

A Call to Action

Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

Folsom church of Christ

July, 2018

The letter to the Hebrews

Call to Commitment

Introduction

In every age, the Christian's faith and stamina is challenged. It was true in the first century and it is true today. The book of Hebrews was written to help Christians meet the risks inherent in confessing Christ as Lord.

There is risk in being a Christian. Even if the risks are not as apparent today, they are no less real, no less dangerous — they have just taken on new, perhaps even more menacing, forms. It is one thing to be told that your confession of Christ is a capital offense and will cost you your life if you don't recant, a reality faced by many of our first century brothers and sisters. But it is another to be duped into thinking that you are serving the Lord when you are far from it (Matthew 7:21-23).

The original recipients of the letter had become so disheartened that they began to reconsider their decision to serve Christ. As Jews, it is not surprising that they chose to slip back into the comfortable cocoon of Judaism. It offered many advantages. Not only was it more familiar, but it also came with less risk. The Roman government had acquiesced to the Jews and, up to this time, allowed them to practice Judaism without much interference. It was also a user-friendly religion; you got plenty of feedback on your performance. If you followed the Law as it had been explained by the rabbis, you knew you were right with God; at least, that was the theory. Moreover, when you worshipped, you knew you had done service to God, since the elements of worship were so visible: you could see the temple in all its glory; the priests wore vestments that identified them; the incense and sacrifices were tangible reminders of the homage you were giving to God. And, after all, this is a religion that God Himself established.

So some of these struggling Christians had bought the devil's list of the "benefits" of going back to their former way of life. They did not necessarily have to give up Christianity. It was "syncretism" that

Satan was selling — "keep *both*: be a Jew on the outside, but a Christian on the inside. No one will be the wiser."

The challenge is the same today. But instead of being persecuted, we are *seduced*. Persecution forces a decision, often on the spot. But seduction takes a more nuanced approach. We are drawn, like moth to a flame, to a glittering world that promises us success and all the creature comforts, but tells us we can still be disciples of Christ, regardless. Richard Niebuhr observed, some have reinterpreted the gospel to mean that "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

But that's not the gospel and the writer of Hebrews has provided us with an elegant and powerful rejoinder to this perverted view of it. He calls us back to commitment to the real thing, the real gospel — the good news that will sting us and cause trouble for us. But, he says, "do not throw away your confidence that has great reward!" (Hebrews 10:35). Trouble will come, but there is hope. "Whatever you do," he says, "don't let go." Falling back leads to destruction (Hebrews 10:39).

He offers a passage — albeit, a narrow one — through the storms, and points us to the safe harbor just beyond the horizon of this life. The journey is not an easy one, but it is a *sure* one. Anyone can take it and everyone can make it. But it requires endurance, a by-product of faith in our Lord "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

DAVID POSEY
FOLSOM, AUGUST, 2018

How to Study Hebrews

There are certain steps we can take to make our study of Hebrews more profitable. First, remember that “all readers are interpreters.” Whether reading a novel or a newspaper, you interpret (i.e., determine the meaning) as you read. The simplest aid to interpretation is simply reading the text over and over again. Much of what seems obscure upon first reading will become clear as you continue to read.

Secondly, it is important to observe the context when you study the passage. Context is defined as: 1. “The part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage and determines its meaning. 2. The circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting.” Always read above and below the text before drawing your conclusions. Failure leads to such classic mistakes as taking a statement “out of context” or “reading into” a passage something that isn’t there. We will continually keep the setting of the book before us as we study Hebrews, because it helps us understand the original intent of the letter (“a text can never mean what it never meant”).

Third, acquire a feeling for the overall structure of the book. Ideally, you should develop your own outline of the letter, but there are many excellent study Bibles and reference books that do it for you. We’ve included a concise one on page 4. Study the outline until you get a grasp of the general theme and structure of the book.

Finally, whenever you study a New Testament letter, *think paragraphs*. Read and reread the paragraph, then state, in a concise form, the content of it. See if you can state the subject of the paragraph in one or two words. As you read the paragraph, ask: “What’s the point?” “Why did the writer say this?” “Why did the writer say this *here*?”

If you follow these few rules as you study Hebrews, you will not only learn the content of the letter, but you will know how to better apply it in your daily effort to live as a Christian.

Ground Rules for Class Study & Discussion

Our approach will be to introduce the topic, read the text and then open the discussion.

You can choose the level of study you like. You can choose to be mostly an “observer”—just listen and learn what you can from the class. Or, you can take it to the next level and be a “student”—read the text and complete the questions in the workbook prior to class so that you are prepared to discuss the chapter, or at least follow the discussion during the class session. You can even choose to become an “expert”—do the extra work, including doing some word studies and consulting reference books so that you can be a resource for the rest of the class. Let your conscience guide you into the level right for you.



We expect to have 26 class sessions (2 per week) to complete the 13 chapters of Hebrews. Generally, we will cover one chapter per Sunday-Wednesday session, with a couple of exceptions. We’ll have an introduction on the first Sunday and a review at the end. We will cover some chapters in one Sunday or Wednesday session in order to assure that we complete the book and we’ll spend an extra session on a couple of the longer chapters (e.g., Hebrews 11).

Format of Assignments

The assignments are broken down into “units,” which will help give you a complete view of the book. Discussion questions on the text are included to help you prepare, along with some “thought” questions. We will *not* be going over all of these questions in class, but if you complete them prior to the class, you will be well-prepared for the class discussion. We will have separate worksheets for class use.

Look at your fish*!

In his book, *Brave Companions* (1992), David McCullough describes a unique professor at Harvard in the 1840s. McCullough recounts the story of how scientist Louis Agassiz used unusual but effective and memorable teaching techniques with his doctoral students.

A student would enter the professor's office expecting an assignment or interview. Instead, Agassiz would seat the student in the laboratory and place in front of him a tray topped with a smelly, dead fish.



"Look at your fish," Agassiz would tell the student, and then would leave the room. An hour later the professor would return and the student, trying to please, would describe his observations. Agassiz would listen, then repeat:

"Look at your fish. What do you see?"

Invariably, Agassiz's students counted scales, drew likenesses, measured, dissected, took notes and comprehensively ascertained all there was to know about the fish.

After repeating this scenario several times over a couple of days, Agassiz would ask the student: "Do you see the fish yet?"

What he was doing was encouraging his students to know something well. The idea was that "discoveries are as likely to be found in material already in hand, before your eyes, as anywhere."

"Look at your fish"

Chief Abbreviations

Aram.	Aramaic
<i>ASV</i>	American Standard Version (1901)
<i>c.</i>	<i>circa</i> , Latin for about, approximately
<i>cf.</i>	<i>Confer</i> or “compare.” Often follows a primary Bible reference.
ch.	chapter or chapters (chs.)
E.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , (for example)
<i>ESV</i>	English Standard Version
f.(ff.)	and the following verse(s), page(s), etc.
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
i.e.	<i>id est</i> “in other words”
<i>KJV</i>	<i>King James Version</i>
lit.	Literally, or a literal translation
LXX	The Septuagint, Greek translation of Old Testament
ms	manuscript
mss	manuscripts
<i>NASV</i>	New American Standard Version
<i>NEB</i>	New English Bible
<i>NIV</i>	New International Version
<i>NKJV</i>	New King James Version
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
p. pp.	page or pages
v. vv.	verse or verses

Sources

- The Message of the Hebrews*, Raymond Brown, The Bible Speaks Today series, Intervarsity Press, 1982
- Call to Commitment, Responding to the Message of Hebrews*, William L. Lane, Thomas Nelson, 1985
- A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, Eerdman's, 1977
- Hebrews*, John MacArthur, Moody Press, 1983
- The Epistle to the Hebrews, Greek Text, with Notes and Essays*, Second Ed., 1892, B. F. Westcott, Eerdman's
- A Commentary on Hebrews*, R. Milligan, Gospel Light Publishing n.d.

Outline of Hebrews

CHRIST, SUPERIOR TO ANGELS (Ch. 1-2)

Prologue (1:1-4)

Revealed by the Old Testament (1:5-14)

Warning to pay attention (2:1-4)

Jesus Made like His Brothers (2:5-18)

CHRIST SUPERIOR TO MOSES (3-4:13)

Warning against Unbelief (Ch. 3:1-19)

Sabbath Rest for God's People (4:1-13)

CHRIST SUPERIOR TO AARON (4:14-7:28)

Jesus the Great High Priest (4:14-5:10)

Warning against Immaturity (5:11:6:20)

Melchizedek the Priest (7:1-10)

Jesus a Priest like Melchizedek (7:11-28)

CHRIST A SUPERIOR PRIEST (8:1-10:18)

High Priest of a New Covenant (Ch. 8)

Worship in the Tabernacle (9:1-10)

Mediator of the New Covenant (9:11-25)

Superiority of Christ's Sacrifice (9:26 -10:18)

CALL TO PERSEVERANCE (10:19-13:17)

Just Live by Faith (10:19-39)

Warning against falling back (10:26-29)

Examples of the Life of Faith (Ch. 11)

Living Under the New Covenant (12:1-13:17)

Warning against refusing to listen (12:25-27)

PERSONAL REMARKS & VARIOUS EXHORTATIONS (Ch. 13:18-25)

Introduction

Historical Background

The letter “to the Hebrews,” which is more like a written sermon than a letter (cf. 13:22), was written to a small group of Jewish Christians who were facing various challenges to their faith. They had suffered in the past (10:32-33), but had not yet met the brunt of the persecution which was to come (12:4).

In AD 49, the Jews were expelled from Rome; Seutonius had written about the problems instigated by the followers of one “Crestus” (probably *Christus*, Latin for Christ). In AD 64, Rome burned and many of the people were blaming Nero, the cruel and eccentric emperor. The emperor needed scapegoats, and Christians were the perfect subjects. Their open confession made them easy targets. So Nero blamed them for the fire in order to deflect criticism from himself. He sentenced them to die for “sedition” and conjured up various means of torture. The methods were hideous. There are documented cases of Christians who were coated with wax and used as human candles to light the famous Appian Way in Rome. Hebrews was probably written in the shadow of that horrible event.

Date of the Letter

The Roman assault on Jerusalem that culminated in the destruction of the temple in AD 70, had not occurred when the letter was penned. This is obvious from the fact that the writer makes no mention of the destruction of the temple and often refers to it as if it is still standing (cf. 9:6-8; 13:10). Since the invasion of Jerusalem occurred over a four year period, beginning in AD 66, it is probable that the letter was written before that time, perhaps between 64 and 66 AD, though a date of AD 68 is certainly possible.

The Author of the Book

Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Silas, Luke and even Priscilla have been suggested as possible authors of Hebrews. But the identity of the writer remains shrouded in mystery: the author is entirely unknown to us. Those who are quick to assign it to the apostle Paul do so because of the superscription in the King James Version assigning it to Paul. But there is no external (extra-biblical) evidence that points conclusively to Paul, and the internal evidence strongly argues against his authorship.

The style, language, and experience of the writer differ from what we see in the known letters of Paul. “All that can be said with certainty is that Hebrews was composed by a creative theologian who was well trained in the exposition of the Greek Scriptures” (William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Hebrews 1-8, p. xliv).

Theme and Approach

Hebrews was written to combat the fear and discouragement that these pilgrims were facing. Some scholars have suggested that they formed a “house church,” that had pulled away from the main group out of fear (cf. 13:24; 5:12; 10:25). The writer exhorts them to quit falling back, and “go on to perfection” (6:1; cf. Hebrews 10:24-25). “Their Christian development had been arrested; instead of pressing ahead they were inclined to come to a full stop in their spiritual progress, if not indeed to slip back to a stage which they had left (5:11-14). Very probably they were reluctant to sever their last ties with a religion which enjoyed the protection of Roman law and face the risks of irrevocable commitment to the Christian way. “[the writer] encourages them with the assurance that they have everything to lose if they fall back, but everything to gain if they press on (2:1-4; 3:12-4:1; 6:4-8; 10:26-39; 12:15-29” (F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised Edition [Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990] p. 9).

Perhaps the best summary of the theme of Hebrews is found in 3:14: “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” Fellowship (“partakers”) is dependent on finishing the race (12:1). To turn our back on Christ is to give up the only source of salvation we have (2:1-4; 10:26-31), and is, in reality, a turning back to “perdition” (destruction) and a throwing away of confidence (10:32-39). Ironically, those who go back are also giving up the only source of effective help in overcoming temptation and trials. It is Christ who aids those who are tempted (2:14-18; 4:15-16), it is Christ who forgives sins and it is Christ who sits at the right hand of God. There is no such help forthcoming from angels or men or Law. Only Christ secures our hope (6:19-20), and it is only through Him that we can expect to enter the gates of heaven.

Discussion Questions

1. Who wrote Hebrews?
2. Approximately when was it written?
3. What is the setting for the book? What need is the writer addressing? What passages in Hebrews support this conclusion?
4. Briefly state the solution the writer provides to the problem implied in your answer to number 3.

5. What passage in Hebrews provides a good statement for the theme of the book?

Thought Question



Try to imagine what these Christians were going through emotionally. What was their first impulse? What is wrong with their “answer”?

Unit I

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 1:1-4 | God has spoken finally and completely in His Son |
| 1:5-14 | God's Son is superior to prophets and angels |
| 2:1-4 | Therefore, the word spoken through the Son is superior |

Hebrews 1:1 – 2:4

That God is not silent, as these troubled Christians suppose, is proved by the writer's first words: God has spoken, first, in times past through the prophets, but now, in His Son, once and for all. This ultimate, final word is the key to survival for these battered Christians. His "speaking" was accomplished through taking on the flesh, for a little while becoming lower than the angels (2:9). This allowed Him to make the great sacrifice that purged their sins, and then to sit down at the right hand of God (1:3; see Hebrews 10:4-5). It also means that He has shared in flesh and blood, and therefore can render aid to those who are tempted (2:14, 18; cf. 4:15).

But the fact that God has spoken through His Son also signals a great warning, since no one can escape the judgment of God if he turns his back on the only source of eternal salvation there is. Any thought of returning to that which is more physically acceptable or psychologically comfortable is spiritual suicide (2:1-4; cf. 5:8-9; 10:26-31).

God's Final Word [1:1-4]

The writer's point is that God is not a silent God, but has spoken throughout history, using every available means to do it, whether in dreams, visions, miracles, parables, poetry, or other literary or revelatory device. He is a God who communicates and loves to reveal Himself to those who believe in Him. This should be a great comfort to those who are struggling under the load of persecution and increasing stress, since it is hard not to wonder where God is during such difficult times. Many of the earlier Psalms express the same misgivings in the light of extreme adversity (cf. Psalm 13:1-4; 22:1). And, of course, the felt absence of God is a central lament in the book of Job.

What these struggling pilgrims missed, however, is the fact that God has spoken and continues to speak. In the past, He used secondary, incomplete means with the purpose

of preparing them for the final revelation. But now He speaks in a superior way, through His Son, who "always lives to make intercession for them" (7:25). God is not dead, nor does He sleep, but He speaks through our faithful Apostle and High Priest (3:1).

This Son is unlike any being who has ever taken on the flesh. Seven attributes are cited in verses 2-3 that set forth His superiority. (1) He is "heir of all things." This is inclusive, but what is the most significant of "all things"? There is a clear allusion to Psalm 2:8, where God is said to give the nations to the Son as His inheritance. In Ephesians 1:11, 18 (NASV, v. 11 margin), Christians are portrayed as being God's own inheritance, His gift to Himself, as it were. Christ will be heir to all the redeemed of all ages, who will give Him glory and honor throughout eternity. (2) He is also said to be the One through whom God created the world (see Colossians 1:16; John 1:1-3). The obvious implication of the statement, made explicit in John 1:1-2, is that Christ is pre-existent — He is the eternal Son of God. (3) Christ "is the radiance of His glory." He shines forth, or radiates, the glory of God. He is of the same essence, the light being the same as the Source from which it emanates. John 1:14 suggests that to speak of God's glory is to speak of God's ever-abiding presence. (4) Christ is the "exact representation of His nature." The essence of this statement is that He is a perfect "engraving" (Greek, *karakter*) of God. When you see Christ, you see God as He is, in all His glory (see John 14:8-11). (5) Christ is not separate from His creation, but continues to uphold all things by the word of His power. Christ continues His involvement in the divine government of the world. Paul said that in Christ "all things consist" or "hold together" (Colossians 1:17). He is God's glue, His cosmic cement. Deist views of God, that He is far removed from His creation, are thus put to rest. (6) He is our redeemer — he made purification for sins, He

purged our sins (the Greek word is similar to our word *catharsis* — Christ is the ultimate *catharsis* for our guilt). Of course, He had to die on the cross to accomplish this cleansing, but He willingly did so (see Hebrews 12:1-2). Finally, (7) He received His reward as He entered upon His reign — “He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” After Jesus performed His sacrificial work, He was exalted to God’s right hand, which is a position of royalty (see Psalm 110). This statement also serves to introduce the contrast of the Jewish High Priest with Jesus Christ. The High Priest was not permitted to “sit down” in the Holy of Holies; i.e., he was not permitted to take up permanent residence beyond the veil. He stayed there at his risk, on pain of death (Leviticus 16:2ff.). He was to do his priestly duties and leave at once. Jesus, however, bringing the final, ultimate sacrifice, sat down, once and for all, at the right hand of God. The veil was torn in two (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). There is no more need for sacrifices by human mediators, since there is one Mediator, the man Jesus Christ (I Timothy 2:5). This last assertion, that Christ made purification for sins through His sacrifice, and then was exalted to the right hand of God, will form a major part of the argument that follows.

The point of all this is to show how Christ, who upholds all things by His powerful word, is also able to sustain His people during their periods of persecution and stress. He is heir of all things, He upholds all things, and He has all authority (Matthew 28:18), sitting, as He does, at the right hand of God. And there is more than a side glance to the suffering that Christ underwent in order to receive the joy on the other side (12:2). These “stressed out” Christians need the same kind of disposition of heart that Christ had on His way to the cross.

In v. 4, the writer introduces the theme of his next paragraph, that Jesus is “better than the angels.” In other words, not only is He superior to any human competitors, but He is also better than any unfleshed, heavenly beings. This is an important issue to a Jew who held angels in high esteem since they were intimately involved in delivering God’s Law (Galatians 3:19). If Jesus is better than the

angels, there can be nothing better — anywhere, anytime.

Greater than the Angels (1:5-14)

Angels played a major part in the Jewish view of salvation through the Law. Therefore, the writer found it necessary to handle a crucial question: “Where does Jesus stand in relation to the angels?” When he finishes his argument, there can be no doubt about the answer. Angels are important agents in God’s scheme of things, serving spirits sent out to help those who are headed for heaven (1:14; see Luke 15:10; 22:43; Matthew 4:11; Hebrews 12:22). But they are spirits who are sent to work for the benefit of others; they are neither the source of salvation nor its object (2:16). Jesus, on the other hand, is the “Author and Finisher of our faith” (12:2); He has a better name (v. 4), greater dignity (v. 6) and greater power (vv. 8-13) than any angel.

This paragraph is not only an argument against those who think angels are as important as Christ. The quotations used in the discussion tell us how important Jesus is even without reference to angels. They exalt Him as Creator and Judge, and the only Son of God, a King whose kingdom has no end. It is not only the angels who are foreclosed from claiming such a place in God’s plan — no being of any kind shares His place. That is a timeless truth applicable to every generation, regardless of how they regard angels.

Pay Attention! (2:1-4)

If Jesus is who the writer says He is, what then? He is worthy of much more than a casual nod now and then. He must be listened to closely, and followed implicitly. One of the most common themes of Jesus during His teaching ministry was that people should listen to Him and then do as He says. The wise build their houses on the “rock” while the foolish build their houses on the “sand” (Matthew 7:24-27). Several times, Jesus admonished His hearers to listen: “he that has ears to hear, let him hear!” Yet few would listen, and when they were offended, they would turn back and not follow Him anymore (John 6:66).

The writer of Hebrews is writing this “word of exhortation” (13:22) to prevent his readers from taking the same destructive steps. They are tending to drift, and are getting weaker

because they have grown “dull of hearing” (5:11). In this first of five warnings, the writer urges them to pay closer attention to the things they have heard and accepted in the past. In other words, instead of going back, they should be going forward. Failure will lead to a loss of the only really eternally significant issue of life — salvation.

Questions for Discussion

1. To whom did God speak “long ago”?
2. Explain “in many portions and in many ways.”
3. When are the “last days”?
4. List the seven things affirmed about the Son in verses 2-3. Be able to explain each.
5. What is the significance of a “more excellent name”?
6. Why does the writer discuss “angels” in Hebrews?
7. What are “angels,” according to this text?
8. Describe the nature of the writer’s argument in verses 5 and 13.
9. Where do you find most of the Old Testament quotations used by the writer in this unit?
10. Explain v. 6.
11. To whom were these Old Testament passages originally applied?
12. Describe the Lord from quotations used in 1:5-14.
13. In 2:1-4, “For this reason...” refers back to what?
14. What have these readers “heard” that they should pay closer attention to?
15. What word was “spoken through angels”? How were angels involved?



Thought Questions

Explain “progressive revelation” in light of the writer’s argument in 1:1-2.

What is God like? How do you know?

Does God ever seem silent to you? When? Why? What can you do? What current issues in your life are you facing that knowing Christ better will help?

Why was it important for the writer to discuss the relative positions of the angels and the Lord? What perspective was he addressing?

“Jesus is greater than any angel”... so what?

Do you believe angels are still acting on your behalf? If so, is that significant to you? Why is even more important to have Christ as your Lord and King than to have angels ministering to you?

What does “drift away” mean in practical terms? When does one “drift away”?

If the Old Testament was unalterable (steadfast), what can we conclude about the New Testament?

Does God exempt anyone from believing and obeying Jesus Christ? How do you know?

How can we “pay closer attention”? What can we do to prevent it? How do we know when we are slipping away?

Unit 2

- | | |
|---------|--------------------|
| 2:5-9 | The dignity of man |
| 2:10-16 | Jesus, our Pioneer |
| 2:17-18 | Jesus, our Priest |

Jesus is fully God, the Son of God, through whom God speaks today, superior to the prophets and to angels (1:1-14). Therefore, we must pay even closer attention to Him, since to reject the gospel of Christ is to reject salvation (2:1-4).

