

# **New Testament Studies**

## **Hebrews** *(RVS Notes)*

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## Hebrews Introduction

**Author and recipients**—Authorship of this letter has been debated since the early days of the church. Both Clement of Alexandria (150-215) and Origen (185-253) thought Paul was the author, with minor qualifications. Clement thought Luke translated the epistle into Greek and Origen thought that one of Paul's associates served as an amanuensis with some flexibility. Others thought differently, including those assembling the Muratorian Canon of the Scriptures (appearing in Rome, circa 200), Hippolytus of Rome, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Tertullian (who thought the author was Barnabas). Jerome and Augustine both asserted Pauline authorship, which became the prevailing Western view until the Reformation.

The Reformers challenged this view. Calvin argued for Clement of Rome or Luke as the author and Luther proposed Apollos. Modern commentators have abandoned the idea of Paul's authorship and have generally proposed four potential authors:

- Barnabas.
- Apollos.
- Priscilla and Aquila.
- Someone else in the Pauline circle (suggestions include Silas, Timothy, and Epaphras).

We really do not know who wrote Hebrews. What can be said from the advanced arguments in the book and its fine literary style is that the author had sophisticated training and literary skills.

This letter was addressed to Jewish Christians, who formed the nucleus of many early churches. Support for this assertion comes from the book's title, the assumptions the author's arguments make concerning the readers' knowledge of Old Testament sacrificial practices and general Jewish teaching, and the core teaching of the book that Christianity is superior to Judaism. For Jewish believers, these were not easy times. Hebrews 10:32-34 speaks of persecution. Hebrews 11 includes heroes of faith who suffered for their beliefs. The author is telling them that they cannot go back to an earlier stage of God's purposes, they had to go on with Christ.

**Date and occasion**—Some think that the reference to Italy (in 13:24) suggests that this letter may have been directed to Jewish Christians living in Rome. In addition, the initial hesitancy for the canonicity of this letter came from the church at Rome based on their doubts of its apostolic authorship. As direct recipients, perhaps they knew Paul did not write it.

Again, others think differently. The mention of Italy in 13:24 is tantalizing, but inconclusive as to place of origin or destination. It may mean the author was originally from Italy, one of those believers expelled from Rome by Claudius (see Acts 18:2). The reference to Timothy in 13:23, Paul's young associate, does place things in Paul's orbit, but suggests little else.

There are two keys to the dating of this book. Clement of Rome cites Hebrews in a letter to the Corinthians written in 95. The book was written before this date, probably sometime well before it, to enjoy such a general circulation and familiarity. The second date of import is the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70. Hebrews was written before this date since it's difficult to imagine that a book making the types of arguments this book makes would not refer to that momentous event.

Beyond these two points, dating is difficult to pinpoint. The book may have been written anytime from the 50s to 70. Given the tone and concern of the author for the potential falling away from the faith by the recipients, a date in the later 60s is more likely. Timothy (see 13:23) was probably arrested during the Neroian persecution in the mid-60s and perhaps released upon Nero's death in 68. A date in the later 60s also allows time for the Jewish people to become Christians, experience opposition and a certain amount of cultural discomfort, and perhaps cool in their initial enthusiasm so as to need the warnings Hebrews supplies.

***Purpose and theme***—A central theme of Hebrews is the superiority of the Christian faith. The book is an orderly and systematic treatment of the person and work of Jesus Christ based on key Old Testament texts. He is the summit of God's revelation, a better mediator, offering a better position and rest, a better high priest of a better covenant, ministering in a better sanctuary, based on a better, once for all sacrifice. Jesus is our great High Priest, with deep sympathy for our human condition, calling us forth by faith to a heavenly reward. This book urges us to full commitment to the Lord Jesus and to go on to maturity in the faith.

### **Guiding Concepts—**

***Sermonic letter***—The writer argues from Scripture the way a good Jewish interpreter of his day would have done. Some commentators have described the letter as an extended sermon, a homiletic midrash on a number of Old Testament texts pointing to their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Midrash was an expansive Old Testament interpretation using rabbinical exegetical practices prominent at the time.

### ***Warning passages—***

- 2:1-4—Warning against drifting away.
- 3:7-19—Warning against hardening your heart.
- 5:11-6:12—Warning to go on to maturity.
- 10:19-31—Warning and call to persevere.
- 12:14-29—Warning against refusing God and growing bitter.

Christians have found these passages disconcerting, particularly 6:4-8 and 10:26-31. Common interpretations include:

- The passages speak of the real possibility of a true Christian reverting to a lost condition. On the contrary, there are numerous New Testament assurances of the perseverance of true saints (Jn. 6:39-40; 10:27-29; Rom. 11:29; Phil. 1:6; 1 Pt. 1:5; 1 Jn. 2:1).
- They pose a hypothetical, rather than a real possibility. But what about all the repetition? And what about 10:26-31?
- Loss of reward (see 1 Cor. 3:12-15) in view, not loss of salvation.
- The warnings are addressed to near Christians, not true Christians. But how do you understand phrases like “those who have once been enlightened” (10:32)? How about the writer’s appeal to maturity instead of conversion, warning of apostasy (6:6) instead of failure to convert?

- Warning directed to professing Christians, with the implication that they must show the genuineness of their profession by withstanding pressures to apostatize.

***Greater than/Better than in Hebrews***—Note the “greater than” or “better than” in Hebrews:

| Truth                                                            | Passage supporting |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Jesus is greater than the prophets                               | 1:1-3              |
| Jesus is greater than the angels                                 | 1:4-14; 2:5        |
| Jesus is greater than Moses                                      | 3:1-6              |
| Jesus is greater than Joshua                                     | 4:6-11             |
| Jesus is greater than the high priest                            | 5:1-10; 7:26-8:2   |
| Jesus is greater than the Levitical priests                      | 6:20-7:25          |
| Jesus, as high priest after Melchizedek, is greater than Abraham | 7:1-10             |
| Jesus' ministry is greater than the tabernacle ministry          | 8:3-6; 9:1-28      |
| Jesus' new covenant is greater than the old covenant             | 8:7-13             |
| Jesus; sacrifice is greater than the Old Testament sacrifices    | 10:1-14            |
| Experiencing Jesus is greater than the experience on Mount Sinai | 12:18-24           |

***Jesus as perfected High Priest***—One of Hebrew’s distinctive contributions to the New Testament is the clear development of Jesus Christ as our great High Priest.

***New Covenant***—The superiority of the New Covenant over the Old is the key development on Hebrews 8-10. This section of the book is an exposition of the implications of Jeremiah 31:31-34.

***Centrality of faith***— Hebrews 11:6 exemplifies the centrality of faith, as demonstrated throughout the chapter.

***Heavenly city***—The author introduces the image of the heavenly city or country in 11:10 and 16, which he will develop in the later chapters. The focal point in these initial references is the Promised Land and the beginning of the ability to see that as a hint of a greater heavenly reality. In 12:12, clearly the heavenly Jerusalem is in view and in 13:14, the future city is contrasted with the one on earth to which one might give allegiance. The author points to a heavenly reality awaiting us in the renewed heavens and earth. The elements of this great theme are elaborated upon in the description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22.

## Hebrews Selected Texts

**1:1-3**—In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

**2:14-15**—Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

**2:17-18**—For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

**4:12**—For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

**4:14-16**—Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

**9:11-12**—When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

**10:24-25**—And let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

**11:6**—And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

**11:13-16**—All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them at a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

**12:1-3**—Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

**13:20-21**—May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

## Summary Outline

- I. Superiority of Christ and the Christian Faith (1:1-10:18)
  - A. Better Revelation: Jesus to Prophets (1:1-4)
  - B. Better Mediator: Jesus to Angels (1:5-2:18)  
*Warning: Take Care; Don't Drift Away (2:1-4)*
  - C. Better Position and Rest: Jesus to Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13)  
*Warning: Take heed; Don't Turn Away (3:7-19)*
  - D. Better Priesthood: Jesus to the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-7:28)  
*Warning Against Spiritual Laziness and Being Slow to Learn (5:11-6:12)*
  - E. Better Covenant: New over Old (8:1-13)
  - F. Better Sanctuary: Heavenly over Earthly (9:1-28)
  - G. Better Sacrifice: Christ Once for All (10:1-18)
- II. Exhortation to Persevere (10:19-12:29)
  - A. A Call to Persevere and Press on to Maturity (10:19-39)  
*Warning: Do not Reject the Word (10:26-31)*
  - B. Faith's Perseverance Exemplified in Old Testament Believers (11:1-40)
  - C. Jesus' Example and the Value of Discipline (12:1-13)
  - D. *Warning Against Refusing God and Growing Bitter (12:14-29)*
- III. Concluding Exhortations, Benediction, and Greetings (13:1-25)

## Detailed Outline

- I. Superiority of Christ and the Christian Faith (1:1-10:18)
  - A. Better Revelation: Jesus to Prophets (1:1-4)
  - B. Better Mediator: Jesus to Angels (1:5-2:18)
    - 1. Superiority established by Scripture (1:5-14)
    - 2. Warning against drifting away (2:1-4)
    - 3. Christ as truly human, not an angel (2:5-9)
    - 4. Christ, our elder brother, and perfect high priest (2:10-18)  
*See Appendix B—In the Valley of the Shadow*

- C. Better Position and Rest: Jesus to Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13)
  - 1. Jesus, greater than Moses (3:1-6)
  - 2. Warning against hardening your heart and turning away (3:7-19)
  - 3. Sabbath rest for God's people (4:1-13)
- D. Better Priesthood: Jesus to the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-7:28)
  - 1. Jesus as sympathetic high priest (4:14-16)
  - 2. Jesus' qualifications as high priest (5:1-10)
  - 3. Warning against spiritual laziness and being slow to learn (5:11-6:20)
  - 4. High Priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
- E. Better Covenant: New over Old (8:1-13)
  - 1. Christ's better ministry based on a better covenant (8:1-6)
  - 2. Old Covenant superseded by the New Covenant (8:7-13)
- F. Better Sanctuary: Heavenly over Earthly (9:1-28)
  - 1. Old sanctuary and its ritual (9:1-10)
  - 2. Blood offering that is effective (9:11-14)
  - 3. Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant (9:15-22)
  - 4. Christ's perfect, once-for-all sacrifice (9:23-28)
- G. Better Sacrifice: Christ Once for All (10:1-18)
- II. Exhortation to Persevere (10:19-12:29)
  - A. A Call to Persevere and Press on to Maturity (10:19-39)
    - 1. Persevere in faith (10:19-25)
    - 2. Warning: Do not reject the Word (10:26-31)
    - 3. Don't throw it all away (10:32-39)
  - B. Faith's Perseverance Exemplified in Old Testament Believers (11:1-40)
    - 1. Faith described (11:1-3, 6)
    - 2. Antediluvian heroes (11:4-7)
    - 3. Abraham and Sarah (11:8-12)
    - 4. 11:13-16—Longing for a better country (11:13-16)
    - 5. Abraham again (11:17-19)
    - 6. Later patriarchs (11:20-22)
    - 7. Moses and the Exodus generation (11:23-31)
    - 8. Summary of other exploits of faith (11:32-40)
  - C. Jesus' Example and the Value of Discipline (12:1-13)
    - 1. Looking to Jesus (12:1-3)
    - 2. Accepting suffering as God's instructive discipline (12:4-13)
  - D. Warning Against Refusing God and Growing Bitter (12:14-29)
    - 1. Warning against refusing God (12:14-17)
    - 2. Contrasting Mount Sinai and Mount Zion (2:18-24)
    - 3. The unshakeable kingdom (2:25-29)
- III. Concluding Exhortations, Benediction, and Greetings (13:1-25)
  - A. Practical living of God's people (13:1-8)
  - B. True sacrifice offered outside the gate (13:9-16)
  - C. Final exhortations, doxology, greetings (13:17-25)

## Hebrews: Looking to Jesus; Going On to Maturity

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,  
let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,  
and let us run with perseverance, the race marked out for us.  
Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,  
who for the joy set before endured the cross, scorning its shame,  
and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.  
Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men,  
so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.  
(Hebrews 12:1-3)*

### I. Superiority of Christ and the Christian Faith (1:1-10:18)

#### A. Better Revelation: Jesus to Prophets (1:1-4)

The author concentrates on the significance of Jesus and his salvific work. The first four verses form a single sentence proclaiming the superiority of a new and complete witness to God made by his own Son as compared to the fragmentary word spoken by a variety of prophets. The revelation that comes through Jesus is the climax of the matter. The author will take passage after passage from the Old Testament and show how it points to the fulfillment in Christ. From the beginning of the letter right to the end (12:2), the writer urges us to have our eyes fixed on Jesus.

