

Hebrews

BELIEVE AGAIN



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The book of Hebrews may be one of the least trodden books of the New Testament. If you ask any given small group which book of the Bible they'd like to study, you'll probably get a lot of Pauline letters, or one of the Gospels, even Revelation on occasion. In my experience, seldom will you hear anyone ask for Hebrews. The blame for that lies squarely on pastors. The study patterns of God's people often reflect the preaching of their pastors. If a pastor isn't preaching it, his flock is less likely to study it.

This study is an effort to remedy that problem. Hebrews is rich with amazing Christology that only gets mentioned in passing in the other New Testament writings. It was written purposely with a high view of Christ because the author's target audience was believing Jews who were tempted to turn back to the Old Covenant, hence the title *Hebrews*.

This study covers the entire book of Hebrews in three eight-week sections. It's good for individual study or use in a group. If you're a small group leader, you can do it eight weeks at a time with breaks in between, or you can plow straight through. You decide what is best for your group.

My hope is that your spiritual life will be enriched greatly as you work your way through this study.

Many Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Steve', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Table of Contents

I

Week One: The Supremacy of the Son	1
Week Two: The Enthroned Son	9
Week Three: Pay Closer Attention	17
Week Four: He Made Himself Like Us	23
Week Five: The Son Surpasses the Servant	29
Week Six: Unbelief to Unrest	35
Week Seven: Belief and His Rest	41
Week Eight: He Gets Us	49

II

Week One: High Priests	61
Week Two: A Pause for Rebuke	67
Week Three: The Impossibles & God's Promises	73
Week Four: Who is Melchizedek?	81
Week Five: Perfect, Indestructible, Effective	87
Week Six: Jesus is Better and Best	93
Week Seven: Shadows	99
Week Eight: God's Living Will	107

III

Week One: Once for All	119
Week Two: Therefore, Faith - Part I	125
Week Three: Therefore, Faith - Part II	133
Week Four: What is Faith?	139
Week Five: Durable Faith	149
Week Six: A Tale of Two Mountains	159
Week Seven: Final Instructions	167
Week Eight: Benediction	175



I



The Supremacy of the Son

HEBREWS 1:1-4

INTRODUCTION

It's customary in studies like this to spend some time examining some precursors that may help you understand the text better. Historical context, authorship, and intended audience, among others, help readers gain a better feel for the motives and intents behind the content of the letter. So without any delay, let's look briefly at this information.

Historical Context

This is difficult to nail down precisely. There seems to be little doubt that this letter was written in the 1st century A.D. but since the author of the letter is unknown, we can only narrow this down by reading early church fathers who make reference to the letter. The earliest reference seems to be from Clement of Rome, who was the bishop of Rome in the late 1st century. Clement was a co-laborer with Paul the Apostle (Philippians 4:3), and he wrote a letter to the Corinthian church where he appeared to cite from the book of Hebrews. If this is accurate, then Hebrews was decidedly a 1st-century work.

Author

No one truly knows. The author of Hebrews never identified himself. There's no shortage of possible authors. Paul, Clement, Apollos, Luke, and Silas are among the serious contenders. At the end of the day, not a single air-tight argument exists for any of them. However, there is ample evidence within the text to suggest that Hebrews may have been a sermon that was recorded and circulated like a letter. The pastoral nature of Hebrews is evident through the use of horatory subjunctives ("Therefore... let us..."). This was very likely a sermon preached by a local church pastor that was circulated among the early churches. That still doesn't solve the authorship issue. We'll find out when we get there.

Intended Audience

You'd think that by the title of the book, the intended audience was clear, but a debate does exist. For our purposes, you need to know that

this letter was written to Christians who were once of the Jewish faith; Messianic Jews. The content is aimed at believers who grew up Jewish, but came to faith in Christ. Not that Gentiles don't benefit from what is written, but the content is clearly targeting men and women with a firm grasp of the Law, Prophets, and Writings of the Old Testament.

Q WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GAIN FROM THIS STUDY?

OUR PROPHET

"¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." Hebrews 1:1-4

The author began with a grand statement. In the old days, and in many different ways, the LORD spoke to us through the prophets. The sects of Jews understood the prophets differently. Pharisees embraced the prophets as Scripture. Sadducees did not. So, while not every Jew believed the prophets, it's a safe assumption that those who believed in Jesus as Messiah also believed the prophets because the apologetic that Jesus is Messiah relied on the prophets. Therefore, the prophets had a huge place in the hearts of many Jews, including the ones who believed in Jesus. The author affirms their importance.

However, he quickly introduced an important *but*. That but is that in the last days, the LORD speaks to us by His Son. Take note that he called the time they lived in these last days. Almost every author in the New Testament referred to the day in which they lived as the last days. Peter was the first. He made reference to it as he quoted the prophet Joel in Acts 2:17.

"¹⁷ And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;" Acts 2:17 (ESV)

Joel's prophecy is important for our discussion. *The last days* began a time period that is still unfolding. We currently live in these last days. That has enormous implications for how we should understand the role of prophets.

Formerly, the LORD spoke through the prophets. Now He speaks through His Son. That means at least two things. First thing, Jesus is the final

Prophet. From here on, this study will make a distinction between Prophet and prophet. Note that Prophet (uppercase) is an office, while prophet (lowercase) is not. Men like Isaiah, Elijah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Elisha, and Obadiah, are Prophets, in that they held a God-appointed office for the nation of Israel. While our English Bible translations don't capitalize the word *prophet* in Hebrews 1:1, the reference made is to those men who were appointed to the office of Prophet in the Old Testament. Christ is the fulfillment of the Prophets, and since the LORD now speaks through His Son, the Son now holds the office of Prophet. Forever.

Q DOES GOD CONTINUE TO APPOINT PROPHETS?

However, Joel presents a small problem. He said, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." If Christ is the final Prophet, why did Joel predict that our sons and daughters shall prophesy? Remember, Peter said that the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was fulfilling Joel's prophecy. This problem is resolved with Galatians 2:20 in view.

"²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20

Because Jesus Christ is our Prophet, all believers become prophets (lowercase). It's not an office of Prophet, but rather it is Christ in us and through us that makes us prophets. We declare the Gospel. We build up, encourage, and console one another when we gather. This is how Jesus can be our final Prophet, and simultaneously His people fulfill Joel's prophecy as sons and daughters who prophesy by the Holy Spirit. *It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me.*

Q WHAT ELSE ARE WE BECAUSE CHRIST LIVES IN US?

HE IS HEIR AND CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

"² ...whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world."

Not only is the Son our final Prophet, but He is the heir and the Creator of all things. Immediately, the author raised the ante. Not only is He our Prophet, but He is our Creator God, and as Creator, the Heir of all creation. It stands to reason that if He created the world, then the world belongs to Him and is His inheritance.

The author buttressed His argument upfront that the Son is greater than any of the heavenly hosts. All of chapter one and much of chapter two are

dedicated to this theme. He did this because Jews of that day had a great reverence for angels. Angels played an enormous role in the history of Israel, so their reverence wasn't without cause. The Apostle Paul had to call out believers in Colossae who were being influenced by men and women who worshiped angels.

"¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind," Colossians 2:18

The author contended with a similar thought pattern among Jews who tended to elevate angels to a place that challenged the authority of the Son. Here in the opening verses, he declared the utter superiority of the Son over all creation, therefore over all created beings. He is their Creator, so He is greater. It also helps us understand that since Satan is numbered among the created heavenly host He too is under the Son's authority. How much more superior is the Son? The author goes for the knock-out.

"³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,"

Q WHAT DOES VERSE THREE TELL US ABOUT THE AUTHOR'S CHRISTOLOGY?

HE IS THE RADIANCE

What is radiance? The definitions given in Strongs and other Greek resources don't seem to squarely fit with how the author is using the word *radiance*. He is the radiance of the glory of God. He doesn't just reflect God's glory. He doesn't just radiate God's glory. He IS the glory. He IS the radiance.

"¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" John 8:12

He isn't a reflection of the light. He is the light. He is the embodied manifestation - the incarnation - of the glory of God. He is God's glory with a physical human body. He is THE radiance. He's not one of many radiances. He is THE radiance, and there is no other.

HE IS THE EXACT IMPRINT

Not only is the Son the radiance of God's glory, but He is the exact imprint of God's nature. Jesus is precisely, in every way, just like the Father. His responses are the Father's responses. His emotions are the Father's emotions. His sense of humor is the Father's sense of humor. Everything

about Him, from the most minute detail of his personality to the most extravagant displays of supernatural power, is just like the Father. It's why Jesus could say:

"...Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." John 14:9b

In some ways, this has a callback to the garden of Eden. Jesus can say what Adam could never say. Even before his fall, Adam was not what Jesus is. Adam was an imager of God, in that he reflected the glory of God. He even reflected it perfectly before his fall, but he was never the *actual* radiance of God's glory. Neither was Adam ever the exact imprint of God's nature but only created in His likeness.

"²⁶ Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" Genesis 1:26a

HE IS THE WORD OF GOD'S POWER

The author of Hebrews isn't the only New Testament author to make this claim. He wrote that the entire universe is upheld by the word of His power. The Apostle Paul wrote something very similar in Colossians.

"¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:15-17

If Paul isn't the author of Hebrews, then it seems that the author was perhaps familiar with Paul's letter to the church of Colossae. The similarities between these opening verses in Hebrews and verses 15-17 in Colossians are stunning. The power of God's Word holds the cosmos together. Both Paul and the author of Hebrews contend that the Son, Jesus, is the Word of God and therefore it is He who holds all things together. And why not? As the Creator of all things, it stands to reason that He is the Sustainer of all things, which is what is meant by *He upholds the universe*.

Q CAN YOU BE A CHRISTIAN AND DENY THE CHRISTOLOGY IN VERSE THREE?

HE REIGNS TODAY

"After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,"

Some Christians believe a misconception that we are waiting for His reign to come. Indeed we are waiting for His bodily return to fully establish His kingdom on earth. But He reigns over all things right now. We're not waiting for His reign to begin. He has reigned ever since He ascended

back to Heaven and took His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high. He has already received the kingdom and dominion that was prophesied by Daniel. Ever since He ascended, the mission of God's people has been to bring the Kingdom wherever we go.

HE IS GREATER!

⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs."

This has the potential for a misunderstanding. If you read this verse cherry-picked from everything else we just covered, you might think that there was a time when Jesus wasn't superior. Divorced from verse three, this seems to say that prior to completing His triumphant earthly ministry where He died, rose from death, and ascended, somehow the angels were superior. But because we know the Son is the Creator, He cannot be inferior to created angels. So what does this mean? To grasp it, we have to look at Psalm 8 and Philippians 2.

⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." Psalms 8:4-5

⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Philippians 2:7-8

Humans were made a little lower than the heavenly beings. When the Son took on the form of a servant, born in the likeness of men, He clothed Himself with weakness. He purposefully took a form that was lower than the angels. In His time on earth, prior to his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus was clothed in weak, human flesh. In human terms, He made Himself lower than the angels. But, (and this is an enormous but) once He rose from the grave, glorified in an incorruptible human body, even His humanity became elevated above the angels. So, let's sum up this tricky part.

- Before His incarnation, the Son was Creator and by nature superior to the angels.
- In His incarnation, the Son took on the weakness of human flesh, and in His humanity made Himself lower than the angels, but never ceased to be God.
- In His resurrection and ascension, His humanity was glorified and exalted above the angels.
- Therefore, after the resurrection and ascension, in a very real sense, Christ has an even more exalted status. Where before He was superior as the Son of God, now He is superior as the Son of Man.

He is greater in every way. And the LORD even pulled off what seemed impossible. He was infinitely superior as Son of God before His incarnation as the Son of Man. When He rose from death, He became even more



The Enthroned Son

HEBREWS 1:5-14

In the opening chapter of Hebrews, the author addressed an issue that was vivid in the mind of Jewish readers but two thousand years later isn't so clear to us. It doesn't help that some English Bibles tend to obscure this matter with strange translation choices here and there. We need to discuss the issue of *sons*.

We've already noted that Jews held angels in reverence, and rightly so because of their activity in Israel's history. However, the issue of reverence isn't the only thing at work in the author's decision to elevate the Son over the angels. If you've read the Old Testament, you may remember that there's this entourage of heavenly beings called the *bene elohim*, or the *sons of God*. These sons of God are in mind here for the author of Hebrews because they would have been in mind to the Messianic Jews who initially heard this sermon or read it later as a letter. Who are the sons of God? They make their first appearance in Genesis 6:1-4.

"¹ When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. ³ Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." ⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown."
Genesis 6:1-4

There's much to be said here, but for this study, we're only highlighting the identity of the sons of God. The sons of God mentioned in Genesis 6 are heavenly beings, not humans. Both Peter and Jude refer to them as such.

"⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment;" 2 Peter 2:4

⁶ And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—" Jude 1:6 (ESV)

Furthermore, the Old Testament consistently refers to the sons of God as heavenly beings.

⁶ Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them." Job 1:6 (ESV)

¹ Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD." Job 2:1

⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
⁶ On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
⁷ when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Job 38:4-7

As best you can, put yourself in a first-century Messianic Jew mindset. You have this category in your thinking for the phrase *sons of God*. The sons of God are heavenly beings. In Job, they were assembled before the LORD to present themselves, seemingly to give an account of their activities. As we move through the remainder of Hebrews chapter one, we'll get an idea of what these sons of God were and are doing. And we will also see that though there are many sons of God, there is only one *Son* of God who is enthroned above all other sons.

Q HOW HAS POPULAR CULTURE AFFECTED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ANGELS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN THE UNSEEN?

YOU ARE MY SON

⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'? Or again, 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son'?" Hebrews 1:5

The author used several passages from the Psalms, Deuteronomy, and 2 Samuel to make his point about the Son. In these citations, the author didn't employ the traditional understanding of the passages. Instead, he claimed that those passages were *also* forward-looking to the Messiah. He repurposed them to apply to Jesus. This happens all the time with NT authors because they understood Jesus to be the final fulfillment of Israel's prophets, priests, and kings.

The OT verses quoted in verse five are Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. Both passages speak of King David. In fact, Psalm 2:7 refers to 2 Samuel 7:14, where it was a part of His covenant with David, and the LORD declared that He will take David as His son. Christ is a descendant of David, which made Him an inheritor of the LORD's covenant with David. That means it wasn't a giant leap to reuse these verses for Christ because He was David's descendant. This was the case when any NT author spoke of Christ with repurposed passages originally about King David.

Q ARE YOU COMFORTABLE WITH HOW THE AUTHOR REPURPOSED OLD TESTAMENT VERSES FOR HIS OWN ARGUMENT?

LET ANGELS WORSHIP HIM

“⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’” Hebrews 1:6

This brings up the matter of dominion. Unlike King David, Jesus wasn't only the King of Israel. His dominion extends to the heavenly realm as well. He is King over all creation, both heaven and earth. It's why Jesus could say that all authority in heaven and earth was given to Him (Matthew 28:18).

But, notice the author called Him *the firstborn*. This does not mean, as some try to make it, that He had a beginning. The Bible often uses the word *firstborn* to indicate status, not chronology of birth. Every believer receives the status of a firstborn son because we are co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). This isn't without precedent. The LORD called Israel His firstborn son in Exodus 4:22. So it seems from Scripture that the LORD is generous with giving people who aren't chronologically firstborn the status of firstborn. In this way, He applies the status of the firstborn to His eternal Son. Jesus is the eternal, uncreated, firstborn Son.

ANGELS ARE SERVANTS

“⁷ Of the angels he says,
‘He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire.’” Hebrews 1:7

“¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” Hebrews 1:14

Both of these verses tell us the role of angels. Verse seven is a quotation from Psalm 104:4. Where the author of Hebrews used the word *angels*, in Psalm 104 it says *messengers*. This isn't a misquote. The author quoted from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the OT, which says, *angelos*. The Hebrew word for angels is *malak* who are a class of heavenly beings. They are informing servants. Repeatedly in the Bible, angels (*malak*) do just that: deliver messages to people.

Take note of verse fourteen. What else does the work of angels entail? They are sent out to work on behalf of those who will inherit salvation. Angels work for the benefit and blessing of God's church. It's somewhat like how the Secret Service is tasked with the protection of the President's children. So angels are tasked with a similar mission for God's family.

Q IN LIGHT OF THESE THINGS, HOW SHOULD WE REGARD ANGELS?

THE SON IS ENTHRONED

⁸ But of the Son he says,
'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.
⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'
¹⁰ And,
'You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
¹¹ they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment,
¹² like a robe you will roll them up,
like a garment they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will have no end.'
¹³ And to which of the angels has he ever said,
'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?'"
Hebrews 1:8-13

Here, the author more fully established the dominion of the Son. In verses 8-9, he quoted Psalm 45:6-7.

- The Son's throne is an everlasting and upright throne.
- He loves righteousness and hates wickedness.

The author's use of Psalm 45 firmly establishes that the Son has a kingdom and dominion, but he takes it a step further in verses 10-12 by quoting Psalm 102:25-27.

He reaffirms that not only is the Son King of kings but that He is also Creator, which is a claim to Divinity. The author wrote that not only was the Son the active agent in creating the world, but He'll be the one who de-creates it as well. He will roll up the worn and battered creation like a used garment and change it. Yes, the Son will be the Creator of everything new that comes after the old is gone.

Verse 13, though, is key. This is Psalm 110:1. Right hand... where have we heard this? Jesus said it the night of his mock trial.

“⁶¹ Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ ⁶² And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’” Mark 14:61b-62 (emphasis added)

When Jesus said this, the council knew what He meant. This was His very direct claim to be the Son of God. Why? Two reasons. First, to be the right hand, or at the right hand, was symbolic of authority. His claim to be seated at the right hand of Power was saying that all of God’s authority was invested in Him. Second, coming with the clouds of heaven meant something very specific. In the OT, there was only one cloud rider. Look again at Psalm 104.

*“³ He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters;
he makes the clouds his chariot;
he rides on the wings of the wind;” Psalms 104:3*

The LORD is the cloud rider. Then look at Daniel 7.

*“¹³ I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13-14*

Jesus claimed to the council that He was the Daniel 7 cloud rider, whom the Jews of that day understood to be the LORD. If not, why else did the high priest tear his robe and accuse Jesus of blasphemy? So the author of Hebrews skillfully employed several OT passages to demonstrate that the Son, Jesus, is God and, therefore, superior in every way to the other sons of God.

Q WHY DOES THE AUTHOR GO TO SUCH LENGTHS TO ELEVATE JESUS ABOVE THE ANGELS?

WHO ARE HIS COMPANIONS?

*“⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”
Hebrews 1:9*

If the author repurposed Psalm 45:7 for the Son, there remains a question. Who are the LORD's companions over whom the Son receives a greater anointing? I think that's a fair question. In the case of King David, it would have been speaking of the members of his court. I believe it means the same thing for the LORD.

In 2 Kings, Ahab, king of Israel, wants to go to war against a city, but he needs help, so he calls on Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, to help him. Ahab summons his prophets, and they all tell him to go and that they will have success. But Jehoshaphat is a godly king and asks Ahab if there was a prophet of the LORD they could consult. Begrudged, Ahab calls on the prophet Micaiah. Micaiah came and gave this word.

"¹⁹ And Micaiah said, 'Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; ²⁰ and the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. ²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' ²² And the LORD said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'" 1 Kings 22:19-22

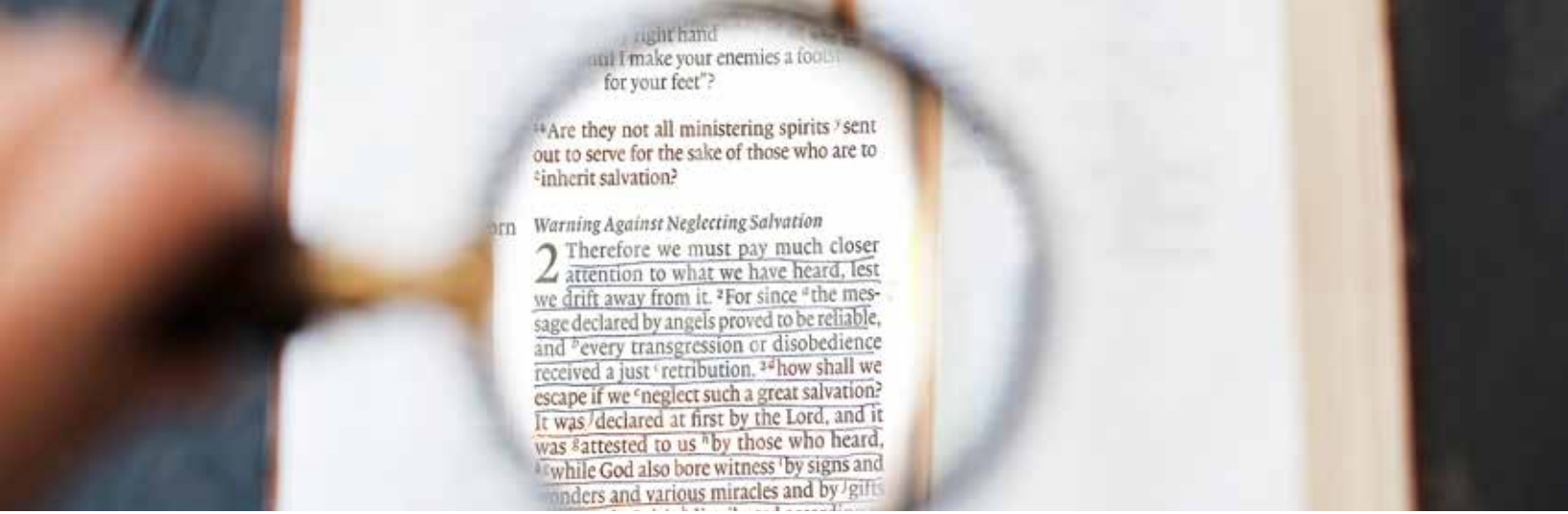
This sneak peek that Micaiah received into the LORD's courts was revealing. The LORD chose to include the sons of God in the execution of His plans. He doesn't need them, but it seems that He delights to include them. That gives even more context to what the author of Job described in chapters one and two of his writing. Why were the sons of God gathered? They are servants who participate in the LORD's work. They are His divine council of heavenly beings that go and do as He decrees.

Who are the LORD's companions? Answer: His divine council. And God has anointed the Son with the oil of gladness above His companions. He is enthroned above the sons of God. But it gets better. When we are glorified, we will join the divine council, replace the sons of God who rebelled with Satan and become their judges (1 Corinthians 6:3).

FINAL THOUGHTS

A.W. Tozer once said that what we think about God is the most important thought in our entire lives. The LORD wants to enlarge your view of His dominion and majesty. We've made the epithet, King of kings, almost cliché because, as Western Christians, our concepts of a king are mostly defined by history books, fairy tales, and popular entertainment. Whatever we can do to expand our understanding of Christ's dominion and majesty is immensely helpful. It helps put Him in the exalted place that Scripture puts Him.

These issues are the kind of foundational things that inform how we approach more practical matters. Get these in order, and you're more likely



Pay Closer Attention

HEBREWS 2:1-4

Hebrews chapter one began a discussion about the Son's superiority to angels, which continues into chapter two. (If you missed the first two weeks, be sure to work through them after this one!) Like any good sermon, the content of Hebrews is all connected. Chapter two begins with *therefore*. Therefore is an essential term in the Scripture. Every time you read that word, it does the same thing. Whenever you read it, train your mind to do one thing: consider what was just said.

"¹ Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." Hebrews 2:1-4

Therefore - in light of what was just said - we must pay much closer attention. Why? What did they hear that the author said must be given greater attention? Let's break this down.

FIRSTBORN, SECONDBORN

What did they hear? The Gospel. Why is that relevant to chapter one's content? Consider the angels - the sons of God. Remember, we were made lower than them. Then consider that they were created first. In a chronological sense, they would be considered firstborn, created before us, and we would be secondborn, created after them. YET! To whom did God promise redemption when they rebelled? With whom did the LORD make covenants and promises? For whom did the LORD send a Redeemer to atone for their rebellion? To whom does God give undeserved firstborn status?

Answer: *us, the secondborn.*

The LORD frequently gives firstborn status to younger siblings. Consider Cain and Abel. The LORD preferred Abel's sacrifice over Cain's. Consider Esau and Jacob. God gave His covenant promises to Jacob, the second-born. Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob, but the scepter went to the fourth-born, Judah. Consider King David. He was the youngest of His brothers, and God's chosen one. The theme is pervasive.

So, we, the lowly secondborn of God's creations who rebelled, have received covenants, promises, and a Savior, none of which did the rebelling firstborn sons of God receive. In Christ, the LORD is giving their status to us. Note the pastoral nature of this admonition... lest we drift away from it. The author's pastoral heart for his audience comes through here. This is his plea. Don't forget this! Don't drift away from this! When you consider our estate and the lengths the LORD went to for our redemption, pay closer attention!

Q HOW SHOULD WE REGARD OUR SALVATION IF REDEMPTION WAS NEVER OFFERED TO THE REBELLING SONS OF GOD?

Verse two presents a tricky statement. The author refers to a reliable message declared by angels. Many commentators connect this statement with the giving of the Law at Sinai and Galatians 3:19

"¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary." Galatians 3:19

You may wonder what angels had to do with the giving of the Law. Deuteronomy tells us.

"² The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand." Deuteronomy 33:2

The problem with the translation of *holy ones* - *kodesh* - is that it can refer to either angels or the Israelites themselves. There's also a translation difficulty with the phrase, *flaming fire at his right hand*. Some English translations say, *from His right hand Came a fiery law for them* (NKJV). What does that mean? The author of Hebrews looked at it like this. He took the position that the *kodesh* are angels, and that they were at the right hand of God where they served as the intermediaries of Galatians 3:19. This is what is meant by the phrase, *from his right hand came a fiery law for them*. From the angels at the LORD's right hand came a fiery law for the Israelites.

Now that we've cleared up the difficulties of the first half of verse two, look at the whole verse. The angels aren't the focus. They delivered the law of Moses - a reliable message that contained just retribution for all disobedience and transgressions. Why did the author bring this up? Because the Gospel has greater glory than the law of Moses!

"⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory." 2 Corinthians 3:7-9

Q DOES THE MORE GLORIOUS COVENANT IN CHRIST ALSO COME WITH A MORE SERIOUS RETRIBUTION?

DECLARED FIRST BY THE LORD

Now verse three. Because the Gospel is far more glorious than the Law, declared by angels, how can we escape just retribution if we neglect such a great salvation? Notice, the author drew attention to how angels gave the Law at Sinai, but proceeded to highlight how the Gospel was first shared by the LORD himself. Go back to the author's assertion that the Son is superior to the angels. He also delivered a superior message! And if the message delivered by angels was to be taken seriously, then even more so, the message declared by the LORD himself is to be given our complete devotion!

GOSPEL WITNESSES

"... and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." Hebrews 2:3b-4

Here's where it gets really cool.

First, to say that the Law of Moses was delivered by angels doesn't mean it wasn't from the LORD. Angels are God's messengers! They delivered messages all the time in Scripture. Angels not only were the messengers of the Law but they would be considered witnesses to its giving. What they received, they delivered and were thereby witnesses.

Now, Jesus has proclaimed the superior message - the Gospel - and has entrusted it to us lowly humans. So, likewise, what we received, we deliver and become witnesses! Look at the end of verse three: the Gospel was attested to us (the author and his hearers/readers) by those who were first-hand hearers of Jesus. Then verse four: the LORD continued bearing witness through his human messengers with signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The LORD never used His angelic family (firstborn) in the way He has chosen to use His human family (secondborn). He never filled His angelic family with the Holy Spirit. Nor did He endow them with various gifts of the Spirit. Because of Christ, we, the lesser secondborns, receive firstborn

status with a greater message, greater authority, greater power, and a greater witness than our greater firstborn angelic brothers!

How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

We must pay closer attention! We must give Jesus our undivided hearts! And the warning implied in this is neglecting a great salvation will have great consequences. Jesus declared that things will be less severe for Sodom and Gomorrah than for those cities that witnessed His ministry and rejected Him (Matthew 10:15).