In order to accomplish this salvation, this superior Son had to be made like His brethren — like us! Therefore he took on flesh and blood and in that body accomplished our redemption, abolishing the power of death. God's action in Christ speaks volumes about God's love and concern for us, crucial to restoring the confidence of these persecuted Christians to whom this letter was addressed. With that thought in mind, the writer begins a discussion of how and why Jesus "was made like His brothers."

The Dignity of Man [2:5-9]

Structurally, 2:1-4 are best regarded as a parenthesis with 2:5 picking up from 1:14. 1:14 speaks of angels as ministering spirits who serve those who are inheriting salvation. But it was not to these "ministering spirits" that God has subjected the inhabited earth, but to man, and, ultimately, to Christ. Psalm 8 is employed to describe God's intention for man in general, as the original Psalm taught. Man has inherent dignity, honor and status by virtue of God's care and concern for him.

But the writer is using this Psalm primarily to show how man has failed in his part, through sin, and how Jesus, through the suffering of death, exemplified "perfect man." It was after His death that He was "crowned with glory and honor" (v. 9; cf. 5:8-9; Philippians 2:8-9). It was by the grace of God — that is, by His divine initiative — that He tasted death for everyone. The term Jesus (Heb., *Jehoshua*) appears here, at v. 9, for the first time in the letter. This is appropriate since the emphasis in this unit is on the humanity of Jesus and the effect of His death on the "children" (v. 14) — the name

Hebrews 2:5-18

"Jesus" means "the help of Yahweh" (cf. v. 14, 17-18; 4:15).

Jesus, our Pioneer [2:10-16]

According to v. 10, Jesus is the *archegos* of salvation — Jesus "wrote the book" on salvation, in a way that the world scarcely understands (see I Corinthians 1:18ff.). It was fitting for God to perfect, through sufferings, the author of our salvation. In other words, Jesus became our "pioneer," "captain" or "champion" by taking on a fleshly body, like us, and suffering in it for us. In this sense, to be perfected means He was made completely like us so that He could finish His work for us and come to our aid (cf. 2:17-18; 10:5-7). Since we, in the flesh, are all "one," meaning we all share a common humanity, He is not ashamed to call us "brethren." (v. 11). God gave us dignity by creating us in His image; we abandon that dignity when we sin; Christ has restored it by taking on the flesh and sharing humanity with us and dying for us. Only when we "neglect so great a salvation" do we remain in our "undignified" state.

Much of the rest of the letter is devoted to describing Jesus as our High Priest, beginning in 2:17-18. But here, the writer concentrates on the effect of Jesus' incarnation and suffering — [1] He rendered powerless the one who had the power of death (14) and, [2] delivered those, who were afraid of death and therefore in bondage all their lives. Jesus, by taking on humanity and dying on a cross, and then being raised again, has both overcome death and freed us from the enslaving bondage of sin. These struggling pilgrims needed to know that God has swept away the only powers the devil had left — to kill the soul through sin.

Jesus, the Priest [2:17-18]

The writer comes back to his theme: Jesus "had" (lit., "was obligated") to be made like His brethren to become a priest for them. In order for us to relate to Christ as our Mediator, our

“go-between,” Jesus needed to become like us in every way. This speaks to His physical nature, not to actions and attitudes. Christ became like us in that He became fully human; He suffered temptation and experienced completely the trials and vicissitudes of humanity, yet without sin (4:15; cf. II Corinthians 5:21). He is therefore the perfect intermediary for us, since He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (v. 18).

The fleshly life of Jesus culminated in His death which was effective to make “propitiation” (cf. Romans 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10) for the sins of the people. To get a better grasp on the language of v. 17, see Leviticus 16, which describes the “Day of Atonement.”

Questions for Discussion

1. To what previous teaching does “for” refer [v. 5]?
2. Explain “the world to come” [v. 5].
3. Where is the quotation of vv. 6-8 found? Describe the context of the original passage.
4. Is “man” or Christ being discussed in vv. 5-8? Why?
5. When was Jesus “crowned with glory and honor”?
6. For whom did Jesus “taste death”?
7. What was “fitting” [v. 10]?
8. Who is “bringing many sons to glory”?
9. How was Christ “perfected” through sufferings? [v. 10]
10. In v. 11: “all from one. . .” What or who? What’s the point?
11. V. 12 comes from what OT passage? What is the context? What is the meaning here? What about v. 13 (same questions).
12. What does “in all things” cover? [v. 17]
13. Where else in Hebrews is the subject of Christ as High Priest discussed? Find the references.
14. Why do angels appear in the discussion again (v. 16)?

15. How is Christ as High Priest different than the Jewish High Priest?

16. What does “propitiation” mean? Where else do you read about it?



Thought Questions

The primary purpose of the quotation from Psalm 8 is that God's intention for man was neutralized by man's sin; Jesus then became the perfect Man envisioned by God in the beginning. To what end?

Psalm 8 expresses surprise at the deep concern the God of the universe has for man. What do these verses say to you, at this stage of your life?

The writer describes the wonderful effect of the death of Jesus. What is special about this death?

In what sense are we subject to slavery? How can we be free?

What is your greatest fear? What has Christ done to take it away?

Did Jesus have to be made like His brethren? If so, why?

What particular character trait of God does “propitiation” cure? What does it do for us?

Precisely how does Christ come to the aid of us when we are tempted?

What can you do when facing a temptation? How has Christ helped you in the past?

Unit 3

- | | |
|--------|---------------------------------------|
| 3:1-6 | Christ is greater than Moses |
| 3:7-19 | Warning against unbelief |
| 4:1-14 | Warning: be careful to enter the rest |

Hebrews 3:1 – 4:14

This section is anchored by an extended warning against unbelief, not limited to the exhortation paragraph (3:7-19), but central to the argument in 4:1-14 as well. The whole unit speaks to the necessity of holding fast to our confession by focusing on Christ so that we may one day enter into the rest God has prepared for His people (more than words from the mouth, our “confession” denotes our voluntary entrance into the service of Christ). The writer utilizes Psalm 95 as an admonition against failure — he does not want his readers to make the same mistake that Israel made. This warning was necessary because these Hebrew Christians could point to several reasons why it would be to their advantage to give up faith in Christ, not the least of which was self-preservation in the face of severe trial.

The whole unit is tied together by an *inclusio* (a technique whereby similar wording is used to bracket a unit of thought — see 2:5 and 2:16 for another example): the same terms used in 3:1 are used in 4:14, serving to mark off the passage as a unit. The idea of Jesus as High Priest is introduced in 3:1, but not picked up again until 4:14, where it serves to introduce the next major unit in which Christ’s role as High Priest is underscored.

Christ is greater than Moses [3:1-6]

The writer’s first concern in this section is to establish that Jesus is superior to the greatest leader Israel ever had, Moses. Other writers have dealt with this theme: John in his gospel at 1:17 and Paul in II Corinthians 3:4-18. He begins by telling his readers to “consider” (“fix your thoughts on,” NIV) Jesus. “Therefore” probably refers back to the argument of the whole letter up to this point: God spoke through Jesus, who is the sum total of everything (1:1-3); He is better than angels (1:4-14); He must be listened to (2:1-4); He fulfilled the ideal for man by becoming the perfect sacrifice while in the body

of a man (2:5-15); He is therefore able to come to the aid of those who are tempted and tried (2:16-18). “Therefore, holy brothers, partakers of a heavenly calling, fix your eyes on Jesus. . . .” (cf. 12:2). He is our Apostle (the ultimate “sent” one, or messenger) and our High Priest, a concept the writer will develop in the next section.

The writer alludes to Numbers 12:6-8, which records the occasion when Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses for marrying an Egyptian, and added that they wished to have some of Moses’ power for themselves. The Lord called them out of the tent of meeting and reminded Miriam and Aaron of His special relationship with Moses. To mere prophets, God revealed His will in visions and dreams. But it was not the same with Moses. Moses was “faithful in all My household,” said the Lord. “With him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings, and he beholds the form of the Lord.” With that, the anger of the Lord burned against Miriam and Aaron and he punished Miriam with a bout of leprosy for seven days (Aaron’s punishment was to know that he was partly responsible for her pain, and was scolded by the Lord).

Once again we see the importance of knowing the Old Testament context of a quote used in the New Testament. The writer is establishing the considerable greatness of Moses, and his readers would have thought of the event with Miriam and Aaron. Moses was great, indeed. But as great as Moses was, Christ is greater. The writer develops the analogy of the “house” and says that the builder of the house is worthy of more honor than the house itself. We may look at a building and be struck with its awe-inspiring design or the details of its construction; but we know that the house didn’t build itself, and we will soon give “glory” to the architect and builder. The picture is of God as the builder (v. 4) with Christ as the Son of the builder put in charge of the house (v. 6). Moses

was just a “servant” in the house, called upon to testify about the things of God that were to come (Christ! cf. Deuteronomy 18:15).

Verse 6 identifies the house over which Christ has been placed: us! Christ’s house is the church of Christ, the “household of God” (I Timothy 3:15). But our stay in the house is conditional upon our continuing to hold fast the confidence and hope until the end. We cannot expect to stay in the house without a strong commitment to the builder of the house. The Jews made the mistake of thinking that having the name of “Jew” was all that counted, but John the baptist told them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:7-9). We stay in the “house” through our full-fledged allegiance to the Son.

Warning against unbelief [3:7-19]

The second warning section begins here, but extends through most of chapter 4, though the theme changes slightly, from the anger of God with Israel in the wilderness in this section to the failure to enter the rest because of unbelief in 4:1-14.

The writer of Psalm 95 begins by praising God and then encourages the people to stay faithful and not harden their hearts as the people did in the wilderness (see Exodus 17:2-7; Numbers 20:9-13). The writer makes his argument from the latter part of the Psalm, using it as a warning against unbelief. Earlier in the chapter, he alluded to Miriam’s and Aaron’s rebellion, and now he reminds them of the rebellion of the people at Rephidum, where the people, not too long after they had left Egypt, demanded water and murmured against Moses. He argues, at least implicitly, that to return to Judaism, for whatever reason, would be to align oneself with those who rebelled in the wilderness.

The word “rest” is the Greek word *katapausin*. Nine of its ten occurrences in the New Testament are in Hebrews 3-4. This concept of “rest,” which plays such an important role in the next section, occurs here for the first time. The failure to enter the rest was a direct result of God’s anger with the people and that anger was provoked by the people’s rebellion. Notable especially is the statement that the people “did not know My ways” (v. 10) Israel

seemed to suffer throughout its history from a miscalculation of how God would or wouldn’t react; they misjudged His justice and mistook his love for permissiveness (cf. Isaiah 5:20; Malachi 2:17). It’s not unlike today, when people have turned the grace of God into a “theology of license” and often trade on His mercy, expecting God to forgive them because “that’s His job.” But people with that kind of disrespectful attitude toward the Lord of hosts cannot expect to enter into His rest.

The writer offers a prescription for avoiding the deleterious effects of unbelief, and it’s one that he repeats on other occasions: “encourage one another” (cf. 10:24ff.). Daily temptations require a daily remedy, so he says to encourage each other “day after day.” In other words, develop a sense of urgency about encouraging each other. Why? Because sin is “deceitful.” Few of us set out to sin, but circumstances and situations that occur make us seek avenues that are opposed to God’s will. We may justify ourselves, especially if we have only ourselves to answer to. Part of the dynamic of church membership is helping each other see the right way and follow it (see James 5:20).

The only way we have a part in Christ is if we hold on to what we learned “firm until the end” (v. 14). The idea of holding on until the end is a major theme in Hebrews, since it speaks directly to the situation of the readers (cf. 6:11; 10:36; 12:1). They had begun well, and had even suffered for their faith (10:32); some were even suffering now (13:3). But they were tempted to let go, to cut corners and not finish the race. The writer reminds them to forsake such a foolhardy course, since it amounts to “unbelief”; the only thing that matters is where you are at the end, whenever that end may come. To illustrate, he refers again to the Israelites who rebelled under Moses — their bodies fell in the wilderness and they never entered the rest that God had planned for them. Why? Because they were disobedient. Notice how the writer ties disobedience and unbelief together. “Unbelief” is *apistia*, “without faith” (v. 19) and results in a disobedience as serious as those who rebelled in Moses’ day. Taken with 2:1-4, the implication is that it is even more ruinous to rebel under Christ than it was to rebel in Moses’ time; yet, it

was those rebellious souls in Moses' day whose bodies fell in the wilderness. They could not enter the rest because they were without faith and "without faith, it is impossible to please Him" (11:6).

Warning: be careful to enter the rest

[4:1-14]

Thirteen times in Hebrews, the writer says "let us" (in the NASV). The word that follows "let us" here is derived from *phobia* and is translated "let us fear." Some feel that using fear as motivation is old hat and counterproductive. Those teachers often present a "gospel" that is stripped of all references to fear and consequence for disobedience. But the writer of Hebrews has no qualms about using the fear motive (see 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 12:28-28). While it is always better to serve God out of love and appreciation for all He's done, sometimes fear is the only thing that gets our attention (cf. Matthew 10:28).

The concept of God's promised "rest" takes center stage now. The writer is saying that there is nothing worse than to come short of the goal, the promised "rest." "Rest" can refer to the future, the eternal rest in heaven, or to the present rest we enjoy in kingdom.

It would be sad beyond description to miss the eternal rest; to get to the last day having fallen short of the goal. Is it possible? Yes, he says, because we're not saved by the preaching of the good news alone. Proof: the people of old heard the good news, too, but "fell." The missing ingredient was faith. Faith means different things in different contexts. "Faith" (Gk. *pistis*) sometimes simply means mental assent (see James 2:19) and other times acceptance of something as true (cf. Genesis 15:6). But usually it involves trust and commitment based upon promises. The Israelites heard, but they had no faith. Hearing without faith is just hearing — there is no profit in it (cf. James 1:22-25).

According to v. 3, it is those who have believed (past tense) that are entering (present tense) that rest. Here, the tenses suggest that those who once made the decisive choice to turn to Christ (in baptism, cf. Galatians 3:26-27) are in the process of entering into the rest that God has prepared. In most every other instance of

"rest" the idea is future. But here, the writer points out that there is some sense in which we are entering the rest now. This would equate with John's use of the term "eternal life" as both something we will have in the future (Matthew 19:29) and something that we have now (I John 5:11-13). God intends for His people to enter that rest since He prepared it from the "foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34), and this rest is prefigured in His own rest after He made the world (4:4; cf. Genesis 2:2). Yet His chosen people (Israel) blocked their entrance to His rest because they rejected the "good news." So they will not enter. Yet it remains for some of His people to enter (4:6).

From the perspective of David, who was writing Psalm 95, God had fixed a "certain day" to make this rest available. Since Israel was already in Palestine when David wrote, the "rest" was not to be completed in physical Israel, but was spiritual in nature, for if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day (v. 8). There is a "Sabbath rest" (*sabbatismos*) that remains, therefore, for the people of God. The Sabbath rest of v. 9 corresponds with "it" ("rest," *katapausis*) of v. 6, but the writer chose the former word in order to convey a nuance not found in the latter. According to William L. Lane (Word Biblical Commentary, Hebrews, Vol. 1, p. 102), the writer probably coined the word from the cognate verb that is translated "to observe/to celebrate the Sabbath." In its only occurrence outside Christian literature (Plutarch), it means "Sabbath observance." In other documents independent of Hebrews 4:9, it refers to the celebration or festivity of the Sabbath. The Greek term was employed here, then, to signify the special aspect of festivity and joy expressed in the adoration and praise of God. In v. 9, this nuance defines the character of the promised rest which awaits the people of God. The concept of this Sabbath rest, then, takes on a future application. We don't need to celebrate the Sabbath here because we will celebrate it in eternity when we enter our final, eternal "resting place" in heaven.

In 4:10, the writer again refers to God's rest from His labors after he made the world. In the course of the argument, he makes reference to

all of the “rests” that we read about in the Bible: God’s rest is the archetype; the entrance of Israel into the land of Canaan is the type; and our entrance into the “Sabbath rest” to come is the antitype. “Let us, therefore, be diligent (or eager) to enter that rest. . .” (v. 11). Again, the writer encourages his readers to stay the course and finish the race, lest they fall just like their predecessors. He then warns them again, this time on the basis of the power of God’s word, which is living and active and sharp, able to pierce and to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart (4:12-13). This is the classic passage on the strength of God’s word, but more than that, it asserts the close identification of God with His word — when the word is discerning our hearts, it is God discerning them; He is speaking to us, directly and forcefully and we had better pay attention (2:1-4), since it is to Him we will give account.

The writer completes this section where he started, pointing our attention back to Jesus, our great High Priest who has “passed through the heavens.” Typically, he ends with another “let us” and, for the third time, tells us to “hold fast our confession.”

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the “heavenly calling”?
2. Describe the logic of the writer in arguing for the superiority of Christ over Moses.
3. What are the comparisons the writer refers to between Moses and Christ?
4. In what sense are Christians a “house”?
5. What clue can you find that tells you that the writer of Hebrews considered the Psalms to be inspired by God?
6. When did Israel “provoke” God?
7. What makes God “angry”?
8. What “rest” did the children of Israel *not* enter?
9. How does the writer of Hebrews characterize those who “fall away”?
10. What is his remedy for preventing apostasy?
11. Why is sin so hard to overcome?

12. Is there any practical difference between “disobedience” and “unbelief”?
13. What should we “fear”?
14. What is required of us before we can get any profit from the preached word?
15. What is “wrath”?
16. When did God establish heaven (the place of rest)?
17. What is the connection between God’s resting on the seventh day and the rest that is provided for Christians?
18. How was the gospel (good news) preached to people in Old Testament times?
19. What does the certain day that has been fixed (v. 7) refer to? See Acts 17:30-31
20. What is the “Sabbath rest”?
21. To what are we to “hold fast”?



Thought Questions

One exhortation is repeated in each paragraph of this unit. What is it and why is the writer saying it?

Notice how the writer describes the situation of a Christian: he has a heavenly calling, he is part of the house over which Christ rules, he has confidence and hope.

Just using chapter 3, how would you describe God? How does your picture differ from the common concept of God?

Think of ways that Christians can encourage one another on a daily basis. Do you think it is as important to do that today as it was when the writer told the Hebrews to do it?

Describe the elements of the word of God brought out in the description in vv. 12-13. Describe faith, in terms of the argument in v. 4?

What happens when you read God's word? How does it affect you? Why?

Unit 4

- 4:15-5:10 The High Priesthood of Christ
- 5:11-6:8 Dullness of hearing can lead to apostasy
- 6:9-20 A reason for hope

In 2:17, the writer introduced the idea of Jesus as High Priest, showing that He was made like us so that He could become a merciful and faithful High Priest. The writer wants to develop this theme further, showing how Christ is a priest in the likeness of Melchizedek, but his audience has grown sluggish in their hearing. He therefore finds it necessary to exhort them, once again (see 2:1-4), to open their ears and their hearts so that they can receive the instruction. He is confident that they will respond (6:9-12) and that they will go on to maturity in the strength and encouragement of the hope that Christ provides.

The High Priesthood of Christ

[4:15-16]

4:15-16 reintroduces the concept of Christ as High Priest, a figure that would be rich in meaning to the Jewish audience he was addressing. The term “High Priest” combines the element of sacrifice, especially on the Day of Atonement, with the idea of compassion for sinners. He will show how Jesus fulfills both of these functions of a High Priest, only in a unique way. His aim in these two verses is to assert that Jesus is a High Priest who “suffers with us” (a more accurate expression than “sympathizing,” which suggests detached pity). He utilizes a grammatical device known as “litotes” to emphasize his point: “We do not have . . . who cannot” means we have a High Priest who *can*. The writer wants these embattled strugglers to know that Jesus is enduring their trials along with them, since He went through them, too.

The statement that Jesus was tempted, yet “without sin” is more than a theological affirmation. It means that He suffered the full brunt of temptation, taking everything Satan could throw at Him, and yet did not fold under the pressure. Sports fans are familiar with the

Hebrews 4:15 – 6:20

term “choke”; a player who “chokes” is one who can’t handle the pressure of the moment. For example, think of a golfer who must make a four-foot putt to earn \$50,000. Everything hangs on this one putt. He’s made hundreds of them before, but never under these circumstances. The pro has the ability to control himself and treat a \$50,000 putt as if he is putting on the practice green. Usually, the pro will sink a putt that the amateur can’t.

Jesus never choked. Not once. He never failed to meet the temptation and overcome it, no matter how difficult. At first, we may think that Jesus’ sinlessness places a barrier between us and Him, but the writer says that it is the very thing that allows Jesus to identify and help us (see 2:18). There is no class of temptation that Jesus has not experienced (the writer is not asserting, necessarily, that Jesus endured every conceivable temptation — some of our temptations arise from our own previous failures). He is telling us that in every trial, Jesus knows what we are going through because He has taken on the flesh and has “become one of us.”

Verse 16 answers the 5 “W’s” of journalistic inquiry (who, what, when, where, why, as well as how) with regard to Christ as High Priest: “We” are the who (the writer includes himself when he says “let us”) and we are to draw near (a technical term that would remind the Jew of “drawing near” to the tabernacle and the priest in order to offer his sacrifice); how, with confidence (or boldness); where, to the throne of grace (God’s throne); why, to receive mercy and grace; when, “in time of need” (at temptation, especially when tempted to quit, or “choke”). Notice that the writer encourages the readers to do something: draw near so that they may receive. The gift is free, but we must draw near to find it (cf. Romans 10:6-8).

5:1-10 establishes the qualifications of Jesus as High Priest, comparing Him with earthly High Priests, but with some crucial distinctions. The writer presents his argument using “concentric symmetry”:

- A The High Priest in the Old Testament [5:1]
- B Identity of the High Priest with people [5:2-3]
 - C Humility of the High Priest [5:4]
 - C' Humility of Christ [5:5-6]
- B' Identity of Christ with the people [5:7-8]
- A' The new High Priest [5:9-10]

Jesus has all of the qualifications of a High Priest: He was appointed by God, He can identify with the people and therefore He has been designated a High Priest by God. It was not Christ who took this glory on Himself, but God who placed Him in the position (cf. John 8:54). That men don't take this honor to themselves is an interesting statement considering what was going on at the time. The High Priesthood had become a political office and men were routinely taking it for themselves. But it was never meant to be that way.