**1:2-3**—“In these last days” (1:2) means that in Jesus the Messianic age has dawned. The earlier revelation is consistent with the later one; the old prepares the way for the new. The author makes a series of pronouncements about Jesus:

- That he is appointed heir to all things (1:2).
- That he made the universe (1:2).
- That he is the radiance (the shining reflection) of God's glory (1:3). We see the glory of God in Jesus.
- That he is the exact representation of the divine being (1:3). The word translated “exact representation”, or “precise expression”, is a Greek word used for the process of stamping coins in ancient times. What the author is saying is that Jesus is the exact imprint of the Father's very nature and glory.
- That he sustains all things by his word (1:3). Christ carries the universe along and bears it onward toward the fulfillment of the divine plan.
- That he provided purification for sins (1:3). The Son of God came to deal decisively with the problem of human sin.
- That he sat down on the right hand of Majesty on high (1:3). Sitting is the posture of rest, and the right hand is a place of honor. Thus, the author is saying that Christ's saving work is done, and he is now in the place of highest honor.



**1:4**—This section concludes with the assertion of Christ's superiority to angels. The term translated as "superior" or "better" appears often in Hebrews (see 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24).

## **B. Better Mediator: Jesus to Angels (1:5-2:18)**

The author begins with a flurry of Old Testament quotes all designed to say that Jesus, the Messiah, God's one and only Son, was superior to angels (1:5-14). The crucial point is that the revelation of God in Christ is the superlative revelation bar none, including the law. Christ is the ultimate Word of God. That being the case, the Hebrews needed to pay more careful attention to such a word (2:1-4). This then blends with the discussion of Psalm 8 in 2:5-9, where it becomes clear that Jesus is the truly human being who has already attained the sovereignty over creation which God intended for the whole human race. The discussion then moves on to say that Jesus, the older brother of God's family, could and did come to where his siblings were, wallowing in the land of sin and death. He identified with them, shared their fate, and thereby rescued them from it (2:10-18). This work, angels could never have done.

**1. Superiority established by Scripture (1:5-14)**—Why all the fuss about angels? In Jewish tradition, the angels were the agents of the giving of the law. The Jewish believers were in danger of going back to a prior revelation (the law) rather than going on with the Son, who is the fulfillment of the law. The author begins his long argument for the superiority of Christianity by noting that the Messiah, the ultimate revelation of God, is superior to those agents of God who gave the law to Moses. There may have been movement among the Jewish believers to tone down assertions of Christ's divinity to mere angelic status to placate fierce Jewish opposition to what they regarded as blasphemy. The author rejects that.

**1:5**—The first of these Old Testament quotes is from Psalm 2:7. The writer is viewing the psalm as messianic and understands it as conferring great dignity on Jesus. He follows that with a quote from 2 Samuel 7:14 (also in 1 Chronicles 17:13). The passage originally referred to Solomon, but the writer applies the words to the Messiah, who would be a descendant of David.

**1:6**—This quote is from Deuteronomy 32:43. The quote signifies that Christ has the status with God that a firstborn son has with his father. Christ is exalted and enthroned as sovereign over the inhabited world, including angels. The idea of the "first-born" in the Jewish mind carried with it inheritance rights and was linked to another Messianic text from the Psalms (89:27-29), declaring the "first born's" exaltation to a forever kingship and a never-failing covenant.

**1:7-9**—The writer continues to draw out the implications of Old Testament texts, here Psalm 104:4 and Psalm 45:6-7, to make the case of the superiority of the Son to angels. Psalm 45:6-7 moves the argument. God (the Father) is referred to in 45:6, but God (the Son) in 45:7 is distinguished from the God (the Father) that he worships. The writer is explicitly affirming Christ's deity in this passage. References to throne, scepter, and kingdom indicate his royal status.

**1:10-12**—Psalm 102:25-27 is quoted to bring out the Son's eternality and superiority over all creation. God's purposes reach their climax in Messiah, who will see God's plan of salvation through to the age to come.

**1:13-14**—Psalm 110:1 is an acknowledged messianic text and applied to Jesus. This verse speaks of the enthronement of the true king at God's right hand. He will defeat everything that thwarts his purpose of justice and salvation. The angels are compared to the exalted Son. They are ministering spirits sent to serve the redeemed.

**2. Warning against drifting away (2:1-4)**—This is the first of five significant warning passages in Hebrews. The author is concerned about the spiritual state of the recipients. He is concerned that they might drift away from the faith (2:1-4), grow hard-hearted toward God (3:7-19), fail to go on to maturity (5:11-6:12) and persevere in the faith (10:19-31) and even refuse to follow the Lord and grow bitter (12:14-29).

These verses constitute a warning against drifting away. The Greek verb translated “drift away” was used of such things as a ring slipping off a finger. A believer can suffer loss by living an unfocused life that just drifts along a path of least resistance. The recipients are exhorted to heed this message of salvation. It was announced by the Lord himself, confirmed by those (the apostles and others) who heard him directly, and testified to by God himself with signs and wonders and with the gifts of the Spirit distributed in accordance with his will. Signs and wonders attested to the authenticity of the message as spoken by the Lord and by his apostles.

These believers were Jewish in orientation and much taken with following the Law as a means of salvation. That Law did indeed come from God through angels (as the author reveals here). However, the message is that they were in danger of drifting away from what completed that earlier message. It is imperative that those to whom so great a salvation is offered do something about it.

This is familiar pattern for Jewish argument, *qal vahomer* or “how much more.” If violation of the word delivered by angels carries grave consequences for Old Testament people, how much more drifting away from or rejecting the word from the exalted Son.

**2:2**—The Old Testament does not speak of angels in connection with the giving of the Law. However, their presence in connection with the giving of the Law is mentioned in Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19.

**3. Christ as truly human, not an angel (2:5-9)**—This portion gives us images of the Lord Jesus with which we can identify. He is our representative carrying for us our hopes, fears, needs, and aspirations. The phrase “son of man”, quoted from Psalm 8 in 2:6, could refer to a typical human being but also, to those familiar with the book of Daniel (Dan. 7:13; 8:17), could refer to Messiah as the true, typical, authentic, and representative human being. That is to say that what we see fulfilled in Jesus is indeed our destiny as well. He has already attained the status which God has marked out for each of us.

**2:6-8**—The author quotes Psalm 8:4-6, which declares that although humanity is nothing, God appointed humans as rulers over his creation (alluding to Genesis 1:26-27). However, he does not make a case for humanity's current rule, for the creation is not currently subject to humanity, but applies the text to Jesus. The Lord Jesus is the representative man who has gone on ahead for all humanity.

**4. Christ, our elder brother, and perfect high priest (2:10-18)**—The point of this passage is that Jesus, the older brother of God's family, could and did come to where his siblings were, wallowing in the land of sin and death. He identified with them, shared their fate, and thereby rescued them from it.

This passage speaks most clearly in the New Testament of Jesus as our older brother (also see Rom. 8:29). All this is done without a trace of patronizing, out of sheer love and goodness of heart, to help us out of a dire mess. The author adds three more elements to fill in this picture:

- Jesus as a pioneer, one who leads the way. He pioneered through the tangle of suffering, pain, sin, and death. He did this out of love. He rids the world of sin and pollution that otherwise clings to humanity.
- He did all this through his death. The author quotes from Psalm 22:22 (2:12), which speaks of the suffering one bringing his siblings to a knowledge of God. Going back and reading the whole Psalm paints a fuller picture. The Psalm describes in graphic detail the suffering and death of one who fully trusts God and finds himself God-forsaken. As a result of this suffering, salvation is accomplished, and God's kingdom is coming. There is a wonderful text (2:14-15), where the writer tells us that Jesus, by his death, destroys him who holds the power of death that has held humanity in slavery by fear.
- Through this travail, Jesus has become the true high priest, one who is able to act as God's representative to and for his people, making atonement for sin (2:17) and also one who can fully sympathize with those to whom he ministers (2:18).

**2:10-13**—The author explains that it was “fitting” for the God of glory to make the author of our salvation perfect through suffering. The author emphasizes the link between Jesus and those whom he saves. We are of the same family. He is qualified to be our priest and Savior because he shares our nature. The connection described in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8 highlights the relationship between Jesus and those he came to save.

**2:14-18**—In sharing our humanity in all its fullness places Jesus in the position of destroying the power of death by his own death. The author does not explain exactly how Christ's death does this, but contents himself with the fact that it does. Jesus becomes a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Only in Hebrews is the term “high priest” applied to Jesus. The author will develop the significance of this priestly ministry as the book unfolds.

### **C. Better Position and Rest: Jesus to Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13)**

In chapters 3 and 4, the writer asserts that Jesus has a superior position (than Moses) in the household of God and provides a superior rest (than Joshua) for the people of God.

**1. Jesus, greater than Moses (3:1-6)**—Jesus is greater than the angels (1:4), the author of a great salvation (2:3), and great enough to become human to accomplish it (2:9-18). He is described as having a higher status than Moses (3:1-6). He is greater because he is the builder of the household of God while Moses was a part of the house. In addition, Jesus is a Son over the house while Moses was just a servant in it.

Jesus, our apostle and high priest, has brought God's new age to birth. The law, the angels who gave it, and Moses the great lawgiver who brought it to the people, matter but they no longer have the last word. Jesus and our confession of him matter more. Moses was a true servant deserving honor, but Jesus is God's unique Son, deserving supreme honor.

There is another element in all this. What exactly is the “house”? First century Jews would immediately think of the temple, the scene of the cultic rituals commanded by the law. However, that isn't the reference point of the author. The house is a community of people called out by God. These called out people were to believe that God's kingdom had come and was coming with Jesus and were to have the definite and enduring hope of that reality. They were to be bold in living and acting on that basis and make sure and confident claims about it (3:6). To come up short of that confession was to indicate that you really did not understand what Christianity is about.

**3:2-6**—This is an implicit midrash (exposition) on Numbers 12:7-8, expounding on a familiar text with out quoting it. In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron are opposing Moses and God honors Moses above them, claiming that Moses was greater than a normal prophet for God spoke with him face-to-face. Following the implicit midrash on Numbers 12:7-8 (3:2-6), are explicit midrashes on Psalm 95:7-11 (3:7-4:14) and on Psalm 110:4 (5:4-6).

**2. Warning against hardening your heart and turning away (3:7-19)**—These verses constitute a warning against hardening your heart toward God. The author quotes Psalm 95:7-11. That text records Israel's rebellion in the desert which resulted in that generation's not entering the Promised Land. The people stopped believing that God was really with them; they stopped believing in his promises. Readers are exhorted to avoid repeating this error. The challenge was to live in the “today mode” (3:7), not in the tomorrow or yesterday mode. Jesus is at work right now in our midst, bringing God's kingdom reign to earth. Really believing that is essential to being vigorous followers of Jesus.