Look at what we have been given!! Then look in the mirror to see the undeserving estate in which we find ourselves. Consider whom the LORD never offered redemption, then consider us. Why were they not deserving, yet somehow, we who are lower than they receive such abundant salvation?

The only appropriate response is complete and total devotion to and worship of Jesus, the Son who made it all possible.

Q DOES THE AUTHOR'S CONTRAST BETWEEN US AND THE SONS OF GOD STIR YOUR HEART? HOW DOES IT CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

FINAL THOUGHTS

The author's arguments are tailor-made for his original audience. There was a high reverence for the angelic host among them that for the most part, we do not share. The firstborn-secondborn understanding doesn't occur to us as readily as it would have to them. But the pattern is everywhere in the Scriptures.

Consider Jesus' parable about the Prodigal Son. The second-born son of a wealthy man goes to his father and asks for his inheritance so that he can move away and live his life on his own rebellious terms. His father gave it to him, and the second-born son went out on his own. The firstborn son remained with the father, serving him faithfully. When the second-born had spent his money, was broke, and finally came to his senses, he returned home, planning to live in servitude to his father for the rest of his life. But when the father saw him coming, he rejoiced, met him on the road, embraced him, and threw a party for his homecoming.

Did the older son ever get a party for his faithful service? No. He became embittered, for which his father rebuked him. Why does the rebellious second-born receive forgiveness and the firstborn receive a rebuke?

Its a parable, so not everything parallels perfectly, but the paradigm is present in the story. God loves giving second-born kids firstborn status. That's us. If you pay closer attention, you see two things that you'll never be able to unsee.



He Made Himself Like Us

HEBREWS 2:5-18

So far in this journey through Hebrews, we've talked a lot about the superiority of the Son to the angels. That theme continues through the remainder of chapter two, but it begins to transition. While there are a few points to hit upfront about angels, we'll spend most of our time focusing on the transitional thoughts, which focus on the incarnation. There's a lot of ground to cover, so this introduction is officially over. Let's go!

THE WORLD TO COME

"⁵ For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. ⁶ It has been testified somewhere,

'What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?

⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,

⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet.'

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Hebrews 2:5-9

Remember in 2:1-4 when we were told to pay close attention? Verse five rides the wave that imperative created. The world to come has been subjected to the Son, not the angels. But then the author takes a turn back to Psalm 8:4-6.

The Psalmist, in his context, was speaking of how the LORD had placed humanity in a unique place of authority. Made inferior to the heavenly beings, yet given dominion over creation, the Psalmist pondered the

mystery, but He didn't have the fullest perspective. The author takes the Psalmist's ponderings and applies them to the Son. This is the fullness of Psalm 8:4-6. The son of Man, Jesus, completes the picture. Jesus Christ is the incarnation - God in human form.

Q HOW HAVE YOU UNDERSTOOD JESUS' INCARNATION? IS IT SOMETHING YOU'VE SPENT MUCH TIME CONSIDERING?

The author noted in verse 8 that we still don't see everything in subjection to Him, which draws attention to the already-but-not-yet nature of the world as it is. Christ has already won, is already reigning, but He has not returned. In the meantime, His enemies will do their worst.

"¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Ephesians 6:12

So, though Christ has been given all authority in heaven and earth, we have not arrived at the state where all of His enemies have been made His footstool. He already reigns, but His enemies are not yet completely subdued. This won't happen until the Great White Throne of the LORD where everyone stands before Him to be judged (Revelation 20:11-15).

THE SANCTIFIER AND THE SANCTIFIED

"¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying,
'I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.'
¹³ And again,
'I will put my trust in him.'
And again,
'Behold, I and the children God has given me.' "
Hebrews 2:10-13

The author revealed his Trinitarian understanding of the LORD. The *he* in verse ten is the Father because it is he who perfects the founder of our salvation, Jesus, through suffering. This is yet another verse that can be misunderstood if it's cherry-picked out of the context we've been covering. The author doesn't mean that Christ was lacking perfection before the incarnation. Rather, the incarnation was the final step in revealing the fullest expression of the Son's glory. Christ's enthronement as Son of Man unveiled the mystery of the Son for all to see, and it could only be done through the suffering of the incarnation.

Therefore, verse eleven. The sanctifier and the sanctified all have one source: the Father. The LORD's tri-unity isn't always crystal clear to us, but there are aspects that the Scriptures do reveal. Though each Person of the LORD is co-equal, co-powerful, and co-eternal - meaning each Person is fully God - the eternal plan of the LORD gives each Person of God a role to play in the redemption of all things. What appears, on the surface, to be a hierarchy is the outworking of the divine roles each Person of the LORD agreed to take.

- The Father subjected His Son to suffering (Isaiah 53:10-11)
- As the Son of Man, He would be crowned with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:4-6)
- He will have everything subjected to Him in the world to come. (1 Corinthians 15:24-27)

In doing this, through the Son, the Father brings many sons to glory. That's us! And He sanctifies us through the Son.

Q HAVE YOU EVER EXAMINED YOUR SALVATION THROUGH THE LENSE OF THE ENTIRE TRINITY? HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOUR UNDERSTANDING?

If you're a student of Scripture, you might wonder about the role of the Spirit in sanctification. Elsewhere in the Word, the Spirit is clearly portrayed as the one who sets us apart. Sanctify means to set apart. Consider Romans 8:9-13 where Paul teaches that it is the Holy Spirit who sets us apart as believers.

"⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." Romans 8:9-11

Who sanctifies us? Christ or the Spirit? Answer: both. Christ sanctifies us by His blood through the forgiveness of our sins and the transfer of His righteousness to us. That is a once-for-all act of sanctification before the Father. It's why Paul could also write that we are already seated with Christ in the heavens (Ephesians 2:6).

The Holy Spirit sanctifies us in real-time as we work out our faith. His sanctifying ministry is for our earthly journey, making us more like Christ day by day. He sanctifies us and sets us apart from the world, making us peculiar people among the nations. However, the author's purpose here wasn't to give a comprehensive teaching on sanctification. He was highlighting the sanctifying work of Christ to support his next thought.

He unashamedly sanctifies us for our inclusion into God's divine family council. *He is not ashamed to call them brothers.* We will rule with Him.

“¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.” Revelation 19:14

The armies of heaven are God’s redeemed human family returning with Him. Look at what we’re wearing and what we’re riding. We’re wearing white robes and riding white horses. White is symbolic of several things in Scripture, one of which is victors. The white horse particularly symbolizes authority. In Revelation 6, the first horseman conquers on a white horse. It’s widely understood that it symbolizes human government. Christ returns on a white horse to usher in HIS government. We return with Him on white horses as well, to co-rule with Him in His government.

Therefore, when the author of Hebrews quoted Psalm 22:22 and Isaiah 8:17-18, he repurposed them. Christ placed His trust in the Father’s plan to redeem a family of human siblings with whom He will stand in solidarity and give authority to rule with Him!

But remember.

“²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;” 1 Corinthians 1:27

He didn’t choose us because we’re special, but instead because we’re uniquely *not special*. We are foolish, unwise, and weak, but He delighted in choosing us for His ruling family. In that way, no one can boast before Him that they brought something to the table or that they had something the LORD needed. We’re in His family because there was nothing about us that distinguished us as worthy.

Amen.

Q HAVE YOU EVER ASKED YOURSELF, “WHY DID GOD SAVE ME?” HOW DO THESE TRUTHS AFFECT THAT ANSWER? THEN, HOW SHOULD IT AFFECT YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

MADE LIKE US

“¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” Hebrews 2:14-18

Verses fourteen and fifteen are one sentence, so let's deal with them as a whole. The author began his concluding thoughts on the Son's superiority to angels by zooming in on why the Son became human. We - the children - are flesh and blood; therefore, He - Jesus - took on the same things. Why was that necessary? Why couldn't redemption be accomplished by declaration instead of incarnation? There are two parts to the answer.

First: that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.

Your salvation has a purpose that goes far beyond yourself. God saves sinners because He loves us and desires that no one should perish, yet that is not His only motivation. What is God's first purpose in redemption? To glorify Himself through the destruction of Satan and his fellow rebels. How? Through the death and resurrection of Christ, whereby men and women might receive forgiveness and redemption by grace through faith in Him. Every person born again is another soul ripped from the grip of Satan. And those whom the LORD saves - His church - will become exhibit A in the LORD's case against those who rebelled against Him.

"¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." Ephesians 3:10

It was prioritized in this order by the author's own words. First, Christ came to defeat the devil, then, as a result, men and women would be set free from lifelong slavery. Slavery to what? How did the fear of death enslave us? The author referred to how humanity had been enslaved to the power of sin, death, and ultimately under the rule of the devil and his kingdom of darkness. So the primary goal, the defeat of Satan, results in freedom for anyone who calls on the name of the LORD for salvation.

Q HAS THE UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR SALVATION BEEN SELF-FOCUSED OR HAVE YOU UNDERSTOOD IT TO BE BIGGER THAN YOURSELF?

Second: If Christ is to call us brothers and stand in solidarity with us in God's family council, then He had to become one of us.

Note verse sixteen: it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. This is worthy of some thought. First of all, who qualifies for salvation? Those who believe by faith (Romans 5:1). This seems to be the primary reason that angels cannot be redeemed. They have seen Him since they were created. Therefore, since we are justified by faith, those who have seen Him and still rebel can never be saved. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to Him as righteousness. So, for those who are the offspring - of the same faith - of Abraham, Jesus helps them.

How does He help? Saving them? Yes, but His work on His siblings' behalf doesn't end at the cross. In verse seventeen, the author dropped his first reference to Christ's ongoing ministry as our High Priest. He had to

be made like us so that His High Priestly work would be effective. We're saved, but we're still going to sin. We're still going to have issues and problems, and we're still going to say and do things that don't resonate with our identity as God's family. He intercedes for us because - to borrow a controversial phrase - *He gets us*. He endured the suffering of His human life so that He could, in turn, be merciful and faithful toward us when we behave faithlessly.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We need a larger view of Jesus. The author of Hebrews began big. As we move forward, he'll focus our attention on subsequent matters of greatness that are framed by His cosmic greatness. The author spent a great deal of time on the subject of Christ as our High Priest. It is the topic that garners the most attention in this whole letter, starting at chapter four, verse fourteen, all the way through chapter eight. If Jesus, our High Priest, is greater than the angels, what human could we possibly offer up as an alternative? That discussion comes next.

Q HOW DOES CHRIST'S EXALTATION AS THE SON OF MAN CHANGE THINGS? HOW DOES CHRIST'S INCARNATION AFFECT YOU PERSONALLY?

APOSTLE AND HIGH PRIEST

The author said something here no other Biblical author ever said. He called Jesus an apostle. Most of us haven't been trained to think of Jesus as an apostle but instead as the one who sent out the twelve apostles. And, that would be correct, but the author of Hebrews draws a direct line from the Father to Jesus to us. Apostle simply means *sent one*. In that sense, Jesus was sent by the Father, and Jesus sent out the twelve Apostles, and ever since as men and women have heard the Gospel, we too have been sent out with the same authority that the Father invested in Christ, and that Christ invested to the twelve, and so forth and so on. Apostles are sent ones.

However we shouldn't dilute the word too much. There indeed seems to be a broad sense that all believers are apostles in that we are sent ones. In that regard, apostle and ambassador would be synonyms. But there is also a more specific gift of apostleship that some believers receive from the Holy Spirit. These men and women would be church planters and missionaries who spread the kingdom in unreached places. The church recognizes this gift, commissions them to go, and sends them out. Then there's an even more specific office of Apostle. The Apostolic office belongs to the twelve apostles, commissioned by Jesus himself in the New Testament. Some argue that the Holy Spirit is still calling people to the office of Apostle, but the Scripture offers a definition of who qualified for the office in Acts chapter one.

"²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." Acts 1:21-22

The context here is the replacement of Judas, and the qualifier was it had to be someone who had accompanied the original twelve when Jesus was among them during his earthly ministry. That's a really strict qualifier which disqualifies anyone, ever since, from holding the office of Apostle. So there are no more men who hold the office except Jesus, who holds it eternally.

Q WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT THERE ARE NO MORE PEOPLE APPOINTED TO THE OFFICE OF APOSTLE?

Jesus is the apostle and high priest of our confession. That confession is the Gospel. *It is the good news that Yahweh sent His Son, Jesus, to fulfill the Law, atone for sins through the shedding of His blood, grant forgiveness to all who would believe in Him, raise Him from the grave, give Him all authority in heaven and earth to rule, to judge, and to intercede for us from the right hand of the Father until He returns.* That is our confession, and He is the apostle - sent one - who declared it first to us and the high priest who prays and intercedes on our behalf while we continue declaring that same message until He returns.

In some sense, Christ's intercession for us is intimately tied to our apostolic work in being His sent ones. Perhaps we have been taught to think that He's interceding for us so that we'll have all our bills paid on time, have healthy lives, have good relationships with our children and spouses, etc. Perhaps that's part of His intercession, but it seems more likely that the majority of His prayers are directed toward our boldness and character as sent ones. He's more concerned that that we'll have the boldness and courage to share the gospel and proclaim the Word with clarity than we'll pay off our mortgages ahead of time or that our side hustles will generate a lot of extra income.

There's plenty of reasons to believe that His prayers for us indeed cover everything, but He's more concerned that we are faithful witness, and therefore His intercession supports that end more than anything else.

Q HOW DO CHRIST'S PRAYERS AFFECT YOU? KNOWING HE PRAYS, DO YOU FEEL BOLDER AND MORE CONFIDENT TO SERVE HIM?

THE SON SURPASSES THE SERVANT

It's a bit surprising that the author only spent a few verses doing this Jesus-Moses comparison. But verses five and six reveal why there needs not be much more said. Let's work backwards through verses five and six to finish our discussion on Jesus and Moses.

"⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, ⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope." Hebrews 3:5-6

There's something powerful about this son-servant comparison. Jesus also made a similar contrast.

"³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever." John 8:35

Jesus said this in a conversation with some Jews who claimed to be Abraham's children but who were still enslaved to their sins. The concept Christ was communicating was this: you may well be in Abraham's household, but you're servants, not sons. You aren't a member of his family because you don't have the same faith that he had. Slaves don't remain in the house forever. Only sons.

The same concept applies here. Moses wouldn't remain the steward of God's people forever because he wasn't the Son. Jesus is the Son of God, and He came to take over the shepherding of God's people from the faithful stewardship of Moses. Note: the author doesn't diminish Moses one bit. He even goes as far as to say that Jesus is faithful, just like Moses was faithful in all of God's house. He honors Moses. We can even go as far as

to say that the author loved Moses like any faithful Jew. But he recognized that Moses was a faithful manager, not the owner of God's house. He was a servant, not the Son. As such, he could not remain the shepherd of God's people forever.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Do you see it?

In the beginning, before sin entered the picture, the LORD Himself shepherded His family. He had an unveiled relationship with Adam and Eve, and they were naked and unashamed before Him and with each other. After sin entered, a veil fell. There was a separation between mankind and the LORD. There was even a veil that fell between Adam and Eve as they could no longer be naked and unashamed with each other.

Because the LORD desired fellowship with His family, he gave them human shepherds, beginning with Moses, who would point them toward Himself. But human shepherds were no substitute for personal interaction. Human shepherds would not satisfy the LORD's desire forever. He sent Jesus the Son to become THE Shepherd of His family. And so, with Christ as our Shepherd, the LORD is moving us back toward what He had in the beginning. An unveiled relationship with His family. We are heading back to Eden. A better Eden!

Moses, as faithful as He was, could not get us there. Only the Son.

Therefore, when the author contended that Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, it was not disrespectful to Moses. He did not denigrate Moses or minimize him one bit. He only states that Jesus - the builder of the house - is deserving of more glory than the one who was steward of the house - Moses. It wasn't Moses' house, though He deserves honor and glory for his stewardship. The apostle Paul puts it another way in 2 Corinthians.

"⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory." 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

Moses had glory. He spent so much time in the LORD's presence that his face shone (Exodus 34:29-35). But his glory wasn't even his. It was transferred glory from being in the presence of the LORD. It was LORD's glory rubbed off on him! The Son, Jesus, is Yahweh incarnate, and His glory is what was shining on the face of Moses. Whatever glory Moses had, was a reflection of the glory that outshone him. Jesus surpasses the servant.

This is a quotation from Psalm 95:7-11. First off, the author gave credit to the Holy Spirit as the author of Scripture. In case you wonder about Scripture's authorship, it ultimately was the Holy Spirit through various human authors: inspired men of faith, prophets, and apostles.

Since the author quotes this Psalm, it would be helpful to familiarize ourselves with the specific day of testing that he references. As he did in chapter one, the author quoted from the Septuagint (LXX) when he referenced the Old Testament, so if you go look up Psalm 95 in your Bible, it will likely not read exactly the same. In this case, that's actually helpful.

⁷ Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness," Psalms 95:7-8

The Old Testament gives more specificity about the day of testing in the wilderness. That particular day was Meribah/Massah (two names for the same place) in Exodus 17.

⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" Exodus 17:7

This gives us a clue about the nature of Israel's rebellion. This was maybe three or four months after leaving Egypt and had arrived at their third encampment at Rephidim (Exodus 17:1). This was before the golden calf, so it's not a matter of worshiping idols and the immorality they engaged in while Moses was up on Sinai receiving the Law. It's much simpler.

They were thirsty.

Their thirst for water, which is legitimate, led them into hardened hearts. The LORD wasn't providing water in ways that satisfied their expectations. Rebellion can be stirred by something as simple as a legitimate need that doesn't arrive on your time schedule!

Q HAS A LEGITIMATE NEED, NOT MET ON YOUR TIME SCHEDULE, EVER STIRRED YOUR HEART TO REBELLION AGAINST THE LORD?

Broadly, Hebrews 4:8 gave a blanket reading of every rebellion in the wilderness. But Exodus 17:7 sums up why God was angry. They questioned whether the LORD was with them at all, despite what they had witnessed a few months prior in Egypt. So, because of their lack of faith, *"They shall not enter my rest."* And this is the pattern for that generation who came out of Egypt at almost every turn. Despite what they saw with their own eyes in Egypt, they lacked faith again and again that the LORD was with them.

"They shall not enter my rest."

THE WARNING FOR US

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said,

'Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'

¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief." Hebrews 3:12-19

First, please note: the author's plea was to brothers. He addressed fellow believers, warning them to be vigilant against unbelief. Is it possible he meant brothers in a much broader ethnic sense, like fellow Hebrews, fellow Greeks, fellow whatever? It's possible since the Greek word for brothers (in this case) can be used in either context. But the literary context of the whole letter is a message to Hebrew believers. He's addressing believing Jews who are brothers in Christ.

Second, the author warned that an unbelieving heart can lead one to "fall away from the living God." What does the author mean by falling away? The Greek word in play here - *apostēnai* - is related to the word *apostasia*, where we get the word *apostasy*. Unbelief that leads to falling away - which the author has firmly rooted in the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness - means it is possible to be a witness and recipient of God's deliverance and still miss the train heading for the Promised Land.

Q WHAT AREAS OF YOUR LIFE SEEM TO BE THE EASIEST PLACES FOR UNBELIEF TO SETTLE IN?

Third, the author tells us to exhort one another. What is exhortation? Exhortation is strong urging. It's encouragement through a megaphone. The author told his reader to strongly urge one another, every day so that no one would be *hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*.

That's an interesting turn of phrase. To be hardened means that, at first, you were soft. At first, you were malleable and easy to mold, but you gradually became hard. Why? Because sin is deceitful. It makes you think, "*This is no big deal. It won't hurt me or anyone else.*" Except that it grieves the Holy Spirit, every time. Having an ungrieved relationship with Him is

the top priority. But the deceitfulness of sin rocks us to sleep and hardens our hearts as we get comfortable with a compromised relationship with the LORD.

That is why we EXHORT!! We encourage one another through a megaphone!! We hold each other accountable with ferocity! Why so intense? Because the hardened of heart are also usually the deafened of hearing and the dimmed of sight.

Q HAVE YOU EVER EXHORTED SOMEONE OR BEEN ON THE RECEIVING END OF EXHORTATION?

Fourth, for we have come to share in Christ, IF... That "if" can be a thorny two-letter word. Some will arrive at this verse and see a condition. *If you hold on, you'll make it. If you keep believing, you'll enter His rest.* Others see this verse and say that it demonstrates the nature of your faith from the beginning. *If you cease believing, you demonstrate that you never truly believed.* Either one has the same outcome: *apostasy.*

Q HOW WOULD YOU INTERPRET THE PRESENCE OF PERSISTENT UNBELIEF IN A PERSON'S LIFE?

It may seem that the author of Hebrews has made a strong case that believers can apostatize and return to a state of unbelief. However, there's more that will be covered in chapter four that will shed light on this matter. Also, the book of Hebrews doesn't contain all there is to say about the security of salvation. The understanding that salvation cannot be lost or forfeited is rooted in a broader understanding of the entire New Testament. So how do we reconcile this stern warning in Hebrews three, with other passages in the New Testament that seem clear on eternal security?

- Keep reading! An important part of the answer lies ahead. Never read portions of a letter. The entire letter will provide the fullest context to the author's thoughts. If you stop here at the end of chapter three, you might well conclude that believers can return to an unbelieving state by falling away in unbelief. Keep reading, there's more ahead.
- Read the whole Bible! While there are reports all throughout church history of persecuted believers living out their lives with portions of a Bible, maybe even a single book of the New Testament, if you are of the fortunate ones who have a complete copy of the Scriptures, READ THE WHOLE THING. No single book of the Bible contains everything that the LORD has revealed. Even the beloved book of Romans doesn't have everything we need. Therefore, what we have read together in Hebrews 3:7-19 needs the context of the whole Bible to be understood rightly.

Q HAVE YOU READ THE ENTIRE BIBLE? IF NOT, WHAT HAS PREVENTED YOU FROM DOING SO?



Belief and His Rest

HEBREWS 4:1-13

The conclusion of chapter three is somewhat of a cliffhanger. If you stop there, you'd perhaps be left with the idea that believers can apostatize - i.e., reject the Gospel they once believed in and fall away from the living God. Indeed, that is the warning in 3:12.

"¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."
Hebrews 3:12

However, chapter four contains the rest of the story. Plus, remember, it's our verse and chapter numbers that create this cliffhanger. There is no break in thought between chapters three and four. Only an artificial break exists because we start a new chapter. Let's see what lies beyond the cliff.

THEY WERE NOT UNITED IN FAITH

"¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."
Hebrews 4:1-2

Since unbelief is the thing that prevented the first-gen wilderness Israelites from entering the Promised Land, we should be vigilant against it. Exhort one another daily, as 3:13 instructs. But here, the author introduces the concept of transcending rest. It's bigger than land promises. Without minimizing the land promises, let's put them in their proper place.

The geographical land that OT Israel received was not their ultimate rest. When the author wrote this, Israel hadn't been a sovereign nation for centuries. In fact, historically, Israel only existed in the fullness of the land promises for approximately 80 years. King David completed the conquest that Joshua began a few hundred years earlier. He reigned for forty years.

His son, Solomon, reigned for forty years as well. During their respective reigns, Israel had rest from their enemies and lived in the fullness of their geographical size. Things began falling apart after Solomon died.

If we tied God's rest to geography, they rested for about eighty years. But even within that timespan, there was internal turmoil. David and Bathsheba. David and Absalom. Solomon's idolatry and excesses. Was it really the fullness of God's rest? No. The geographical land promises were a foreshadowing of the ultimate and final rest, which is why the author leaves the door open for still entering His rest. Hence, we exhort one another daily so that none of us are deceived by the deceitfulness of sin!

Q IF THE LORD'S REST ISN'T TIED TO THE GEOGRAPHIC LAND OF ISRAEL, WHAT DOES THE PHRASE "PROMISED LAND" MEAN TO NEW TESTAMENT BELIEVERS?

"² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened." Hebrews 4:2

Verse two is a linchpin verse for this whole discussion. Let's break this verse down.

- For good news came to us just as to them,
 - » It's helpful to remember that the word gospel means good news. Christians have essentially taken over the use of the word gospel, but in the first century, it had a much broader use. Any good news was called gospel. So from that standpoint, gospel came to the Israelites - via their dramatic deliverance from Egypt - just as gospel comes to us - via Christ's death and resurrection. Broadly speaking, the good news in both cases is that God is with you and is your Deliverer! Both then, and in the case of Christ, there were miracles that testified to the good news. Both then and in Jesus, God Himself came down to reveal Himself and make a covenant with His people.
- but the message they heard did not benefit them,
 - » This statement can only be made in hindsight. How can you know that a generation received no benefit until that generation is gone and the proof is in the so-called pudding? The author points out that despite all the LORD did on their behalf, they didn't benefit from it. It's strange because it would seem that the surrounding nations understood what happened, but the people for whom it was done were blind. Exodus 15:14-16 says the nations trembled at what the LORD was doing for Israel. Yet, Israel didn't get it. Why?
- because they were not united by faith with those who listened.
 - » Despite what they saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears, the first-gen wilderness Israelites were faithless.

They stood apart from the ones who believed. Remember the spies? Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb, believed the LORD would give them victory over the inhabitants of Canaan. The other ten stood apart in unbelief. They were not united in faith with Joshua and Caleb. But it wasn't just these ten spies. As a whole, they represented the heart of their entire generation. They were a grumbling, complaining, impatient, stiff-necked, fearful people despite everything that the LORD did for them. Multiple times they lamented that they would have been better off remaining in Egypt. They were never people of faith. Instead of stepping out in faith, armoring up against foes who, from all outward appearances, should be able to defeat them, and trusting the LORD to do miracles through their weakness, they remained in unbelief.

Q GOOD NEWS THAT REACHES THE EARS OF PEOPLE WHO REFUSE TO BELIEVE, HAS NO BENEFIT. DID THOSE ISRAELITES WHO DIED IN THE WILDERNESS LOSE THEIR FAITH?

No! They never believed to begin with, which is why no amount of good news was going to change their hearts. They stood apart from faith in the LORD. They were apostates from the start. The LORD rescued an apostate people out of Egypt so that His ultimate purpose to redeem the whole world in Christ would be accomplished. That doesn't mean that the LORD didn't love that generation. He did. In Exodus 4:22 He called Israel his firstborn son. His response to Israel's outcry was motivated, in part, by His love for them. But He also knew exactly whom He rescued. His plans for their rescue had purposes that transcended their generation.

UNENDING REST

The author did something here that likely turned the Jewish thought of rest on its head. It's evident that many, if not most, Jews of the first century still had their hope set upon the nation-state of Israel regaining their own sovereignty through their Messiah's political-military leadership. Their idea of rest was still rooted in geo-political goals. But the author reminded them (and us) that God's rest existed from the foundation of the world, and we can enter that rest with Him. Therefore, some aspects of God's rest would never be satisfied by Canaan's conquest.

³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, 'As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,' although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.' ⁵ And again in this passage he said, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" Hebrews 4:3-5

We've covered the fact that belief is the ticket to His rest. Look at verse four. The roots of God's rest takes us back to the beginning.

“² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” Genesis 2:2-3

There are three things that make the seventh day unique from the first six.

- The LORD rested and did no creating work.
- The LORD blessed the seventh day, making it holy.
- There is no end. It doesn't conclude with, and there was evening and morning, the seventh day.

The LORD rested. There's a fair question to ask about the nature of His rest. Does this mean the LORD did absolutely nothing on the seventh day? Did He kick back, put His feet up, and refuse to take calls all day? What you think about this affects you down the line in how you practice Sabbath. The answer is actually in the verses. Twice it says he rested from, all His work He had done. So, the answer is He rested from creating. All the stuff He had been doing for the last six days, He ceased doing them on the seventh. He didn't stop holding all of creation together. He didn't stop listening to His creations ask Him questions, nor did He stop answering their questions until the seventh day was over. But what He had been doing for six days, He stopped. His creative work was complete.