In drawing the comparison with earthly High Priests, the writer draws some important distinctions. First, he quotes Psalm 110:4 which designates Christ not only a High Priest but a Son. No earthly High Priest, including the first, Aaron, was ever called a Son of God. Second, using Psalm 2:7, he says that Christ was a priest in the likeness of Melchizedek, who was also a king (“of Salem”—Genesis 14:18 — probably meaning Jerusalem). The Jews were trained by their rabbis to look for two Messiahs, a kingly one, after David, and a priestly one, after Aaron. By referring to Christ as a priest like Melchizedek, the writer combines these two ideas into the one Messiah, Jesus.

The writer draws on the function of the High Priest as well. He was to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins (5:1). Jesus “offered up” both prayers and supplications and then suffered (death), becoming the ultimate “gift and sacrifice” for the sins of the people (5:7-8). Thus, he was a superior (or “better”) High Priest than Aaron (the writer is continuing his theme of “better things”: better than the prophets, better than the angels, better than Moses; now, better than Aaron).

There are a couple of interpretative decisions to make in verses 7-8. First, what “loud crying and tears” is the writer referring to? And, second, in what sense was He “heard”? In answer to the first question, we may be inclined to think of the agony Jesus suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of His betrayal. The statement in v. 7 seems to fit with the mental state that Mark describes in 14:34: “And He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch’” (NASB). But the “loud crying and tears” seems to refer to more than one event — it took place “in the days of His flesh” and it modifies “offered up both prayers and supplications.” The crying and tears probably is better regarded as describing the nature of His work as High Priest, corresponding to verses 2-3 in regard to the earthly priest who is “beset with weakness.” Jesus, in the flesh, had to rely on God and was fraught with trials and emotion, just like us. He shared our temptations. The crucial moment came at Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed that the cup be removed from Him, if possible. Of course, the cup was not removed and Jesus suffered death on the cross.

That brings us to the next question. If Jesus prayed that the cup be removed, in what sense was He “heard because of His piety” (a careful and thoughtful reverence)? Remember that Jesus’ whole aim in life was to do God’s will (see 10:7-9; cf. John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38). Even at the garden, he had resolved to do His Father’s will: “nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will” (Mark 14:36b). Answered prayer is not “getting what we want,” because what we want may not fit what God wants. Our prayers are answered when God’s will is done, and our prayers are in accordance with His will only when we pray that His will be done (see Matthew 6:10).

It was through the cross that He, “Son though He was,” learned obedience (v. 8). This doesn’t mean that Jesus traveled a path from disobedience to obedience, but that He went through the experience by obeying, “even to the point of death” (Philippians 2:8). And this, even though one

would never expect the Son of God to suffer so (the Greek and Roman gods never suffered like humans; it was unheard of). The purpose of verse 7 is to provide an illustration of the identity of Christ with the people. It is because He has suffered that He can help those who are being tempted (2:18). Of course, we are the ones who need to know that Christ identifies with us; it was not for His benefit that He suffered.

Having been made “perfect” (that is, He fulfilled the mission that was His purpose for coming into the world) through obedience, he became the source, or cause, of salvation for all those who obey Him (v. 9). Jesus has all authority and is to be obeyed; to those who do obey, He — who obeyed — brings an everlasting deliverance, as a High Priest who “always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). He is the perfected, and therefore perfect, High Priest.

Dullness of hearing can lead to apostasy [5:11–6:8]

Jesus was better than Aaron, because He was a Son and a priest in the likeness of Melchizedek. The writer would like to develop this theme further, but there is a problem — his audience has grown sluggish in their hearing. Their spiritual progress is like that of a slug, whose movement is nearly imperceptible. The writer’s concern is not academic — he’s not worried that they won’t be able to pass a quiz. His concern is much more serious: to fail to grow is to fall back. You cannot stay stagnant for long without drifting backwards.

There is much discussion about whether “concerning him” in v. 11 refers to Melchizedek or to Christ. The NIV handles it by saying “we have much to say about this.” Though it doesn’t express the literal meaning, it is probably an accurate interpretation — the writer wants to discuss the way in which Christ is a priest in the likeness of Melchizedek. It is “hard to explain,” not so much because of the difficulty of the subject, but because they are “dull of hearing.” It is this issue he discusses in the next few verses, not resuming his discussion about Melchizedek until 7:1.

In 5:12–6:8, the writer preaches to his readers, and he pulls no punches in his preaching. He tells them that they have had

more than enough time to develop knowledge enough to be teachers, but instead they are just “beginners,” in need of someone to teach them the basic principles of God’s word. They need to learn the ABC’s again when they should be diagramming sentences! He uses food as an illustration of their condition: they need milk, like a babies, instead of the solid food that normal adults can handle. Babies drink milk because they have no experience with meat; likewise, his readers are capable of drinking only milk because they have little experience with “the word of righteousness.” TDNT (2:198) explains this in terms of a baby who is unable to understand the “words” of a grown-up. The “word of righteousness” can refer to the words that tell us how to be justified (like Paul’s use of “righteousness of God” in Romans), or to the words that tell us how to conduct ourselves. Lane says that the “word of righteousness” was a technical term for the teaching that one must never deny Christ, even if it cost him his life. In any case, the church had not progressed as far as they should have and thus were still “babes.”

The writer is not excusing them, however, as v. 14 clearly shows. These Christians had failed to practice what they had learned and thus were exposing themselves to grave risk. If they should be called to give up their lives for Christ, would their “senses” be trained enough so they could make the proper choice between good and evil? Their lack of progress up to this point suggests not.

Chapter 6 opens with the admonition to leave (or “leave standing,” Lane) those elementary teachings about Christ and move on to more meaty matters. They are to press on to maturity. The Greek word for “maturity” is in the same word group as that used in describing the *perfection* of Christ in 5:9, and the “mature” in 5:14. It refers to that which reaches the end that is intended. Christ met His goal, He completed His mission. Christians, too, have a goal to reach and should not rest until they do (it may take a lifetime; in the first century, that lifetime was often cut short, and it was often in martyrdom that they came to “maturity,” i.e., that they fulfilled their intended purpose. Christ was glorified when they did not “love their lives even to death” — Revelation 12:11).

It is interesting to notice what this “teaching about Christ” includes because there are those who teach that there are certain doctrines in the Bible that are more significant than others, the so-called “core” gospel. These issues are sometimes referred to as the “polar stars” of the faith. Usually, these are the death and resurrection of Christ and other matters that center in the cross. This is called “preaching the cross” or “preaching Christ.”

Yet notice what the writer includes in “teaching about the Christ” in verses 1-2: repentance, faith, baptism(s), laying on of hands, resurrection and judgment. These are the “basics,” he says and are included in “teaching about the Christ” (cf. Acts 8:35, re: “preaching Jesus” and what that involved). While a couple of these subjects may be included in a list presuming to delineate a “core gospel,” I’m certain others would not. The point is, of course, that teaching any biblical subject is “preaching Christ.” Paul “shunned not to declare the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

The subjects themselves are somewhat self-explanatory and are divided in three groups of two pairs. Repentance from “dead works” can mean either repentance (turning from evil works that lead to death; cf. Romans 6:21) or from a “works-righteousness” that cannot save (the probable meaning in 9:14). Obviously, faith is an important subject in the book, and will be taken up in more detail later. Yet, here, it is numbered among the foundational issues that the readers need to move beyond. “Repentance” refers to what must be given up and “faith” refers to what must be embraced. Thus both the negative and positive sides of the Christian mind are presented (Westcott, p. 144).

“Instructions about washings” (*baptismos*) probably refers to Christian baptism. Modern day commentators don’t like this conclusion, and explain that the plural form argues against it. But all the plural suggests is that there was teaching about different kinds of baptisms (remember that the Jews were familiar with several kinds of “washings”). To the Jewish mind, baptism for forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16) would need to be distinguished from other “washings.” We, too, must know the distinction between baptism in water and other “baptisms”

mentioned in Scripture (e.g., of the Holy Spirit, suffering, etc.). The word “baptism” itself simply means “immersion” (from *bapto*, “to dip”).

“Laying on of hands” was a common practice, both in the Old Testament and the New. In Numbers 8:10, the sons of Israel laid their hands on the Levites to set them apart for service and in 27:18, Moses was instructed to lay hands on Joshua (cf. Deuteronomy 34:9). In the New Testament, laying on of hands was the means by which the apostles imparted gifts to others (see Acts 6:6; 8:17; 13:3; 19:6; I Timothy 4:14; II Timothy 1:6).

The last pair of subjects that make up foundational material is about “last things” (eschatology). The “resurrection of the dead” (taken up in the Old Testament in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2, and, of course, numerous places in the New Testament; see especially I Corinthians 15) is the main principle upon which we rest our hope. “Eternal judgment” suggests more than the fact that we will be judged, but refers to the continuing effects of that judgment — it will be everlasting. Again, remember that this was “basic” material that anyone who has been a Christian for very long ought to have known.

The writer says in v. 3 that “we” (including himself) will press on past these basic concepts to maturity, “if God permits” (“Lord willing,” or, perhaps, “if God spares our lives”). He then issues a stern warning in verses 4-6, focusing on the catastrophic results of falling away. He describes the status of a Christian — he is “enlightened” (though this was a technical word for “baptism” in the second century, it probably refers here to coming into the light, as in Colossians 1:12-13, or to a Christian’s adherence to the “Light of the world,” as in John 1:4-9; 8:12; 9:5, etc.). To “taste” (“of the heavenly gift,” v. 4, see II Corinthians 9:15, and “of the good word of God,” v. 5) is to experience the blessing of being a Christian. To be a “partaker of the Holy Spirit” means to participate and share in the work that the Spirit has done (see John 16:8; Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:13). The “powers of the age to come” probably refer to the distinguishing characteristics of the new age, as described in 2:4 as “signs and wonders.”

After describing what a person has in Christ, he then describes his situation if, in spite of these blessings, he turns his back on Christ and “falls away.” He cannot be renewed again to repentance (a change of mind) since he is “crucifying the Son of God for himself and putting Him to open shame.” The writer is describing the most extreme state of apostasy when one who decides, after becoming a Christian, that he has no need for Christ anymore, and turns his back on Him. There is probably an implication in this warning about renouncing Christ because of the threat of death (cf Rev. 12:11; 21:8). Confessing Christ would become a capital offense in the Roman Empire in the lifetime of most of the readers of this letter. They would be called upon to state openly their allegiance to the Emperor and publicly renounce their commitment to Christ; to say, as the Jews did when yelling for Christ’s crucifixion, “We have no king but Caesar!” To do that would be like putting the spikes into the hands and feet of Jesus again, and crucifying Him afresh. How much more serious could this warning be?

In verses 7-8, the writer uses an illustration from farming, probably alluding to Isaiah 5, the song of the vineyard. When the ground has been prepared and the rain nourishes it, the natural result is that it will produce crops. In that case, the ground is useful to the farmer and those who eat its produce. But if it yields weeds instead of fruit, even though it has received every provision needed to produce good crops, it is good for nothing except to be cursed, and its end is only to be burned. Of course, he is not speaking of dirt here; he is speaking of the hearts and minds of men who, given every provision by God (the Vinedresser), yet still produce nothing but thorns and thistles. The warning is simple enough: if we don’t press on to maturity, we risk falling away; and if we fall away, our end is to be cursed and burned.

A reason for hope [6:9-20]

The writer changes to a more optimistic tone. He is convinced that they can put the past behind them and build the kind of faith that will see them through to the end.

He reminds them that though they may be lacking maturity today, God will not forget their

past work and the love demonstrated in service to the saints (v. 10). Pointing to the past is a method this author will use again to urge faithfulness in the future (see 10:32ff). A remembrance of past days when we endured can help restore the confidence that we need to face an uncertain future. Here, the writer focuses on God and on ministering to the saints as the most visible evidence of their concern for the things of God. We may have expected him to say, “Remember when you attended all the services and gave of your means.” Those things are important, but only if we are truly servants on behalf of others.

The past can help them build confidence for the future, but they had better not “rest on their laurels.” Once again, the writer stresses the need to be just as diligent today as they were then — you can’t let up, you can’t give in! Keep pressing on until it is all over (6:11). Those who are sluggish will not make it (“dullness of hearing” leads to “dullness in doing”). Instead, be imitators — take on the attitudes and actions — of those who inherited what God has promised through their faith and patience. It takes trust in the promises of God followed by patient endurance, if we ever expect to inherit what God has provided for us. Don’t mistake this with the notion that we do works to earn eternal life. We do works because of what we have in Christ — our doing is an expression of our love for the God who has “enlightened,” us (and given us the other blessings spelled out in 6:4-5). We labor in light of our status as children, not to attain, earn, or even maintain the status.

The writer uses Abraham as a supreme example of this “faith and patience,” although, as usual, the real message here is about God’s faithfulness (see v. 10). God promised Abraham that He would make him a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham accepted the statement and acted on it, even though the promise of a son didn’t come to pass for 25 years.

The first test of faith, perhaps, is a willingness to wait for God to act. We tend to rush God’s plan. Moses did it when he killed the Egyptian. Abraham did it when he had Ishmael by Hagar at the behest of Sarah. But there are many admonitions in Scripture to “wait on the Lord” (Psalm 27:14; 37:1-8, 34; 59:9; Isaiah 40:31;

49:23). Waiting does not necessarily mean doing nothing, but it does mean to allow God to work out His plan. The opposite is when we take matters in our own hands. Waiting is hard, but we must allow God to do His part. Failure to wait, once we understand the promise, demonstrates a lack of faith. Be patient.

Eventually, the promise came through the birth of Isaac. Later, Abraham was told to offer him up, and Abraham again obeyed God. After Abraham proved himself in this test, God repeated the promise that he would become a great nation, and added an oath (or confirmation) to the promise (Genesis 22:16-17). While it was not necessary for God to add an oath, He did it for the benefit of Abraham and for men, who settle everything by oaths (v. 16). Man would relate to an “oath” perhaps more than a naked promise.

It is this same God who makes promises to us and, in a sense, guarantees them with an “oath,” so that by two unchangeable things, in both of which it is impossible for God to lie (cf. Titus 1:2), we can “flee to hope” (v. 18). What do we flee from? Persecution? The evil in the world? Death? All these, and more, were applicable to the struggling pilgrims to whom this letter was addressed, and they are similarly applicable to us. It is this hope (“confident expectation”) that anchors our soul. An anchor has one purpose — to keep a vessel from drifting out to sea. Our hope is like that. It keeps our eyes focused on Jesus who has the ability and the desire to see us through, to help us finish the race that we set out to run when we were baptized into Christ and volunteered to serve Him. Christ is our forerunner; He has been there already and knows what it is like, so He can provide all the support we need, lifting us over every hurdle (2:18; 4:15).

In asserting that Jesus has “entered within the veil,” the writer returns to his original theme, that of Jesus Christ as High Priest, in the likeness of Melchizedek. He’ll develop this theme in detail in the next chapter.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Jesus “sympathize” with us? Is sympathize the best word to describe what He does?
2. In what way is Jesus like an earthly High Priest?
3. What are the unique qualifications of Christ?
4. Who was Melchizedek?
5. In what sense was Jesus “heard” when he prayed?
6. Describe the “obedience” of Christ.
7. To whom is Jesus the source of eternal salvation?
8. V. 11 — concerning whom?
9. Why should the people have been “teachers”?

10. What are “elementary principles”? What are “oracles”?
11. Who needs milk and who can handle solid food?
12. How are our senses trained? To what end?
13. Describe the Christian in the terms the writer uses in chapter 6.
14. What risk is inherent in failing to “press on to maturity”?
15. How would you describe the backslider from this passage?
16. What is the message of v. 9? What is the rationale behind the message of v. 9?
17. What specific acts does the writer refer to that these people practiced in the past?
18. What is the “full assurance of hope”?
19. How did Abraham demonstrate his faith? What element does the writer emphasize here? Why?
20. Why did God add an oath to His promise?
21. How do we “lay hold” of the hope that is set before us? What does hope do for us?



Thought Questions

What is the significance for us of the fact that Jesus never sinned?

Describe why we should get encouragement from 6:8-20.

Unit 5

Hebrews 7:1—8:13

7:1-25 Christ in the likeness of Melchizedek

7:26-8:6 A more excellent ministry

8:7-13 A new and better covenant

The writer aims to prove that the old order has given way to the new order and that the new order is far superior to the old. He wants to persuade the troubled Hebrews that going back to the old way amounts to a shrinking back to destruction. So they need to cultivate faith “to the preserving of the soul” (10:39).

Only in the book of Hebrews do we read that Jesus is a High Priest. Yet, given the prominent place of the High Priest in the Old Covenant, the analogy is an important one for Bible students. The priest was one who stood between the people and God, a “go-between” or “mediator.” The emphasis in Hebrews is on Jesus’ function as our sacrificial Mediator. Though sinless, He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (II Corinthians 5:21).

As the Son of God, He is the only one truly qualified to stand before God and make a plea based on His righteousness. His sacrifice was a perfect one that ushered in a new covenant with God for us. Therefore, “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25, NASV). Other writers use terms like “Advocate” or “Mediator” to describe Christ’s priestly role (I John 2:1; cf. I Timothy 2:5).

Christ in the Likeness of Melchizedek [7:1-25]

In chapter 7, the writer resumes the discussion of Christ’s likeness to Melchizedek which he started in 5:10. In the interim, he thought it prudent to warn the Hebrews about the dangers of becoming dull of hearing, perhaps with the aim of shaming them into paying attention to what could prove to be a challenging discussion. However, he was “convinced of better things” concerning them (6:9), confident that they would buckle down and learn this important lesson about how Christ compares with the mysterious figure named Melchizedek.

In 7:1-10, the writer once again utilizes a literary technique called “concentric symmetry”:

- A The meeting with Abraham [7:1a]
- B The blessing bestowed [7:1b]
 - C The tithe received [7:2]
 - C' The tithe received [7:4]
- B' The blessing bestowed [7:6]
- A' The meeting with Abraham [7:10]

The original account of the meeting is recorded in Genesis 14:18-20. The only other mention of Melchizedek in the Bible, other than in Hebrews, is in Psalm 110:4 which the writer quotes in 5:6 and 7:17. When Abraham (then, Abram) returned from defeating the king of Elam, Chedorlaomer, Melchizedek met him along the way and blessed him. Abraham then gave him a tithe of all he had, and Melchizedek moved on, never to be heard from or mentioned again until David predicts, in Psalm 110:4, that his “Lord” would come in the likeness of Melchizedek.

For centuries, this account must have intrigued the Jews — what could be the significance of the man, described as both “priest” and “king”? A full explanation was not to come until the writer of Hebrews penned his letter to the struggling Jewish Christians in the middle of the first century AD. Some of the riddles about Melchizedek are solved in Hebrews 7.

First, the writer informs us that his name means “king of righteousness” (7:2), but he was also “King of Salem.” “Salem” means “peace” (Hebrew, shalom). “King of Salem” may just mean he was a

king who brought peace (cf. Luke 2:14; 19:38 re: Jesus) or it may indicate that he was king of the city that eventually became Jerusalem (cf. Psalm 76:2). Second, he tells us that Melchizedek was “without genealogy” and had “neither beginning of days nor end of life.” Of course, the writer is not suggesting that Melchizedek actually was without father or mother, but is referring only to what is recorded about him. It was common in Jewish interpretation to assume, within reason, that if an event was not recorded, it did not happen. So Melchizedek was “without genealogy” in the sense that it was not written down. This is remarkable, given the number of genealogies in the first part of Genesis.

There is another important lesson here: the writer is refusing to “go beyond what is written” (I Corinthians 4:6) in his discussion of Melchizedek. Instead of trying to solve unrevealed issues about who he was and why he did what he did, he is simply focusing on what is written in Genesis 14 and using it to make his point. Too often we are tempted to “read between the lines,” psychoanalyze, and speculate about the whys and wherefores of the actions of biblical characters. We may be guilty of reading into the text instead of taking it at face value. Instead, we should be careful to draw our conclusions only from what is revealed.

The writer refers to the meeting between Melchizedek and Abraham but, unlike Genesis 14:18-20, which records the meeting matter-of-factly, the writer of Hebrews tells us something about its significance, drawing some logical conclusions from the meeting, in light of Psalm 110:4. In fact, Hebrews 7 is something of a commentary (the Jews called it a *midrash*) on Genesis 14:8-20 and Psalm 110:4.

Since nothing about his genealogy is recorded, Melchizedek is a type of Christ, the Son of God, whose significance does not lie in His human lineage, since He is an eternal being (see John 1:1-3). In a sense, therefore, Melchizedek is a priest “perpetually”; that is, since he has no [recorded] “end,” there is no end to his priesthood (remember that priests were to serve for the duration of their lives).

Remember the writer’s purpose here is to show the superiority of the priesthood of Christ

over the Levitical priesthood. One way of doing that is to compare the priesthood of Christ with that which came from Aaron, through the tribe of Levi. If Christ is a priest (and Psalm 110:4 says He is), then the logical conclusion is that the priesthood has changed. If the priesthood has changed, then there must have been a change in the law (7:12). If the law has changed, the writer implies, what will become of those who are trying to find comfort in returning to the Law? In a way, there is no law to return to — it has been changed.

In 7:4, the writer focuses on the greatness of Melchizedek. Remember that, for a Jew, there was no one greater than Abraham, Moses and David. But the writer has already shown how Christ is superior to Moses (3:5-6) and implied, through the quotation of Psalm 110:4, that He is superior to David (the Jewish reader would be familiar with Psalm 110 where David said “the Lord [Yahweh] said to my Lord [Adonai] . . .” and would ask the question, “who is David calling ‘my Lord’?” The answer is Jesus. Peter used the same argument in Acts 2:34-36.) Now, he shows that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham since Abraham received a blessing from him and paid him tithes (and since the Levitical priesthood eventually descended from Abraham, “Levi” paid tithes to Melchizedek, too — v. 9). The writer’s conclusion: it is the greater one who gives the blessing to the lesser (7:7) and the greater receives tithes. Therefore, Christ is greater than Abraham, since His priesthood is “according to the order of Melchizedek” (or after the likeness of).

The writer draws some additional logical conclusions from the events concerning Melchizedek and Abraham. “If perfection was through the Levitical priesthood” (7:11) there would be no need of another (*heteros*, another of a different kind, qualitatively different, as distinguished from *allos*, another of the *same* kind) priest, whether after the order of Melchizedek or not. Remember that the writer is showing how men are “perfected.” His aim is to convince his frightened readers that their intention to go back to the provisions of the Law are ill-founded, since they can never be made “perfect” under that old system.

