

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

STUDY BOOK

FALL 2026



**FINDING LIFE'S
BETTER THINGS**

The Book of Hebrews



Thru-the-Bible
Book by Book

STUDY BOOK FALL 2026

For use with *Understanding the Bible's Leader's Guide*.

FINDING LIFE'S BETTER THINGS

The Book of Hebrews

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE®—A quarterly series of Bible book studies that will help you understand the Word of God and apply it to your life.



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Volume 35, Number 1 September-November 2026

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Hebrews

Hebrews is a pep talk to a group of professing Christians who had evidently lost their initial enthusiasm for the Christian faith. The recipients of the letter had apparently failed to progress in spiritual understanding and discernment. They seemed to be growing more slothful and discouraged. They had even begun to question whether they should remain professing Christians or revert to their old ways and traditions.

To help them make the right choice, the author of Hebrews pointed to Christ as the perfect revelation

of God. In essence, the author encouraged his readers to make the better choice—to choose the eternal salvation of the Lord, even if it has trials and tribulations, rather than to renounce what is true.

Like the Hebrews to whom this letter was addressed, professing Christians today face many crises that may chip away at our faith in the Lord. But as we will learn through this study of Hebrews, we too can find the better things of life as God enables us to persevere in faith and live wholeheartedly for Christ.

Author and Recipients

No one knows for certain who wrote Hebrews. Several leaders of the early church considered the apostle Paul to be the letter's author. Like Paul, the writer of Hebrews had close connections with Timothy (Heb. 13:23). But unlike Paul, the author considered himself a second-generation Christian—one who was not an apostle, who had not been taught by Christ directly, and who was not an eyewitness of the risen Lord (2:3). In addition, a comparison of Hebrews' opening with the openings of Paul's thirteen identified letters reveals the distinctiveness of Hebrews.

Although there are no significant theological or doctrinal differences

between Paul's letters and Hebrews, the main emphases and overall writing style are so dissimilar that most Bible scholars since the Reformation have not believed Paul could have written this letter.

Having ruled out Paul as the author, there is little agreement among scholars about who may have written the letter. For the most part, the authorship of Hebrews remains a matter of speculation.

Some favor the idea that Apollos wrote it. A native of Alexandria in Egypt, Apollos had a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 18:24–28). He was noted as an eloquent speaker, and this letter was certainly written with eloquence.

Apollos was associated with Paul through the church at Corinth and likely would have known Timothy.

Others favor the idea that Barnabas wrote Hebrews. As a Jew from the priestly tribe of Levi (4:36), Barnabas would have been knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the role of priests in performing Jewish rituals—both of which are described in detail in the letter. And as a companion of Paul's for some time, he too likely would have known Timothy. It does seem unlikely, however, that Barnabas, referred to as an apostle (14:3–4, 14; 1 Cor. 9:5–6), would have considered himself a second-generation Christian.

Among others who have been suggested as the author of Hebrews is Priscilla. She and her husband, Aquila [ACK-wih-luh], were friends of Paul's and hosted church meetings at their home in Ephesus. The masculine grammatical form the writer used in Hebrews 11:32, however, seems to discount this view. (Some scholars suggest that Aquila and Priscilla cowrote the letter.)

A few scholars have offered the

apostle Philip, Luke, or Silas as the author of this letter.

The location of the people to whom this letter was written is almost as uncertain as who wrote it. There is included in the letter no description of the recipient church, and only a few clues vaguely identify the letter's readers. Some scholars point to the author's greetings from "those from Italy" (13:24b) as evidence that the letter's recipients were Italians, perhaps living in Rome. Using the same phrase, however, other scholars say the greeting is evidence that the letter was written *from* Italy. There is no way of verifying either interpretation.

The Hebrews who received this letter evidently had faced adversity, though no one had yet met martyrdom (10:32–34; 12:4). Based on the topics addressed by the letter—sacrifices, the role of priests, and the function of the tabernacle, for instance—they were Jews who had converted to Christianity. And yet they may have been contemplating reverting to their Jewish traditions rather than maturing in their faith in Christ.

Purpose

Directed to Christians who had faced adverse circumstances and challenges to their faith, Hebrews sought to strengthen believers to live wholeheartedly for Christ. Some professing Jewish Christians who were the recipients of this letter may have been on the brink of relinquishing their commitment to the Lord. They had begun to consider leaving

the church and reintegrating fully into the Jewish synagogue worship of the day. In response to their circumstances, the writer of Hebrews encouraged them to remain firm in their faith in Christ.

From the text of this letter, we can surmise that these Hebrew people were confronting a choice. Should they persist in Christianity, or

should they renounce their Christian beliefs and settle into a more conventional life-style? Advising them to make the best decision, the writer of Hebrews stressed the importance of persevering by keeping their faith in God's Son.

Citing the covenant established by Christ as replacing and as better than the covenant God established with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, the writer said God could now be approached through His Son. Through the sacrifice of Christ, we can be forgiven of our sins and have

an everlasting relationship with the Lord.

Christ is the supreme and sufficient revealer and mediator of God's grace, the author wrote. He is the "great high priest" (4:14), who came to earth to offer the once-for-all, perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world (9:27–28). Though these Jewish believers were no doubt steeped in the Jewish traditions, the writer reminded them that Christ is God's full and final revelation.

Date

Hebrews was probably written between A.D. 60 and 70, but it is impossible to fix a date with absolute certainty. Several passages of this letter may, however, help us narrow the time frame in which the letter could have been written. For instance, Hebrews 10:11 may indicate that animal sacrifices were still being offered at the temple in Jerusalem—a ritual that ceased after A.D.

70, when the temple was destroyed. In fact, the writer said the old covenant "is obsolete and outdated [and] will soon disappear" (8:13), perhaps implying that this letter was written shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem. And the letter's conclusion tells of Timothy's release from prison (13:23), perhaps indicating that the letter likely was written sometime after A.D. 60.

How to Use the *Study Book*

The *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the *Study Book* until you

get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

1

God's Son Superior to All

Hebrews 1:1–2:4

a God's Speech by His Son (1:1–4)

In the past God spoke to our ancestors 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.

—Hebrews 1:1–2

In the opening of his letter to the Hebrews, the author emphasized the superiority of Jesus Christ, who as God's only Son died on the cross to provide salvation for all people. To portray Christ's superiority, the author compared the incompleteness of God's revelation through the Old Testament prophets with the completeness of His revelation through His Son.

Four prepositional phrases in verse 1 reveal some of the characteristics of God's communication:

- the timing ("in the past");
- the target ("to our ancestors");
- the medium ("through the

prophets"); and

- the methods ("in various ways").

The author of Hebrews wrote that God had been active in history. Speaking through prophets and in various other ways, the Lord had on occasion communicated His word to people of faith, and those men and women of God had passed on His word to others. Though acknowledging these ancient revelations for what they taught people about God, the author implied that they were fragmentary and incomplete. At most, they pointed to a time when God would reveal Himself fully and finally.

Still, the author did not mean to lessen the value of God's revelation through the Hebrew prophets. The fact that he considered them the transmitters of God's revelation is evidence of just how much respect he held for these faithful servants of God. But the same God who had partially revealed Himself in times past now had revealed Himself completely.

Ask Yourself . . . How has God revealed Himself to me through His Son?

God's Creative Means of

C O M M U N I C A T I O N

The author of Hebrews wrote that God had communicated with people through the prophets “at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1). Following is a list of some of God’s creative and varied means of communicating with the people of Old Testament times:

- through miracles (Exod. 3:2–6);
- through the Urim and Thummim (28:30);
- through direct speech (Num. 12:8);
- through angels (Judg. 6:11–12);
- through a whisper (1 Kings 19:11–13a);
- through dreams (Job 33:14–18);
- through family circumstances (Isa. 8:1–4);
- through catastrophes (45:7);
- through visions and parables (Hos. 12:10);
- through symbolic actions (Ezek. 40:1–7);
- and through prophets (Heb. 1:1).

The author said the full and final revelation of God had come in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ. The phrase “in these last days” would carry a special significance for the Hebrew readers, who probably interpreted the phrase as meaning that Jesus, as the Messiah, had ushered in the messianic age. Jesus is not merely the end of a long line of Old Testament prophets; He is the One for whom the Hebrews had waited for centuries. He is the complete and distinct revelation of God’s being (v. 3).

Having pointed out Jesus’ distinction as the Son of God, the author proceeded to explain ways in which God’s revelation through Christ is superior to all other revelations of the Lord. To show this superiority, the writer made seven statements describing the Son (vv. 2–3).

1. “Appointed heir of all things.” In Hebrew culture the firstborn son was the highest ranked of all children. Therefore, he was also the family heir. Jesus is the heir of God’s creation.

2. “Through whom also he made the universe.” God created the world through the Son, who was with God even at the beginning of time.

3. “Radiance of God’s glory.” The glory of God is in Christ, and Christ reflects that glory. In essence, the Son is the revelation of the majesty of God.

4. “Exact representation of his being.” Christ is an exact representation of God. He is the perfect image of God’s character,

expression, and being. He represents God's very essence.

5. "Sustaining all things." Not only did the Son create the universe, but He also sustains it. He has a continued interest in the world and loves it, and He is carrying it toward the fulfillment of His divine plan.

6. "Provided purification for sins." Jesus did once and for all what the Hebrew priests were required to do on a regular basis—He provided purification for sins. Through His redeeming work on the cross, He dealt with humanity's problem with sin, which alienated people from God. His sacrifice brought about complete redemption for humanity's transgressions. The Greek verb for "provided purification" is *katharismos*, from which we derive the term *catharsis*, meaning a purging that brings about spiritual renewal.

Ask Yourself . . . In what ways did Jesus' sacrifice bring about a catharsis in my own life?

7. "Sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." The Son's saving work is done. And because He completed the task for which He was sent, He was granted the place of highest honor—at God's right hand.

Because the Son has come to earth and sacrificed His own life for the sins of the world, He is to be considered superior to all things, including the angels (v. 4). The Hebrew people had long held angels in high esteem because these heavenly beings were instrumental in the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. The author told the Hebrews

that God's Son is absolutely above all angels. To emphasize his point, he said Christ's name is superior to that of the angels. To Jews, a name summed up all that a person was—his or her character and even profession. Thus the writer explained that Jesus' character and work were far superior even to those of the heavenly beings.

b

God's Son Superior to Angels (1:5–14)

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

—Hebrews 1:13–14

Having made seven statements about the superiority of God's Son, the author then quoted seven Scripture passages to show how and why Christ is superior to the angels. The author apparently intended to imply that Jesus, as the Messiah, is to be seen throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The writer began this series of quotations with a question: "For to which of the angels did God ever say . . . ?" (v. 5a).

Quoting first a messianic psalm (Ps. 2:7) and then 2 Samuel 7:14, the author indicated that God had never singled out an angel and applied to that being the status He

had accorded His Son (Heb. 1:5). In the first quotation, the writer made a clear distinction: the angels are created heavenly beings, but Jesus is the only Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah who gives salvation to those who trust in Him. Although the second quotation originally referred to Solomon, the author of Hebrews applied it to the Messiah. Christ enjoys a unique Father-Son relationship with God, something the angels cannot claim.

The writer referred to Jesus as God's "firstborn into the world" (v. 6).

Again, Christ's unique relationship as an heir to God the Father is depicted in these words. As God's firstborn heir, Jesus is the source of both righteousness and eternal life for all those who will come after Him—in essence, for all those who place their faith in His atoning work.

The source of the quotation in verse 6 is disputed by Bible scholars. Some say it was taken from Deuteronomy 32:43 of the Septuagint—a pre-Christian Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures—and was not included in other ancient texts of the

All about

Angels

Angels are spirits (Heb. 1:14) who are in heaven (Matt. 22:30) sent to earth as messengers by God. They are mighty (Ps. 103:20) and powerful (2 Thess. 1:7) and possess great wisdom (2 Sam. 14:20). Ordinarily they are invisible to us (2 Kings 6:17), though they have appeared as men (Luke 24:4).

Contrary to popular belief and artistic portrayal, few angels in the Bible are explicitly stated to have wings. In fact, Isaiah 6:2 may be the sole instance. On the other hand, angels are said to have the ability to fly (Dan. 9:21).

Among their duties are serving God by serving us (Heb. 1:14), providing us protection (Dan. 6:22), guarding us (Ps. 91:11), guiding us (Acts 8:26), and helping us (Dan. 10:13). In addition to the elect angels who worship and serve the purposes of God (1 Tim. 5:21; Heb. 1:6), there are also fallen angels who serve the purposes of Satan (Rev. 12:7–9).

Bible. Others say it was taken from Psalm 97:7, and still others say the author of Hebrews combined the Deuteronomy and Psalm passages.

Whatever the case, the author's purpose in using the quotation was to show that the Son is worthy of the angels' worship in the same way that God the Father is worthy of the angels' worship. The quotation also affirms Christ's deity. And this worship of the Son was no small affair; in fact, all of God's angels would participate in it.

***Ask Yourself . . .** When I worship the Lord, do I remember that there are hosts of angels joining me in worshiping Him? How might this realization change the way I worship?*

Still addressing the Son's superiority to angels, the author then cited a quotation—the Septuagint version of Psalm 104:4—describing the character of the angels (Heb. 1:7). In the original Hebrew version, that Psalms verse appears to describe the wind and lightning of a storm as God's servants. The Septuagint version, however, identifies angels as God's servants, and that's the point the author of Hebrews wanted to make.

While the angels are God's servants, Jesus is God's Son and a divine King. Hebrews 1:8 and 9 are a quotation from Psalm 45:6–7. These verses are one of the Bible's strongest affirmations of the deity of Christ. In them, the Son is addressed as God. His royal status is alluded to through the words "throne," "scepter," and "kingdom" (Heb. 1:8). Like God,



This drawing represents a scene in a sculpture showing an Assyrian king placing his foot on the neck of a conquered foe. This common ancient practice is reflected in the passage saying that God will force the Son's enemies into subservience (Heb. 1:13; see Ps. 110:1).

Christ loves righteousness and hates wickedness. Because of these characteristics, God set His Son above all other people and beings, and anointed Him to carry out the most sacred function of all time—to bring people to salvation.

Quoting Psalm 102:25–27, the author of Hebrews pointed out the Son's supremacy over creation. In Psalms, these words were applied to God; in the letter to the Hebrews, they are applied to Christ. As in Hebrews 1:2, Christ again is noted as God's agent in Creation. The Son Himself laid the foundations of the

earth and constructed the heavens (v. 10).

Like clothing, however, the created world will wear out (v. 11). And when it does, the Son will roll it up like a worn-out robe that is to be discarded, and will replace it with a new heaven and a new earth (v. 12a). But though the present worlds He created will come to an end, Christ Himself, like God, will remain the same throughout all eternity (v. 12b).

Using the same phrase he used in verse 5, the author of Hebrews again introduced a Scripture quotation by asking, “To which of the angels did God ever say . . . ?” (v. 13). This time referring to Psalm 110:1, the writer said that while the Son sits in the place of honor, God forces the Son’s enemies into subservience. No angel has such privilege as the Son has. In fact, angels have a lesser role as “ministering spirits,” serving those who are saved through faith in the Son (Heb. 1:14).

C God’s New Message Superior to the Old (2:1–4)

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

—Hebrews 2:3b–4

Hebrews 2:1–4 explains why its author spent the first two chapters of his letter discussing at length angels in relation to the Son. Apparently the Hebrew readers were in danger of drifting away from the basic teachings of Christianity. In the place of Christian teaching, these Hebrews were considering adapting strict Jewish teaching, including reverence of angels, whom they believed to be instrumental in delivering God’s law to Moses at Mount Sinai.

In response to this crisis, the author urged the Hebrews to consider carefully the message of the gospel. In essence, he said that because the Son is superior to the angels, they should give heed to what the Son had said. If they did not do so, they were in danger of drifting away from the greater revelation of God given through His Son (v. 1). The Greek word translated “drift away” could also mean “slip off,” and was often used to refer to a ring slipping off a finger.

Ask Yourself . . . How carefully do I apply the words of Jesus to my life?

Verses 2 and 3 are the hinge of the writer’s argument. He said that if the Hebrews had seriously considered the message of the law that had come through the angels, then how much more so should they consider the message of salvation that has come through the Son! And if the law administered by angels had attached to it severe penalties for neglecting it, how much more seriously will people be penalized

for neglecting the message conveyed by God's Son?

Though angels are not mentioned as being instrumental in God's giving the law to Moses in Exodus 20, their presence at Mount Sinai is mentioned in several New Testament passages (see Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19), in the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 33:2, and in the *Antiquities* of the first-century A.D. historian Josephus. Apparently, their involvement in the giving of the law was widely accepted by the second century B.C.

Strongly compelling the Hebrews not to surrender their Christian profession, the author distinguished the Son's salvation from all fruitless human efforts for salvation—including trying to keep the law—by calling it so great a salvation (Heb. 2:3). Then he proceeded to describe three aspects of the Son's salvation.

First, he said this salvation was announced by the Lord Himself. Jesus proclaimed His purpose for coming to earth at the outset of His ministry (see Luke 4:16–21). Though everything He said should have been of interest to the Hebrews, His proclamation of salvation should have been especially important to them.

Second, the writer said this salvation had been confirmed by those who had first heard the gospel and had passed the message on to others. Here the writer appealed to the accounts of eyewitnesses, who would include the apostles but not exclude others who had

APOSTLES

Those Who Heard Jesus

The word *apostle* comes from the Greek word *apostolos*, which means “a messenger who has been sent.” Originally, this term was applied only to the twelve disciples who accompanied Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. Their purpose was to be with Jesus, to preach the gospel, and to heal the sick and exorcise the demon-possessed.

Because the term was later—after Jesus' death and resurrection—applied to someone to whom Jesus had appeared and who had received a divine call to preach the gospel, Paul came to be considered an apostle.

Apostolic teaching was to be the norm for the doctrine and fellowship of the church. Because of their intimacy with the Lord, the apostles' common witness was the yardstick against which all Christian teaching was measured.

encountered Jesus face-to-face. The author implied that all Christian teaching must agree with the teaching of the apostles. Note that the author did not include himself among the eyewitnesses of Christ. For that reason, many Bible scholars reject the conjecture that Paul or any other of the apostles wrote Hebrews.

Third, the writer said this salvation had been confirmed through God's own testimony of supernatural acts. God attested the gospel "by signs, wonders and various miracles" (v. 4). The word "signs" emphasized the meaning of the miracles. In essence, they pointed beyond themselves to God. The word "wonders" emphasized

the spectacular aspect of the miracles. In essence, no human being could perform them; only God is capable of such marvels.

Not only did these miracles accompany and affirm Jesus in His ministry on earth, but they also accompanied and affirmed the apostles and others who preached the gospel throughout the world. In addition, God confirmed the Son's salvation by distributing gifts of the Holy Spirit to believers. These, too, would produce miracles that human beings on their own were incapable of performing. They were granted to Christians only as God willed, and their purpose was to reaffirm the truth of the gospel of Christ.

2

Jesus above Angels and Moses

Hebrews 2:5–3:6

a King of the World to Come (2:5–9)

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

—Hebrews 2:8–9

The first two chapters of Hebrews compare and contrast God's Son and the heavenly angels. The author had already written that the Son is superior to the angels as a mediator—that Christ's message and revelation are superior to those of the angels. Now, in this passage, the author pointed out that the Son is also superior to the angels when it comes to the administration of the world to come.

The author started out by saying, "It is not to angels that [God] has subjected the world to come, about

which we are speaking" (v. 5). He had just been speaking about the great salvation announced by the Lord, confirmed by the apostles, and testified to by miracles (see vv. 1–4). The "world to come" (v. 5), then, is the messianic age, which will reach its final and most complete stage when Christ returns.

Evidently, some of the Hebrews had been tempted (for some reason we can only guess) to think of angels as being in charge during the messianic age. But, in fact, the world to come is subjected not to angels but to Jesus Christ; God has made Jesus the King of the world to come. To explain this point, the author showed how Jesus, the perfect man, fulfilled the ideal for humans to be rulers. The author quoted Psalm 8:4–6—a passage so well known that he could give the attribution by saying, "There is a place where someone has testified . . ." The author selected the part of this Davidic psalm that presents the paradox of people's being insignificant yet highly honored.

David wondered in prayer, "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him?" (Heb. 2:6). In other words, he

said, “We human beings are but a speck of dust in this universe. Why, then, do you love us and take care of us, God?”

Ask Yourself . . . When have I, like David, been overwhelmed with a sense of the unmerited favor of God upon me or others?

David went on to say, “You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet” (vv. 7–8a). This part contains three parallel phrases describing how God exalted human beings at the Creation.

The phrase “a little lower” possibly should be “for a little while lower” (see NIV margin). In that case the phrase would refer

to the fact that human beings are inferior to the immortal angels only for the present because we are mortal. Adam and Eve were immortal until their sin; human beings will be immortal again after the resurrection. On the other hand, if the NIV translation is right, it suggests that in some sense human beings are lower in the order of creation than angels—but only a little lower. This may be the correct meaning, since it would imply that it is an honor to be almost as great as the angels.

The other two phrases are more clearly descriptions of human exaltation. Like a king, human beings were crowned—crowned with glory and honor. Like a conqueror, we had the world put

The Poetic Parallelism of Psalm 8

One of Hebrew poetry’s most characteristic devices is called parallelism. In parallelism two or more lines are related to one another in some way. For example, in synonymous parallelism, the lines mean about the same thing. In antithetical parallelism, the lines present a contrast.

In Psalm 8:4–6, we see synonymous parallelism—one of two lines (Ps. 8:4) and one of three lines (vv. 7–8a). “What is mankind that you are mindful of them” (8:4a) parallels “human beings that you care for them (8:4b). “You put everything under their feet” (v. 6) is paralleled by “all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas” (vv. 7–8), showing the meaning of “everything.”

Recognizing parallelism in Hebrew poetry can be helpful in determining the passage’s meaning. For example, we also learn in Psalm 8 that the “heavens” (v. 3) include “the work of [God’s] fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,” and that to be “mindful of” and to “care for” (v. 4) mean about the same thing.

under our feet. Picking up on the last phrase of the psalm quote, the author of Hebrews reaffirmed that absolutely everything in the world was subjected to human beings. In fact, God had told Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and to rule over all their fellow creatures (see Gen. 1:28). But then the author pointed out the obvious fact that as we look about us, we see that humans are not in complete control of the world. That's because when Adam introduced sin into the human race, he impaired our ability to be the kings and queens we were meant to be. Our crowns are bent and tarnished, and often we're under someone else's foot.

But just as we see that not everything is subject to us, so we see Jesus, who fulfilled the ideal David described (Heb. 2:9). All things are subject to Christ, including the world to come. To fulfill the ideal, Jesus had to become a true human being. He was made a little lower than the angels, like other people. Though He was fully God, He was made fully man. But as a man, He was without sin and He obeyed the Lord even to the point of dying for the sins of His fellow human beings. Because He died on the cross, we can be spared eternal death.

For Jesus' obedience, He was crowned by God with glory and honor. He now sits on a throne at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Our Savior is our King—in this world and the next!

b

Christ Our Brother (2:10–13)

Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. —Hebrews 2:11

Just as God's Son has been crowned with glory (see v. 9), He is also in the process of bringing many people to glory (v. 10). And in order to get human beings to glory with Himself, He had to come to earth and become a human being. Of course, this made Him lower than the angels. The fact that He suffered a criminal's execution would seem to push Him even lower. But Jesus' death on the cross was actually part of His greatness, because it was the way He would provide salvation for all humanity.

While making sure that his readers understood why it was necessary for Christ to come to earth as a man, the author also wanted his readers to know that only the suffering of the Son of God could provide for their salvation. The writer said that sending Jesus—"the pioneer of their salvation"—to die on the cross was part of God's plan. By saying that God made Jesus perfect, the author of Hebrews did not intend to imply that Christ was ever morally or spiritually imperfect. Rather he meant that through suffering, Jesus was perfectly able to carry out the task

God had given Him. Because He so thoroughly identified with us—even with our pain—Jesus became qualified to be sacrificed on behalf of sinful humanity.

Jesus' perfect sacrifice brings people into a family relationship with the Lord (v. 11a). The author of Hebrews stressed the familial link between Jesus and the people He saves. He is the One who restored the holiness that all people had lost, and the people He has made holy become part of His spiritual family. In fact, the writer said Jesus is not ashamed to call those He saves His brothers and sisters (v. 11b).

Ask Yourself . . . What effect does being a member of Jesus' family have on my lifestyle?

Having shown his readers how they had become part of Christ's family, the author again quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures to prove his point. Referring to a psalm about the sufferings and triumph of God's righteous servant, the writer explained that the Messiah proclaimed God's character to His brothers—those who believe in Him (v. 12; see Ps. 22:22). Furthermore, the Messiah would sing God's praises in the midst of His people, showing them that He is one of them.