**3:7-15**—Psalm 95 is a great call to worship and praise. However, the mood changes in verse 7, where the writer begins his quote. Verse 7 and the verses following are a warning centuries after the Exodus that a new day is dawning, and it matters whether people who hear this call to worship in the earlier verses will obey it or not. God uses the wilderness generation as a warning. That generation started enthusiastically, but grumbled and rebelled when things got tough. The Lord promised that those who wallowed in their unbelief would never enter his rest.

The Hebrew believers were in danger of making the same unbelieving and rebellious choice. God had acted decisively, once for all in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. A new day had dawned, and the believers needed to respond appropriately. Today was the day to respond.

There were those who never really signed on to the faith in the first place. However, there may have been those who made a genuine beginning but needed strong encouragement. The deceitfulness of sin is powerful (3:13) and it is progressive. You either progress or regress. There is no neutrality. Will we continue to follow and trust Jesus, or will we be content to drift, to let our initial belief fade away to a memory, and our hope to dissolve into a puff of smoke?

**3:16-19**—The writer employs a series of rhetorical questions to underline the point the wilderness generation forfeited their privileges and their rest because of their unbelief. He rams home the point that the Hebrews needed spiritual discipline right up to the very end.

First, who was it that heard God's message and became bitter? It was the children of Israel who had seen the miracles in the exodus from Egypt and experienced God's supernatural provision in the desert. They were bitter grumblers. Second, who was God angry with? Not the Gentiles and pagans in the

surrounding areas, but with his own people, who went against his word. Those who heard him and turned away anyway. Third, did it matter? It did indeed. They most certainly did not enter the land and receive God's rest.

The warning to the Hebrews is clear. Once you stop believing either in the God who called you, rescued you, and guides you, or in the future he has promised you, you may end up simply going around in circles in your own wilderness and never getting anywhere.

To harden your heart is to disobey God's voice and follow your own desires. Hebrews 3:17-18 makes it clear to the recipients (and to us nonchalant moderns) that God indeed punishes sin. However, this is not an arbitrary penalty imposed by a despotic God. Sin is self-defeating and prevents us from entering God's rest. Restless wandering is the inevitable outcome of unbelief.

**3. Sabbath rest for God's people (4:1-13)**—By the time of Jesus, the parts of the Mosaic law which dealt with Sabbath observance had become such a tightly drawn legal system that the people were forgetting the purpose of the Sabbath rest. The Sabbath observance was not allowing the people to rest from their labor but adding pious burdens to them. In this passage, the author uses Psalm 95 as a means of speaking of entering God's rest in three different ways: (1) Israel entering the rest of the Promised land; (2) God's rest at the completion of creation; and (3) our rest from our own works.

Ancient Israel did not enter God's rest, but Christians will. However, Christians must take care, lest they fail to enter the blessing as well. The author reminds the readers about a generation promised rest but did not receive it. They should beware of making the same mistake. It is not enough to hear God's message. Action is required. The author compares the wilderness generation with his contemporaries. The voice of God still called; the day of opportunity remained. The fate of the wilderness generation served as a witness to the possibility of spiritual disaster.

**4:9-10**—What exactly does the author mean in referring to Sabbath rest in 4:9? More than getting to the Promised land and having a respite from war. He is speaking of the kind of rest Jesus spoke of—rest for the souls of people (see Mt. 11:28-30). To enter God's rest means for believers to cease from any sense of self-justification, to cease from striving and our own work, just as God ceased from his in the creation narrative. The rest is an experience we receive by faith here and now, ceasing from self-striving and resting securely on what Christ has done.

**4:12-13**—These verses highlight the ministry of the Word of God. God's Word reaches into the innermost recesses of our being, searching every detail of our hearts and thoughts (see Ps. 139:23-24). This is a classic text on the incisive power of the Word of God to lay bare our thoughts, intentions, motives, and attributes of heart and soul. There will be an accounting. The readers were to take heed. God is not one to be trifled with.

Ominous? But it is also a great encouragement. If we consistently open ourselves to message of Scripture, its grand sweep and its minute details, if we allow the faithful preaching of Jesus and his atonement to soak in, then God's admittedly uncomfortable work will be happening on a regular basis and showing us what we really are deep inside—both a beloved saint destined for glory and a broken sinner saved by grace.

The author bases his arguments on an insightful analysis of the Old Testament. But the way he uses “God's word” in 4:12 seems to mean more than just the Old Testament, but also how these ancient texts and their message came true in Jesus.

#### **D. Better Priesthood: Jesus to the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-7:28)**

At the end of chapter 4, the writer focuses on Jesus as the true high priest, introducing us to Psalm 110, which mentions Jesus as a priest in the order of Melchizedek. This is the central theme from chapter 5 to chapter 8. The author speaks of Jesus as our sympathetic high priest (4:14-16), elaborates on the Lord's qualifications as high priest (5:1-10), warns the readers once again of falling away (5:11-6:20), before elaborating on Jesus as a priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28).

**1. Jesus as sympathetic high priest (4:14-16)**—This portion of the text reiterates the Lord's kind reception to our petitions borne of our deep need (see also Heb. 2:17-18). This passage describes what theologians call the Lord's present session, his intercessory ministry for us. We approach the throne and find one who eagerly welcomes us in our times of need, having been there himself.

Hebrews develops the idea of Jesus as the perfect high priest. The high priest was a bridge between the people and God. On the one hand, he had a liturgical and ceremonial role, offering gifts and sacrifices. On the other hand, he had a pastoral role, looking after the people, sympathizing with them, getting alongside them, and being a bridge to them. Jesus is the culmination of this concept of the priesthood, the priest par excellence. He is a perfect priest in perpetuity who can sympathize with human weakness because he has been there—to be weak, to get sick, to be tempted repeatedly.

**4:15**—Temptation is the test of an alien power of a personality. Jesus successfully endured all these tests and therefore can understand our trials. Temptations often arise from our flawed human nature. However, sometimes the temptation is along the line of shifting the point of view and our losing the possibility of being of use to the Lord.

**2. Jesus' qualifications as high priest (5:1-10)**—These verses highlight that the qualifications of a high priest are met by Jesus Christ, including oneness with the people, compassion, and appointment by God. The true high priest has a community of nature with those he represents. He is not indifferent to the moral lapses of people, nor is he harsh. He shares our nature and has a reservoir of compassion. Finally, his role is one of divine appointment.

**5:1-3**—Levitical priests represented people before God, offering sacrifices for their sins and their own first. This last point pressed home what should have been a most humbling thought of the high priest's own sinfulness and prompt them to deal gently with the people.

**5:4-6**—The author quotes from Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4, bringing the ideas of the exalted Son together with the priest-king in the line of Melchizedek. The writer makes it clear that Jesus' appointment as our great high priest was not something he dreamed up or for which he lobbied. The Jewish community had been critical of Jesus pretending to snatch up a position that belonged to the Levitical heirs. The author is saying that God always intended the priesthood Jesus holds.

Christ is king and priest like the Canaanite priest-king, Melchizedek. The Jewish history had separated the two offices and treated them as ancestral (the priesthood from Levi and the kingship from Judah).

However, Melchizedek's priesthood was not Levitical. One like him (Jesus), could/would be priest-king without descent from the Jewish priesthood.

*Aside*—In the discussion of ancestry as key to the Levitical priesthood, the author is following the Old Testament law on the issues of high priestly succession. In fact, the practice in the first century under Roman rule, was that the office of high priest was something of a political football, a favor granted by the Romans. This is evident in the attitudes of priests towards Rome as depicted in the gospels and New Testament epistles.

**5:7-10**—Although Jesus was God's Son, he learned the nature of obedience through what he suffered. These verses seem strange to us. The perfect Son of God learning his gig? How can the flawless one be perfected?

Hebrews 5:7 recalls the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane to describe the intensity of his suffering. He had to know its depths and its heights. He had to learn what it would take to rescue the created order from the mess humans got it into. It was not just a matter of sharing God's rule of the world and living in glory and bliss. To be his Father's Son meant to suffer because the Father had suffered long with his fallen creation in order to rescue it. The Father made and loved a world that had become a dark and wicked place that the Son suffered for in order to work this rescue.

The statement that Jesus was made complete and perfect does not imply that he was imperfect or sinful. It conveys the sense of the Son attaining the full stature of sonship through the experience of pain and grief of the Father himself over the world having gone wrong.

The Old Testament and later Jewish wisdom traditions portrayed divine chastisement as a sign of God's perfecting love, a theme the author will return to in 12:4-11. Jesus' participation in human suffering qualified him to be the ultimate high priest. Indeed, the word translated “made perfect” (5:9) is applied in the Septuagint to the consecration of priests.

**3. Warning against spiritual laziness and being slow to learn (5:11-6:20)**—The author is concerned that his readers would slip back into a state of denying Christianity. In this passage, he gives a strong warning concerning the dangers of apostasy. The argument moves from discussing their failure to progress in the faith (5:11-14), to identifying some of the elementary teachings they needed to move beyond (6:1-3), to a severe warning about the seriousness of falling away from the faith (6:4-8), to a general exhortation to persevere (6:9-12), to a stirring affirmation of the certainty of God's promises (6:13-20).

**5:11-14—They were slow to learn**—The readers needed to be more biblically informed, to be better equipped to persevere in faith (5:11-14). By this time in their faith walk, they should have been teachers, yet they needed instruction in elementary truths. What the writer is longing for are people who would become proficient in understanding, digesting, and using the entire message of God's healing, restoring, and saving work. He wants them to know “the whole counsel of God” in relation to their own lives, their communities, and the wider world. People ready for solid food are people skilled in the Word and have their spiritual, intellectual, and emotional faculties trained by practice to distinguish good and evil and give themselves to the good.

**6:1-3—They needed to move beyond elementary teachings**—He exhorts them to repent of acts that lead to death and move on to a robust faith in God. Implicit here is a key spiritual truth. We do not plateau in our walk with God. We either progress or retrogress. Hebrews 6:3 reminds us that we do not make progress by self-effort or discipline. Progress stems from God's grace and our reliance on it.

The author exhorts them to move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ. His list of these ABCs of the faith include:

- Repentance from dead works—The religious practices and behaviors of paganism as well as deadening rituals, Jewish or otherwise.
- Faith in God, spelled out more fully in Hebrews 11.
- Baptisms and the laying on of hands—This was associated with admission into the Christian community.
- Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

They have learned the basics and have started enthusiastically, but they needed to go deeper.

**6:4-8—Falling away from the faith is serious stuff**—It can mean cutting yourself off from blessings God offers. Falling away from divine enlightenment, his heavenly gift in the operation of the Spirit in our midst, his good grace in our living, and the realization of the coming Messianic age may put you on a path of no return. You place yourself in the position of spiritual obtuseness and can result in becoming heart and mind just like those who put Christ to death at Calvary. Beware of spiritual waywardness and how unproductive and worthless it can make our lives.

In the Old Testament, God had a higher standard for those who should have known better (see Num. 14:22-23). The author is saying that his readers should know better. Jewish tradition held that people could rebel against God so brazenly, fully aware of what they were doing, that they would become unable to repent. This was an intentional apostasy, not a single sin of drifting away. It is not that God does not accept the repentant. Hearts can become too hard to repent. By choosing the kind of willful unbelief that nailed Jesus to the cross, they accept responsibility again for killing him.

When he speaks of falling away and of crucifying God's Son all over again, the author seems to have in mind people who have belonged to the church, have taken part in its community life, and have decided that it isn't for them, abandoned their membership, and joined in the general contempt for the Christian faith.