“Perfection” speaks to the problem of sin — the Levitical priests ministered on behalf of men, making sacrifices for their own sins and the sins of the people. “Perfection” means complete redemption, remission of sins. If those sacrifices by imperfect men, utilizing the blood of bulls and goats, had been able to accomplish man’s perfection there would be no need of Jesus Christ. But, the writer aims to show that it is impossible for the “blood of bulls and goats to take away sin” (10:4). That is why David spoke of another Priest in Psalm 110:4.

Up to now, the readers of the letter had acknowledged that Jesus was the “Priest” David spoke about. But they had not understood completely that this should have affected their view of the Law. Again, if the priesthood has changed then the law must have changed, also (7:12). Moses spoke nothing about a priest coming from Judah, the tribe of David. Yet Jesus came from Judah (7:13-14; notice that the writer treats as *conclusive proof* that a priest could not come from Judah because “Moses spoke nothing concerning priests” with regard to that tribe. Silence is not authority, a lesson many yet to learn!).

The writer’s intention becomes even more clear with a close reading of verses 11-28. He is not as interested in the priesthood itself as he is in establishing that Christ’s priesthood is not based on the Law. Instead, the basis of His priesthood is the “power of an indestructible life” (7:16), which he has illustrated by reference to Melchizedek. The duration of Christ’s priesthood is forever, unlike any priest under the Law, since the tenure of Old Testament High Priests ended at death.

Again, the writer turns to Psalm 110:4 to prove his point (7:17). He continues to draw out the logical conclusions from his argument: if Christ’s priesthood is not based on the Law of Moses, then the Law has been “set aside” (7:18). Why? Because it is “weak” and “useless” in regard to making men perfect (forgiving sins). Without reference to other passages, we might get the impression that the Law itself was weak and useless, but that is not so. Indeed, the Law is the mind of God revealed to man and is therefore “holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). But therein lies the problem. Because of

the Law’s inflexible perfection, it is unable to bring men to “perfection.” It is powerless to purify men because men have sinned and therefore violated the Law; and since the Law has no provision for redemption, it only serves to drive men deeper into sin. Therefore, it is “weak” because of the flesh and becomes a minister of death, instead of a giver of life (see Romans 7:7-13; Galatians 2:16-21; 3:9-14). A completely different approach is needed if men are ever going to be right with God.

The “different approach” is Jesus, who has opened the way of reconciliation and peace with the Father. He has given us hope, allowing us to “draw near” to God without the need of human mediators (7:19). Hope is a psychological benefit. It means “confident expectation,” and is an “anchor of the soul” (6:19). Hope is an “anchor” because it is based in the promise of God, sealed by an oath, and fulfilled in the action at the cross. Therefore, this hope is a better hope (7:21-22), since Jesus — the Son of God — is the personal guarantor of a better covenant (7:22). The distinction is between Jesus and the Law. There can be no hope in the Law, since it is designed only to point out errors. But there is hope in Jesus because faith in Him creates a relationship with God that features forgiveness as its prime characteristic.

This is the first time the word “covenant” (*diatheke*) appears in Hebrews, but it is found 13 more times in the letter. A “covenant” is an agreement to arrange or dispose of one’s affairs. It is a “compact” one makes with another. God made many covenants with His people over the centuries, including the covenant with Noah (signed by the rainbow), the covenant with Abraham (repeated a number of times), and the covenant with Israel (mediated by Moses). The crowning covenant is the “new covenant,” which was sealed by the blood of Jesus.

In chapter 8, the writer will show how this New Covenant is superior. His purpose in doing this is to remind his readers that there is no turning back — the New Covenant is “better”: it has a better Mediator, a better Priest, and produces a better hope. Why would anyone go back to an inferior way that is based on a Law that can only condemn and not forgive, and is

mediated by imperfect priests? Furthermore, there was no real consistency in the priesthood since none of the human priests lived on to make intercession year after year (7:23).

On the other hand, there is Jesus. He is a risen-from-the-dead High Priest who has “sat down” in the Holy of Holies and abides there forever (7:24). Therefore, His is a permanent priesthood — He lives forever and therefore is able to “save forever” (or “completely”) those who draw near to Him (7:25). Christ is not shackled with any of the disadvantages of earthly priests, but is in a permanent position to help us (cf. 2:14-18; 4:15).

A more excellent ministry [7:26-8:6]

In 2:10, the writer said it was “fitting” or appropriate that God would make perfect the one (Jesus) who would “bring many sons to glory” (cf. Isa. 53:11). “Fitting” means that it fits God’s plans or designs — it is in keeping with His overall purpose for man. Now, he argues that it is appropriate — it is compatible with God’s design for the universe and man who lives in it — that we have a High Priest who is unlike earthly priests. This High Priest sacrificed Himself, died the death of a common criminal, even though He was personally “holy, innocent, undefiled, and separated from sinners” (He does not share humankind’s common malady). He is the perfect High Priest. Ultimately, He was “exalted above the heavens” and is now able to intercede for us who are still struggling against sin (7:26).

At the end of chapter 7, the writer sums up his argument thus far: Jesus doesn’t need to offer daily sacrifices because He offered Himself once-for-all (7:27). Finally, he says that the Law could only appoint men who are weak to the office of High Priest, but the “word of the oath” (see v. 20ff.), which came after the Law was given, appointed a Son to the office and He is made perfect (complete) forever (7:28). “Now the main point. . . .” (8:1): we have such a High Priest (i.e., holy, undefiled, perfected forever) who is sitting in heaven at this very moment, interceding for us at the right hand of God, serving, not in a temple constructed by humans, but in heaven itself.

Christ rules from heaven, which is the true tabernacle (dwelling place of God). The church is sometimes spoken of as a “temple” (I Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21). In Hebrews, however,

context seems to demand that the “true tabernacle” is heaven itself. 8:1 tells us that Jesus has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty “in the heavens.” 8:5 says the earthly tabernacle was a copy and shadow of “heavenly things,” and while the latter term could refer to the church (that is, things relating to the kingdom of God), that conclusion seems to require a reading into the text. Later, in 9:11, the writer says that Jesus entered through the “greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands” and 9:24 seems to settle the issue by saying that He did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.” The point, once again, is that Jesus is in heaven as an Advocate for us, taking our case directly to the highest Court in the universe and securing justification for those who have faith (cf. I John 2:1). Go back and read again 4:14-16.

In 8:3, the writer takes his contrast between Jesus and earthly High Priests a step further by saying that if the latter offered both “gifts and sacrifices” (see 5:1) then Jesus should have something to offer also. How very subtly the author of Hebrews refers to the death of Christ! He offered Himself, “learning (experiencing) obedience through the things that He suffered” (5:8), becoming both the gift and sacrifice. The writer then presses the point once again: if Christ’s priesthood is supposed to be an earthly one, then He doesn’t qualify since He could not be a priest under the Law (8:4). Those priests, however, served only the shadow, not the reality (8:5). Again, the writer makes a subtle point — “if you have the real thing, why would you want to go back to a copy?” He also connects his thoughts here with the warning given to Moses regarding the tabernacle to “make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain” (Exodus 25:40).

Why was Moses to be so careful? Because the earthly tabernacle was a copy and shadow of heavenly things. Isn’t there a lesson here about being careful in those matters that we connect with our service to God? Our earthly “religious” activities reflect on the heavenly. That is why God has given us a pattern to follow and why we must be careful to follow it. Those who improvise and disregard the pattern fail to

appreciate the spirit behind the instructions given to Moses on the mountain. God said, “This is how I want things done and when you do them this way, you’ll be reflecting the heavenly things.” After all, God knows what those “heavenly things” are; we don’t.

Once again the writer sums up his thoughts with the word “better” (8:6). “Better” is a qualitative term, meant to elicit a comparison. Throughout the letter, the writer has been setting the old order and new order side-by-side and encouraging his audience to compare them. On the one hand, you have the earthly tabernacle, it’s an earthly priesthood and a covenant based on Law; on the other, Jesus, who comes with a better service, because, unlike the service of the priests, His service accomplished our redemption. He is therefore a mediator of a better covenant because it is enacted on better promises which gives us a better hope.

A new and better covenant [8:7-13]

“New and Improved!” “Under New Management!” Why would someone selling a product or service advertise that what they have to offer is “new”? They hope to convince you that the new is better than the old. “New” Tide gets clothes whiter; “new” Wrigley’s gum is sweeter, with less calories and still freshens your breath. The new is better than the old, or there would be no need to eliminate the old.

The writer, in 8:7, makes the argument that if the old system, based on Law, had been without a flaw — in other words, if it had been able to accomplish the redemption of man’s sins — there never would have been another plan put into place. Paul said in Galatians 3:21, “If a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.” It is important to understand two things: (1) man’s righteousness is the goal of God’s planning in Christ and, (2) law is unable to impart life, not because law itself is bad, but because of man’s weakness in keeping it. God knew that man would fail to keep the law and provided a remedy for sin before the foundation of the world (see Ephesians 1:4). Righteousness through Christ was not an “afterthought” in the mind of God. Law was given to show man his

need for Christ. Paul deals with that aspect of the Law in Galatians and Romans. The writer’s emphasis here is to show the superiority of the New Covenant and to encourage his readers to stay faithful to it.

In 8:8, the writer says that God found “fault with them” (we would expect “it,” in reference to the law; instead he refers to the people who were unable to keep the law — the house of Israel and Judah), followed by an extended quote from Jeremiah 31:31-34. He wants to show that the New Covenant was part of God’s plan even during the period of time that the Old Covenant was still in place. The Old Covenant was never meant to be permanent and the Law and the Prophets said so. If these readers are going to base their decision to go back to the old system on what is written in the Old Testament, they are going to run into prophecies like this one that foretell of a better one to come. Among other things, that prophecy says that the New Covenant will be unlike the old one (8:9). They didn’t keep the old one and God “did not care for them.” The original statement in Jeremiah 31:32 says that they broke the covenant “even though I was a husband to them.” The idea is that God did not continue to maintain the relationship that they broke through their disobedience. Time after time, Israel had committed spiritual adultery, until God finally broke the bond with them. The Old Testament is replete with the stories of Israel “playing the harlot” and God cutting them off, but then returning to them again. In what seemed to be the final blow, God departed from the temple and left it open to the Babylonian invaders (see the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Habakkuk for example). Yet even then God later restored the people to their land and gave them another opportunity to serve Him.

Israel, as a nation, never did serve God. Still, God was faithful to the promise made many years ago to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that “all nations would be blessed.” Here, in this quote from Jeremiah 31, God says that He will make a New Covenant that will be different in nature from the old one. Under the first, a man came into the relationship with God through physical birth into the community of Israel — if you were

an “Israelite,” or could become one, you were in God’s “household of faith.” Even newborn babies, who had made no decision of faith, were part of the community of God’s people. By its nature, the Old Covenant required that those who became of age be taught the Law and its ordinances. The law was external — it had to be learned, and there was a need to come to a true knowledge of the Lord — a baby was not born with such knowledge (see Isaiah 54:13). When the people went astray, God would send prophets who would preach to them with the aim of giving them a knowledge of the Lord. In Ezekiel, for example, the Lord says at least 65 times in reference to the message Ezekiel was to preach, “then they will know that I am the Lord.”

Things are different under the New Covenant, however. Instead of placing a person in the family of God regardless of his will, those in the New Covenant are there because of a conscious choice, based upon their knowledge of the Lord. Everyone who is under the New Covenant “knows the Lord.” Infants can’t “know the Lord” and therefore a baby is not under the New Covenant. But infants who die go to heaven because they are innocent, unable to sin. All others must have their sins taken away. The Old Covenant could not accomplish that kind of forgiveness; but God has done it through Christ’s sacrifice.

A question arises at this point: if the New Covenant is here, then what has happened to the old? In 8:13, the writer says that the old is obsolete and “ready to disappear.” Why doesn’t he just say the Old Covenant is gone, since the New Covenant was already in place when he wrote his letter? My guess is that he making reference to the final, ultimate judgment on the old system, the destruction of Jerusalem that took place in AD 70, soon after this letter was written. In a couple of years (from the time of the writing of the letter), all references to “Judaism,” at least as far as the temple was concerned, would be strictly academic.

Questions for Discussion

1. Trace the writer’s logic concerning the interaction between Abraham & Melchizedek — what’s his point?
2. What does “without father, without mother” mean [7:3]?
3. Why does the writer add “although these are descended from Abraham” in 7:5?
4. The writer assumes that his audience accepts the premise that another priest would arise “after the order of Melchizedek.” Upon what basis can he make that assumption?
5. What does the writer mean by “perfection”?
6. Explain why Jesus could not legally be a High Priest under the Law. If not under the Law, then what is the basis for the High Priesthood of Christ?
7. In what way is the Law “weak and useless” [7:18]? Why is that important?
8. What is an “oath” and what does it have to do with Jesus as High Priest?

9. What is the duration of Christ's priesthood? What does it mean to us?
10. What was "fitting" [7:26]?
11. Relate the terms in 7:26-27 with the requirements for a priest under the Old Covenant. What is the difference between the qualifications of earthly priests and Jesus?
12. What is the "word of the oath"?
13. The writer's "main point" is that "we" have a High Priest. What difference does it make?
14. The tabernacle, the priesthood and other components of the Law had a purpose that pointed beyond themselves. What was it?
15. What is a "mediator"? Give some OT examples of "mediators." How many do we need today?
16. Why is the New Covenant better? What are some of the "better promises"?
17. Explain why the first covenant was not faultless.
18. When v. 8 says "days are coming," to which "days" does the writer refer?
19. The writer speaks in the third person in vv. 8-9 ("them," "their," "they"). To whom is he referring?
20. Verse 10 says "after those days." What days?
21. Is there no teaching about the Lord to be done under the New Covenant? If so, what is the meaning of v. 11?
22. What does it mean to "know the Lord"?
23. What is the primary difference between the Old and New covenants?
24. What is "ready to disappear"? Did it?



Thought Questions

Jesus is High Priest on the basis of an “indestructible life” [7:16] and He “always lives to make intercession” [7:25]. To what aspect of Christ’s experience and being is the writer referring and why is it crucial both to his original audience and to us?

Do you feel that you have been “perfected”? Consider how this section of the Bible affects your confidence.

Why did the writer remind his readers about the warning God gave Moses about making everything “according to the pattern”? Do you believe God gives us a pattern to follow in religious matters today?

There are many logical arguments and references to “doctrine” in this section. How can we put this teaching to use on a daily basis? Consider how the Bible speaks to the whole person: the intellect, the emotion, the will (mind, feelings, heart).

The writer speaks about a covenant that will be made with the house of Israel (vv. 8, 10). What does that have to do with us?

Take this opportunity to consider the impact of the New Covenant to those of us blessed enough to live under it. If everything else was taken away from you, would the statement of 8:12 be enough to sustain you?

Unit 6

The tabernacle — a symbol:	9:1-10
Christ, the substance:	9:11-28
Christ, the perfect sacrifice:	10:1-18

Hebrews 9:1 – 10:18

Chapter 8 ended with the writer telling his readers that the first covenant was obsolete because of the coming of the New Covenant. That first covenant was therefore on the verge of disappearing (8:13). He continues his discussion of the relative merits of the two covenants in chapter 9 via a look at the tabernacle. He uses the tabernacle to show how the things in the Old Testament were merely a shadow of the real. The reason he refers to the tabernacle instead of the temple is probably to fix his audience's mind back on days of Moses and Aaron, when the Law was first given and practiced. That the temple was still standing when Hebrews was written seems clear enough from 9:8.

The tabernacle—a symbol: 9:1-10

Before we examine this passage, we should note v. 5: “of these things we cannot now speak in detail.” The writer has not sought to give us a detailed description of the tabernacle and its worship because a detailed description is not necessary to his main argument that there was no power in the regulations of the Old Testament to make the worshipper “perfect in conscience” (9:9). The writer’s goal is to show that only Christ can accomplish this “perfection.” The ordinances and practices of the old system were not capable of opening access to God.

The writer does tell us that the first tabernacle is a “symbol for the present time” (9:9). Therefore, we know that the tabernacle has a symbolic significance which is explained in chapter 9. The old tabernacle pointed to a “more perfect tabernacle” which was to come (9:11) and was “a mere copy of the true one” (9:24). Similarly, he’ll show that the old sacrifices were just copies and shadows of the “better sacrifices” (9:23) and of the one all-sufficient offering of Christ (10:10, 14).

The writer, then, is content with a short description of the layout of the tabernacle, depicting the outer portion (the holy place) and the inner portion (the Holy of Holies), along with some of the furniture that graced the interior. There is a difficulty posed by the writer’s assertion that the altar of incense was located behind the second veil in the Holy of Holies (9:3-4). Exodus 30:6 says that the altar was in front of the veil, in the holy place, not in the Holy of Holies. At least seven solutions have been suggested by scholars, any one of which would resolve the difficulty: (1) there was a copyist error in the manuscripts; (2) the altar was really inside the veil, as the writer states here, and that there is some other explanation for Exodus 30:6; (3) the veil was moved back on the Day of Atonement so that the High Priest would have ready access to the altar on that day; (4) there were two altars of incense (though there is no evidence for two altars); (5) the Greek word translated golden altar in Hebrews 9:4 should be golden censer, an item that would be taken behind the veil; (6) the altar was moved on the Day of Atonement (this fits with a possible interpretation of I Kings 6:22 which can be rendered: “the entire altar [of incense] was in the inner sanctuary.”) (7) the altar was “inside” figuratively, by doctrinal association. This is supported by reference to the writer’s use of “having” (*echousia*) instead of the expression “in which” (*en he*) which would clearly refer to spatial location. Alternatives 3, 6 and 7 are the most likely solutions.

In 9:6-7, the writer describes the “divine worship” that takes place in the “earthly sanctuary”—priests continually (twice daily) entered the holy place to make sacrifices, but only the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies, once a year, with blood that he offered first for himself and then for the sins of the

people (cf. 7:27). V. 8 gives us a clue as to why it was important for Moses to build all things according to the pattern that God had given him (8:5). The Holy Spirit is

“signifying” (through inspiration) that the way into the Holy of Holies was not disclosed as long as the tabernacle service of the Old Covenant was still relevant (or “standing”). That is, access to God, restricted under the Old Covenant to the once-per-year entrance of the High Priest behind the veil, was closed off to the people under that old system. But Christ came and opened the way to God (10:19ff; I Peter 2:5), removing the barriers (Colossians 2:14). People who insist on observing the old system, with its physical rules and obligations, are shutting themselves off from Christ, the only source of access to God (John 14:6; cf. Galatians 5:4; 3:3).

Perhaps we have here the key to the entire section, if not the entire letter: Jesus Christ has opened access to the presence of God for all of us. We no longer must rely on imperfect men, that are just like us, to get an audience with God. As priests, we go directly to Him by the authority and with the advocacy of Jesus (I John 2:1). No more tabernacle, no more sacrifices, no more human priesthood. Those things were symbols, copies and shadows of the real, but the substance is Christ (see Colossians 2:16-17). Those things had teaching value (Galatians 3:24), but were unable, in themselves, to cleanse us from sin (“make the worshipper perfect in conscience”; cf. 9:14). Food, drink and washings had no power (cf. Romans 14:17). But through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have one who ever lives to make intercession for us (7:25) through the power of an endless life (7:16). In other words, the “time of reformation” has come! (9:10; cf. 7:12; cf. Luke 2:25, 38).

Christ, the substance: 9:11-28

In 9:11-28, the writer begins to draw out more implications from the fact that Christ is our High Priest. This section is bracketed in verses 11 and 28 with the word “appear,” a reference to the two comings of Christ. First, He appeared as a High Priest and then entered into the tabernacle “not made with hands,” a clear reference to His ascension into heaven (9:24).

He will appear again for the purpose of (final) salvation, thus putting an end to the effect of sin for all those who “eagerly wait for Him” (9:28).

Christ was the High Priest of “the good things that have come” (9:11; this translation is preferable to “to come,” as it emphasizes that the “time of reformation,” that the Jews under the Old Covenant so eagerly awaited, has indeed arrived). To his struggling readers, the writer is saying, “Look, these are the ‘good days’ to which you looked forward,” and begins to outline why that is so. First, he urges his readers to think about the Day of Atonement, with its physical, man-made structure, the blood of animals, and the Holy of Holies, to which you had no access, none of which had the ability to secure eternal redemption. But here is Christ, who entered heaven, the true tabernacle (see 8:2; 9:24), by virtue of His own blood has secured your eternal redemption once for all (9:12; in the NASV, *ta hagia* is translated “holy place” but throughout this epistle, it clearly refers to the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies, in v. 12, refers to heaven, the “true tabernacle”).

If the sacrifices under the Old Covenant had the effect of purifying the flesh (9:13; see Leviticus 16:15; Numbers 19:9, 17f.), how much more will the blood of Christ “cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (9:14). Presumably, this audience was convinced that the Old Covenant sacrifices did some good. They knew their Bibles! So the writer presses his point: if those shadowy sacrifices had value, what about the real thing? Instead of a ritual, external purifying of the flesh, however, Christ has accomplished much more: “He has achieved the radical inward cleansing of the conscience.” He did this “through His eternal spirit” (not the Holy Spirit, as the NASV and NKJV suggest, but through the everlasting spirit of Christ). “Eternal spirit” corresponds to the “indestructible life” in 7:16 and points back to the connection between Melchizedek and Christ. A finite, temporal man could never have accomplished the once-for-all forgiveness of

sins and cleansing from dead works. But Jesus did it through His eternal spirit.

The works of the dead (Ephesians 2:1-5) are “dead works.” They have no value, produce no fruit and end in death (Romans 6:21, 23). But Christ’s blood has cleansed us from these, so that we are free to serve the living God. As a practical matter, we can appreciate that our freedom from the guilt of sin is a prerequisite to loving and productive service to God. Christ has accomplished our freedom from guilt, thus freeing us to serve “in the spirit” and not in the letter.

The writer turns back to a discussion of the covenant in 9:15. If Jesus has secured our eternal redemption, then He is the mediator of the New Covenant (see 8:5-13 for features of this covenant). A “mediator” is a go-between. In this case, Jesus is the one who stands between God and man and reconciles them, through His death. But His death was also effective to redeem all of those under the first covenant as well. Sometimes, we use the term “grandfathering” to describe the effect of the law on people who acted prior to the law’s passage. For example, when a new law passes, it usually has an effective date sometime in the future. Occasionally, however, a law will have a “grandfather clause” which serves to include others under it, even though they acted prior to the enactment of the law. Jesus’ death “grandfathered” everyone who lived faithfully under the Old Covenant, as well as those who live under the new (see Zechariah 14:8-9).

