers they are a part of a larger community – the community that surrounds the throne of God in worship as part of an eschatological assembly (Hebrews 12:22-24). They are not alone – they have a community beyond the borders of their own house churches that is spread across the Mediterranean basin.

Most of all, however, they are not alone because through Jesus – the great Shepherd – they approach God himself in his throne room. And Jesus is there, ever alive and ever the same. After modeling faith through suffering, he eternally sits at the right hand of God interceding for them and helping them through their difficult pilgrimage. That same theological truth is for us as well. It is our confidence too!

### ***Reflections and Exhortation***

We have entertained numerous metaphors in Hebrews, notably a ship on rough seas and as we have seen Hebrews 12's wisdom for living the Christian life by employing the metaphor of a long-distance race. Following Jesus of necessity involves enlisting in a lifelong spiritual marathon. Success in this great race is dependent on the careful cultivation of spiritual athleticism. Verses 1-3 presented the basics – we must run with perseverance divested of sin and hindrances and focus on “*Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.*” Verses 4-11 further advised us regarding how to endure again if we wish to finish well.

One of the facts that comes through loud and clear is that marathoning is tough. Spiritual runners experience spiritual equivalents of what the Boston marathoner regularly undergoes – bone grinding against raw bone, searing half-dollar-sized blisters, “hitting the wall” so that each step is like running through warm caramel. Sometimes, like modern marathoners, they are encouraged by those along the way,

just as the spectators who line Boston's "Heartbreak Hill" encourage the walkers to jog and the joggers to run, cheering and exhorting, "Pick up those feet. You can do it!" Because of such encouragement, runners finish well. But there is an experience the spiritual runner undergoes that is virtually unknown to those involved in a mere physical race – and that is the jeering of carping distractors. This was the experience of the early Hebrew church and of virtually all who have subsequently followed in its footsteps. Specifically, in that day Jewish Christians were being taunted by their newly estranged relatives and friends and synagogue officials for leaving the historic Jewish faith. As they followed Jesus and attempted to put one foot in front of the other, as they ascended their own spiritual "heartbreak hills," they were hearing discordant voices: "You are on the wrong path. You are headed away from Sinai and Jerusalem. You have left your heritage in Abraham and Moses. You have forsaken your nation that has had the great blessings of God. You will never make it!"

For those who are disheartened, there is a negative prospect to consider for anyone who turns his back from the journey. The stakes are high. We must not turn back.

The Book of Hebrews closes with one of the most exquisite and soaring of all Scriptural benedictions. Multiple millions of worshippers have been dismissed with the pastor's upraised hand and the sonorous words that begin, "*Now may the God of peace ....*"

In its original setting it was especially appropriate for the expatriate Hebrew church as it battened down its hatches, trimmed its sails, and pointed its prow into the ominous rising seas of Roman persecution that would explode full-fury under Nero's infamy. Its appropriateness comes from the fact the benediction and doxology of verse 21 flows from a grand foundational statement in verse 20 regarding what comes from the God they serve – namely, his *peace*, his *eternal covenant*, and his *risen Shepherd*.

We have seen, as we move toward the great benediction, that we have God's peace and God's eternal promise. The remaining element is his risen Shepherd. The middle clause of verse 20 tells us that God "*brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep.*" The shepherd metaphor is one of the most spiritually sumptuous in all of God's Word. It reveals volumes about us (the sheep) and about the Lord (our Shepherd). As to our "*sheepness*," Dr. Bob Smith, long-time philosophy professor at Bethel College in Minnesota, used to humor his point home regarding our human state by insisting that the existence of

sheep is *prima facie* evidence against evolution. Sheep are so unintelligent and obtuse and defenseless, they could not have possibly evolved – the only way they could have survived is with shepherds!

Certainly we must admit we are sheep. Even more, we must note Jesus took up the term *shepherd* and applied it to himself (cf. Mark 14:27). Jesus' shepherd heart welled with compassion, for Mark tells us, "*When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*" (Mark 6:34). Even more, his good shepherd's heart caused him to give everything: "*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep*" (John 10:14, 15).