Is it possible to become a genuine Christian and then lose everything after all? Paul's answer is emphatically “No” (see his long argument in Romans 5-8). In this passage, the writer raises this but quickly moves on to say that he does not think his readers are in that category. The historic Reformed answer to the question raised is that the people in danger are those who have come under the influence of the gospel and have shared something of the community life of faith, but who never really made a commitment.

**6:9-12—Confident of better things in their case**—However, the author is confident of better things for his readers. They had ministered to the saints (6:10) and had suffered various persecutions and deprivations (10:32-34). He was making the warning to urge them on to spiritual diligence to the end to inherit the promise. He wants them to make their hope sure. No movement, no frame of reference ever



grips the hearts of people if it does not give them hope. Hope is an anchor to our souls.

There is a dynamic balance between God's faithfulness and human effort. We can do nothing to earn God's favor—it is all grace. However, the Scripture is equally insistent that Christians must step anew into that grace in obedient living. The normal Christian life is not passive, but one of energy, enthusiasm, faithful effort, and patient endurance. Indeed, it is God himself at work within us that brings about this effort by us (see Phil. 2:12-13).

**6:13-20—Certainty of God's promise**—The rest of the chapter explores the life of Abraham, the classic biblical example of patient endurance. God made a promise to Abraham (a great posterity) and Abraham received the first fruits of that promise (in an heir, Isaac) after patiently waiting for it. God made promises to Abraham and swore an oath that he would indeed keep those promises (6:13-14). He made his unchangeable purpose clear by swearing by himself (6:15-17). We can find assurance in the promise that God will renew all things, since it is impossible for God to lie (6:18). This hope is the anchor of our souls tethered to Jesus (6:19-20), whose great high priestly ministry in the order of Melchizedek the author is about to unfold.

Abraham is a splendid example of holding on to God's sure promises in dire circumstances. He lived for many years (25 years, if you are counting) in patient expectation with God's promise of descendants (6:14 cites Gen. 22:17), when he had nothing to go on other than God's promise itself. God will certainly fulfill his promise; he is utterly dependable. However, we need to wait patiently, for he will do this in his time, not ours. The New Testament often speaks of God's promise in connection with Abraham (citing Acts 3:25; 7:17; Rom. 4:13; Gal. 3:8, 14, 16, 18).

**6:17-18**—He swore by himself in the promise made to Abraham (Gen. 22:17; Ex. 32:13) just as he did to the one who would be high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4). When God swore by himself, his words were guaranteed. In the Old Testament, God swore an oath to David (Ps. 89:35, 49; 132:11) which the Jewish people expected to be fulfilled in Messiah; he swore to judge Israel for their sins and did so (Ps. 106:26); he swore by himself judgment on the royal house of Judah (Jer. 22:5), on the Jewish refugees in Egypt (Jer. 44:26), on Israel again (Amos 4:2; 6:8), on Edom (Jer. 49:13), and on Babylon (Jer. 51:14).

The “two unchangeable things” mentioned in 6:18 are God's promise to Abraham and the oath God swore by himself that he would keep his promise (6:13-14, 17). In 6:19, the author describes the hope that serves as the anchor of our souls. Entering the inner sanctuary provides a picture of the high priest going into the holy of holies once a year to make atonement for the people. He applies that picture to Jesus, the perfect high priest in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus entered glory itself and provides our anchor to the very presence of God himself.

**7:1-28—High Priest in the order of Melchizedek**—The author has referred to this “order of Melchizedek” three times (5:6, 10; 6:20) and now he develops it. It entails an understanding of Christ's work that is peculiar to this letter. He uses it to show the uniqueness of Christ and the splendid work that he accomplished for humanity. The argument proceeds to make the case for the greatness of Melchizedek and his priestly order (greater than the Levitical priesthood so revered by the Jews and the author's recipients, 7:1-10), the royalty associated with the priesthood of Melchizedek and Christ (7:11-14), and the clear superiority of Christ's priesthood (7:15-28), because of his life (7:15-19), divine oath

(7:20-22), the permanence of his priesthood (7:23-25), and the superiority of his sacrifice (7:26-28).

**7:1-10—Melchizedek's greatness**—The writer begins to elaborate on the significance attaching to Melchizedek. This passage seems bizarre. Apart from Psalm 110, Melchizedek is mentioned only once in the Bible (Gen. 14:17-20). The author goes there because of Psalm 110, the implications of which he is unfolding. Psalm 110:1 speaks of one sitting at God's right hand, waiting for his kingdom to be complete (quoted in 1:13). In Psalm 110:4, the psalmist speaks of this same one as a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (quoted in 5:6).

The puzzle for any Jew was the union of the offices of king and priest. Kings came from the tribe of Judah and priests from the tribe of Levi. When kings presumed on the office of the priest in making sacrifice, terrible things happened (Saul in 1 Sam. 13:11-14; Uzziah in 2 Chron. 26:16-18). So, what is this stuff about the order of the priest-king Melchizedek?

**7:1-3**—The first three verses reiterate what the Hebrews would know of this shadowy figure. That is what occurred in Genesis 14, where Melchizedek meets Abraham after the patriarch's rescue of Lot. He is the king of Salem (meaning peace), one bringing bread and wine, described as a priest of God Most High, and one to whom Abraham gave a tithe of his plunder. To the meaning of Melchizedek's name (king of righteousness) and of his position as king of Salem, he adds the information that Melchizedek appears out of nowhere without reference to father or mother or genealogical background. Some have thought that the author concludes that Melchizedek lacked such ancestry. However, that is not the author's point here. Melchizedek's priesthood was not inherited from his family like the Levitical priesthood. His priesthood was of a different and permanent order, an order in which Jesus stood in line.

**7:4-10**—Then the author contrasts the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood which Psalm 110, explained in the light of Genesis 14, ascribes to Jesus. The priesthood in the order of Melchizedek is clearly superior. It is permanent, not passed from one generation to another. Furthermore, Abraham received blessings from Melchizedek and paid tithes to him. One could say, figuratively, that Levi, the still unborn great-grandchild of Abraham, paid tithes, recognizing Melchizedek's superiority.

The discussion about the significance of Abraham giving a tithe to Melchizedek does not make sense to the modern mind, but it did to the recipients. In the ancient world, there was an obligation to pay tithes to important religious people. The law required tithing, but Abraham voluntarily gave a tithe to someone from whom no tithe was required and received a blessing in return. The one who blessed was understood as superior. Offering a tithe that not commanded by the Law was further evidence of the greatness of Melchizedek.

What results from this superiority? First, the cultic rituals point to Jesus. Second, Jesus is the true, permanent high priest, whom we can completely trust.

**7:11-28—Christ's superior priesthood**—The author probes the idea of the priest-king (7:11-14) before pursuing the theme of the superiority of Christ's priesthood. The Lord's priesthood is superior because of his life (7:15-19), because of a divine oath (7:20-22), because of the permanence of his priesthood (7:23-25), and because of his better sacrifice (7:26-28).

**7:11-14**—Jewish tradition recognized two anointed positions: the royal Messiah descended from David from the tribe of Judah and the anointed high priest from the tribe of Levi. However, Psalm 110 leads the writer to view both roles as fulfilled in one future figure—a priest-king like Melchizedek. Descent from Levi for his priesthood was superior to the Levitical priesthood.

Throughout Israel's history, there had been a clear division between kingship and priesthood. Now, in the elaboration of this shadowy figure of Melchizedek and in the exposition of Psalm 110, the Hebrews come to a deeper understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Not only were the offices of priest and king joined in Jesus, but Jesus' priesthood was a permanent one unlike that of the Levites. The Levitical priesthood and the law on which it was based were not perfect or complete. God's final purpose was achieved through a permanent priesthood based on a better covenant, which the writer will elaborate upon in chapter 8.

**7:15-19**—*Superior because of his life*—Christ's priesthood is not based on priestly ancestry but on the power of indestructible life. Psalm 110:4 is cited once more to affirm the unique nature of Christ's priesthood. The Levitical system in its entirety is set aside and annulled by Christ's coming and work. The law did not give people complete and lasting access to the presence of God. It did not meet our deepest needs.

**7:20-22**—*Superior because of divine oath*—The author argues from the divine oath taken with the establishment of the priesthood in the order of Melchizedek, quoting Psalm 110:4 once again. The Levitical priesthood did not involve the taking of an oath, indicating it was not intended to be permanent. There was something conditional about the Levitical priesthood. The idea of Jesus as the guarantee of a better covenant is interesting. The guarantee works in two directions. He guarantees to people that God will fulfill his covenant and forgive them, and he guarantees to God that those who are in him are acceptable.

The author uses “covenant” seventeen times. In non-biblical Greek this denoted a last will and testament. There is an absoluteness to a will. You cannot dicker with a deceased testator. Likewise, human beings cannot bargain with God. He is the one who lays down the terms.

**7:22**—The word translated “better” occurs more times in Hebrews than in the whole of the rest of the New Testament. The author is comparing the new and the old. He is not saying that the old, with its temple, law, and priesthood, was bad, but that the new was better. In these verses, the author emphasizes that Levitical priesthood was not permanent but changed through generations. The priests had imperfections, needing to offer sacrifices for themselves first, and that the sacrifices were continually offered. In the new and perfect system, Christ's priesthood was permanent, not needing to continually offer sacrifice because his once for all sacrifice was perfect and not needing to make atonement for his own sins.

**7:23-25**—*Superior because of its permanence*—The permanence of Christ's priesthood based on his indestructible life is superior to the Levitical priesthood. His life is such that there is no need and no place for a successor. For Christ's unchanging priesthood, the author draws an important conclusion about the salvation Christ accomplishes. He saves in the most comprehensive sense; from everything humanity needs saving from. This idea relates to the Lord's intercessory role, which will be elaborated in a later section of the book.

**7:26-28—*Superior because of his better sacrifice***—This priest did not need to offer sacrifices for himself. He had no sins. This high priest is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. All this contrasted with the Levitical priests. In addition, in offering himself for the people's sins, he offered a far superior offering—once for all. There is an air of utter finality in that expression. Once again, the author contrasts the law that appointed weak priests who die with the divine oath appointing the Son who is indestructibly alive and made perfect forever.

## **E. Better Covenant: New over Old (8:1-13)**

Before following the author's argument unpacking this idea of a better covenant, let us preview where he is going in the next three chapters. The death, resurrection, and enthronement on high of the Lord Jesus spelled the end of the Mosaic system. The author makes this argument to people who had grown up with this Mosaic covenantal understanding. He proceeds by describing how Christ's better ministry was based on a better covenant (8:1-7), that the new covenant had superseded the old covenant (8:8-13), and that the old rituals were ineffective (9:1-10). He then moves to the efficacy of Christ's blood sacrifice (9:11-14), his ministry as the mediator of a new covenant (9:15-22), and the once for all nature of his sacrifice (9:23-28). He concludes his argument by demonstrating that the Law was just a shadow of what was to come (10:1-4), that Christ's perfect sacrifice accomplishes what the old sacrificial system could never accomplish (10:5-18), before exhorting them to get onboard with the sound way of viewing God's activity (10:19-39).

**1. Christ's better ministry based on a better covenant (8:1-7)**—After developing the concept of the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, the author moves on to emphasize the superiority of Christ's ministry to that of the Levitical priests. This high priest took his place at the right hand of God himself (the place of highest honor), in the heavenly abode itself, and sat down (his work was complete). He serves in the heavenly tabernacle to which the earthly temple is but a copy and a shadow (8:2, 5). That is why the instructions in Exodus for the tabernacle's construction were so precise. Like the earthly priests, this heavenly high priest must have something to offer (8:3), but the author doesn't specify that in this chapter. He goes on to emphasize that Christ's high priesthood was superior because he is the mediator of a superior covenant, having better promises (8:6).