God made a covenant and then called upon people to participate in the promise of an eternal inheritance (cf. 3:1). This call (and the inheritance) was effective because “a death has taken place” (9:15). In verses 16-22, the writer is concerned with showing the importance of death in the effecting of a covenant, or “will” (the Greek word *diatheke* can mean either “covenant” or “testament”; the writer is simply using an everyday occurrence—the enacting and enforcing of wills—to illustrate the nature of the New Covenant).

Wills written by human beings are effective only when a death has taken place. Until that time, the will is of no value—it can be changed

or even destroyed without any legal ramifications. However, after a death has taken place, the will becomes a binding legal document. No one can change it or destroy it.

The writer uses this example and combines it with the ritual of the Old Covenant which involved the blood of animals, again showing that a death had to take place for the covenant to have effect. He wants his readers to ask the question: “why was a death required? Why blood?” to which he would answer, “without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness” (9:22). He doesn’t delve into the question of why God commanded blood, but points to the inescapable fact that He did (9:23: “Therefore, it was necessary . . .”). There seems to be an implication that if forgiveness could have been accomplished without blood (or a death), that God would have used such means. Cf. Galatians 3:21.

In any case, if the “copies” of the heavenly things (see v. 19 for what these “things” included) required blood for cleansing, how much more the heavenly things themselves? They required better sacrifices than the blood of calves and goats (9:23). To accomplish this, Christ didn’t go into the tabernacle, since that would have availed nothing; instead, He went into heaven itself, appearing in the presence of God for us (9:24; cf. v. 11). Nor did He have to offer Himself often, like the High Priest who made his sacrifices “year by year with blood not his own” (9:25). If the death of Christ was like that of bulls and goats, then He would have died many times over, since the very beginning; instead, He has died once, at the critical point in history, to put away sin (9:26).

All men will die once and then await judgment (9:27). Likewise, Christ died once to take away sins and, by implication, to save men from judgment. Instead of awaiting judgment, we eagerly await the appearance of Christ at the end of time, not so that He can deal with sin, but to award his servants with eternal salvation (9:28). There are fascinating references here to time: the “foundation of the world” (cf. 4:3, where the writer asserts that all preparations for our salvation were made from the foundation of the world; see Ephesians 1:4); the “consummation of the ages,” (9:26) an

affirmation about the central place in history of Jesus' death on the cross (see Galatians 4:4); and a reference to the second coming of Christ, when He will wrap up all things and provide eternal salvation for those who wait for Him.

Thus the writer reminds his audience that an end-time is coming—that all men are going to die and then they must await judgment. But for those who are Christ's at His coming, salvation is what awaits them. The indicative ("for those who eagerly await Him") has the effect of an imperative ("wait for Him!").

Christ, the perfect sacrifice: 10:1-18

Chapter 9 closed with a discussion of the suffering of Jesus, who was "offered once to bear the sins of many" (9:28). In chapter 10, the writer returns to a discussion of the Law—its priesthood and its sacrifices, and why they were inadequate to cleanse the conscience of the worshipper under it. He does this through a series of pointed affirmations: (1) The Law was a shadow and not the final form of God's provision for man (10:1). (2) The sacrifices could never make one perfect, but instead, in them, there was a reminder of sins each year (10:3). (3) It is impossible for the blood of animals to take away sin (10:4, 11). (4) It was not the sacrifices and burnt offerings themselves that God desired (10:8). (5) He takes away the first in order to establish the second (10:9). (6) Jesus became the once-for-all-time, final offering for sin (10:12-14). (7) Where there is forgiveness of sin, there is no longer any offering for sin (10:18).

The four paragraphs of 10:1-18 are arranged in a concentric symmetry:

- A *The inadequacy of the provisions of the Law because of repeated sacrifices for sins (10:1-4)*
- B *The repeated sacrifices have been set aside by the one sacrifice of Christ (10:5-10)*
- B' *The Levitical priests have been set aside by the one priest who sits at God's right hand (10:11-14).*
- A' *The adequacy of the provisions of the New Covenant; therefore, a sacrifice for sins is no longer needed (10:15-18).*

Note that the preacher is showing the inadequacy of the Law, which required many priests to offer many sacrifices over many years, yet these sacrifices were not able to take away sin. He contrasts the Old Covenant with the New; the latter features the one-time sacrifice of Jesus Christ which is sufficient to take away sins, something the old Law could never do.

Several themes introduced earlier in the sermon are taken up again. For example, the theme of Jesus enthroned at the right hand of God was mentioned in 1:3 and 8:1 and is repeated here in 10:12-13. Also, part of Jeremiah 31:31-34, quoted in full in 8:8-12, is repeated in 10:16-17. Furthermore, much of the argument of 9:1-28 is discussed in 10:1-18 but with a different perspective. In chapter 9, the writer was concerned with showing the fact of Jesus death and its effectiveness in taking away sin. In 10:1-18, he is concerned with developing the subjective benefits of Christ's sacrifice—that is, its effect upon Christians.

Christ's death can "make perfect those who draw near" (10:1), meaning we are forgiven of our sins. By His death we have been "sanctified," meaning Christians are set apart for a special purpose (10:10). He summarizes these two ideas in v. 14: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." In 9:14, he noted the effect on the conscience—that the blood of Christ is sufficient to cleanse it from "dead works."

The point of all of this is to remind the Christian of what he has gained in Christ and to restore to him the confidence that he can have in Christ (see 10:35). The theme of "confidence" (or "boldness") is sprinkled through the letter: cf. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19. When we are facing trials, or even imminent death, we find the confidence to face those trials only in a strong faith in Christ. We must be sure that our sins have been forgiven (we need a clean and clear conscience) and the writer's point is to show that forgiveness only happens in Christ. Without Him there is no forgiveness, no clear conscience and no confidence.

As he's done throughout the letter, the writer proves his thesis by an appeal to Old Testament Scripture. Not only does he refer again to Jeremiah 31:31-34, but also to Psalm 40:6-7 (in Hebrews 10:6-7). As he usually does, the writer quotes from the Septuagint version (LXX, the Greek translation of the OT Scriptures). The reading of Psalm 40:6-7 differs slightly in the Hebrew and LXX versions, but is not as significant as may first appear. In the Hebrew, it reads: "My ears You have opened"; in the LXX, "a body You have prepared for me." The psalmist probably used a synecdoche, a literary device in which the part is put for the whole—here, the ears for the body. The meaning of 10:6-7 then is that Christ has come to hear and do God's will, not just to offer a cold sacrifice which neither results in nor promotes obedience (see I Samuel 15:22).

The point of the quotation from Psalm 40 is to show that even in the Old Testament the emphasis was not on the sacrifices, but on obedience. The sacrifices themselves did not necessarily promote obedience on the part of the worshipper. But God has always desired obedience, not sacrifice (I Samuel 15:22; Micah 6:6-8). Jesus, through His sacrifice, accomplished the supreme act of obedience (Hebrews 5:8-9). His whole purpose in coming was to do God's will (10:9) and it was through "this will" (10:10) that we have been perfected. The writer then repeats part of the quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34, focusing now on the place of the new law (the heart) and the essence of the New Covenant, the forgiveness of sins (10:16-17). His logical conclusion: if there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin (10:18).

Questions for Discussion

1. What does "tabernacle" mean?
2. What were the two main compartments in the tabernacle?
3. What was the Holy of Holies and why was it significant?
4. "The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the present time" (9:8-9a). Explain.
5. The OT sacrifices were unable to make the worshipper "perfect." What does "perfect" refer to?
6. What is the "time of reformation" and why does the writer use that term?
7. What "greater" tabernacle did Christ enter? How do you know?
8. Name the effects on believers of the death of Christ.
9. What makes the death of Jesus so historically and spiritually significant?
10. Define "covenant."

11. What was the effect of Christ's death on people who lived before His death?
12. In what sense are people "cleansed by blood" (10:22).
13. Why is it not necessary for Christ to offer Himself often, like the sacrifices under the OT?
14. How many times will man live and die on earth?
15. For what purpose will Christ come back again?
16. The Law is described as "only a shadow of the good things to come." Does that mean it was a "bad thing"? If not, what?
17. Why couldn't the OT sacrifices make men perfect?
18. What was the effect of the OT sacrifices on sin?
19. If God commanded the sacrifices, why does Scripture say "Sacrifice and offering You have not desired"?
20. Why did Jesus come into the world? Where is Jesus now? What is His function?
21. What does "sanctified" mean? How is sanctification accomplished?
22. Who wrote the words recorded in vv. 16-17?

Thought Questions



Under the Old Covenant, there were many physical aspects to pleasing God—priests, sacrifices, the tabernacle and its elements, foods and washings, etc. What has changed and why?

Three times in this section the writer refers to the "conscience." What is the conscience and what has Christ done regarding it?

What is forgiveness? Find some passages that describe it in picturesque terms.

The Covenant

The word covenant is generally thought of in terms of an agreement between parties, usually with equal rights and responsibilities on both sides. The word is used that way in the Bible but only in reference to contracts between men. The covenants given by God to man differ in that they are a contract between *unequal* parties. In civil law, we would call this kind of contract a “unilateral contract” because all the terms of the contract are defined by the superior party. Indentured



servant “contracts” would be an example. Most contracts today are bilateral contracts with the terms and conditions negotiated and agreed to by both parties. The rights and responsibilities are “equal”—I make an offer on a house, negotiate the terms, and begin making payments. I get to live in the house while the mortgage company gets thousands of dollars over the 30 year period.

The contracts or covenants that we read about in the Bible between God and man are clearly unilateral—God defines all the terms, makes the promises and determines what conditions are required to meet the terms of the contract. Strictly speaking, it is only when we meet these conditions that we can enjoy the benefits (promises). The Law of Moses, which spelled out the terms for the Old Covenant, required strict adherence to every aspect of the Law. Failure to keep the law brought a curse (see Deuteronomy 27:26 quoted in Galatians 3:10). If it hadn’t been for God’s grace, all of the people who lived under the Old Covenant would have been “under a curse” and destroyed. The sacrifices under the Old Covenant were provided to give relief, though never an excuse, for the burden of breaking the Law. By taking an innocent animal and “transferring” his sins (violations of the Law) to it, the worshipper could “feel” first the guilt and then a sense of relief from the guilt. Yet these sacrifices were unable to objectively, or finally, remove sin. That couldn’t happen until the New Covenant was established by Christ, through His one-time perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 10).

A reminder: the covenant and the Law were not the same thing. The covenant was the agreement God made with the people; the Law was the instrument that defined the terms of the covenant. When I make a promise to pay my house payment, my covenant to pay is not the same thing as the promissory note I signed defining the terms of my payment and the consequences of failure to pay. However, since the Law and the covenant are so closely related in the Old Covenant, they often appear to be used interchangeably. The Law was the basis of the Old Covenant, while grace is the basis of the New Covenant (cf. John 1:14-17).

¹ *When Critics Ask*, by Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe, Victor Books, 1992, pp. 517-20

² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* p. 356

Unit 7

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|-----------------------------------|----------|
| 1. Three imperatives | 10:19-25 |
| 2. A warning against willful sin. | 10:26-31 |
| 3. A reminder | 10:32-39 |

Hebrews 10:19-39

The writer has completed the doctrinal part of his argument and moves on to application. He has discussed virtually every aspect of the superiority of Christ over the Old Covenant—the priesthood, the tabernacle and its service, the law and its sacrifices. Those things were but a shadow of the real (10:1). They could not provide complete access to God because they were not sufficient to take away sins. But Christ, through one offering of Himself, has “perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14).

Three Imperatives (10:19-25)

[19-21] Under the old system, no one could enter the Holy of Holies except the High Priest. The inner sanctuary was where the High Priest came into presence of God to make sacrifice on behalf of himself and the people. The writer has gone to great lengths to demonstrate how the believer under the New Covenant has access to God through the blood of Jesus (9:6-14, 24).

In these verses, the writer points to Christ’s work as the rationale for the call to action that will follow in verses 22-25. We have confidence, or boldness (*parresian*), to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, which has secured our forgiveness of our sins. In Hebrews, the Holy of Holies is called “the holy place” and represents the presence of God. It is our sins that separate us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). Forgiveness opens the way to God, a “new (fresh) and living way.” 9:11-12 tells us how Jesus dedicated that way through His flesh, here referred to as “the veil.” Remember that the veil was the curtain which separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies. Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except by Me” (John 14:6). If one is to have access to God at all; that is, if one is to pass through the veil, he must do so by the flesh (the sacrifice) of Jesus Christ. There is no other way to God (an interesting passage is Mark 15:38, where the veil was torn in two at Christ’s death).

The writer also alludes to his discussion about Jesus as High Priest which he developed in 4:14-7:28. Here, He is said to be “a great priest” (note the singular: there are no other “great priests”) “over the house of God.” In 3:6, the writer says we are that house, “if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (cf. I Timothy 3:15, where the church is described as the household of God).

[22-25] Contemplating the great blessings we enjoy in Christ provokes a threefold “let us” from the writer—let us draw near, let us hold fast and let us consider how to encourage one another. Instead of shrinking back, which leads to destruction, we should be moving forward, which leads to faith from which springs hope and confidence in the day of judgment. Notice how he includes the three great concepts of Christianity—love, hope and faith—in this passage.

In light of the spiritual blessings we enjoy in Christ, do this: “draw near with a sincere (undivided, loyal) heart in full assurance of faith.” You are able to draw near (a term that the Jew would associate with sacrifice, but used here as a way of referring to entering into a relationship with God; cf. 7:19, 25) because your heart has been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and your body has been washed with pure water. The forgiveness of sins, secured by the “sprinkled blood” of Christ, has effectively cleansed your conscience (see 9:14). “Sprinkled” (see 9:18-22; 10:1-4) and “washed” are both in the perfect tense in the Greek, meaning they refer to actions in the past that have lingering results. “The bodily cleansing here is initiatory and thus refers to baptism. . .the symbolic value of Christian baptism would not have been lost on Jewish observers” (Craig Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, p. 670). There may be an allusion to Leviticus 14:7-9, in which a leper, if he found that his leprosy was healed, was to show

himself to the priest and the priest would sprinkle him with the blood of a live bird. After seven days, he would bathe his body in water. Afterward, we would be considered “clean.” Ezekiel 36:25-26 speaks of a similar, spiritual cleansing that was to take place in the new era.

In addition, we are to “hold fast the confession of our hope.” This same statement, used three other times in the letter (3:6, 14; 4:14; cf. 10:35), may almost be thought of as the writer’s theme. Here, he reminds his readers that they can hold fast to their hope because the one who has promised is faithful (the promise is referred to again in v. 36). The final “let us” tells the readers to “consider” (“giving serious thought to” or “focus intently on”; cf. 3:1) how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. “Stimulate” is a translation of the Greek word from which our English word “paroxysm” comes. It means to “sharpen” (cf. Proverbs 27:17) or incite, in a positive way, to love and good deeds.

The writer obviously believes that much of this “stimulating to love” is to take place at the assemblies of the saints. The assemblies serve the purpose of stirring each other up and encouraging one another. The writer warns his readers about forsaking the gatherings, as was the habit of some. (“forsaking” is in the Gk. present tense: “do not go on forsaking”; forsaking means “leaving behind”: see Matthew 27:46 and Acts 2:27 for examples of the use of the same Greek word). The writer brackets this warning by references to “one another,” suggesting that those who make a habit of forsaking the gatherings are selfishly withholding the encouragement they could provide by being present. We should be even more zealous in our attendance and the encouragement of others as we see the “day” approaching. The “day” could refer to the second coming of Christ (there was a sense of urgency among Christians in the New Testament that is lost on us today) or to the time when persecution would become more severe. In the Old Testament, “the day” usually refers to a time of judgment.

Warning [26-31]

[26-27] If we take v. 26 with v. 25 (and why shouldn’t we?), the writer suggests that forsaking

the assembling is an example of willful sin. In a statement reminiscent of 6:4-6, if we go on sinning after we’ve come to a knowledge of Christ, what remains? There will not be another sacrifice, because Christ has already offered the ultimate one-time sacrifice. If we reject that, all that is left is a “terrifying expectation of judgment.” Hear this: there is no middle ground. We either commit to Christ or we look forward to judgment (cf. 9:27). Remember, he is not speaking abstractly about non-believers here. He is talking about those who are in the body of Christ, but who are falling away. They have received the knowledge of the truth, but have become adversaries (opponents) of God. Hence, the fire of God’s judgment will consume them (see Isaiah 26:11).

[28-31] An appeal to the Law makes sense to these Jewish readers, so the writer directs their attention to the punishment due someone who “set aside the Law of Moses.” He was worthy of death. But, in an argument from the less to the greater (verses 28-29), he says “how much severer” is the punishment for one who rejects the New Covenant? One who seeks salvation through any other means but Jesus Christ is lost — they have *trampled under foot God’s own son*; regarded as “unclean” the blood of the covenant (that which was unclean could not even be touched; i.e., backslider treat Jesus as if he is just another dead body); and insulted the Holy Spirit which has revealed God’s grace (see Isaiah 63:10).

It is not surprising that God will take vengeance on such people; but notice the writer quotes from Deuteronomy 32:36: “The Lord will judge His people.” God will judge those who have never named the name of Christ and have rejected Him and run after other gods. But He will also judge those who once made a commitment and then had the nerve to turn their backs on Christ. In one sense, it is more serious to believe and then reject God, than to never have believed at all (see II Peter 2:20-22). It is a phobia worth having to fear falling into the hands of the living God. This is not a dumb, lifeless idol the writer is talking about, but He who has power to destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28).

A Reminder From the Past [32-39]

[32-34] After the warning recorded in 5:11-6:6, the writer said, “We are convinced of better things . . .” With a similar vote of confidence, the writer here points his readers back to former days. Exactly when these “former days” occurred is hard to fix. Many point to AD 49 when Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius (see Introduction). However, remember that the writer is pointing back to some specifically Christian persecution, not anti-Semitic activity. Ironically, those “good old days” were days which were filled with persecution. Those who think Christianity guarantees health, wealth and safety need to consider this passage. The word translated “conflict” is *athlesin*, suggestive of the training and discipline that an athlete endures (see 12:1). Reference to being “made a public spectacle,” (v. 33) may point to the gladiatorial games of the Romans. They endured a “conflict of sufferings” through reproaches (affliction, abuse) and tribulations (Gk. *thlipsis*, “pressure”; it is an onomatopoeic term, meaning the word is formed from the sound it makes when pronounced. *Thlipsis*, the sound of crushing grapes, means “pressure”). The writer also indicates that suffering comes to those who sympathize (“show compassion”; “feel with”) with those who are suffering (v. 34; cf. 13:3, “as if in prison with them”).

One trial the readers of this letter suffered was the loss of their possessions. But they accepted it “joyfully.” The writer is introducing a point he will drive home strongly later—this world is not our home. A characteristic common among the faithful is that they all confess that they are strangers here (see 11:13-16; 13:14). The writer reminds them of the time when they accepted the plundering of their goods since they knew that they have a better possession awaiting them, a possession that “abides.” Jesus referred to this abiding possession as the treasure “where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves cannot break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19). It is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to obtain what he cannot lose.

[35-39] “Therefore . . .” Before moving on to the great exposition of faith in chapter 11, the writer first urges his readers not to cast away their confidence, reminding them that it has “great reward” (the better possession referred to above). “Do not throw away” is just another way of stating his theme, to “hold fast” (3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23). We are to hang on to the confidence that comes from faith and commitment in and to Christ, and not let go for anything or anyone. Whatever must be suffered is worth it, for there is “great reward”—what God has promised—for those who are faithful to the end (see Revelation 2:10). The Bible never condones a mercenary attitude, but neither does it minimize the reward to be given later. The test is in developing the kind of faith that causes us to focus on heaven while undergoing various trials on earth (see 12:1-2).

The writer says “you need endurance so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (v. 36). He is not suggesting that we earn salvation. His reference is to staying faithful to God despite persecution. In I Peter 3:17, Peter says, “For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.” It is not that God wills His people to suffer for suffering sake (there is no virtue in that). But God desires that, if they suffer, they suffer for doing what is right (see I Peter 4:16). This is the “will of God”: to endure suffering, if required, keeping our eye on Jesus and the joy on the other side of the trial (again, see 12:1-2).

The writer uses a classic statement of faith to make his point and to introduce the great examples of faith he discusses in chapter 11. He refers to Habakkuk 2:3-4. Jewish readers would remember that Habakkuk was concerned about the oppression of his people by his own people, and took that concern to God. God told Habakkuk that He was bringing a judgment on the oppressors, but that the judgment would come through the Chaldeans (the Babylonians). Habakkuk was shocked, since he considered the Chaldeans far worse than his own people. He wondered how God could use someone even more wicked to accomplish His ends. God

assured Habakkuk that the judgment of Babylonians “will not delay.” He said, in effect, “but you Habakkuk, like any others who are just, will live by your faith.” In other words, regardless of how things looked, no matter how desperate the circumstances, God is in control. Believe it. Trust in it. Do not shrink back, because God has no pleasure in those who quit living by faith (verses 37-38).

The writer ends this section with a positive word. He includes himself and says, “We are not of the *shrinking back* type! We’re not going to fall back into destruction, but we’re just like those who have faith, the kind of faith that preserves the soul.” The word “preserving” can be translated “possessing.” Faith does not come by possessing the truth, but by allowing the truth to possess you. Once that truth gets possession of your soul, there is no turning back.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the “holy place” refer to?
2. How do we enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus?
3. Describe how the flesh of Christ is the “veil”?
4. How and when are our hearts sprinkled clean and our “bodies washed with pure water”?
5. What enables us to hold fast our confession without wavering? Explain.
6. What exactly is v. 25 saying not to forsake?
7. What is the purpose of assembling?
8. What is the “day” of v. 25?
9. What is “willful” sin? What other kinds of sin are there? What is the Old Testament background?
10. What is the point of saying that “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (if one goes on sinning willfully)?
11. What do backsliders have to look forward to?
12. A backslider is charged with three crimes in v. 29. Describe each.
13. Who will the Lord judge?