The LORD blessed. He didn't do this to any other day. He set the seventh day apart by blessing it, thus, making it holy. This is huge, and it became a central command given in the Ten Commandments. It wasn't just the LORD's rest, but it was His blessing on the seventh day that made it holy. You can take a day off and do nothing, and there be nothing holy about it. But the LORD blessed His "day off," making it holy, and commands us to observe a Sabbath day every week. No other day of the week received His blessing. No other day of the week was set apart as a holy day. Only the seventh day. This need not become a discussion about working on Sundays or going to church on Saturdays, or anything of the sort. Jesus is the LORD of the Sabbath, and because by the indwelling Holy Spirit, He lives through me, there is room for discussion about how we practice Sabbath under the New Covenant. But what is important is that the LORD expects us to enter the seventh-day rest that He established, both in a here-and-now way and in a completely fulfilled way when Christ returns.

There is no end. This is the most exciting part. When we enter into His rest, we enter into an unending rest. Don't let that thought terminate on things like work. Our experience of life in a cursed world is that our work never ends. You can weed the garden, and for a couple of weeks, you may be able to rest from that. But eventually, the weeds return, and you'll have to do it all over again. Whatever it is that needs repair, remodeling, reconstruction, eventually, it needs it all over again because nothing in a broken world remains fixed. Nothing remains clean. Nothing remains in a functioning state forever. Everything dies, everything atrophies, all things tend toward a state of disorder and disrepair unless you do something to stave off that unrelenting march toward rust and ruin. Yet, here we have a promise of unending rest.

Q HOW DO WE WALK IN AN UNENDING REST WHEN NOTHING IN THIS WORLD REMAINS FIXED?

Hopefully, you know by now that the answer is *belief*. If that seems too simple, don't be surprised. The word of the cross is foolishness to men, but it is the power of God unto salvation - HIS REST - for those who believe. Let's continue.

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, 'Today,' saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

'Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.'

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." Hebrews 4:6-10

When is the best time to enter His rest? Always today! Any time you have a moment of clarity, where the gospel and your need for Jesus weigh upon your soul, that is the best time to respond. Don't harden your heart and suppress the truth that the Holy Spirit is making clear. That's what the author meant when he said that it remains for some to enter it. God isn't finished building His family. He puts the knife to the very heart of Jewish thought. Joshua's work was incomplete, and, therefore, could not be the promised rest for God's people. There is a Sabbath - seventh-day - rest for God's people that has nothing to do with geo-political power. It's an unending rest that begins now, for all who believe, as a rest for our souls, and will culminate with an eternal whole-being-rest on a new heaven and new earth.

THE ONLY STRIVING THAT MATTERS

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Hebrews 4:11-13

Here's another of those pastoral, *let us*, admonitions. The author includes himself. Together, we must strive to enter that rest. As we wind down, let's draw a contrast between this and Psalm 46:10 and Luke 14:24.

“¹⁰ Stop striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted on the earth.” Psalm 46:10 (NASB)

“²⁴ Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” Luke 13:24

Q WHICH IS IT? ARE WE TO STRIVE OR CEASE STRIVING? WHAT MIGHT BE THE DIFFERENCE IN THESE VERSES?

Imagine you're climbing a mountain because you were told at the summit is a treasure beyond your wildest dreams. However, there's a catch. Once you reach the summit, there's no way to go back down without a parachute. Fortunately, a parachute is included with the treasure. The climb is arduous and filled with peril. You nearly fall several times. Finally, you can see the summit is within grasp. You muster your strength and push through your exhaustion. When you get to the summit, you look around, and to your shock and frustration, there's no treasure, and also, no parachute. You are stuck, and you know that there's no way to climb back down.

As you sit there, dismayed, you start looking around at the landscape. It's a landscape of mountains, just like the one you're on, as far as the eye can see in all directions. Then you notice that not too far away, on a very similar mountain summit, there's an oasis. It's the only mountain out of the several dozen that you can see that has such a place. You get out your binoculars, and your heart sinks. The treasure is on THAT peak, parachute and all! You spent yourself climbing the wrong mountain.

STRIVE to climb the right mountain! It's paradoxical, but we are to strive to make sure that we are entering His rest. The Greek word for strive means *to be zealous, to be diligent*. In other words, there's a kind of zealous, diligent work that one should engage with, which helps us know we are entering His rest. The author has linked the veracity of our faith to whether we've entered His rest! Therefore, fight for His rest! Strive to enter it!

Q HAVE YOU EVER WORKED HARD FOR SOMETHING THAT ENDED UP BEING AN EMPTY MIRAGE?

FINAL THOUGHTS

What is that work? Unsurprisingly, it's knowing the Word. The author said, "FOR the word of God..." That is the same as saying, "because the word of God." So put it all together. Strive to enter His rest, for the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword.

Hebrews 4:12 is one of the top ten quoted verses of Scripture by most evangelicals because, broadly speaking, we have a high regard for the Word. Because it's quoted so much, it's often applied to contexts that the author didn't have in mind. Remember: what is the topic? God's rest. If



He Gets Us

HEBREWS 4:14-16

Hopefully that simple phrase hasn't been trademarked. Despite how "He gets us" is being used by the current movement, *He Gets Us*, it's actually appropriate for our conversation today. While three verses may seem like a small portion to devote an entire lesson, there will be plenty to discuss.

"¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:14-16

YOU ARE NAKED!

Verse fourteen, begins the discussion of Christ's high priestly role in earnest. Recall, though, that as a sermon/letter, there is a flow of thought at work. This isn't a clean break where he begins a completely different subject. This is intimately connected to his prior thoughts. Look back to verse thirteen to connect the dots.

"¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Hebrews 4:13

Here's what we have. This verse serves as the **weight**. There is nothing hidden from the LORD. Every thought, every motive, and every intention is visible to Him. Those thoughts that you don't tell anyone about are as good as said out loud. You stand before the LORD completely stripped of all privacy. This is why the author used the image of being naked before Him.



Horizontal lines for writing notes.

Americans value privacy... in theory. All humans probably value some level of privacy, despite how we seem to give it away willy-nilly online. It's oxymoronic to get on social media and complain of an invasion of privacy. Big Brother/Big Tech knows you better than you know yourself because you've been feeding them behavior data for over a decade now. Pairing your data with a probability algorithm you become extremely predictable. It's why Amazon always knows what you're likely to enjoy or purchase or want to read or want to listen to... etc.

Some may imagine that there's a human being on the other end of the line listening. But all it is is a computer algorithm that is really good at making predictions. And those predictions don't go to a human being. It's all handled by computers. Many are upset about this and it's not even real intelligence that's causing our paranoia. It's artificial. It's cold and calculating, unfeeling and uncaring. It couldn't care less if you actually click that clickbait. It only responds to your response one way or another. There's nothing malevolent in the algorithm. It's just a mirror of your online choices.

What about when real intelligence knows things about you? You've probably been exposed to or been a victim of gossip. Sometimes gossip is true, but often it's a distorted version of the truth, rife with exaggerations. Other times gossip is simply untrue, which is slander. But let's just say some accurate things that you wanted to be kept private become public knowledge. Depending on the nature of those things, you may be angry, embarrassed, or perhaps even ashamed. Regardless, though, you feel violated because somewhere along the line, there was a violation of trust.

We value privacy. Do you feel the weight of this? Perhaps as you read this, some frustrations came to mind; frustrations with privacy online, privacy offline, and violations of trust among friends, all create callouses that jade our worldview just a little.

The bad news is worse than you could ever imagine. The LORD of the universe knows everything you've ever said, done, or thought. You stand before Him so utterly naked that even your best, most altruistic thoughts will be uncovered as selfishly motivated and condemning. It's a weight that you can never lift from yourself because you don't understand or perceive the depth of how broken and sinful you truly are.

Q HOW SHOULD KNOWING YOU HAVE NO PRIVACY BEFORE THE LORD AFFECT YOUR DAILY DECISIONS?

THE GOOD NEWS

"¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Hebrew 4:14

We have, in Jesus, a great high priest. Jesus, the Son of God, intercedes for us. Look ahead in Hebrews.

“²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” Hebrews 7:25

It should be clear that we have a great high priest in Christ who always lives to intercede for those who draw near to God through Him. This is why the ascension is so important. His ascension wasn't merely a return to heaven to hang out until the Father tells Him to go back. His ascension was to a continuing work of high priestly intercession for everyone who belongs to the Father, through Him. His ascension is what the author meant by saying he passed through the heavens. He ascended to the right hand of the Father, where He intercedes for us. His ascension may be called his high priestly entrance into the heavenly Holy of Holies. And there He will remain until His intercessions are complete.

Q HOW DOES THIS CONNECT WITH JESUS SAYING IT WOULD BE BETTER FOR HIM TO GO AWAY AND SEND THE HOLY SPIRIT (JOHN 16:7)?

Verse fourteen contains the fact of His high priestly role, but not an explanation. Verse fifteen offers why it is good news.

“¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Hebrews 4:15

In one regard, this isn't unique. Hebrews 5:1-2 reveals that all priests under the Law of Moses shared these same qualities. In part, all high priests are chosen because they can sympathize with human weaknesses. Let this remind you that Jesus Christ is completely human. He must be completely human to qualify to be our high priest. A high priest can't be less than completely human, otherwise, he wouldn't be able to completely sympathize.

The matter that separates Jesus from all other high priests is His sinlessness. He was tempted in every way that we are tempted. Now, please don't apply a rubric to that statement that the author didn't have in mind. If you're wondering whether Jesus was tempted to smoke weed, probably not. Was Jesus tempted to knock over mailboxes? No. These are modern conventions that didn't exist in the first-century middle east. Think of it in broader categories. Was Jesus tempted to rely on something other than the LORD for peace and calm? Yes. Was Jesus tempted to destroy someone else's personal property out of anger, or mischievousness? Yes.

He was tempted in every way and did not sin. Do you understand the depth of that? Nevermind the sins we commit with our words and actions. Jesus never sinned in thought either. There may be very occasional days where with our words and actions, we somehow squeak by with a perfect score, but never have our thoughts and motives achieved that perfect score.

Jesus achieved that perfect thought-motive score every day of His earthly life. In every way, He never failed.

Q HOW CAN JESUS TRULY SYMPATHIZE WITH US IF HE HAS NEVER SINNED?

We often take comfort in that, though we sin, we're not alone in it. The fact that everyone sins levels the field for us and gives us a sense that our sins don't make us worse than the next guy because he sins too. So, we often turn to others for sympathy because there's a camaraderie to be found with others who have failed in similar ways. They understand, and so offer mercy and grace to your failures with the same things.

There's nothing wrong with that, but it's also completely wrong if this is where it stops. The mercy and grace you need doesn't come from other people with similar failures and struggles. They aren't the one to whom you'll give your final account. You need a greater sympathy. You need divine sympathy. Christ can and does sympathize with you because though He never sinned, He gets why you failed. He understands the urge to do what you did. He also understands that, unlike Him, you aren't fully divine. He is completely human and completely God, while you and I are merely human, lacking the capacity to always successfully resist sin in word, action, and thought at all times.

Q SINCE JESUS WAS FULLY GOD, DID HIS TEMPTATIONS MEAN ANYTHING SINCE THERE WAS NEVER ANY REAL DANGER OF FAILURE?

The question misses the point. It assumes that the risk of failure was somehow a critical component of Christ's mission. The purpose of His humanity has more to do with His exaltation as the Son of Man so that He could assume the responsibilities of the final and ultimate high priest. Remember 2:10?

"¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." Hebrews 2:10

Jesus experienced the power of temptation as a human because, as God, He is untemptable. Remember James 1:13?

"¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." James 1:13

To serve as our high priest, He had to become human and experience the power of temptation Himself, so that He can sympathize with us. He had to take on a real human body and experience hunger, thirst, sexual desire, loneliness, and anger, among many other things, through the filter of flesh. Christ received on-the-job experience through His humanity, which qualified Him to be our forever high priest!

Isn't failure part of being human? Yes, but it doesn't matter in the way you might think. Adam was one hundred percent human before his fall. We needed a fully human Savior who wouldn't fail. Jesus, the God-man, came to succeed where Adam failed. He took on one hundred percent hu-

manity, like Adam, but was also one hundred percent God, unlike Adam. His incarnation was the plan all along. Adam's failure ruined humanity. Christ's success made a way for ruined humanity to be redeemed and once again enter the Father's rest. Without His perfect righteousness applied to us, we would remain in the ruin of Adam.

Indeed, being human means ruin for us. But for Jesus, becoming human meant redemption for the ruined. His perfection doesn't make him less human, instead it made Him what the LORD meant for humanity to be all along.

Q IN YOUR MIND, DOES CHRIST'S PERFECT HUMANITY MAKE HIM MORE OR LESS APPROACHABLE? WHY?

DRAW NEAR WITH CONFIDENCE

"¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:16

If verse thirteen is the weight, verse sixteen is the promise, because of verses fourteen and fifteen. The author includes himself. Let us do this together. Naked as we are, fully exposed, with every thought, every intention of the heart, and every motive laid bare, let us draw near to the throne of grace with confidence. What confidence? Confidence that in Christ, we have a high priest who is not ashamed to call us brothers because He gets us. He sympathizes with us in our weakness because He understands why we fail. And though we approach the throne of grace naked and exposed, we will receive mercy and grace.



What is that mercy and grace? The mercy and grace we need is given when we come in confidence, with no pretense, and repent. From the macro point of view, we are forgiven and adopted into His family, and nothing can separate us from the Father's love. However, in the micro sense of the daily grind of life, we have a relationship to cultivate. We follow Him, and when we grieve the Holy Spirit with our sins, we repent and renew fellowship with Him. That daily repentance and renewal is what the apostle John had in mind.

"⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:7-9

Q HAVE YOU EVER WRESTLED WITH THE CONCEPT OF DAILY FORGIVENESS WHEN WE ARE ALSO COMPLETELY FORGIVEN THE MOMENT WE ARE BORN AGAIN?

FINAL THOUGHTS

The importance of the daily discipline of entering His presence with confidence to receive mercy and grace when we repent cannot be overstated. When we do this, we enter His rest every day. Jesus intercedes for us as our high priest. He prays the Father's will for us. The Holy Spirit works out those prayers in us in real-time as the member of the Godhead who resides within us. The Father welcomes us to come as we are to His throne, naked as we are. And if we walk in the light, we will find rest for our souls every day.

This is the *why* of Christ's high priesthood. *He gets us*. Therefore, we can come, confidently, to the Father, in repentance, to receive the mercy and grace that renews us every day and gives us the rest Jesus promised.

Q IN VIEW OF HOW WE ENTER HIS REST, WHAT KIND OF SPIRITUAL REFORMATION DOES YOUR LIFE REQUIRE?



II



High Priests

HEBREWS 5:1-10

Unit one ended explaining the *why* of Christ's priesthood. Now begins the lengthy discussion of the *how*. How is Jesus Christ our high priest? Although there will be a break in this discussion in the last half of chapter five and most of chapter six, the high priest discussion doesn't cease until the end of chapter nine. In light of that, prepare yourself for some deeper content. You don't hear or see much of the content from here to chapter eight being quoted in social media memes and pop-Christian things. For that matter, you don't hear a lot of preaching about it either because we Gentile believers don't have strong categories for high priests and Melchizedek and other such things. But there's treasure in these deep waters, so let's tread them together.

"¹ For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was." Hebrews 5:1-4

AARON APPOINTED

The priests described here are Old Covenant priests, prescribed in the law of Moses. These men were selected by God. But the focus here narrows down to Aaron. For the Mosaic covenant, Aaron was the first high priest chosen to serve before the LORD for Israel. He and his descendants would have a monopoly on the high priesthood. While the tribe of Levi, in general, was set apart as the priestly tribe, only Aaron and his descendants would be high priests (Exodus 28:1). So let's ask the question: why Aaron?

If you track Aaron's life through the Torah, he might be the last person you'd think the LORD would assign as high priest. If you recall, it was Aaron who made the golden calf and led the Israelites into idolatry!

"¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'" Exodus 32:1

The LORD knew this would happen. Yet, he chose Aaron. In fact, you could argue that He chose Aaron way before he knew what God doing. Aaron wasn't seeking an appointment to do anything. The LORD simply chose him.

"¹⁴ Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, 'Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.'" Exodus 4:14

Moses was afraid because he was slow when he spoke. Some think that meant he stuttered. Regardless, at that moment, the LORD chose Aaron to be Moses' spokesperson. Why not choose someone who would be a better leader? Why not choose a man who was closer to the LORD? Why not a more faithful man?

Q HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY THE LORD CHOSE YOU?

The answer lies in verse two.

"² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness." Hebrews 5:2

God doesn't choose qualified people. He chooses people He can qualify. Friends, we must rid ourselves of this notion that to serve we must have our ducks in a row. Aaron committed one of the biggest failures of his life after he was appointed high priest. Did the LORD remove him from his position? Did God pick a different family to be the line of high priests? Not at all. He knew what He was getting when He appointed Aaron. He knew what kind of priests Aaron's descendants would be. God designed this whole priest thing to be beset with weakness so that when the weak need ministry, they can help. This is one of the primary reasons the LORD had to become human. The Son of Man had to experience and, therefore, relate to human weakness. Let's make this practical.

Weakness is gain. If you never admit weakness, you're losing. If you don't see your weaknesses, you're blind. If you hide your weaknesses, you're fearful. The high priest periodically had to make sacrifices for his own sins just like he did for everyone else. Whether or not he addressed them out loud, there would come a day of public acknowledgment that he too was a sinner beset with weaknesses. And guess what. If he failed to deal

with his own sins, he disqualified himself from serving as a high priest. Likewise, for us, the way up is down. We will never get anywhere in our spiritual lives if we bury, hide, or fail to acknowledge our besetting weaknesses.

Q WHAT IS YOUR MOST DIFFICULT OBSTACLE WHEN IT COMES TO CONFESSION OF YOUR WEAKNESSES?

JESUS APPOINTED

“5 So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; 6 as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.’” Hebrews 5:5-6

In some ways we’ve already dipped in and out of this subject a few times. In Hebrews chapter one we looked into Christ’s humility. Then again when we studied Hebrews 2:5-18. Here, the author brought it up again. Christ did not exalt himself to be made high priest, but was appointed. He waited for the Father’s appointment. He didn’t presume to take the role for Himself, even though He was God. The author again quoted Psalm 2:7 and combined it with Psalm 110:4 to provide support for his claim.

Before we look at Melchizedek, there’s a principle at work here that every believer would do well to recognize. Christ waited for His appointment. We would do well to do as He did. The line between healthy aspiration and selfish-ambition can get hazy. Some people see every ministry position they obtain as a stepping stone to something bigger. They pursue advancement. They exalt themselves and grasp at promotion. Often, they end up crashing. It’s not always a moral failure, though sometimes it is. Many times they hit a ministry ceiling of sorts. Maybe they didn’t know the right people or live in the right area. Or perhaps they went as far as their personality, skill, and education could take them. Whatever the reason, they cannot or do not move upward because they’ve hit their ceiling. Then from boredom, they leave the ministry and find a different ladder to climb where they can advance upward.

Contrast that with those who wait upon the LORD. They wait for His appointment. They wait for Him to advance. They wait for Him to move. There is a verse about this.

“³¹ but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31

Note it doesn’t say *those who plan their next move shall renew their strength*. Renewal is in the waiting, not the moving. Waiting on the LORD gives us

strength for what is in front of us. Ministers who served in one place for decades learned the secret of waiting on the LORD. They renewed their strength daily to keep serving until He determined the next move.

Q HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED BURNOUT? HOW MUCH BURNOUT HAPPENS BECAUSE WE'RE DOING ALL THE PLANNING INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR THE LORD?

WHY MELCHIZEDEK?

One hurdle that exists for Christ's priesthood is that He is from the tribe of Judah. God established the tribe of Levi as the priests, not Judah.

⁸ At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD to stand before the LORD to minister to him and to bless in his name, to this day. ⁹ Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The LORD is his inheritance, as the LORD your God said to him." Deuteronomy 10:8-9

Notice, the LORD set Levi apart. They did not choose their priesthood, but the LORD appointed them. In the case of Jesus, the LORD appointed Him as high priest, but to get around the whole Levite matter, He sourced a different lineage: Melchizedek. Who is Melchizedek? He's mentioned briefly and only twice in the Old Testament, one of those in Psalm 110:4 which the author quoted. All other references are in this letter to the Hebrews.

¹⁷ After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). ¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) ¹⁹ And he blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; ²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him a tenth of everything." Genesis 14:17-20

Melchizedek's mention in Genesis is almost forgettable. Yet, he's noteworthy for a few reasons.

- First, he is the evidence that the LORD had human priests prior to the Law of Moses.
- Second, Abraham gave him a tenth of everything, evidence that the concept of a tithe also predated the Law and showing that Abram recognized him as the LORD's priest.
- Third, he was both king and priest of Salem. Salem is an early name for the city of Jerusalem. Salem means *peaceful* or *peace*. Melchizedek was both the king and priest of peace.

There is much more to say about this, but we'll address it when we arrive at chapter seven. But, based on this, The LORD declares Melchizedek the lineage of Christ's priesthood, eliminating the need for Him to be a descendant of Aaron. Like Melchizedek, Christ is both king and high priest. Interestingly, you get a glimpse of the transition to king-priest with King David. Look at what David did.

"¹² And it was told King David, 'The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.' So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. ¹³ And when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. ¹⁴ And David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁵ So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn." 2 Samuel 6:12-15

Two things. First, David was making sacrifices. Second, he's wearing a linen ephod. The linen ephod was a simple garment worn by the priests. Even if David himself wasn't making the sacrifices himself, he was dressing himself in a garment commonly worn by priests. It's possible that David was doing more than just overseeing the sacrifices. The king was performing priestly duties as they entered Jerusalem, the city of David.

It all seems to tie together nicely. Melchizedek, king and priest of Salem, David, king of Jerusalem doing priestly things, and Jesus, a descendant of David, King of kings, declared a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Q HAVE YOU EVER FELT CALLED BY THE LORD TO A PLACE OR A MINISTRY? WHAT GAVE YOU CONFIDENCE TO PURSUE IT?

CHRIST'S PRIESTLY WORK

"⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 5:7-10

Because we covered this matter previously, we won't redo how Christ was perfected through his suffering. Let's zoom in on His priestly work. His intercessory work began in the days of His flesh. It's interesting how the author highlighted the emotional nature of Christ's intercession. Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. While this certainly has the garden of Gethsemane in mind, the author has the larger scope of Christ's entire ministry. Jesus did not have a boring prayer life! While it's true that the volume of our prayers isn't the point, it is good to know that Christ's prayers had a direct connection with His feelings.

He didn't just pray rote, boring, dispassionate prayers. He prayed in the Spirit! He prayed from His heart! He poured Himself out in intercession for others!

His priestly work is directly connected to the LORD's heart for us. He loves us. The Father loves us. If we love Jesus, they make their home with us through the Holy Spirit, and Jesus will manifest Himself to us. And His prayers for us continue, still full of deep compassion.

Q HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED THAT JESUS IS PASSIONATELY PRAYING FOR YOU IN THE PRESENT? HOW DOES THAT AFFECT YOUR DEVOTION TO HIM?

FINAL THOUGHTS

One last thing. He was heard because of His reverence. That's interesting. It wasn't because He is the Son of God. It was because He revered His Father. What does reverence mean? Reverence means *to give honor*. Christ honored the Father through His obedience, of which verses 8-9 speak. His reverence inclined the Father to hear Him. How that works when you're in a co-equal, co-eternal, co-powerful Trinity, is beyond human comprehension, but trinitarian mechanics is not the point. The point is relationship. The Father-Son relationship at work between Jesus and the Father is beautiful. The Father's love for us is manifested to us through Christ. Christ's love for the Father manifested in obedience to His plan for redemption. The Father loves the Son and raises Him from the dead so that we can receive the Father's love by faith in Son. The Holy Spirit fills us and serves as the divine Person who transforms us, grants us access to the Father through Christ, and works out the intercessions of Christ for us.

The relational aspects of the whole thing are mind-blowing. It's a divine tapestry of love, mutual submission, reverence, and glory. And Jesus welcomes us into this divine love triangle.

Q HOW DO CHRIST'S INTERCESSORY PRAYERS FIND EXPRESSION IN YOUR LIFE?



A Pause for Rebuke

HEBREWS 5:11-6:3

Have you ever began explaining something to someone, but then realized that you're talking over their head? They were looking at you and appeared to be listening, but you could see in their glazed eyes that you lost them. What did you do? Did you just keep going hoping they would catch on, or did you stop and ask if they were still engaged?

This particular passage of Hebrews begins a pause in the high priest discussion. It's a pause for rebuke. The author stopped his discussion of Christ as high priest in its tracks, as if he suddenly remembered how immature they were. However, he didn't ask them if they were still tracking with him or if they were understanding all the truth he was teaching. It wasn't a gentle inquiry to ensure their comprehension. The author simply began a sharp rebuke. That's where we're starting.

Q WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU RECEIVED A STERN REBUKE?

DULL OF HEARING

¹¹ About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food," Hebrews 5:11-12

First thing: notice the plural we. Way back in the beginning of this study we discussed how Hebrews may be a sermon that was later circulated as a letter. Who is the we? If it was a sermon, the *we* was likely a reference to the plurality of elders present within the church where this was first preached. The elders agreed on this teaching and the rebuke that the author delivered in the following verses.

Indeed they do have much to say on the subject of Christ's high priesthood. After this rebuke concluded the author continued this topic for quite

a while. It's a subject that hard to explain to people who aren't maturing in their faith. The author told them they were dull of hearing. That's a strong accusation and it echoes back to 4:2: "...because they were not united in faith with those who listened." The implication is this: authentic believers listen, and because they listen, they grow.

"²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." John 10:27-28

It isn't out of bounds to say that the dull of hearing are also possibly the apostate who never believed. If you think that may be too strong, hang on because this rebuke is only going to get stronger.

Q DO ALL BELIEVERS SUFFER FROM DEGREES OF SPIRITUAL HEARING IMPAIRMENT? WHY OR WHY NOT? IF SO, WHAT IS THE REMEDY?

Verse twelve gives the impression that the author had journeyed with his hearers/readers for a considerable time. He had personal knowledge about how long they had been professing their faith in Christ. He clearly wasn't satisfied with their lack of understanding and growth: *by this time you ought to be teachers*. He chastised them for needing constant remedial teaching on the basics of the faith.

Toward the end, we'll look at a list of elementary teachings. For the moment, let's say this. The work of an elder is to feed and tend the sheep. Anytime someone stands before the body of Christ to teach or preach, there are three categories of people listening: saved, lost, and deceived. Your content should have threads for all three.

- Feed the sheep. All preaching should give the sheep something spiritually nourishing. This is the primary function of elders. What did Jesus tell Peter three times? *Feed my sheep*.
- Preaching should also fish for the lost. Call the lost to a wonderful Savior. The lost should have the secrets of their hearts exposed by preaching. For sure, that's a work of the Holy Spirit, but it's not a passive matter for the preacher. Consider how your content calls the lost to salvation, and let the Spirit lead you.
- And finally, preaching should expose the apostate. Billy Graham once said that he believed up to fifty percent of the visible church isn't really saved. These are precisely who the author of Hebrews took aim at in his rebuke.

Weave those three together and thread the needle, which is the cross of Christ. All preaching needs to plow a row straight to Jesus. The saint, the sinner, and the apostate need to see the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world before any change can happen. The author was trying to do this, but he also realized his audience wasn't mature enough for the beautiful truths he hoped to communicate. He suspected by their lack of growth that some of his people were apostate. *They were dull of hearing*.

Q SOMETIMES THE SHEEP WON'T LISTEN, AND OTHER TIMES THE SHEPHERD ISN'T FEEDING WELL. BOTH ARE A PROBLEM. WHICH HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED?

MILK AND SOLID FOOD

"^{12b} You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." Hebrews 5:12b-14

Let's be clear: milk isn't a bad thing. Peter encouraged his readers about spiritual milk.

"² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" 1 Peter 2:2

However, both Peter and the author of Hebrews speak of milk as healthy for the young in faith. New believers need the pure spiritual milk of the Word. Every new believer should be nourished with the elementary beliefs of our faith. But eventually every believer should wean themselves from milk and start consuming solid food. The solid foods of the Word include deeper subjects, such as the high priesthood of Christ, spiritual warfare, identity in Christ, and discerning of spirits, among many others.

The author linked milk to a lack of skill in God's Word. That's not shameful if you're a new believer, but it is of great concern for believers who've professed faith for years. You can't really put a precise timeframe on spiritual infancy, but for the sake of argument, let's say two years. If after two years of professing faith you are still unskilled in the Word, needing milk and unable to digest solid spiritual food, showing no signs of growth, the author of Hebrews places you in the category of *possibly apostate*. That's a serious matter. To be apostate is akin to being spiritually stillborn. You look Christian, but you're still dead.

Q DO PETER'S AND PAUL'S ADMONITIONS TO TEST OURSELVES MAKE MORE SENSE IN LIGHT OF THE SERIOUSNESS OF APOSTASY?

The evidence that you are maturing and are able to consume solid food is that your powers of discernment are getting sharper (v 14). Increasingly, the Word helps you discern the spirits and distinguish between what's good and evil. In very practical terms, you get better at applying godly wisdom to situations that don't have a direct analog in the Scriptures. You can see supposed gray areas for what they really are. You also get better at understanding nuance. Not every situation has one-size-fits-all answers. Also, you have begun identifying spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit manifests in your life and use them with increasing effectiveness.

The importance of this cannot be overstated. In our desire to please people, we lower the bar so that others don't feel lesser. Who are we to lower the bar that God's Word so clearly gives? The author of Hebrews along with every other New Testament author illustrates unambiguously that

the fruit of genuine faith manifests in spiritual growth. Of course we struggle, but even in struggle growth happens. We don't shrink back in defeat when we stumble. We get up, we learn, and we grow. Where there's no growth, there's no life.

Q WHAT SIN HAS THE WORD OF GOD UNCOVERED THAT YOU HAVE JUSTIFIED WITH LESSER STANDARDS?

ELEMENTARY DOCTRINES

"¹ Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits." Hebrews 6:1-3

Despite his suspicions that some of the people were apostate, the author turned his focus upward, hoping for better things. He told his hearers/readers that it was time to grow up. It was time to stop circling around the same elementary teachings. What are these teachings?

- Repentance from dead works and faith
- Washings (baptisms)
- Laying on of Hands
- The Resurrection of the Dead
- Eternal Judgment

The author didn't take time to explain these doctrines, but just offered a list that his hearers/readers would've recognized. These were the basic doctrines that kept requiring a redo. Two thousand years ago he said let us not lay again a foundation of these things. It's not within the scope of this study to examine each one of these doctrines, but instead to drive home the point that the author was making: *get off the milk and grow up.*

Now, when the author said, let us leave, and, not laying again a foundation, he did not mean we never speak of these things again. We are supposed to remind ourselves of these truths with some regularity. The author's point is that a foundation, once laid, is supposed to be built upon, not laid again and again. Connected with what he wrote at the end of chapter five, people who fail to understand the elementary doctrines after they've been clearly taught again and again, probably haven't been born again because...

"¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."
1 Corinthians 2:14

Q BY THE STANDARDS OF THE HEBREWS AUTHOR, WHERE DO YOU STAND? DO YOU STILL NEED MILK, OR CAN YOU RECEIVE SOLID FOOD?



The Impossible & God's Promises

HEBREWS 6:4-20

We have arrived at this famed passage. Hebrews 6:4-6 are three of the most well-known, well-debated verses in the entire New Testament. Broadly, there are two camps of people who argue over these verses. In one corner you have those who believe salvation is eternally secure and cannot be lost or forfeited. In the other corner are those who believe the opposite and appeal to these verses as some of their strongest support.

Both groups come to the table with presuppositions, and typically apply those presuppositions to the text instead of allowing the text to inform their presuppositions. Not all presuppositions are bad, but if you're using them to shoehorn meaning into a passage that isn't there, then you're in the wrong.

We will not be shoehorning. If you've been participating in this study since the beginning, you are well-prepared to engage with this text. If you interpret this passage independent of the content that came before it, you'll likely go astray. Before we go verse by verse, let's do some ground-work.

Q HAVE YOU EVER ENGAGED IN A DISCUSSION ABOUT THIS PASSAGE? WHAT WAS YOUR CONCLUSION?

AN INFORMED APPROACH

What was the original problem? It is well established by now that these Hebrew believers were tempted to return to the observances of the Law. The author wasn't specific about how exactly this manifested, but in Paul's letters, typically this problem centered around returning to the Law for a sanctifying righteousness. In other words, Jesus saved them, but now to remain saved they sought to obey the Law (Galatians 3:1-6). The author of Hebrews linked this kind of unbelief to apostasy. And as we've stated already, apostasy demonstrates you never were saved in the first place. Apostates are not united in faith with those who listen (4:2)!

How should we apply this in the present? It's likely that you aren't Jewish. The church is far more Gentile than Hebrew at this point in history. Therefore, you probably aren't looking to obey the Law as a means of remaining saved. However, that doesn't mean that you aren't relying on something other than Christ for your sanctification in the faith. Church denominations abound in man-made regulations that have been added on to faith in Christ for sanctifying righteousness. Let's make this simple: Jesus plus anything is always a disaster and can produce apostates. The warning for them is applicable to us: Jesus saves you and Jesus sanctifies you. Dependence upon anything else for sanctification - to use a football metaphor - is a false start.

This is about belief, not morality. The author wasn't chastising his hearers/readers for living immoral lives. To the contrary, they were seeking to obey the Law, so their morality wasn't in question. Belief is what is at stake here, not sinful living. What they believed revealed their apostasy, not how they lived. This was the author's clear aim.

Doesn't belief produce action? In some regard, even the licentious believer who takes advantage of God's grace has a belief problem, but we should be careful to keep things in order. Belief is always first. If Abraham believed, and it was counted to him as righteousness, then belief is the horse and action is the cart, always. Behavior is the metric by which we measure our growth (or lack of), and belief is the metric by which we measure the mettle of our faith. Belief is the root, behavior is the fruit. This is part of the deception of apostasy. Apostates can look very saved by their actions, but by their belief, demonstrate that they're very lost.

None of this should be new to you. These are all things we've picked up along the way, and are now bringing to bear on this debated passage. With that said, let's break down these verses by asking a few questions.

"⁴ For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt." Hebrews 6:4-6

Q WHO IS BEING ADDRESSED?

The *who* is professing Hebrew believers who are stagnate in their faith and tempted to return to aspects of the Law for sanctification. Refer to 5:12-13.

They were of the community of God's people. They were enlightened to the Gospel, they shared in the Holy Spirit's activity, and tasted God's goodness. They have tasted and seen that the LORD is good. Why then were they turning back to the Law?

Q WHAT IS THE OUTCOME OF THEIR PROBLEM?

It is impossible for them to be brought back to repentance. What does that mean? Did they repent once, but not well enough? That's actually close. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, the apostle Paul made a distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. They apparently possessed some understanding that they needed to repent, and made some changes to their lives, but there was the missing element of belief. Repentance without genuine belief in Christ isn't much more than behavior modification. The author is concerned that some of them changed their behavior, but their belief remains unchanged.

Q WHY IS IT IMPOSSIBLE?

The impossibility of their repentance is because they have rendered Christ's crucifixion null and void. As long as they persisted in the false belief that the Law would sanctify them, they showed themselves apostate. They hadn't actually believed the truth! This was a wholesale rejection of Christ's work on the cross. The author said they effectively crucified the Son of God once again to their own harm and shame. Pursuing the Law for righteousness in addition to Christ's death and resurrection, is a complete rejection of His death and resurrection. In other words, you either have all of Christ, or you have none of Him.

The rest of the New Testament affirms the author of Hebrews. This is why Paul was so concerned for the Galatian believers. In response to the their propensity to return to the Law, he wrote:

"¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain."
Galatians 4:11

Peter reminded his readers that they were ransomed from the Old Covenant by Christ's blood, making those ways futile.

"¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold," 1 Peter 1:18

John declared that those who depart from the faith were never truly in the faith!

"¹⁹ They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." 1 John 2:19

The author was completely in step with the other New Testament authors. The professing believers of Hebrews 6:4-6 are apostates. They are of those who weren't united with those who listened (4:2).

Note, the severity of this matter. Religious apostates are effectively crucifying the Son of God all over again *to their own harm*. If indeed these professing Jewish believers were apostates, their unbelief essentially demands that Jesus should die again because the first death wasn't enough to make them righteous. Unbelief of this nature is harmful and we're about to see why.

HIS WORD ALWAYS ACCOMPLISHES SOMETHING

"⁷ For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned." Hebrews 6:7-8

These verses provide a metaphor that explains the meaning of 4-6. However, not everyone does well with metaphors, hence the disciples at times asked Jesus to explain in parables. Here's what we have.

- Land
- Rain
- Useful crops
- Thorns and thistles.

The author portrays the land as the church. The rain is the Word of God - specifically the Gospel. The rain falls on the land. This is the Word of God preached and taught to all in the church. Two kinds of harvest result. There are useful crops who receive a blessing from the LORD. These are the ones who hear the Word, cultivate their hearts, apply the Word, and God gives growth. But there's also a harvest of thorns and thistles. These are the apostates. They benefit from the rain, but they aren't useful. The author went for the jugular and said they're worthless and close to being cursed. This is the harmful aspect of their apostasy. The longer they persist in unbelief, the closer they creep toward being cursed and destined for the fire.

This has echoes of Christ's parable of the wheat and tares. Go read it if you have time (Matthew 13:24-30).

Without true belief and repentance, their end is to be burned. As it is for anyone who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven, an apostate's repentance is tied entirely to a complete embrace of Christ and a complete rejection of all other means of righteousness.

Q IS THERE A POINT OF NO RETURN FOR THOSE WHO PERSIST IN UNBELIEF?

The author's warnings against apostasy are heart-felt. It is a dangerous state of the heart. It rejects Christ's work as sufficient, it is harmful to the soul, and it nudges individuals toward a cursed state where you are destined for the fire. We must be diligent to examine and test our profession of faith against the Word of God to see if we are truly born again.

BETTER THINGS

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. ¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” Hebrews 6:9-12

The author’s pastoral heart emerged. He didn’t end his rebuke on a low note. He concluded it with hope. Note again, the *we*. The elders of their church all feel this way. They were hopeful that they would be heard and prove that these possible apostates weren’t apostate after all. At times, to get people to listen, a heavy rebuke is necessary. We all need an occasional shaking. The LORD sends people into our lives who will speak boldly and in a way that catches our hearts. They don’t share warm fuzzy feelings with us, but instead cold, hard truth that undeniably reveals our problems so that we can repent.

The author also noted that though they were dull of hearing, they had continued in their work of ministry to the saints. This is important. It’s easy to use a single measuring stick. Though the author zeroed in on their lack of understanding, knowledge isn’t the only way we measure the validity of our faith.

Q HAVE YOU EVER RECEIVED A HEAVY REBUKE FROM A FELLOW BELIEVER? HOW DID YOU RECEIVE IT?

However, Christian growth is a comprehensive growth of the whole person. *Show the same earnestness.* The author desired to see the whole church growing together in knowledge and practice which would lead to the full assurance of their faith.

Full assurance is affirmed by comprehensive growth. When stagnation persists either in our growth in the knowledge of Jesus, or in our obedience to His commands, you’ll begin to struggle with assurance of faith. Knowledge or works alone aren’t sufficient. It is the combined growth in knowledge and obedience that manifests the power of the Spirit as we walk in the light. This is the solution to apostasy. Repent and grow up into Him, cultivating a comprehensive growth in knowledge and practice.

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Ephesians 4:15-16

THE LORD'S DOUBLE PROMISE

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.' ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath," Hebrews 6:13-17

Why the callback to Abraham and how is it connected to the full assurance of our faith? The full assurance of our faith may be affirmed in our comprehensive growth into Christ, but it has deep roots. Those roots reach all the way back to God's promise! And what is that promise?

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.'" Genesis 22:15-18

There's something to consider here. God made this promise to Abraham multiple times before this moment (Genesis 12:2-3, 15:5-6). Isaac was the promised son, so this scene comes after the LORD commanded Abraham to sacrifice him - in seeming opposition to everything that the LORD had previously promised. If you know the story, Abraham followed through, and was about to plunge the knife into his promised son when the LORD stopped him.

This whole scene was a test to see if Abraham truly trusted in God's promises. So the LORD added an oath to His promise. "*By myself I have sworn.*" He promised to keep His promise. Why the double promise? Well, humanly speaking, Abraham had just endured the most difficult moment of his life, so the LORD took this oath for his reassurance. Did that mean His original promise wasn't good enough? By no means! But the LORD is full of compassion and recognized Abraham's need for reassurance.

Notice. The double promise isn't linked to anything except Abraham's belief. You might object and say that Abraham's obedience to sacrifice Isaac was a work, and therefore the LORD's promise was tied to Abraham's works. However, that's not how the author of Hebrews understood it. He made that clear later in chapter seven:

¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." Hebrews 7:19

Q HAVE YOU EVER HAD TO MAKE A DECISION WHERE FOLLOWING THE LORD SEEMED LIKE THE MOST CONTRADICTORY AND COUNTER-INTUITIVE PATH TO TAKE?

Abraham's works were *preceded* by faith in God. He wasn't sacrificing Isaac to get the LORD's favor. He had the LORD's favor and reasoned that because the LORD favored him, He would keep His promise by resurrecting Isaac from the dead. Do you see the difference? One point of view works and labors for favored status, and the other understands that favored status has already been given. The former is the position of a slave, the latter a son. Full assurance of faith is only available for sons. Slaves never have full assurance because all things are tied to how well they perform.

This was the lesson these Hebrew believers needed to grasp. Returning to the Law for sanctifying righteousness meant that you're still a slave. Why is this such a temptation? At the core of this desire to work for righteousness is a frail human weakness. We don't like being indebted. The thought that someone else's work grants me righteousness is an offensive idea. It nullifies us. It makes us feel as if we're unsuccessful or somehow unable and unworthy. Which is all true.

You are still a slave if you feel compelled to earn your keep. Sons know that their "*keep*" is kept by Christ alone. Sons obey out of gratitude. Slaves obey out of indebtedness. Sons understand their debt is a debt of love. Slaves see their debt as one of oughtness.

Abraham believed as a son. He knew he was already favored and lived accordingly. This is why he received righteousness. God's promise to keep his promise - His double promise - is where all of our assurance is rooted. He is doubly faithful to His sons.

"¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us." Hebrews 6:18

Q SEEING NOW THAT GOD'S DOUBLE PROMISE IS THE ROOT OF OUR ASSURANCE, HOW MUCH MORE ABSURD IS THE BELIEF THAT ANYONE CAN LOSE THEIR SALVATION?

FINAL THOUGHTS

"¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 6:19-20

With these verses, the author gently reopened his teaching about Christ's high priesthood. Within these verses stands another promise. The promise that we will see our God, face to face. The author says that the double promise of God is our sure and steadfast anchor for our souls, but then continues with a third promise. *Jesus, the Son of Man, has entered into the inner place behind the curtain as a forerunner.*

In the Tabernacle/Temple, the Ark of the Covenant was where God's manifest presence dwelled. It was in a room at the heart of the temple complex that was shut off with an enormous curtain. Only the high priest would enter that room, once a year, to offer blood atonement for the sins of the nation. Jesus, the Son of Man, our great High Priest has entered the presence of God on our behalf as a forerunner. It's vital to say *the Son of Man* (though the author did not) because it's important that He has entered as a human.

Why? Because as a forerunner, it means that He has gone first, and we will follow. And this is, if you will, the third promise in this text. Because He is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, we too are priests in the order of Melchizedek, and as priests, we too will enter the manifest presence of God, fully human, as Jesus is.

That is exciting!

Q DOES KNOWING THAT CHRIST HAS ENTERED GOD'S PRESENCE AS A FORERUNNER FOR US CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE?



Who is Melchizedek?

HEBREWS 7:1-10

We must spend time on this, and not just because it's the next passage. This subject is mired in conjecture, traditions, and sometimes plain ridiculous ideas. LORD willing, what we cover will bring clarity and simplicity to the man, the mystery, the legend, Melchizedek. Let's go.

"¹ For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. ³ He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever."
Hebrews 7:1-3

Apart from Hebrews, Melchizedek only appears twice in the rest of Scripture. First is the passage in Genesis where Abraham encounters him (Genesis 14:18-20). The second is Psalm 110:4, quoted earlier in Hebrews 5:6. By the time you arrive at the first century, Second Temple Judaism (STJ) had developed a spectrum of beliefs concerning Melchizedek. The author's description is quaint compared to what was circulating on the subject at the time.

Before we go any further, let's be clear about something. The author of Hebrews gave us a definition for Melchizedek that we can accept as accurate because of the divine inspiration of Scripture. However, the author wasn't all-inclusive in what he wrote. There are things behind the scenes that demonstrate the complexity of translation, which is why - hopefully - you appreciate the people who pour their lives into Hebrew and Greek translation. So let's answer three questions as best we can.

- What does Melchizedek mean?
- What did Melchizedek do?
- Who is the person of Melchizedek?

WHAT DOES MELCHIZEDEK MEAN?

The author of Hebrews provides a definition: *king of righteousness*. How did the author arrive at this? The name, Melchizedek, is composed of nouns next to each other. *Melchi* means *king* or *my king*. *Zedek* means *is righteous* or *righteousness*. So you either have *king of righteousness* or *my king is righteous*. Those two definitions differ only slightly, but it impacts things later as we go deeper.

Also, the name itself can be both a personal name or a title. Therefore, Melchizedek could have been an honorific title bestowed upon this man, but his personal name was never revealed. It seems that most scholars lean toward *king of righteousness* as the author of Hebrews did and that it was his personal name.

The deeper you dig, the trickier it gets. There are a few other translations of Melchizedek that would have been congruent with the ancient Hebrew and Semitic context in which he and Abraham lived. Zedek was also the name of a Semitic deity that would have been known to Abraham and Melchizedek. In that case, the name could have meant something entirely different. My king is Zedek would change the whole story.

This highlights an easy pitfall for Bible students. As you study, don't place too much emphasis on word studies. Language is a fluid matter. The Bible was written over the course of 1,500 years, which means the language Abraham and Melchizedek spoke wasn't the same Hebrew spoken by King David, much less by anyone living in the first century. Language changes quickly over time, and with that, the meanings of words. Word studies can be helpful, but they're just one facet of the jewel.

Q AS WE STUDY SCRIPTURE, WHAT OTHER METHODS SHOULD BE EMPLOYED IN ADDITION TO WORD STUDIES?

WHAT DID MELCHIZEDEK DO?

¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)" Genesis 14:18

This verse is loaded, so let's address one thing at a time. Melchizedek was the king of Salem. Salem was a Canaanite city in Abraham's day. The word *salem* is an English rendering of *shalem* which means *peaceful*. If you have any Hebrew exposure, you'll note that this is rooted in *shalom*, which means *peace*. This is why the author said he is the king of peace. This Canaanite city, Salem, will eventually be conquered by King David. In his day, it was called Jerusalem. Much ado has been made about this, which we'll get to shortly.

He was priest of God Most High (El Elyon). The book of Genesis makes very little of this fact except to state it. But as people who have the complete Word of God, the notion that God was appointing priests before giving the Law is a pretty big deal. Most of Scripture deals with the sons

of Levi, whom the LORD appointed as Israel's priests. Yet, here, hundreds of years before the Law was given, before Levi was born, there was one of the LORD's appointed priests, Melchizedek, in (Jeru)Salem no less.

Q WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR SOMEONE OR SOMETHING TO BE A TYPE OF SOMEONE OR SOMETHING THAT HASN'T HAPPENED YET?

This completes a picture for us. Melchizedek was a Priest/King. He is the first Priest/King mentioned in Scripture after Adam, whom (arguably) also held that role before his fall. This creates a parallel that we can trace from Melchizedek to King David to Jesus.

- Melchizedek was both Priest and King of Salem
- David was the King of Jerusalem who did priestly things (a subject that deserves its own lesson).
- Jesus is both High Priest and King of kings and sets His throne on David's throne in Jerusalem.

We'll deal a bit more with this in a moment.

Finally, he gave Abraham bread and wine. Many Christians interpret this as a foreshadowing of the LORD's Supper, which prepackages some pre-suppositions about the identity of the person of Melchizedek. We'll get to that in an orderly fashion momentarily. But on the face of things, to Abraham, these were simple provisions. Melchizedek provided a basic meal. That is the foundation of what's happening here. Anything else is something we read into the text, which may or may not be wrong. All examples of foreshadowing are interpretations read into a text, looking back in light of later events that unfolded.

Primarily, what Melchizedek does here is an act of generosity and blessing to Abraham and his men. Abraham's response was to give him a tenth of the spoils as an offering to the LORD.

WHO IS THE PERSON OF MELCHIZEDEK?

This is where things get weird. Some of that weirdness is because of verse three.

"³ He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever." Hebrews 7:3

The rest of the weirdness comes from STJ thought (not Scripture). Let's start with STJs. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that some STJ writings believed Melchizedek was divine. Some say Enoch, others say the archangel Michael, while others thought him to be the Son of Man in Daniel 7, making him the Messiah.

Christian traditions pick up the STJ speculations and range from him being a forerunner to Jesus to being a Christophany - a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. The belief that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate Jesus

possibly arose from Gnostic teachings around the 4th century. But, it must be noted that most of these speculations are just that - speculations. Some of them are more like imaginations than speculations. If you take all of the combined references to Melchizedek in the inspired Scriptures, you'll never conclude that he was Enoch, or the archangel Michael, or the angel of the LORD, or that he was even a divine figure of any sort.

What about Hebrews 7:3? First, don't cherry-pick the verse. Keep reading, and what do you find? A discussion about two priesthoods: Melchizedek's and Levi's. Levi's priesthood was based on *who's your daddy*. If you weren't a descendant of Levi, the Law didn't permit you to serve as a priest.

Now, look at verse three again: He is without father or mother or genealogy. The author isn't saying he didn't have parents; he's talking about Melchizedek's priesthood. His priesthood didn't depend on genealogy. *Who's your daddy* didn't matter. When the author said, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, he was referring to Melchizedek's priesthood, not his literal lifespan. So, *in that*, he resembled the Son of God, and his priesthood continues forever.

Q WHAT PROBLEMS DO WE ENCOUNTER WHEN WE GO BEYOND WHAT IS WRITTEN?

The word *resembled* is crucial. That indeed lets us know that Melchizedek was a forerunner to Christ. However, we should be clear. He was not Christ, just someone who resembled him. Now we can look at the things which foreshadowed the Messiah. He reigned in Salem - Jerusalem - which made him king of peace. His name meant king of righteousness. He brought out bread and wine to dine with Abraham, which clearly got a redo with Jesus the night before his crucifixion. Not only was he king, but he was also priest of God Most High, not based on genealogy, but on God's appointment. He was a king and priest at once, and in that, he foreshadowed Christ's Priest/King role.

Nothing within the Old Testament would lead us to conclude that Melchizedek was anything more than a mortal man, appointed by the LORD to be His priest in the city of Salem, where he was also king. On this side of history, we can see how he resembled the Messiah and served as a forerunner to His ministry. Anything about his personhood beyond the inspired Word is speculative. However, the author of Hebrews doesn't completely shut the door on the notion that Melchizedek is special. In verse eight he said, "*it is testified that he lives.*" This is a tricky statement which may indicate that the author believed Melchizedek is like Enoch who never died, but the LORD took him. The case remains open.

MELCHIZEDEK'S PRIESTHOOD

⁴ See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! ⁵ And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their

brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham.
⁶ But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸ In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. ⁹ One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.”
Hebrews 7:4-10

The author had a task before him. Remember, he was preaching/writing to believing Jews who were tempted to return to the Law for sanctifying righteousness. So, the task was to demonstrate Melchizedek’s superiority to Levi. If he could do that, returning to an inferior system wouldn’t make sense. How did he do this?

Tithing.

Remember, when building his Biblical case, all the author had to go on was Genesis 14:18-20 and Psalm 110:4. He went in hard on Genesis 14, which is about Abraham’s tithe. What about his tithe makes Melchizedek’s priesthood superior to Levi’s? Here are a few observations.

- Abraham tithed to Melchizedek in the absence of any law about tithing. It predates Moses by hundreds of years, so his tithe wasn’t offered out of compulsion or even obedience to a command. It was given from pure gratitude to the LORD.
- The Levites had a command to take tithes from Israel. It was a covenantal condition, and blessing was tied to obedience.
- Because the tithes in the Law were tied to command and obedience, Abraham’s tithe was fundamentally better and superior because it was given freely from gratitude. The argument then follows that a superior gift is offered to a superior priesthood.

This is what is meant by verse seven: *It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.* Abraham, the father of Levi, gave a superior offering to Melchizedek. So, when Melchizedek blessed Abraham, Levi, the inferior, was blessed by the superior. Therefore, the author argues in verses nine and ten that Levi participated in this superior tithe through Abraham, making Melchizedek’s priesthood superior to his.

Q IT’S OFTEN DEBATED WHETHER TITHING IS A NEW TESTAMENT COMMAND. DOES ABRAHAM’S TITHE TO MELCHIZEDEK GIVE US ANY INSIGHT ON THIS MATTER?

It is a small but strong thread. Now couple that thread with Psalm 110:4. This priesthood, to whom Abraham, and by implication, Levi, gratefully gave a tithe, will also rule as king.

¹ The LORD says to my Lord:
‘Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.’
² The LORD sends forth from Zion

your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!
³Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.
⁴The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
'You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.'"
Psalm 110:1-4

The priestly order of Melchizedek was given to the Davidic kings. The author has already dropped the knowledge that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, the Son of God, and the Son of David, is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. This priesthood is far superior to Levi at every level. But here's the surprise ending.

Because Jesus Christ is our High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, all believers are also priests in that same order. You are a priest in the order of Melchizedek because it is no longer you who lives, but Christ who lives in you by the Holy Spirit. Christ's priesthood provides and empowers our priesthood. His order is our order.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This examination of Melchizedek was fascinating, to say the least, but we only scratched the surface. The Old Testament portrays him as a man appointed by the LORD as high priest. But there are volumes of extra-Biblical STJ writings that speak of Melchizedek. They provided speculations that have influenced, to this day, beliefs about who he was. But what we can conclude from Scripture is fairly ordinary.

The author's main point is this: Melchizedek gave us a footprint of what to expect from the Messiah. Jesus Christ filled that footprint perfectly and then some. The remainder of chapter seven contains the author's comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek, which will be a foundation to begin speaking about a better covenant in chapter eight.

Q WHY DID THE AUTHOR GO TO SUCH LENGTHS TO COMPARE MELCHIZEDEK TO JESUS?



Perfect, Indestructible, Effective

HEBREWS 7:11-28

Let's begin with an admission. This section of Hebrews is very... Hebrew. Basically from here to the end of chapter eight, the author dug in hard on the matter of the priesthood. Many may confess that they speed read from here until chapter nine. But since we're doing a verse-by-verse study, speed reading is out. And, of course, you won't regret it.

As we read the author's teaching contrasting Christ's priesthood to Aaron's, remember that he preached this/wrote this to believing Jews who were tempted to return to the old system. That is the impetus behind everything in this letter. Therefore discussion about the priesthood was incredibly relevant for the original audience. But we'll find that it is just as relevant to us.

PERFECTION?

"¹¹ Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. ¹³ For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests." Hebrews 7:11-14

Perfection. *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The precepts of the LORD are upright, instructing the wise.* A Jew may have found the author's statement in verse eleven hard to swallow. The Torah prescribed the Levitical priesthood and the Aaronic high priests. If Torah is perfect, how could one say that perfection wasn't its goal? The author's point here links to what he said in verse twenty-eight - *the word of oath, which came later than the law.* If perfection was something the law could offer, why

would the LORD continue Melchizedek's priesthood much later (Psalm 110:4) while the Levites and Aaron's line were still serving as priests?