Still portraying Christ's relationship with believers, the author of Hebrews quoted Isaiah 8:17–18. Hebrews 2:13a expresses how the Messiah put His trust in God to see Him through His earthly ministry. Just as life is troublesome

and difficult for God's people, so it was troublesome and difficult for the Son. But the Son provided an example for all human beings in that He trusted in God.

Making a new point in verse 13b, the author showed how Christians are the children God has given to Christ. Reemphasizing our family relationship with the Lord, the writer pointed out that if Christ is our brother, then God is our Father.

Therefore, each of the three quotations used by the writer of Hebrews placed the speaker—the Messiah—in the same group as all God's children. The Lord had joined the human race so that He could participate in people's joys, sorrows, and temptations. Ultimately, He joined the human race so that He could become its Savior.



Our Human-Divine Helper (2:14–18)

For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

—Hebrews 2:17–18

Still addressing reasons why Jesus became a human being, the author

of Hebrews pointedly said that Christ “shared in [the] humanity” of God’s flesh-and-blood children (v. 14). Christ did this so that He could nullify Satan’s power to hold humans captive in their sin, and thus to bring about their death sentence. By dying on the cross and making Himself the penalty for sin, Jesus, in effect, destroyed the devil’s death grip on us.

Ask Yourself . . . How has Christ nullified Satan’s power in my life?

This defeat of Satan and the power he wielded over humanity set free those who had been gripped by the fear of death (v. 15). Rather than entering the afterlife with dread and uncertainty, Christians can face death knowing that our sins have been forgiven—that Jesus Himself paid the penalty for our unrighteousness when He died on the cross. Thus believers can enter the afterlife with security and assurance.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I enslaved by the fear of death?

Returning to his teaching regarding angels, the writer declared that Christ did not become human to rescue the angels; He became human to rescue people (v. 16). By so doing Christ earned the right to represent all humanity before God, just as the high priest represented all of Israel when he made atonement for the sins of the Israelites (v. 17). As our great High Priest, Christ is both merciful and

REASONS FOR THE INCARNATION

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became a human . . .

- to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17);
- to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45);
- to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18–19);
- to preach the good news of the kingdom of God (v. 43);
- to seek and save what was lost (19:10);
- to save the world (John 3:17);
- to do the will of God and to finish His work (4:34);
- to give life to the world (6:33);
- to do the will of God (v. 38);
- so that people may have life, and have it to the full (10:10);
- to put to death the misdeeds of human beings (Rom. 8:13);
- to destroy the devil, who holds the power of death (Heb. 2:14);
- to free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (v. 15); and
- to become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and to make atonement for the sins of people (v. 17).

faithful. He is gracious and reliable to meet our needs.

Here for the first time in his letter the author labeled Jesus as the High Priest. (Perhaps the writer hinted at this title in 1:3 when he wrote that the Son had done what priests do, that is, provide purification for sins.) This book is the only one in the Bible that addresses extensively the subject of Jesus as our High Priest.

The writer said Jesus suffered when He was tempted. Because of that suffering, He has sympathy for those who are being tempted and is able to help them through that time (2:18).

Ask Yourself . . . What does it mean to me that Jesus understands the temptations I face?

d Jesus Superior to Moses (3:1–6)

Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself.

—Hebrews 3:3

The author of Hebrews had already established that God's Son is superior to the prophets (1:1–3) and to the angels (1:4–2:18). Now the author turned his attention to Moses so that he might show his readers that Christ is superior even to the great Israelite lawgiver, whom Jews had long thought of as the greatest of men.

This mountain in the Judean wilderness is traditionally considered the site of Jesus' temptation. The writer of Hebrews said Jesus suffered when He was tempted (Heb. 2:18). Today, monastic buildings cling to the side of the mountain.



As he had done in his description of the angels, the writer did not mean to undermine Moses' character. Rather he simply showed that as great as Moses was, Christ is greater by far. Showing how dear his readers were to him, the writer called them "holy brothers and sisters" (3:1). These people had been set apart for God's service, and the author did not want them to renounce their divine calling. Thus he instructed them to focus on Jesus and all that He had done for them.

Ask Yourself . . . In recent days, how often have I fixed my thoughts on Jesus?

The writer called Jesus both an apostle and a high priest. His intent was probably to convey that Christ had been sent into the world by God—"apostle" means "one sent out"—and that He had made a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Perhaps included in this reminder is another reminder that Jesus accomplished this great work as a human being.

To better explain the greatness of Jesus' work, the author compared Jesus to Moses, another person who had accomplished a great deal during his earthly life. Calling Moses a faithful servant of the Lord, the writer said Jesus, too, had faithfully carried out the task God had given Him (v. 2). It is easy to see why this comparison would have a great impact on the Hebrews reading this letter. Moses had led his people from Egyptian bondage to the border of the promised land; Jesus had led His people from

bondage to sin and its penalty of death to the promise of eternal life.

Moses was said to be faithful "in all God's house." Setting up the analogy that would follow, the author portrayed Moses as being a faithful leader for the Israelite people, which he referred to as a house. Just as angels were the heavenly mediators of the old covenant, so Moses was the human mediator for the old covenant.

Moses was great, but Jesus is greater still. The reason for Jesus' superiority is expressed simply: "The builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself" (v. 3). Jesus, as the Son of God, gathered and established the community of Israel that Moses was a part of. Moses was a man, and Jesus became a man; but Jesus, though taking on human nature, was still more than just a man. He was God incarnate.

Verse 4 explains the author's assertion in verse 3. There is no such thing as a self-built house. The Israelites did not gather themselves into a nation, nor did the Christians gather themselves into a church. God gathered and established the Israelites as a nation, and He gathered and established believers as a church. In fact, "God is the builder of everything" (v. 4). Everything owes its existence to God.

Returning to his comparison of Moses and Jesus, but still using the house analogy, the author reasserted Moses' faithfulness as a servant (v. 5). The Greek term for "servant" denotes one who is more honored

than a slave but is still a servant. Though Moses even prophesied about God's salvation, which would find its final fulfillment in Christ, his level of greatness remained on a level with servants. Thus his status corresponded with the status of the angels, who as God's servants minister to believers (see 1:14).

Having praised Moses as a distinguished servant in God's house, the author then praised Jesus as the master's son over the house (3:6a). God's house is the people of God, and though Moses may be numbered among those people, Christ is over them. He is the Head

of His church.

His comparison completed, the author redirected his attention to the Hebrews' situation. Realizing they were in danger of falling away from the faith, he urged them to persevere. In fact, he said that the people of God can prove their faithfulness by their perseverance, courage, and hope (v. 6b). The writer of Hebrews said that being a member of the people of God is something of which we can be proud. Christ, who brought the church into existence, is our brother and God is our Father. We have every reason to be confident in the Lord.

3

God's Rest for God's People

Hebrews 3:7–4:11

a A Failed Attempt to Enter Rest (3:7–19)

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. —Hebrews 3:16–19

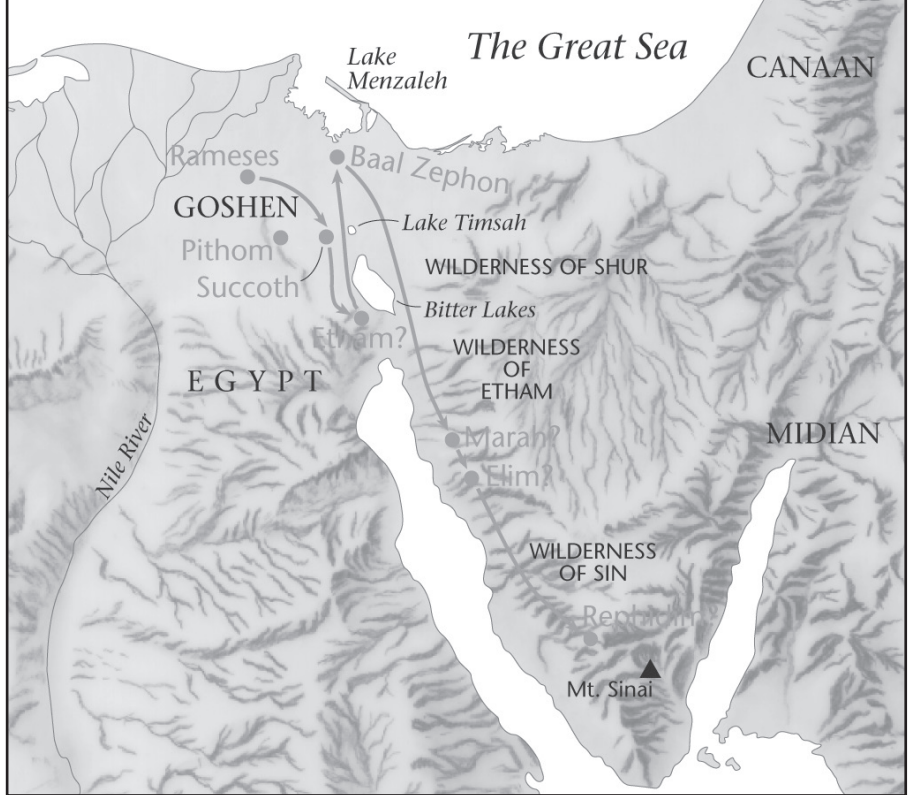
Having compared Christ and Moses in previous passages of this letter, the author of Hebrews then compared Christians to the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for forty years before reaching the promised land. The author stressed that since the angels and Moses were faithful in giving the law, and since Christ was faithful in bringing a final, superior revelation, those who receive this revelation should be faithful in their response to it.

The Hebrews to whom the author was writing had received God's

revelation through Jesus Christ; the Israelites to whom they were being compared had received the old revelation through Moses and the law. Pointing out how the Israelites had hardened their hearts against God while wandering in the wilderness, the author warned his readers against departing from their Christian beliefs, and thus becoming another generation of Hebrews to harden their hearts against the Lord.

The author reminded the recipients of this letter that God had promised them rest in Christ just as He had promised the Israelites rest in the promised land. To illustrate this point, the author quoted Psalm 95:7–11 and appealed to his audience to enter into God's rest. Some historians claim that Psalm 95:7–11 was sung by Jews in their Sabbath worship, which would make the author's selection of this passage all the more meaningful to his Hebrew readers.

Urging the Hebrews not to make the same mistake the ancient Israelites had made, the author told them to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and not to harden their hearts (Heb. 3:7–8). The writer attributed the quotation from Psalm 95 to the



Holy Spirit, revealing his high view of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Other Jewish writers commonly attributed Scripture passages to the Holy Spirit, as did the author of Hebrews on several occasions in this letter. Thus what had been relevant to people living centuries before was also relevant to people living in the writer's day, and in our day as well.

Ask Yourself . . . How do I find God's Word relevant to my life when I study the Bible?

By telling his readers to guard themselves from hardened hearts, the author meant for them to restrain themselves from both disobeying God and following their own whims and desires. Acting

according to their own will was what the Israelites had done in the wilderness, the writer said.

The passage from which he quoted referred to an incident during the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The Israelites were encamped at Rephidim and discovered no drinkable water there. They rebelled against Moses' leadership, accusing him of leading them into the desert to die. After pleading his case to the Lord, Moses was led to a rock from which—after he struck it—water gushed out. Moses called that place *Massah*, which means "rebellion," and *Meribah*, which means "testing" (see Exod. 17:1–7).

Apparently, the Hebrews were in danger of becoming as calloused about faith in Christ as the wilder-

ness generation of Israelites had been about their faith in God. In case they were, the author reminded them of the result of the Israelites' rebellion: the Israelites were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years, until a generation of rebels died out, before reaching the promised land (Heb. 3:9).

At the point when the Israelites could have entered Canaan, Moses sent twelve spies from Kadesh Barnea into Canaan. Ten of the spies reported that it would be impossible for them to conquer the land; only Caleb and Joshua recommended that the Israelites take the land. Choosing to listen only to the ten spies' report, the people rebelled and refused to enter the land God had promised them. Because God had done so much for them, the Israelites should have responded with faith in the Lord. Instead, they responded with doubt, disobedience, and rebellion (see Num 13–14).

The forty-year time period mentioned by the author of Hebrews (Heb. 3:9) may have a hidden meaning. If the date of this letter is close to A.D. 70, then the Hebrews would have been reading it about forty years after the Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore, the writer could have been warning his readers against rejecting Christ even forty years after His crucifixion and resurrection just as the Israelites had rebelled against God for forty years after He had delivered them from Egypt.

In quoting this psalm, the author implied that if the Hebrews strayed

from faith in Christ, a punishment just as severe as what happened to the wilderness generation of Israelites might happen to them (v. 10). Bible scholars point out that the writers of the psalm, when referring to the heart, meant a person's whole being—his or her thoughts, feelings, and will—rather than simply the emotions. In essence, the writer of Hebrews wanted to warn his readers of the consequences of turning away from Christ.

Faithlessness and rebellion arouse God's anger (v. 11). In fact, the psalm said such sins led God to declare an oath against the disobedient Israelites, telling them that they would never enter the rest of the promised land. At verse 12, the author stopped quoting and started applying. Concerned for his readers' spiritual welfare, he urged them to be alert spiritually so that they could not be led astray into rebellion against the Lord. To strengthen their resolve, he advocated that they encourage and support each other on a regular basis.

The author clearly saw Christian fellowship as vital to maintaining faith. Without encouragement from each other, the Hebrews would have to face the hardening of sin's deceitfulness on their own (v. 13). Rather than becoming hardened by sin's deceitfulness, the Hebrews were encouraged to be active partners of Christ. And to do so, they would have to confidently persevere in their faith in the Lord. The author suggested that believers' faith is evidenced by their faithfulness (v. 14).

To emphasize the urgency of the need for perseverance, the author quoted Psalm 95:7 again in Hebrews 3:15, as he had done earlier in verses 7b and 8a. Then the author unleashed a barrage of five rhetorical questions. To the readers of this letter, the answer to each question was clear; nonetheless, the author answered each question. Also, the questions and the answers directly applied to the Hebrews' situation.

The point of the rhetorical questions was to show how a generation of Israelites died while wandering in the wilderness because they had refused to believe God's promise that they would possess the land of Canaan. When God told them to enter the land, they had balked. Believing that they would be slaughtered if they fought against the land's inhabitants, they went so far as to begin the process of choosing a leader to lead them back to Egypt and slavery. Such an act was called rebellion (v. 16), sin (v. 17), and disobedience (v. 18).

This series of questions was a clear warning to the Hebrews that if they turned away from the promises of Christ, their action would be just as rebellious, sinful, and disobedient as had been the Israelites' turning away from entering the promised land. The author pointedly said that the Israelites' turning away from the promised land cut them off from receiving an inheritance in that land (v. 19). Thus for the Hebrews to turn away from Christ meant that they would be kept from receiving the rest promised to Christians.

b The Promise of Rest Still Stands (4:1–5)

For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. —Hebrews 4:2–3

At the end of chapter 3, the author concluded that the wilderness generation of Israelites failed to enter God's rest. He began chapter 4 by saying that Christians can possess the promise to enter God's rest. The "rest" he was referring to is both spiritual and eternal. This rest that had been offered to the Israelites hundreds of years earlier was symbolic of the spiritual rest that culminated in the salvation offered by Christ.

The author warned the readers against failing to accept the rest of Christ, telling them not to be like the generation of Israelites who had failed to accept God's rest in the promised land. Thus he said to take care not to fall short of God's promise (v. 1).

Ask Yourself . . . What can I do to

keep others from falling short of God's promise?

The rebellious Israelites had missed out on entering God's rest because of their unbelief. Though God's promise that they could take possession of the land had been made clear to them, they had lacked faith in His promise. Their lack of faith rendered God's promise of no value to them.

The Hebrews were warned not to make the same mistake. To actually become recipients of God's rest, they had to combine hearing God's promise with having faith in that

promise (v. 2). In essence, the only proper response to what God has done and what He has made known is faithfulness to Him. Faith is the key to the door of God's rest.

Bible commentators differ on the chronological meaning of the author's words "we who have believed enter that rest" (v. 3a). Some say he meant that the Hebrew Christians were certain to enter God's rest. Others say he meant that they were in the process of entering His rest. Still others say the entrance into God's rest lies ahead and is something to be attained in time.

ASPECTS OF REST

The author of Hebrews referred to several different kinds of rest:

- **Creation rest** (Heb. 4:3c, 4). God rested after Creation. Therefore, God has prepared a rest that His people may enter.
- **Canaan rest** (4:8). Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land, where they entered into God's rest. Deuteronomy 12:9 refers to the land of Canaan as the Israelites' "resting place."
- **Continuing rest** (Heb. 4:9–11). The fact that David wrote about God's rest (Ps. 95) around four hundred years after the Israelites had entered the promised land means for the author of Hebrews that God's rest is continuously offered to those who have faith in the Lord. How did the author intend for his readers to apply these concepts of rest to their own lives? Following are a few suggestions:
 - **Christian rest.** When people become Christians, they enter into God's rest.
 - **Consecration rest.** People enter into God's rest at some point after conversion when they fully surrender their lives to the Lord and allow Him to work through them.
 - **Celestial rest.** People cannot enter God's rest completely until they go to heaven.

After quoting Psalm 95:11 again to strengthen his argument, the author reminded his readers that God rested on the seventh day after He finished His work of creating (Heb. 4:3bc, 4). The author wanted to make it clear that the rest he was talking about was a rest God Himself had experienced and enjoyed. Consequently, His rest had been available from the time that Creation had been completed. From the beginning of time, God has invited people to share that rest with Him. Though that rest remains available, some may miss out on it.

Ask Yourself . . . What person comes to my mind to pray for as someone who may not yet have entered God's rest?

The author did not precisely locate his quotation from Genesis 2:2, assuming God to be the author of all Scripture. Rather he simply said, "For somewhere he has spoken . . . these words" (Heb. 4:4). Bible commentators stress that according to the Genesis account, God's rest was marked by His knowledge that all He had created was good. Thus, some say, the author of Hebrews implied that our rest in the Lord will be like the comfort that comes from successfully accomplishing a task.

As he had done in 3:11 and 4:3, the author again quoted Psalm 95:11, this time limiting himself to the final line of the verse (Heb. 4:5). Whereas he had reminded his readers of God's promise of rest to those who have faith in Him, he repeated to them that the Israelites had failed to enter that rest because of their

lack of faith. In this way, the writer reminded his readers of the consequences of failing to maintain faith in the Lord.

C An Exhortation to Enter Rest (4:6–11)

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

—Hebrews 4:6

The author continued to use the Israelites' rebellion against entering the promised land and their later entrance under Joshua as symbolic of entering into God's rest. He repeated the same point that he had made in verse 1: the readers can still possess the promise to enter God's rest. In verses 4–11 the author moved from descriptions of creation rest (v. 4) to Canaan rest (vv. 6, 8) to continuing rest (v. 7) to contemporary rest for his readers (vv. 9–11).

The author thought of the Israelite generation who could have entered Canaan as having had the gospel preached to them. Obviously, he was not referring to the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. Rather he was speaking of good news in a more generic sense, in that God had promised the Israelites an inheritance in the land of Canaan. And yet a disobedient generation of Israelites had refused to enter God's

rest and had died while wandering in the wilderness (v. 6).

But just because the rebellious Israelites failed to accept God's promise did not mean that successive generations could not accept His promise. In that a generation of Israelites had passed up the opportunity to go into Canaan, God would offer His promise to another generation. In essence, "God again set a certain day" (v. 7a) to offer His promise. In fact, "today," the author said, that opportunity is still available to those who will place their faith in Christ.

Another generation under Joshua was given the opportunity to enter God's rest—that is, the promised land of Canaan. The author argued that if Joshua had actually given the Israelites rest, God would not have spoken later about establishing another day of rest (vv. 7b, 8). David, who lived about four hundred years after Joshua, was still speaking about

God offering rest to His people. Thus from probably 1400 B.C. (the time of Joshua) to 1000 B.C. (the time of David), God's rest had remained to be offered and entered.

To the author of Hebrews, God's rest was ultimately offered through Jesus Christ. In the Greek text of this letter, the author actually used "Jesus" in verse 8 rather than "Joshua."

The writer knew that his readers would be aware of the connection between the two names—the Hebrew name Joshua means "salvation of Yahweh," and Jesus is the Greek derivative of the Hebrew. Therefore, the author may have been implying that there had been a "Joshua" who could not lead people into God's rest, but now there was another "Jesus" who could.

The author realized that the Israelites had eventually entered the promised land. And though they had dwelt in that land and had even experienced periods of peace and independence, the promise of God's rest remained



This landscape from the West Bank, with its fertile fields and pastures, shows one of the reasons the land of Canaan was considered a place of rest for the Israelites. Though impressed with the land, the rebellious Israelites did not believe God would enable them to have it for their own. Due to their lack of faith, they never entered "God's rest."

unfulfilled (v. 9).

The implication of the author here is that fulfillment of “Sabbath-rest for the people of God” had finally come. (The writer here obviously made reference to the Jews’ weekly day of rest.) In that Christ had come to offer salvation for all people, He had provided a type of rest quite different from that found in an allotment of land; He had provided rest for the souls of humanity.

Explaining the idea of “Sabbath rest” further, the author said that anyone who enters God’s rest also ceases from his or her own labor in the same way God ceased from His labor after the Creation (v. 10). Once again, as in the interpretation of verse 3a, Bible scholars differ on the chronology of when this rest takes place. Some say Christians live in this rest here and now. Others say Christians receive it as a heritage, but will reap the full benefits of this rest in the hereafter.

Whatever the case, the main point of the author seems to be that believers should rest on what Christ has done to purchase our salvation. In essence, when we place our faith in Christ, we can rest assured in God’s grace, realizing that God’s work in Christ was completed at the cross.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I fully placed my faith in Christ for my salvation, or am I striving to earn it on my own?*

As a result, we can rest from any attempt to work for or earn our own salvation. This is a theme also heavily elaborated upon by the apostle Paul,

who wrote, “To the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). At the same time, we can be assured that having received our salvation from Christ, all labors we have done for the Lord will someday culminate in a sense of completeness and fulfillment that leads to rest, just as God’s knowing that all He had created was good led to His Sabbath rest.

There is bit of irony in the way verse 11 is worded: “Make every *effort* to . . . *rest*” (emphasis added). Thus the author instructed his readers to relax no effort in order to relax. One writer captured this paradox by paraphrasing the verse, “Get all worked up about settling down!” In essence, the author urged his readers to place their faith unequivocally in Christ. In fact, by writing “Let us,” the author included himself in his own injunction.

Once more referring to the bad example of the Israelites who, because of their lack of faith, failed to accept God’s promise of entering Canaan, the writer drove home his advice to his readers. The Israelites had perished in the desert, never having entered God’s rest. But the Hebrews reading this letter had been given a new opportunity to enter God’s eternal rest. If they placed their faith in Christ, they would receive the salvation of God. If they did not, their end would be as fatal as that of the rebellious Israelites who lived unfulfilled lives and died in the wilderness.

4

Jesus: Our Great High Priest

Hebrews 4:12–5:10

a Judged by God's Word (4:12–13)

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

—Hebrews 4:12

In the preceding Scripture, the writer of Hebrews continued his warning about the awesome danger of a hardened heart. From reading his description of the Israelites' rebellion against entering the promised land, one might conclude that a hardened heart cannot be penetrated. But the author conveyed the good news that there is something that can pass through a hardened heart: "the word of God" (v. 12).

The Word of God that the author referred to meant anything spoken by God. He may have had in mind the Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of Christ. God's Word, like a double-edged sword, is sharp. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had spoken of His words as bring-

ing life (see John 6:63) and as bringing judgment (see 12:48). In this passage, the author said God's Word reaches to the innermost recesses of our being and judges our feelings and thoughts.

Some people have referred to Hebrews 4:12 to try to prove that human beings consist only of spirit, soul, and body (compare 1 Thess. 5:23). This sort of analysis, however, leaves out a number of other human aspects specified in Scripture (see Matt. 22:37). Rather than attempting to show the different aspects of human beings, the author was pointing out how God's Word pierces into the deepest parts of our existence.

The Word of God confronts us with the God of the Word (Heb 4:13). Because the Word of God can penetrate the hardest human heart, the God of that Word can see into the deepest secrets of our heart and mind. The writer used comprehensive language to prove this assertion—"Nothing . . . is hidden" and "Everything is uncovered." The phrase "laid bare" is translated from a Greek term that was typically used in one of two ways: (1) in reference to the way a wrestler's neck was exposed by his opponent's hold on

him, and (2) in reference to the way a sacrificial animal's neck was exposed to the priest's knife. In essence, everything is exposed before God, to whom we are responsible to give an account. The author here used a play on words. The Greek term translated "account" in verse 13 is the same Greek term translated "word" in verse 12. One way to rephrase these verses is "God's Word exposes our secrets, so that we must render to God in words an account of how we have responded to His Word."

Ask Yourself . . . In what area may I need to be more responsible toward God, to whom I must give an account of my life?