14. What does it mean to “fall into the hands of the living God”?
15. How would it help the readers of Hebrews to remember past times of suffering?
16. In what specific ways had these people suffered?
17. What is “sympathy”?
18. How might someone “throw away” his confidence?
19. What is the “will of God” (v. 36)?
20. What is the context of Habakkuk from which the quote in vv. 37-38 comes?
21. What is the opposite of “shrinking back”?
22. What does shrinking back lead to? What does faith lead to?



Thought Questions

Explore the nuances of meaning of “drawing near,” a term which appears several times in Hebrews. What is the derivation of the term? What is the main idea expressed by the term?

What means does the writer use to emphasize the importance of staying faithful in this section? Describe the condition of one who falls away. Describe his future.

Calvinists teach a doctrine of “eternal security”; i.e., that, once saved, it is impossible to fall from the grace of God (also known as “impossibility of apostasy” or “perseverance of the saints”). How do you suppose they this section of Scripture and 6:4-6?

Unit 9

Hebrews 11:1-40

Introduction to chapter 11

Hebrews 11 is one of the most famous chapters in all of the Bible. It has been called the “Roll Call of the Faithful,” the “Hall of Faith,” the “Honor Roll of Faith,” and many other titles. However, we often forget that Hebrews 11 is found in a context that begins before v. 1. In 10:19, the writer appealed to the blood of Jesus as the means by which we have confidence (*parresian*, boldness, cf. 3:6) to “enter the holy place” (the presence of God, represented by the Holy of Holies, shut off to the people under the former covenant).

What is “Faith”?

The word “faith” itself needs little definition; like “love,” it is better described than defined. But there are many things associated with faith, phrases like “walk by faith” or “live by faith,” and these can seem ambiguous. For example, to “live” by faith can refer either to behavior, or to being justified (“alive”) by faith. The Bible speaks of a saving faith and a practical, working faith. The word may be used to describe an attitude of trust, even by itself. Abraham’s faith in Romans 4, Habakkuk’s faith, or James’ negative view of mere attitude without action in 2:14-26, are all examples of this use.

However, while faith and obedience are separate, faith always includes obedience where any action is called for, even the “action” of waiting.

B. F. Westcott said, “everyone lives by faith, however he lives.” Even in the little things, like switching on a light or driving a car, we walk by faith. When we talk about ancestors we’ve never seen or relatives we’ve never met, we do so by “faith,” basing it on the testimony of others. Every historical event which preceded our birth must be accepted as true by “faith.” We even accept the fact of our “birth” by faith!

What all humans have in common, regardless of religious experience or training, is a belief in some things without tangible evidence, things not experienced by the five senses. We flip the light switch because we believe it will turn on a light. Few of us know or care why the light goes on, nor about the particular process which is occurring to make it happen. We just flip the switch by faith and get a little irritated when the bulb burns out!

So faith itself is common enough. It is based upon what we learn and is simply defined as “confidence or trust in a person or thing.” If we say we have “faith” in a friend, we mean we trust them or have confidence in them. We even have faith in inanimate objects such as the computer I’m using to type this paper. Not only that, I “trust” my Toyota to get me to my destination, that my tires won’t blow out and that the metal won’t fly off the car —you get the point. We have faith in these things.

But is it that simple? Why do we have such “faith”? Is there a basis for it? Is it reasonable? Or are we all mad?! We have faith in people, and even things, because we must. Without faith, we would be immobilized by fear. Think of a world where you could not trust anyone or anything. We cannot function without “living by faith.”

But there is more to biblical faith than what we’ve described so far. A faithful friend is one who has proven himself trustworthy on previous occasions, perhaps in times of stress. We have reason to trust the person. If someone asks you why you trust your friend, you may well say, “I just do.”

Faith, then, is not a nebulous, mystical concept. On the contrary, it is part of our daily experience. In fact, faith is as real as life. The writer of Hebrews says, “But without faith it is impossible to please God. . .” (Hebrews 11:6) and, “The just shall live by faith” (Hebrews 10:38). But these passages aren’t talking about light switches, cars or even friends. They talk of a faith which is directed heavenward and has as its goal the saving of our souls. It is a faith that’s based upon the absolute veracity of God Himself.

That confidence has “great reward” so he encourages his readers not to throw it away (v. 35). These Christians were facing an uncertain future, even the threat of death (cf. 12:4; note the frequent reference to death in chapter 11). The writer had reminded them to think back to former days when they “endured a great conflict of sufferings” (v. 32), even accepting “joyfully the seizure of your property” knowing they had a better possession in store (v. 34). They had suffered before for their faith; they must be willing to suffer again with the same admirable attitude that they had then.

The historical context of chapter 11, then, is the suffering that these Christians were facing for Christ. “For you have need of endurance” because it will only be after they have done the will of God that they will receive what was promised (v. 36). Doing the “will of God” is what motivated Jesus (10:7; cf. John 4:34; 5:30; 8:29). He is the perfect example of one who endured suffering because he could see the joy on the other side of it (12:2; cf. I Peter 4:1). These Christians could not quit now, because the promise will only be received by those who endure. Those who “shrink back” are headed for destruction. God takes no pleasure in those who shrink back, but He does take pleasure in those who have faith: the righteous (before God) are those who live by faith (verses. 37-39).

The words from Habakkuk 2:4, “the righteous shall live by faith,” provide the immediate context of Hebrews 11. In Habakkuk, those who “shrink back” are described as the “proud” (the arrogant or puffed up ones). The connection is clear: to shrink back in the face of trials is arrogance because you choose to put your confidence in yourself instead of in God. Only those who persevere in their trust in God can please God (11:6).

This chapter can be divided into four paragraphs, roughly along chronological lines. (1) 11:1-7 deals with pre-flood heroes of faith; (2) 11:8-22, patriarchal heroes; (3) 11:23-31, the faithful under Moses; (4) 11:32-40, the faithful under subsequent eras. 11:1-2 are introductory and the whole chapter is bracketed by the words “gained approval” in verses 2 and 39. The teaching of the chapter carries over into chapter

12, where Jesus is presented, not among the “clouds of witness,” but as the one who is worthy to be looked at and considered (12:1-2).

The subject, of course, is faith. The Greek word, *pistis*, occurs some 24 times in this chapter. While this chapter does not provide a formal definition of the concept, it does describe it in some detail through a catalog of the faithful acts of men and women. Such a catalog would be unheard of in Greek tradition. “Only an uneducated person would suffer for what is undemonstrable” (Lane, p. 316). But God does not see as man sees. God blesses those who are willing to put their trust in Him, as these Old Testament worthies did. The aim is not to develop an abstract concept of “faith,” but to show that faith is based in the nature of God. In 10:23, the writer points out that we hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, not by gritting our teeth and steeling ourselves against various trials, but because “He who promised is faithful.” The ultimate test of faith is not our own strength, but the strength of God. Ours is but to believe Him and His promises. Jesus told His followers that they had “little faith” (Matthew 6:30) or “no faith” (Mark 4:40) or “great faith” (Matthew 8:10). He was referring to their view of God, not the quantity of faith they could muster. Our faith is only as good as the promise and the Promisor. Since our faith is based upon the promise of God, a God who cannot lie (6:18-20), our faith can be great, indeed!

Hebrews 11:1-2. The Proposition.

Faith (*pistis*) is without the definite article (“the”); the writer is speaking of faith in general, not about the faith as a body of doctrine which we teach and believe (cf. Jude 3). The same Greek word is used for the word “belief” in the New Testament. Verse 27 defines faith: “as seeing Him who is invisible.” A person who will only believe what he can see with his own eyes cannot be a spiritual person and therefore cannot please God since he is devoid of faith. Faith apprehends as real that which cannot be seen.

The writer tells us that faith is the “assurance of things hoped for.” Much discussion swirls about the word “substance” (*bupostasis*). Is faith a mental assurance, something that our

mind grasps, and therefore primarily a psychological matter? The word can mean “foundation” or “substance” (Latin, *sub stantia*), and may suggest something deeper than mere mental assurance. Papyri documents have been discovered that indicate the word often carried the meaning “title deed” or guarantee. Looked at from this perspective, faith is our guarantee of things hoped for (the holy place, the heavenly home: see verses 13-16), and is a reality of those things, not just a firm hope. It’s as if we have the “deed to the property, the possession” and that deed is our faith (cf. Ephesians 1:13). If we “shrink back,” it is tantamount to forfeiting the property by handing the deed back, saying “thanks, but no thanks.”

This view fits with the second part of v. 1 which says faith is the “conviction” (Gk. *elegchos*, proof, evidence). “Assurance” (substance) and “conviction” are complimentary statements (in “apposition”). Faith gives us a guarantee, faith provides proof, of things hoped for, things not seen. Our faith, then, is not just a mental exercise, but a kind of sight. God and heaven are as real to eyes of faith as if we had seen them with our own eyes. This is the kind of faith that “men of old” had by which they “gained approval” (v. 2), a point that is made in verses 2, 4, and 5.

“Gained approval” means that God bore witness, or testified, to their faithfulness. Faithfulness to God is the force of the term “by faith,” repeated 18 times in this passage. Faith is clearly more than mental assent, since “full of faith” means more than “full of assent.” Even the devils “believe and tremble” (James 2:19). What emerges in these examples is that mental assent to the words of God led them to trust and then action in light of that trust. Faith that stops at mental assent may yet be called “faith,” but it is a dead faith according to James (James 2:14ff.). Without a trusting submission that produces works, “faith” is lifeless and worthless. But a faith that starts at mental assent to the promises of God and then proceeds on to unqualified trust in Him, is a faith that is substance and conviction. It is by that kind of faith that we function from day-to-day.

This is the attitude which set apart the faithful men and women of times past. It

provided them with the power to carry through despite all kinds of adversity. And because of their faith, God “bore witness” to them. It is God Himself who testifies to their faithfulness and He has recorded their names in the record of His word.

Pre-flood Examples of Faith (11:3-7)

[3] We “understand” (i.e., perceive with the reflective intelligence), by faith, that God created all there is. “Worlds” is, literally, “ages.” “The world—history—is not the result of blind fate, but answers to an expression of the will of God” (Westcott, p. 352). This is basic, but profound. If we are willing to acknowledge that God created the world, isn’t everything else relatively elementary? If the fact that God created the world by the word of His mouth (see Psa. 33:6) is substance and proof to us, what would prevent us from believing that nothing is impossible for God? And our faith is proof that God made the world out of things which are not visible (cf. Romans 4:17). In other words, matter is not eternal, as some scientists want us to believe.

[4] Literally, Abel offered a “greater” or “more abundant” sacrifice than Cain. The exact meaning of this is a matter of speculation since the Bible does not say how Abel’s sacrifice exceeded Cain’s. We know for certain, however, that Abel offered his sacrifice through faith and for that he is listed among the righteous (10:38 - “the just [righteous] shall live by faith”).

When the writer says “through which he obtained...” and “through it being dead...” is he talking about Abel’s sacrifice or his faith? It seems he is talking about Abel’s faith, his sacrifice being evidence that he was one who “lived by faith.” It is not that the sacrifice was the only aspect of faith in Abel’s life, but was the one act that prompted Cain’s jealousy, and cost Abel his life. His faithfulness to God resulted in his death, a message the readers of the Hebrew letter needed to hear. Faith will get you in trouble as often as it will spare you from it (see Daniel 6). Because Abel did God’s bidding, he was counted faithful and he still speaks, though dead.

Abel recognized the natural obligations of man toward God and rendered worship to God, faithful unto death (cf. Rev. 2:10). We need to

understand that our first priority is to worship God, realizing that all we do to the glory of God is worship (I Cor. 10:31). However, we do not worship God when we do those things that are not according to His will. Our worship must be in “spirit and truth” (John 4:24). That means that not only must we put our “heart” into it, it also means we must follow directions. That seems to be at least one legacy of faith that Abel has left us.

[5] We know little about the life of Enoch, but what we do know is enough—he was a man who “actively relied on the promises of God” (cf. Jude 14). Enoch “walked with God,” as did Noah (Gen. 6:9) and Abraham (Gen. 17:1). The walk of faith involves knowledge and action and we can infer that God revealed some things to Enoch. Saving faith is a working faith which starts with knowledge of God’s will. In the Old Testament, “knowledge” is often used as a synonym for “walk” (see Hosea 4:1-2, 6; 6:3-4).

Because of his faith, Enoch never tasted death. Instead he was translated, which simply means “removed” from the scene or “carried away.” Elijah was also “translated,” albeit more dramatically (II Kings 2:11). The point Hebrews 11:5, remember, is the example of faith which Enoch provides—he, through his faith, was pleasing to God. Our goal is life must be to gain God’s approval (I believe the primary meaning of the word “blessing” is “approved of God”; look at the beatitudes [Matthew 5:3-12] that way and see if it makes any difference).

[6] Enoch pleased God by his faith. But without faith, there is no way we can please Him: it is “impossible.” What does it mean to “please God”? The answer is in this chapter. It means to gain the approval of God, to “obtain the witness.” Back in 10:38, the writer quoted the LXX of Habakkuk 2:4 and said that “if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.” Our aim must be to please God (not mom and dad, our friends, our co-workers or preachers, but GOD). We can only do this through faith—a trusting submission and unfailing allegiance to the Master. The writer points to two aspects of this faith in v. 6: it involves believing (the only use of the verb in Hebrews 11), that God is actual and that God acts—that “He is” (i.e.,

that He exists) and, secondly, that “He is a rewarder.” Of whom? “Of those who seek Him.” The construction of the Greek word, *ekzetousin*, implies that the seeker finds, or at least exhausts his powers of seeking; hence, some translations add: “diligently seek” (e.g., NKJV). Seeking Him is necessary to please Him (see Matthew 6:33; cf. Psalm 42:1-2; 63:1).

[7] Noah was “warned” by God about things “not yet seen” (a destroying flood) and acted on that word (cf. 8:5, where Moses is “warned” by God, and builds the tabernacle “according to the pattern”). The text says he “in reverence prepared an ark.” “Reverence” (*eulabethis*) means to “act circumspectly,” to “beware.” The sense of the verse is that Noah heard God, and upon hearing Him took great care in setting out to prepare the ark. He took God at His word. The results of this act of faith were threefold: (1) he saved his family, (2) condemned the world. “Condemning the world” was not something Noah said, nor was he the “judge”; this is just the flip side of “saved his household.” If only Noah’s household was saved, then the rest of the world was condemned. Noah didn’t do the condemning, but his righteousness is contrasted with the evil in the world and the floodwaters made the distinction. Thus it is for all who live by faith. If our first priority is to please God, we, by our actions, “condemn” all those who insist on living by sight. We’ll probably annoy them, too. (3) Noah became “an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.” This is similar to the statement made about Abraham in Genesis 15:6 and repeated in Romans 4: “Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness.” In Abraham’s case, he was asked to accept something, to trust in God, and he did. In Noah’s case, he was told to build something, in light of future events, and he did. They were “righteous” by virtue of their faith.

Like Enoch, Noah walked with God. He was obedient to that which he understood to be God’s will. Obedience, in the Old Testament, is simply a development of the concept of “hearing.” We might describe it as the correct response to the voice of God. To hear (effectively) is to be persuaded (see 4:2) and thus, to obey. The only alternative is active

resistance; in the Old Testament, this is called “rebellion” while in the New, it is called “disobedience.” In the Greek New Testament, the word often translated “disobedience” is *apitheo*, the same word often translated “unbelief.” It is clear that disobedience is the direct opposite of faith. The point is that when God demands an action, obedience is the bottom line. There’s no substitute for it, and no faith without it.

Patriarchal Examples of Faith: Hebrews 11:8-22

[8-12] Abraham and Sarah’s life provides us with a vivid example of walking by faith and not by sight (see Genesis 11:26-12:4). Abraham “went out” (obedience to God’s word), “not knowing where he was going” (trust in God to lead him), and he did it because he “was looking forward to the city with foundations” (faith based in the promise of God). While we see these concepts combined in Abraham’s action of leaving the land of Ur, remember that obedience and faith are not synonymous. That is, faith is what prompts obedience and that obedience must be to a promise of God. Abraham could have left Ur (or Haran) without faith; he could even have obeyed God without faith. The crucial phrase in v. 8 is “he went out, not knowing where he was going.” In one sense, he *did* know. He was going wherever God led him. But he didn’t see where he was going because God hadn’t shown the land to him yet. He had to cast himself completely on the Lord.

The reason that is given for Abraham’s willingness to dwell in tents as in a foreign land is that he was looking for the “city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (v. 10). This theme is developed a bit more in verses 13-16, because the forward-looking, hopeful attitude it describes is a central element of the kind of faith that helps us endure the trials of life, and “finish the race” (12:1-2).

Before expanding that theme, however, the writer tells us that Sarah received the ability to conceive, because “she considered Him faithful who had promised” (v. 11). Thus Sarah becomes an example of what the writer encouraged us to do in 10:23, viz., “to hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” Why? Faith is

based upon the promises of none other than God Himself; “for He who promised is faithful.” While Sarah’s faith was somewhat shaky at the beginning (remember, she laughed to herself when she heard the promise repeated, when she was very old; see Genesis 18:12), she remembered who it was who had promised. It was God who said, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14).

[13-16] These verses describe the essential element in the walk of faith: faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hope that is seen is not hope (Romans 8:24). This is illustrated in these people who were willing to trust God, even though they did not receive in full measure the promises God made to them. These verses prove again that faith is more than passive belief or mere mental assent. It is an attitude about life. It gives substance to hopes, and proof to the invisible. It gives us a kind of sight—not tangible or physically visible, but an ability, nonetheless, to “see” the promises and welcome them. Because we are so certain of receiving the promise, through faith, we are able to live as strangers on the earth. Faith transforms our earthly goals into a search for a true homeland, a better country, a city prepared by God (vv. 14-15).

It is at the point of fully appreciating the “pilgrim” or “stranger” aspect of Christianity that we will experience a quantum leap in our faith. We are not here to finish and furnish the world. Instead, we are diligently seeking God, who is never ashamed to be our God.

[17-19] If we are living a life of faith we should expect trials of faith. Abraham was tested by a command of God to offer up his only son, Isaac. Here’s a case where a man had physically received the crucial part of the promise, but then was told to give it up. Abraham knew that the promises upon which he was relying were to be realized through this only son. We can only guess at how perplexed and confused Abraham must have been at God’s command, besides being grieved at the prospect of killing his own son. But he did not complain, he just obeyed. Why? How? Because he “considered”—or accounted—that God was able to raise men from the dead (remember,

Sarah “considered Him faithful,” 11:11). Abraham’s faith proved to him not only that God created the world (11:3), but also that he was able to “give life to dead” (Romans 4:17). The words “as a type” in v. 19 tell us that Abraham, in his heart, had completed the command. Even though the angel of the Lord stayed his hand, it was as if Isaac was killed and brought back to life.

When God speaks to us through His word, we need the faith of Abraham — just *obey*, knowing God will provide. We court trouble when we start second-guessing God’s plan, whether the discussion is about marriage, divorce and remarriage, church discipline, the growth of the church, or whatever. One “secret” of faith is found in the words here: “he considered that God is able...” We may not think God’s way will work in “this situation,” but let’s take a cue from Abraham and learn to walk by faith and let God work out the details.

[20-22] Another aspect of faith is demonstrated in how we view death. We need to examine our faith under the bare light of the prospect of death. What will go through your mind as you lay dying? Intellectually, we know that Christians can die triumphantly and in full assurance of God’s care. Anything less indicates a lack of trust. When we face death, we have an opportunity to glorify God in our dying (see Phil. 1:20); or we can glorify ourselves by calling attention to our suffering; or we can glorify Satan, by caving in and giving death all its power, its “sting” (I Cor. 15:55).

The three men listed in our text illustrate the proper way to face death. Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau because he believed in the future (Genesis 27:27-29, 39-40). Jacob likewise blessed his posterity, believing there was “more to come.” The writer adds the interesting information that Jacob “worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff.” This refers to an earlier time (that is, a time before the blessing took place, recorded in Genesis 47:31) when Jacob made Joseph promise that he would not bury him in Egypt, but in the land of promise. The writer quotes from the Septuagint version where the Hebrew word *matteb* is translated staff. Most of our versions have the word “bed” in 47:31, translating the Hebrew word *mittah*. “Staff” is

probably the better choice, but in any case this passage tells us that “worship” does not require the four walls of a church building to constitute “worship.” Jacob worshipped by honoring God through his faith.

Joseph likewise demonstrated that the “things he hoped had substance” by commanding that his bones be transferred from Egypt to the promised land. All of these men exemplified the truth of Hebrews 11:13—they died without physically seeing the promises of God fulfilled in their own lifetime, yet they lived and died by their faith in those promises.

It provides no excuse for spiritual indolence, but it is helpful to realize that these men were not perfect. Perhaps Isaac best illustrates this point, though Jacob would run a close second. Isaac was basically a materialistic man, living much of his life by his wits. He often did the wrong thing in the wrong way and with the wrong attitude. Yet when it came his time to die, he faced it in faith. He understood the promise and the irreversibility of God’s plans and blessed Jacob, even though he favored his rugged son, Esau. Jacob was also inconsistent in his life, sometimes faithful, sometimes brazenly faithless. It was by deceit that he procured the blessing of his father. Yet, in the end, he proved to be a man of faith. Note that Hebrews 11 is not in our Bibles for the purpose of condoning every aspect of these people’s lives but it does call our attention to the value of acts done by faith instead of sight (II Corinthians 5:7).

Joseph is a remarkable figure. He lived all of his adult life in Egypt, much of it as an official of high rank in the government. It had been about 200 years since the promise was given to Abraham, and yet there was no fulfillment in sight. In spite of this, Joseph, by faith, gave instructions concerning his bones. Like Jacob, he was convinced that God would fulfill his promise; he relied on it!

Mosaical Examples of Faith: Hebrews 11:23-31

[23] It is the faith of Moses’ parents that draws the attention of the writer at first. The fact that Moses was a “beautiful child” (the word suggests a “beauty or a comeliness that is unusually striking,” Hughes, p. 492) is not meant to suggest

that they would have given him up if he wasn't beautiful; it may mean, in an "Old Testament" context, that they believed God had great things planned for Moses. In any case, they made a choice which demonstrated their faith in God. The key language here is that they "were not afraid of the king's edict." It illustrates that a firm faith will always overcome fear. This is the same kind of faith that set Moses and Rahab apart (vv. 27, 31) since they too feared God more than their respective kings. Jesus reminded his disciples not to fear those who are able to kill the body, "but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Whenever we are faced with a choice between what man can do to us and serving God, we must choose to do the latter (cf. Rom. 8:31-39). This theme is illustrated more completely in verses 36ff.