That's a great question. The answer is that the LORD was telegraphing His intention to establish a New Covenant that would replace the old one. Why a New Covenant? The author said that when the priesthood changes, so does the law. Why? Because the new priesthood doesn't draw its authority from the Old Covenant. Therefore, if there's a new priesthood it must draw its authority from something new.

To further nail this down, he also pointed out that Jesus' genealogy would have disqualified Him for the priesthood under the Old Covenant. For Jesus to be our high priest, a New Covenant had to be in place from which He drew authority to serve in that role. All of this could only mean one thing. The Old Covenant was null and void.

Q WHY DO PEOPLE SOMETIMES RETURN TO OLD WAYS, EVEN WHEN IT'S FAILINGS ARE APPARENT?

Why would anyone want to return to a null and void system? There are a few possibilities. First, at this point in history, Jewish ethnicity and Jewish religious practice were intimately tied together. It's may be that as Gentiles increased within the church, the Jewish distinctiveness of the New Covenant was being diluted. In Acts chapter fifteen, the council of Jerusalem released Gentile believers from adherence to Jewish dietary laws and observance of feasts, only telling them to refrain from things polluted by idols, strangled things, blood, and sexual immorality.

"¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood." Acts 15:19-20

With the numbers of believing Gentiles increasing, the observance of Jewish custom decreased. As the Hebrew believers found the church's practices increasingly less Jewish, the temptation to return to the old ways might have grown strong.

Second, the presence of Judaizers was (and is) and ongoing problem in the church. Judaizers are false teachers - wolves - who mislead as many as they can into returning to the Law of Moses. Unlike the first group, this isn't a sentimental desire for familiar forms of worship. These wolves teach that adherence to the Law is how we remain in God's grace once we're born again. False teachers are always looking for a following and seduce as many as they can into their fake sheepfold.

These two things brought together may have formed a perfect storm to move believing Jews toward a return to something null and void.

Q HOW ATTACHED ARE WE TO THE PARTICULAR CULTURE OF OUR CHURCH EXPERIENCE? WOULD YOU ATTEND A CHURCH WITH BAD TEACHING, BUT A FAMILIAR CULTURE?

AN INDESTRUCTIBLE LIFE

¹⁵ This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of him,
'You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.'
¹⁸ For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God."
Hebrews 7:15-19

What becomes more evident? It's the change in the covenant. Verse twelve introduced the idea and fifteen brought reinforcements. So let's ask the question: How does it become more evident?

Christ's priesthood isn't based on a commandment, but on His very nature: *His indestructible life.*

This is in contrast to the mortality of the former priests. According to Jewish tradition (not the Old Testament), a rope was tied around the ankle of the high priest before he entered the Holy of Holies, just in case he died in God's presence, so they could drag him out without entering themselves.

Christ didn't need a rope. In fact, He didn't just enter and then get out like the former priests. *He entered and stayed, and took a seat!* He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty and will stay there, interceding for us, until the appointed time of His return!

The author then called the former commandment weak and useless. Again, these are statements that might've been hard to swallow for a believing Jew, but this isn't a slight against the Law itself. *The Law is perfect in its purpose, and the Law perfectly accomplishes its purposes.* But it was never given for the purpose of making its adherents perfect. What was its purpose?

²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." Galatians 3:24

The purpose of the Law was to shepherd our hearts and underscore our need for a Savior. It shows us our sinfulness, and it does this perfectly. It perfectly highlights our imperfections. The better hope, then, is in Christ! Hope for forgiveness. Hope for relationship. Hope for resurrection. Hope for inheritance. Hope for eternal life. The Law pointed to these things. Christ provides them in their fullness!

Q ARE FAITH IN CHRIST AND OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW SEPARATE MATTERS? WHY OR WHY NOT? IF SO, WHY IS IT SO EASY TO CONFUSE THEM?

AN OATH

²⁰ And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, ²¹ but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him:

'The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind,
'You are a priest forever.'

²² This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

²³ The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴ but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Hebrews 7:20-25

Why does an oath make Christ's appointment to priesthood better than Aaron's? Twenty-first-century people have a diminished view of oaths. We break oaths all the time, rather flippantly. Presidents break their oaths of office. People lie under oath in courts. Parents break their promises to their kids. Broadly speaking, as a low-integrity people we simply don't place much trust in things like oaths.

Ancient people took oaths far more seriously than we do. An oath is built on the integrity of the one taking it. Therefore, this oath is more than an one given between men. This is God's oath, hence built upon his character. So will God ever appoint a different High Priest and replace Jesus as He did Aaron? No because His oath is backed up by his character.

Q WHY DID JESUS INSTRUCT HIS FOLLOWERS TO REFRAIN FROM SWEARING OATHS? WHY THEN IS IT OK FOR THE LORD TO SWEAR AND OATH, BUT NOT US?

That means one thing for us. Since there will never be another High Priest, *there also will never be another covenant*. This is why Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant. Remember, a change in the priesthood would necessitate a change of covenant. Jesus is the High Priest, forever, of a covenant that will never end because He will never end. Then comes the best line in this entire chapter.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

He offers an uttermost salvation. That means I am so utterly saved that nothing can undo what He has done. But notice, this uttermost salvation is only for those who draw near to God through Jesus.

Notice further, Christ's intercession is only *for those who draw near to the Father through Him*. So not only is uttermost salvation exclusively for those who draw near to God through Jesus, His prayers have the same limited scope. He only prays for His church. He prays for our endurance, our transformation, our provision, and He does this without ceasing.

Hopefully you find that comforting. Jesus did more than die for you; He lives for you. He fulfilled his own teaching. We demanded his coat which He gave, but He also gave His cloak. His eternal session is His cloak thrown over His church, the ones who demanded his coat - his death. And He will continue to cover us with the cloak of His prayers until we see Him face to face.

Q HOW CAN WE BE MORE LIKE JESUS IN OUR INTERCESSION FOR OTHERS?

EFFECTIVE PRAYERS

“²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.” Hebrews 7:26-28

The author listed several qualities: holy, innocent, untainted, separated from sinners, and exalted. Let’s sum that up into one word: *righteous*. His prayers for us are effective. James said that the prayers of a righteous man has great power as it works (James 5:16).

He is the Righteous One. Jesus’ prayers are always effective. You can be comforted that the Righteous One prays powerfully effective prayers for you. Unlike priests who were beset by their own sins, whose prayers ebbed and flowed in their effectiveness, Christ the Son, who is made perfect forever, prays for you and never fails.

Q IF CHRIST’S PRAYERS FOR US NEVER FAIL, HOW SHOULD THAT FRAME OUR EVERY DAY EXPERIENCES OF STRUGGLE AGAINST THE FLESH?

FINAL THOUGHTS

At the end of this very Hebrew chapter, the author brought us to a truth that resounds for all of God’s people, Jew or Gentile. The LORD has given us a better High Priest, who is the guarantor of a better covenant, who’s prayers for us are always effective because He is forever the Righteous One, and by His perfectly effective intercession provides an uttermost salvation for everyone who draws near to the Father through Him.

Why would any born again Jew ever want to go back to something less than this? Why do we Gentile believers cling to our traditions that embrace lesser things than this?

The only answer is that we've been enticed to look away. The more you gaze at Jesus, the longer you keep your eyes fixed upon Him, the more you know Him in His unveiled majesty, the more every other alternative seems utterly foolish. Let us turn our gaze back to Him and let go of every tradition, every desire, every way of life that would lead us to something lesser.

Q WHAT LESSER THINGS PULL YOUR GAZE AWAY FROM JESUS?



Jesus is Better and Best

HEBREWS 8:1-13

Do you know how to properly employ the words *better* and *best*? Here's an example. The phrase, *may the best man win*, is only applicable in situations where more than two men are competing. In a competition between two men, you should say, *may the better man win*. The word *better* is only appropriate when two things are being compared, while *best* is used when the comparison is between more than two. You probably have never given it that much thought. Which is better? This or that? Which is best? This, that, or the other thing?

Here, in chapter eight, the author compared the old covenant and the new covenant and correctly employed the word *better*. "*The covenant He mediates is better since it is enacted on better promises.*" (8:6) Let's look.

"¹ Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer."

Hebrews 8:1-3

A new concept appeared in verse two: the *true tent*. So far, the author has built his argument against the Old Covenant by highlighting Christ's ministry as the final High Priest in the order of Melchizedek. This chapter will roughly conclude that argument and begin a new contrast: the earthly temple versus the heavenly temple. He started this transition by pointing out how Christ's superior priesthood serves in the true tent, set up by the LORD Himself and not men. We'll get into that more in just a moment. For now, look at verse three. *Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer*. This leads to a great question.

Q AS OUR HIGH PRIEST, WHAT DOES JESUS HAVE TO OFFER?

GIFTS AND SACRIFICES

Let's do the obvious stuff first. Christ's sacrifice was His death. To say it succinctly, His blood shed on the cross is the sacrifice He brought, and His blood was sprinkled over the heavenly altar. The author will address his once-for-all sacrifice in chapter ten, so we won't get ahead of ourselves.

But what about gifts? What gifts does He offer? Let's turn to Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

⁸ Therefore it says,

'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'

⁹ (In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." Ephesians 4:8-14

Why this passage? Paul tied Christ's ascension to His high priestly ministry with gifts given to His church. He gave these gifts *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*. These are gifts - manifestations of the Holy Spirit - that the LORD uses to mature His church. This isn't a comprehensive list of gifts, but they do seem to be foundational gifts that lead us to *unity of the faith and of the knowledge of Jesus*.

Q AS HIGH PRIEST, CHRIST GIVES GIFTS TO HIS PEOPLE. WHY IS IT CRUCIAL FOR BELIEVERS TO UNDERSTAND AND USE THE GIFTS HE GIVES US?

How does this connect? The connection lies in part of the High Priest's ministry in the Old Covenant: The Feast of Weeks.

Exodus 34:22 calls it the feast of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. Leviticus 23:15-17 says this feast should happen on the 50th day after the Passover Sabbath, and two loaves of bread should be prepared from the firstfruits of the wheat. Numbers 28:26-27 commands additional offerings of two bulls, one ram, and seven one-year-old male lambs. Finally, Deuteronomy 16:10 calls it a freewill offering, according to how the LORD had blessed you.

The Feast of Weeks commemorates receiving the law at Sinai, fifty days after the first Passover. You have freewill gifts of the firstfruits of wheat and sacrifices of bulls, rams, and lambs. By the time Christ had come, this

feast was also called Pentecost, a Greek word that meant *the fiftieth day*.

In addition to commemorating the giving of the Sinai Covenant and firstfruits, Pentecost was also the day the Holy Spirit was sent to birth the church and commence the New Covenant.

Here's how this connects. Christ, the Bread of Life (wheat) and our once-for-all sacrifice, had ascended to the *true tent* where the *true altar* exists. He then "*waved*" Himself over that altar as the *true* firstfruits offering, the *true* freewill offering, the *true* sacrifice, and the *gift* of the Holy Spirit was sent to His people to initiate the New Covenant that His death and resurrection had secured!

He is the sacrifice, the Holy Spirit is the gift, and Jesus continues to give the Holy Spirit until His Bride is complete! Aren't you glad He is our High Priest?

Q THE OLD TESTAMENT FORESHADOWS JESUS CONSTANTLY. DOES THIS AFFECT HOW YOU READ OLD TESTAMENT CONTENT?

THIS IS WHY HE HAD TO LEAVE

⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." ⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second." Hebrews 8:4-7

If you've ever wondered why Jesus had to return to the Father, verse four offers part of that answer. The author gave a very practical reason for Christ's departure. *He could not have served as a priest if he had stayed. Why?* The New Covenant had to be enacted. Under the old one, all priests had to come from Levi and High Priests from Aaron to serve in the temple. Jesus was neither. To enact the New Covenant, He had to ascend to a temple where He has every right to serve.

Here, the author began his build-up to a contrast between the earthly temple and the heavenly temple. He pointed out that Moses' tabernacle was built according to the pattern God showed him on Sinai. It was a copy of the original; a shadow of the heavenly reality. Even Solomon's Temple, as glorious and beautiful as it was, was a copy and shadow. Christ's more excellent ministry demands service from the heavenly original. He mediates a better covenant enacted on better promises.

What does the author mean by *better promises*?

First, let's lay something to rest immediately. The difference in promises isn't about whether God's promises now are more reliable than the old ones. The LORD is full of steadfast love and faithfulness. His promises never fail. Every promise He makes is equally reliable. The author does not have the reliability of God's promises in mind.

The difference lies in the type of covenant. God enters into two kinds of covenants with humanity: *conditional and unconditional*. Conditional covenants rely upon how we respond to the LORD's commands. The Old Covenant was conditional. It hinged upon Israel's faithfulness. Deuteronomy 28 details the conditions of the covenant God established with Israel at Sinai. Blessings and curses were utterly contingent upon Israel's faithfulness to the LORD.

Unconditional covenants are different. *Unconditional* is somewhat of a misnomer. All covenants have conditions. But in the case of so-called unconditional covenants, the conditions lie entirely upon God's faithfulness, not ours. In other words, the LORD takes the curses of our disobedience upon Himself. I hope that sounds familiar because that is precisely what Christ did on the cross. He took the curses of our disobedience. The one condition that remains for us is belief. *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is LORD and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved* (Romans 10:9). When we believe, the curses of our disobedience transfer to Jesus, the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world, which He bore upon the cross.

Q IS IT CLEAR TO YOU HOW THE NEW COVENANT IS FOUNDED UPON BETTER PROMISES?

They're not better because they're more reliable. They're better because the curses for disobedience were laid upon Jesus, and the LORD took our just punishment, sparing anyone who believes in Him. When the author said the Old Covenant wasn't faultless, he referred to its complete inability to save its people from their sins. It cannot, it never could, it was never supposed to.

Why, then, go back to it?

THE PROPHETS SAID SO

⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says:
'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah,
⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers
on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out
of the land of Egypt.
For they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.

¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.
¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.'
¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." Hebrews 8:8-13

The author masterfully used Jeremiah 31:31-35 to drive home his point. Even the prophets said so. They pointed out the insufficiencies of the Old Covenant. The second half of verse nine says it plainly: *they did not continue in my covenant*. Any covenant that relies on the faithfulness of human beings will be broken on the human side. Jeremiah isn't the only prophet to say this. Many prophets alluded to this reality, but perhaps the most famous is Ezekiel.

"²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." Ezekiel 36:26-27

The giving of the new covenant must mean that the old one is now unnecessary. The new one is better, led by a better High Priest.

Q HOW WOULD YOU PERSUADE A BELIEVER WHO BELIEVES WE MUST FOLLOW THE DIETARY LAWS, OR OBSERVE THE FESTIVALS THAT THEY ARE UNNECESSARY?

FINAL THOUGHTS

But, let's compare more. Though there are some, today, most believers aren't being tempted to go back to the Sinai covenant. People seem to hodge-podge their own path to God. Some so-called churches incorporate New Age practices into their discipleship. Some groups have outrightly written their own additions to Scripture or their own versions of the Bible.

Perhaps for you, it isn't a cult or anything like that. You might be the sort who embraces a works mentality. While it's not exactly an Old Covenant idea, you believe that if you do enough good things,

the LORD will welcome you into His kingdom. You don't base that on anything in the Bible; you just feel like that's the kind of person the LORD is.

None of this works out. *The gate is narrow, and the way to eternal life is hard. Few find it* (Matthew 7:14). One last passage.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."
Ephesians 2:19-22

That thing you made up doesn't cut it. The path is fixed. The Old Covenant is null and void. That thing you made up is bankrupt. Christ, as taught to us by the prophets and Apostles, is the only way.

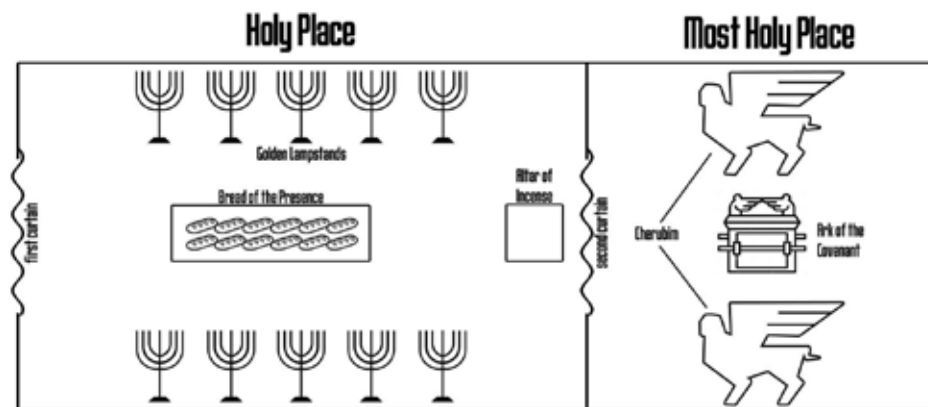
Jesus is best.

Q HOW EASY IS IT TO MAKE UP YOUR OWN PATH TO JESUS? TO WHAT DEGREES HAVE YOU DONE THIS?

ble and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place.³ Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place,⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.⁵ Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail." Hebrews 9:1-5

In the previous chapter, the author called the heavenly temple, *the true tent*, and the earthly temple a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. Beginning with this description, chapter nine discusses it further. In verse one he called it an earthly place of holiness. Under the Old Covenant, the regulations for worship helped prepare worshipers for sacred space through washings and sacrifices that sanctified them.

If you're a student of the Word, you may recognize a couple of things in these verses. First, the author is only describing what was within the tent or the temple building. He wasn't describing everything within the outdoor courts of the Temple. He zooms in on the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place - also called the Holy of Holies. Here's a simple diagram.



Second, on a casual reading, it seems the author placed the altar of incense inside the Most Holy Place when it was actually positioned just outside of it. Some have pointed to this as an error in the author's teaching, hence an error in the Biblical text. But the error is only apparent, not actual. The language he used - having the altar of incense - implies ownership rather than location. The high priest would take incense from the altar with him when he entered the Most Holy Place. Therefore, the primary function of the altar belonged to the Most Holy Place, though it was physically positioned just outside.

Beyond this, the author basically said there wasn't time to go into more detail, and neither will we. It would do us well, though, to remember that despite its beauty and glory and holy stature (especially Solomon's Temple) it was a copy and shadow of the true tent.

Q WHEN JESUS SAID HE WOULD TEAR DOWN AND REBUILD THE TEMPLE IN THREE DAYS, WHAT DID HE MEAN? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR US?

WHAT HAPPENED IN THERE?

“⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.”
Hebrews 9:6-7

The Law of Moses fully explains the various kinds and types of sacrifices that needed to be made for all manner of sins. Go read that if you truly want the details on all of the priests’ duties within the Temple. However, we can briefly speak of what the author mentioned. Look at the diagram. In the Holy Place, there are three stations: lampstands, the bread of the Presence, and the altar of incense. As such, the responsibilities of the Levites in the Holy Place included:

- Keep the lampstands lit refilling the oil every evening.
- Replenish the bread of the Presence every Sabbath.
- Replenish the incense on the altar every evening.

Then on a yearly basis, the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place with incense from the altar, and blood from a sacrifice. He sprinkled the blood on the ark of the covenant for the forgiveness of Israel’s sins and the smoke from the incense represented the prayers of Israel before the LORD.

Q WHEN PAUL SAID THAT OUR BODIES ARE THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, HOW DOES THAT PARALLEL WITH THE OLD COVENANT TEMPLE?

NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY CONFUSING...

“⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing ⁹ (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.” Hebrews 9:8-10

Wait a second. Don’t we sing songs and preach sermons that talk about how the curtain has been torn and now we have access to the Father by the blood of Christ? What did the author mean by that the Holy Spirit indicated that the way into the holy places is not yet opened? Notice that the author was speaking in the present tense - is not yet opened. And what’s this business about the Holy Place being symbolic of the present age?

Let’s begin this explanation by emphasizing the importance of accuracy and precision when the Word is taught. There’s a reason Paul encouraged Timothy to rightly handle the word of truth. Doing it recklessly creates eventual misunderstandings. First, our worship songs, hymns, and sermons are correct to teach that the way to the Father has been opened.

Christ has ascended and serves as our high priest for the very purpose of mediating this new and better covenant on our behalf. However, the author delved into a realm of precision in his teaching that demands a sharper focus. Let's define our roles.

Christ is our High Priest, and we, His people, are a kingdom of priests. There's the first similarity. The Old Covenant had a high priest and regular priests. Those high priests did things and went into places that the regular priests could not. It's the same in the new covenant. Christ ascended to the true tent where He continually serves, while we remain here on earth to do our service. It's as if we are serving in the Holy Place, and Christ is serving in the Most Holy Place. Do you see the analogy coming together? The author said that the Holy Place is symbolic of the present age. And... we do the same things in our priesthood that the old priests did.

- **Lampstands:** You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before men. Keep your lamp oil filled. The Holy Spirit is represented by oil. We are continually to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- **The Bread of Presence:** Just as the old priests consumed the bread of Presence that was being replaced, we consume the bread in the Lord's Supper. Jesus is the bread of life. The bread represents His body given and broken for us.
- **Altar of Incense:** Incense represents the prayers of God's people. We pray without ceasing.

In the Old Covenant, these were all done outside of the Most Holy Place. These were outward signs of the covenant. They're outward signs for new covenant believers as well. They show forth what has happened on the inside! We're changed on the inside, therefore we are a people filled with the Spirit, who pray without ceasing and depend on the Bread of Life.

Q HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED THAT YOU ARE A MOBILE TEMPLE AND, LIKE THE OLD COVENANT PRIESTS, YOU HAVE THESE PRIESTLY RESPONSIBILITIES?

With all of that in mind, the author's confusing remark about the first section - the Holy Place - representing the present age begins to make more sense. The author saw the activities of the old priests, and our activities as new priests as the same kinds of work.

It's helpful to remember that the author employed a *simile*, which is a comparison between two things with similarities. Like metaphor, simile has built-in inaccuracies. You don't employ similes to say things are exactly the same. You use them to say things are similar. He communicated truth by comparison. There isn't an actual physical temple building on earth, but we are living Temples, and we continue in similar priestly service. Like the old regular priests, we do our work outside of the Most Holy Place. And like the old high priests, Christ has entered the Most Holy Place to do His work.

Before we finish this line of thought, we must mention the core difference. We, as new covenant priests, may not have physical access to the Most Holy Place yet, but we do have access by the Holy Spirit. The Old Covenant priests never had the indwelling Holy Spirit as we do. It's because

of this reality that we can sing about entering behind the curtain. We can preach boldly that the veil has been torn and access to the Father is open. But it is only open through Christ, by the Holy Spirit. You and I cannot yet just walk into the unfiltered, unveiled presence of the LORD. That day is coming, but not yet. Until that day, we will continue our service in this Holy Place - the present age - which will stand until Christ returns.

Q WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE, HOW ARE WE TO LIVE IN THIS PRESENT AGE? WHAT KIND OF GROWTH DO YOU NEED TO CULTIVATE?

WASHING THE OUTSIDE

^{9b} According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”
Hebrews 9:9b-10

The second half of verse nine and verse ten echo back to something Jesus once said to the Pharisees.

²⁷ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”
Matthew 23:17-28

The Pharisees were very meticulous at observing the law. Their diets and every sacrifice, every peace offering, every washing, and every Sabbath were practiced pedantically. Yet, as Jesus pointed out, none of it did anything to transform their hearts. In fact, their law-following made them self-righteous and harsh with people outside of their sect.

Over the course of this study, the author has already made it abundantly clear to us that the law is unable to perfect worshipers. It dealt with purifying people for a moment while they worshiped in sacred space, but did nothing to fix the problem of the hard heart and dead spirit. The apostle Paul alluded to this problem in Romans.

⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” Romans 7:7

It’s interesting that Paul singled out coveting. Unlike the other commandments, coveting is entirely an attitude of the heart. It’s not something you do to someone else. If you covet your neighbor’s wife, they may never know about it because it’s an attitude that lives within your heart. The law did nothing to conquer coveting. In fact, the law increased Paul’s coveting because it made him acutely aware of it. No amount of sacrifice or peace offering or Sabbath observance could cleanse Paul’s heart from coveting.

The law dealt with how we honor the LORD and others outwardly in our actions, but was powerless to change the worshiper's heart. Jesus wasn't the first person to sound the alarm. The prophets sounded it hundreds of years prior.

"13 And the LORD said, 'Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,'" Isaiah 29:13

Q THE LAW COULD MAKE SOMEONE LOOK GOOD, BUT WHY COULDN'T IT MAKE THEM ACTUALLY GOOD?

THE GOOD THINGS

"11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God." Hebrews 9:11-14

We won't retread the high priest discussion that we've already thoroughly addressed in previous chapters. Let's get to the author's point, and wrap this up.

- Christ serves in the greater and more perfect tent not made by human hands. It is the heavenly Temple which Moses was shown to copy.
- The sacrifices in the earthly tent only addressed purification of the flesh. Because the hearts of worshipers weren't cleansed, the outward cleansing had to happen again and again.
- Christ's more perfect sacrifice, delivered to the more perfect tent went to the root of the problem. Sanctify the heart, then the flesh will follow. Sanctify the heart, and our lips will no longer defile us.
 - » *"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."* Luke 6:45

The whole reason the old system is now obsolete is because in Christ the heart is sanctified. Change the heart, transform the whole person. This is the *good things* that have come.

Q WHAT DOES THIS TELL US ABOUT THOSE WHO MAKE PROFESSIONS OF FAITH, BUT NEVER SEEM TO UNDERGO ANY TRANSFORMATION?



God's Living Will

HEBREWS 9:15-28

Have you ever been in someone's will for an inheritance? Do you have a distant, wealthy uncle with no children who has put you in his will? The thing about wills is that before they can be executed, the one who wrote it has to die. Legally, the actions prescribed in the will are only effective upon the author's death. The author of Hebrews employed the analogy of a will to highlight the necessity of Christ's death to enact the new covenant and render the old one useless.

CHRIST'S MEDIATION

"¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant."
Hebrews 9:15

We won't redo Christ's mediation in this article. If you need a refresher, go review the chapter *He Gets Us*. We will, though, single out this verse because it highlights the outcome of His mediation. Along the way, we have discussed how He prays for His believing family. In Hebrews 7:25, the author said Christ saves us to the uttermost through His intercession. Here, the author said something equally extraordinary. The outcome of Christ's mediation is that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.

Let's be honest about something. Many appeal to Hebrews for pushback against the doctrine of eternal security. You may have grown up in churches that believe once a person is born again, they can never lose or walk away from their salvation. This is pejoratively called *once saved, always saved* theology. It's a pejorative because the phrase is sometimes thought to defend the idea that someone can pray a sinner's prayer and profess belief but never truly experience a transformed life.

Uncle John was an alcoholic and mean-spirited, but he prayed a prayer to ask Jesus into his heart when he was twelve, so... once saved, always saved.

Q HAVE YOU EVER ATTENDED A FUNERAL WHERE THE PASTOR WAS "PREACHING THE DECEASED INTO HEAVEN" BASED ON A PRAYER THE PERSON PRAYED?

That's not what the Bible teaches. A more Biblical saying would be *once saved, always repenting*. However, we cannot give that a proper treatment right now. The point for now is that the expected pushback on the doctrine of eternal security isn't here. Instead the opposite is true. Not only has Hebrews not pushed back, but it has reinforced eternal security. Yet another reason is here in this verse. Christ's mediation ensures that those who are called receive the promised eternal inheritance. If someone can forfeit or lose the promised eternal inheritance, that creates room to say that Christ's mediation was somehow insufficient, which is utterly untenable.

But, as airtight as this seems, it's not the end of the discussion. Another matter must be cleared up.

WHO ARE THE CALLED?

If you agree with this conclusion, you must deal with another passage which seems to throw a monkey wrench into everything. The parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14) ends with a prickly verse.

"¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen." Matthew 22:14

This verse gives rise to the idea of a general call and an effective call. The general call is the belief that all people are invited to the kingdom of God. That's the picture portrayed in this parable. The effective call is the belief that only those whom the LORD predestined to believe will respond to the invitation of the general call. For our purposes, we need to figure out if the word called here in this parable is the same word that the author of Hebrews used in his message.

It is not.

Matthew used the Greek word *kletos*, which means *invited*. The author of Hebrews used the Greek word *kaleo*, which means *to call by name*. That rings a bell.

"¹ But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
'Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.'" Isaiah 43:1

The author of Hebrews used a word that's more targeted than a general call to all peoples. He referred to those whom the LORD had called by name. In this case, the called are those whom the LORD knows and ransomed and called by name. These are they for whom He prays. These are they for whom His prayers secure the promised eternal inheritance.

What more do we need to hear? Once you belong to Jesus, nothing will separate you from His love. You may stumble and fall many times, but He's always there to receive you again. You may get hurt by others in ways that cast large shadows of doubt on your belief, but you'll never walk away. This is precisely why the apostle John could say that those who went out from us never belonged to us (1 John 2:19). If you can walk away from Jesus Christ, you never really knew Him. He's that good! We don't stay with Him because of good rhetoric and firm doctrinal conviction. We remain with Him because He prays for us, and **His prayers are effective!**

Q SINCE CHRIST'S PRAYERS ARE EFFECTIVE, HOW CAN WE ALSO HAVE EFFECTIVE PRAYERS? HOW CONFIDENT CAN WE BE WHEN WE ASK FOR THINGS IN HIS NAME?

THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. ¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷ For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive." Hebrews 9:15-17

A death has occurred. Christ died a death that redeems us from the transgressions that the first covenant established. But that death did something else. Verses 16-17 explain that His death enacted a will. This is the only time in the New Testament where a biblical author uses this imagery. This imagery helps explain a few things.

First, it helps us understand another facet of why Christ had to die. The new covenant is likened to a will that needed a death to enable its execution. Without His death, there would be no enactment. Covenants required the shedding of blood, and the new covenant is no different. It's why Jesus told his disciples that the new covenant was in His blood (Luke 22:20).

Second, it demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the old covenant. Sinai's covenant would never secure the enactment of this will because the author had not died. There was indeed blood, but it was the blood of animals that required renewal on a regular basis. They provided purification for things and people but never secured the promised inheritance. This is spelled out in the next few verses.

¹⁸ Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹ For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰ saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.' ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the

blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Hebrews 9:18-22

Perhaps the only other place in the Bible where we may get a picture of this is in the book of Revelation. The verbiage of a will was not used, but John's description of the scroll with seven seals parallels closely with the idea. Revelation 5:1 depicts a scene where a document is in the hands of the Father (the one seated on the throne), and the only one worthy of opening it is the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 5:5). Many have called that scroll a title deed which contained the Lamb's inheritance rites to the earth. He is the only one worthy to open it because He died. The parallel is obvious. If the will in Hebrews is the execution of a new covenant that includes the promised eternal inheritance, then what happens in Revelation chapters 5, 6, and 7 is the execution of that will.

Q PAUL WROTE ABOUT OUR INHERITANCE IN ROMANS CHAPTER EIGHT. WHAT ARE WE INHERITING?

ONCE FOR ALL

²³ Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."
Hebrews 9:23-28

The author made a turn here toward completing his thoughts on Christ's priesthood and mediation, which he completes in chapter ten. There's an interesting statement in 9:23. A contrast is made between what was necessary to purify the copies of heavenly things versus the actual heavenly things. It raises a question. Why did the heavenly things need purification?

The statement that the heavenly things needed better sacrifices implies that they, too, had to be purified. If you're like many, you were raised with this unquestionable assumption that everything in heaven is perfect. But actually, the Biblical authors never used that word to describe heaven. It's fair to say that God is described as perfect (Matthew 5:48), but heaven is never described as such. In fact, the Bible says quite the opposite.

“¹⁵ Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not pure in his sight;” Job 15:15

Huh?

This is not some tangent. It goes somewhere, and it’s all connected. Question. Where did rebellion against the LORD first begin? In heaven.

“¹² ‘How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
¹³ You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;
¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’
¹⁵ But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.” Isaiah 14:12-15

If rebellion began in heaven, then the heavens are not pure in His sight. The Bible teaches that Christ’s redemption has a cosmic scale. His death did more than offer forgiveness to humans. It provided redemption for all of creation - including heaven itself. Look at it like this. Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee of a resurrection for everyone who believes. But it goes further.

“¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Romans 8:19-21

We have been trained to think of creation as the earth and all we can see. But it also includes the unseen. The unseen spirit realm is also a creation of the LORD. When Paul wrote that creation itself will be set free, that includes both heaven and earth. How? Because in the end, just as we receive new bodies in our final redemption, the heavens and earth get new bodies of a sort in their recreation (Revelation 21:1). So when the author declared that Christ appeared once for all it has a cosmic scope. He came first to offer sacrifice for sin, and He’ll come again to complete redemption for those who eagerly await Him. According to Romans, that includes creation itself!

Q PAUL WROTE ABOUT OUR INHERITANCE IN ROMANS CHAPTER EIGHT. WHAT ARE WE INHERITING?

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we close this, let's draw our attention back to the author's intent for his audience. These men and women who desired to go back to the Old Covenant system of priests and sacrifices needed to hear this loud and clear. Christ died once for all. There is no longer a need for the sacrifices of bulls and goats, so the whole system is rendered obsolete.

We may not be tempted to return to the Sinai covenant, but we are likewise tempted to add to Christ's sacrifice with our own. The variety of extra sacrifices is as numerous as the different kinds of people within the church. We all feel this innate desire to bring something to the table. For what reason? That's the appropriate question.

There are appropriate desires to pursue God, please God, and give yourself to serving God. That's expected and healthy. However, if at any time, any one of those desires to do something becomes about receiving God's grace, or more of it, then you're adding sacrifices to what Christ has already done. That's Old Covenant territory, and it's obsolete.

Imagine this. You walk into a large, unlit room. Apart from the windows, there's no additional light. You notice there are several lights hanging from the ceiling, but there aren't any light switches. You only see chains hanging from each fixture. There are no ladders, but you figure out how to stack chairs so you can barely reach the chains. As you stack and restack for each light, you discover none of the chains do anything. As you're climbing down from the last light, another guy walks in the room and says, "*Google, turn on the lights.*" Not only did all that hard work you did not turn on a single light, it was the wrong way to go about it in the first place.

Q HAVE YOU ADDED ANYTHING TO JESUS FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, SANCTIFICATION, OR SALVATION? WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE IN LIGHT OF WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED?



III



Once for All

HEBREWS 10:1-18

Chapter ten contains both the apex and closing remarks of the author's deep dive into Christ's priesthood and sacrifice. A few chapters ago, it was said this was a very Hebrew section of this book. Most of us are Gentile believers, and on top of that, two thousand years removed from the context of the original audience. However God is faithful, and we've drawn some good depth. Since chapter seven the author has built three solid arguments.

- First, he built the argument for Christ's high priesthood (Hebrews 7:1-8:13).
- Second, he built the argument for the inferiority of the earthly temple (Hebrews 9:1-10).
- Third, and finally, he began an argument for Christ's superior sacrifice. (Hebrews 9:11-28). We're finishing that argument today in Hebrews 10:1-18. Let's get started.

SHADOWS OF GOOD THINGS

"¹ For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." Hebrews 10:1-4

A shadow of a good thing is connected to a good thing, but it can never be the thing itself. The law gave us regulations for worship that perfectly served the purpose for which they were given. However, he is pointing out what should be plain to the reader. They weren't sufficient to perfect the worshiper and deal with sin once and for all. The fact that the blood of bulls and goats had to be regularly spilled and sprinkled over things in the Temple implies the limited effectiveness and scope of those sacrifices.

Remember, the author was dealing with believers who believed returning to those sacrifices would somehow help their sanctification. But the point offered (and hopefully well taken) is that they couldn't perfect worshipers in the Old Covenant, much less the new and better one! Adding the blood of bulls and goats to the blood of Christ isn't only futile, but suggests that you haven't actually believed at all. It is faith in Christ alone that saves, not Christ plus something else.

Look at verse four. Did you know that all of the New Testament uses of the word impossible happen in Hebrews? It means *impotent, not possible, weak*. Those sacrifices were impotent. It was not possible for them to change the heart of the worshiper. They were weak because they lacked the power to transform. Let's not retread old ground too much, but as we draw near to the end of this discussion it's good to be reminded once more. The blood of bulls and goats were a stop-gap measure until the fullness of time unfolded. They were the shadow of the greater sacrifice of Christ. By all means, they served their purpose, but they became obsolete with the death of Jesus. Continuing those sacrifices is not only unnecessary, but cruel and deceptive.

Q HAS THE JOURNEY THROUGH HEBREWS, THUS FAR, TAUGHT YOU ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR FAITH IN JESUS?

A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' ⁸ When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, 'Behold, I have come to do your will.' He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Hebrews 10:5-10

Did Jesus say this? This isn't a direct quote of something Jesus said in the gospels, but instead a citation of Psalm 40:6-7. The author did what many New Testament authors did: he reread the Old Testament through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Psalm 40 was written by King David. However, because King David was understood as a type and shadow of the Messiah, any writing of David that seemed to link with Christ's experiences were deemed prophetic. So Psalm 40:6-7 is understood by the author to speak both of David and Christ. But, that isn't the real problem with this passage.

⁶ In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,
but you have given me **an open ear**.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have **not required**.

⁷ Then I said, "**Behold, I have come**;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me:" Psalm 40:6-7
(emphasis added)

The differences are emboldened. It appears that the author modified the passage for his purposes. But it only appears that way. This is yet another instance where the author quoted from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was widely used in first century Jewish and Christian communities. Modern English Bibles largely employ the Hebrew Old Testament, called the Masoretic Text (MT), to translate the Old Testament.

This brings up a fair question. Why is there such a difference between the Hebrew and Greek texts in these verses? The Hebrew phrase in question from verse six literally means "you dug out ears for me." You may have to dig for a while before you'll arrive at a sensible explanation.

There are times when translators come across phrases that have no sensible translation. Sometimes the Hebrew phrase doesn't translate into a grammatically correct Greek (or English) phrase. Other times Hebrew idioms didn't make much sense to Greek speakers. In both cases, translators typically employed a dynamically equivalent translation. Dynamic equivalence is the translation of words and phrases that retain the intended meaning but isn't a word-for-word. This is what happened in the LXX translation of Psalm 40:6. Ancient translators understood the intended meaning of the Hebrew and employed a dynamically equivalent Greek phrase.

What does all of this mean? It means while the verbiage is different, the meaning is the same. The author of Hebrews employed the dynamically equivalent, widely used (and popular) Greek translation of the Old Testament, so we can remain confident in the accuracy of God's Word.

Q DOES THE AUTHOR'S REPURPOSING OF OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES HELP YOU SEE CHRIST MORE CLEARLY IN ALL OF THE BIBLE?

But let's not let this obscure the author's purpose. Verse five links to verse ten. Both deal with His body. The Father sent Jesus, incarnated in a human body, and this body was offered once for all that we may be sanctified once for all. These are the bookends of this little section. You gave me a body. That body was offered. In between lies the reasons that Old Covenant sacrifices wouldn't do. The Father didn't delight in those sacrifices because they never accomplished the mission. He does, however, delight in His Son. This points to a hard truth for many.

The Father delighted in His Son's sacrifice. Isaiah 53:10 says it was God's will to crush Him. Some translations say it was his good plan, while other say it pleased the LORD to bruise Him. The Hebrew (according to the

varied English translations) seems to imply that it wasn't merely God's will, but that He took pleasure in the Son's sacrifice. Here is where many deconstructors get off the bus. Many an atheist and agnostic have used this passage to decry cosmic child abuse. But that logic only betrays a worldly and unspiritual understanding of the LORD. We'll discover later in Hebrews the answer to the cosmic child abuse garbage.

"² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, **who for the joy that was set before him** endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2 (emphasis added)

The Father and Son were in on this together from the beginning. Jesus knew exactly what would be obtained by subjecting Himself to death on the cross. The sacrifice of His body was the plan all along. One might say it this way: the Father and Son plotted together to undo the damage done to creation by sin and rebellion. This wasn't the Father commanding the Son to die. It was the Son willingly offering His life to overturn death for all who would believe in Him! There's no hint of abuse in such a selfless offering. The Son's sacrifice delighted the Father because of the joyous outcome that would happen: the death of Death!

"²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death."
1 Corinthians 15:26

Q HAS IT EVER OCCURED TO YOU THAT A HUGE REASON FOR THIS REDEPTIVE SAGA IS TO DESTROY DEATH? WHY IS THAT SUCH AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE PLAN?

HE PERFECTED HIS FAMILY

"¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Hebrews 10:11-14

You can feel the finale coming. The author reminded his people once more that the old system of priests and sacrifices are null and void. Why? Because Christ's sacrifice made them obsolete. How? When Christ entered the heavenly Temple as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, he didn't leave. The fact that He sat down and now waits for His enemies to be made His footstool means the work of His sacrifice is not only effective but absolutely finished. He doesn't need to do it again and again. Once was enough, so He sat down and entered the intercessory phase of His work. He doesn't need to die again. In fact, by design, He can't die again. So He prays for us, without ceasing, until His return.

But notice verse fourteen. His single offering perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. Let's say that another way. He has made forever holy those are being made holy. Or another. He has forever made

righteous those who are becoming righteous. Forgive the liberties, but these are in bounds. All true believers live in a dual reality. We are both holy and becoming holy. We are both righteous and becoming righteous. We are both perfected and becoming perfect. We are both sanctified and becoming sanctified.

This dual reality is an on earth as it is in heaven kind of thing. We pray, let your kingdom come, let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. As new creations in Christ, we exist in both planes of reality. The apostle Paul taught this.

“⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,” Ephesians 2:4-6

Note the past tense: God *raised* us up with Him and *seated* us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. In a cosmic sense, everyone who is born again is immediately seated with the LORD in heaven. But in an earthly sense, we remain here for the good works that God prepared in advance for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). In heaven, we are completely holy, completely righteous, completely sanctified, perfected for all time by Christ’s single sacrifice. On earth, we are progressively becoming those things as we live out our human lives. When we pray, on earth as it is in heaven, we are asking for the reality of our heavenly state to manifest in our earthly state. In heaven, holiness, righteousness, sanctification are complete. On earth, we grow in them and gradually move toward that perfected status that we already have in heavenly places.

Not to beat this drum again, but how can a believer who is seated in heavenly places in Christ, perfected for all time, completely holy, completely righteous, completely sanctified, ever walk away or sin their way out of faith on earth if we believe all this on earth as it is in heaven stuff?

Answer: we can’t.

Q HOW DO WE INCREASINGLY LIVE OUR LIVES ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN?

A THIRD WITNESS

“¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,
¹⁶ ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws on their hearts,
and write them on their minds,’
¹⁷ then he adds,
‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’
¹⁸ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.” Hebrews 10:15-18

These four verses feel like a postscript on the entire argument. An inspired and important postscript, but a postscript nonetheless. The author already made a compelling argument, but here at the end, just to put the cherry on top, He threw in this bonus. *By the way, the Holy Spirit agrees and bears witness to everything I've said!*

When he made this final point, the author did all trinitarians a good service. Two things happened here. First, the author gave the Holy Spirit authorial credit for Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 31:33). That reminds us that the Holy Spirit a divine author of Scripture, which makes Him God. But what's more powerful than authorship, is what the Holy Spirit said. The author of Hebrews said the Holy Spirit testified that He will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. If the Holy Spirit is forgiving sins and lawless deeds, then He must be God since God alone can do this.

The author's final word on the whole old covenant priesthood and sacrificial system is this: if we've been forgiven, then there's no need for any more sacrifices. Christ's sacrifice, once for all, is completely sufficient. It provides all forgiveness, it never needs to happen again, and it not only forgives our sins, but it perfected us in the heavenly places and sanctifies us as we journey through earthly places.

Q KNOWING THIS, WHY WOULD ANYONE EVER RETURN TO A SYSTEM WHERE RIGHTEOUSNESS DEPENDS UPON THINGS THAT CANNOT DO THE JOB?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Pondering on that question hopefully leads you to a singular conclusion. We aren't trying to revive the old covenant system of priests and sacrifices. We're usually returning to old mindsets of earning our way, working our way, proving our merit, and demonstrating our worth. The only reason we could ever do that is that we neither recognize the magnitude of Christ's work on the cross, nor the utter impotence of our abilities to satisfy the LORD's holy standards. In other words, we are deluded.

As we move on from this discussion, keep these things in mind because they will serve as foundational reasons for the author's teachings in the remaining chapters of this book.

Q AS YOU'VE STUDIED HEBREWS, HOW HAS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHRIST'S HIGH PRIESTLY WORK AND HIS SACRIFICE CHANGED?



Therefore, Faith - Part One

HEBREWS 10:19-39

This passage represents an enormous shift. It's a hinge of sorts. It begins with the most loaded *therefore* in the entire letter. Why? Built into that single *therefore* is the contents of everything that came prior. Within it we find:

- Jesus is greater than the angels (chapters 1-2).
- Jesus is greater than Moses (chapter 3).
- Jesus is our Great High Priest (chapters 4-8).
- Jesus is greater than the Temple (chapter 9).
- Jesus is the greatest and final sacrifice (chapter 10:1-18).

It's very much like the *therefore* in Romans 12:1. In light of everything that we've said before, this is how we respond. So, as we move ahead, we're moving into the response portion of the author's sermon/letter. Because of all of that, this is how we should respond.

Therefore, faith. The author's content has three parts:

- Let us (vv 19-25)
- A Warning (vv 26-31)
- How to (vv 32-39)

There's much to cover, so we'll be dividing this passage into two lessons. Let's begin.

WE HAVE CONFIDENCE

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who

promised is faithful.²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
Hebrews 10:19-25

Have you ever needed to fix a kitchen appliance but didn't know how to do it? Back in the 1990s and even the 2000s, if you couldn't find anyone knowledgeable, you had to pay someone to do the job. Now, we can go to YouTube and find tutorials and how-to videos on virtually any appliance repair job you might encounter.

Have you done that? Do you remember that feeling of confidence that YouTube gave you? That's the confidence the author is talking about. Now that we know what we know, we have CONFIDENCE to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus. You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to be unsure. We enter with the confidence that Christ's blood doesn't just make us right but grants us the right to enter God's holy presence.

Q WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR FRIENDSHIP WITH THE LORD IS MARKED BY CONFIDENCE?

Because we have this confidence, the author gave us three *let us* statements.

LET US #1

“²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” Hebrews 10:22

First, let's look at a true heart. It echoes back to Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob in John 4. He told her that the Father sought those who worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23). It contrasts what the author had been trying to correct. The ones who “fall away” are those whose hearts are wicked and unbelieving. Wicked and unbelieving hearts don't possess the confidence the author highlighted in this passage. It's why they rejected the Gospel and sought to return to the system that Christ made obsolete.

Second, let's talk about the full assurance of faith. There's an English problem that's coming. The word *assurance* is used here and in Hebrews 11:1. We're dealing with this now because what we're going to see here may appear to contradict what we'll see when we arrive in the chapter eleven. Let's break this down now so we don't have to repeat it when we arrive at 11:1.

In the ESV, both 10:22 and 11:1 use the same English word, *assurance*, but in Greek, it's two different words: *plerophoria* (10:22) and *hypostasis* (11:1). *Plerophoria* means *certainty or most certain confidence*, and is used four times in the New Testament: Colossians 2:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Hebrews 6:11, and here in Hebrews 10:22.

Hypostasis has a more complex definition. It appears five times: 2 Corinthians 9:4, 11:17, Hebrews 1:3, 3:14, 11:1. Here's a definition from Strongs. A few other few other lexicons were consulted and all are in broad agreement.

g5287. ὑπόστασις hypostasis; from a compound of 5259 and 2476; a setting under (support), i.e. (figuratively) concretely, essence, or abstractly, assurance (objectively or subjectively): — confidence, confident, person, substance.

- AV (5) - confidence 2, confident 1, person 1, substance 1;
- a setting or placing under, thing put under, substructure, foundation
- that which has foundation, is firm
- that which has actual existence; a substance, real being
- the substantial quality, nature, of a person or thing
- the steadfastness of mind, firmness, courage, resolution
- confidence, firm trust, assurance

When Paul used hypostasis in 2 Corinthians, it seems he leaned more into the confidence side of this definition. The author of Hebrews isn't that consistent. In Hebrews 1:3, it is translated as *nature*. In Hebrews 3:14, *confidence*. And in Hebrews 11:1, *assurance*. Each of those is from the ESV. If you look in the Lexham English Bible (LEB) in the same order, you get *essence, commitment, and realization*.

Here's the point. The ESV's *assurance* in 10:22 shouldn't be interpreted the same as 11:1. Why? Here in 10:22, the author referred to what faith produces in us: the assurance - *plerophoria* - OF faith, the certain confidence that faith provides. In 11:1, the author (according to the ESV) said faith IS assurance - *hypostasis*. It seems the LEB's translation of 11:1, is more accurate.

"¹ Now faith is the realization of what is hoped for, the proof of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1 (LEB)

So, our faith produces the blessed assurance that we sing about. Please note that assurance and faith are not the same. Faith produces assurance. Why is that distinction important? There's a brand of faith that's based on a subjective feeling of being saved. To put it the way that it was put to many of us growing up, *you just know that you know that you're saved*. The author demolishes that definition in the next chapter.

But here, we're talking about something that genuine faith produces: *full assurance*. And it is in that full assurance that we draw near. How is that assurance produced? Everything that is packed into the *therefore* we referenced at the start. Knowing all that, our faith produces a full assurance that we can draw near with confidence!

Q IS YOUR ASSURANCE BASED UPON WHO HE IS AND WHAT HE'S DONE OR HAVE YOU BASED IT UPON HOW YOU PERFORM?

Then, we draw near with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and with bodies washed with pure water. The sprinkling is a tie to the priestly duties of the old covenant, which the author has covered extensively. They sprinkled the altar with the blood of a sacrifice that could not perfect our conscience (Hebrews 9:9), but Christ sprinkles our hearts with His blood, effectively cleansing the conscience.

Washing with pure water can link two ways. It can refer to the washing of baptism. It could also link well with Christ's teaching in John 7:38.

³⁸ "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" John 7:38

LET US #2

²³ "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." Hebrews 10:23

We don't say *hold fast* anymore. It's just not part of our vernacular anymore. To hold fast is to *firmly grasp*, to *not waver*, to *be immovable*. This is precisely what some of these Hebrew believers weren't doing. They were wavering. Having explained all that he did, the author called them back to faithfulness.

Hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. Why?

It's because the LORD is faithful. He is faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13). This touches upon the core motivator of our faith. Our motivation is not a fear of loss, therefore we work hard to please Him. Our motivation is the grace of God that He loves us, even when we aren't lovable. The Christian life lived out of a sense of dutiful obedience, or fearful obedience, not only misses the point but might've missed salvation altogether. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was correcting a similar problem: returning to the law of Moses. He was much sharper and to the point than the author of Hebrews.

¹ "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— ⁶ just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'?" Galatians 3:1-6

Q WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DELIGHTED AND DUTIFUL OBEDIENCE? WHICH ONE DO YOU BELIEVE THE LORD DESIRES?

Though Paul's tone is sharper, he and the author are saying the same thing. *Hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering because he who promised is faithful.* He's faithful when you're on the mountaintop and when you're in the valley. He's faithful when you nail it and when you get nailed. The Father knew exactly what He was getting when He adopted you as His son. He also knows precisely what you will become. Should you want to obey Him? Absolutely. But that obedience doesn't come from fear of loss. You're going to receive the inheritance that He's promised. Instead, our obedience flows from a heart filled with gratitude and love for the One who saved us!

But catch this. We hold fast together! This is a *let us* statement. Holding fast all alone isn't really holding fast. If the command is *let us* hold fast, it's implied that you don't do it in isolation from the larger faith community. Every believer is to hold fast along with other believers who are holding fast. Are there situations in the world where community is challenging because of oppression? Of course. But even under oppression, believers find each other and form a community.

Q IF A PERSON FINDS NO DESIRE WITHIN TO LOVE AND OBEY THE LORD, HAVE THEY BEEN BORN AGAIN?

LET US #3

"²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Hebrews 10:24-25

Our third and final *let us* is about coming together. Let me finish my thoughts from the previous paragraph. It's ironic and troubling when believers place a low value on gathering when there are believers in oppressed countries who risk their lives to gather with other believers. What is wrong with us? We've heard it all.

- The church hurt me.
- The church is full of hypocrites.
- The church is too worldly.
- The church is... blah, blah, blah.

Can you imagine the utter disbelief that an Iranian or Chinese believer would have when they hear our excuses? It's a sign of our spoiled, privileged, western disposition that we need the church to be so attuned to our personal expectations. But, instead of giving full voice to our inner cynics, let's be fair to these broad objections, and deal with them.

The Church Hurt Me. We must distinguish between sexual abuse (which sadly happens) and run-of-the-mill hurts and disappointments. If someone in your church has sexually abused you, your hurt is understandable. You are not in mind here. We're aiming at lesser offenses.

There is a saying: *there's no hurt like church hurt*. The sentiment isn't hard to understand. You were hurt by people in the one place where it shouldn't have happened. The church should be a place for healing, not getting hurt. But there's one big problem with holding up this lofty standard. God's Word anticipates that people will be hurt in local churches. Since God's Word anticipates this and makes provisions for how we should handle our differences, who are we to expect any local church to have it all together at all times? Who are we to expect any believer to always be on point with loving their neighbor as they love themselves when God Himself expects that we won't? If the LORD of Hosts anticipates our failure, is gracious toward us, and makes provision for us, we should do as He does. We should anticipate hurt. We should expect the failure of others to love us rightly. And we should be gracious and make provision for them, just as God does for us.

Should sweep things under the rug? No. But neither should we nitpick one another into begrudged submission. If love indeed covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8), then our patience with each other should be long-suffering and enduring. Jesus makes no provision for someone sinned against to only sit in the corner and lick their wounds. Jesus also makes no provision for someone to steamroll others, justifying their actions with cherry-picked Scriptures. Both have a responsibility to reconcile.

To the steamroller, Jesus says,

²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." Matthew 5:23-24

To the steamrolled, Jesus says,

¹⁵ If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." Matthew 18:15

No one is exempt from reconciliation. Church hurt often happens because one or both parties fail even to try. However, it is never a justifiable reason to stop gathering. You'll never stand before the LORD with adequate justification for failing to gather.

Q WHAT IS THE DANGER OF UNRECONCILED RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE CHURCH?

The Church is Full of Hypocrites. This is perhaps the most common objection, but it's based on a faulty understanding of hypocrisy. What is a hypocrite? The faulty understanding is that hypocrites don't practice what they preach. Well, by that definition, *everyone* is a hypocrite. No one perfectly practices what they preach. People can't even live up to the standards they hold for themselves, much less the standards of God's Word. That's not being a hypocrite. That's being human.

In Matthew 23, when Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites, he has a more nuanced definition in mind. The Pharisees were indeed not practicing what they preached, but what made them hypocrites was they acted as if they did. That's what a hypocrite is: an actor. You're pretending to be something you're not.

The accusation of hypocrisy in the church is itself (potentially) hypocritical. You're pretending to have moral high ground where you can accuse people who are 1) just like you, imperfect and in process, 2) actually walking in obedience to gather when you aren't, and 3) have chosen to love people in their supposed hypocrisy, while you hold up a kind of contractual, conditional love that only loves when your standards are met.

Who's the real hypocrite here? You're demanding a standard from others that you cannot achieve. Repent, crucify the cynic, gather, and find healing in Christ within the community of faith.

Q HOW DOES HYPOCRISY DESTROY FELLOWSHIP WITHIN THE CHURCH?