Word Pictures of God's Word

Both Old and New Testament writers often compared God's Word to objects with which they were familiar. Using word pictures, these writers described the activity, application, and usefulness of the Word. Following are a few examples:

- a lamp (Ps. 119:105);
- a fire (Jer. 20:9; 23:29);
- a hammer (Jer. 23:29); and
- a sword (Heb. 4:12).



Our Sympathetic High Priest (4:14–16)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

—Hebrews 4:14–15

Verse 14 may be regarded as the thesis statement of Hebrews. There is no other strong and straightforward statement about Christ's priesthood in the rest of the Bible. The author had touched on Christ as our High Priest in 2:17 and 3:1, but at this point in his letter, the topic becomes the controlling concept. By calling Christ a "great" High Priest (4:14), the author implied Jesus' superiority to all the generations of Jewish high priests. Although the high priests were the only ones permitted to pass beyond the final curtain of the tabernacle or temple into the most Holy Place, Jesus "ascended to heaven" and took His rightful place at the right hand of God the Father.

Many Bible scholars believe the author was referring to Jesus' ascension into heaven. If so, then the writer may have likened the high priest's moving out of the view of

HELP = FRAPPING

The Greek word translated “help” in Hebrews 4:16 is *boetheian*, and a form of this word is found in only one other place in the New Testament—in Acts 27:17. The context of the Acts passage is a storm at sea in which the apostle Paul’s party was caught. As one last measure to hold together the shaken ship, the sailors used *boetheiais*, or “helps” (KJV), to undergird the ship. Technically, this procedure is called “frapping.” Cables were passed underneath the ship and tied around the hull in an attempt to hold the ship together.

Thus the author of Hebrews probably intended, by using “help” in 4:16, to encourage his readers to seek God’s undergirding in their time of need.

the people so as to enter the most Holy Place to Jesus’ ascending out of view of His disciples so as to enter the presence of God.

Because Jesus Christ is the believer’s “great high priest,” the author urged his readers to embrace unyieldingly their faith in Him. As he had done earlier in the chapter (v. 1), the author associated himself with his readers as he encouraged them to be true to “the faith we profess” (v. 14).

Apparently, the Hebrews were beginning to lack spiritual steadfastness. Before their dedication to Christ waned any further, the author wanted them to bolster their faith.

As our High Priest, Jesus is not austere, aloof, or fear-inducing, but is one who can sympathize with our weaknesses because He became one of us and experienced life—with its joys and sorrows, highs and lows—just as we do. In fact, He even faced temptations as we do (v. 15). But

unlike us, our High Priest remained sinless despite being “tempted in every way.”

Rather than turning haughtily away from sinners, the sinless One invites such people to His throne of grace. In fact, the author encouraged his readers to approach Christ with confidence, not in what they had achieved, but in what Christ had achieved (v. 16).

In the first announcement of Christ’s high priesthood, the writer called Jesus “a merciful and faithful high priest” (2:17). In this passage, the author said those who confidently and faithfully approach Christ for mercy and grace find that for which they approached Him. Therefore, instead of turning away from the Lord (see 3:12), the Hebrews were told to draw nearer to Him (4:16).

Hebrews tells us that we are especially to draw near to the Lord for His mercy and grace in “our time of need.” This expression, like so many

others used by the author, is a fascinating one. The phrase is actually only one word in Greek. In addition to meaning “time of need,” it could also be translated “well-timed” or “convenient.”

In our own lives, we have prime moments when we need the Lord’s timely help. His help is tailor-made for whatever crisis we face. We must go to Him in prayer, for our impossibility becomes God’s opportunity.

Ask Yourself . . . In what way has God recently shown me mercy and grace in a well-timed fashion?

C The Sympathy of Human High Priests (5:1–3)

[The high priest] is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

—Hebrews 5:2

Because the author had claimed that Jesus is the great High Priest, he had to prove his point by addressing the qualifications required of high priests. After showing how priests must meet two primary qualifications, the writer then conveyed how Christ met each. The qualifications are sympathy (v. 2) and a calling (v. 4); Jesus had both sympathy (v. 7) and a calling (vv. 5–6).

In three phrases, the author described how high priests were

POETIC PATTERNS

The author used a poetic pattern as he substantiated his argument. The A-B-B'-A' pattern of the first portion of chapter 5 can be constructed as follows:

- A** Priests are required to have human compassion (v. 2)
- B** Priests are required to have a heavenly calling (v. 4)
- B'** Jesus had a heavenly calling (vv. 5–6)
- A'** Jesus had human compassion (v. 7).

chosen and what they did (v. 1). First, they were “selected from among the people.” The author may have mentioned this obvious fact because it pointed to Christ’s humanity. Second, the high priests were “appointed to represent the people in matters related to God.” Again, Christ’s connection to humanity is pointed to. Third, the high priests “offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.” High priests, including Jesus, atoned for others’ sins.

Incidentally, some scholars refer to the present tense of the Greek verbs throughout this section as an argument that the sacrificial system was still being conducted in the temple as this letter was being written. In other words, use of the present tense may imply that the letter was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The high priest’s selection,

appointment, and duty all emphasize his similarity with those he represented. Indeed, “he himself is subject to weakness” (v. 2). Knowing what it’s like to be tempted, the high priest “is able to deal gently with those who are . . . going astray.” In his description “to deal gently,” the author used a Greek word for which there is no exact English equivalent. The word shows that the high priest was to take the middle ground between apathy and anger. He was called upon not to be indifferent toward his people’s moral failures, but at the same time, he was not to treat them too harshly for such lapses.

The high priest’s attitude is one we would do well to adopt for ourselves. Whereas some Christians treat sin in a nonchalant fashion, others act mercilessly toward sinners. We should find a balance between a complete tolerance of sin and a heartless overreaction toward the sinner.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I have a balanced approach toward sin?

As someone who could be weak and fall into sinful behavior like anyone else, the high priest had to offer sacrifices for his own shortcomings in the same way he offered sacrifices for others (v. 3). Levitical law required the high priest to present a bull for his own sin offering on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16:11). Only after he had sacrificed this bull was he permitted to minister on behalf of the people.



The high priest in priestly garments.

d Jesus’ Call to High Priesthood (5:4–6)

In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest.

—Hebrews 5:5a

Not only was the high priest required to have compassion, the author asserted, but he was also required to have a calling by God (v. 4). No amount of human initiative could make one worthy of the high priesthood. God selected Aaron as the first high priest (see Exod. 28:1). From then on, a son was supposed

to succeed his father as high priest.

Christ, too, did not take it upon Himself to assume the high priesthood, but rather was called to the office by God (Heb. 5:5). To establish Christ's calling to the high priesthood, the author quoted two passages from the Hebrew Scriptures.

In addition to Jesus' ministry as High Priest, He was also to be seen as the Son of God, who represents us as one who sits at the right hand of the Father. So the first passage quoted by the author was Psalm 2:7 (Heb. 5:5b). The wording of this psalm—also quoted in Hebrews 1:5—served for the writer as describing Jesus' official installment to perform the duties of the Messiah.

After portraying Jesus as the Son of God, the author quoted Psalm 110:4 to portray Him as being called of God to be the great High Priest (Heb. 5:6). In one of the most important messianic psalms, it is written of the Messiah, "You are a priest forever." The psalm also says that Christ is not a priest in the order of Aaron, but in the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek's order predated Aaron's. Melchizedek was the king of Salem during the time of Abraham and was also a priest. Living centuries before Aaron, he directed the worship of his people as well as exercised political authority over them. Thus the writer meant that Christ is both a king and a priest.

In Psalm 110:1, God the Father tells David's Lord (the Messiah) to occupy a kingly position at God's right hand. Therefore, God the

Father is recorded as addressing God the Son in this passage. Thus in Psalm 110:1 the Messiah is a king, and in verse 4 He is a priest. Christ is the perfect combination of a king-priest in one person. Consequently, Jesus is a High Priest, but of a different order from that of Aaron.

Ask Yourself . . . In what ways is Jesus my king? In what ways is He my priest?



Jesus' Preparation for High Priesthood (5:7–10)

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, 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 high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

—Hebrews 5:7–10

Christ was qualified as a priest not only by His divine calling, but also by His compassion. These verses provide a window into Gethsemane that the Gospel writers did not offer. The emotional portrait of Christ's compassion resonates with His

“prayers and petitions” and “fervent cries and tears” (v. 7). The agony expressed by Jesus highlights His humanity, and by doing so, it also highlights His oneness with humanity. Jesus can have compassion for us because He suffered for us.

Ask Yourself . . . What is one lesson I have learned through suffering?

Before His execution on the cross, Christ prayed to the Father, who was the only “one who could save him from death.” And according to the writer of Hebrews, His prayers were “heard because of his reverent submission.” The word translated “heard” was usually taken to mean that prayers were answered.

This presents a problem for some interpreters, because Jesus said, “Take this cup from me” (Mark 14:36), and He was indeed required to go through with the crucifixion. Other interpreters point out that Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane was answered in the terms in which it was asked. Jesus had added, “Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Another possibility is that Jesus’ prayer to be saved from death was, in a way, answered by the Resurrection. Jesus was strengthened to carry out the will of the Father because of His reverent submission. This tells us something about our prayer life.

When we are submitted to God and desiring to do His will, He brings about the end we seek, though not necessarily in the way we wanted.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I so submitted to

God’s will that I can pray that it would be accomplished regardless of the inconvenience it may cause me?

The author may have been alluding to Jesus’ temptation in the desert as well as to the Crucifixion when he wrote about Jesus’ suffering. In the process of this suffering, Jesus “learned obedience” (Heb. 5:8). This does not mean that Jesus turned to obedience from disobedience. Rather, it means that He obeyed God in a way that He had never done before; He obeyed God as a human being.

Ask Yourself . . . How might my examination of Christ’s life as a human being empower my life as a Christian?

The writer used a play on words in verse 8. The Greek word translated “learned” (*emathēn*) rhymes with the Greek work for “suffered” (*epathēn*). Once again the author used his skills in Greek rhetoric to further his argument.

As the Son of God, Jesus attained His ultimate goal through suffering on the cross (v. 9). Just as the author had alluded to earlier when he recounted the role of the priest in offering sacrifices, his point was that salvation does not occur without sacrifice.

Jesus sacrificed His own life and became the source of eternal salvation. Through His suffering, He could provide salvation for all who believe in and obey Him.

Harking back to Psalm 110:4, which he quoted in Hebrews 5:6, the writer concluded this section of

Scripture by restating that Christ “was designated . . . to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek” (v. 10). The author would return to the subject of the Melchizedek priesthood in chapter 7.

Thus it is in this way that we

are introduced to the world’s most unusual high priest. Christ is the Christian believer’s one and only High Priest—the sympathetic, empathetic, and compassionate mediator between deity and humanity.

5

On to Maturity, Not Back to Apostasy

Hebrews 5:11–6:20

a On to Maturity (5:11–6:3)

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation.

—Hebrews 6:1a

The author of Hebrews had compared Jesus to the angels and to Moses. He had also called Christ our King and High Priest. Although the writer would later in his letter continue to establish both Jesus' purpose and His superiority, he interrupted his theological argument to warn his readers against slipping into a denial of the Christian faith.

Stopping his explanation of Christ's being a King-Priest, the author stated that he wanted to write more on the topic. Unfortunately, however, he did not feel his Hebrew readers were fast enough learners to follow what he was teaching (5:11). The author believed that his readers had not reached their full spiritual potential because they had not pursued maturity in the faith. Rather than

growing spiritually, they had become spiritually sluggish and mentally lazy.

The writer pointed out that a span of time had elapsed since the Hebrews had originally received the Christian message. Their knowledge of the faith should have advanced, but instead it was stagnant. They had been Christians long enough to be teachers, but instead, they needed to be reminded of some of the doctrinal basics. They should have been so mature that they could devour spiritual meat, but instead, they were still in need of spiritual milk (v. 12).

Ask Yourself . . . What type of spiritual food am I capable of eating at this point in my life?

Spiritual infants have not advanced enough in their growth to understand teaching about righteousness, the author wrote (v. 13). His point may be that the Hebrews had not yet learned through experience and instruction how to discern what's right and what's wrong.

In contrast to infants, the writer said, the mature are ready for solid food (v. 14). Mature believers,

because they exercise themselves in spiritual perception, gain sound judgment and discernment. The English word *gymnasium* is derived from the Greek word translated “trained.” In essence, just as one gets a physical workout in a gymnasium, so we build up our moral and mental muscles by training our senses to discern good from evil.

After chiding his readers for their lack of spiritual advancement, the author encouraged them to advance from their knowledge of elementary spiritual truths to a more mature knowledge of doctrinal truths (6:1a). Of course, he was not suggesting that believers leave these teachings in the sense that they were to depart from them. Rather, he wanted them to hold firm to these basic truths of the faith while moving toward acquiring knowledge of deeper spiritual truths.

After you’ve laid the foundation of a building, you don’t repeat your action. Instead, you go on to add the walls and the rest of the structure. Similarly, the Hebrews should have built on the foundational teachings of the Christian faith they had learned.

The writer listed six items that he considered to be elementary truths of the faith:

- “repentance from acts that lead to death” (v. 1b);
 - “faith in God”;
 - “instruction about cleansing rites” (v. 2);
 - “the laying on of hands”;
 - “the resurrection of the dead”;
- and
- “eternal judgment.”

If modern Christians were asked to develop a list of six elementary teachings, they might not include all those in the writer’s list, and they might include some the writer left out. Therefore, it is important to note that some of the items in the Hebrews list are teachings carried over from Judaism. For instance, the Jews practiced the laying on of hands for commissioning someone to public office or as part of the sacrificial ritual long before Christians practiced it in imparting the Holy Spirit. Apparently, the Hebrew readers figured they could relax or even regress to their former Jewish teachings and forget the distinctions between Jewish beliefs and Christian beliefs.

The author, expressing his dependence on the will of God, urged his readers to go on to maturity (v. 3). After discouraging regression, he encouraged progression.

b

Not Apostate but Diligent to the End (6:4–12)

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. —Hebrews 6:11

The author felt the need to warn his readers that there was a danger greater even than immaturity. That grave danger was apostasy. The author denied the possibility of repentance to a certain group of people once they have fallen away. This group is made up of people who have benefited from five experiences (most of which can be interpreted in at least two ways):

- They “have . . . been enlightened” (v. 4). By this the author may have meant they

have come to understand the full implications of the gospel. Or he may have meant they have been baptized.

- They “have tasted the heavenly gift.” This may mean they have accepted God’s gift of grace for salvation. Or it may mean they have participated in the Lord’s Supper.

- They “have shared in the Holy Spirit.” This perhaps means they have been endowed by the Holy Spirit and have exercised His gifts. Or perhaps it means they have experienced the laying on of hands.

- They “have tasted the goodness of the word of God” (v. 5). Does this mean they have accepted the gospel by faith, or does it merely mean they have heard Scripture readings and Christian preaching?

- They “have tasted . . . the powers of the coming age.” This means they have observed and perhaps personally benefited from

TWO MAJOR THEOLOGIES

CALVINISM

Comes from John Calvin (1509–1564) of France and Switzerland

strong on God’s will

argues if God has unconditionally predestined everything, including the salvation of the elect (Eph. 1:4), how could a true Christian lose salvation?

ARMINIANISM

Comes from Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) of Holland

strong on human free will

argues if God has genuinely granted us free will, won’t He allow people to genuinely choose what they want, including departing from God (Heb. 3:12)?



The author of Hebrews compared his readers to a field that produces a crop.

the miracles of the messianic age, which began with Christ's advent.

Interpreters for centuries have approached these verses with caution. In fact, Bible scholars today remain divided over whether the people who have participated in the five experiences cited in verses 4 and 5 are authentic Christians or not. The pivotal phrase is in the next verse: "who have fallen away" (v. 6). Many Calvinist Christians claim the people cited in verses 4 and 5 are individuals who merely profess to be believers, not genuine believers who later defect. On the other hand, many Arminian Christians claim the people cited in these verses are genuine believers who later lose

their faith. Yet another view is that the people cited in these verses are genuine believers who backslide but don't lose faith.

The writer warned that there is no way for those who fall away "to be brought back to repentance" (v. 6). Here again, different scholars have understood the word "impossible" (v. 4) in different ways.

Some say the writer meant that repentance in such cases is impossible for humans, but not for God. Others say the writer meant that repentance is impossible as long as the defector continues in defiant defection.

Still others say the author meant literally what he said—it is an absolute impossibility to repent again after having enjoyed experiences like the five listed. In that way, these scholars equate falling away with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (see Mark 3:29).

The reason for the seriousness of falling away is that by doing so, the apostate person crucifies the Son of God all over again and subjects Him to public disgrace (Heb. 6:6b). In essence, the person who does this demonstrates that he or she has come to despise the fact that the Son of God died for his or her sins.

The author resorted to an agricultural analogy to help explain his warning in verses 4–6. He described two fields, both of which receive rain. One field is cultivated

and produces a crop. This field “receives the blessing of God” (v. 7). The other field grows weeds and therefore will eventually be cleared by burning. This field “is in danger of being cursed” (v. 8).

The author’s point is clear. The Hebrews were each like a field. The five experiences of verses 4 and 5 were blessings of God like rain. If a person remained faithful, he or she would be like the first field: fruitful (spiritually) and blessed by God. But if a person fell away, he or she would be like the second field: barren (spiritually) and cursed by God.

Evidently noting that his warnings in the previous verses might sound ominous, the author adopted a more optimistic tone in verse 9. In fact, this is the only occasion in Hebrews when the writer calls his readers “dear friends.”

The writer told his readers that despite his warnings, when he thought of them, he was “convinced of better things . . . —the things that have to do with salvation” (v. 10).

In fact, he wrote that God, in His justice, would never forget what they had done. He praised their work and commended them for their love for God. They had demonstrated their love for the Lord by serving God’s people. Indeed, they were continuing to serve the Lord by assisting their fellow believers.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I show my love for the Lord by helping His people?

After commending them for their work, he encouraged them to “show this same diligence to the very end” (v. 11). By so doing, the author said, their hope of salvation would be fully realized. Cautioning them against sloth, he stated his desire that they would imitate believers of faith and patience. He did not want them to simply follow or observe these people of faith; rather he wanted them to actively perform the same tasks that the faithful had performed. If his readers would take this imitation upon themselves, the writer assured them that they would be sure to possess what God promised, as had the faithful.

C The Example of Abraham’s Diligence (6:13–20)

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

—Hebrews 6:13–15

When the author told his readers to imitate great people of faith so that they could inherit God’s promise, he must have been reminded of one of the supreme Old Testament examples of a person whose life illustrated long-lasting

patience toward receiving God's promise. That person was Abraham. Thus he referred to Abraham as one who should be imitated. (The author was fond of Abraham, referring to him ten times in the course of this letter.)

Abraham was the supreme example of a person who patiently trusted and obeyed God, even though his circumstances often could have caused him to lose faith. To this great man of faith, God made a promise. Since there is no one superior to God, He became not only the giver of the promise to Abraham but the guarantor of the promise as well (v. 13).

Quoting from Genesis 22:17, the author stated exactly what it was that God promised Abraham: "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants" (Heb. 6:14). God made this promise (actually a renewal of an earlier promise) on the occasion when He tested Abraham to see if he would be willing to sacrifice his son Isaac at the Lord's command. Seeing that Abraham was willing to obey Him, God provided a ram to be sacrificed instead, and swore to Abraham that He would give him many descendants.

After the promise was made, however, Abraham did a lot of waiting. But as he patiently waited to see God's promise fulfilled, he maintained his faith. Though not in his lifetime, Abraham finally received what he had been promised (v. 15).

In verses 16 and 17, the author resorted to what is commonly called an argument from the lesser to the

OATHS

In the ancient world, people took an oath to back up a statement's truthfulness. Oaths were used as a guarantee that a promise would be kept. Sometimes they were even used as evidence in court.

Oath takers often called for some punishment to be inflicted upon them if they broke the oath. Israelites would swear by someone greater than themselves, usually the king or the Lord.

Adapting Himself to a human custom, God sometimes made an oath as a guarantee of performance (Heb. 6:17). When His oath was accompanied by a promise of blessing, it was given for assurance. With a promise of judgment, it amounted to a curse. Since there was no one greater, the Lord swore by Himself.

greater. The lesser in this case is ordinary human relations, while the greater is God. The writer had introduced the subject of oaths in verse 13. Now he began to bring out their importance.

When a person makes an oath, he or she swears by someone greater—

someone with the power to carry out retribution if that person breaks his or her oath. Because of the power of the oath maker's superiority, the oath is essentially guaranteed. By saying that an oath "puts an end to all argument" (v. 16), the writer made use of a common expression that may have been written into many contracts of that day; it basically meant "a legal guarantee."

Turning from a description of human oaths to oaths sworn to by God, the author said God confirmed His promise to Abraham with an oath because He wanted to make it absolutely clear that He would fulfill His promise (v. 17; see Gen. 22:16). Now God employs "two unchangeable things" so that people who have left a life of sin to grasp the hope of salvation will be encouraged: His unchangeable promise and His unchangeable oath (Heb. 6:18).

In one sense, all things are not necessarily possible with God, for "it is impossible for God to lie." God only does those things that are consistent with His nature, and He is unchanging in His essential nature. God is perfect. His purpose does not change, and His will does not change. When He makes a promise, He will keep it. God is the guarantor of His own oath.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I trustworthy so that when I make a promise, I keep it?

The author referred to his readers' hope in Christ as an anchor. Of course, an anchored ship is protected from drifting, and this was precisely the image the writer wanted the Hebrews to have of themselves. Their hope in the Lord should have kept them from drifting from Christian beliefs. Indeed, this hope would provide needed security (v. 19a).



Anchors from a first-century A.D. ship.

In addition, the Hebrews' hope in Christ enabled them to enter the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle (v. 19b). This image stemmed from the layout of the tabernacle constructed by the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai. Inside this rectangular tent were two rooms divided by a thick curtain, which protected the innermost sanctuary called the most Holy Place. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the most Holy Place; other people were not allowed to enter this room that housed the very presence of God (see the diagram of the tabernacle on page 59).

But now that Jesus' sacrificial death has, so to speak, torn away the curtain before the most Holy

Place, all those who place their hope in Christ for eternal salvation can directly approach God. As a matter of fact, Jesus, as our great High Priest, has entered the inner sanctuary for us (v. 20). He sacrificed Himself to make atonement for all people, and He will be our High Priest forever.

Thus the author returned to his earlier theme of Jesus' being the great High Priest from the order of Melchizedek. After interrupting this subject so as to encourage the Hebrews to strive for spiritual maturity, the writer was ready to take up the subject again, devoting the whole of chapter 7 to the subject of how Melchizedek and the Messiah are alike.



A Priest like Melchizedek

Hebrews 7:1–28

a Melchizedek Greater Than Levi (7:1–10)

Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, [Melchizedek] remains a priest forever.

—Hebrews 7:3

The author of Hebrews had mentioned Melchizedek earlier (5:6, 10), saying that Jesus is a King-Priest in his order. But before writing an in-depth explanation about this King-Priest, the writer wanted to warn his readers about the consequences of falling away from Christianity (5:11–6:20). With that warning accomplished, he then returned to the subject of Melchizedek, referring to him in order to show the uniqueness of Christ and the greatness of the work he achieved for all humanity.

In the first ten verses of this chapter, the author showed how Melchizedek was superior to Levi. Therefore, a priest in the order of Melchizedek would also be superior to a priest in the order, or tribe, of Levi, as all Hebrew priests were.

The author began his argument to this effect by introducing some background information about Melchizedek.

The writer said that Melchizedek was not only the king of Salem, but that he was also a priest of God Most High (7:1a). The key factor is that he was both a king and a priest. The traditional identification of “Salem” is that it was an earlier place-name for the city of Jerusalem. In Psalm 76:2, the synonymous poetic parallelism of Salem and Zion supports this identification.

“God Most High” is a title found 16 times in the Old Testament and 13 times in the New Testament. Significantly, the author was calling his readers’ attention to a person who was outside the boundaries of God’s revelation to Israel and yet worshiped God.

Leaving out details that would not have supported his argument, the author recounted how Melchizedek met with Abraham—probably before 2000 B.C.—when the patriarch was returning from his defeat of the kings of Elam, Goiim, Shinar, and Ellasar. During their meeting, Melchizedek blessed Abraham (Heb. 7:1b). A number of Bible scholars

MELCHIZEDEK

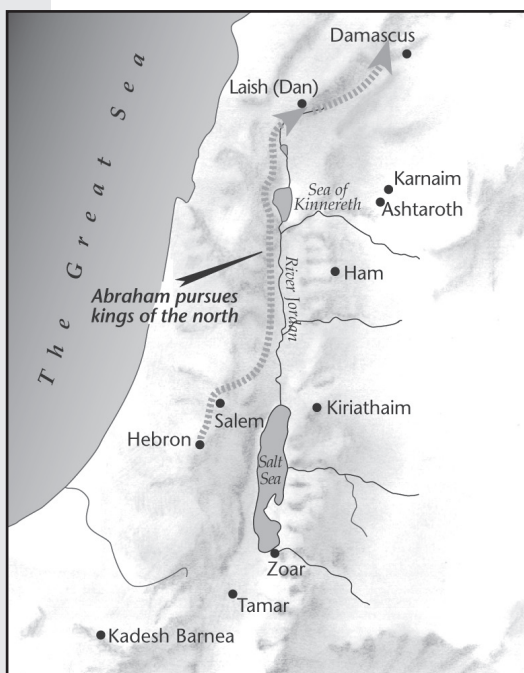
The King-Priest

Melchizedek is mentioned only three times in the Bible—in Genesis 14, in Psalm 110, and in Hebrews. The only biblical background for the life of Melchizedek is found in Genesis 14:18–20.