[24-27] It is ironic, but instructive, that the writer of Hebrews utilizes a poor decision of Moses to illustrate an instance of his faith. Moses, out of a zeal for his people, committed a murder. God did not, and does not, condone murder, regardless of the circumstance. But we are directed to the motive of Moses: he committed the act because he loved his people and he was upset about the burden they were bearing under the Egyptian yoke (see Exodus 2:11-15). He was found out and had to flee Egypt to save his life. Interestingly, we're told he did this "by faith" (vv. 24-27). Perhaps the purpose of this is to bring our attention back to God, who uses us even in our weakness, whether self-inflicted or not (cf. II Corinthians 12:7-10). But keep in mind that Moses did make a choice to serve his people, ready to forfeit his Egyptian privileges, even if his means of serving leaves something to be desired.

There are a couple of crucial points about faith in this example. First, it requires a turning back on the world and an embracing of the future promises of God, as we've already seen (verses. 13-16). Here, the writer says Moses' faith was in his refusal to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (an admission that sin is pleasure—that's what makes it tempting!). To endure ill-treatment instead of enjoying pleasure takes a great deal of faith. Secondly, it requires that we place a priority on knowing Christ over the

"riches of the world." Whether Moses had a complete concept of the Messiah at this point in his life is doubtful; but he was "looking for the reward" and that reward was not to be found in the treasures of Egypt.

This is a significant point, especially when we realize the Moses' position and the nature of his surroundings. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Moses was a great general in the Egyptian army and was a hero in Egypt. Stephen said he was "educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). But when he reached the age of 40, it entered his heart to help his brethren (Acts 7:23). Why? Obviously he had been taught by his family about the promises of God to the descendants of Abraham. His faith in those promises caused him to act, albeit in an unwise manner. But it illustrates that a heart full of faith cannot be held back for long. It would have been easy for Moses to "sit tight" and finish out his life enjoying the riches and honor due the son of Pharaoh's daughter in the wealthiest part of the world. But his faith wouldn't allow him to trade temporal riches for what, in the long run, is far greater: the reproaches (sufferings) of Christ.

[28-29] Verse 28 brings us back to the source of faith. Two examples are mentioned: the keeping of the Passover and the sprinkling of blood on the doorposts (Exodus 21). Moses did these things by faith; that is, he did them because of his view to the future and he did them because God said to do them. In its simplest sense, faith is doing God's bidding: "faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

In v. 29, the writer turns attention to the people whom Moses led. Moses' faith rubbed off on the Israelites and they all passed through the Red Sea. The Egyptians, however, were drowned, not because they didn't have faith (they must have, or why would they have entered between the walls of the water?) Their problem was that they had no promise from God to rely on. The promise was made by God to the Israelites, and they survived.

So, in the life of Moses we see the value of correct decisions. The choices he made were by faith. Some of the choices were based upon his

outlook and condition of heart, even though they were imperfect, perhaps even sinful at times. Others were based upon a specific revelation of God (such as the Passover and its implementation and the incident at the Red Sea). In any case, Moses was a man of faith and demonstrated it in the choices he made. He put God first.

[31-31] The writer continues his recital of faith with two examples from the days when Israel finally entered the promised land, under the leadership of Joshua. The first example is expected: the Israelites encircled the city of Jericho for seven days and the walls fell down, just as God had promised. It wasn't their faith that made the walls crumble; it was God. But God required that they show their trust in Him by doing exactly as He commanded.

The second example is somewhat surprising. We might expect more about Joshua or Caleb, but the writer chooses instead to present a Gentile, Rahab as an model of faith. The event is recorded in Joshua 2:9ff. Word had gotten to Rahab about the exploits of the people of Israel under God's rule. Although she was not an honorable woman, she displayed her faith by choosing to fear the unseen God of Israel instead of the visible king of Jericho. The writer chose her as an illustration for good reason—it shows that faith rests in the word of God and about God. For a pagan harlot to believe and risk her life because of her faith is amazing, especially when considered in light of Israel's own repeated failures (cf. Numbers 13-14).

Examples of faith from other eras:

Hebrews 11:32-40

[32] The writer begins this section as if he is admitting that it would be impossible to review every worthy example of faith throughout Israel's history. The sermonic nature of the letter is illustrated by his comment that "time would fail me," a problem every preacher faces! So he must be content to simply mention such giants of faith as Gideon and David and Samuel and the prophets. From what we know from the Old Testament accounts, we might question the choices of men like Barak, Samson and Jephthah. But since they are included, we know that they subdued kingdoms because of their

faith, which was displayed in their acts of courage. We should not assume that because a person is listed in Hebrews 11 that God is putting His stamp of approval on their whole lives. But in each case, there were times in their lives when they acted on the basis of what God had said, and with an eye toward the unseen future; hence, they did it "by faith."

[33-38] In these general descriptions of the effects of faith, the writer shows that there were physical victories and defeats. Faith does not guarantee physical deliverance, but it does act on the basis of a better future ("a better resurrection," v. 35). Some of the specific names left off the list are surprising, but they are referred to indirectly through a description of what they did. Most obvious are the references to "shutting the mouths of lions" (Daniel) and "quenching the power of fire" (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). The other references are to more general "feats of faith," including torture, mocking and imprisonment. In some cases, the faithful lost their lives, sometimes in violent ways (legend has it that Isaiah was "sawn in two"). In other cases, the faithful were doomed to wander, homeless, as it were, because of their faithfulness to God. The writer editorializes that "the world was not worthy of such" (v. 38).

[39-40] The writer closes out this famous chapter with the reminder that all of these people, though far from perfect, had "gained approval through their faith" (39). Faith—the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things not seen—really is the key to pleasing God (11:6). While the writer has mentioned a couple of times that the faithful had not received the promises, emphasizing their faith in the "heavenly country," he mentions it here for another purpose. In v. 40, we're told that they could not receive the promise because they could not be made perfect apart from us. Why? The answer is found in chapter 12, as the writer fixes our attention on the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ (12:2). In 2:10, Jesus was called the author (or "pioneer") of our salvation. God spoke in the past in various ways and through various spokesmen, but now speaks entirely through His Son (1:1-2). The promises were to be received through Him, and until He

pierced history, the promises remained unfulfilled. We are now perfected through Him, and those faithful people of old are perfected through Him as well (see 9:15).

Summary

While we look forward to the reward which God has promised us, we must never forget that persecution is the lot of the Christian. Jesus has promised that such will be the case (Jn. 16:33; II Tim. 3:12; Rom. 8:17). Why? Simply because there is such a stark contrast between this world and the next. Those who are of this world stand opposed to those who are “in the world but not of the world.” That creates a tension of eternal dimensions (see John 15:18-21; 17:14-17). Conflict is part of the Christian life and it takes courage to deal with such conflict.

The writer presents ample evidence that those who lived by faith also lived courageous lives. He talks of Israel and the faith they demonstrated when the walls of Jericho were brought down. He mentions Rahab’s faith in believing God more than the idolatrous kings of her own land. Many others are mentioned and commended for their faith which was displayed through their courage. Some fought against foreign enemies and some waged their war against the immorality and idolatry of God’s own people. But in all cases, courage was common.

We should notice that the focus of this chapter is not really on these people who showed such outstanding faith. The real Hero is God Himself. It is His high and holy character in which these people placed their trust and, whether or not they survived the physical trials, God proved faithful. But the ultimate object of faith was still a promise when these people were “stoned ...sawn in two...slain with the sword.” Yet they were faithful “unto death” (Rev. 2:10). We have it so much better! Christ has come and sealed the promise for us. Now our faith can look backward to the fulfillment, which should give us strength and courage for the journey. Perhaps we need the reminder that faith without risk is not a biblical, saving faith.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does faith do for the faithful, according to v. 1?

2. What does “gained approval” mean? Whose?

3. Faith begins with an acceptance of what great fact?

4. Why was Abel’s sacrifice better than Cain’s?

5. What is required to please God?

6. How did Noah condemn the world?

7. What had Abraham left? Why did he leave?

8. Why was Sarah’s faith noteworthy?

9. All the faithful made a certain “confession.” What was it?
10. What is the better country to which the faithful aspire?
11. What gave Abraham the strength to offer Isaac? Did he offer him?
12. What is similar in the account of the faith of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph?
13. What was the nature of Moses’ parents’ faith?
14. Contrasting terms are used to describe Moses’ faith in vv. 25-26. What are they?
15. What motivated Moses to try to help his people?
16. Why did he keep the Passover and sprinkle the blood on the doorposts?
17. The Israelites passed safely through the Red Sea, but the Egyptians drowned when they tried. What was the difference?
18. What did the Israelites do that made the walls fall down?
19. Who was Rahab, and why was her faith so remarkable?
20. Does faith always spell v-i-c-t-o-r-y in the physical realm? How do you know?
21. In what way is the “world not worthy” of the faithful?
22. Why had these faithful people not received the promise?
23. What does “perfect” mean in v. 40?



Thought Questions

What exactly are we “hoping” for?

What are some of the obstacles to considering ourselves “strangers” on earth, even though we gleefully sing the song, “I’m just a passin’ through”?

How does faith overcome fear?

Have we received what was promised?

Unit 10

- 12:1-3 Running the race
- 12:4-11 Divine discipline
- 12:12-13 Strengthen and straighten

Hebrews 12:1-13

[1-3] “Therefore” (lit., “therefore, then,” a conclusion of emphasis which sums up the whole argument about the better promises under the New Covenant) refers back to the discussion in chapter 11 about the heroes of faith. The old Greek bard, Homer, spoke of a “cloud of foot soldiers,” meaning a whole bunch of them. The writer of Hebrews adapts this language to the faithful, suggesting that the number far exceeds those mentioned in that chapter. It is popular to picture the “cloud of witnesses” as a “balcony” of “fans” rooting us on. However, the Greek word for “witness” (*marturon*) is the same word we sometimes translate “martyr.” This implies something more profound than “eyewitnesses,” or spectators. These are people who took a risk for God and, in many cases, were faithful “unto death” (cf. Revelation 2:10).

The writer pictures an athletic contest. The “cloud” are those who have finished the race and they surround us as we continue on. They “surround us” because they are part of that special body that has chosen to live by faith, a body that includes all the faithful of all ages (see 12:22-24). By using this language, the writer implies that his readers, whose faith has been shaken and who are struggling with their commitment, are still in that body, or “in the race.” Their doubts and quivering trust have not expelled them from the contest yet. But they are to “run with endurance the race that is set before us”—this is not a 100 meter dash, but a marathon. The Greek word for “race” is *agon*, which is sometimes translated “struggle.” If you put a “y” at the end of the word, you get the idea that this is a special kind of race, an *agonizing* one that requires stamina and fortitude.

To successfully complete the race, these spiritual athletes must do three things. First, they must lay aside every weight that may encumber them. Again, this picks up the analogy from a foot race — an athlete would “lay aside weights” in two ways: (1) through rigorous training and

discipline (see 4-13) and, (2) through stripping down to the bare essentials in clothing. Today, a look at Michael Phelps will confirm that the principle is still alive. Sinewy muscles reveal years of disciplined training. And, modesty issues aside, skimpy attire, made out of the lightest fabric available, cuts water resistance to a minimum. The idea is that we must put away anything that keeps us from “going on to maturity” (6:1), even things that are not bad in themselves. If our work gets in the way of serving Christ and others, we must change jobs; if a friend is making us compromise our commitment, then we must find a new friend. Anything that keeps us from running must be set aside. See Luke 9:57-62; 14:27-33.

A second matter the spiritual racer must deal with is sin. It is pictured here as that which “entangles” or easily ensnares us. It would be like trying to run a race with a long robe on. Sin (*hamartia*, “to miss the mark”) entangles us because we are distracted with it. We take our eyes off the goal in order to pursue the evil. We can’t run the race of faith as long as we are caught up in some sin. The instruction is simple: lay it aside as you would a garment (cf. Romans 13:12; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:8-9. See also Matthew 5:29-30).

The third step is to “fix our eyes on Jesus.” Every runner has a goal, even the 26-mile marathoner. We might have expected the writer to tell us to fix our eyes on “the city with foundations” (heaven), but instead he tells us to focus on Jesus. One reason is that we can see Jesus, in the sense that we follow his life and dwell in his word (cf. I Peter 2:21; John 8:32-32). Furthermore, “He is the author (or “leader”; see 2:10) and perfecter of our faith.” In other words, He is the one in whom our faith is centered. Remember that the quality of faith depends upon its object—Christ is the object. Jesus is the architect of our faith and the one in whom we place our complete trust. He’s our “Champion.”

He is our “perfecter,” the one who brings us to the goal. One Greek word is used to translate “fixing our eyes,” and it means to shift the focus from one thing and onto another. Every other goal must be secondary to Jesus (cf. Matthew 6:33). A runner who begins to look at a goal other than the finish line will eventually turn off the course and follow the object of his interest.

“For the joy set before Him” can mean one of two things, either (1) that Jesus was able to look past the cross to the joy that lay on the other side (i.e., the joy of completing the work and “bringing many sons to glory” 2:10) or (2) that Jesus endured the cross, and refused the joy set before Him. In other words, Jesus made “a decisive choice to endure the cross instead of taking advantage of the joy that He might have experienced if He hadn’t suffered” (Lane, Hebrews, Vol. 2, p. 413f.). Choice number one seems most compelling to me since the arguments for 2 revolve around a supposed “specific historical event” (Lane). But we don’t have any record of such an offer, at least not at the moment Jesus went to the cross. Indeed, some hours before He was arrested He could say He had accomplished the work that God had given Him to do (John 17:4).

Jesus endured the cross because He was able to think beyond current circumstances and see the joy that lay in the future. After enduring the cross, He “sat down” (perfect tense) and thus His joy was complete. His faith enabled Him to “despise the shame (disgrace)” of the cross. To despise something is to treat it with contempt. In His case, He would not allow the horrible shame of the cross to deter Him from enduring it. This is a not so subtle message to His readers who were being tempted to turn away from Christ, partly because of the reproach that His name was beginning to bring.

So Jesus thus becomes the supreme example of keeping faith in spite of persecution, a lesson sorely needed by these Christians (cf. I Peter 4:1). This point is driven home expressly in v. 3: they are to “consider” (to reckon, count up) “Him who endured such hostility” (perfect tense, indicating past action with a continuing result) so that they will not get discouraged in their fight against evil. The answer to dealing

with the trouble brought on by faith in Christ is to focus even more on Christ.

[4-11] Verse 4 tells us that these Christians who have suffered in the past (10:32ff.) and, to some extent, are suffering now (13:3), still have not experienced the worst. They have not yet resisted evil up to the point of “shedding blood” (i.e., dying; cf. Revelation 2:10).

According to Hughes, the metaphor shifts from the race track to the boxing ring. They have had to dodge and weave, but have not taken too many punches yet. The writer is admonishing them, implying that if they can’t handle the current crisis, then they will be ill-prepared to deal with what is coming.

He makes that point explicitly in the following verses. They have forgotten that God disciplines those whom He loves. Discipline (*paideia*) involves both instruction and correction. The writer suggests that persecution for God is a form of discipline from God. I don’t believe any passage teaches that God specifically causes suffering for His children, but He does allow it to happen. And when it comes because of our confession, it has training value since it hardens us for future trials. Many passages in the New Testament touch on this. James 1:2 tells us to “count it all joy when you encounter various trials” because the testing, if faced faithfully, produces endurance (remember that the need for endurance is a continuing theme in Hebrews). See Romans 8:17, where it is assumed that suffering comes with the blessing of being a Christian. The same is true in II Timothy 3:12. In I Peter 3:17, Peter says that it is better “if God should will it so” to suffer for doing what is right. Again, the point is not that it is God’s will for His people to suffer, but He does expect us to do “right” and that inevitably brings suffering. Remember that the apostles rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His name (Acts 5:41).

In almost every mention of suffering in the New Testament, it is suffering for Christ, that is under consideration, not the suffering common to mankind. Virtually every human being suffers at one time or another, but that is not usually the Holy Spirit’s main concern. With the possible exception of James 1:2ff. (“various

trials”), every passage speaks to the suffering that is created by our faith. Faith is not only the answer to persecution, it is the cause of it. While Daniel’s faith “shut the mouths of lions” (11:33), it also was the reason he was in the lion’s den in the first place.

Therefore, the writer is arguing that the discipline we receive comes indirectly from God, insofar as we suffer for Him. But he also points out that it should not surprise us, since every “son” is disciplined by a loving father. Once again, an Old Testament passage is employed to make his point, this time from Proverbs 3:11-12. We are not to “faint” when we are reproved by God (v. 5) since discipline is a kind of proof of God’s love for us. In fact, if you are not disciplined, you are “illegitimate” and not sons. After all, earthly fathers discipline their sons, so why shouldn’t we expect to be disciplined by our Father? And there is an important distinction between the discipline we received from our fathers and the discipline we receive from God: our fathers disciplined us for a short time, in a way that seemed best to them at the time. It was necessarily imperfect. But we can know that God disciplines us for good, that we may share His holiness (verses 9-10).

If discipline doesn’t hurt, in some way, then it is not discipline (v. 11). No one likes it at the time they are experiencing it. But patient endurance of the discipline yields the “peaceful fruit of righteousness.” It is possible to be righteous, free from guilt and confident about your status with God. While we will never get to the place where we can ignore sin, and while we will always be faced with temptations, peace of mind is possible. But peace comes at a price. The price is discipline, the daily buffeting of the body (I Corinthians 9:27).

[12-13] Strengthen and straighten. To realize the peace of a life of righteousness, there has to be an understanding of the process. The writer uses an analogy from orthopedics in verses 12-13 to illustrate it. Just as a broken arm must be reset and put in a cast, always an uncomfortable and painful procedure, so must we realize that our “healing” takes place only through the painful process of suffering for Christ. Today,

there is much talk about “healing” and often it is argued that we need to smooth the path for one who has gone astray. As an old preacher once said, “if the prodigal went into the far country today someone would give him a bed and a sandwich and he never would come to the father’s house.” Proper, complete “healing” does not take place through making the environment softer and more accommodating. Tension is required, or we will not “get better.”

What forms does “suffering for Christ” take? For first century Christians, suffering came through external persecution. Government authorities, or hostile Jews, demanded that Christians give up their commitment to Christ. To the Romans, the Christians’ commitment to Christ was treason, since only the emperor had a right to be praised. To those Jews who had rejected Christ, the Christians posed a constant threat to the religious hierarchy they had constructed. Even the common people, most of whom got their view of Christianity from the first century “media” (mostly word of mouth), the Christians were mocked as cannibals (because of the Lord’s supper) or as immoral (because of the emphasis on “love of the brethren”).

We struggle today to make application of these statements about “discipline,” because we are immune to physical persecution in this nation. But some of the trials we face as Christians are irrespective of the age. For example, adhering to the word of God — His commands and His will — always produces a disciplinary process in us (see 4:12-13). We still face mockery and ridicule and temptation of all kinds is an ageless trial that all those who desire to live godly lives must undergo.

But other trials take different forms today than our early Christian brothers and sisters faced. I’m convinced that Satan, knowing that persecution failed to stem the tide of Christianity, has turned to other, more subtle means of temptations. Instead of raising governments and armies against us, he tempts us to be less than we ought to be. He wants us to gradually get caught up in the world and place our attention on pursuing the things that the world esteems, instead of the holiness of God (see 12:14). He is patient. If he can get a

little of our time, get us to use a little of our money improperly, persuade us that “grace” will make up for any of our deficiencies, so “don’t worry so much about being holy,” then he has a far better situation than he even had in the first century. Now, he’s got an army *within the church itself!* He has infiltrated our ranks with the terminally non-committed “attender” who has swallowed his lie that his puny service is pleasing to God. We are “ignorant of his devices” to our eternal peril (II Corinthians 2:11).

Note that the use of the plural in verses 12-13 may be an admonition to the entire withdrawn community to strengthen its weakest members. “Make straight paths for your feet” means to move in a straight direction with your feet (TDNT, 5:449-50). Proverbs 4:26, from which this verse is taken, says “watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established.” Verse 27 says “do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil.” The writer of Hebrews is encouraging the community to do what it takes to help the weaker members get stronger and to get on the right path, as a group, and stay on it. In a similar vein, Jesus said to Sardis, the dead church, to “wake up and strengthen the things that remain which were about to die” (Revelation 3:2). Failure to heal the weak members will result in him being “put out of joint”—a permanent cripple. His describing the real possibility of apostasy, once again (see 6:4-6; 10:26-31).

Questions for Discussion

1. Explain the “therefore”...to what does it refer?
2. Who are the “cloud of witnesses”?
3. What must we lay aside before we can effectively run the Christian race?
4. Who or what is our goal in life? Why?
5. What is the result of focusing our attention on Jesus?
6. How do we “strive against sin”?
7. What is discipline and how did the readers of this letter experience it?
8. How can discipline be proof of love?
9. What happens to one who is without discipline?
10. What is the result (“fruit”) of righteousness?

11. Explain the “therefore” in v. 12

12. What analogy does the writer use in this paragraph? Explain it.



Thought Questions

What specific things tend to encumber us and make it more difficult for us to live as Christians?

Name some specific ways we experience discipline today.

If the instruction in these verses applies more to the church than to individuals, how should we carry it out?

Unit II

12:14-17: Arriving at the grace of God
12:18-24: Christians in the presence of God
12:25-29: The awesome God

Hebrews 12:14-29

[14-17] The writer has just finished a dissertation on the importance and necessity of discipline. He tells his readers that it is a product of the love of God: God disciplines every child he receives. In verses 12-13, he encouraged them to take the necessary steps, even if painful, that would ensure their healing.

In this paragraph, the writer begins with a command that, if his readers apply it, would be evidence that they have taken the discipline instruction seriously. In v. 11, he said that while discipline at the time it is administered is always “sorrowful,” yet afterwards it “yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” In v. 14, he essentially repeats that point, putting it into a command: pursue peace and sanctification (the process of being made righteous).