The thrust of all this is that the readers needed to distinguish between the copy and the reality, to celebrate and enjoy the real thing and not cling to the copy. This challenge was spiritual, cultic, communal, and political. The spiritual, cultic, and communal aspects we have seen, and the writer will continue to elaborate upon. What is not so obvious to us are the political connotations.

The Jews in Palestine were in revolt, or soon to be in revolt, against Rome. The Temple was the citadel; it was the center of the cultic practice, the central reality of Judaism. To suggest that the Temple was only a copy of the real deal, and that anyone who came to God through Jesus was entering the true Temple in heaven that would one day be revealed in its full glory, would be understood as disloyal, even treacherous.

**8:5**—God gave Moses detailed instructions to build the original tabernacle. Exodus 25:40 is quoted in 8:5. Similar ideas are stated in Exodus 26:30, 27:8, and Numbers 8:4. The insistence on exactitude that we see in narrative in Exodus and Numbers is because the earthly tabernacle was built on the heavenly

design.

Parallels between the heavenly and earthly were common in Jewish tradition of the day (as in the case of Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria). The problem with this copy and shadow talk of a heavenly temple is that we are inclined to imagine the sort of contrast drawn by Plato, who thought that everything in the world of space, time, and material was a second-rate copy of things in the ideal, immaterial world of forms. However, heaven as understood in the Scriptures is not the immaterial world of forms. It is God's space, his realm, which interlocks with our world in any number of ways. The writer does not see the heavenly reality as an ideal world only understood by the mind. Jesus returned to a heavenly reality. The future earthly kingdom is a present reality in heaven. In this analysis, the value of the earthly temple is relativized by comparing it with the true heavenly temple.

**8:6-13—Old Covenant superseded by the New Covenant—**The author provides an extended quote from Jeremiah 31:31-34 to demonstrate that the Bible had predicted a change in the covenant. A new covenant, which brings forgiveness of sins, supersedes the old covenant, which governed Israel's religious observance. God found fault with the people of old. He does not just patch up the Old Covenant, but makes a completely new one with four significant differences (8:10-12):

- The new covenant is inward and dynamic, written on the hearts of the people.
- There is a close relationship between God and his people. “I will be your God” has a fuller meaning considering the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus. God has acted decisively to save his people.
- All who enter this new covenant will have a knowledge of God. This is not saying that teaching is unnecessary in the church today. It highlights that personal knowledge of God is accessible to everyone.
- Under the new covenant there is forgiveness of sins. The once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ completely and finally deals with sin.

He hinted at this change in covenant in 7:12, when he elaborated on the change in the priesthood. The old priesthood was tied to the old law, and both were imperfect and to be superseded. Why the change? Because of covenant infidelity (8:9). The people were simply unable to keep their end of deal. The law of God needed to be on their minds and written on their hearts (8:10). An inside job was necessary.

Let us review what the author has said about the Lord to these wavering Hebrews. Jesus is the Messiah, God's son, a superior mediator to the angels who were instrumental in giving of the law. He is the representative human being, the pioneer of a sovereignty over creation intended for the whole human race. He has a superior position in the household of faith to the great lawgiver, Moses. He offers the true rest which goes far beyond what the Israelites were expecting on their journey to the promised land. Jesus, as the Messiah, is the true high priest, who has accomplished what the ancient priesthood could never do. Now we see that in Jesus, God fulfills one of the most central and vital promises of all, the new covenant spoken of by Jeremiah. His sacrifice for us received by faith removes sins and accomplishes an inside job in us that ushers us into the very presence of God. If God has done all this and is establishing the new things he had always promised, to go back to the old ways was foolish and profoundly disloyal.

**8:13—**The writer refers to the old, stating it is on the verge of being discontinued by Jesus' exaltation. This letter was written in the late 60s, and the temple was soon to be destroyed by the Romans. Most

Palestinian Jews were forced to make major readjustments in cultic practice after 70.

## **F. Better Sanctuary: Heavenly over Earthly (9:1-28)**

The author begins showing the greatness of the new covenant by drawing attention to the ineffectiveness of the old arrangement in the way the tabernacle was set up and utilized (9:1-10). He then discusses the ineffective offerings of the old arrangement as compared to Christ's offering that secures redemption for all eternity (9:11-14). Next, he shows the necessity of Christ's sacrifice as the mediator of the new covenant (9:15-22). He concludes the chapter with the once for all nature of Christ's offering of himself (9:23-28), a thought he will continue to build on in the next chapter.

**1. Old sanctuary and its ritual (9:1-10)**—The author shows the greatness of the new covenant by drawing attention to the ineffectiveness of the old as reflected in the way the tabernacle was set up and used. The author describes the tabernacle's set up in 9:2-5 and its use in 9:6-7. The first room, the Holy Place, had the lampstand and the table and consecrated bread. Behind the second curtain was the Most Holy Place, where the altar of incense and the ark of the covenant were housed. The description of the Ark and its contents is what the author focuses on. After describing the sanctuary set up, he moves on to discuss the rituals performed. The rituals and sacrifices were not able to clear the consciences of the people. They were only ritual sacrifices and ceremonial washings, external regulations until the new and perfect order came.

**9:8-10**—The author presses home the point that the Holy Spirit uses the pattern of the tabernacle to teach important truth. The limited access to the Most Holy Place brings home the fact that ordinary people had no direct access to the presence of God. However, people do have that access now through the finished work of Jesus Christ. The author is fully aware of the regulations and ritual patterns of the Jewish faith but dismisses them as external regulations, having their place but only until the time of the new order. The new covenant that Christ brought has replaced all the merely external regulations of the old way that pointed to its replacement.

**2. Blood offering that is effective (9:11-14)**—Having just described the cultic venue in 9:1-10, he now places Christ's atonement in the background of Old Testament cultic practice. The perfect high priest entered the perfect heavenly tabernacle by means of his own blood which was able to do completely what the cultic sacrifices continually offered could only point to.

Under the law, God's displeasure and judgment of sin could only be expiated by bloodshed. The entirety of the Old Testament religious practices were consecrated through sacrificial offerings. Blood was officially necessary for atonement under the law (see Lev. 17:11). Ritual exceptions were made for the poorest Israelites (Lev. 5:11-13), but the general rule established the principle of cleansing by blood.

However, the Levitical sacrifices were external and material, the blood of bulls and goats and the like. They were an external purification from ritual defilement. The reference to the blood of Christ clearly understands Christ's death as a sacrifice to God for sin. That sacrifice cleansed our consciences, something the old sacrifices could never touch. The author uses a “how much more” argument here: if the blood of sacrifices on the Day of Atonement can deal with sin as a covering, how much more effective is the blood of Christ.

Let us review. The writer is explaining that the new covenant has arrived in Jesus, focusing on the sacrifice of Messiah. The promised new age is better in every way:

- The sacrifice is made in the heavenly tabernacle and by a better high priest (9:11).
- Messiah presented his own blood not that from animal sacrifices (9:12-13).
- Messiah truly cleanses our consciences (9:14; see 10:2, 22; 13:18).

**9:15-22—Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant**—The death of Christ is the means of redeeming people from their sinful plight. It brings them an eternal inheritance. Christ's death is a “ransom,” the price paid to set free a slave or a prisoner (9:15). Then, using a play on the meaning of *diatheke* (used in the sense of both “covenant” and “last will and testament”), the author brings out the necessity of Christ's death just as the death of a testator is required for a will to come into force (9:16-18). He carries this point of the death of testator to both the Old and New Covenant. Both required the shedding of blood. The point of sacrifice in the Old Testament system involved three things:

- Human beings offering to God something that represented their own true selves.
- The outpouring of life to signify dealing with sin.
- The effects of these are in cleansing and purifying the worshiper.

Somehow, the blood of the sacrificial animals was pointing to a deeper truth—that at the heart of the sacrificial system lay the self-giving love of God himself.

Moderns regard this passage as primitive and barbaric theology. I confess to pause at both the import of this passage—and our modern reactions to it. Our modern society tolerates, even promotes so many things that previous generations, and other civilizations, would consider barbaric, that we are hardly able to make high-handed declarations.

**9:16-17**—A properly executed will is legally binding but does not come into effect until the death of the testator. It was a sealed documents opened only on the testator's death. Likewise, the new covenant itself, proclaimed in the text from Jeremiah 31, only comes into force with the death of Jesus.

**9:23-28—Christ's perfect, once-for-all sacrifice**—From the discussion of blood required to purify under the Levitical system, the author moves to the sacrifice that cleanses perfectly, a sacrifice that was offered once for all. The principle that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” was not a freak requirement of the Mosaic system, but one set my divine command (9:22).

The writer begins by explaining that the heavenly sanctuary, like the earthly one, needed to be purified (9:23). Christ's purifying sacrifice was not made in a man-made sanctuary, but in God's presence and was not a constantly repeated exercise but once for all (9:24-28). 9:28 states that Christ will return a second time to “bring salvation.” Sin was addressed by his death; salvation was achieved through it. However, salvation's culmination (what theologians describe as our glorification) awaits his return.

**9:23**—The better purification required for “heavenly things” (9:23) has caused difficulty in interpretation. Is it a reference to Satan's rebellion as causing defilement in heaven such that heaven itself needed purification? This is one of those things the author refers to but does not fully explain. Why does the heavenly sanctuary need purification? The best explanation is that there was nothing

wrong with the heavenly sanctuary itself, but it needed to be prepared for the arrival of people with whom there were many things wrong.

**9:24**—This verse speaks of Jesus appearing “before the face of God”. This is a powerful idea. The angels that flanked God's presence had to veil their faces (Isa. 6:2). Moses had to veil his face whenever he emerged from the Lord's presence after having spoken with him (Ex. 34:29-30, 33-35). Jesus ushers us into that very presence!

**9:26**—The author refers to Jesus' appearance “at the end of the ages.” The word used for “end” refers to something that joins on to something else and so makes one or both complete. The old age was ending. The life and death of Jesus brought the old covenant to its completion, to its fulfillment. The new age, long promised and awaited, was now dawning.

**9:27-28**—The writer now utilizes familiar images from the old system to point to the new. On the Day of Atonement, the Jewish high priest would go into the holy of holies to make the annual atonement for the people. He would then re-emerge to declare that the sign of forgiveness was performed and then go about the work of dealing with community and cultic issues. Jesus, the true high priest, has gone into the heavenly sanctuary, before the very face of God, and will reappear again. His followers eagerly await that day, when he will complete the transformation of them as citizens of the new creation (see Phil. 3:20-21).

## **G. Better Sacrifice: Christ Once for All (10:1-18)**

The author moves briskly through his argument. The old cultic sacrifices continually offered could never take away sin (10:1-4), only the perfect self-sacrifice of Christ could do that once for all (10:5-10, expounding on Psalm 40:6-8). Then the author compares the Old Testament priests standing and performing sacrifice day after day with Christ's once for all sacrifice after which he sat down (completed posture) at the right hand of glory on high (10:11-14). The author then moves again to Jeremiah 31:31-34, which speaks of the inside job of the Spirit to take away the bugaboo of the Old Covenant—the people's covenantal infidelity (10:15-18). If the New Covenant involved a perfected forgiveness for sins (8:7-13) and of sins remembered no more (8:12; 10:17), then there is no longer a need to continually atone for sins. Christ's once-for-all sacrifice has accomplished that (10:18).

This section illustrates another technique of Jewish expository practice of the day. It is a midrash within a midrash. The author is expounding on Psalm 40:6-8 within the larger context of the exposition of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Expounding on Jeremiah 31, which the author has been doing since the middle of Hebrew 8, involves explaining how the death of Jesus has brought about true forgiveness of sins. Now, he launches into an exposition, this time of Psalm 40:6-8, in which he explains that the voluntary offering of a human being, committed to doing the will of God, is the real thing God was after all the time. The sacrifices and cultic ritual were signposts for that real thing.