The setting for Melchizedek's inclusion in the Bible is during a time when the patriarch Abraham became embroiled in a skirmish between some warring chieftains. Four city kings had gone to war against five other city kings. One of their battles took place in a region around the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Abraham's nephew Lot lived in that vicinity and was kidnapped by the marauders. Soon afterward, Abraham—in addition to 318 soldiers—joined in the skirmish so that he could rescue Lot.

After Abraham recovered Lot, Melchizedek, the king of Salem, brought bread and wine to Abraham's encampment. Melchizedek, called a "priest of God Most High" (v. 18), in addition to being a king, blessed Abraham by saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand" (vv. 19–20). In response to Melchizedek's blessing, Abraham offered him a tithe of the spoils of his victory.

have suggested that perhaps the readers—Jews who had come under Christian influence—may have been sending tithes to the temple in Jerusalem to remain in the graces of the Jewish hierarchy. If so, this may explain why the author mentioned Abraham's presenting Melchizedek with a tenth of the spoils he had taken in his victory over the four kings (v. 2a). Combining the meanings of Melchizedek's name and the name of the city where he was king, the author made a clear comparison of Melchizedek's role as King-Priest and Christ's later role as King-Priest. In Hebrew, *Melchi* means "king"



The route Abraham took on his mission to rescue Lot. The patriarch met with Melchizedek probably just outside the city of Salem.

and *zedek* means “righteousness.” Therefore, *Melchizedek* means “king of righteousness.” Furthermore, the name of the city in which Melchizedek was king, Salem, is related to the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means “peace.” Thus Melchizedek could be referred to as the king of peace (v. 2b). This rhetorical argument established a precedent so that the readers might be able to view Jesus as both the king of righteousness and the king of peace.

Ask Yourself . . . How has Christ served as a king of peace in my life?

Over the years many people have been perplexed by the phrase “without father or mother” (v. 3). From this description of Melchizedek some have concluded that he was a Christophany [kriss-TAH-fah-nee]; that is, a preincarnate appearance of Christ. This view can hardly be right, for in the same verse the author also said that Melchizedek “resembling the Son of God . . . remains a priest forever.” The author’s intent was not to say that Christ is like Christ. Rather, he was comparing Melchizedek with Christ.

By using the phrase “without father or mother,” the author evidently meant that Melchizedek is fatherless and motherless as far as the Genesis record is concerned. The Hebrew Scriptures give us no genealogy of Melchizedek such as we have for the descendants of Aaron, the Israelites’ first high priest. Furthermore, the Bible includes no record of the beginning or the end of Melchizedek’s life.

There is also no record of Melchizedek’s priesthood beginning or ending. And it is at this point that the author implied a comparison between Christ and Melchizedek. Like Melchizedek, there is no record of Christ’s priesthood beginning or ending. But in this case, it is because there really is no beginning or ending to Christ’s priesthood.

As the author looked at the biblical record, about all he could say of Melchizedek was that he lives—“he remains a priest forever.” This is also the most vital and valid thing we can assert about the Christian’s High Priest—He lives! In fact, He too remains a priest forever. In this way, the writer modeled Melchizedek upon Christ.

Still implying a comparison between Christ and Melchizedek, the author in verses 4–10 sought to prove just how great Melchizedek was. In fact, Melchizedek stands superior to Abraham.

The author argued that if the Levitical priests came from Levi and Levi came from Abraham, and if Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, then a priest from the order of Melchizedek is greater than a priest from the line of Levi. The author’s argument is based on the fact that Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of his plunder as a tithe (v. 4). Abraham made this presentation just as later Israelites presented animals to a priest, who would, in turn, sacrifice the animals before the Lord for the forgiveness of the presenter’s sins.

Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, then, for two reasons.

First, the one who collected the tithe was greater than the one who presented it. Second, the one who blessed was greater than the one who received the blessing.

Next, the author proceeded to explain the details of this principle. He said the priestly tribe of Levi, which like all other tribes of the nation of Israel was descended from Abraham, was required by the law to collect tithes from the people. In this sense, the Levites were above the people of other tribes (v. 5).

Melchizedek, on the other hand, was not a Levite. In fact, he predated that priestly tribe by hundreds of years. And yet Melchizedek was a priest, and he collected tithes from Abraham, from whom God promised to build the nation of Israel. In addition to collecting tithes from Abraham, Melchizedek also blessed him in priestly fashion (v. 6). Of course, a common principle of that day was that “the lesser is blessed by the greater” (v. 7).

After establishing how this principle works, the author then applied it to the priestly tribe of Levi. He said all Levites who receive tithes from people die. But the testimony of Melchizedek, who received tithes from Abraham, lives on (v. 8).

In a manner of speaking, because Abraham was an ancestor of the Levites, the Levites were in his body when Abraham presented his tithe to Melchizedek (v. 10). Therefore, it could be said that the Levites, whose responsibility it was to collect tithes, actually paid tithes to Melchizedek through their

ancestor Abraham (v. 9). Thus the conclusion of the author’s argument was that Christ, the King-Priest in the order of Melchizedek, is superior to all Levitical priests.



God’s Call for a Priest like Melchizedek (7:11–19)

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.

—Hebrews 7:11–12

The Hebrews who read this letter apparently were at a crossroads. Would they take the pathway that led to deeper Christian faith, or would they take the pathway that led back to their former Jewish ways? In this passage, the author of Hebrews took a strong and vital stand on the premise that Christ is better than all else, including the law of Moses and the Levitical priesthood.

For Jews the law was final; it was God’s definitive word to humanity. Along the same lines, the Levitical priesthood also had an air of final-

ity for the Jews. The law that had established that priesthood had come long after Melchizedek, and the Aaronic priesthood was thought to be the last form of priesthood that would ever be needed.

Though the Jews may have thought of the law and the Levitical priesthood in this manner, the author of Hebrews certainly did not. After arguing that Christ is superior to all Levitical priests, the author actually ventured to say that both the law and the Aaronic priesthood were failures and had been replaced. Initiating this portion of his argument with a rhetorical question, the writer asked why, if the priesthood had achieved a way for people to be perfectly acceptable to God, was there a need for another priest to come. In essence, why was there a need for a priest in the order of Melchizedek to come on the scene and replace the priest in the order of Aaron (v. 11)?

The author proceeded by answering his own question. By doing so he made statements that are paramount in our understanding of Christian theology and the Bible on which it is based. For in these verses are the reason, so to speak, that our Bibles include both an Old Testament and a New Testament.

The writer bluntly wrote that perfection did not come through the Mosaic law. If it had, God would not have been calling for a new type of priest in Psalm 110:4—“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:17). The Aaronic priesthood had not succeeded,

and therefore it had to be replaced by a more effective one.

Because the law and the Levitical priesthood were interwoven, the writer declared that just as there had been a need for a change of priesthood, there had also been a need for a change of the law (v. 12). A change in one necessarily called for a change in the other.

Ask Yourself . . . How did my becoming a Christian elicit a need for some changes in my lifestyle?

Hypothetically, an intensely loyal Jew, upon hearing the author’s argument, would have probably pointed

THE BETTER THINGS OF HEBREWS

Throughout this letter, the author urged his readers to make the better choice—in essence, to choose the eternal salvation of the Lord rather than to renounce what they knew to be true. According to the writer, accompanying Christian faith are:

- better things of salvation (6:9);
- a better hope (7:19);
- a better covenant (v. 22);
- better promises (8:6);
- better sacrifices (9:23);
- better possessions (10:34);
- a better country (11:16);
- a better resurrection (v. 35); and
- a better word (12:24).

out that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah (v. 14), whereas the law required priests to come from the tribe of Levi (v. 13). Anticipating this line of argument as he wrote, the author said that Jesus' being from a different tribe was precisely his point (v. 15)! Jesus is not a priest in the order of Levi; He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Therefore, Christ did not attain priesthood on the basis of the Mosaic law, which prescribed that priests come from the tribe of Levi. He attained priesthood "on the basis of the power of an indestructible life" (v. 16). Jesus is immortal. Like Melchizedek, His beginning and His end have not been recorded, because He has no beginning and no end. As a human being, He died on the cross, but He rose again to new life and now lives forever.

Consequently, the old law and its system of priesthood has been annulled. The author called the law "weak and useless" (v. 18). In addition, he said that all the sacrificial rituals performed by the priests had really done little toward securing the peace of the souls of humanity (v. 19a). That is not to say, of course, that there were not faithful people in the Old Testament era who enjoyed a sense of nearness to God. The writer's point is that the Levitical priesthood and the outward rituals they performed had nothing essential to do with people's ultimate perfection.

Just as the foundation of the Israelites' legal system was crumbling, a new foundation was being laid. A hope far better than the old law has

been introduced, the writer said. And through this hope, people can have complete and lasting access to God (v. 19b). In essence, the gospel of salvation through Christ is better than the ritualistic law.



Christ's Superior, Permanent Priesthood (7:20–28)

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.

—Hebrews 7:23–24

The author said that God did not make an oath when Levites became priests (v. 20). On the other hand, God did make an oath in appointing Christ to His priesthood. Quoting once again from Psalm 110:4, the author showed his readers how this oath was worded: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever' " (Heb. 7:21).

Whereas the Levitical priesthood had as its inception God's command, the high priesthood of Christ had as its inception the promise God made to His Son. Unlike the Levitical priesthood, Christ's priesthood will not fall short of its goal, and thus will never come to an end.

Because of God's oath, Christ is the guarantee of a new and bet-

ter covenant in two ways (v. 22). First He assures humanity that God will fulfill His promise to forgive. Second, He assures God that those who believe in Him are acceptable and may enter God's presence. The Greek word translated "guarantee" came from the word for *hand*. What a person could see in another's hand was guaranteed. (In that way the word is comparable to our phrase "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.")

In Greek sources outside of the Bible, the same word was used for someone who acted as an under-signer—someone who agreed to pay a banking debt or post bail if the debtor or prisoner defaulted. Through His sacrifice on the cross, Jesus paid off our debt of sin, and by doing so, has provided us eternal salvation.

The author explained that though there had been many high priests to serve the Israelites, death prevented them from continuing to serve (v. 23). As a matter of fact, Josephus, the Jewish historian, claimed there had been 83 high priests from the time of Aaron until A.D. 70. By contrast, death cannot stop Jesus' service as our High Priest. Because He lives forever, "he has a permanent priesthood" (v. 24).

Christ's salvation is ongoing in extent and eternal in intent. Through His sacrifice, He is "able to save completely those who come to God" (v. 25). No matter what the need of the sinner, Christ is capable of saving that person and making him or her worthy of entering into God's

presence. And because He lives forever, His intercession for humanity before God never comes to an end. Our High Priest is perfectly adapted to meet our needs. His ability to meet our needs is based on four characteristics:

- He is holy (v. 26). This means that He possesses the character of God.
- He is blameless, meaning that He is innocent and is without evil.
- He is pure, in the sense that He is undefiled.
- He is set apart from sinners in that He is "exalted above the heavens." His sacrificial work on earth has been accomplished, and He now sits at the right hand of the throne of God.

Verse 27 presents a bit of a problem for some interpreters because the Hebrew high priests, strictly speaking, did not offer sin offerings on a daily basis. However, in 9:7 the author revealed that he was aware of the sacrificial regulations. Therefore, for the sake of argument, he must have been combining the annual Day of Atonement sacrifices with the daily burnt offerings (see Num. 28:1–8). Of course, any time a high priest himself sinned, he might offer a sacrifice for his sin, but rarely on a daily basis.

Christ stands in stark contrast to the earthly priests. Unlike the high priests of Israel, He does not have to offer sacrifices for His own sins, because He is sinless. And He does not have to offer ritualistic sacrifices for our sins, because "he sacrificed for [our] sins once for all when he

offered himself” (Heb. 7:27). Jesus’ sacrifice for the sins of the world on the cross was final. No other sacrifices need follow it.

Ask Yourself . . . How does it make me feel to know that Christ has given Himself as a sacrifice for my sins once for all?

Two types (or orders) of priests are pinpointed in verse 28. Those appointed by the law the author called “weak.” The one High Priest sworn in by the oath of God the

author called “perfect forever.” The priests appointed by the law were limited, just as all ordinary people are limited. They were mortal and sinful and could only offer animals for sacrifices, which could never provide a real substitute for the sins of humanity. The High Priest appointed by divine oath, on the other hand, is unlimited. He is immortal and sinless. And He offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all people.

THE SERVICE OF THE PRIESTS

There were three orders in the hierarchy of priests: the high priest, priests, and Levites. Whereas the Levites were subordinate sanctuary officials who supervised the minor duties of the temple, the priests were associates of the high priest.

Priests were to come from the tribe of Levi and had to be without physical defect. They were organized into 24 divisions that served the sanctuary in rotation. Each of the divisions ministered for a week beginning on the Sabbath, except during the annual feasts, at which time all the priests served together.

The ceremony for the consecration of the priests was much like that for the high priest, but not as elaborate. The clothing of the priests included a tunic, breeches, and a turban—all of which were made with white linen, as well as a white linen girdle embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet.

The chief duties of the priests were the care of the sanctuary vessels and the sacrifices at the altar. But priests also taught the law, watched over the physical health of the nation, and administered justice.

7

Christ's Priesthood in a Superior Sanctuary

Hebrews 8:1–9:10

a A Priest in the Heavenly Sanctuary (8:1–6)

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

—Hebrews 8:1–2

By describing Christ as the High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews had established a basis by which he could emphasize that Christ's priestly ministry is far better than that of the Levitical priests. Thus chapter 8 begins with the writer's assertion that he is going to make his chief point regarding Christ's superior priesthood.

Unlike all other priests, our High Priest is so great that He has now taken His rightful place in heaven, God's dwelling place, at the right hand of the Father (v. 1). That He has sat down implies that He has

completed His work of salvation. And to have sat down at the right hand of the Father implies that Christ has earned and deserves to be in the place of highest honor. Making a slight adjustment in his presentation of the imagery of heaven, the author wrote that Christ is a servant "in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being" (v. 2). At Mount Sinai, God had instructed Moses to construct a tabernacle, a tent that was to be set up in the center of the Israelites' encampments as they traveled toward the promised land. It was to be the center of the Israelites' worship.

The writer said that the sanctuary of that earthly tent was modeled after the sanctuary in heaven, at which Christ serves as our High Priest. In fact, the author called the earthly tabernacle "a copy and shadow of what is in heaven" (v. 5a).

God Himself set up the sanctuary in heaven, and He gave Moses specific details as to how to set up its earthly counterpart. God wanted the earthly tabernacle to reflect heavenly reality. That is why He warned Moses, "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern

Hebrews's Alexandrian Connection

Famous for his philosophical writings, Philo was a Jew who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, until the middle of the first century A.D. He became renowned for his allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures and for seeing aspects of Greek philosophy in them. (A Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures had been around for more than 200 years by the time of Philo.)

Philo borrowed certain views from the Greek philosopher Plato to write that the visible

shown you on the mountain" (v. 5b; see Exod. 25:40). Even so, because humans constructed the earthly tabernacle, it was defective and temporary. Because God established the heavenly sanctuary, it is perfect and permanent.

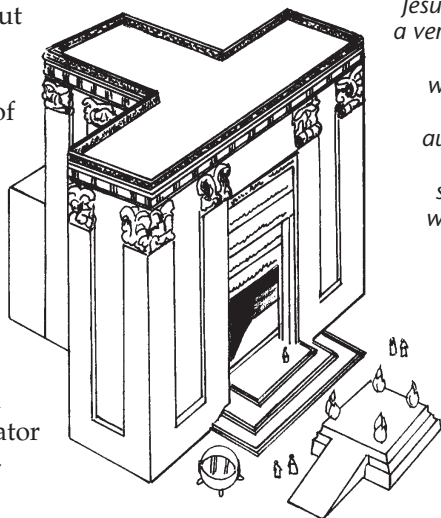
Ask Yourself . . . Am I am looking forward to being with Christ in the heavenly sanctuary?

The author reminded his readers that the high priest offers sacrifices for the sins of the people. Therefore, he reasoned, our High Priest must also have something to offer as a sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 8:3). This is true even though Christ does not carry out the ongoing duties of His priesthood here on earth—even though His sacrifice of Himself did take place here. The writer said that earthly priests perform their duties in earthly sanctuaries. Their priesthood is on the earth. Christ is the heavenly counterpart of that priesthood in a far greater sense.

Christ could not become an earthly priest and carry out priestly functions in the temple because by birth He belonged to the tribe of Judah. On earth, the tribe of Levi was prescribed by the Mosaic law to perform those functions (v. 4).

Because Jesus' ministry is heavenly and unlimited, it is superior to that of the Levitical priests. Jesus, as the mediator between God and human-

ity, has established a new and better covenant than the old one based on the Mosaic law. The new covenant is better precisely because it is "established on better promises" (v. 6). The author would spell out those "better promises" in verses 10–12.



The temple as it may have appeared in Jesus' day. By using a verb tense indicating that priests were still offering sacrifices, the author is believed by many Bible scholars to have written this letter prior to the temple's destruction in A.D. 70.

world was a shadow of the invisible world (compare Heb. 8:5). Beyond this earthly world was a true, spiritual one upon which this world was modeled (compare v. 2). Some favor the view that Apollos was the author of Hebrews. Apollos, like Philo, was a native of Alexandria and “was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). If Apollos was the author of this letter, it is possible that he may have been influenced—at least in his choice of language—by the more famous Alexandrian Jew Philo.

b

A Forecast of the New Covenant (8:7–13)

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

—Hebrews 8:10

Some Bible scholars hold that the idea of the covenant is the determining or controlling concept of Old Testament thought. The author of Hebrews mentioned the concept of covenant by name in 8:6. In these verses, he demonstrated where he got his notion of a new covenant.

The author resorted here to an argument parallel to one he had

used earlier (see 7:11–28). He had already argued that if the Levitical priesthood had been sufficient, there would have been no need for God to talk about another order of priesthood (see Ps. 110:4). Similarly, the writer argued, if the first covenant had sufficiently met the needs of people and had adequately provided for their salvation, then there would have been no need for a new covenant to replace it (Heb. 8:7). But the old covenant was insufficient and inadequate. It wasn't adequate in bringing people to God, and therefore a new covenant had to be established.

The author then proceeded to explain that God foretold the coming of this new covenant through the Old Testament prophets. But before beginning a quotation from Jeremiah, the writer said that God had found fault with the people under the old covenant (v. 8a), primarily because they did not continue in that covenant. Although God initiated the old covenant with the Israelites, the people agreed to it. Thus the covenant was a mutual obligation between God and the people. But the people often failed to live up to their part of the obligation. As a result, human failure rendered the old covenant inoperative.

At this juncture, the author employed the longest Old Testament quotation used in the New Testament—Jeremiah 31:31–34. This prophecy, quoted in Hebrews 8:8b–12, is most completely treated here in the New Testament. Although Ezekiel had written about God's

establishing an “everlasting covenant” (Ezek. 16:60), only Jeremiah had spoken of a “new covenant” (Jer. 31:31).

Jeremiah did not say that the covenant God made with the Israelites would be renewed. Rather, he said that a completely new covenant would be established (Heb. 8:8bc). Thus it would not even be “like” (v. 9a) the old covenant. The prophet also explained why the old covenant was a failure: “because [the houses of Israel and Judah] did not remain faithful to [the Lord’s] covenant, and [He] turned away from them” (v. 9bc).

Turning from the failure of the past covenant to the promise of the new covenant, the prophet had described at least four ways in which the new covenant would be better than the old:

- The new covenant would be inward and dynamic (v. 10ab). God’s Word would actually have a place inside the minds and hearts of His people. The old covenant had been inscribed on tablets of stone and was external. But in regard to the new covenant, God vowed, “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.” God’s teachings would be internalized by His people.

- The new covenant would also provide a way for believers to have an intimate relationship with God (v. 10c). Here Jeremiah echoed several Old Testament promises (see Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12). But the life, death, and resurrection of Christ opened a new avenue for

human beings to relate to their heavenly Father. Because of the salvation provided by Him, all believers can enter into God’s presence.

- The new covenant would enable believers to have a deeper knowledge of God (Heb. 8:11). An inclusiveness concerning knowing and learning about God will exist under the new covenant that was foreign to people under the old. No longer will this knowledge be limited to some people; all believers “from the least . . . to the greatest” will have a personal knowledge of the Lord.

- Through the new covenant, the forgiveness of sins is an eternal reality (v. 12). Amazingly, an omniscient God has amnesia when it comes to our sins! God “remembers [our] sins no more.” Through Christ’s sacrifice, our sins have been dealt with once for all. God does not remember them.

Ask Yourself . . . Are there times that I conjure up memories of my sins that the Lord has forgotten? If so, how can I put them behind me once for all?

After concluding his quotation from Jeremiah, the author wrote a sentence that was pivotal to his entire argument because it makes a clear demarcation between the old covenant and the new. The establishment of a new covenant naturally implies that the old covenant is obsolete. And what is obsolete needs to be replaced; what is replaced becomes useless; what is useless will eventually disappear from the scene altogether (v. 13).

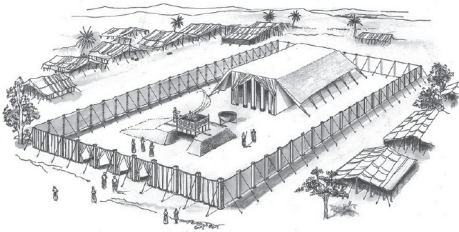
Some Bible scholars point to verse

13 as a tip-off for dating this letter. If “what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear” referred to the complete complex of the sacrificial system centered at the Jerusalem temple, then those words may have been the prophetic foretelling of the destruction of Jerusalem (in A.D. 70). If this is the case, the author may have written this letter during the Jewish-Roman war of A.D. 66–70.

C The Earthly Sanctuary of the Old Covenant (9:1–5)

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. —Hebrews 9:1–2a

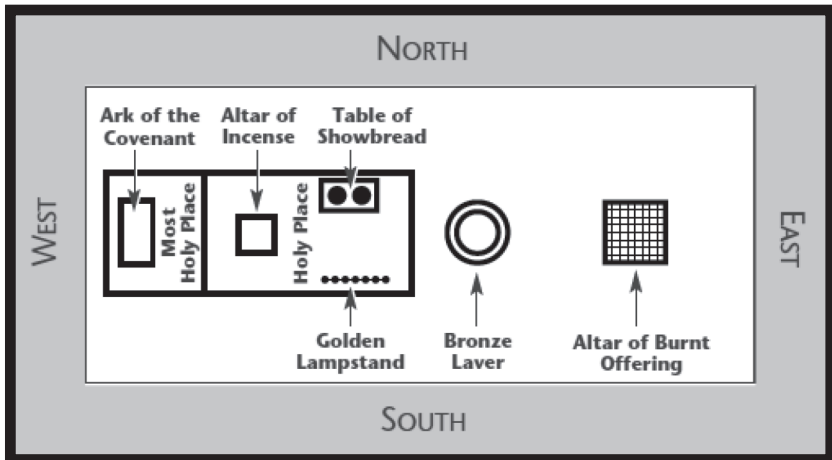
The author had now explained to his readers how the new covenant is superior to the old and how the old covenant was disappearing. In the two early verses of chapter 9, he explained the details of the sacrifi-



Two rooms comprised the tent known as the tabernacle.

Priests could enter the Holy Place, but only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place.

THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE TABERNACLE

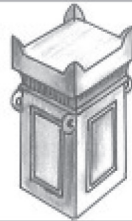


cial system under the old covenant. Later in his letter (9:11–10:18) he would compare this sacrificial system to the sacrificial system of the new covenant—Christ’s death on the cross to provide the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. As an introduction, the author wrote that the old covenant had provisions both for the worship of the people and the place of worship (9:1). Although he did

not say that the people’s mode of worship, as dictated by the law, was to take place through the priests, the author did write where that worship was to take place: at the tabernacle (v. 2a) The tabernacle was surrounded by a large courtyard that was accessible to all Israelites. The tabernacle itself was set up in the western end of the courtyard. Only the priests could enter this structure,



Ark of the Covenant



Altar of Incense

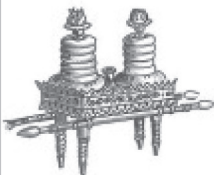


Golden Lampstand

FURNISHINGS OF THE TABERNACLE



Altar of Burnt Offering



**Table of
Showbread**



**Bronze
Laver**

and only the high priest could enter the most Holy Place. The author limited his description to the two-room interior of the structure.