Here our writer tells us that he is not only a "*good shepherd*" – he is also "*the great shepherd of the sheep*." Why? Because he is a risen Shepherd – "*brought back from the dead*." As the great risen Shepherd, his compassion and protection are mediated from a position of an unparalleled display of power! He, our Shepherd, is exalted at the right hand of the Father. All other shepherds pale by comparison. There is none like our "*great shepherd*." Our risen Shepherd lives not only to give us life, but to tend us so we will be sheep who bring him glory. This means our grandest spiritual desires are never audacious and any spiritual aspirations less than the loftiest are not grand enough. What security and what challenge the fact of our risen "*great shepherd*" brings to our souls.

The prayer here in Hebrews – "*working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ*" – is eminently doable!

It is an immutable fact the power to do what is pleasing to God will always be given to us through Jesus Christ – if we want it! But some of us live as if that is not true. The real question is, do we want it? Do we desire it? Do we expect it? Then pray for it!

The foundation we all share is truly monumental. We have God's peace, his own *shalom*. His plans for us are only for our wholeness, our well-being, our completeness. We have his eternal covenant, the new covenant in his blood and the promise of a new heart and new relationship. The great promise will never change. We have his risen Shepherd who cares for our souls with the compassion and power in keeping with his great exaltation at the right hand of God. He is our "*great shepherd*."

Having, therefore, the foundation of his peace, his eternal covenant, and this great shepherd, we pray for ourselves and for our church. We pray for his equipping us “*with every good that [we] may do his will*” – and thus we find him mending us and putting us right so we can do it! We pray for his enabling – “*working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ*” – and so find ourselves living under his pleasure and power.

God chose the human race to be the priests of all creation, offering up creation’s worship to him and bringing order to it. We, the collective people of God, are the continuing incarnation and presence of Jesus on the earth today.

We are, through prayer, equipped and enabled to serve, and our souls soar. Our ship sails well to his glory.

So, the book of Hebrews offers, quite simply - Jesus. It offers us the Jesus who is there to help us because he’s one of us, and has trodden the path before us. In following Jesus he has led us to the place that neither Abraham, Moses, Joshua, nor David could ever lead us.

## GLOSSARY

### Aqedah

The binding of Isaac by Abraham.

### Ascension

At the end of Luke's gospel and the start of Acts, Luke describes Jesus' "going up" from earth into heaven. To understand this, we have to remember that "heaven" isn't a "place" within our own world of space, time and matter, but a different *dimension* of reality – God's dimension, which intersects and interacts with our own (which we call "earth," meaning both the planet where we live and the entire space-time universe). For Jesus to "ascend," therefore, doesn't mean that he's a long way away, but rather that he can be, and is, intimately present to all his people all the time. What's more, because in the Bible "heaven" is (as it were) the control room for "earth," it means that Jesus is actually in charge of what goes on here and now. The way his sovereign rule works out is of course very different from the way earthly rulers get their way: as in his own life, he accomplishes his saving purposes through faithful obedience, including suffering. The life and witness of the early church, therefore, resulting in the spread of the gospel around the world, shows what it means to say that Jesus has ascended and that he is the world's rightful Lord.

### Baptism

Literally, "plunging" (immersing) people into water. From within a wider Jewish tradition of ritual washings and bathings, John the Baptist undertook a vocation of baptizing people in the Jordan, not as one ritual among others but as a unique moment of repentance, preparing them for the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus himself was baptized by John, identifying himself with this renewed movement and developing it in his own way. After his death and resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, baptism became the normal response to the preaching of the gospel and the means of entry into the community of Jesus' people. It was aligned both with Exodus from Egypt (1 Corinthians 10:2) and with Jesus' death and resurrection (Romans 6:2-11).

### Christology

The study in Christian theology which is primarily concerned with the nature and person of Jesus recorded in the gospels and the epistles.