Psalm 40 speaks from the inner bowels, if you will, of the Old Testament revelation. Surrounded by the rules for daily sacrifice commanded by God in so many precise ways, what all this was really after was heartfelt, voluntary commitment to doing the will of God. Psalm 40 expresses this as do other Old Testament texts (see 1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:10-17; Hos. 6:6). The heart of this new and better deal, brought into being and fulfilled by the Son of God, was this voluntary, obedient self-offering of the



Son, who came to do the Father's will (10:7, 9).

The law and the Old Testament sacrificial system could not cleanse our consciences of sin. The priesthood was imperfect, the tabernacle but a copy, the sacrifice patently inadequate, and the constant repetition only really serving notice of these inadequacies. What Jesus, the Messiah, has done, once for all, crowns and completes God's previous purposes and comes as a new reality to take their place. It is not that God had a change of mind and abruptly goes in another direction. No! If you carefully consider the Old Testament texts at their heart, the system declared itself to be a temporary one, pointing to something permanent and better. For the readers to seriously ponder returning to what was temporary and fading away was foolhardy.

**10:1**—Is the author using ideas made famous by the philosopher Plato? This development of a heavenly tabernacle as the real and the earthly one as the copy and shadow sounds very much like Plato's Myth of the Cave. There he develops the idea that true reality lies in the world of Forms and what we interact with in our earthly reality are merely shadows of the true reality that remains out of sight. However, the author does not contrast physical and non-physical reality in 10:1. The contrast is between present and future realities. Jesus has gone on ahead, in pioneer fashion into God's future reality, and will reappear when that future reality bursts into the present for the entire world.

**10:4**—There were those in Judaism of the day who emphasized the spiritual, figurative use of the sacrificial imagery and would deny the need for actual sacrifice. They preceded the 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of the Old Testament's "slaughterhouse religion". However, the writer was not one of these. The problem with the animal sacrifices was not with the idea of sacrificial offering, but with the imperfection of the offering itself. A perfect offering was needed and would be supplied as the author elaborates on in 10:5-18.

**10:5-10**—The author unpacks Psalm 40:6-8. How could the psalmist say that God did not desire sacrifice and offering? Was not the whole Old Testament cultus, as commanded by God, based on sacrifice and offering? Yes, but what God desired was a people who would do his will. The offering of sacrifices was necessary because the people did not do his will. The psalmist predicts one who would do God's will perfectly. The self-sacrifice of this one would be the ultimate atoning sacrifice for wayward people.

**10:11-18**—The author brings various strands of his long argument together. The picture is that of Jesus the Messiah, the truly human being, the great high priest in the order of Melchizedek, the one who has offered the perfect sacrifice of himself through which the New Covenant promise of the forgiveness of sins is established and implemented. In making this conclusion, he returns to Psalm 110, which he quoted in 1:13 and expounded in detail in chapters 5 through 8. He references Psalm 110:1 in 10:13, the verse he referred to in 1:13, speaking of Messiah sitting at the right hand of God until God makes his enemies his footstool. This fits together with the thought of Psalm 8:6, quoted in 2:8, which speaks to Jesus being a representative human being under whose feet everything would be put in submission. Jeremiah 31 reappears in this passage as well (10:16-17). What Jesus has done, in dying as a sacrifice for us, is to procure complete forgiveness of sins spoken of in Jeremiah, and to establish God's new covenant with us. This was a one-time sacrifice, a finished work. No further sacrifice is needed.

**10:11-12**—The author makes a big deal of the posture of the priests and the of Jesus, the significance

of which moderns tend to miss. When we work in the modern world, we often sit. When we break from work we stand up and do something else. In ancient times, people were in occupations that usually worked from a standing posture, just as the Levitical priests did. When they completed your work, they sat down. Thus, the posture point of the author is key. The Old Testament priests stood and offered sacrifice continually. Their “work” was never complete. Jesus offered his once for all sacrifice and sat down at the right hand of Majesty on high. His work was complete.

**10:14**—The basis for our forgiveness is not our repentance, but the cross of Christ. Our change of heart and mind (our repentance) is just the personal realization of the atonement which he has worked out for us. Our Lord never pretends that we are all right when we are not. The atonement is the way God makes unholy people holy based on the death of Christ.

**10:15-18**—Once again he quotes from Jeremiah 31 (see Heb. 8:8-12), citing enough of the passage to indicate that he has the heart transformation of the new covenant in mind and that Christ has provided forgiveness for sins with an emphasis on that provision's utter finality. There is no further need for sacrifice.

*Aside*—Jesus spoke of the new covenant through which sins would be forgiven by the shedding of his blood at the Last Supper, the final meal he shared with his disciples. He instructed them to repeat this practice “in remembrance of me.” We celebrate the eucharistic meal monthly in obedience to this command. Others do so at various intervals, even at each worship service.

Certain traditions see the meal itself as a sacrifice and view the celebrants who conduct the liturgy as priests in the sense of people who offer sacrifice. Some traditions believe Jesus' command to repeat the eucharistic meal means participating in one sacrificial event through remembrance. However, others within these traditions have suggested that the sacrifice of Jesus is somehow repeated at each service. That view is not what the Lord was getting at in his command at the Last Supper. The sacrifice of Jesus is once for all. The subsequent celebrations of the eucharistic meal underline, proclaim, announce again the single, past, unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

## **II. Exhortation to Persevere (10:19-12:29)**

### **A. A Call to Persevere and Press on to Maturity (10:19-39)**

The author issues a sustained call for the Hebrews to persevere in the faith. Based on Christ's sacrifice, the author is imploring his readers to make the utmost use of the blessings won at Calvary (10:19-25). While he is confident that they indeed will do this, he leaves them no doubt of the gravity of their situation and of the terrible consequences of not responding to God's saving act in Christ. Yes, God loves them, but he is implacable opposed to evil and will judge it (10:26-31). After the stern warning, he reminds them of the early days of their Christian experience and their triumph through adversity and persecution. In Christ, they have blessings of a kind they could never have received had they given way to their trials. He urges them on, exhorting them not to shrink away (10:32-39).

**1. Persevere in faith (10:19-25)**—Jesus, our forerunner (see 2:10; 5:8-9; 6:20) had dedicated the heavenly tabernacle so that his followers could join him in the full presence of God. The veil and

prescribed cultic rituals which had separated the people from the awesome, holy presence of God, were no longer barriers. Believers in Jesus now had perfect access to God's presence (10:19-21). A consideration of what Christ has done becomes the basis for three exhortations:

- Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and in full assurance of faith (10:22).
- Let us hold unswervingly to our hope (10:23).
- Let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good deeds (10:24-25).

“Sincere heart” speaks to the whole of our inner life—the target of the new covenant. “Full assurance of faith” speaks to a trust in Christ and his high priestly work. The cleansing he speaks of is a reference to Christian baptism. This is not a washing from ritual defilement, but an inward cleansing by Christ's shed blood.

He continues by re-emphasizing Christian hope, earlier described as the anchor of our souls (6:19). God is behind his promises and can be thoroughly relied upon. He concludes by speaking of their mutual activity. They are to encourage one another and spur one another on in faith. This should show up in their virtuous deeds and in their regular assembling together.

Some people were no longer meeting together. It is a dangerous practice for any believer to endeavor to live without the support of one's fellow believers. We cannot be Christians all by ourselves. This is the basis of the author's exhortation here. Why were the believers slacking off? Maybe they were not processing the corporate dimensions of the faith to which we are called, or that they were being lazy and sleeping in, or that they really didn't like their fellow believers. However, more likely, it was because of the threat of persecution (10:32-34) that caused them to stay home. It would be much easier to avoid notice and therefore much safer if you simply stopped showing up at worship meetings. There is no place for self-sufficient individualism, spiritual laziness that slacks off, or fear of persecution that tries to be a Christian under the radar.

2. **Warning: Do not reject the Word (10:26-31)**—The reference to the Day of Judgment prefaces this warning passage. The author's warning comes full bore: those who do not engage in true worship, who do not continue to persevere, would/could fall away and be lost. The sin in this context is deliberate, unrepentant apostasy. People who come to the knowledge of the truth, who know what Christ has done for them, and who revert to attitudes of rejection and patterns of continual sin, forfeit any hope for there is no other sacrifice to take away sin. There only remains a frightening expectation of judgment, described as a raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

The author is leaving no neutral path. In 10:28-29, the author once again employs the lesser to the greater argument. If ignoring the law of Moses was a grave matter, how much more is turning your back on the final atonement in Christ. This looks back on the entirety of his argument for the superiority of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The indictment of these potential or real apostates is threefold:

- They have trampled the Son of God under foot. They are despising/expressing disdain for the very Son of God.
- They are making light of the shedding of covenant blood.
- They have insulted the Spirit of grace.

He then quotes Deuteronomy 32:35-36 and Psalm 135:14 to bring home the dreadful nature of such

behavior and its consequence. Facing God's judgment after stiffing his mercy is a daunting prospect.

This is the most fearsome warning in Hebrews and in the entire New Testament. Who is being warned has been debated since the early centuries of the church. Early Christians understood this as referring to anyone who after being baptized committed any serious (mortal) sin. Others thought it applied primarily to people who renounced the faith under persecution or threat of persecution.

Moderns tend to downplay warnings like this, and really any reference to God's judgment. They suppose that passages like this apply only in the most extreme and very rare cases. We need to be reminded that there will come a time when the Almighty will bring his wise and just rule to bear fully and finally on the world. Those who willfully stand against his rule, who live a life which ignores and scorns the standards of his word and of the created order itself, who resist and spurn all attempts at reformation and renewal, will face dire punishment.

However, this passage is a more directed warning of judgment—to someone who has come close to Christian faith, shared in worship and community, and then repudiates it all. The warning here is uncompromising—God is not to be trifled with or presumed upon. The idea that it is God's job to forgive is not aligned with biblical teaching.

**10:32-39—Don't throw it all away**—The writer thinks better of his recipients. He reminds them of their earlier vigor in the faith (10:32-24). They had endured persecution, public insult, and the confiscation of their property. They supported those similarly treated. They had behaved and thought correctly about their lives and what was truly valuable. He urges them not to throw away their confidence which would be rewarded in due time (10:35-36). Once again, the specter of judgment looms (10:37-38). The author concludes this section where it began—with his expression of confidence in the proper heart attitude and behavior of the recipients (10:39).

**10:35**—“Throwing away” conveys a reckless rejection of what is most valuable. Their confidence was entirely based on the saving work of Christ. It would be folly to discard it. Just as Christ came to do God's will (10:7-10), so too the Hebrew believers must do the same.

**10:37-39**—In the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, the prophet Habakkuk saw judgment coming as Babylon swept through the ancient Near East. There was no escape. In chapter 2, Habakkuk tells the people that when everything all around seems to be turning upside down, God's true people hold on and stay the course. The classic phrase “the just shall live by faith” is quoted here (10:38) and in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. While the events the believers were called to endure were frightening, the author is telling his readers that they are a sign of hope. There is coming a new age in which God will give his people what he has promised. Therefore, they were to believe and not shrink back and be destroyed. That word on living by faith provides an apt introduction to the most famous faith chapter in the Bible.