As a priest passed through a curtain into the Holy Place, he would see on his left the golden lampstand, on his right the table of showbread, and straight ahead the altar of incense (v. 2). The seven-pronged lampstand, or sacred menorah, looked like a golden candelabra. On the table of showbread were placed consecrated bread loaves. Every day the priests placed 12 new loaves on the table.

One problem in the author's description of the interior of the tabernacle is that he said the golden altar of incense was in the most Holy Place (v. 4a). By contrast, Exodus 30:6 and 40:5 record that this altar was in front of the curtain leading into the most Holy Place. Some Bible scholars conjecture that the author's description actually corresponded to the arrangement of the temple in Jerusalem. First Kings 6:22 indicates that upon building the temple, this altar "belonged to the inner sanctuary." Others say that because of how it was used, the writer logically connected it with the most Holy Place.

As the high priest passed through another, thicker curtain into the most holy Place, he would see that the room was dominated by a gold-covered ark of the covenant (Heb. 9:3–5). The lid of this box was called "the mercy seat," where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. Inside the box were three things: a

golden jar containing a sample of the manna God provided for the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness (see Exod. 16:33–34); Aaron's staff that had budded (see Num. 17:1–11); and the stone tablets of the covenant—the permanent record of the old covenant (see 1 Kings 8:21). At first it appears that the author was going to give a more specific description of the ark of the covenant. He explained that above the ark were the cherubim, or guardians, of God's glory, and that these cherubim overshadowed the mercy seat, or atonement cover. But then he stopped. Apparently feeling the need to continue his argument, he wrote, "But we cannot discuss these things in detail now" (Heb. 9:5).

d Limitations of the Earthly Sanctuary (9:6–10)

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 worshiper.

—Hebrews 9:9

Just as the author first described the layout of the outer room of the tabernacle before depicting the contents of the inner room, so in this passage he outlined the priest's operational procedure in the Holy Place before describing the high priest's once-a-year functions in the

most Holy Place. Once the tabernacle had been set up, the lower priests moved in and out of the holy place, carrying out such responsibilities as burning incense, setting the bread loaves out on the table of show-bread, and trimming the lamps (v. 6).

Ask Yourself . . . What duties as a Christian “priest” might I engage in on a daily basis?

After scant mention of the duties carried out by the lower priests, the author moved on to describe how the high priest carried out his responsibilities in the most Holy Place. Only the high priest could enter the inner sanctuary, and thus he had to do so alone. The high priest was allowed into the most Holy Place on only one day a year: the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). And when he did go into the inner sanctuary, he was required to take with him an offering of blood to atone for both his own sins and the sins of the people (v. 7).

Because the high priest was himself a sinner, the law prescribed that he first seek forgiveness for himself. Only afterward could he seek forgiveness for the sins the Israelites “had committed in ignorance.” To perform this ritual out of order would mean death for the high priest.

Verse 7 can serve to remind us that all of us have sinned (see Rom. 3:23). Our sins may not always be outwardly or even inwardly detectable, but they still occur. Both believers and unbelievers sometimes sin against the Lord in ignorance—without knowing it. But through

Christ’s grace under the new covenant, we are forgiven of all our sins.

The author understood that the Holy Spirit used the regulations about access to the most Holy Place to teach important truths to the Israelites. And the most important truth they learned was that they had no direct access to the presence of God. Nor could they ever gain that access as long as the first tabernacle was still in operation (Heb. 9:8).

Thus the tabernacle and its sacrificial system were an illustration of how the old covenant failed to effectively deal with the sins of humanity. And because it unsuccessfully dealt with sin, it also failed to clear the worshiper’s conscience (v. 9).

The sacrifices that were part of the old covenant were external actions, and so had only an external effect. In fact, the author called these rituals “external regulations” (v. 10).

The writer implied that these rituals had served their purpose in times past. Perhaps they had even anticipated the new covenant. But now “a new order” is in place. The Greek word translated “order”—*diorthosis*, from which English words like *orthodontist* and *orthopedist* are derived—implied an object that was being straightened out, and is found only here in all of the Bible.

This new order is, of course, the new covenant, and it revolves around internal essentials rather than externals. No external ritual or action can ever substitute for our having a direct, personal relationship with Christ.

8

Christ's Superior Sacrifice

Hebrews 9:11–28

a The Superiority of Christ's Blood (9:11–15)

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

—Hebrews 9:14

The author had set the stage for this passage by reminding his readers about the sacrificial system of

the tabernacle. He noted that this system had served a purpose in the past but had become obsolete. In its place, God had established a new covenant through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus' sacrifice is the foundation of the new covenant.

The principal purpose of a priest was to sacrifice for sin. Therefore, as our High Priest, Christ too must offer a priestly sacrifice. Other priests offered animals as a sacrifice for sins, but those sacrifices did not "clear the conscience of the worshiper" (v. 9). Christ sacrificed Himself by dying on the cross and so secured

The High Priest's Sacrifice

When the high priest made sacrifices on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), he slaughtered one young bull for his own sins and another for the sins of the people. After killing an animal, he collected its blood and carried it into the tabernacle. There he sprinkled the blood before the curtain leading into the most Holy Place. Then he turned back to the altar of incense and poured some of the blood onto each of the four horns of the altar.

The culmination of the ritual was when the high priest carried the blood behind the curtain into the most Holy Place. There he sprinkled the animal's blood over the covering of the ark of the covenant (called the mercy seat). After the blood rituals had been performed by the high priest, the animal's fatty tissue was burned at the altar of burnt offering. Edible flesh that remained was given to the priest for food.



God's forgiveness and blessing for believing sinners (v. 11).

The author had described the layout of the Israelites' tabernacle in verses 1–5. Here he proceeded to contrast that structure with a better tabernacle. The author's primary message was that it was in the heavenly sanctuary and through the shedding of His own blood that Christ purchased our salvation and entered the presence of God.

We should not, however, think of Christ as engaged in some elaborate ritual in heaven. Rather, the author meant that those external, earthly elements in the tabernacle below find their spiritual and eternal counterpart in the reality of Christ and His work.

Christ was not counted worthy of entering God's presence—and making a way for all humanity to enter God's presence—by sacrificing animals such as goats and calves and sprinkling their blood on the mercy seat in the most Holy Place of the earthly tabernacle (v. 12a). This was, of course, how the Levitical priests were counted worthy. And they were to offer such sacrifices year after year.

Christ made His passage into the heavenly sanctuary by shedding His own blood on the cross. He does not have to offer sacrifices year after year because He gave His own life, once for all, to provide eternal redemption (v. 12b). His sacrifice was decisive and final. It does not have to be repeated.

***Ask Yourself** . . . In what ways am I to respond to Christ's sacrifice for me?*

After paying the ransom for people's sins, Christ ascended into the true heavenly sanctuary. From there His salvation is continually offered to all human beings.

***Ask Yourself** . . . Who do I need to tell about Christ's offer of salvation?*

Briefly recounting how the high priests under the old covenant made atonement for the sins of the people, the author referred to two types of sacrifices (v. 13). On the Day of Atonement, goats and calves were slaughtered and their blood shed (see Lev. 16). But that annual ceremony was different from the one the author referred to by "the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean" (Heb. 9:13). This purification ceremony could take place any time during the year. In it the priest slaughtered a red heifer, burned its carcass, and stored its ashes. Whenever a person became ceremonially unclean by contact with a dead body, he or she could be purified by being sprinkled with these ashes mixed into water (see Num. 19).

The author confirmed that these ceremonies were effective, even if they were limited. They were successful in sanctifying their participants by making them outwardly clean. External ritual made these people clean to the degree that it could. But an outward cleansing was not enough. So the author turned his readers' attention back to

the sacrifice of Jesus, which cleanses within. The author of Hebrews often resorted in his letter to what Jews termed “the argument of the light and heavy.” This line of argument was conducted as if two views were placed on a set of imaginary scales that determined which view was the heaviest, or the most worthy. The author wrote, “How much more” (Heb. 9:14) valuable is Christ’s offering when compared to the tons of offerings sacrificed by the priests under the old covenant!

Ask Yourself . . . How have I needed Jesus to cleanse me within?

Verse 14 contains a distinctive phrase found only here in the New Testament. Christ offered Himself to God the Father “through the eternal Spirit.” Is this documentation that the total Trinity was involved in the transaction of the cross? Most Bible versions capitalize the *S* in “Spirit,” thereby interpreting the word as referring to the Holy Spirit—the Third Person of the Trinity. Other Bible scholars hold that the “eternal Spirit” is Christ’s own spirit—His “preexistent divine personality,” as the Amplified Version paraphrases it, interpreting it to refer to Jesus’ own divine nature.

The greatness of Christ and of His sacrifice is incomparable, the author implied. Like the high priest, He offered the sacrifice for our sins. But unlike the high priest, He offered Himself—unblemished and undefiled—to God as a sacrifice. The purpose for His shedding his own blood on the cross was to wash away those

sins that trouble our consciences. By dying on the cross, He provided a way for our sins to be completely removed, even from the core of our being.

Christ’s freeing of our consciences had another purpose beyond salvation. The sacrifice of our Lord enables us to serve God. No longer hampered by our sins, we who have free consciences are able to engage in service to our Lord with all our heart and soul.

Ask Yourself . . . How can the freeing of my conscience enable me to serve God in ways I never have been able to before?

Returning briefly to his earlier theme of the new covenant, the author said Christ mediated this new agreement between God and humanity (v. 15). Like the arbitrator between two alienated factions, He represented both sides. God, who is righteous, could not accept unrighteous human beings into His presence. Therefore Christ, who is both God and man, lived a perfectly righteous life and then sacrificed that life so that human beings can be made righteous before God.

Being made acceptable, humans can now enter into the presence of God. Because Christ died for them, believers inherit eternal life in heaven. So great is Christ’s sacrifice that it even benefits those who had sinned in the Old Testament era. The author had insisted that the old covenant sacrifices could not remove sins. Thus it is Christ’s sacrifice that leads to the forgiveness that had been desired from the time of the

old covenant but that the old covenant could never fully accomplish.

b

The Blood of the Covenant (9:16–22)

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

—Hebrews 9:22

By this point in his letter, the writer had established how Christ's shed blood is superior to the shed blood of animal sacrifices. Thus he opened this passage about how blood must be shed in order for there to be forgiveness with an illustration that may be just as familiar to us today as it was in the first century A.D.: the reading of a deceased person's last will and testament.

It is a universally accepted idea that a will goes into force only when it can be confirmed that the testator has died (v. 16). A will never goes into effect while the testator is still living (v. 17). The writer recounted this information that his readers certainly already knew for the sake of introducing his argument.

Ask Yourself . . . What sort of things might I do with my time, money, and possessions now that could enhance the spreading of the gospel even after my death?

Then preparing his readers for the main point of that argument, he began to explain why Christ had

Diatheke= 'Will' and 'Covenant'

The Greek word translated "will" in Hebrews 9:16 is **diatheke**. Where it appears in other New Testament passages, however, this same Greek word is usually translated "covenant." The Greeks used **diatheke** when referring to a last will and testament. When the testator had died, his or her will was read to people who had no choice but to accept it. In that way, the testator's words carried a sense of finality.

Among Jews who spoke Greek, the word was also used to refer to divine covenants. In a covenant God issued the terms and the people accepted them. So just as in a last will and testament, in a covenant, God's words carry a sense of finality.

The author may have used the term **diatheke** in Hebrews 9 as a rhetorical device to enhance the eloquence of his argument. He smoothly moved from using the word to mean "covenant" (v. 15) to using it to mean "will" (v. 16).

The Author's Sources of Information

Exodus 24:3–8 records the ceremony the author of Hebrews described in Hebrews 9:18–21. And yet some of the items the writer of Hebrews mentioned are not included in the Exodus account. For instance, Exodus fails to mention water, scarlet wool, hyssop, or the sprinkling of the book and the tabernacle. So how did the author come by this information if it had not been recorded in the Bible?

The author probably relied on other reliable sources of information. As confirmation, the Jewish historian Josephus supplied information about how Moses sprinkled blood on the tabernacle. A similar situation is found in Jude, in which the author quoted from the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch in Jude 14 and 15. Inspired authors were free to quote from reliable literature that was not divinely inspired (compare 2 Sam. 1:18 and 1 Chron. 29:29).

to die for the new covenant to go into effect. He said that even the old covenant “was not put into effect without blood” (v. 18). In essence, he meant that something living must die—which is what is really being emphasized by the author’s use of the term “blood”—for a covenant to be put into effect.

In order to illustrate his point, the author shifted his readers’ attention back to the scene at Mount Sinai. There Moses, acting as God’s representative to the people, laid out the conditions of the covenant. He made sure the people knew what was demanded of them. But Moses also performed a type of sacrificial ritual in order to confirm the covenant. Including details that were not mentioned in Exodus 24—where this ceremony is recorded—the author wrote that Moses “took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people” (Heb. 9:19).

In verse 20, the author quoted Moses, but he changed the wording somewhat from the wording contained in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The author’s rewording may have been an intentional attempt to make his readers recall the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, when He said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24). According to Hebrews, Moses said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep” (Heb. 9:20; compare Exod. 24:8).



Hyssop was used at Passover as well as in various purification rites by the

Israelites. The plant

had stiff, hairy stems and leaves that could hold water or blood.

Citing another example of the use of blood in ancient Israelite sacrificial rituals, the author told how Moses sprinkled blood on the tabernacle and the vessels and utensils used in the structure (Heb. 9:21). Details of this event, like some of those in verse 19, were not included in the Exodus account (Exod. 40:9–11, 16).

After naming historical instances in which blood was shed for the sake of human purification, the author made the sweeping statement that the law had required almost everything to be cleansed by the shedding of blood (v. 22). Leviticus 17:11 was one of the chief substructures of all Hebrew thinking: “The life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” Indeed, the author summed up his references to historical sacrifices by writing, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).

Ask Yourself . . . How does it make me feel to know that blood had to be shed for my sins to be forgiven?

C

Christ’s Better, Permanent Sacrifice (9:23–28)

[Christ] has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. —Hebrews 9:26b

In presenting his argument to his readers, the author had been leading up to showing them another way in which Christ is better. He had already shown them that Christ is better than the angels and Moses. He had already shown them that He is the better High Priest. Now he would prove to his readers that Christ’s sacrifice is superior to that of the old covenant. Thus not only do we have a great High Priest, but we also have our own supreme sacrifice for sin.

Just as in the early part of this chapter the writer had portrayed the earthly tabernacle as a model of the heavenly sanctuary, so in these verses he implied that the earthly animal sacrifices were only models, as it were, of Christ’s supreme sacrifice of Himself.

Thus the author said that if it was necessary for the earthly tabernacle (which was modeled after the heavenly sanctuary) to be purified with animal sacrifices, then a far

better sacrifice is needed to purify the heavenly sanctuary (v. 23). Bible scholars are divided over the way in which the heavenly sanctuary would require purification. Many say that the author's intent was that people required purification before entering the heavenly sanctuary, or the presence of God. These interpreters say that the author saw God's people as His dwelling place, and thus it is the church that required cleansing.

Others disagree with this interpretation, saying that "the heavenly things themselves" is too strange a way to refer to people. Thus these scholars propose that the heavenly realm did, indeed, require purification because spiritual forces of evil had been operative there (see Eph. 6:12).

Ask Yourself . . . Do I still need purification for my sins?

Nonetheless, the author explained that Christ never entered the tabernacle that was "a sanctuary made with human hands" and a "copy of the true one" (Heb. 9:24). The author did not mean to imply that in heaven there is some sort of physical counterpart to the earthly tabernacle. He meant that all the priestly activities of the old covenant were simply dramatizing a vastly greater truth: Christ has "entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."

We are not fit to plead our own case before God. In addition to our sinfulness, we are on earth and God is in heaven. Thus we need Someone worthy of going before God to plead

for us. Christ does just that.

Ask Yourself . . . How does it make me feel to know that Christ is pleading my case before God?

Christ did not enter the earthly tabernacle to make sacrifices, nor does He offer Himself as a sacrifice for us again and again in heaven. He does not make sacrifices from time to time as the old covenant's high priests did from year to year. They slaughtered animals and used the animals' blood for sacrifices that were not sufficient to forgive sins. Christ's single sacrifice of His own blood is the only sacrifice that can put away humanity's sins (v. 25).

If this were not true, the author wrote, then Christ would have had to suffer death over and over again (v. 26a). As the author had done in verse 15, he again implied that Christ's sacrifice was effective for all time. In fact, its impact began at the beginning of time. No one throughout all the ages could have been saved had not Christ sacrificed Himself on the cross.

Once again the author emphasized the once-for-all aspect of Jesus' sacrifice. He said Christ appeared at the turning point of history to provide the only means by which all people's sins can be annulled (v. 26b). By offering Himself as a sacrifice, Jesus ushered in the final state of affairs—the messianic era, the age that all preceding ages led up to.

Concluding his argument that Jesus' sacrifice is better than the sac-

rifices under the old covenant, the author mentioned the fact that all human beings experience physical death once. Death is not something human beings can control; it is part of the natural order that we must die. Making death all the more serious is the fact that after death we must face judgment and render an account of our lives to God (v. 27).

Just as it is part of the natural order that humans should die only once, so it is that Christ should die only once to provide for our salvation (v. 28a). Here the author emphasized yet another time the once-for-all nature of Jesus' sacrifice.

And yet the author, after emphasizing the superiority of Christ's sacrifice, said this was not the whole story. Christ would someday return. When He does, He will not be concerned with providing salvation from sin. He has already dealt a deathblow to sin by sacrificing Himself on the cross. This time, the

author said, His concern will be to bring about the consummation of salvation for all believers (v. 28b).

The author may have used the phrase "to those who are waiting for him" to compare Christ's second coming to the image of a high priest emerging from the temple after offering sacrifices in the most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. The writer's Hebrew readers may have seen the high priest of their day appear outside the temple, disappear inside the sanctuary, and reappear after making offerings.

The author in these verses pointed out that Christ, too, "appeared" (v. 26) on earth to offer Himself as a sacrifice, "appear[s]" (v. 24) for us in God's presence (thus disappearing from our earthly view), and "will appear a second time" (v. 28) when He comes to bring about the consummation of the salvation He purchased for us on the cross.

2

Christ's Once-for-All Sacrifice

Hebrews 10:1–18

a **Limitations of Animal Sacrifices (10:1–4)**

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.

—Hebrews 10:1

Once the author of Hebrews had explained how Christ's sacrifice is superior to the animal sacrifices under the old covenant, he went on to emphasize the once-for-all character of Jesus' sacrifice. The writer gave credit to the Hebrew Scriptures—the "law" (v. 1a)—for being a foreshadowing of what was to come. This foreshadowing was not a copy of the real thing, however, as the earthly tabernacle was a copy of the actual heavenly tabernacle. In this case, the author used a Greek word meaning "image" or "arche-type" rather than "copy." The word typically referred to a likeness such as the head on a coin or the parental

likeness in a child.

The observances of the Old Testament were only outlines. Like an artist who draws a shadowy pencil sketch of a work before actually painting a portrait, the writer considered the Hebrew Scriptures as a preliminary sketch of the realities to come. Thus the Old Testament, by calling for animal sacrifices for the atonement of sins, showed little more than the shape of the sacrifice that would come in Christ.

In that Old Testament period, those who brought offerings were required to do so year after year. Thus they received—to a certain extent—forgiveness for their sins on an annual basis. And yet those sacrifices in no way provided them permanent atonement (v. 1b). The weakness of the old covenant was its failure to put away sins once for all. And that ineffectiveness was highlighted in that the failure of the sacrifices of one year had to be repeated the next year, and then year after year. The author stressed the monotony of this system by writing, ". . . the *same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year*" (emphasis added).

The author asked a rhetorical question to emphasize his point. In



Bulls and goats were offered as sacrifices under the old covenant. The writer of Hebrews said shedding the blood of these animals did not adequately provide for human salvation.

Still, their sacrificial system offered no permanent solution to their guilt problem.

By these over-and-over-again offerings, God was teaching the Isra-

essence, he said that if the sacrifices under the old covenant had provided permanent atonement, then it would not have been necessary for them to be repeated indefinitely (v. 2a). The necessity for repetition proved that the sacrifices were ineffective.

But as it was, the people had not been forgiven once for all, and therefore they continued to feel guilty for their sins (v. 2b). The author reintroduced the concept of conscience in the expression “felt guilty for their sins.” Here was a psychological or felt guilt based on an objective guilt. They felt guilty, the author implied, because they *were* guilty.

elites that repeating their sacrifices meant that they were repeating their sins. Thus the Day of Atonement with its repeated sacrifices was “an annual reminder of sins” (v. 3). And thus the Day of Atonement was also a reminder that something perma-



nent still had to be done about sins.

Ask Yourself . . . Is God using one of my traditions to teach me an important lesson?

Referring to his emphasis in chapter 9 that Christ's sacrifice was better than the sacrifices under the old covenant, the author again pointed out that the blood of bulls and goats could do nothing toward completely removing the sins of humanity (10:4). But the writer wanted to remind his readers that the blood of Christ could do just that.



Christ's Declarations to God (10:5–10)

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, "Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God."

—Hebrews 10:5b–7

Because animal sacrifices were unable to permanently remove sins from the lives of humans, Christ offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice. To prove his point, the author again appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures (vv. 5–7).

Quoting Psalm 40:6–8, the author showed how David had said that God wanted willing obedience from those who worship Him; He did

not want animal sacrifices. In this case, however, the author treated David's declaration as a messianic statement—the words were Christ's words to God (Heb. 10:5a). The author's attributing these words to Christ was intended to prove Christ's preexistence as well as His submissive obedience to God by offering Himself as a sacrifice.

Although the four terms for sacrifices in verses 5 and 6 are not clearly distinguishable, some Bible interpreters view them as four of the five types of offerings specified in Leviticus 1–7: "sacrifices" (or fellowship offerings); "offerings" (or grain offerings); "burnt offerings"; and "sin offerings." Together, they were mentioned probably as a summary of the Levitical sacrificial system.

In the Hebrew of Psalm 40, David said, "My ears you have opened" rather than "A body you prepared for me" (Heb. 10:5c). He may have been referring to a ceremony in which Hebrew servants had the option of permanently serving a kind master. In that case, the servants would officially signify their commitment to their master by having their ear pierced with an awl against a door. The servants literally received an earmark that they permanently belonged to that master (see Exod. 21:5–6; Deut. 15:16–17).

While referring to Psalm 40:6, the author of Hebrews used the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which somewhat changes the meaning of the Hebrew text. He probably resorted to a figure of speech called *synecdoche* [suh-NECK-duh-key].

THE FIVE LEVITICAL OFFERINGS

1. *Burnt offering.* While in other types of offerings only the fat portion of the animal was burned, in the burnt offering the animal was wholly consumed on the altar. The purpose of this offering was for the worshipers to voluntarily devote their whole beings and possessions to God (see Lev. 1).

2. *Grain offering.* This offering was also called a meal offering, cereal offering, and grain offering. For a bloodless sacrifice, worshipers brought produce from their labors in the fields. Their purpose was to thank God for His blessings and offer their lives to Him for His service (chap. 2).

3. *Fellowship offering.* The animal's blood was collected and poured out on the altar, and animal's fat was burned as part of this offering. The breast and leg of the animal were kept and eaten by the priests, while the rest of the animal was eaten by the worshipers and their families. This was also referred to as a peace offering. Its purpose was for the worshipers to participate in the blessings of fellowship with God and the Israelite community (chap. 3).

4. *Sin offering.* The type of animal used for this offering depended on the status of the worshiper. For instance, the high priest was required to slay and collect the blood of a young bull, and a ruler was to sacrifice a male goat. The poor could offer two young pigeons. The purpose of this offering was for the worshipers to be forgiven of unconscious or unintentional sins (4:1–5:13).

5. *Guilt offering.* The animal for this offering was always a lamb. This offering's purpose was to seek forgiveness for sins in which restitution or other legal satisfaction could be made to the victim (5:14–6:7).

This means that the author used the whole of something (a body) for a part of that thing (an ear). For instance, some people speak of the celebration of Communion by referring to a part of it—the breaking of the bread.

It is through the ears that we hear commands, and it is the body that carries out the commands. Therefore, Jesus' willingness to carry out the Father's commands was demonstrated by His taking a human body that had been prepared for Him by God.

Startlingly, the author asserted that in one sense the God who had demanded sacrifices and offerings did not desire them, nor was He pleased with them (Heb. 10:5b, 6).

The author's meaning here is not that the offerings in and of themselves were opposed to God's will or that He was displeased with what He had specified. Rather, he meant that God did not want and desire those sacrifices offered under the old covenant that were not offered willingly and obediently.