### Circumcision, circumcised

The cutting off of the foreskin. Male circumcision was a major mark of identity for Jews following its initial commandment to Abraham (Genesis 17), reinforced by Joshua (Joshua 5:2-9). Other peoples, e.g., the Egyptians, also circumcised male children. A line of thought from Deuteronomy (e.g. 30:6), through Jeremiah (e.g. 31:33), to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New

Testament (e.g. Romans 2:29) speaks of “circumcision of the heart” as God’s real desire, by which one may become inwardly what the male Jew is outwardly, that is, marked out as part of God’s people. At periods of Jewish assimilation into the surrounding culture, some Jews tried to remove the marks of circumcision (1 Maccabees 1:11- 15).

## **Covenant**

At the end of Jewish belief is the conviction the one God, YHWH, who had made the whole world, had called Abraham and his family to belong to him in a special way. The promise God made to Abraham and his family, and the requirements that were laid on them as a result, came to be seen in terms either of the agreement that a king would make with a subject people, or sometimes of the marriage bond between husband and wife. One regular way of describing this relationship was “covenant,” which can thus include both promise and law. The covenant was renewed at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah; in Deuteronomy before the entry to the promised land; and, in a more focused way, with David (e.g. Psalm 89). Jeremiah 31 promised that after the punishment of exile God would make a “new covenant” with his people, forgiving them and binding them to him more intimately. Jesus believed that this was coming through his kingdom proclamation and his death and resurrection. The early Christians developed these ideas in various ways, believing that in Jesus the promises had at last been fulfilled.

## **Dead Sea Scrolls**

A collection of texts, some in remarkably good repair, some extremely fragmentary, found in the late 1940s around Qumran (near northeast corner of the Dead Sea), and virtually all now edited, translated and in the public domain. They formed all or part of the library of a strict monastic group, most likely Essenes, founded in the mid-second century BC and lasting until the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70. The scrolls include the earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures, and several other important documents of community regulations, scriptural exegesis, hymns, wisdom writings, and other literature. They shed a flood of light on one small segment within the Judaism of Jesus’ day, helping us to understand how some Jews at least were thinking, praying and reading scripture. Despite attempts to prove the contrary, they make no reference to John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, James or early Christianity in general.

## **Exile**

Deuteronomy (29-30) warned that if Israel disobeyed YHWH, he would send his people into exile, but if they repented he would bring them back. When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and took the people into exile, prophets such as Jeremiah interpreted this as the fulfillment of this prophecy, and made further promises about how long exile would last (70 years, according to Jeremiah 25:12; 29, 10). Sure enough, exiles began to return in the sixth century (Ezra 1:1). However, the post-exilic period was largely a disappointment, since the people were still enslaved to foreigners (Nehemiah 9:36); and at the height of persecution by the Syrians, Daniel 9:2, 24 spoke of the “real” exile lasting not for 70 years but 70 *weeks* of years, i.e., 490 years. Longing for the real “return from exile,” when the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. would be fulfilled, and redemption from pagan oppression accomplished, continued to characterize many

Jewish movements, and was a major theme in Jesus' proclamation and his summons to repentance.

## **Exodus**

The Exodus from Egypt took place, according to the book of that name, under the leadership of Moses, after long years in which the Israelites had been enslaved there. (According to Genesis 15:13f., this was itself part of God's covenanted promise to Abraham.) It demonstrated, to them and to Pharaoh, King of Egypt, that Israel was God's special child (Exodus 4:22). They then wandered through the Sinai wilderness for 40 years, led by God in a pillar of cloud and fire; early on in this time they were given the Torah on Mount Sinai itself. Finally, after the death of Moses and under the leadership of Joshua, they crossed the Jordan and entered, and eventually conquered, the promised land of Canaan. This event, commemorated annually in Passover and other Jewish festivals, gave the Israelites not only a powerful memory of what had made them a people, but also a particular shape and content to their faith in YHWH as not creator but also redeemer; and in subsequent enslavements, particularly the exile, they looked for a further redemption which would be, in effect, a new Exodus. Probably no other past event so dominated the imagination of first-century Jews; among them the early Christians, following the lead of Jesus himself, continually referred back to the Exodus to give meaning and shape to their own critical events, most particularly Jesus' death and resurrection.