## **B. Faith's Perseverance Exemplified in Old Testament Believers (11:1-40)**

This is one of the sublime chapters in the Scripture, a classic treatment on the subject of faith. He does not contrast faith with works. He does not wax eloquent about faith as the means of one's justification. Here, he speaks of faith with reference to the future and underlines how the readers can rely on God. He points to people of faith and shows how that faith motivated them to face difficult circumstances. It

encourages his readers and hosts of readers throughout the ages. He describes faith in general terms (11:1-3) before selecting outstanding examples of faith. These include people before the flood (11:4-7), Abraham and Sarah (11:8-19), the patriarchs (11:20-22), Moses (11:23-28), the Exodus generation (11:29-31), and others through Israel's history (11:32-40).

This chapter provides an excellent example of the spiritual landscape with which we must deal. We learn from those who have gone on before, of what may lie ahead, with what we must cope, and the wonderful welcome and commendation that awaits us at the end of the journey. The author wants his readers to realize that faith is not a general religious attitude toward life, nor is it simple credulity. Faith is a reliance on God that takes proper action based on that reliance. This chapter catalogs the heroes of faith whose lives illustrate what the author would see in the lives of his readers.

The discussion of faith will continue into the author's own time with faith's climax in Jesus (12:1-3), the author's exhortation to his readers to live out this story for themselves (12:4-17), before declaring what the goal of the journey is (12:18-24) and the culmination of the age (12:25-29).

**1. Faith described (11:1-3, 6)**—The writer begins with general observations about faith. He does not offer a formal definition but calls attention to noteworthy features of faith and shows how faith works out in practice. Faith is linked to hope in the promises and to banking on a reality that is not seen. It looks at the creation and celebrates the Creator, looks at death and sees the promise of new life beyond, and looks to and trusts God and builds on that trust a life which honors and pleases the Almighty.

Faith is not only the assurance of unseen realities with the backbone of hope (11:1), not only the persistent belief that God exists and rewards those who seek him (11:6), but it is also something of a badge of reliance on promises without the necessity of seeing the fulfillment of those promises for themselves. There is the assurance that the God who promised will surely come through.

**2. Antediluvian heroes (11:4-7)**—The heroes of faith begin with Abel, Enoch, and Noah, people who lived before the flood. Abel is the first example, having brought a more acceptable sacrifice to God than his brother Cain (Gen. 4:3-7). Scripture is otherwise silent about the inherent superiority of Abel's offering. He was a righteous man (11:4; Mt. 23:35; 1 Jn. 3:12), but the text here focuses on the importance of his faith. That faith gave him a voice long after he died.

Enoch is next, taken home without experiencing death, because he pleased God. We know little about Enoch, other than who he sired and that he walked with God (Gen. 5:21-24). The New Testament only refers to him here and in Luke 3:37 and Jude 14. Enoch must have had faith because he pleased God. That connection moves the author to a classic text on faith in 11:6: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

The writer then moves to Noah. When warned of the impending flood, Noah lacked natural indicators to back it up. He built the ark in “holy fear.” This is not a term conveying the idea of natural timidity but of reverence for God and his command. He stood up against the mockery of the antediluvian crowd. By his faith, he saved his family and was described as “righteous,” meaning that he was right with God because he took God at his word and acted upon it.

**3. Abraham and Sarah (11:8-12)**—Next up is the great progenitor of the Jewish race, Abraham. The faith of Abraham and Sarah is extolled in two distinct sections separated by a general description of the heroes of faith listed in the chapter (11:13-16). Abraham is cited for his faith several times in the New Testament (Acts 7:2-8; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Jas, 2:23). Abraham accepted God's promises and acted on them even though there was nothing immediate to indicate that they would be fulfilled.

Three instances are noted, with the last one in 11:17-19:

- Abraham is commended for launching out in faith when he was called even though he did not know where he was going and never inherited the promised land. He only lived there as an alien and sojourner (11:8-10; see Gen. 12).
- He and Sarah (by implication and association) believed God's promise of an heir and a great posterity even though they were far past child-bearing years (11:11-12; see Gen. 15; 18).
- Finally, Abraham's faith is commended in the aborted offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah (11:17-19; see Gen. 22).

**4. Longing for a better country (11:13-16)**—The author breaks from his treatment of Abraham to make general remarks about people of faith. All the people mentioned so far died without seeing the promise. The best that happened to them is that they had glimpses of what God had in store for them. This aside underlines the forward thinking of the heroes of faith. They longed for a better country and that provided them with eyes to see beyond the here and now. They were able to be aliens and strangers on the earth because of this forward view of faith and the ability to hold to God's promises without seeing the immediate fulfillment of them.

The author introduces the image of the heavenly city or country in 11:10 and 16, which he will develop in the later chapters. The focal point in these initial references seems to be the Promised Land and the beginning of the ability to see that as a hint of a greater heavenly reality. In 12:22, clearly the heavenly Jerusalem is in view. In 13:14, the future city is contrasted with the one on earth to which one might give allegiance. The author is describing a future state when the heavens and earth are transformed.

**5. Abraham again (11:17-19)**—The writer returns to Abraham to note his exercise of faith in connection with the near offering of Isaac on Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22). The author depicts Abraham as struggling with two conflicting revelations: he would have numerous descendants through Isaac, yet God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. The old man's faith told him that God would somehow work this out. Abraham struggled through to the conclusion that God would keep his promise for he was able to raise Isaac from the dead. The author elaborates—Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead in a way of speaking. The aged patriarch had abandoned his son to God in heart and mind; he gained his son when his hand was supernaturally stayed.

*Aside*—What is interesting throughout this discussion of the heroes of faith is the absence of any reference to their failures. The author does not mention the sorry episode of Noah's drunkenness (Gen. 10:20-27). Nothing is said that Abraham twice passed off Sarah as his sister when in the land of Egypt (Gen. 12 and 20), hardly a courageous decision to trust God with their personal welfare in sojourning in a distant land. Nor does the text mention Abraham complicity in Sarah's conniving for an heir in putting Hagar into her husband's arms or in his caving in to her demand that he abandon Hagar and her child to the desert wilderness (Gen. 16). That was certain death without divine intervention. A sordid

episode for the hero of faith. Yet there is no reference. This observation will hold true throughout this chapter. The author refuses to comment on the failures of the heroes of faith that he catalogs.

**6. Later patriarchs (11:20-22)**—Next, the faith of the patriarchs comes into purview. It was when the patriarchs were dying that they exhibited faith that looked beyond the grave. Thus, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau when he thought death was upon him (Gen. 27:2, 4; 28:1-4), Jacob blessed Joseph's sons (Gen. 48:12-20), and Joseph gave instructions concerning his ultimate internment (Gen. 50:24-25). Their firm conviction was that death could not frustrate God's purposes.

**7. Moses and the Exodus generation (11:23-31)**—Moses and the Exodus generation is next up. Their faith is cited in—

- The first example involves the faith of Moses' parents when they defied the Pharaoh's edict to kill all Hebrew male babies.
- Moses, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, could have enjoyed a life of privilege (and suspicion!) at court, but he willingly abandoned that and set out to liberate his people from their oppressive taskmasters. He initially went about it in a completely wrong way (Ex. 2:11-15). However, effectively disciplined on the back side of the desert, he was given the task of leading the people out of Egypt. Interestingly, the writer sees all this in terms of implicit loyalty to Messiah (11:26). Moses was looking ahead, in the long purposes of God, to the time when Messiah would come.
- Sprinkling the blood on the doorposts during the Passover night.
- Going through the parted Red Sea.
- The incident where the walls of Jericho fall upon a trumpet blast.

The author seeks to ensure that readers have a comprehensive understanding of their valuable spiritual heritage. He wanted them to know where they had truly come from for them to continue on to what that heritage pointed to.

**11:26**—The reference to Moses regarding disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the riches of Egypt (11:26) is curious. Most likely, the author is thinking of Christ as identified with the people of God in the Old Testament along the lines that Paul was thinking in 1 Corinthians 10:4 when he says: “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”

**11:29-31**—This section is curious. The people who followed Moses thorough the Red Sea are cited. They were hardly shining examples of faith, given the subsequent experience of the wilderness wanderings. The failure to explicitly mention Joshua among the heroes of faith is also strange. Perhaps the writer is thinking of Joshua when he mentions the fall of Jericho in this list. Apart from the conviction that God would act, nothing could have been more pointless than marching around the city and blowing trumpets.

Rahab the prostitute seems, at least at first sight, an unlikely example of faith. However, her subsequent behavior belies the initial thought that she was an opportunist saving her own skin. She lives a commendable life thereafter. She is listed as the wife of Salmon in the Lord's genealogy (Mt. 1:5) and is mentioned favorably in James' epistle (Jas. 2:25).

**8. Summary of other exploits of faith (11:32-40)**—The author tells us he could go on and on listing heroes of faith throughout Jewish history. He has made his point. However, he proceeds to outline what he would have covered. He mentions several judges, refers to Daniel and his three friends, and speaks of the women receiving their dead back to life in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. He summarizes how these heroes exercised faith.

These heroes of faith, though blessed, did not receive the promise. The promise relates to the ultimate blessing that is in Christ Jesus. God indeed planned something better for Christians. Only the work of Christ brings those Old Testament saints and those of the new and living way into the very presence of God. And that is by faith, and faith alone.

### **C. Jesus' Example and the Value of Discipline (12:1-13)**

**1. Looking to Jesus (12:1-3)**—The Christian life is portrayed as a long-distance race with a throng of spectators at the finish line cheering us on, surrounding us with enthusiastic encouragement, urging us to conclude the course in fine style as they had done. Those in the race need to fix their eyes on Jesus and not on their difficulties.

How to run this race successfully? Three things—

- Get rid of the baggage—anxieties about trivial concerns, ambition for self-advancement, resentments, secret greed, and sin. All these things are excess baggage that hinder us in the central endeavor of life.
- Run patiently. Keep at it. It is the long haul. You are in it to the finish. Do not burn out. Do not give up.
- Keep your eyes on the prize. Our task is to follow in the steps of Jesus. The author invites us to carefully consider what exactly he went through on his own patient journey. How he kept his eye on the prize—the joy of doing his Father's will and bringing God's saving purpose to fulfillment.

The author is keenly aware that his readers are weary of all that they are facing—threats, persecution, intimidation, and mockery from their contemporaries. They must keep going, reminding themselves of the truth, and fortifying their souls in the power of the Spirit.

**12:2-3**—What is meant by the “for joy set before him” as a motivator to his enduring the Cross? Probably that he went to the Cross for the joy that salvation would bring. He looked past the Cross to the coming joy of bringing salvation to those he loves. Observing what abuse he received from sinful people should steel our hearts to persistent faithfulness, that we will not grow weary and lose heart. Any hard lot along our journey is in the backdrop of his sacrificial atonement on our behalf.

No wound, no scar?  
 Yet as the Master shall the servant be,  
 And pierced are the feet that follow Me,  
 But thine are whole,  
 Can he have followed far,  
 Who has no wound, no scar?

**2. Accepting suffering as God's instructive discipline (12:4-13)**—The writer goes on to address



the subject of spiritual discipline. Suffering comes to all. It is part of life, and it is not easy to bear. Christ's suffering had meaning, and for those following him, suffering is transformational. Suffering is God's way of guiding and correcting us. The point of suffering is to teach us something. The author concludes, realistically, that no discipline is pleasant at the time, but afterwards it yields a harvest of righteousness and peace.

In the ancient world, raising children involved disciplining them. When God speaks of discipline and rebuke, it is his children that he addresses. Suffering should encourage rather than dismay us for we know God's paternal concern in applying discipline. It is evidence, not that he does not love us, but that he does. Rather than questioning their faith when persecuted, the readers were to embrace suffering as a gracious opportunity to better learn God's heart and purpose.

**12:4-6**— The sacrifice of Jesus exemplified the expectations associated with Christian discipleship (12:4). The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12, an example from Jewish wisdom literature, showing that discipline was a sign of the father's love for his children, his concern that they would take the right path. The word translated “discipline” is the most basic term for “education.” The term naturally encompasses moral instruction.