In essence, the author was still comparing the old sacrificial system with the new. Saying that God wanted an obedient and willing sacrifice, the author showed how Christ became that sacrifice. The preexistent Christ said, "I have come to do your will, my God" (v. 7b).

The author also referred to the fact that Christ said He had been written about in "the scroll"

(v. 7a). By quoting this, the author meant to demonstrate that Christ had fulfilled what had been written in the Hebrew Scriptures about the Messiah.

In verse 8, the author again portrayed the sacrificial system under the covenant as divinely inspired and yet only preliminary to the new covenant that comes through Christ.

A Hebrew scroll. The author of Hebrews said Christ had been written about in the ancient Hebrew scrolls.



The Levitical sacrificial rituals had their place. But now they have been replaced. They were not God's final solution to humanity's problem with sin. Christ is that final solution.

While explaining his purpose for quoting Psalm 40, the author quoted portions of the passage again. He pointed out that Christ had stated to God His willingness to be the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world (Heb. 10:9a). And because Christ was willing to become that sacrifice, the author arrived at the conclusion that God had set apart the old covenant, based on the shed blood of animal sacrifices, in order to establish the new covenant based on the shed blood of Jesus Christ (v. 9b).

God's *will* was carried out through the Son's *willingness*. And through Jesus' willingness to be sacrificed, we have been sanctified—made holy, set aside in consecration to God (v. 10). Because of Christ's death we have the opportunity to become Christians and can enter the holy presence of God.

The author once more emphasized the once-for-all character of Jesus' sacrifice. Christ's dying on the cross for the sins of the world avails for all people of all times.

Ask Yourself . . . Why is it important to me that Christ died once for all my sins?

C

The End of Sacrifices (10:11–18)

And where [sins] have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

—Hebrews 10:18

In verses 11–18 the author gathered together many of the loose ends of his argument up to this point. The old order was over, for the supreme sacrifice of all the ages had been offered, antiquating and abolishing all animal sacrifices.

Again he wrote of the religious regimen that was probably being carried out in the temple at Jerusalem even while he penned his masterpiece. He said that priests perform their rituals day by day. By writing that the priests stand while offering their sacrifices, the author implied that their work is never finished. (This, of course, is the opposite of what Christ did after offering His sacrifice. His sitting down afterward indicated that His work was complete.) The cumulative effect of all the sacrifices of all the priests could still not remove sins (v. 11).

Ask Yourself . . . What sin of mine would I most like to see removed at the practical level?

After making reference to the sacrifices of priests, the author returned to the topic of Jesus' sacrifice. The writer said that as our High Priest, Christ offered Himself as the onetime-for-all-time sacrifice for our sins. With His great and perfect

work accomplished, He “sat down at the right hand of God” (v. 12). He occupies the position of utmost power and the place of highest honor.

As a result of His completed work, Christ is now waiting until an appointed time, when He will overthrow all His enemies (v. 13). While drawing upon Psalm 110:1, the author did not explain who Christ’s enemies are. Some conjecture that He was referring to Christ’s bringing an end to all evil. Others say the author’s intent was to issue a warning to his readers. In essence, he told them to take care that they were not numbered among the enemies of the Lord. Whatever the case, this waiting has been called Christ’s “unfinished work.”

Christ’s unfinished work of waiting is based upon the finished work of His supreme sacrifice (Heb. 10:14). The author again emphasized the all-sufficiency of Jesus’ single sacrifice. This time he wrote that believers are being made perfect by Christ, who was granted the power to do this by means of His once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

Ask Yourself . . . How am I being made perfect by Christ at this point in my life?

The author referred to believers as being sanctified. The phrase “those who are being made holy” probably refers to all people who, at various intervals throughout the ages, are being added to the Body of Christ, His church. They are the ones who accept the salvation of Christ. They

are also the ones being set apart forever for God’s service. (Whereas the apostle Paul might have spoken of believers being justified in this verse, here the writer of Hebrews referred to believers being sanctified.)

It certainly was not unusual for the author to think of the Hebrew Scriptures—our Old Testament—as the voice or word of the Holy Spirit (v. 15; compare 3:7). To the author, when Scripture—God’s objective, written testimony—speaks, the Holy Spirit—God’s invisible, inspiring Testifier—speaks.

Ask Yourself . . . Is my use of and devotion to the Word of God all that it should be?

The writer resorted once more to Jeremiah 31:33, a passage from which he also quoted in expanded form in Hebrews 8:8–12. By doing so he again emphasized the fact that Christ had established the new covenant through His death on the cross. The old covenant was written in stone; the new covenant is written on the hearts and minds of believers (10:16).

The main reason for the writer’s reminding his readers of this Old Testament text was to reintroduce the ultimate effect of the new covenant: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more” (v. 17; see Jer. 31:34). The old procession of offerings was a regular reminder of sins (see Heb. 10:3). Those sacrifices inadvertently announced, “Your sins are remembered, not removed.”

However, under the new covenant initiated by Christ, such sins

are no longer remembered by the omniscient God! A single provision for the sins of humanity has been made once for all. Jesus' sacrifice has led God to forget our sins. Forgotten sins are forgiven sins.

Still referring to Jeremiah's new-covenant text, the author drew a final conclusion about the sacrifice

of Christ: "Where [sins] have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (v. 18; see Jer. 31:34). Through Christ's sacrifice our sins are gone. Because our sins have been finally and effectively dealt with through the sacrifice of Christ, there is no need for any other sacrifice.

10

Perseverance in Doing What's Right

Hebrews 10:19–39

a Responses to Having Confidence and a Priest (10:19–25)

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

—Hebrews 10:22a

Virtually every Bible interpreter divides Hebrews into two parts: 1:1–10:18 and 10:19–13:25. This division is based on a shift in the author's emphasis that begins at 10:19. Through verse 19 he had explained to his readers who Christ is and what He has done for the people of the world. The writer had called Jesus the great High Priest and had said that Christ's once-for-all sacrifice provides complete salvation for all who believe in Him. But at verse 19, the author's heavy doctrinal teaching is for the most part concluded. Now he instructs his readers on how to apply and live out the doctrines of the Christian faith that he had taught them up to this point in his letter.

Based on Christ's saving work on the cross, the author reminded his readers that they could now enter

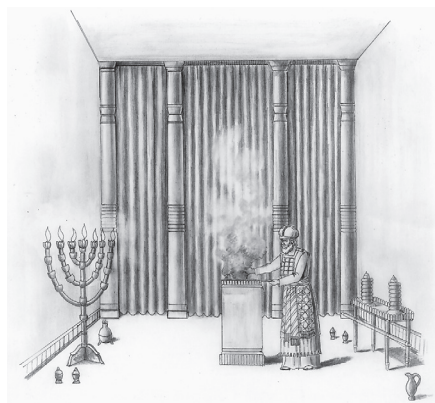
God's presence. To many of the Hebrews, this may have been a bold statement. As far as they had known, only the high priest was permitted into the most Holy Place. Yet the author issued an open invitation to all Christians to confidently enter the presence of God (v. 19).

Still referring to the salvation purchased by Christ's death on the cross, the author explained that the way into God's presence is "new and living" (v. 20). The way is new in that it is based on the new covenant established by Christ's sacrifice. It is living because it is dependent on Christ Himself, our eternally living Lord.

In Jesus' day, the separating curtain between the Holy Place and the most Holy Place in the Jerusalem temple was sixty feet high by thirty feet wide and about five inches thick. Obviously such a curtain could not have been torn easily, and yet when Jesus died, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt. 27:51). Until that curtain was torn, access into God's presence (in one sense) had been limited to the high priest. But just as that curtain was torn, so Jesus' body was torn on the cross. Viewed symbolically by the author of Hebrews, Jesus' torn body

is the way by which all believers are afforded access to God.

Not only do we have a spiritual sacrifice enabling us to enter God's



At the rear of the holy place was the curtain dividing the Holy Place from the most Holy Place. Only the high priest was allowed behind this curtain. This drawing shows the high priest in the tabernacle making an offering at the altar of incense.

presence, but we also have a great High Priest “over the house of God” (Heb. 10:21). Though the Son of God took on the form of a man so that He could die to make for us a way to God, He is still the authority over all God's people. The author had made it clear that after Christ completed His work of salvation, He returned to heaven, where He sits at the place of highest honor—the right hand of God the Father. From there He intercedes for us before the Father.

After reminding his readers of what Christ had done for them, the author instructed them about how they were to respond in faith. Because of our provisions from

Christ and our position in Him, we should claim what He has promised to us. In essence, the writer said Christ's work of salvation should spur His people into action. In the exhortations that followed, the author numbered himself with his readers. Five times in verses 22–25 he used the words “let us” in introducing ways in which Christians were to respond to Christ's work.

First, he told his readers to draw near to God, and he encouraged them to do so “with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings” (v. 22a). The author knew that it was important for God's people to be right inwardly when they entered God's presence. Therefore, he stressed that only through faith in Christ could people be made acceptable and enter the presence of God.

Probably thinking about how priests were cleansed under the old covenant, the author said believers are cleansed by having their hearts sprinkled and their bodies washed (v. 22b). Some Bible scholars say the author was referring to baptism in this analogy; others say he meant an inner cleansing.

In either case, when we receive the salvation of Christ, our sins are erased. Also erased are our inhibitions (due to a guilty conscience) about entering God's presence. Because our sins are forgiven, and because our guilty conscience has been relieved, we are enabled to confidently enter the presence of God.

Second, the author encouraged his readers to hold firmly to their profession of hope. He urged them to do so

without doubt or hesitation (v. 23). The writer said God is to be thoroughly relied upon. He is faithful to His promises. Therefore, he urged his readers, who were tempted to give up their Christian beliefs and return to a form of Judaism, to confidently await the fulfillment of God's promises.

Third, the author encouraged his readers to help each other be loving servants (v. 24). The word translated "spur" is the same word from which is derived the English word *paroxysm*, referring to a fit or tantrum. The only other place in the New Testament where this Greek word occurs is in Acts 15:39, describing how Paul and Barnabas argued over whether to take John Mark on another missionary journey. Indeed, the author told the Hebrews to provoke fellow believers into loving each other and exasperate them toward doing good works.

Surely we could use a little more provoking and exasperating of this type in our churches! Just as a cowboy spurs his steed onward with his boot spurs, we should continually be looking for ways to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24).

Ask Yourself . . . How might I spur another Christian on to do something good and loving?

Fourth, the author tried to discourage the Hebrews from giving up meeting together (v. 25a). This verse is often used out of context by those anxious to goad Christians into regular church attendance. Certainly, we

should not give up meeting together.

However, those to whom the author was referring when he wrote "as some are in the habit of doing" were not merely missing a worship service to go fishing on a nice summer Sunday. Rather, they were nonparticipants in church who were in danger of apostatizing (as verses 26–31 make clear).

Still, habitual church attendance with meaningful interchange among believers is always healthy. As Augustus Strong wrote in his *Systematic Theology*, "A whole bundle of rods cannot be broken, though each rod in the bundle may be broken separately."

Fifth, the author exhorted his readers to encourage each other (v. 25b). They were especially to do so as "the Day" approached. Interpreters are unsure as to the author's intent in his use of "the Day." Some believe he meant the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which occurred in A.D. 70). Others believe he meant the day of judgment. Whichever is the case, the author's main intent seems to have been to ensure that his readers were accountable to each other by urging each other along in the faith.

These verses contain the often repeated trio of Christian characteristics—"faith" (v. 22), "hope" (v. 23), and "love" (v. 24; compare 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4–5; and 1 Thess. 5:8).

b The Danger of Apostasy (10:26–31)

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.

—Hebrews 10:26

Writing to Jews who had professed Christianity, the author realized that

his readers had faced a downpour of persecutions (see vv. 32–34). In addition, they were in danger of dropping out of the Christian community and reverting to their prior Judaism. To confront some of them who may have been considering committing apostasy, he issued this somber warning about the inherent dangers of renouncing their faith in Christ. To do so the author returned to a theme he had written about in 6:4–6.

The sacrificial system under the old

DEALING WITH APOSTASY

The author of Hebrews had written a warning against apostasy in chapter 6. He returned to that theme again in chapter 10. The chart below compares his wording and shows how he addressed this grave danger in the church.

HEBREWS 6	HEBREWS 10
"who have fallen away" (v. 6)	"if we deliberately keep on sinning" (v. 26)
"tasted the goodness of the word of God" (v. 5)	"received the knowledge of the truth" (v. 26)
"have once been enlightened" (v. 4)	"after you had received the light" (v. 32)
"shared in the Holy Spirit" (v. 4)	"insulted the Spirit of grace" (v. 29)
"subjecting [the Son of God] to public disgrace" (v. 6)	"trampled the Son of God underfoot" (v. 29)
"crucifying the Son of God all over again" (v. 6)	"treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant" (v. 29)
"we are convinced of . . . things that have to do with salvation" (v. 9)	"we . . . belong . . . to those who have faith and are saved" (v. 39)

covenant offered sacrifices for those who sinned unintentionally (see 5:2; see also Num. 15:22–29), but no sacrifice was prescribed for those who sinned defiantly or blasphemously (see Num. 15:30–31; compare Ezek. 18:26). This information is probably the background for the writer’s teaching in Hebrews 10:26–31.

Apostasy is a deliberate defection from the living God. Some Bible interpreters equate apostasy with the unpardonable sin (see Mark 3:22–30). Others say it occurs when people believe for a while but fall away in a time of testing (see Luke 8:13). Still others say it happens when people make a shipwreck of the faith (see 1 Tim. 1:19–20), or when people turn completely away from God (see Heb. 3:12), or when those who have known the way of righteousness turn their backs on it (see 2 Peter 2:20–22). Of course, Calvinists and Arminians treat the theological question of apostasy differently [see the chart “Two Major Theologies” on page 41].

Those who are in danger of committing apostasy are people who have understood Christ’s work of salvation, have been inside the church, and yet have rejected Him. By continuing their deliberate sin of rejecting the Lord, they are left with no other sacrifice for their sins (Heb. 10:26). In essence, they have rejected their only means of salvation, and therefore have no other person to whom they can appeal.

The author’s words are heavy laden with warnings of God’s wrathful judgment. Probably explaining the meaning of “the Day” (v. 25), the

author described God’s judgment as “a fearful expectation . . . of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (v. 27). Rejecting the only sacrifice for their sins, apostates will carry their own sins to God’s judgment throne. And without any means of salvation, they will find themselves consumed by God’s fury. Thus they will be punished for bearing sins for which they could have been forgiven.

Again using an argument based on comparing the lesser to the greater, the author illustrated the seriousness of the apostate’s situation. Those who rejected the Mosaic law were executed “without mercy” on the testimony of two or three witnesses (v. 28). If such severity existed under the old covenant, how much more severity would fall on the apostate who rejected Christ and His new covenant (v. 29a)! The author thus implied that the apostate under the new covenant would be dealt with more harshly than the apostate under the old covenant.

The writer then listed three of the crimes committed by those who have renounced their faith in Christ:

- First, they have “trampled the Son of God underfoot” (v. 29b). Not only have they rejected Christ, but they have disdained and despised Him.

- Second, they have “treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them” (v. 29c). The very sacrifice that provides people with eternal salvation apostates have treated as a common thing. They have looked upon Christ’s shed blood lightly and without respect.

• Third, they have “insulted the Spirit of grace” (v. 29d). To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit was akin to insulting the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God showcases the work of the Son of God, and by repudiating the Son of God, apostates have rejected the Spirit of God. Willfully rejecting the Son’s salvation was an insult to the Spirit, who brings the grace of God to humanity.

As was usual for the writer, he appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures to reinforce his assertions. The first quotation in verse 30 is from Deuteronomy 32:35, in which Moses said that God’s vengeance against His enemies is a divine prerogative.

The second quotation is from Deuteronomy 32:36 and Psalm 135:14. With this quotation, the author of Hebrews intended to leave no doubt in his readers’ minds about God seeing to it that sinners are punished.

The author appended a final dire warning in case his readers did not yet regard God’s judgment with proper trepidation: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). The dread, of course, is for the unbeliever. Believers look forward to falling into the hands of the Lord, “for his mercy is great” (2 Sam. 24:14). But for a calloused, incorrigible apostate, falling into the hands of the Lord should indeed be “a dreadful thing” (Heb. 10:31).

Ask Yourself . . . In what ways do I look forward to falling into the hands of the Lord?



Perseverance by Faith (10:32–39)

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

—Hebrews 10:36

After giving stern warnings to those who might be tempted to become apostate, the author soothed his readers by stating his confidence that they would choose to do what is right. Thus he reminded them of their early days as believers—just after they had first accepted the gospel. During that time they had undergone a series of persecutions. The author called this “a great conflict full of suffering” (v. 32).

In the face of suffering for their faith, the Hebrews had stood their ground. Surely they had been tempted to renounce their faith in Christ at that time, and yet they did not succumb to the temptation. Their faith had stood fast back then, and the author wanted their faith to continue to stand fast.

Then the author reminded them of some of the persecutions they had endured. Some of them had been made into spectacles by being publicly exposed to insults and injuries (v. 33). At the time the author was writing, however, apparently none of them had as yet suffered martyrdom (see 12:4).

Others, though they had not suffered themselves, had sympathized with those who had suffered. Sym-

pathizing with those who were being persecuted was not easy in the first century A.D. By one believer standing side by side with another who was being ill-treated, there was great likelihood that the two would be identified together. If so, both were in danger of being harmed.

Still reminding the Hebrews of their early days as Christians, the writer praised them for sympathizing with other believers who had been imprisoned and for maintaining a right attitude about having their property confiscated (10:34). Although some interpreters say the Hebrews willingly gave up their possessions to a Christian community when they joined it, most say their possessions were taken from them by either government edict or mob violence.

In either case, the author noted that the readers maintained a cheerful attitude in spite of being stripped of their things. The reason for this joyful attitude was that they knew they had “better and lasting possessions” waiting for them in heaven.

Ask Yourself . . . What might be my response if I had to experience the type of persecution thrust upon the Hebrews?

Whereas verses 32–34 looked backward at how the Hebrews had dealt with persecution, verses 35–39 look forward toward the fulfillment of God’s promises. The author had earlier written that because Abraham persevered, he had received what God had promised him (see 6:15). Similarly, the author encouraged all the battered believers who were

reading this letter to persevere so that they, too, would receive what God had promised them (10:36).

The author did not write about perseverance as if it were an option for the believer. His statement reflects the fact that he saw endurance and steadfastness in the faith as absolutely necessary.

Before giving the Hebrews the positive injunction to persevere, the author told them to not throw away their confidence (v. 35). He did not want them, by returning to a form of Judaism, to reject what was of the utmost value to them.

They had shown that they realized the value of salvation through Christ. But perhaps with the passing of time, they were coming under increasing temptation to fall away. Thus the author urged them to think of past perseverance and future promises. He wanted his readers to progress, not regress.

Ask Yourself . . . What might be most likely to block my moving forward in my own spiritual experience?

Drawing his readers’ attention to Christ’s second coming, the author quoted Habakkuk 2:3–4 (Heb. 10:37–38). He said that God’s Messiah would return without delay. The author did not want his readers to allow the failure to persevere for “just a little while” to rob them of their heavenly reward (v. 37).

The ones who will be prepared for His return will be the ones who are living by faith (v. 38a). These Habakkuk had called “righteous,” and the author of Hebrews stressed that they

would hold fast to their faith even in the face of temptations.

By quoting Habakkuk, the author also added another warning: God will not be pleased with those who shrink back (v. 38b). Thus the author again urged his readers to go forward in faith and not draw back from professed Christian beliefs.

After the alarm about apostasy in verses 26–31 comes verse 39—“We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those

who have faith and are saved.” Thus the author stated his confidence that his readers would persevere in faith. They would not be like those who draw back and are destroyed, he wrote. They would be among those who would be saved.

These words ring true for us today. We have come this far; we cannot turn back. There is salvation in no other than Christ. So with an optimistic outlook, let us press on—full speed ahead. Forward, onward, upward!

Habakkuk’s Resounding Words

The prophet Habakkuk probably had no inkling of the reverberations seven of his words would make on the world for thousands of years. About 600 B.C., Habakkuk was thinking over the Babylonians’ assured capture and enslavement of Judah. At first, he could not understand how God could allow such a devastating thing to happen to His people. But as he questioned the Lord, he received an answer: “The righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Hab. 2:4). In other words no matter how bad it gets, the righteous person goes on living by his or her trust in God’s faithfulness.

More than six hundred years later, that text found its way into three strategic places in the New Testament: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38. Another fifteen hundred years later, Habakkuk’s words became the basis of the Reformation as Martin Luther reportedly experienced a breakthrough while reading and studying Romans 1:17. Another two hundred years later, John Wesley, at a Moravian group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, heard Luther’s commentary on this text being read and he was spiritually transformed.

Many Christians are familiar with the repeated refrain of “by faith” in Hebrews 11 and throughout their church’s doctrine, but probably few realize that the expression is derived from Habakkuk 2:4.

11

Lives Lived by Faith

Hebrews 11:1–40

a The Faith of the Ancients (11:1–7)

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

—Hebrews 11:1–2

Based on a phrase from Habakkuk 2:4 (see Heb. 10:38), chapter 11 is devoted to portraying the lives of Old Testament heroes who lived, as the author put it time and again, “by faith.” As a result, chapter 11 is probably the best-loved chapter in Hebrews and is often called “The Honor Roll of Faith.” It furnishes us with brief biographies of belief and encourages us to fortify our faith in God as so many who have gone before us have done.

The original readers of this letter may have wondered if it would be easier simply to fade back into their former Jewish traditions and religious practices. In those traditions and practices were many more things they could see: the beauty of the temple, the smoke arising from the sacrifices, the elaborate clothing

of the high priest. Christianity was far less oriented in its religious practices around what could be seen. Thus they asked themselves, “Do we go back to Judaism, or do we go on in Christianity?”

To such people the author explained that faith is a present and continuing reality. Hope, of course, is a vital element of that reality. The writer implied that there are realities for which there is no visible evidence. And yet those realities are no less real. In fact, faith is the only way people can know that those realities exist. Faith, then, is the certainty of our hope in God’s promise of salvation even when that promise cannot be seen or felt (v. 1).

Like the world of the Hebrews, our world, too, often tries to convince us that because we cannot see or touch God, He does not exist. Therefore, the implication is that we cannot be confident that He provides salvation. At those times we need to allow Scripture to remind us that there are realities vital to life—and to eternal life—that we cannot see or touch. Our faith provides assurance of God’s love for us. It also enables us to rest upon His provision of salvation.

Ask Yourself . . . Can I recall a time when I was forced to exercise faith in God's unseen reality when much of what I saw around me argued otherwise?

Introducing a list of Old Testament people who lived by faith, the author wrote that God commended them precisely because of their faith in Him (v. 2). But before beginning his "Honor Roll of Faith," the author pointed his readers all the way back to the beginning of time.

He said it is by faith that "we understand that the universe was formed at God's command" (v. 3). Probably supporting his definition of faith in verse 1, the author gave an example of an unseen reality that eventually became a seen reality. He recalled for his readers that God, by speaking the universe into existence, created that which is visible out of nothing.

Appealing to God's creation of the universe as the foundation for the examples of faith that follow, the author began his list of those who lived by faith with the example of Abel (v. 4). Both Abel and his brother Cain brought sacrifices to the Lord. But because of Abel's faith, his sacrifice was more pleasing to the Lord than Cain's. Therefore, the Lord commended Abel for being a righteous man (see Gen. 4:1–16).

Righteousness by faith becomes a key theme in Hebrews 11. Although the righteous actions of faithful people are referred to time and again, the author implied that faith was the wellspring of their righteous acts and that God commended them

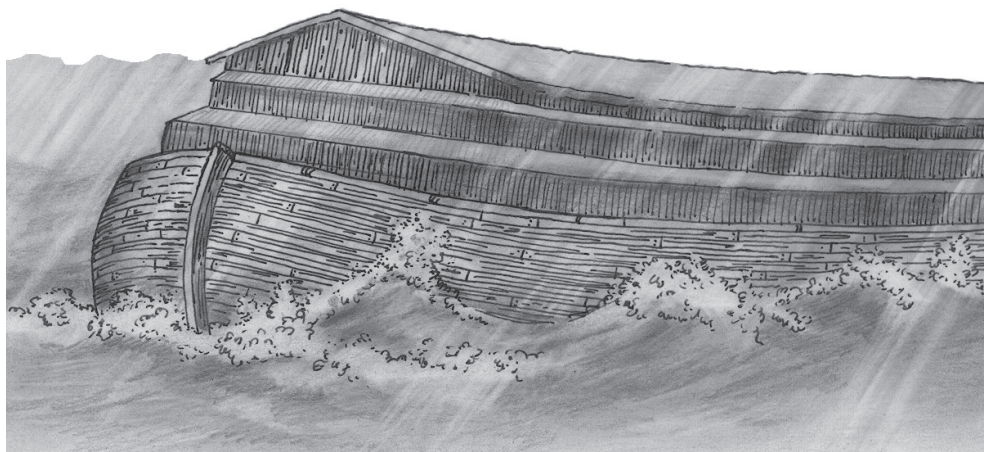
for their faith. After all, according to Genesis 15:6, God credits faith in Himself as righteousness.