## **Gentiles**

The Jew divided the world into Jews and non-Jews. The Hebrew word for non-Jews, *goyim*, carries overtones both of family identity (i.e. not of Jewish ancestry) and of worship (i.e. idols, not of the one true God YHWH). Though many Jews established good relations with Gentiles, not least in Jewish Diaspora (the dispersion of the Jews away from Palestine), officially there were taboos against contact such as intermarriage. In the New Testament, the Greek word, *ethne*, "nations," carries the same meanings as *goyim*. Part of Paul's overmastering agenda was to insist that Gentiles who believed in Jesus had full rights in the Christian community alongside believing Jews, without having to become circumcised.

## **Gehenna, hell**

Gehenna is, literally the valley of Hinnom, on the south-west slope of Jerusalem. From ancient times it was used as a garbage dump, smoldering with a continual fire. Already by the time of Jesus some Jews used it as an image for the place of punishment after death. Jesus' own usage blends the two meanings in his warning both to Jerusalem itself (unless it repents, the whole city will become a smoldering heap of garbage) and to people in general (to beware of God's final judgment).

## **Heaven**

Heaven is God's dimension of the created order (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 115:16; Matthew 6:9), whereas "earth" is the world of space, time, and matter that we know. "Heaven" thus sometimes stands, reverentially, for "God" (as in Matthew's regular "kingdom of heaven"). Normally



hidden from human sight, heaven is occasionally revealed or unveiled so that people can see God's dimension of ordinary life (e.g., 2 Kings 6:17; Revelation 1, 4-5). Heaven in the New Testament is thus not usually seen as the place where God's people go after death; at the end the New Jerusalem descends *from* heaven *to* earth, joining the two dimensions for ever. "Entering the kingdom of heaven" does not mean "going to heaven after death," but belonging in the present to the people who steer their earthly course by the standards and purposes of heaven (cf. the Lord's Prayer: "on earth as in heaven," Matthew 6:10) and who are assured of membership in the age to come.

## **Hermeneutics**

Interpretation, especially in reference to biblical sources and scripture.

## **Eikons**

Introduced for use by theologian Scot McKnight to avoid the over-used "made in the image of God." He suggests the use of the creation of human, male and female, as *Eikons* of God. That is, as made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). The gospel begins, and only begins, because humans are Eikons of God. "Instead of seeing humans first and foremost as sinners, we need to see them as Eikons of God, created to relate to God, to relate to others, and to govern the world as Eikons. The Fall affects each of the previous... humans then are cracked Eikons. There is all the difference in the world in depicting humans simply sinners and seeing sinfulness as the condition and behavior of a cracked Eikon. Humans' sin, but their sin is the sin of an Eikon. They can't be defined by their sin until they are seen as Eikons."

## **Justification**

God's declaration, from his position as judge of all the world, that someone is in the right, despite universal sin. This declaration will be made on the last day on the basis of an entire life (Romans 2:1-6) but is brought forward into the present on the basis of Jesus achievement, because sin has been dealt with through his cross (Romans 3:21-4:25); the means of this present justification is simply faith. This means, particularly, that Jews and Gentiles alike are full members of the family promised by God to Abraham (Galatians 3; Romans 4).