His readers were to “pursue peace with all men.” To “pursue” is to “hunt” or “follow” after. It implies a strong desire to find what you are hunting for, which, in turn, suggests the need for discipline. Christians are people who crave peace, if it is at all possible to achieve it (see Matthew 5:9; cf. Romans 12:17-21; but see I Cor. 11:19). And the peace that Christians are to pursue is not just among brethren (that’s taken for granted!), but with all men. We are to be peace-loving and peace-making people. While some division is inevitable, this passage reminds us to choose our battles very carefully (cf. Titus 3:9-11). To do so takes discipline.

Christians are also to pursue “sanctification” or “holiness.” In verse 10, the writer pinpoints the purpose of discipline: “that we may share His holiness” (cf. I Peter 1:15-16). “Sanctification,” from the Greek word *hagiasmos*, is the separation or setting apart of the sacred from the sinful to make it holy. Christians voluntarily go through the discipline of purifying themselves, not conforming themselves to the world (cf. I Corinthians 9:27; I John 3:3; I Corinthians 6:11; II Corinthians 6:14-7:1). Christ’s sacrifice was

effective to set apart those who are being sanctified (10:14: present passive participle). That the pursuit of holiness is not optional for Christians is clear from the rest of v. 14: “without which no one will see the Lord.” Clearly, the sanctification process, difficult though it is, is an essential aspect of the Christian walk (for more on what sanctification involves, see Romans 8:1-15).

“See to it” (v. 15) means “watch out.” The instruction here seems to be to the community, perhaps specifically to the leaders (cf. 13:17). They are to watch that no individual “comes short” (cf. 4:1; 11:37 — “destitute”) of the grace of God. In other words, don’t fail to attain to or appropriate God’s grace. The danger is that if a “root of bitterness” springs up many others will be defiled. Cf. I Corinthians 5:6: “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?” The term “root of bitterness” comes from Deuteronomy 29:18, where it refers to the inclination of the people to fall into idolatry and, therefore, apostasy.

The church is also to watch that there is no immoral (Gk. *pornos*) or godless (“irreligious”) person in the community. As an illustration of a “godless” person, the writer uses Esau, who despised his birthright (Genesis 25:34). Jacob, for all his failings, demonstrated an appreciation for the heritage promised by God and thus is counted among the faithful. Esau always viewed life from a temporal perspective and never looked ahead. This is probably why God chose Jacob to receive the blessing over Esau (cf. Malachi 1:3). When Esau realized that the blessing had been given to Jacob, and sought to have it overturned, he learned there was “no turning back” (Genesis 27:38). Isaac would not, and could not, “repent” of blessing Jacob instead of Esau, Esau’s weeping notwithstanding.

[18-24] The writer provides a rationale for the preceding by contrasting Mount Sinai with Mount Zion, representative of the old and new covenants, respectively. The reference to the burning mountain is found in Exodus 19:16-19; 20:18-21. Moses, in recounting his experience, said the words recorded in v. 21 in Deuteronomy 9:19. Under the Old Covenant, all was darkness, gloom, fear and trembling. The theme, of course, is the awesome holiness of God, so crucial that even if a beast touched the mountain it was to be stoned so that no one would touch it.

The Hebrew Christians are reminded that they have not come to a frightening scene, such as that on Mount Sinai, but to "Mount Zion." Mount Zion was the Jebusite stronghold that David captured in the seventh year of his reign, and built the royal residence there (II Samuel 5:6-9). When Solomon built the temple on a site to the north of Zion, it became synonymous with Jerusalem (Psalm 122:3ff.). I Kings 14:21; Psalm 78:68f.; 87:1; Isaiah 18:7; 31:9; Amos 1:2; Micah 4:7).

It is to this mountain, figuratively speaking, that Christians have "come to" (the Greek word for "you have come to" is similar to "proselyte," implying that we come to the mountain upon our conversion). It is the "city of the living God" (see 11:10; 13:14), "the heavenly Jerusalem" (cf. Galatians 4:26; Revelation 21:2). All of these terms refer to the place we call heaven. As Paul does in Philippians 3:20, the writer argues that we are, in a sense, citizens of this heavenly kingdom now, even while we continue our struggle on earth.

From place, the writer turns to beings: we come to "myriads of angels in festal assembly" (the literal translation of the latter part of v. 22 and the first part of v. 23). 10,000 angels were involved in the giving of the law (cf. 2:2; Deuteronomy 33:2; cf. Daniel 7:10; Revelation 5:11). They've also come to the "church (*ekklesia*) of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven," probably referring to all Christians, living and dead (the universal church). The word "first-born" is plural here, compared to 1:6, where the word is singular. There may be an allusion to Esau, mentioned in v. 16, who sold his right as a first-born.

Christians also come to God, here referred to as the "Judge of all," an allusion to Genesis 18:25 where Abraham negotiated with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. The message to these wavering pilgrims is that they had come this far, to the city of God and even to God Himself; but don't forget that this God is Judge (cf. 4:13; 10:30-31). "Spirits of righteous men made perfect" surely refers to the heroes of faith of chapter 11, the "cloud of witness" (12:1). They were not made perfect apart from us (11:40), but now that Jesus has come, their perfection has been accomplished (cf. 9:15). In fact, Christians have also come "to Jesus, the mediator of a New Covenant, the one who is able to "save to the uttermost" (7:25). His blood speaks better than that of Abel, which cried for vengeance and justice. Rabbinical stories suggested that they believed the blood of a murdered person kept seething until it had been avenged. In contrast, Jesus' "sprinkled blood" speaks the New Covenant words of forgiveness and mercy (see 8:8-13).

[25-29] A final warning is given, and once again it focuses on the need to hear what God is saying. Its message is similar to 2:1-4 and 3:7-19: God spoke before and people were expected to listen. If they did not escape His punishment for failure to heed His warnings from earth, how much less will we escape when He warns from heaven? Warning "from earth" likely refers to the mediation of the law through Moses under the Old Covenant. Now, God has spoken in a final and ultimate way through Christ (1:1-2). The first "shaking" took place under the Old Covenant, presumably at Sinai (cf. Psalm 68:7f.). But even then God predicted that He would shake not only the earth, but heaven as well (see Haggai 2:2f.; cf. Isaiah 13:13). This "shaking" of earth and heaven refers to the removing of the Old Covenant and the establishment of the new, with Christ as mediator (cf. 8:8-13).

That which is "unshakable" is that which survives while the universe is shaken to pieces; it is eternal. In this letter, the author has emphasized the temporal nature of the world with the eternal nature of the Son of God. Now, he emphasizes the temporary nature of the Old

Covenant with the permanent, unshakable nature of the new, which has been brought in by Christ. “We should be thankful,” he says, “that the kingdom we are in the process of receiving is unshakable, and in our gratitude, render to God acceptable service, giving Him the reverence and respect He deserves. After all, God is a consuming fire” (paraphrase, v. 28-29). The last statement is virtually ignored today. That “God is love” (I John 4:8) everyone will agree. But the statement that He is a “consuming fire” is just as forthright. In Deuteronomy 4:24, God is called “a consuming fire, a jealous God.” In Isaiah 6:3, God is called “holy” three times; it is the only term applied to him in a triad. We ignore the absolute holiness and awesomeness of God to our eternal peril.

Summary

If we are being disciplined by the Lord, there will be fruit (cf. II). We will pursue peace and holiness and remember that we have come into the presence of God, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Remaining in this splendid company is not automatic, however, so we continue to submit to the discipline of our loving Father, even as we also remember that he is a “consuming fire.” This section is one of the best arguments in Scripture for balance in our view of God and salvation (see Rom. 11:22).

Questions for Discussion

1. What is “peace” and with whom should we seek it?
2. Why is sanctification crucial to pleasing God?
3. What is a “root of bitterness”? Where does the figure come from?
4. Why such a poor biography for Esau in vv. 16-17?
5. Whose repentance does v. 17 refer to?
6. To what mountain had the readers of Hebrews *not* come? Compare the two mountains.
7. Why was no one allowed to touch the mountain? What happened if they did?
8. Describe each element in the description of “Mount Zion” as recorded in vv. 22-24.
9. Who are “righteous men made perfect”? When did their perfection take place?
10. How does Jesus’ blood speak “better” than the blood of Abel?
11. Who is speaking (v. 25)?

12. Compare his argument in v. 25 with 2:2-4 and 10:26ff. How are they similar?
13. Where does it say “once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven”? What is the context of the book quoted from?
14. What are the shakeable things that have been removed? What has taken their place?
15. In what sense do we “receive the kingdom”? Why can it not be shaken?
16. How should we respond to receiving this kingdom?



Thought Questions

What, if anything, do these verses have to do with discipline, discussed earlier in the chapter?

The essence of the description in vv. 22-24 is that we have, even now, come into the presence of God. What is the impact on our daily lives if we are truly convinced that we are in God’s presence?

God is love. God is a consuming fire. God is holy. Which is most important?

In sum, what does God want from His people?

Unit 12

13:1-17: Instructions and Exhortations

13:18-25: Concluding Exhortations, Requests and Greetings

Hebrews 13:1-25

Ultimately, our Christianity must be put into practice if it is going to have any impact on us or the world. That's why Jesus told us that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matthew 5). Both light and salt have value only when they contact other elements. So application is essential. Having said that, do not forget that application without theology is as pointless as theology without application. And let it be carefully noted that the writer of Hebrews has spent the main portion of the book correcting his readers' theology before showing how they are to apply it.

Much of the instruction in this chapter is presented "shotgun" style. It is especially difficult to discern any structure in the first part of the chapter. The technical name for this is *parasis*, "an ancient rhetorical and literary style consisting of moral exhortations loosely fitted together" (Craig Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, p. 682).

Instructions and exhortations [1-17]

[1] There is a sense of urgency in the writer's instruction in v. 1. He wants to make sure that "brotherly love" (*philadelphia*) "continues." In the Greek, the word is a verb in the present active imperative tense, meaning to "keep on loving the brethren." The use of the verb suggests that the bond of love was in jeopardy if the brethren did not give close attention to it (cf. Revelation 2:4). We sometimes underestimate the power of brotherly love has in deflecting apostasy in the community. If I sincerely love you as a fellow child of God I will think twice about overthrowing the faith I share with you and I will reconsider risking exclusion from the community of people I love (that assumes that church discipline is a reality). I will also be sensitive to the problems my brethren are facing that might tend to threaten their faithfulness.

[2] From love of the brethren the writer turns to a concern about showing hospitality to strangers. In the first century inns were few, so putting up travelers was a necessity and a common practice among the Jews. "Do not neglect" means, literally, "do not go on being unmindful," which implies that this grace was lacking among these Christians. The writer alludes to Judges 13:16 in his reference to "entertaining angels without knowing it." His point is a practical one: as we show kindness and hospitality to those whom we do not know, we may well entertain one who will bring a great blessing into our life. Has that ever happened to you? Besides family, didn't everyone who has had a positive influence in your life start out as a stranger to you?

[3] The writer undoubtedly refers to those who were imprisoned for their faith (cf. Hebrews 10:34). They were to do more than remember them, however; they were to be "bound together" with them, the literal meaning of the Greek verb translated "as though in prison with them." They were to empathize with them, and with those who were mistreated ("tortured" in NRSV), remembering that they, too, are "in the body" and therefore vulnerable to such treatment.

[4] This is the most explicit teaching in the New Testament on the idea that sexual relations are to be confined to marriage, and that marriage is designed to satisfy sexual needs. Marriage to be held in honor, or respected, by all and the marriage bed is to be kept undefiled. "Bed" is an idiom for sexual intercourse. Those who ridicule marriage as "old fashioned" or unworkable, as did some Greek philosophers during the time of this letter, show their ignorance of God's view of the matter. Furthermore, those who engage in sexual relations outside of marriage are adulterers or

fornicators, and God will judge all of them (cf. I Corinthians 6:9-11). The two words cover everyone who engages in sexual relations outside marriage.

[5] The writer encourages his audience to be content with their material goods, keeping their “character” (lit., “manner of life”) free from the love of money (see I Timothy 6:6-10 for a similar exhortation). The verse provides a good definition of “contentment”: what you have at any given moment is “enough.” But the writer goes a step further and quotes a passage that contains an address originally given to Joshua by the Lord: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5; cf. Deuteronomy 31:6, 8). Christians who are not content admit that they do not trust God completely yet (see Matthew 6:24-33). Furthermore, in the context of this letter, discontented Christians (those whose focus in life is on acquiring more material goods) are ill-prepared to meet the trials that are likely to come (cf. 10:32-34). Some Christians are bound to lose goods — how will these Christians accept the plundering of their goods?

[6] The writer quotes Psalm 118:6 (see 56:11). This is combined with Joshua 1:5 (Deuteronomy 31:6, 8) to make the powerful point that God never leaves His people without support or help, no matter what the circumstances. Therefore, Christians should be confident or courageous, just as Joshua was. A “helper” is one who gives aid in times of need. When we are confident about our relationship with God, man has no power over us; even the power of death is nothing (cf. 2:14). Not a hair of a Christian’s head is harmed without God taking careful notice (cf. Matthew 10:26ff; Psalm 55:8).

[7] “Led” probably refers to local leaders who taught these Christians in the past, but have since died. The readers are to “remember,” as they are encouraged to do in 10:32. They are to remember in order to gain confidence. Dwelling on the good example of those who were faithful unto death is a profitable and motivating exercise (see chapter 11). They could do no better than to imitate the faith of these leaders.

Perhaps the writer wanted to give them a more immediate example than the examples he gave in chapter 11. His point is clear enough: to give up now (1) would render their past suffering meaningless and (2) would make vain their past leaders’ sacrifices on their behalf.

[8] The Greeks were taught that only that which is changeless is eternal. This letter is written in the middle of the storm of change and so the writer takes this opportunity to assert the immutable character of Jesus Christ. This may also be intended to bring the focus back to Jesus (cf. 12:2, where “fixing your eyes on Jesus” comes right after fixing their minds on the faithful in chapter 11). In any case, Jesus is the same—changeless, immutable, permanent—yesterday, today, forever.

[9-16] There is a certain coherency to these verses, that may start in v. 8: the statement about Jesus may be there to introduce these comments about the inadequacy of the Old Covenant, in comparison with Jesus’ New Covenant. You should recall the comparison between the “shaking kingdom” and the unshakable one (chapter 12). The “varied and strange teachings” refer specifically to teachings in the law, especially the dietary provisions. The heart is strengthened by grace, but not by eating or abstaining from certain foods (cf. Colossians 2:8ff; Romans 14:17). Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3-20 listed unclean foods that distinguished the Jewish people from the nations. But the writer of Hebrews shows that the time for such provisions has passed and that eating or not eating will not benefit those who observe them (i.e., in the conduct of life). Those things were a shadow, but the substance is Christ (Col. 2:16-17); they are of no value in combatting fleshly indulgence (Col. 2:23).

The priests had no right to eat the sacrifice which was brought into the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement; on that day, the bodies of the animals were totally burned outside the camp (Leviticus 16:27). As the writer has explained in Hebrews 9-10, Jesus fulfilled the typology enacted in the Day of Atonement through His unique, once-for-all sacrifice of

Himself, after which He entered the heavenly sanctuary. Perhaps some had claimed that Christians were inferior to Jews because they “had no alter.” But, in fact, we do “eat” at an altar in the New Covenant at which the priests under the Old Covenant have no right to eat [10], namely the cross of Christ. We serve as “priests” (see v. 15) at a different kind of altar (cf. I Peter 2:5, 9), and enjoy the privilege of partaking of Christ’s sacrifice (Hughes, p. 575).

The writer makes a point that must have been shocking to his first century Jewish audience. The ground outside the camp where the carcasses of the sacrificed animals were burned was unholy territory; therefore, ceremonial cleansing was required before a man could once again enter the camp (Leviticus 16:26, 28). Jesus, the writer says, was sacrificed outside the camp in order to sanctify the people through His own blood. Perhaps, as one writer points out, the death of Jesus “outside the camp” marked the abolition of the necessity of holy places for sanctification (Helmut Koester, “Outside the Camp”: Hebrews 13:9-14, Harvard Theological Review 55 (1962), p. 300f.). In any case, by suffering outside the camp, Jesus identifies with the world in its unholiness. God came to sinful man with the sacrifice of His Son and, figuratively, went where man was in His effort to redeem him. Leaving the camp to follow Jesus [13] may imply being willing to leave the Jewish community, and even be expelled from it. Those who are seeking the city to come [14] are willing to risk being “thrust out of the synagogue” (Jerusalem), and ready to renounce their citizenship here.

The concept of “sacrifice” is carried forward with the exhortation to continue to offer sacrifice, only now of “praise” instead of dead animals. We are to do good and share, because these kind of sacrifices “please God” [15-16]. God desires our thanksgiving and praise for His wonderful work in Christ, and a willingness to help others (cf. Psalm 116:12-19 for an Old Testament perspective on this idea; see also Micah 6:6-8; Psalm 51:16-17). An interesting rabbinical tradition teaches that all the Mosaic sacrifices would have an end except the thank offering and all prayers would cease except the prayer of thanksgiving. The word

“confess” (*homologeo*) in v. 15 means “proclamation” as well as “praise” (cf. Matthew 10:32-33). Christians praise God, but do not neglect (habitually) the doing of good deeds and “sharing” (*koinonia*, the Greek verb is usually translated “fellowship” in the New Testament).

[17] “Leaders” are surely the elders of the congregation. The readers are to “obey” and “submit” to them (the words are so similar that this is the only passage in the New Testament in which they appear together in the same sentence). Both verbs are present imperatives, indicating that this submission must be the norm in the church: “keep on obeying and submitting.” Elders are those who keep watch over the souls of those in the church, as a shepherd keeps watch over his flock (see Exodus 3:17; 35:7; cf. Isaiah 21:8; Habakkuk 2:1). These same leaders will “give an account” (future tense); therefore, the church should do its best to make their job easy, so that they can serve with joy, instead of with grief (lit., “groaning”). It is often a very tiny percentage of people in the average church that create the most grief for the elders. We should make it our aim to never be in that number, since they too shall give an account. To cause grief to the elders is “unprofitable” or harmful to the one doing it, either because of the final judgment to come or because of the present harm it will do both to the community and to the individual who is causing the grief. Both may well be in view here.

Concluding Exhortations, Requests and Greetings [18-25]

The final verses of the letter are devoted primarily to personal matters. In verses 18-19, the writer requests the prayers of the community (“pray for us” is present imperative, “keep on praying”), with a sense of urgency so that the writer may be restored to them sooner. Perhaps the writer is in prison, an intriguing thought if the author is Paul, though there is no concrete evidence that he is (see below on vv. 22-25). The writer appeals to his good conscience and his honorable (honest) conduct in all things (cf. Paul’s statements in Acts 23:1; 24:16; I Timothy 1:5).

[20-21] The writer expresses his hope that God will equip the group to do His will. He bases his appeal on the fact that God is the one who “brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep.” This may be a allusion to Isaiah 63:11, where Moses is referred to as a shepherd “brought up from the sea.” Once again, the writer sets the two leaders in contrast (see 3:1-6). A further implication is that if God raised Christ from the dead, He is capable of equipping His saints with what they need to do His will. Given the readers’ temptation to slip back to Judaism in the face of trials, the writer reminds them either directly or indirectly that (1) God is a God of peace (or “reconciliation”; cf. Romans 15:30-33; II Corinthians 5:17-21; Ephesians 2:11-22), (2) they serve a risen Savior, (3) the blood of Jesus ratified an eternal covenant, (4) that pleasing God happens through Jesus Christ, and (5) Jesus is worthy of all glory.

[22-25] The writer ends his written sermon by urging his readers to “bear with” (lit., “endure”) the message he has written “briefly” or “in few words.” The readers are directed to take notice that Timothy had been released. “If, as is likely, Timothy was arrested under Nero in Rome, he may well have been released on Nero’s death, because the Praetorian Guard and the Roman aristocracy had long before lost faith in Nero’s policies” (Keener, pp. 684-85). Nero died in AD 68. That presents a problem for Pauline authorship since it is commonly assumed that Paul was executed during Nero’s reign. None of this is certain however, and so the mystery about authorship remains (see Introduction). The writer intended to visit this church and hoped to bring Timothy with him, if the latter arrived on time to go with him.

Verse 24 seems, at first glance, to prove a Roman venue for the composition of the letter. However, “those from Italy” could just as easily refer to Christians who once lived in Italy, but now live elsewhere and are sending greetings back to Italy. However, the author is probably in Rome as he writes. The writer ends his letter on a teaching note: “grace be with you all” (cf. 12:15).

Summary

This chapter is chock full of application: love the brethren, be hospitable, empathize with those who suffer for the faith, avoid fornication and adultery, free yourself from the love of money and be content, and don’t forget that God is with the faithful. Furthermore, we are to avoid strange doctrines and focus on Jesus, who never changes. Our sacrifices, under the New Covenant, are sacrifices of praise and good works. We are to obey our leaders in the church and make sure their job can be carried out with joy. And, in the final analysis, God will equip us to do what we must do to please Him — a fact that we are prone to forget, replacing trust in God with our own devices.

Perhaps here lies the most important message from Hebrews for us: we can trust God to equip us for earth and heaven, “for we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end . . .” (3:14).

Questions for Discussion

1. What other passages in the NT specifically address the issue of “brotherly love”?
2. What is the point of “some have entertained angels without knowing it” (v. 2)?
3. What does being “in the body” have to do with remembering the prisoners?
4. How is marriage to be regarded? How is the bed kept “undefiled”?
5. Why should Christians be free from the love of money?
6. Who are “those who led you” and why are these Christians supposed to remember them? What’s the point?
7. Why is verse 8 in here? What does it teach about Christ?
8. What are the “varied and strange teachings,” specifically?
9. Why weren’t the people under the Old Covenant benefitted by the dietary laws (v. 9)?
10. To what sacrifice or event does v. 11 refer?
11. Explain the irony in v. 12. Why are Christians to “go outside the camp”? What is the historical significance of that statement and what does it mean to us today?
12. What does God want from us?

13. What is the connection between “pray for us” and “we are sure we have a good conscience” (18)?
14. In what sense is God the “God of peace”?
15. Describe the meaning of “the blood of the eternal covenant” using scriptures from Hebrews.
16. What is a “word of exhortation”?



Thought Questions

Does v. 4 say anything to the view that sexual relations in marriage is strictly for procreation?

Find other passages in the NT that refers to the obligations of elders and those who are led by them.

Is there any lesson to be applied to us from vv. 24-25? If so, what?

In your mind, draw a line from the exhortations in chapter 13 back to various arguments in Hebrews. What connections can you find? Or are the applications unrelated to the doctrine?

17.