Numerous conjectures have been recorded as to why Abel's sacrifice was superior to Cain's. One possibility is that God accepted Abel's sacrifice because, as an animal sacrifice, it involved blood, whereas Cain's, as a type of grain offering, did not. Among other theories of the sacrifices are that Abel's was living and Cain's was lifeless and that Abel's grew spontaneously and Cain's grew by human ingenuity.

One reason Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's rejected definitely lies in the attitude of both brothers. Abel offered his sacrifice willingly, and thus his was a demonstration of his faith. The author of Hebrews added that even though Abel is dead, his faith speaks to all the generations that follow him.

Next, the author pointed to Enoch. He said that because of Enoch's faith, this ancient figure—about whom Scripture says little—did not experience death (Heb. 11:5). Rather, "God had taken him away." Like Abel, Enoch pleased God and was commended by Him because of his faith (see Gen. 5:21–24).

How did the author know about Enoch's faith when it is never spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures? The author stressed that it is impossible to please God without faith. Therefore, since it is evident that Enoch pleased God, it is also evident that Enoch possessed faith in God (Heb. 11:6). Faith is necessary for salvation. The author explained that



Noah's ark

anyone who approaches God must first believe that He exists. Furthermore, the person who approaches God must also believe that He greatly rewards “those who earnestly seek him.”

We, too, are required to follow these steps of belief if we are to be faithful to God. As William Barclay wrote, “We must believe, not only that God exists, but also that God cares.”

After mentioning the faith of Abel and Enoch, the author touched on the faith of Noah. The writer recounted how by faith Noah was warned of “things not yet seen” (v. 7). Because he believed the Lord, he constructed an ark, even though at the time he built it, there was no water upon which to float it. Though he must have been cruelly ridiculed by his neighbors, Noah continued to act on his faith (see Gen. 6:11–22). And as a result, he saved his family from disaster.

Because the people of the world failed to respond to and follow Noah's example of faith, they were condemned to die in the Flood. On the other hand, Noah “became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith” (Heb. 11:7).

Bible scholar Simon Kistemaker sums up what the author said about the faith of these three ancients by writing, “For his *faith* Abel paid the price of his *life*. Because of his *faith* Enoch was taken from this *life*. By *faith* Noah saved his own family's *life*.”

While Abel died because of his faith, Enoch did not die because of his faith. In other words faith does not force people into the same mold. People of faith may have exactly opposite outcomes or experiences. Nevertheless, the common denominator in every believer is faith. And “without faith it is impossible to please God” (v. 6).

b The Faith of the Patriarchs (11:8–22)

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

—Hebrews 11:13

Turning from the ancients to the patriarchs, the author first briefly surveyed the life and faith of Abraham. The author was quite interested in this patriarch; he mentioned Abraham 10 times in his letter.

When God instructed Abraham to leave the only home he had ever known, the patriarch promptly obeyed. By faith, he journeyed toward a place God had promised to him for his descendants, and yet “he did not know where he was going” (v. 8; see Gen. 12:1–9). Using Abraham as an example, the author again showed his readers how faith is “confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1).

In Abraham we see a man who relied on God by faith as he set out on an adventure. To him, his faith meant he had to take risks. Certainly the Hebrew readers could

relate to such a risk, and perhaps some of us today can relate to that risk too. But probably most of us prefer a life with lots of security. If so, we may need to allow our faith to enable us to take more risks for the cause of Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . In what area of my life might my faith become more adventurous, more risky?

Even when Abraham arrived in Canaan—the land God promised to the patriarch’s descendants—he had to live in the land as a resident alien, not as the land’s owner. Thus he and his household lived in tents rather than houses (v. 9). The reason Abraham could accept this arrangement was that through his faith he could look forward to living in an eternal city designed and built by God Himself (v. 10). Even Abraham, who had been promised an earthly land for his descendants, faithfully anticipated something more: what God promised extended beyond this life.

It was also by faith that Abraham

Abraham’s tent may have looked something like this modern tent belonging to Bedouin (nomadic Arabs).



and Sarah were enabled to become parents at a late age (v. 11; see Gen. 15:1–6; 21:1–7). God’s promise to Abraham was that his descendants would be “as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore” (Heb. 11:12; compare Gen. 22:17). And yet Abraham (at age 99) and Sarah (at age 89) were well past the normal parenting age when their son, Isaac, was conceived. Thus for a long time, the hope of God’s promise actually being fulfilled must have looked dim. But Abraham kept faith in God and His promise, and eventually that promise was realized.

For four verses the author broke away from writing specifically about Abraham to make some general remarks about those he had written about so far: Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. He pointed out that all these men were still living by faith when they passed into the afterlife, yet not one of them had seen the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise while living here on earth (Heb. 11:13a). They had accepted God’s promise by faith even though His promise was not clearly visible, and they had recognized that the complete fulfillment of God’s promise was heavenly, not earthly (v. 13b). Each one saw himself as an earthly pilgrim whose ultimate citizenship was in God’s hands (v. 13c).

The author noted that these men were looking for “a country of their own” (v. 14). If they had been looking for an earthly country, they would have returned to their original homelands (v. 15). For example,

Abraham could have gone back to Ur. But they were not anticipating an earthly home; they were looking for a heavenly home (v. 16a), and with such people God was pleased. God rewarded them for their faith in Him and His promise by preparing for them a heavenly home where they could dwell forever (v. 16b).

Returning to the faith of Abraham, the author described how the patriarch, by faith, was willing to offer Isaac—whom Abraham saw as the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promise to him—as a sacrifice to the Lord (vv. 17–18; see Gen. 21:12; 22:1–14). Thus by faith Abraham was willing to sacrifice what he valued most. The writer said Abraham believed God to be so powerful that He could give the dead new life. In the sense that God made a provision for Isaac to live, it must have seemed to Abraham that God had done just that. Having Isaac alive was to Abraham like getting his son back from the dead (Heb. 11:19).

Briefly listing how others of the patriarchs lived by faith, the author said that Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph each blessed their sons in a way that caused them to look to the future for the fulfillment of God’s promises (vv. 20–22; see Gen. 27:27–29, 38–40; 48:15–16; 50:24–25). Each of these patriarchs maintained his faith in God and God’s promises even at the time of his death and even though the fulfillment of those promises must have seemed uncertain.

C Faith at Israel's Beginning (11:23–31)

[Moses] regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

—Hebrews 11:26

After writing about the ancients and the patriarchs, the author continued to recite the faith of people throughout Israel's history.

The author wrote that Moses' parents acted on their faith when they hid him for three months after he was born. Pharaoh's edict had called for all Israelite males to be killed upon their birth. Believing that God had a special plan for their child, Moses' parents disobeyed Pharaoh's edict (v. 23). Hiding may at times, then, be a form of faith rather than a form of fear. Later, by placing their baby among the reeds along the banks of the Nile River, they also placed their faith in God to protect Moses and sustain his life (see Exod. 2:1–10).

Being rescued from the Nile and raised by Pharaoh's daughter did not strip Moses of his faith in the Israelites' God. In fact, when he became a man, Moses refused the prestige and comforts that could have been his had he agreed to continue living in the royal household (Heb. 11:24). By faith he chose to be persecuted along with the

Israelites rather than to indulge in the pleasures of the Egyptians (v. 25; see Exod. 2:11–15).

Our culture is so convenience- and pleasure-oriented that it may seem rather shocking to hear of someone forgoing comfort and gratification for any cause. Psychologists tell us that we prefer a homeostatic environment—that is, we prefer things to run smoothly and remain relatively stable.

Faith in God, however, does not always allow us to live such a lifestyle. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Ask Yourself . . . What conveniences and pleasures am I willing to give up for the sake of my faith in Christ?



Telling how Moses was looking ahead in faith to future promises, the author wrote that the great Israelite leader "regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater

It's been suggested that this woman—Hatshepsut—was the daughter of Pharaoh who found Moses in the Nile River and adopted him as her own son.

value than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11:26). In this way the author implied that Christ was involved with the people of God even in Old Testament times. Therefore, when Moses was persecuted, he was persecuted with Christ and for the cause of Christ. Moses withstood these pressures because he was looking to his future eternal reward.

Rather than remain in Egypt, Moses fled. Whether the author was referring to Moses’ flight to Midian or to his leading the Israelites out of Egypt is unsure. In either case, Moses “saw him who is invisible” (v. 27; see Exod. 3:1–10; 33:18–23). Later, it was by faith that Moses instituted and kept the Passover (Heb. 11:28; see Exod. 12:1–30) and led the Israelites through the “Red Sea,” or sea of reeds (Heb. 11:29; see Exod. 13:17–14:31).

Moving forward in Israel’s history, the author ascribed the crumbling of the walls of Jericho to faith as well (Heb. 11:30). In this case, the author did not specify by whose faith the walls fell. Presumably, the author was referring to Joshua and the soldiers with him (see Josh. 6).

Like the acts of the faithful men the author had already written about, Joshua could not have seen without God’s information how the promise could be realized. The military maneuver God told Joshua to exercise must have seemed utterly ridiculous. Yet Joshua carried it out as he had been told, marching and blowing trumpets around what appeared to be an impenetrable fortress. By faith, however, the walls

came tumbling down.

Rounding out the author’s “Honor Roll of Faith” to this point is a prostitute, Rahab, who by faith risked her life to hide Israelite spies scouting out the city of Jericho. Rahab was both a non-Israelite and a sinner, and yet her faith in Israel’s God led her to act on her deep convictions (Heb. 11:31; see Josh. 2; 6:25).

d More Lives Lived by Faith (11:32–40)

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.
—Hebrews 11:39–40

The author of Hebrews indicated that he could go on and on telling about men and women of great faith. Of those to whom the writer referred, some would by worldly standards have been considered triumphant, and others defeated. Some had escaped death in miraculous fashion, while others were forced to endure torturous deaths. The one common denominator among all these people was that they lived by faith. Regardless of their circumstances, they maintained their faith in God’s promise of something beyond earthly life.

The author wrote that time did

not allow him to talk about many other grand examples of faith. But to offer his readers a general list of people who belong on his “Honor Roll of Faith,” he named four people from the period of the judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah), one king (David), and a prophet (Samuel), and then referred to other prophets whom he did not name (v. 32).

Next, the writer created a list of thrilling feats that he said were performed by men and women “through faith” (v. 33). Among these feats, listed in verses 33–35a, were accomplishments affecting an entire community (such as military victories, moral successes in the judicial system, and material gains), personal deliverances (such as from wild beasts, physical forces, and human tyranny), and personal and community attainments (such as strength and renewed life).

The earthly results of faith did not always appear to be successful. Nonetheless, a heavenly reward awaited those who through faith endured horrible suffering, just as it awaited those who triumphed through faith.

In fact, the author said some had refused their freedom while being tortured “so that they might gain an even better resurrection” (v. 35b). The writer then offered a list of what some of the faithful endured (vv. 36–38b).

Whether these people were triumphant or were persecuted because of their faith, the author said “the world was not worthy of them” (v. 38). Though they usually lacked material possessions and were often forced to move from place to place, though they often seemed insignificant to the people of the world, it was these people the writer pointed to as great examples of living by faith.

Again the author reminded his readers that the heroes of faith did not receive the fulfillment of God’s promise during their earthly lives, and yet they did receive God’s commendation because they lived their lives by faith (v. 39). Because they had lived by faith, God planned something better for them. In fact, the author said that they would be included in the promise God made to him and his readers (v. 40). Also included in God’s promise are believers throughout all generations, including us, who have placed their faith in God and His promise of eternal life.

Through Christ, God has begun delivering on His promises. True faith—saving faith—is faith in Jesus. All believers are citizens of the same kingdom of God. In Christ are the “better things” that even the ancient heroes of faith looked forward to.

***Ask Yourself** . . . In what ways am I living by faith today?*

12

Remaining Faithful to the End

Hebrews 12:1–29

a Persevering like Jesus in the Race (12:1–3)

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,
—Hebrews 12:1

Chapter 12 begins with the author's describing the Christian life in terms of a footrace, a popular sporting event in his day. The author's comparison shows us that from the day we come to faith in Christ until the day we die, our life is one long contest against anything that would prevent us from achieving holiness and fulfilling the Lord's will for our lives.

Chapter divisions, placed in the Bible centuries after it was written and compiled, can prove misleading. For instance, Hebrews 12:1–3 piggybacks perfectly onto chapter 11. In fact, the first word in 12:1 ("Therefore") alerts us to the fact that what we are reading proceeds directly from what comes before it. The writer said, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . ." Presumably, the witnesses are the people of faith mentioned in chapter 11.

From the perspective of a runner in a stadium, the spectators all around him in the stands might look something like a cloud of people. In a sense, Christians have a cloud of people as witnesses: the saints in heaven. As "witnesses," their faithful testimonies cheer us on (12:1).



The well-preserved stadium at ancient Aphrodisias in Turkey. Athletic events were held in this stadium, as in many others throughout the Roman world. The author of Hebrews compared the Christian life to a footrace, with past saints in the stands and Jesus at the finish line.

With the departed saints' faithful witness as our example, we should "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." Runners in the ancient world raced unclothed. So like throwing off cumbersome clothing, we should throw off everything that might impede our spiritual progress. In mentioning "the sin that so easily entangles" us, the writer may have had in mind particularly the danger of defection resulting from discouragement—in other words, apostasy.

We are to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us." This goes to show that our spiritual race is more like a marathon than a sprint. We must have the determination and the fortitude to keep running a long time and not quit.

Ask Yourself . . . Has fatigue or any sort of setback made me want to quit the race recently?

Every race has a definite goal, a tape to break. The wise runner is one who keeps his or her eyes on the finish line and doesn't look back. As Christians, we too have a goal; we are heading for Jesus. And so the writer urged, "[fix] our eyes on Jesus" (v. 2).

Jesus is "the pioneer and perfecter of faith." While we must persevere in our running, it is Christ who enables us to both begin the race and complete it.

One way Jesus helps us complete our race is by being an example. He is the champion runner of the ages. As we struggle in our race, we can know that He has already been there and has shown that the race can be won.

Just as we are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, so He kept His eyes fixed on the joy of completing the mission given to Him by the Father. And just as we are to persevere in the race marked out for us, so Jesus "endured the cross, scorning its shame." The cross brought great suffering and disgrace, but Jesus kept in mind that the glory of enduring the cross would be much greater.

Despite facing the highest hurdle anybody has ever had—the Cross—Jesus successfully completed His race. And instead of receiving the wreath of leaves awarded to a victorious runner in the ancient world, Jesus was rewarded with supreme authority. He took His seat at the right hand of God.

Knowing that his readers would sometimes feel weary and lose heart because of opposition, the author of Hebrews urged them to consider Jesus. The Lord had to endure terrible opposition from sinners, and yet He persevered until He won the victory. Taking inspiration from Christ, we can persevere in our race no matter what obstacles wicked people may place in our way. Christ is our supreme example.

Ask Yourself . . . How does knowing that Jesus has been rewarded with supreme authority help me face the obstacles people place in my way?

b

The Discipline of God (12:4–13)

They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

—Hebrews 12:10

One schoolmaster, Dr. Allan Heely, was asked what would be the ideal curriculum for children. He answered, “Any program of worthwhile studies, so long as all of it is hard and some of it is unpleasant.” The original readers of Hebrews had been experiencing what was hard and unpleasant in their “struggle against sin” (v. 4). Fortunately, however, none of them had so far “resisted to the point of shedding . . . blood,” probably meaning none of them had been martyred.

Despite the fact that their struggle was not as bad as it could be, they were being tempted to look on their suffering the wrong way. Once more the author brought in some Hebrew Scripture to hammer home his point. This time he zeroed in on Proverbs 3:11–12.

This passage teaches those being disciplined by the Lord to respond properly. We are not to err by making light of it. Neither are we to err by losing heart, taking it *too* seriously. We should recognize that discipline from the Lord is a sign that He loves us and considers us His children (Heb. 12:5–6). And therefore, we should accept His discipline and pay attention to what He’s trying to

teach us through it.

The author’s aim was to make his audience aware of suffering as a teaching tool used by God; discipline is pedagogical. Therefore, his punch line plummets out of the first part of verse 7—“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.” All children are normally disciplined by their parents, and likewise all children of God are disciplined by Him. When we are disciplined by God, we should not think He no longer cares about us. Rather, we should recognize that the discipline demonstrates we are His sons and daughters (vv. 7–8).

Ask Yourself . . . What are some of the things I have learned from being disciplined by God?

Furthermore, the author argued from the lesser to the greater (“how much more”)—from human fathers upward to the heavenly Father (v. 9). If we respect our earthly fathers and mothers when they discipline us, we should much more “submit to the Father of spirits and live!” Discipline by God should not cause us to think worse of God, but rather to respect Him all the more.

In human discipline there is always the element of imperfection, even though our parents disciplined us as well as they knew how (v. 10). By an upgraded contrast, divine discipline is always “for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” His discipline is always wise, and we can be sure it is needed and contributes to our spiritual growth.

The author admitted that no disci-

pline is pleasant while it's occurring; in fact, it's downright painful. The benefit appears only later, when it "produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (v. 11). The Greek word translated "trained" is based on the word from which we get *gymnasium*. You could say discipline gives us a tough workout, but helps us get into shape. No pain, no gain.

Ask Yourself . . . What is one example of God's discipline in my life that seemed painful at first but afterward proved to be profitable?

The author evidently returned to the running imagery. Like a track coach, he exhorted Christian runners, "Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees" (v. 12). As Jay Adams indicated (in *Competent to Counsel*), "The relaxed arms and feeble knees . . . represent a condition impossible for participation in sports. [An athlete's] muscle tone must be honed to a fine edge."

Proverbs 4:26 is quoted in Hebrews 12:13 in order to extend the imagery. We are to smooth out the racetrack so that even the lame can get around it without falling and hurting themselves. In other words, as we are running our own race, we should look out for our fellow Christians and try to help them succeed in their races as well. By God's grace the Christian life is one in which we all can eventually wear the wreath of victory—no matter what disabilities we start with.

C

Peaceableness and Holiness (12:14–17)

See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

—Hebrews 12:15

Hebrews 12:14 pulls together two threads from preceding verses. Verse 10 mentions "holiness," while verse 11 refers to "peace." Both words reflected strategic Hebrew ideas that, taken together, carry the connotations of a life of wholeness.

Both peace and holiness are to be goals for Christians. We are to strive to be at peace with "everyone" (v. 14). That includes our fellow believers, our non-Christian neighbors, even our enemies. We are also to seek personal purity. The author provided an incentive for seeking holiness when he said, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." God is all-holy, and He cannot tolerate unholiness in His presence.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I making every effort to live in peace with everyone I know and to be holy?

The twin virtues in verse 14 are the opposites of two vices in the following verses. Peace's opposite is the trouble-making of sinners (v. 15). Holiness's opposite is sinfulness such as immorality and godlessness (vv. 16–17).

The author explained some of the things involved in seeking peace and holiness. Verses 15 and 16 begin

similarly: “See to it that no one . . .” and “See that no one . . .” These verses show us the responsibility Christians have for helping one another become the men and women God wants us to be.

First, we are to make sure others don’t miss the grace of God. Verse 15 alludes to Deuteronomy 29:18, which describes apostasy. If someone in a church rejects Christ, that person’s apostasy can have a negative effect on others in the church. Like a root that grows underground and then puts out weeds that choke a crop, apostasy can spread and harm many. Second, we are to help others avoid immorality and godlessness (Heb. 12:16–17). While Jacob takes his place in the

honor roll of faith in chapter 11, Jacob’s brother Esau became a classic case of godlessness. Esau was a prototype of the secular person—he failed to value what God accorded a high price tag. He bartered away his birthright (see Gen. 25:29–34).

Esau had to live with the consequences of his error. He couldn’t get back the firstborn’s blessing after he had lost it, no matter what he did (see 27:1–40). The lesson in this for the Hebrews—and for us—is that if a person persists in rejecting Christ, he or she must eventually pay the price. After death the godless will be filled with remorse, but they will no longer have the chance to repent.

ESAU: Isaac’s Other Son

At the time of the Hebrew patriarchs, the firstborn son traditionally received more honor and benefits than his younger brothers. But the Bible shows that more than once an older brother lost the pride of place to a younger brother. The most prominent case of such a switch involved Isaac and Rebekah’s two sons, Esau and Jacob.

These brothers were fraternal twins, Esau being born shortly before Jacob. They were rivals from the womb, and their parents fueled their rivalry by each favoring one of them. When they were grown, Esau foolishly agreed to sell Jacob his birthright, which was his right as the older son to inherit the larger portion of his father’s estate. Several years later, while Esau was preparing to receive his father’s blessing (which would have established him as Isaac’s chief heir), Jacob managed to receive the blessing instead.

Understandably, serious friction arose between Esau and Jacob, though later they were able to patch up their relationship. Esau became a powerful man and the founder of the Edomite nation; nevertheless, from the Bible’s perspective, he will always remain Isaac’s “other son.”

d Mount Zion Superior to Mount Sinai (12:18–24)

You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

—Hebrews 12:22

As a way of encouraging his readers to persevere in their Christian faith, the author reminded them of the superiority of the new covenant over the old. He did this by showing that while Mount Sinai (where the law was given) was great, Mount Zion (representing Christ's kingdom) is greater still.

Of course, the author did not intend to discredit Mount Sinai. In fact, when Moses was receiving the law from God on Sinai, the mountain was the scene of some special effects that would put any Hollywood studio to shame. Sinai was “burning with fire” and covered with “darkness, gloom and storm” (v. 18). There was a trumpet blast and the sound of God's voice, which the listeners could not bear to listen to (v. 19). The voice would not even permit animals to touch the mountain, since it had been made holy with His presence (v. 20). The display of God's awesomeness was such that even Moses, God's prophet, was terrified (v. 21). All of these details are confirmed in the Old Testament (see Exod. 19:12–13, 16–19; Deut. 9:19).

The Hebrews had not come to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion. And



The traditional Mount Sinai, with a monastery at its base.

unlike Mount Sinai, which “can be touched” (Heb. 12:18), Mount Zion is impalpable. Mount Sinai is a physical mountain; Mount Zion—the one referred to here—is not. The author described Mount Zion as “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (v. 22; see also 11:10, 13–16; 13:14).

In coming to Mount Zion, the Hebrews had come to many other things as well:

1. “Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” (12:22). The fact that the angels are in “joyful assembly” shows us that heaven is a party.

2. “The church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (v. 23). This “church” is simply all Christians on earth. Because of Christ we will be treated like privileged inheritors of heaven (see also Rom. 8:17), where we already have

our names enrolled.

3. “God, the Judge of all” (Heb. 12:23). As judge, God will not condemn but rather justify those who believe in His Son.

4. “The spirits of the righteous made perfect.” These are probably believers from the Old Testament era such as the men and women mentioned in chapter 11. They have been made perfect in the sense that their souls have been cleansed of sin

through Christ (see 11:40).

5. “Jesus the mediator of a new covenant” (12:24; compare 8:6). Moses was the mediator of the old covenant by receiving the law from God and delivering it to the Israelites. Similarly, Jesus mediated the new covenant by teaching about faith and dying so that sinners can be reconciled with God.

6. “The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:24). The “sprinkled blood” is Jesus’ blood, which He shed on the cross. Abel’s blood cried out for retribution (see Gen. 4:10), but Jesus’ blood tells a tale of forgiveness.

Ask Yourself . . . As I look through the list of things associated with Mount Zion, which am I most glad I have come to recognize?

ZION

Hill, City,
Divine Dwelling Place

The term “Zion” is used over 150 times in the Old Testament. Originally it referred to the citadel of the Canaanite city of Jebus—later known as Jerusalem—conquered by David (2 Sam. 5:7). This eminence eventually came to be equated with Jerusalem itself (Isa. 40:9; Mic. 3:12). Psalm 125:1 declares that “Mount Zion . . . cannot be shaken but endures forever.” In biblical thought Zion is the place where the Lord resides and presides. Therefore, Mount Zion is further defined in Hebrews 12:22 as “the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.”

e An Unshakable Kingdom (12:25–29)

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

—Hebrews 12:28

Hebrews has been packed with warning signs, and here is another one. This warning sign says, “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks” (v. 25). “Him who speaks” is God. As before, the author was again warning the Hebrews against apostasy.

The author referred once more to the Exodus generation for an example of what *not* to do. When God dwelt with the Israelites, He repeatedly warned them not to disobey Him. But they did disobey Him, so He punished them on several occasions. And finally, virtually all of them died in the desert before the nation entered the promised land (see Num. 14:26–35).

“If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?” (Heb. 12:25). “Him who warns us from heaven” is Jesus. Reigning from heaven in the hearts of His followers, Jesus demands faithfulness. And the fact that this warning comes from heaven rather than from earth can be taken as indicative of the greater seriousness of this warning.