## **Kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven**

Best understood as the *kingship*, or sovereign and saving rule, of Israel's God YHWH, as celebrated in several psalms (e.g., 99:1) and prophecies (e.g., Daniel 6:26). Because YHWH was the creator God, when he finally became king in the way he intended this would involve setting the world to rights, and particularly Israel from its enemies. "Kingdom of God" and various equivalents (e.g., "No King but God!") became a revolutionary slogan around the time of Jesus. Jesus' own announcement of God's kingdom redefined these expectations around his own very different plan and vocation. His invitation to people to "enter" the kingdom was a way of summoning them to allegiance to himself and his program, seen as the start of God's long-awaited saving reign. For Jesus, the kingdom was coming not in a single move, but in stages, of which his own public career was one, his death and resurrection another, and a still further

consummation another. Note that “kingdom of heaven” is Matthew’s preferred form for the same phrase, following a regular Jewish practice of saying “heaven” rather than “God.” It does not refer to a place (“heaven”), but to the fact of God’s becoming king in and through Jesus and his achievement. Paul speaks of Jesus, as Messiah, already in possession of his kingdom, waiting to hand it over finally to the father (1 Corinthians 15:23-28; cf. Ephesians 5:5).

## **Life, soul, spirit**

Ancient people held many different views about what made human beings the special creatures they are. Some, including many Jews, believed that to be complete, humans needed bodies as well as inner selves. Others, including many influenced by the philosophy of Plato (fourth century BC), believed that the important part of a human was the “soul” (Greek, *psyche*), which at death would be happily freed from its bodily prison. Confusingly for us, the same word *psyche* is often used in the New Testament within a Jewish framework where it clearly means “life” or “true self,” without implying a body/soul dualism that devalues the body. Human inwardness of experience and understanding can also be referred to as “spirit.”

## **Messiah, messianic, Christ**

The Hebrew word means literally “anointed one,” hence in theory either a prophet, priest, or king. In Greek this translates as *Christos*; “Christ” in early Christianity was a title, and only gradually became an alternative proper name for Jesus. In practice “Messiah” is mostly restricted to the notion, which took various forms in ancient Judaism, of the coming king who would be David’s true heir, through whom YHWH would bring judgment to the world, and in particular would rescue Israel from pagan enemies. There was no single template of expectations. Scriptural stories and promises contributed to different ideals and movements, often focused on (a) decisive military defeat of Israel’s enemies and (b) rebuilding or cleansing the Temple. The Dead Sea Scrolls speak of two “Messiahs, one a priest and the other a king. The universal early Christian belief that Jesus was Messiah is only explicable, granted his crucifixion by the Romans (which would have been seen as a clear sign that he was not the Messiah), by their belief that God had raised him from the dead, so vindicating the implicit messianic claims of his earlier ministry.

## **Mishnah**

The main codification of Jewish law (Torah) by the rabbis, produced in about AD 200, reducing to writing the “oral Torah” which in Jesus’ day ran parallel to the “written Torah.” The Mishnah is itself the basis of the much larger collections of traditions in the two Talmuds (roughly AD 400).

## **Pharisees, legal experts, lawyers, rabbis**

The Pharisees were an unofficial but powerful Jewish pressure group through most of the first centuries BC and AD. Largely lay-led, though including some priests, their aim was to purify Israel through intensified observance of the Jewish law (Torah), developing their own traditions about the precise meaning and application of scripture, their own patterns of prayer and devotion,

and their own calculations of the national hope. Though not all legal experts were Pharisees, most Pharisees were thus legal experts.

They effected a democratization of Israel's life, since for them the study and practice of Torah was equivalent to worshipping in the Temple – though they were adamant in pressing their own rules for the Temple liturgy on an unwilling (and often Sadducean) priesthood. This enabled them to survive AD 70 and, merging into the early rabbinic movement, to develop new ways forward. Politically they stood up for ancestral traditions, and were at the forefront of various movements of revolt against both pagan overlordship and compromised Jewish leaders. By Jesus' day there were two distinct schools, the stricter one of Shammai, more inclined towards armed revolt, and the more lenient one of Hillel, ready to live and let live.

Jesus' debates with the Pharisees are at least as much a matter of agenda and policy (Jesus strongly opposed their separatist nationalism) as about details of theology and piety. Saul of Tarsus was a fervent right-wing Pharisee, presumably a Shammaite, until his conversion. After the disastrous war of AD 66-70, these schools of Hillel and Shammai continued bitter debate on appropriate policy. Following the further disaster of AD 135 (the failed Bar-Kochba revolt against Rome) their traditions were carried on by the rabbis who, though looking to the earlier Pharisees for inspiration, developed a Torah-piety in which personal holiness and purity took the place of political agenda.