The writer engages once again in a “how much more” argument. If we respect our human fathers, who disciplined us imperfectly but for our good, how much more should we receive the discipline of our perfect heavenly Father and take to heart the lessons we are to learn. God is treating us as his sons and daughters. He wants the best for us and will refuse to spoil or ignore us, will refuse to let us get away with our rebellion or our folly, with sin or with stupidity. When we find ourselves thwarted or disappointed, opposed or vilified, subject even to abuse or violence, we need to be able to hear the gentle and wise voice of the Father, urging us to follow him more closely, trust him more fully, and to love him more deeply.

From prayer that asks that I may be  
 Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee  
 From fearing when I should aspire  
 From faltering when I should climb higher  
 From silken self, O Captain, free  
 Thy soldier who would follow Thee.  
 From subtle love of softening things  
 From easy choices, weakenings  
 Not thus were spirits fortified  
 Not this way went the Crucified  
 From all that dims Thy Calvary  
 O Lamb of God, deliver me. (Amy Carmichael)

**12:12-13—Get on with it**—From the acceptance of life's discipline in general, the author moves to discipline as applied in Christian living. There is no room for spiritual laziness. “Strengthened your feeble arms and weak knees” has Isaiah 35:3 in the backdrop. The people were to sort themselves out. God is doing a new thing, and the thrust of Isaiah 35 is to stand up and get on it. It is followed by a similar quote from Proverbs 4:26. In a phrase, they were to kick it into gear.

Do not give up when disciplined. Do not get into a sulk. “I just can't help it.” “That's just the way I am/things are.” Sanctification is not our idea of what we want God to do for us; it is God's idea of what he wants to do for us. We need to get into an attitude of mind and spirit where we will let him sanctify us.

#### **D. Warning Against Refusing God and Growing Bitter (12:14-29)**

Turning away from Jesus was worse than Esau's shortsighted apostasy (12:16-17) and more serious than rejecting the revelation of God at Sinai (12:18-21). Jesus is the true and rightful leader of Israel (12:23) and the mediator of a new and better covenant (12:24). Most Jews who sought to keep the law were embarrassed by their ancestors in the wilderness wanderings. The writer warns his readers that if they turn their backs on Christ, they are worse than the ancestors they would disown (12:25-29).

**1. Warning against refusing God (12:14-17)**—The point of the warning in this passage is that it is indeed possible to do things which bring our character to ruins and to discover that there is no way back. The story of Esau in Genesis 26 and 27 is the backdrop. Esau exchanges his birthright for a mess of stew. Jacob then tricks Isaac into receiving the eldest son's blessing and Isaac refuses to undo it despite Esau's tears and protestations. The warning in 12:17 is akin to those in 6:4-8 and 10:26-31: a warning that to turn back to the ways of the world after tasting the benefits of new life may result in a fixed and unalterable condition of heart and mind. Hebrew 6:4 and 12:17 seem to say the same thing—one's heart can be hardened to such a state that it is impossible to restore one to repentance.

**12:14-15**—The author encourages a holy lifestyle and avoidance of any bitter root that causes trouble and defiles. An Old Testament text is in mind here—Deuteronomy 29:18, which warned against apostasy. The warning in Deuteronomy is for the bitter root of unmet expectations that causes one to turn away from the Lord of glory. It is a bitter poison in the community.

**12:16-17**—Jewish tradition regarded Esau as enslaved by sensual and temporal desires because of actions like the one the author refers to in this text. He gives up his birthright for some stew because he is hungry! Esau functioned as if he viewed life only in the present and lacked any long-range or eternal perspective. He later came to deeply regret his flippant attitude, but his sorrow and tears did not reverse the result.

**2. Contrasting Mount Sinai and Mount Zion (12:18-24)**—The writer proceeds to contrast Jewish and Christian ways by contrasting the terrors associated with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai with the joys and glory associated with Mount Zion. 12:18-21 highlights the terrors associated with the giving of the Law—burning fire, gloom and storm, trumpet blasts, terrifying voice. Moses trembled with fear (quoting Deut. 9:19) before a holiness that is an unapproachable terror.

But coming to Mount Zion is entirely different (12:22-24). Thousands of angels in joyful assembly, the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven, the spirits of people made perfect, and an approach to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. This holiness is welcoming, cleansing, and healing. It is not a contrast between a holiness that is exclusive and an inclusive version that simply lets everyone come as they are. No! The heavenly city is populated with a throng in whom the lavish grace of God has worked a marvelous cleansing and transformation. People can approach the very presence of God, which in 12:18-21 is presented as so terrifying.

**12:24**—This text seems strange to us. The sprinkling of blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel is a telling contrast. In Genesis 4:10, Abel's blood shed by his brother Cain cried out for vengeance on his killer. Jesus' blood speaks a better word of redemption, opening to us a way to the Most Holy place (see 10:19). Rabbinical Jewish tradition suggested that the blood of a murdered person kept seething until avenged. Jesus' blood, dedicating a new covenant of forgiveness, thus speaks better things than Abel's blood, understood as calling out for vengeance.

**3. The Unshakable Kingdom (12:25-29)**—The author takes us back for a minute to the image of Mount Sinai in 12:18-21. Heaven and earth must be shaken in such a way that everything transient, temporary, secondary, and second-rate will fall away. Then the new creation, based on Jesus and his resurrection life, will remain and shine forth.

The comparison between the giving of the law on Mount Sinai and the New Covenant reception of the saints in the heavenly Mount Zion leads the author to engage in a once again “how much more” argument. If the law was glorious and profaning and something to fear, how much more to be feared is profaning the more formidable glory of the New Covenant given from heaven.

**12:26-27**—The land shook when God came to give the law at Sinai (Ex. 19:18). The quote from Haggai 2:6, 7 refers to that shaking. There was to be a second shaking when God would subdue the nations and fill his temple with glory.

**12:28-29**—We, who will receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, should come and worship this glorious God with reverence and awe. The author quotes Deuteronomy 4:24, concluding the chapter with a warning against taking God's ultimate revelation for granted.

### **III. Concluding Exhortations, Benediction, and Greetings (13:1-25)**

**A. Practical living of God's people (13:1-8)**—The opening exhortation to love one another echoes the Lord's closing words to his disciples (see Jn. 15:12-17). The bonds of true Christian community would also hinder apostasy within the community. The author goes on to make a number of loosely organized exhortations: for hospitality, recalling Genesis 18 and 19 without much elaboration (13:2), for the care of the imprisoned (13:3), for sexual purity in marriage (13:4), for keeping their lives free of greed and covetousness (13:5-6), for supporting and imitating faithful leaders (13:7). Noting that Jesus was the same yesterday, today, and forever in 13:8 was in accord with Jewish tradition in the Diaspora that emphasized God's changelessness. They needed to communicate truth about God to Greeks, who thought that only what was changeless was truly eternal.

**13:1-2**—When we get our view of Jesus right, the urgent issues of our living fall into place. Christian community should embody love and generosity. Mutual affection accompanied by doing good for one another is vital. Hospitality was to be customary practice in the early church and extended whenever possible. This grace was highly esteemed in the ancient world and especially important for Christians. Public accommodation was expensive and often dangerous. This exhortation includes the intriguing promise that welcoming someone at your front door may result in an unexpected visit from an angel, as

suggested by the experiences of Abraham in Genesis 18 and Lot in Genesis 19.

**13:3**—Prison was a feature of Christian life from the earliest days. Those enjoying freedom must remember, pray for, and help their brethren who are in prison. The immediate context of this verse is helping people in prison because of their faith. An application in our world today is to practically stand with persecuted and imprisoned Christians around the world. But the writer would certainly not have excluded the wider work of caring for those in prison for other reasons.

**13:4-6**—Sex and money. Sexual promiscuity and material greed were as common in the first century as in ours. God's intention for the gift of sex is for a rich and satisfying bond between husband and wife, not as a self-oriented plaything. As for the love of money, the writer's counsel of being content with what we have enables us to escape the greed that can enslave us even while it fails to provide the happiness it falsely promises.

**13:7**—The advice is to consider the outcome of their leader's faith. This anticipates advice given in 13:17-19. They were to be people who appreciated and supported their leaders.

**13:8**—This verse seems strange, sticking out at the end at the end of a string of practical exhortations. The whole letter has been about the way God guided and led his people from the early days of the old covenant through its fulfillment in Jesus and how the Lord leads his people in the new covenant to its fulfillment in glory. The whole book has been about Jesus, and this provides us with a short pithy epigram of God's kingdom program. Jesus makes sense of it all.

**2. True sacrifice offered outside the gate (13:9-16)**—This portion of the text begins by referring to strange teachings (13:9) that he does not specify. The strange teachings may have been with reference to Jewish ritual sacrifice for the author once again extols the superiority of Christ's sacrifice over the ceremonies and offerings upon the Day of Atonement (13:11-14). As Christ suffered outside the city gate, so believers were to share willingly in that disgrace and continue to offer to God the sacrifice of praise (13:15) and of good works of generosity (13:16), which pleases God.

**13:9**—The author cautions the Jewish believers against “strange teachings,” perhaps referring to Jewish food laws! The readers needed to see familiar regulations as “strange” and as not doing them any good.

**13:10-14**—The writer again compares Jesus to the sacrificial animals of the sin offering. He makes a parallel between Jesus, put to death outside the city, with the sacrificial animals, burned outside the camp. Jesus fulfilled, at the heavenly altar, what the sacrifices outside the camp on the Day of Atonement pointed to (13:11-12).

Leaving the camp with him may, by implication, mean that the Hebrew readers were to be willing to be expelled from the Jewish community to follow God wholeheartedly. The Christians may have needed to hightail it outside the city of Jerusalem which had arose in revolt and were deemed disloyal by their former Jewish friends. No worries. They were to look to the heavenly city.

**13:15-16**—Glad and uninhibited worship was to be the result. They were to offer the sacrifice of praise and combine that with the service which pleases God. This was the sacrifice God really wanted, not the

endless carcasses of dead animals.

### 3. Final exhortations, doxology, greetings (13:17-25)

**13:17-19—Obedience and Prayer**—The author enjoins obedience, submission, and prayer for leaders. The writer has reflected on the responsibilities of leaders in Christian community (13:7). They will give an account for their shepherding role. He urges his readers to keep this in mind and not to be difficult. Make the labor of their leaders a joy, not a burden.

The writer is reminding the readers that there are appropriate structures of responsibility within God's church. This is a word moderns need to hear. Western society currently distrusts authority, assuming that power is often misused by corrupt individuals. The attitude provides an additional excuse for people who want to do their own thing rather than to submit to authority. That is not to be the attitude that Christian people take toward leadership.

**13:20-21**—The doxology touches on the central themes of the author's arguments—the blood, the eternal covenant, the lordship of Christ, and the imperative of doing his will. This great benediction is the crowning glory of this final passage and one of the genuinely great benedictions in the Scriptures. It is extensively used in churches around the world, especially in the Easter season. What a wonderful text to pray over those you love—family, friends, and other fellow believers. Furthermore, this is the sole instance within the epistle where Jesus is identified as our shepherd and where his resurrection is explicitly mentioned. The mighty act of the God of peace was the resurrection of Jesus and the victory over the forces of evil. This resurrected Jesus was the great shepherd of their souls whom they could entrust with their lives and all their circumstances.

**13:23-25**—The conclusion of the letter provides information regarding the letter's immediate context. There is a tantalizing mention of Timothy's release (13:23, from prison?) and greetings sent by those from Italy (13:24, is that where the writer is?). These verses, supplying as they do the only clues to the locale of the writing, have been subject to speculation.

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