What kind of punishment would the Hebrews not escape if they ignored Jesus’ warning? They would have to face a kind of “shaking” that is coming.

In the time of Moses, there was an earthquake at Sinai (v. 26; see Exod. 19:18). But a time is coming when God will cause not only an earthquake but a heavenquake as well (Heb. 12:26; see Hag. 2:6)! This latter shaking will be much more serious than the former one.

The future shaking that the author was referring to will come in the end times. That shaking will be a part of God’s judgment. All of creation will

be shaken, and only what is unshakable will survive (Heb. 12:27). Thankfully, as F. B. Meyer (in *The Way into the Holiest*) put it, “Not a fragment of heaven’s masonry shall crumble beneath the shock.” Christ’s kingdom is unshakable and will survive the quake.

Similarly, we in our own lives go through times of shaking. Illness, betrayal, divorce, job loss, death—such things can make us feel like we’re living on the San Andreas fault. But in times like those we find that the parts of our lives that are anchored to Jesus hold firm. In a world that’s coming unglued, we find out what’s nailed down.

Ask Yourself . . . Have I ever experienced such a life shake-up that I felt things were falling apart around me?

The author drew two conclusions from the truth that “we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (v. 28). First, we should “be thankful.” H. D. McDonald said, “What comes *gratis* demands *gratitude*.” Because we receive grace, we say grace. Second, we should “worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” Before such majesty as God’s, we should exercise humility as we offer praise.

In support of his second conclusion, the author quoted Deuteronomy 4:24, which says, “God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). We must face God as a purifying fire or as a punishing fire—to be cleansed or to be consumed.

13

Final Instructions and Requests

Hebrews 13:1–25

a Moral Instructions, Part 1 (13:1–6)

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

—Hebrews 13:1

Hebrews 13 communicates some twenty commands on 15 different subjects. Therefore, in its format, this chapter is somewhat akin to Proverbs, which takes a rather scattershot approach with its many seemingly unrelated verses.

Nevertheless, Hebrews 13 is far from being a haphazard wrap-up to the book; it has a logical arrangement. The first four verses, for instance, have in common the fact that they all deal with social relationships. These verses tell how to treat Christian brothers and sisters (v. 1), strangers (v. 2), prisoners and the mistreated (v. 3), and marriage partners (v. 4). Then verses 5 and 6 deal with the related issue of greed versus contentment.

Perhaps verse 1 contains the most all-embracing of the commands in this section, for it tells the readers to keep on loving each other as broth-

ers and sisters. Often in the New Testament we read that Christians are, in effect, members of the same family, and should treat each other that way. The Hebrews were already exercising brotherly love toward one another, but the writer felt a reminder would not be amiss.

Of course, Christians are not to relate only to one another, but to outsiders as well. The next verse urges readers to show hospitality to strangers. In those days, there weren't many inns, and those that did exist often had an unsavory reputation. So travelers had to rely on householders if they were to get good accommodations during a journey. As an encouragement toward hospitality, the writer reminded his readers that some have unwittingly hosted angels. And as a matter of fact, Abraham (see Gen. 18:1–15), Lot (see 19:1–13), Gideon (see Judg. 6:11–23), and Manoah (see chap. 13) all entertained angels unawares.

Entertaining in our homes can still be a way of ministering to others.

Ask Yourself . . . What are some creative ways I could use my home to entertain and minister to others?

Travelers will visit our homes if we carry out the command of Hebrews 13:2, but we ourselves will need to travel a bit in order to fulfill the command of verse 3. This command is to remember two groups: prisoners and the mistreated.

Probably with both groups the writer had in mind Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. Thus visiting and identifying oneself with such people, as the writer urged, could have entailed considerable risk. But it was important for the Christian community to present a united front—believers supporting one another and maintaining the links within the body of Christ, regardless of the danger.

The recipients of the letter had already suffered persecution and had stood with others who were being persecuted (see 10:33–34), so they knew just what the writer was talking about.

From relationships with individuals mostly outside the home (13:1–3), the author turned to the primary relationship within the home—marriage (v. 4). Marriage was to be honored by everyone in the Christian community, and adultery was to have no place among them. In warning, the writer said that God judges the impure (“the adulterer and all the sexually immoral”) who violate the purity of proper sexual relationships.

Just as there is a danger in wanting more than our mate, there is also a danger in always wanting more and more money. The Bible is never anti-money, but it does warn against

“the love of money” (v. 5; compare 1 Tim. 6:10). Too many today *love* money and *use* people, but for us, it should be the reverse: we should *use* money and *love* people. And so we should look out for any sign of greed entering our hearts.

Contentment with our material condition should characterize Christians. And the writer provided Old Testament quotes to show why Christians have every reason to be content. First, he quoted Deuteronomy 31:6, which contains a promise that God will never leave nor forsake His people. Why should we go mad over dollars when the God who owns the whole universe is our constant companion? Next, the author cited Psalm 118:6–7 (Heb. 13:6). This quote contains the psalmist’s declaration that since he had God, he would not be afraid, because no person had the power to hurt him (unless it was God’s will). Why should we look to money for our security when we have almighty God for our helper?



Moral Instructions, Part 2 (13:7–17)

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

—Hebrews 13:7

Verses 7 through 17 open and close with references to leaders. The

reference in verse 7 appears to be to the Hebrews' past leaders, who had probably died. Verse 17 evidently refers to their present leaders.

In the first case, the author urged the Hebrews to remember the leaders who had preached the gospel to them, considering the results of how these people had lived (v. 7). The word translated "remember" referred to calling to mind what one knew of a person, while the word translated "consider" referred to carefully observing something.

The readers had evidently been blessed in the past with excellent Christian leaders. But one could still benefit from leaders who were no longer with them.

Alone or together, the Hebrews could recall these people, and especially the Christlike character they had achieved and the good they had done for Christ's cause. In this way, the departed leaders could still be heroes and models for the believers. Indeed, the author urged his readers to "imitate [their former leaders'] faith."

Ask Yourself . . . Whose memory should I keep alive to honor them and model myself after them?

Human leaders come and go, but our great leader, the Lord, never changes. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (v. 8). He is the contemporary of all the centuries. The Hebrews' leaders had undoubtedly made Christ the subject of their teaching, and the Hebrews were to cling to Christ just as they had.

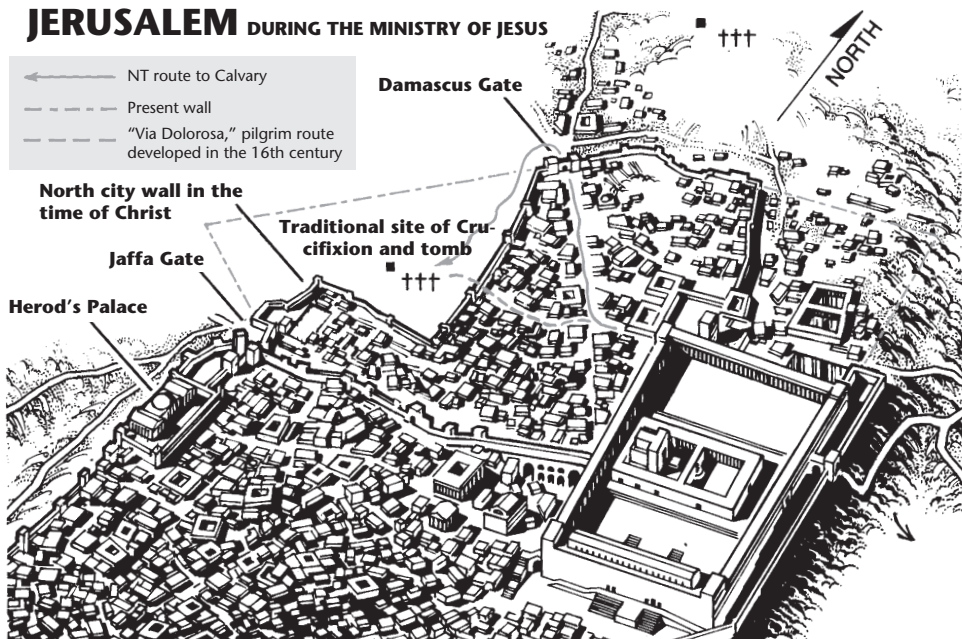
Anchored in the unchanging Christ, the Hebrews were not to be "carried away by all kinds of strange teachings" (v. 9). Evidently they were being exposed to many kinds of heretical teachings. ("Strange" means "foreign"; that is, foreign to the gospel.) We don't know precisely what the "strange teachings" were, but the Greek word for "strange" might woodenly be rendered "many colored." It suggests the rainbow variety of false teachings that confront Christians. Those temptations that come dressed in canary yellow or flaming flamingo aren't too difficult to detect, but what about those that insinuate themselves in shades of pastel?

Ask Yourself . . . What are some false teachings that I have recently encountered from my family members or friends, or perhaps even from fellow church members? How do I know that these are, indeed, false teachings?

Probably some of the "strange teachings" current in the Hebrews' day involved eating "ceremonial foods." (This may refer to Jewish food laws, but not necessarily, since many religions had food regulations.) The author flatly stated that ingesting ceremonial foods was of no value, while taking in God's grace was of much value. Philip Hughes (in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*) summarized verse 9 this way: "Food goes into the stomach for strengthening the body; but only grace strengthens the heart."

Continuing his argument, the author of Hebrews said, "We have

JERUSALEM DURING THE MINISTRY OF JESUS



The Via Dolorosa ("Way of Sorrows"), the traditional route Jesus took to the cross, leads to the traditional site of the crucifixion.

The author of Hebrews referred to Christ's being led outside the city.

an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat" (v. 10). Shock! Professional priests without Christ are barred from the true Christian "altar." Presumably the author is referring to "Christ, our Passover lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7) and His sacrifice. Thus the cross is our "altar" (Heb. 13:10).

To put all this another way, while Christians are not to be bound by the food laws of non-Christian religions, we are to eat the "food" of grace, which is ours because of the cross. And this "food" is a privilege to eat, being even greater than the sacrificial food that the priests of the tabernacle ate.

The writer continued talking about tabernacle worship (v. 11). As he had done before, now he referred

to the Day of Atonement ritual in which the high priest carried the blood of a bull and a ram into the holiest part of the tabernacle to sprinkle it on and in front of the ark of the covenant (see Lev. 16:11–16a). The bodies of the animals that were sacrificed for this ritual were to be burned outside the camp. They had been associated with sin, and therefore were considered unclean (v. 27).

The author saw a parallel between these practices and the way Christ was sacrificed for people's sins outside the walls of Jerusalem (Heb. 13:12; see also John 19:17). Executions were normally performed outside a city, but Jesus' case symbolized how the Messiah was rejected by the Jewish authorities.

In order to offer us *grace*, Christ

underwent great *disgrace*. Therefore, Christians should be willing to share Christ's disgrace, in a sense following Him outside the camp (Heb. 13:13). Are we willing to share His unpopularity when necessary? Are we willing to endure rejection for the gospel as He did?

Indeed, we should not expect to be entirely comfortable and satisfied with earthly life. There is no complete security, no permanence on this earth for us.

While the Jews venerated their holy city of Jerusalem, that city won't last. Christians are to be longing for "the city that is to come." (v. 14). This city is probably what the writer had earlier referred to as "the city . . . whose architect and builder is God" and the "heavenly Jerusalem" (see 11:10; 12:22; see also Isa. 65:17–25; Rev. 21). (As the "city" theme crops up several times in Hebrews, some readers apparently felt like rejects from their community because they had identified with Jesus as the Messiah.)

Because of our relationship with Christ, we should give God glory. It seems that not only do we have an "altar" (Heb. 13:10), but also we have a "sacrifice" to offer (v. 15). The content of our offering is "praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name."

Ask Yourself . . . How often do I really praise God for my relationship with Christ?

However, what we do with our lips is not the sum total of our commitment, but our sacrifice

includes what we do with our lives (v. 16). First, we are to "do good." The word *good*, when the letters are reordered, becomes *go do*. To do good we must go do; activism is required. So, second, we must "share with others" as part of our Christian sacrificial system.

Ask Yourself . . . How might I do good and share with others in my church and community?

Returning to the subject of church leadership, the author urged obedience. The Hebrews' great leaders of the past were gone, but they had new leaders, and these leaders deserved submission (v. 17). While the author did not say what kinds of leaders he had in mind, he described them as those who (1) have "authority"; (2) must "keep watch" (like shepherds); and (3) must "give an account" to God.

If the Hebrews went along with what their leaders asked, the experience could be a pleasant one for all involved. If, on the other hand, they balked and objected, they would be putting an unnecessary burden on the leaders and would be causing problems for themselves as well.

Of course, verse 17 does not give church leaders a license to become little dictators. Christ is still the head of the church. When we take the whole New Testament in view, we see that leaders are to be servants. Yet as long as church leaders are doing what they are supposed to be doing, others should give them respect and follow them obediently.

C Benediction and Closing Words (13:18–25)

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact, I have written to you quite briefly. —Hebrews 13:22

After the section referring to the Hebrews' leaders (see vv. 7, 17), the author (himself a kind of long-distance leader) requested prayer for himself (vv. 18–19) before offering prayer for the readers (vv. 20–21). Then he went on to add a postscript (vv. 22–25).

The writer twice urged his readers to pray for him (vv. 18–19). In between, he defended himself, saying he had a clear conscience and was striving to live a holy life. Why would he say such a thing at such a time? Possibly he feared that some of the things he had said in his letter would upset his readers. So, in effect, he said, "Trust me; I know what I'm doing. Don't draw back from me, but rather strengthen our fellowship through prayer."

The writer had been away from his readers for a while, perhaps because he had been busy ministering elsewhere. But he hoped to be among them again soon, so he asked them to make this anticipated reunion a subject of prayer.

Verses 20 and 21 comprise a majestic benediction, or prayer of good wishes. This benediction asks God to do two things for the Hebrews. But first it describes God—He is the "God of peace" (v. 20). He creates peace between Himself and sinners, peace among Christians, and peace in hearts where His Spirit dwells.

The benediction also describes God as the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Intriguingly, it is only here that the author specifically referred to the resurrection of Christ, though he alluded to it elsewhere. It was "through the blood of the

eternal covenant" that God raised Jesus. Christ's sacrifice not only sealed the new covenant for all time, but also ensured His own resurrection life. Easter happened because of Good Friday.

The first prayer request that the writer had for his readers was



The writer of Hebrews called Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep.

that they would be equipped to do God's will (v. 21). The term for "equip" was used in medical contexts outside of the Bible for the setting of dislocated bones. Thus the author wanted what was not right in the Hebrews' lives to be set straight. Perhaps he wanted them to have more spiritual gifts, more gospel teaching, more holy examples, and so on.

The second prayer request was that God would work in the Hebrews and in himself in ways that would please Him. Christians are to strive to please God by loving and obeying Him. But we can't be successful in this on our own; He must work in us if we are to be pleasing to Him.

This benediction merges into a doxology where the author said, "Through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." *Doxology* comes from the Greek word for "glory" (*doxa*). It is praise, giving God glory.

Ask Yourself . . . How pleased is God with the way I behaved this past week?

In a sense the benediction draws the book to a close, but the writer had a few more things he needed to say, so he added a postscript.

First, he encouraged his readers to bear with what he said in the book (v. 22). He even cited its shortness, as if to say he wasn't really asking much. He wanted them to listen to what he said

A Brief Biography of

TIMOTHY

(All dates are approximate)

CHILDHOOD

- Hometown: probably Lystra in Asia Minor (Acts 16:1)
- Parents: mother—a Jew named Lois (2 Tim. 1:5); father—a Greek (Acts 16:1)
 - Studied Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14–15)

CONVERSION

- Probably became a Christian on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14:8–20)

COMPANION IN TRAVEL

- A.D. 50—leaves with Paul on second missionary journey (16:3)
 - A.D. 50–52—two years of traveling together on Paul's second journey
- A.D. 53–57—third missionary journey (18–21)
- A.D. 57–59—ministry not known while Paul imprisoned at Caesarea
 - A.D. 63—pastoral work at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) while still probably under forty (Timothy is still "young" [4:12] about fifteen years later)
- A.D. 67—receives 2 Timothy before Paul is killed under Nero
 - A.D. 69—released from prison (Heb. 13:23)

and accept it, even if it challenged some of their ingrained religious beliefs.

The writer referred to his work as both a “word of exhortation” and implied it was a “letter.” Bible scholars have long had difficulty knowing just what type of document this is. A. T. Robertson wrote (in *Word Pictures in the New Testament*): “It begins like a treatise, proceeds like a sermon, and concludes like a letter.” Perhaps we should call it a *homiletter*—a hybrid consisting of a homily (short sermon) plus a letter.

The writer also shared some news that he knew would interest his readers. Timothy had been released from prison (v. 23). This Timothy was probably the same person who had for many years been a companion of Paul and was by now well known among the Christian churches.

Evidently, Timothy had been locked up for his Christian preaching, but now he was free again. The writer was not with Timothy, but expected Timothy to come to him

sooner or later. If sooner, then the writer would bring Timothy along with him on his planned visit to his readers.

The writer also sent greetings from himself and “those from Italy” (v. 24). There is some ambiguity about what the writer meant about “those from Italy.” He may have meant, “The Christians with me here in Italy send you greetings.” Or “Your fellow Italians who are with me send greetings to you.” Or even “Before I left Italy, the Christians there asked me to pass on their greetings to you.” In short, we don’t know if this means either that the writer or that the recipients were in Italy.

The author’s final words are “Grace be with you all” (v. 25). Grace is the quintessence of the gospel. A life lived by marching forward under the banner of God’s grace is one where the pilgrim makes real progress. Therefore, in the wording of Hebrews 6:1, let’s “go on to maturity.”

Quotations from the Old Testament in Hebrews

The author of Hebrews often appealed to Old Testament to prove his assertions for his readers. Following is a list of the Hebrew Scripture passages used by the author and where those passages are found in Hebrews.

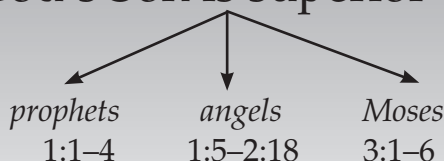
Ps. 2:7	Heb. 1:5a	Ps. 110:4	Heb. 7:17, 21
2 Sam. 7:14	Heb. 1:5b	Exod. 25:40	Heb. 8:5
1 Chron. 17:13	Heb. 1:5b	Jer. 31:31–34	Heb. 8:8–12
Deut. 32:43	Heb. 1:6	Exod. 24:8	Heb. 9:20
Ps. 104:4	Heb. 1:7	Ps. 40:6–8	Heb. 10:5–7
Ps. 45:6–7	Heb. 1:8–9	Jer. 31:33	Heb. 10:16
Ps. 102:25–27	Heb. 1:10–12	Jer. 31:34	Heb. 10:17
Ps. 110:1	Heb. 1:13	Deut. 32:35	Heb. 10:30
Ps. 8:4–6	Heb. 2:6–8	Deut. 32:36	Heb. 10:30
Ps. 22:22	Heb. 2:12	Ps. 135:14	Heb. 10:30
Isa. 8:17	Heb. 2:13a	Hab. 2:3–4	Heb. 10:37–38
Isa. 8:18	Heb. 2:13b	Gen. 21:12	Heb. 11:18
Ps. 95:7–11	Heb. 3:7–11	Prov. 3:11–12	Heb. 12:5
Ps. 95:7–8	Heb. 3:15	Prov. 4:26	Heb. 12:13
Ps. 95:11	Heb. 4:3	Exod. 19:12–13	Heb. 12:20
Gen. 2:2	Heb. 4:4	Deut. 9:19	Heb. 12:21
Ps. 95:7–8	Heb. 4:7	Hag. 2:6	Heb. 12:26
Ps. 2:7	Heb. 5:5	Deut. 4:24	Heb. 12:29
Ps. 110:4	Heb. 5:6	Deut. 31:6	Heb. 13:5
Gen. 22:17	Heb. 6:14	Ps. 118:6–7	Heb. 13:6

GOD'S BETTER IDEA

*The new covenant is better
than the old covenant
because of . . .*

WHO INITIATED IT

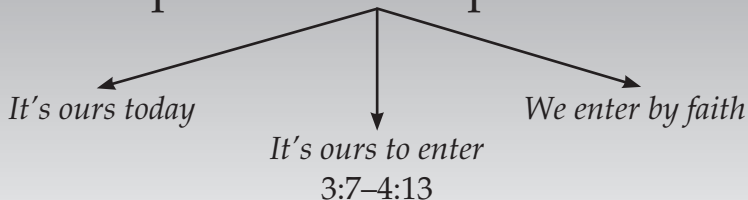
God's Son is superior to



God's Son is the message
as well as the greatest messenger.

ITS PURPOSE

To provide redemption rest



Whereas our entrance to rest had been blocked by
unbelief, we can enter by faith.

ITS PRIESTHOOD

Jesus is the High Priest

4:14–6:20

from the order of Melchizedek

7:1–28

Our sacrificing High Priest
is also our priestly sacrifice.

Like Melchizedek,
Jesus lives.

THE ORDER IT INAUGURATED

The new covenant is superior in its

content

8:1–13

The new covenant offers
inner forgiveness.

*sanctuary
service*

9:1–1

sacrifice

9:11–10:18

Christ offered
His own blood.

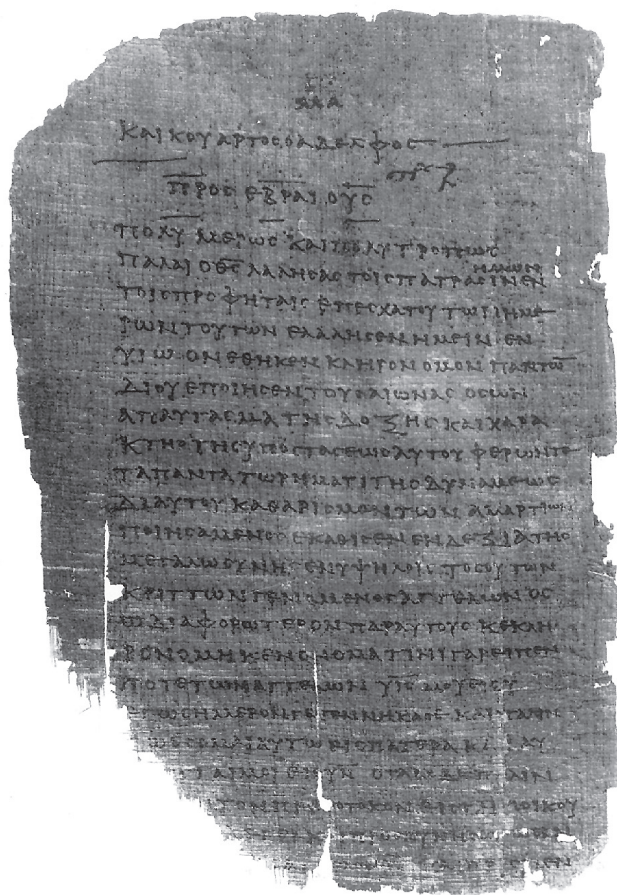
THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES IT INSPIRED

The righteous live by faith

10:19–13:25

Persevere in faith.

The last five verses of Romans and the first seven verses of Hebrews are contained together on this ancient papyrus now housed at the University of Michigan Library.



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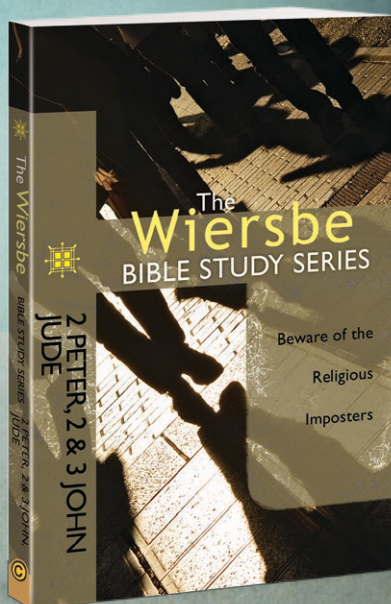
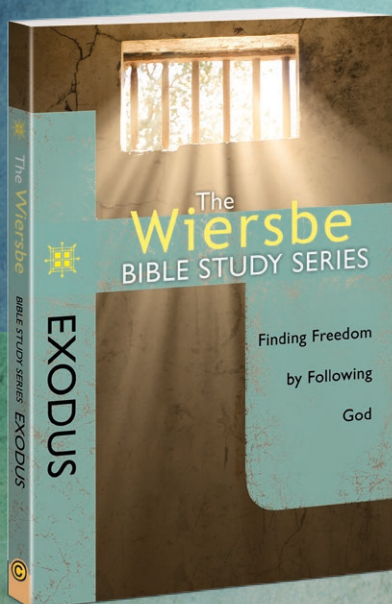
is organized according to a systematic, sensible plan that will take you through every book of the Bible.

	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	MARCH	JUNE
2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

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Next quarter:
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