### **Present age, age to come, eternal life**

By the time of Jesus many Jewish thinkers divided history into two periods: "the present age" and "the age to come" – the latter being the time when YHWH would at last act decisively to judge evil, to rescue Israel, and to create a new world of justice and peace. The early Christians believed that, though the full blessings of the coming age lay still in the future, it had already begun with Jesus, particularly with his death and resurrection, and that by faith and baptism they were able to enter it already. "Eternal life" does not mean simply "existence continuing without end," but "the life of the age to come."

### **Priests, high priest**

Aaron, the older brother of Moses, was appointed Israel's first high priest [Exodus 28-29], and in theory his descendants were Israel's priests thereafter. Other members of his tribe (Levi) were "Levites," performing other liturgical duties but not sacrificing. Priests lived among the people all around the country, having a local teaching role (Leviticus 10:11; Malachi 2:7), and going to Jerusalem by rotation to perform the Temple liturgy (e.g., Luke 2:8).

David appointed Zadok (whose Aaronic ancestry is sometimes questioned) as high priest, and his family remained thereafter the senior priests in Jerusalem, probably the ancestors of the Sadducees. One explanation of the origins of the Qumran Essenes is that they were a dissident group who believed themselves to be the rightful chief priests.

## Resurrection

In most biblical thought, human bodies matter and are not merely disposable prisons for the soul. When ancient Israelites wrestled with the goodness and justice of YHWH, the creator, they ultimately came to insist that he must raise the dead (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2-3) – a suggestion firmly resisted by classical pagan thought. The longed-for return from exile was also spoken of in terms of YHWH raising dry bones to new life (Ezekiel 37:1-14). These ideas were developed in the second-Temple period, not least at times of martyrdom (e.g. 2 Maccabees 7). Resurrection was not just “life after death,” but a newly embodied life *after* “life after death”; those at present dead were either “asleep,” or seen as “souls,” or “spirits,” awaiting new embodiment.

The early Christian belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead was not that he had “gone to heaven,” or that he had been “exalted,” or was “divine”; they believed all those as well, but each could have been expressed without mention of resurrection. Only the bodily resurrection of Jesus explains the rise of the early church, particularly its belief in Jesus’ messiahship (which his crucifixion would have called into question). The early Christians believed that they themselves would be raised to a new, transformed bodily life at the time of the Lord’s return or parousia (e.g. Philippians 3:20f.).

## Sabbath

The Jewish Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, was a regular reminder both of creation (Genesis 2:3; Exodus 20:8-11) and of the Exodus (Deuteronomy 5:15). Along with circumcision and the food laws, it was one of the badges of Jewish identity within the pagan world of late antiquity, and a considerable body of Jewish law and custom grew up around its observance.

## Sacrifice

Like all ancient people, the Israelites offered animal and vegetable sacrifices to their God. Unlike others, they possessed a highly detailed written code (mostly in Leviticus) for what to offer and how to offer it; this in turn was developed in the Mishnah (c. AD 200). The Old Testament specifies that sacrifices can only be offered in the Jerusalem Temple; after this was destroyed in AD 70, sacrifices ceased, and Judaism developed further the idea, already present in some teachings, of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as alternative forms of sacrifice. The early Christians used the language of sacrifice in connection with such things as holiness, evangelism and the eucharist.

## Sadducees

By Jesus’ day, the Sadducees were the aristocracy of Judaism, possibly tracing their origins to the family of Zadok, David’s high priest. Based in Jerusalem, and including most of the leading priestly families, they had their own traditions and attempted to resist the pressure of the Pharisees to conform to their. They claimed to rely only on the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and denied any doctrine of future life, particularly of the resurrection and other ideas associated with it, presumably because of the encouragement such beliefs gave to revolutionary movements. No writings from the Sadducees have survived, unless the apocryphal

book of Ben-Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) comes from them. the Sadducees themselves did not survive the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70.

## **Son of David, David's son**

An alternative, and infrequently used, title for Messiah. The messianic promises of the Old Testament often focuses specifically on David's son, for example 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:19-37. Joseph, Mary's husband, is called "son of David" by the angel in Matthew 1:20.

## **Temple**

The Temple in Jerusalem was planned by David (c. 1000 BC) and built by his son Solomon as the central sanctuary for all Israel. After reforms under Hezekiah and Josiah in the seventh century BC, it was destroyed by Babylon in 587 BC. Rebuilding by the returned exiles began in 538 BC and was completed in 516, initiating the "second Temple period." Judas Maccabaeus cleansed it in 164 BC after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes (167). Herod the Great began to rebuild and beautify it in 19 BC; the work was completed in AD 63. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Many Jews believed it should and would be rebuilt; some still do. The Temple was not only the place of sacrifice; it was believed to be the unique dwelling of YHWH on earth, the place where heaven and earth met.

## **Torah, Jewish law**

"Torah," narrowly conceived, consists of the first five books of the Old Testament, the "five books of Moses" or "Pentateuch." (These contain much law, but also much narrative.) It can also be used for the whole Old Testament scriptures, though strictly these are the law, prophets and writings." In a broader sense, it refers to the whole developing corpus of Jewish legal tradition, written and oral; the oral Torah was initially codified in the Mishnah around AD 200, with wider developments found in the two Talmuds, of Babylon and Jerusalem, codified around AD 400.

Many Jews in the time of Jesus and Paul regarded the Torah as being so strongly God-given as to be almost itself, in some sense, divine; some (e.g. Ben Sirach 24) identified it with the figure of "Wisdom." Doing what Torah said was not seen as a means of earning God's favor, but rather of expressing gratitude, and as a key badge of Jewish identity.

## **YHWH**

The ancient Israelite name for God, from at least the time of the Exodus (Exodus 6:2f.). It may originally have been pronounced "Yahweh," but by the time of Jesus it was considered too holy to speak out loud, except for the high priest once a year in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Instead, when reading scripture, pious Jews would say *Adonai*, "Lord," marking this usage by adding the vowels of *Adonai* to the consonants of YHWH, eventually producing the hybrid "Jehovah." The word YHWH if formed from the verb "to be" combining "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be," and perhaps "I am because I am," emphasizing YHWH's sovereign creative power.

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### Dr. Bill McDowell

Bill McDowell was born in Brownwood, Missouri on the edge of the great dark cypress swamps. He grew to maturity in the Church of Christ in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, attended Central High School, and left for Nashville to attend David Lipscomb University. There he majored in Speech and Bible graduating *cum laude*, and was selected by Lipscomb faculty as one of the two most representative preachers to graduate in 1960. Bill earned a Master's of Divinity degree from Emory University Chandler School of Theology and United Theological Seminaries. After ten years of full time ministry in Churches of Christ Bill entered Kent State University and in 1971 he completed his Master's of Education and earned his PhD in rehabilitation and counseling psychology. Bill joined the counseling faculty at Marshall University in Huntington, WV in 1971 and served as professor and department chair until he retired in 2000. He returned in 2003 as professor and department chair, working until his "final" retirement in 2008, only to return in 2014 to serve one year as Director of the Chancellor's Scholars Program recruiting minority students for doctoral programs. During his ministerial career, Bill has served churches in Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia.

Bill is an active member of the Norway Avenue Church of Christ. After retirement he returned to his first love of studying biblical theology. Among his writings are *There's Good News in the World* (2011), *The Story of My Life: From the Edge of the Great Dark Cypress Swamps to the Mountains of Appalachia* (2012), *Before the Foundation of the World: Connecting Foundations of Faith to Christian Living* (2014), and *Sermon on the Mount: A Pathway to Radical Living* (2015). Bill authors a blog, *McDowell's Musings, Metaphors, and Messages* for the Norway Avenue Church of Christ.