The Church is Too Worldly. This is a special kind of objection that tends to only come from professing believers. This objection also has some merit. It's not hard to find churches where their gatherings feel more like a concert with a motivational speaker. The mega-church has done harm in this area. There's nothing inherently wrong with mega-churches. Not all mega-churches have this worldly vibe, but many do. Also, worldliness isn't limited to mega-churches. Smaller local churches are guilty as well. And it's not always because of praise bands and colored lights. Sometimes, worldliness creeps in through the compromise of doctrine. Churches that sing orthodox hymns but deny that homosexuality is sinful are just as worldly as mega-churches that embrace orthodox doctrine but have big bands, light shows, and motivational pep-talks.

However, the question here is whether the worldly nature of some churches give believers a license to refrain from gathering. The answer is a resounding no. The answer is always to find like-minded believers and gather with them for worship regularly. It's true that some are disenfranchised because they think the whole institution is broken from top to bottom, so they have a problem with all churches simply based on form and function. Some claim that the institution, since Constantine, has been infiltrated with Babylonian practice. Regardless of all that, the Scripture is still clear: assemble often for gathered worship.

Find a way to get over the objections of worldliness and gather with other believers. We don't gather for the sake of an institution. We gather for Jesus and for each other. For Him because He's our Savior, and He loves us. For each other because we need the fellowship of other believers to become fully formed followers of Jesus.

Q WORLDLY CHURCHES EXIST BECAUSE WORLDLY BELIEVERS EXIST. HOW CAN BELIEVERS GUARD THEMSELVES AGAINST WORLDLINESS?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Look, we could fill in the blank with our reasons all day, but the words in these verses still bring us back to a decision to walk in obedience by gathering or disobedience in isolation. You can't accomplish any *let us* commands outside of the church fellowship. You can't stir anyone up to love and good works, nor encourage anyone, if you aren't gathering with the body of Christ. So, let's wrap up part one with this.

These *let us* commands imply that we regularly gather for worship and fellowship. If that's the case, let us stop pretending that we can have thriving spiritual lives apart from gathered worship with the local church. Let us cease with self-excusing justifications for not assembling. And let us do these things together as the LORD intends for us. The imperfections that we see within the Body of Christ should highlight the need for faith. In faith, let us gather with grateful hearts and encourage one another as we see His return drawing near.

Q IF GOD CHOSE THE FOOLISH THINGS OF THE WORLD TO BUILD HIS CHURCH, SHOULD WE NOT EXPECT FLAWS AND IMPERFECTIONS IN THE PEOPLE HE IS REDEEMING?



Therefore, Faith - Part Two

HEBREWS 10:19-39

In part one, we noted that this passage has three sections.

- Let Us (vv 19-25)
- A Warning (vv 26-31)
- How To (vv 32-39)

In part one we covered the *let us* statements. Now, we're entering the author's warning.

A WARNING

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."
Hebrews 10:26-31

The supremacy of Christ over the law of Moses, which the author had meticulously unpacked, gave this warning considerable weight. Think about what you would be rejecting. The author's pastoral heart for his flock is pleading loud and clear.

Jesus Christ has been portrayed in every way, superior to what some of you are desiring. Don't go back! Hold fast! Believe! If you don't, it demonstrates that you never believed in the first place, and you'll be consigning yourself to a fate intended for the adversaries! It's nothing but fiery, all-consuming judgment!

So, let's clear up a potential misunderstanding. When the author said, "if we go on sinning deliberately," he had something specific in mind. He wasn't talking about moral failures. The deliberate sin in mind was what he had been teaching against all along: *unbelief*. What's in mind here is a deliberate unbelief in the Gospel. If you reject the Gospel, as the author said, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. Outside of Christ Jesus, there is no forgiveness of sins, inheritance, promises, or eternal life, but only a fearful expectation of judgment.

Note the fury of fire that awaits was intended for the adversaries. Remember what Jesus said would happen to the goats at the final judgment?

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Matthew 25:41

The eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. Did you know that God never intended for humans to go there? It wasn't made for us. The eternal fire was made for supernatural rebels, Satan, and his demonic servants. But because mankind followed Satan in his rebellion, people will end up there as well, as members of Satan's hoard of rebels. That tells us two things.

First, God doesn't send people to hell. He didn't prepare hell for humans. Hell was made for beings beyond human comprehension. It was Adam who consigned humanity to hell by his rebellion. Adam, created to be the head of mankind - like Christ is the head of His church - condemned humanity by his actions - just as Christ redeems humanity by His actions (See Romans 5).

Second, hell is far worse than anything you can dream up. We have the descriptions of fire, darkness, and undying worms given in the New Testament, but those are just analogies that we can understand. Hell was prepared as a place for the punishment and torment of rebelling supernatural beings. Ask yourself this. What degree of severity is necessary to punish an anointed guardian cherub? What magnitude of judgment is sufficient to torment powerful spiritual beings? Now consider that people will end up there as well. It makes every hellfire and brimstone sermon you've ever heard pale in comparison!

Q HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED THE SEVERITY OF THE LAKE OF FIRE? DOES THE AUTHOR'S WARNING CAUSE YOU TO EXAMINE YOUR FAITH?

According to verse twenty-nine, unbelief tramples Jesus underfoot, profanes His blood, and outrages the Holy Spirit. Hopefully, outraging the Holy Spirit isn't on your bucket list. This is blaspheming the Spirit. Unbelief prevented God's people from entering His rest (Hebrews 3:19). Unbelief infuriates the LORD. He swore in His wrath that they would not enter His rest (Psalm 95:11). Why so furious? Redemption came at the cost of His eternal Son's life. The brutal murder of His eternal Son ups the ante on the outrage against unbelief. Put simply, when your daddy is also the judge, those who commit crimes against you will get the book thrown at

them. Unbelief is the crime, outrage and furious judgment are the penalty. No wonder the author penned one of the most memorable statements in God's Word concerning the LORD's outrage.

"³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."
Hebrews 10:31

SOME CLARIFICATION

Unfortunately, many Christians use the word *hell* as a blanket word. It's usually a general reference to where unsaved people go after death. But the Bible is more nuanced. The Hebrew words *sheol* and *gehenna* are frequently translated into English as *hell*. Yet, *sheol* and *gehenna* do not speak of the same things. Likewise, in Greek, *hades* and *tartarus* are translated as *hell*, and both have different meanings.

Then we have two things in Revelation that add to our pile of hell concepts. There's the bottomless pit, mentioned in Revelation 9:1-2 and 20:1-3. And there's the lake of fire, into which *hades* is cast. That's not a metaphorical way of saying all those in *hades* will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. The LORD will cast death and *hades* into the Lake of Fire first, and then those not found in the book of life.

Let's clear this up.

- Sheol
- Gehenna
- Hades
- Tartarus
- The Bottomless Pit
- The Lake of Fire

First, the Hebrew and Greek words *sheol* and *hades* refer to the same thing: the underworld or the holding place. When Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he was describing the holding place.

"²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side." Luke 16:22-23

The Jewish understanding of the holding place was that it had two compartments, one for the righteous and the other for the unrighteous. In the parable, after dying, the poor man, Lazarus, entered rest with Abraham and the righteous, but the rich man entered torment with the unrighteous. For this discussion, we're focusing on the part of *hades* reserved for the unrighteous, but it's noteworthy that before Christ, both the righteous and unrighteous went to *sheol/hades*, the holding place.

Second, the Hebrew word *gehenna* and the lake of fire are synonymous. Jesus refers to *gehenna* multiple times, referring to the final judgment.

“²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28

One part of these verses securely tie them to final judgment. Both of them speak of the LORD throwing the body into gehenna. Today, when the unrighteous die, their bodies go to the grave, and their spirits go to hades. The body is cast into gehenna only after the second resurrection at the final judgment in Revelation 20:11-15.

Last, we have tartarus and the bottomless pit. Tartarus only appears once in the New Testament.

“⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell [tartarus] and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment;” 2 Peter 2:4

Peter borrowed tartarus from Greek religious beliefs. Tartarus was an abyss (bottomless pit) beneath Hades (the underworld) where Zeus imprisoned the Titans. Peter borrows the word tartarus to tell the real story. God imprisoned the sons of God from Genesis 6:1-4 in tartarus – the bottomless pit – because they rebelled and, according to Jude verse 6, left their proper position of authority. You can see the connection now. Tartarus and the bottomless pit are the same.

Q WERE YOU AWARE OF THE MULTI-FACETED BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HELL? DO THESE GREEK AND HEBREW CONCEPTS CHANGE YOUR THINKING?

HOW TO

Thankfully, the author follows this warning with instructions for his hearers/readers on how to return to faithfulness. If unbelief is the problem, belief is the remedy, so how does a professing believer buttress his soul against unbelief?

“³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” Hebrews 10:32-34

This isn't the only time the LORD gives this instruction. Jesus told the church of Ephesus to do the same thing.

“^{5a} Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.”- Revelation 2:5a

Remembrance can be a powerful motivator. The Israelites were constantly building altars and erecting monuments in significant places so that they could remember what God did in that place. The LORD's Supper was instituted to remember Christ's spilled blood and broken body for our redemption. Here, the author invokes another call for remembrance. Recall the former days. Specifically, remember what you endured after you initially believed! Remember how you loved others after you believed! Remember the joy you experienced when you suffered for your faith! Jesus told the Ephesians to recall how they loved when they first believed. So should we.

Q REMEMBRANCE IS OFFERED AS A REMEDY AGAINST UNBELIEF. HOW DOES REMEMBRANCE MOTIVATE YOU TO RETURN TO FAITHFULNESS?

Of course, building monuments isn't always the practical way to remember, so here are a few practical ways we can remember.

- **Journaling** - Here are some common objections. *My handwriting is atrocious. I'm not a writer. I'm not wordy.* All three of those objections are easily overcome by putting pen to paper and practicing this discipline. Also, there's an undeserved stereotype that mainly women journal. That might be true in recent history, but throughout history, men journaled prolifically. The manliest of men in history usually maintained a journal. It's a discipline that waned as men were increasingly made to believe that manly men were of few words. Get over it, and start doing this. It is the most practical way to create a record of what God has done in your life. Don't expect that you'll be able to rely on your memory. Pen on paper and some effort to keep up with what you write will outlive your brain cells.
- **Testify** - when the LORD does something, don't keep it to yourself. Share it with others. Say it out loud again and again. When we bring others into our joy, it becomes a part of the larger faith community and part of their faith as well.
- **Make something** - this is kind of like monument building, but on a smaller scale. When God does something you want to remember, make something that will remind you of His faithfulness. It doesn't have to be complex or super creative. Order a coffee mug with a personalized picture or message commemorating what the LORD did.

Q WHAT DO YOU DO TO REMEMBER THE LORD'S FAITHFULNESS?

^{35b} ...do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For,
'Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;
³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him'

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.” Hebrews 10:35b-39

Believe. Enduring in belief will result in receiving the promised rest. The author concludes his thoughts on a high note. We are not of those who shrink back. Again, including himself in this, together we don't shrink back, together we walk in faith and preserve our souls. As I wrap this article, I'm once again struck by the togetherness of our faith. We persevere in the faith together. None of the commands for individual holiness, individual sanctification, and individual repentance are complete outside of the togetherness of the body of Christ. Together, we do all things. We find encouragement, upbuilding, and consolation (1 Corinthians 14:3) when we are together. We suffer spiritual malnutrition when we aren't together.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It seems that everywhere we look there are men and women who are shrinking back. Call it backsliding, deconstruction, or whatever, those who depart are demonstrating that from the start they were not united in faith with us. The author did not mince words. *Those who shrink back are destroyed.* The present tense - *are* destroyed - is reminiscent of Christ's words to Nicodemus.

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” John 3:18

If you aren't believing, you're condemned already. The call is to repent and believe, always. Faith in the Son takes you from condemned to redeemed. The author has hope for better things. *Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.*

Q WHAT DID THE AUTHOR MEAN THAT FAITH PRESERVES OUR SOULS?



What is Faith?

HEBREWS 11

We have arrived at a hallmark chapter in the New Testament. Hebrews chapter eleven is one of the most cherished chapters in the whole Bible. It's frequently called the Hall of Faith. The author cites no less than eight patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as examples of men and women whose faith pleased the LORD. The author meant to inspire, encourage, and remind his readers/listeners of what it meant to be a person of pleasing faith.

Take note. We're going to depart from a more traditional use of the phrase *great faith*. Instead, we'll be using the phrase *pleasing faith*, first because of Hebrews 12:6. Second, because our minds draw different conclusions between the words *great* and *pleasing*. For sure, pleasing faith is indeed great, but greatness isn't something to be sought in God's kingdom. It is better to seek to please God than to be great in His kingdom. In doing so, one will take care of the other. So, *pleasing faith* it is.

Also, the pedigree of faith isn't necessarily judged by the size of the logical leap. We're going to find out that giant leaps in logic aren't necessarily what makes faith pleasing to God. Do logical leaps mean anything with faith? Yes. At the end of the day, faith is faith because we're trusting something that can't be proven by natural means and, therefore, isn't apparent to everyone. But within the body of Christ, we shouldn't engage in a greatness test by measuring the size of the departure from apparent reality.

Q BEFORE WE GET INTO THIS CHAPTER, HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE FAITH?

DEFINE FAITH

So, with all that said, we should define faith. The author has dropped the word faith so much in this letter/sermon it's surprising that he waited this late to define it.

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation." Hebrews 11:1-2

Before we go any further, recall that we did a deeper dive into the word assurance two chapters ago. If you missed it, please go read it before going any further. We won't redo it in this chapter. Here, the author said faith is the assurance of things hoped for. In chapter ten he described assurance as something that faith produces. If you have questions about that, please re-read unit three, week two.

The ESV's translation of this verse seems to obscure some of the meaning. The Lexham English Bible's (LEB) translation perhaps captures the meaning better.

¹ Now faith is the realization of what is hoped for, the proof of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1 (LEB)

The difference is that the ESV's words, *assurance* and *conviction*, are replaced with *realization* and *proof*. Based on what we've learned (two chapters ago), one might re-render this verse to communicate a fuller understanding of this definition.

Now faith is the realization of the concrete reality of what we expect, the proof of those things that we can't see.

In this verse, assurance is related to the concrete reality of a thing. It's the Greek word *hypostasis*, and the author used it in chapter one to describe Christ's nature.

"3a He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his **nature** (hypostasis)," Hebrews 1:3a (emphasis added)

Next, the word *hoped* has nothing to do with wishful thinking or the possibility of not getting what we're hoping for. New Testament hope is based on concrete reality. It is the same fact-based realization that we have about sunrises and sunsets. They happen, and we give no serious thought to the possibility that they won't. So when the author said the assurance (realization) of things hoped for (expected), he had the same kind of concrete expectation in mind that we have about sunsets. *It will happen.*

Q WOULD YOU CONSIDER YOUR FAITH TO BE BASED IN CONCRETE REALITY?

However, that's not the end of the definition. He finished it with the conviction of things not seen. Again, the ESV rendering is not the clearest. Other English translations use less ambiguous and perhaps more accurate words, *evidence*, and *proof*. People have sincere convictions that are sincerely wrong. Conviction seems too mushy of a word for what the author was teaching. What appears to be a better rendering is *evidence* or *proof* of things not seen.

This would make better sense with the first half of the definition. Is faith the realization of what we expect, based on our conviction or proof of things not seen? The author finished this chapter with examples that leaned more toward an evidence-based faith than a faith based on mere conviction.

So, moving forward, the working definition we'll employ is more along the lines of the LEB's translation than the ESV's.

Now faith is the realization of what is hoped for, the proof of things not seen.

Q WHAT IS THE PROOF OF THINGS NOT SEEN WHICH UNDERPIN YOUR FAITH?

EXAMPLES OF PLEASING FAITH

"⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Hebrews 11:6

We're leaping to 11:6 first because it's helpful. Each person listed lived a faithful life like this. Also, this is one of those chapters where a preacher could preach for a month. But we can't. So, we're going to deal with all these examples in a single survey. Many try to devote special time to each person the author referenced, but that's not what is best for the author's point. Even he did not dive deep into each example but in order, gave brief summaries. So, let's look at the primary examples, applying the definition of faith as we go.

#1 CREATION

"³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." Hebrews 11:3

This one might seem counterintuitive to 21st-century Western ears. We're almost entirely in the opposite paradigm. We've been educated that the universe, indeed, did create itself. But, by faith - the realized expectation - we understand the universe was created by the LORD, not made from what can be seen. In other words, it is *self-evident* that the universe didn't create and organize itself, so based on what is clearly understood, we know that the LORD created everything we see. He designed creation to clearly show that He created it. The Apostle Paul echoed this sentiment in his opening remarks in Romans.

"²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Romans 1:20

#2 ABEL

“⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.” Hebrews 11:4

We don't know much about Abel except for the episode between him and Cain in Genesis 4. We know that God regarded his sacrifice and not Cain's, which provoked Cain to murder. That's about it. So, what we're about to say can be applied to every person given as an example in Hebrews eleven. They were faithful to what God had revealed about Himself up to that moment. Abel didn't know as much about the LORD as Abraham, and Abraham didn't know as much as Moses, etc. But each one was faithful to what they did know, and that is how they were rewarded.

What did Abel know? He knew what his parents told him. They likely shared, ad nauseam, everything that happened to them in the Garden and the aftermath of their rebellious decision. Abel knew that the LORD killed an animal to clothe his parents, and they continued that pattern, killing animals to cover their nakedness. Abel likely understood that his nakedness needed covering before the LORD, and blood had to be spilled. By faith, he took informed action, and God commended him. He made a leap based on everything he knew. Neither was it blind nor uninformed. It was the logical step to take even though the LORD had given no instructions about that next step.

Q IN OUR CASE, WE HAVE THE FULLY REVEALED WORD OF THE LORD BY THE SCRIPTURES. HOW WILL OUR FAITHFULNESS BE MEASURED?

#3 ENOCH

“⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.” Hebrews 11:5

Similar to Abel, we don't know much about Enoch. Outside of genealogies, his only mentions are here in Hebrews and in the book of Jude. But what we can learn here, based on our definition of faith, is that Enoch lived a life informed by what he knew about the LORD. He made his decisions based on what He knew was true because it was evident. He pursued the LORD continually until he was taken up, which seemed to be his reward for a life of pleasing faith. If we can draw anything from Enoch, he saw what was evident about God, lived accordingly with a faith informed by what he knew, and it pleased God, resulting in his commendation and eventual taking.

#4 NOAH

“⁷ By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the sav-

ing of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." Hebrews 11:7

Noah gets way more press than Enoch, and at times he likely wished he received Enoch's treatment. Noah's story is the first one where we get a closer glimpse of long-suffering, enduring faith. The LORD warned him that a flood was coming. He warned him perhaps 120 years in advance (Genesis 6:3). We can deduce that Noah first believed God because he obeyed and built the ark. He believed God would do something no one had ever seen because of what he already knew about God. What the LORD had revealed about Himself was evident; Noah believed it and reasoned that what God said he would do in the future was as good as done. Thus, in faith, he built an ark for a flood of the likes that had never been seen before or since. But, his reward is that he became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith, which is the same righteousness we receive in Christ when we believe.

Q WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FAITH IN JESUS AS LONG-SUFFERING AND ENDURING?

#5 ABRAHAM

"⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God... ¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'" Hebrews 11:8-10, 17

Something is going on with Abraham's call that doesn't always make it into our sermons and Sunday school lessons. Broadly speaking, we have taught that God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans. In one respect, that is true. It's Abraham's birthplace. But in our generalizations, we forget or pass over the fact that Abraham did not begin the journey to Canaan. His father, Terah, uprooted their family from Ur, and began moving to Canaan, but they didn't quite make it.

"³¹ Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there." Genesis 11:31

It seems that Terah, Abraham's father, was told to move first. Did God tell him? Did he get a job offer? The Bible doesn't say, but Terah felt compelled to move his family to Canaan one way or another. Some have taught that until God called him, Abraham worshiped other gods. They may be wrong. What if Abraham was next in line of Shem's descendants who

remained faithful to the LORD? What if the LORD told Terah to start the journey to Canaan, and his son, Abraham, finished it? These are speculations because we don't get this much detail from Scripture, but it explains Abraham's faith. It wasn't an uneducated, blind faith. He decided to obey the LORD because he had seen His faithfulness in generations of his family. We may not be able to die for that statement, but it's consistent with what we've been learning about faith.

Now, look at verse seventeen. By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. How? How can any father do such a thing? This was the son of promise, who came to them long after their fruitfulness had faded. Why would God give him and then take him away like this? What was going through Abraham's mind?

"¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." Hebrews 11:19

This verse is crucial to our understanding of faith. Abraham wasn't blindly obeying the LORD. The word *considered* means *to calculate*. Abraham did exactly what we've been saying at this high-cost, high-stress moment. He remembered what God had done in the past and, in faith, made an informed leap of logic that God would raise his son from the dead. God had kept every promise. He'll also keep this one. *This is gritty, real-time, in-the-moment, pleasing faith.*

Q HOW HAVE YOU BEEN TAUGHT FAITH? IS IT BASED ON AN INFORMED LEAP OF LOGIC, OR IS IT BLIND?

#6 SARAH

"¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised." Hebrews 11:11

Sarah gets a bad rap for finding the LORD's promise about Isaac humorous. In Genesis 18:12, Sarah couldn't believe what she heard and laughed. She was an older woman, post-menopausal, long past her child-bearing years, and she knew it. Yet, she got over her disbelief and believed the word of the LORD. She had seen His work in their family and chose to believe even the most ridiculous-sounding promise she'd ever heard. She considered Him faithful, so she believed.

#7 ISAAC

"²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau." Hebrews 11:20

This one is a little sticky. If you're familiar with the story, you'll remember that Jacob deceived Isaac. The blessing that Isaac spoke over Jacob was intended for Esau. But the sibling rivalry isn't what the author has in mind here. He zooms in on Isaac's faith. Although he was literally blind at this

point, Isaac wasn't blind to the rivalry between his sons. He also knew the prophetic word that the older will serve the younger. Despite all that conflict, he knew that God was faithful and, in faith, spoke blessings. He trusted that the LORD's word would prevail and the promise that began with him would continue.

#8 JACOB

"²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff."
Hebrews 11:21

The blessing of Joseph's sons came at the end of a long saga. Jacob believed Joseph to be dead, but the LORD brought things full circle. This blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh was done in faith that, in a manner of speaking, saw the LORD bring his son back from the dead. Jacob worshiped and blessed his grandsons in a faith that was renewed in the goodness of God's hand on his family.

#9 MOSES

"²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward." Hebrews 11:24-26

Like he did with Abraham, the author dwelled on Moses a little longer than the rest. We'll only highlight these verses. Moses didn't grow up ignorant of his heritage. By providence, Pharaoh's daughter hired his birth mother, Jochebed, to wean him (Exodus 2:1-10). It's hard to say how long that was, but it could've been three to four years. After that, who knows? Perhaps she remained in Pharaoh's employ as a nanny of some kind, but the Bible doesn't say. However, we do know that Moses grew up knowing he was Hebrew. He knew his heritage and, most importantly, about the God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Knowing what he knew, with informed faith, he chose reproach instead of status, mistreatment instead of pleasure.

Q HOW DOES AN INFORMED FAITH AFFECT HOW WE UNDERSTAND PAUL'S TEACHING THAT WE WALK BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGHT?

LOOKING AHEAD!

Then, the author drops verse twenty-six. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt. We skipped some crucial verses to hold them for the end. Let's look at them.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city." Hebrews 11:13-16

How do generations upon generations of God's people die without seeing the fulfillment of the promise yet continue believing generation after generation? There's only one answer. The LORD's faithfulness is either remembered or renewed, or both, in every generation. Let's be clear about something. The Bible doesn't record that every generation of God's people witnessed some sign or wonder that renewed their faith. Some did, but not all. So, either they witnessed His faithfulness or they recalled it. And through this cycle of the LORD speaking and preserving His Word, Israel kept believing. Was their belief perfect? No. Did they ever stray into disbelief? Constantly. But the LORD kept faithful men and women, even if they were few, and He used them to keep faith alive in His people.

They looked forward to Christ. They may not have known Him by His name, Jesus, but they knew He would come. They looked forward to a kingdom and a city that had not yet been built. So do we. And with them, we know that we are strangers and exiles on the earth. Our country and citizenship is a heavenly one. But the key to pleasing faith that endures is found in verse fifteen. *If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.*

Keep your mind fixed on Jesus.

Q HOW WOULD A PERSON'S FIXATION ON THEIR PAST BE DETRIMENTAL TO THEIR FAITH?

⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Romans 8:6-8

If you constantly think about where you came from, you'll return to it. If you constantly think about where you're heading, you'll endure to it. Paul's admonition helps us understand how these men and women persevered without receiving the promise. They kept looking ahead. What happened to that generation of Israelites in the wilderness who constantly complained and longed to return to Egypt? They died and did not enter His rest (Hebrews 3:19).



Durable Faith

HEBREWS 12:1-17

Though many find Hebrews chapter eleven to be a source of great encouragement, chapter twelve is a strong rival. It starts with this encouragement that we have an enormous cloud of people who've gone ahead of us in the faith and a directive: therefore, endure as they did. This chapter is all about endurance from beginning to end. As much as the accounts of our forefathers encourage us, putting our hands to the plow is a forward-facing effort. Jesus did just that. He put his hand to the plow and endured.

In that spirit, let's move ahead with this passage because we have lots of ground to cover.

"¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:1-2

If you've been following along, you know that this great cloud of witnesses is the men and women mentioned in chapter eleven. Some have taught that this cloud includes all believers who have gone before us. That might be true, and there is no reason that it can't be true, but the author was not angling for them. He was aiming for the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. Why? Because the ones he sought to reach in this teaching were believing Jews who were tempted to return to the Old Covenant. And for our sake, those are the ones we should also consider. The very reason they are essential to his argument is because they believed with faith yet never saw the fulfillment.

"³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised," Hebrews 11:39

Q HOW IS OUR FAITH SIMILAR TO THEIRS? THEY WERE WAITING FOR CHRIST TO ARRIVE. WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

This cloud is these people: those who were commended for their faith without seeing its fulfillment. They testify to us with a durable faith undeterred by the long wait. This chapter is entitled Durable Faith because of them. Their faith took a beating and kept on ticking. Their faith was tested and kept on passing. It's not that they never felt like giving up or taking shortcuts or that they never felt abandoned. Read the Psalms, and you'll find all of those feelings. Read Abraham's account, and you'll see that he and Sarah tried a shortcut or two. None of them were perfect. Yet, they all endured to the end, believing in a promise that wasn't fulfilled in their days.

Now, we, who have seen the promise fulfilled in Christ Jesus, can be encouraged by their faith. Those who endured without seeing still serve to strengthen those of us who have seen and need endurance. We need a durable faith like theirs because we also await fulfillment: the promise of His return. We have kindred hopes in that regard. They endured, so we, too, may endure to see the fulfillment of our shared faith.

LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT AND CLINGY SIN

Durable faith casts aside the things that weigh us down in our endurance. There's a genuine sense in which the people who don't endure fail to do this. These weights aren't necessarily sinful things. Some things in life aren't sinful, yet they weigh us down. These weights can include things like hobbies, side-hustles, social commitments, and sports. They're not evil in themselves, but they demand time.

Some protest. Don't people always fill their lives with side hustles, work, family, and recreation? Yes, they do, but we all have good works that the Father has prepared for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10), so though there are good things that may interest us, they also can serve as weights that hinder us from running the race we're called to run.

There seems to be a relationship between the weights and the sins that cling so closely. The sins that cling so closely often find significant footholds in the lives of those of us who overcommit. When we leave no space for cultivating our spiritual lives, sin clings more easily to the gaping, vulnerable places that develop from a lack of growth. The durability of our faith is significantly affected by every weight and the clingy sins that accompany them, which we refuse to cast off.

The great cloud of witnesses stands as examples of men and women who cast off the extra weights and ran with endurance.

Q WHAT EXTRA WEIGHTS ARE YOU CARRYING WHICH INTERFERE WITH YOUR DEVOTION?

LOOK TO JESUS

Along with the great cloud, we have Jesus, the one they anticipated but never saw. We have seen Him. Take note of His endurance and what motivated Him to stay the course.

"² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2

What was that joy? It caused him to endure all of his persecutions, beatings, and eventual shameful and gruesome death on the cross. What was this joy? It had to be so desirable for Him that He would endure such suffering. What was it? It is a two-fold joy. The first half would be returning to the glory that He has shared with the Father for eternity.

"⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." John 17:5

You'd think that would be enough, but there's more. We read about the other half of it way back in chapter two.

"¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. **That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers,** ¹² saying, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.'" Hebrews 2:11-12

The other half of that joy was presenting all those He saves to the Father as His brothers. He longs to bring all His adopted siblings into the Father's presence and say, "*Abba, our family is here!*"

Likewise, we look forward to that same joy. The joy of uniting with Jesus, our elder brother, the Father, the Spirit, and the whole family of God that Jesus ransomed. We endure by looking to Him at the Father's right hand, just as, in a sense, He endured by looking forward to us and the Father. In doing this, we will endure with durable faith.

Q WHY DOES FAITH NEED DURABILITY?

HE DISCIPLINES US

"³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.'" Hebrews 12:3-6

What is God's discipline? It deserves a discussion because the way the author used the concept of discipline and what comes to mind may not be entirely congruent. For many the word *discipline*, may stir up two primary

thoughts. First is punishment for wrongdoing, particularly with children. The second is routines and habits. When a person seems disciplined they possess a faithfulness to a daily regimen. But the author has something bigger in mind that encapsulates both of these, and much more.

The Greek word that the ESV translated as discipline is *paideia*, which means *tutorage, education, or training*. By implication, it can be linked with either of the meanings mentioned earlier, but the word itself has a broader definition. The author had something more than punishment or regimen in mind. He was aiming for something more along the lines of training. The discipline of the LORD, then, is the training that He chooses for us to build endurance for our good and His glory. How does He train us? He trains us through suffering, which is why the author reminded us of Christ's sufferings and how we haven't resisted to the point of shedding our blood. That's not to say that no one ever dies for their faith, but this letter was written to the living who still needed to endure well.

Q HAVE YOU EVER TRAINED FOR AN EVENT? WHAT KIND OF DISCIPLINE DID YOU UNDERTAKE SO THAT YOU'D ENDURE IN THE EVENT?

"⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Hebrews 12:7-11

If the Father trained His Son, Jesus Christ, through suffering, we adopted sons will receive the same training. We will endure suffering as our training so that we might share in His holiness. Also, notice that you are not a legitimate son if you aren't being trained / disciplined. How is this relevant to the author's listeners / readers?

In all probability, these Jewish believers were disillusioned with the amount of suffering that came with following Jesus. The Old Covenant included promises of blessing for obedience. (See Deuteronomy 28). Jesus also promised blessings (Matthew 5:1-12), but those blessings in this life are primarily spiritual. This is an informed speculation because the reason for their weariness is never spelled out clearly. In chapter ten, the author listed several of their sufferings, including the plundering of their property (Hebrews 10:32-34). It all seemed so contrary to the promised blessings for obedience given to Israel at Sinai.

Q HAVE YOU EVER QUESTIONED THE VALIDITY OF YOUR FAITH SIMPLY BECAUSE YOUR LIFE IS FILLED WITH DIFFICULTY?

The author was trying to tell them their suffering meant they were on the right track! If you're being trained by suffering for the name of Christ, then you are a legitimate, adopted son of the Most High! He is making your faith durable! And this training causes us to share in Christ's holiness! By it, we become holy as He is holy. The discipline we endure is not punishment by a capricious, unpredictable God but, but instead, that of a loving Father's training. He trains us so we'll be more like Him. He desires that His ways will be our ways, His thoughts, our thoughts, His responses, our responses. That only comes by training - by His discipline.

This isn't complicated, but since all discipline is unpleasant at the moment, the knee-jerk reaction is to quit. So there's good news and uncomfortable news. The good news is that the Father is patient and knew precisely what He was getting when He adopted you. You can't surprise Him with your reluctance. The uncomfortable news is that *the Father is patient* and will continue to put you through the same caliber of trials until you finally learn.

How do we know that His discipline is bearing fruit? Later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. You know his training is working when you later discover you're not as quick to anger as you once were. You're not as impatient. You're far less given to worry. And the weights and clingy sins mentioned earlier don't seem as heavy or clingy as they once were. In other words, your faith is becoming durable.

FOUR PREPARATIONS FOR GOD'S DISCIPLINE

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears." Hebrews 12:12-17

Because the LORD's discipline is inevitable, the author detailed four things that prepare us.

- Strengthen what isn't lame.
- Strive for peace and holiness.
- Don't become bitter.
- Don't be like Esau.

STRENGTHEN WHAT ISN'T LAME

The lame things in life are often areas where we've been wounded. We can't be certain what was lame in the lives of the author's audience, but whatever it was, they were tempted to leave.

The answer is never to leave. Leaving doesn't heal the wound. How do we give what *is* lame time and space to heal? We strengthen what *isn't* lame. *Lift drooping hands, strengthen weak knees, make straight paths for your feet.* Your hands and knees aren't broken, they're just tired. How do we strengthen them? One, recall God's faithfulness and do the things you did when you first believed (Heb 10:32, Rev 2:5). But the other way that this passage specifically brings to mind is this.

There was a time when Israel was doing battle with an enemy, and Moses was watching from afar. As long as he held up his arms, Israel prevailed, but when he lowered them, their enemy would prevail. The battle went on and on, so he had men come and *lift his drooping* arms for him so that Israel would win the day. An important way we strengthen weak arms and knees is by inviting our brothers and sisters into our struggle so they can help.

Many are too proud to do this. If you can't overcome your pride, you'll never heal. You'll just tear down everything in search of something or someone to blame for your pain. At the end of the day, all you'll have is the rubble of a demolished life and a wound that still needs healing.

Q WHY ARE WE TOO PROUD TO ASK FOR HELP FROM OTHERS?

But the last part is best. Make straight paths for your feet. What does Proverbs 3:5-6 say?

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths." Proverbs 3:5-6

Straight paths for your feet come from trusting the LORD with all your heart. It's plain and simple but not always easy. Trusting Him with your hurt may be the most difficult thing you'll ever do because our instinct is to protect, cover, and conceal what has hurt us so that no one can do more damage. But, again, pride is almost always what stands in the way of our healing.

⁴ Humble yourselves before the LORD, and He will exalt you." James 4:10

¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'" Mark 2:17

Whatever that hurt is that's causing you to stray will only be healed when you humble yourself, invite others to help support your weak hands and knees, and place all of your trust in the LORD so that you'll have straight paths for your feet. Then healing can begin.

You may object. You might know people who have walked away and are "happy." But their hurt didn't heal. It only calloused. Callouses aren't ac-

tual healing, but instead, they're just a layer of toughened skin that covers the original wound. Now what once had feeling no longer feels. Jesus doesn't give us callouses. He truly heals and restores life to those things that have been wounded.

Don't settle for a calloused, out-of-joint life. Let the Holy Spirit bring true healing and restore what is broken.

Q DO YOU HAVE WOUNDS THAT CALLOUSED INSTEAD OF HEALED? ARE YOU WILLING TO LET THE LORD REMOVE THE CALLOUS AND BRING TRUE HEALING?

STRIVE FOR PEACE AND HOLINESS

There's an interesting thing about the word *strive* in the Greek. The definition of the Greek word means *to pursue (literally or figuratively); by implication, to persecute, ensue, follow; to make to run or flee, put to flight, drive away, to run swiftly in order to catch.*

That means we should strive for peace and holiness with the same fervency as a persecutor or, perhaps a more contemporary example, a bounty hunter. Strive for peace with everyone. It echoes Romans 12:18, where we should seek peace with everyone as much as it depends upon us. That includes our enemies (Matthew 5:25)! So, not only do we humble ourselves and invite other brothers into our suffering to hold up our weak limbs so that what is lame can heal, but we seek peace with everyone with bounty hunter intensity.

Along with peace, we're also to strive for holiness. Pursue holiness like a bounty hunter. That lands differently than perhaps what we've heard. *Just do your best to live a holy life, and remember that we're all sinners saved by grace, so get out of sorts if you fail.* I don't see a bounty hunter telling his apprentice something like that when there's so much at stake! *Hey man, there's a lot of money at stake, but don't beat yourself up if you mess up. Just grab a latte, go do some reflection on a bench in the park, and try harder next time.*

Hopefully you understand. At the risk of sounding legalistic, striving for holiness is a different attitude than just doing your best and hoping it works out. Having that lackadaisical attitude betrays the seriousness of the discipline the LORD puts us through. He has good works that He prepared beforehand for us to walk in and this discipline prepares us to do them. It's time to pursue peace and holiness like... you guessed it, a bounty hunter.

Q IS THE FERVENCY YOUR PURSUIT OF PEACE AND HOLINESS MORE LIKE A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER OR A BOUNTY HUNTER?

DON'T BECOME BITTER

This has a direct link to whatever is lame in us. How? Our hurts and wounds will turn us toward bitterness if we refuse to strengthen what isn't lame and heal. Bitterness is often the callousness that grows over the wound. It's ugly, unfeeling, and insensitive to everything around it. This

is all too common in the Body of Christ. And notice that the bitterness is radioactive because it defiles many. If you've become bitter, you are spiritually radioactive, and you're hurting everyone else in your life.

The funny thing about radiation is that it's invisible. Your bitterness may be well hidden and covered with all sorts of things to disguise it, including religious activity. The symptoms of radiation sickness begin shortly after exposure, not at the moment. Similarly, people close to you might not even realize that you're poisoning them until their symptoms start to emerge.

Sadly, many bitter people don't recognize the problem. Instead of their bitterness, they blame something or someone on the outside. Bitter people often end up alone because once people realize that they're being made sick, they leave. Bitterness is always the calloused fruit of disjointed, lame areas of our lives that we refuse to let Jesus heal. The more calloused that part of your life becomes the more painful the healing.

Q DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS A ROOT OF BITTERNESS? HAVE YOU BEEN THAT PERSON? WHAT EFFECTS DID/DOES THAT BITTERNESS HAVE ON OTHERS?

DON'T BE LIKE ESAU

Esau is the author's case study for bitterness. We must highlight that the author made statements about Esau - specifically his sexual immorality - that don't have direct parallels in the Old Testament. However we can draw a parallel by implication. But first, why was Esau bitter?

From a young age, Esau probably knew that the LORD chose his brother Jacob for the blessing even though he was second-born. The pattern of Esau's life indicates this created bitterness in his heart.

- He had no regard for his birthright since he sold it for a single meal.
- The reference to his sexual immorality is likely tied to his multiple Hittite wives.
 - » The sons would take wives from within the family, but Esau took multiple foreign women. The Bible even says that his wives made life bitter for his parents (Genesis 26:34-35). This seems like contemptuous and bitter behavior.

Esau was bitter his entire life, even before Jacob stole his blessing. And he never sought repentance; instead, he only sought a blessing, even tearfully. He badly wanted a blessing, but he wanted that blessing apart from repentance. Thus, he was rejected. You can't recognize your mistake but not repent and expect that you'll still receive a blessing.

That's what bitterness does. It removes the sensitivity required to feel godly sorrow for sins you committed. If you can't feel conviction, you can't repent, even if you intellectually know what you did was wrong. Repentance isn't merely an intellectual exercise. Godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10) - a feeling - drives us to genuine repentance. Esau didn't have that. Don't be like Esau and coddle your bitterness for so long that you won't repent even when you realize you're wrong.



A Tale of Two Mountains

HEBREWS 12:18-24

One of the most famous lines from Charles Dickens', *A Tale of Two Cities*, comes near the end of the book. Carton, the protagonist, is sacrificing his life for the love of his life, Lucy. Before his execution his final words were, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

Better rest. If you've participated in this study since the beginning, you know the author of Hebrews brought this up earlier in the letter. Enter the LORD's rest. Carton entered a better rest by dying to himself, and so do we.

"²³ And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'" Luke 9:23

We enter the LORD's rest by deciding between two mountains. This text represents the author's final contrast and warning and brings both mountains into view. On one hand, we have Mount Sinai, and on the other, Mount Zion. It's the Old Covenant and New Covenant. Let's walk through the comparison.

MOUNT SINAI

"¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.' ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.'" Hebrews 12:18-21

This is Sinai. The author didn't name it, but everything he described took place there. Let's look closely at how the author describes Sinai.

For you have not come to what may be touched. In other words, the kingdom you seek is not of this world. This may give a small clue into what troubled these believing Jews. They were raised believing that the Messiah would come and reestablish the throne of David in Jerusalem in their day. They were taught that the Messiah would drive out the Romans and reinstate the Promised Land to its rightful Jewish owners and then peace would finally come.

But the author reminded them that the kingdom of God isn't of this world. At their moment in history and today, God's kingdom on earth is not bound to physical land and geographic borders because it is a spiritual kingdom. Sinai represents a promise for a kingdom hemmed in with borders and with land and an ethnic people. The author points out, first off, that the New Covenant isn't about that. *You have not come to what may be touched.*

Q DO MATERIAL BLESSINGS HAVE A PLACE IN THE NEW COVENANT? ARE ALL OF GOD'S PROMISES RELEGATED TO SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT IN THE CURRENT AGE?

A blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. Do you know what was on top of Mount Sinai while Israel watched? Everything described here. It was a terror to witness. Fire, smoke, dark clouds, lightning, and then imagine all of those things swirling around the top of the mountain because tempest means whirlwind. This was a frightful sight, and the Israelites watched Moses walk up into that and not return for forty days. Is it a wonder that they believed he was dead when they asked Aaron to lead and make an idol for them?

But that wasn't all. The trumpet and voice only added to the fear. They created such terror in the hearts of the Israelites that they begged God to stop speaking to them.

"¹⁸ Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.'"
Exodus 20:18-19

Mount Sinai represents a dreadful, fearful, burdensome, heavy command that no one can hope to keep. And we know very well that although Israel agreed to the covenant and said they would do everything they were told, they did not. But it wasn't only a matter that they did not, but actually, they could not keep it. Remember Romans 5:20? The law came in to increase the trespass, not decrease it!

In conflict resolution, the problems that led to conflict often involve unclear boundaries. Neither party understood the other's boundaries, so they trampled them and caused an offense. In a similar way, prior to Sinai, the Law of the LORD wasn't clear to anyone. Sinai made His law clear, but what we discovered is that we can't keep it. The Law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul, but Romans 7 uncovers the ugly truth about us.

“⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ ⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. ⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” Romans 7:7-12

The Law is perfect, *but we are ruined by sin*, and Sinai only puts a very definite period on that statement.

Q DOES ROMANS 7 RESONATE WITH YOUR EXPERIENCE? HAVE YOU TRIED TO DO WELL AND LIVE A GOOD LIFE, BUT EXPERIENCE CONSTANT FRUSTRATION AND FAILURE?

MOUNT ZION

“²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Hebrews 12:22-24

Notice the difference? This is the city of the living God! This is the city to which Abraham looked forward. This is the city not built with human hands. This city is the heavenly Jerusalem! This is the city from where Moses received copies of the plans to build the Tabernacle. The earthly Tabernacle and Temple were patterned after the Tabernacle and Temple in the heavenly Jerusalem! King David reigned from the earthly Jerusalem, King Jesus reigns from the heavenly Jerusalem!

Look at the gathered angels. They are uncountable and in festal gathering. Based on how other translations word this verse, this seems to be a joyful, celebratory public gathering. To put it simply, the angels are gathered to celebrate! It represents a new way of life that’s marked by unending celebration. This city is built on joyful gatherings.

The next gathering is of the firstborn. Who are these firstborn?

“²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son,’” Exodus 4:22

This seems to tie back to the great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1. These are the patriarchs, matriarchs, and the faithful people of Israel who went before us and died without seeing the Promise fulfilled. These are

the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. Upon hearing the word firstborn, in their minds, the author's Hebrew audience would think of Israel. Therefore, the author's intent was that these were the faithful ones who endured from Israel's history.

It then says we come to God, the judge of all. Don't take lightly the fact that we are welcomed into the judge's home. We who were once enemies have been drawn near. We who deserved death have been given life - not by our own merit but by Christ's merit. He paid the penalty of our sins so that we might gain entrance into this joyful assembly at Mount Zion.

The next gathering is that of the spirits of the righteous made perfect. This is the Church. We are those who have been made righteous by the precious blood of the perfect Lamb of God. Not only that, but eschatologically, this is an accurate statement. These spirits have not yet received their new bodies. We are awaiting our resurrection until Christ returns. When we depart this life, our bodies go to the grave, and our spirits enter into Christ's presence. There, we wait until the appointed time, to return with Christ to earth.

"¹⁴ It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.'" Jude 1:14

The phrase "holy ones" is *hagios*, which is usually translated as *saints*. We will come back with Him, and when we do, we will receive new bodies.

"⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." 1 Corinthians 15:52

The gathering of the spirits of the righteous made perfect is undoubtedly His Church.

Q WHEN YOU THINK OF HEAVEN, DO YOU THINK OF IT IN THESE TERMS? DO YOU CONSIDER HOW IT IS BUILT UPON THE JOYFUL GATHERINGS OF GOD'S ETERNAL FAMILY?

But best of all, Jesus is there. We will be with the one who died, who lives, and who intercedes for us until it's time to come back, Jesus Christ our great and final High Priest who mediates the New Covenant!

You may have been taught to think of Christ's mediation more along the lines of a defense attorney. As in, every time you drop the ball and walk in some kind of sin, He is there to defend you before the Father to remind Him that your sins are paid... PLEASE DON'T KILL HIM! Jesus is not constantly defending us before an angry Judge. We don't need a defense before the Judge since the penalty has already been paid. All of our penalty was poured out on Jesus when He died on the cross. No judgment for my sins remains for us to experience, so we don't need a defense lawyer.

Instead, we have a High Priest, and He is praying for us. He's praying for our endurance. He's praying for our boldness. He's praying that we'll walk in the good works that the Father prepared for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). And the Holy Spirit works out His High Priestly prayers in our lives in real time. This is why it's important to be filled with the Holy Spirit! And since He is working out the intercession of Christ in our lives, being filled with the Spirit becomes the most important aspect of our waking moments every day. Read the Word, pray without ceasing, and be filled with the Spirit!

Q WHEN YOU CONSIDER THE GREAT THINGS ABOUT HEAVEN, IS JESUS AT THE TOP OF THAT LIST?

Then in the last statement of this contrast, we come to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The Word of God doesn't say much about Abel's blood except in Genesis 4:10 where the LORD said his blood was crying out from the ground. In the context of comparing these two mountains, it would seem that the author means that Abel's blood cries out for justice. He was murdered by his brother, Cain. The Law cries out for justice against murder. But Christ's blood speaks a better word. Though His blood was shed to satisfy justice, the word His blood cries out is *mercy!* Even as He was being murdered, He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And this blood that cries mercy is sprinkled across the heavenly altar in the heavenly Temple in the heavenly Jerusalem.

So here you have it: two mountains that represent the Lord completely and perfectly. Mt. Sinai represents His holy judgment against sin, and Mt. Zion represents His mercy toward sinners.

Q DO YOU SEE THAT NEITHER OF THESE MOUNTAINS CANCEL OUT THE OTHER? DO YOU UNDERSTAND HOW BOTH STILL REPRESENT THE LORD PERFECTLY?

DO NOT REFUSE HIM

"²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' ²⁷ This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire." Hebrews 12:25-29

In Christ, we become new creations. The old has passed away, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Judgment is coming. Christ will return and usher in the fully realized Kingdom of God. And not only will there be a new earth, but a new heaven, hence He's going to shake both the earth

and the heavens. If you remain a part of the old creation, you will not stand. Only the things that cannot be shaken – new creations – will remain. If you refuse He who is speaking, you will not escape His wrath. Who is speaking? Go back to the beginning of the letter.

“¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”
Hebrews 1:1-2

Heed what He is saying. Pay no attention to those who would pull you away from Him. Perhaps you are disillusioned. Are you questioning what you have been believing? Hear His voice. Listen to Him. Is He speaking to you? Does His Word ring clear in your heart as you read this? Questioning what you’ve been taught doesn’t have to end in the destruction of all you’ve believed. The foundation has been laid that cannot be destroyed.

“¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”
Ephesians 2:19-22

Don’t lay aside the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together. What this study says should always be measured against the Foundation and the Cornerstone. But also, measure your own life against the Foundation and the Cornerstone. He cannot be shaken. His kingdom cannot be shaken. You cannot demolish it. Though you may justify and rationalize your mind into demolishing everything you’ve ever believed, at the end of the day, those justifications and rationalizations are fueled by self-interest and selfish ambition and, according to James, arise from demonic wisdom (James 3:14-15). Whether you believe or not, the foundation and Cornerstone remain.

Q HOW CAN WE QUESTION WHAT WE’VE ALWAYS BELIEVED WITHOUT BECOMING UNSTABLE IN OUR FAITH?

FINAL THOUGHTS

The choice of these two mountains remains. You don’t have to be Jewish to choose Mount Sinai. Nor do you become Jewish by choosing Mount Sinai. Sinai represents one simple thing. When you refuse to believe the Gospel, you choose to bear your own sins before a holy God. And you will consequently bear the judgment that those sins deserve. God is just and will not let sin go unpunished, and His Law – Sinai – will crush you.

But if you choose Mount Zion, you have chosen to believe in Jesus, the Son of God, who bore all of God’s judgment for your sins on the cross. He



Final Instructions

HEBREWS 13:1-19

We have finally arrived in the last chapter of Hebrews. Chapter thirteen represents the start of the author's final thoughts. If there is an argument for Pauline authorship, this chapter is the strongest. He inserted a bucketload of final admonitions, much in the same way Paul did in some of his other letters.

However, this bucketload of instruction also gives rise to a different thought. It is possible that chapter thirteen was a later addition in its entirety. Having given such close attention to the text for this entire study, it seems like we're reading a different letter. Hebrews 12:18-28 feels like an appropriate end to a masterful sermon. However, there also seems to be little scholarship on this matter.

Therefore, we're only able to offer you informed guesses on the matter. Chapter thirteen feels like a later add-on by the author. If that's the case, it plays nicely with the idea that Hebrews was a sermon that became circulated as a letter, and chapter thirteen serves as a lengthy postscript that allows the author to convey a few more things and conclude with a doxology and some final remarks.

We cannot die for those thoughts, but they make sense. However, right or wrong, the authority of chapter thirteen remains unchanged. Let's begin.

FIVE ADMONITIONS

"¹ Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' ⁶ So we can confidently say,

'The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?'" Hebrews 13:1-6

Verses one through six contain five rapid fire admonitions.

- Let brotherly love continue
- Show hospitality to strangers
- Remember prisoners and the mistreated
- Honor marriage
- Don't love money, be content

LET BROTHERLY LOVE CONTINUE

While this one may seem the simplest, it perhaps is the one that suffers the most neglect. By neglect, we mean that brotherly love is something that we're faced with consistently, so it suffers from familiarity, and, therefore, drift.

It's easy to become so familiar with our faith communities that we assume that they know that we love them. Those assumptions don't have much staying power. Some learn the hard way that though they are not people who need ongoing affirmation, many are. That's not a character flaw, it's just the way some personalities function. For them, more than others, they need to hear heartfelt love and gratitude from the people they love.

If we fail in this, we're not letting brotherly love continue. And this is only one manifestation of brotherly love. In the end, we all need to experience affirming words. We all need to be served. We all need an embrace. We all need to give and receive these gifts of grace to one another. This is how brotherly love continues.

Q IN YOUR LIFE, WHAT COULD CHANGE TODAY THAT WOULD HELP YOU LOVE OTHERS BETTER?

SHOW HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS

Isn't it interesting that the author didn't point to Jesus? He didn't say, "*Show hospitality to strangers because of the mercy and grace you've received in Christ Jesus.*" Instead, he told us that when we show hospitality to strangers, we might be entertaining angels without knowing it. Why this instead of that? Without doubt, the mercy and grace we've been shown is reason enough. But through the author, the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that, at times, angels are indeed sent to test us and learn from us. The testing isn't hard to understand. It's a part of the LORD's refinement of our character. The learning comes from 1 Peter 1:12. Angels long to understand the grace of God given to us in Christ. If our hospitality is indeed rooted in the grace and mercy we've received, then it becomes an action lesson for the angels who are sent.

Q HAS OUR CULTURE MADE US TOO PARANOID TO EFFECTIVELY MINISTER LIKE THIS? ISN'T THE RISK OF STRANGERS THE SAME BACK THEN AND TODAY?

REMEMBER PRISONERS AND THE MISTREATED

This is a reference to other Christians who were imprisoned and mistreated because the author concluded this sentence with, *“since you also are the body.”* Also, these Jewish believers have already been reminded of the suffering and mistreatment that they, too, suffered (Hebrews 10:32-34). It is reminiscent of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:26 that if one part of the body suffers, the whole body shares in that suffering. Weep with those who weep. Rejoice with those who rejoice. This is a spiritual skill that we all could improve. The skill of entering into another’s suffering seems to be lacking. Weep with those who weep isn’t a display of empathetic tears but sympathetic ones. We enter in because we, too, have suffered and can come alongside and weep with them.

Q HOW SHARP IS YOUR SKILL OF ENTERING INTO ANOTHER’S SUFFERING? WOULD YOU CONSIDER SYMPATHY A STRENGTH OR IS IT SOMETHING THAT NEEDS WORK?

HONOR MARRIAGE

What a simple yet largely ignored command. What does it mean to honor marriage? It means to hold it in high esteem. Give honor to those who enter into it because they’re making a life-long commitment to be real-life examples of the love between Christ and His Church. It’s no small feat. It shouldn’t be entered into recklessly, nor should it be delayed out of fear.

The author said husbands and wives honor their marriage by keeping the marriage bed undefiled. There’s so much to say about this, but little time. For sure, an undefiled marriage bed is one where there’s no adultery. That would include no pornography. But the marriage bed can be defiled by more than adultery. It can be defiled by reducing sex to something that’s self-serving. It can be defiled by coercion. It can be defiled by using sex as a weapon. It can be defiled by loose lips. The marriage bed must remain undefiled because it is the place of highest vulnerability between a husband and wife. If that sacred place is defiled, the entire marriage is affected because trust has been violated where it hurts the most.

Q IN THE CHURCH, HAVE WE DUMBED DOWN MARRIAGE AND SEX? HOW CAN WE CHANGE THAT AND RESTORE HONOR AND DIGNITY TO BOTH?

DON'T LOVE MONEY, BE CONTENT

This is perhaps the trickiest. Money is a necessity for survival. It was then, it is today, and it will continue to be in the future. It presents an apparent solution for most problems you encounter. Let’s be honest about it. Money is a help. We need it, we work for it, we become destitute without it. The Bible never calls money evil, but rather the love of money is the root of many evils (1 Timothy 6:10).

Therefore, believers must cultivate a healthy relationship with money. It is a tool, nothing more. It’s not your savior. It’s not the fix-all. It’s not the aim of our pursuits. When God is gracious and provides money, our gratitude is to Him for giving us the tools we need for flourishing. Our responsi-

bility to money is wisdom. Use it the same way you would any gift from the LORD. Multiply it for building His kingdom, not yours. Find your contentment in Christ, and you'll be able to flourish in little or in much.

Q HOW HAS THE ACQUISITION OF MONEY AFFECTED YOUR WALK WITH JESUS? DO YOU HAVE A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH IT? WHAT NEEDS CHANGE?

HONOR YOUR LEADERS

Hopefully, pastors feel uncomfortable preaching through this passage because it feels self-serving. But pastors and teachers don't have the liberty to skip things that make them uncomfortable. The author's final urging has to do with honoring your leaders by remembering and obeying them.

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Hebrews 13:7-17

Verses 7-16 actually contain two lines of thought, but the latter flows from the former. First, remember your leaders. This is similar to Paul's admonitions in other letters to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). This imitation isn't a carte blanche imitation. *We only mimic our leaders' inasmuch as they are faithfully following Jesus.* And even then, it's not a call to copy catting all aspects of how they minister. Each person the LORD calls to lead does so with their own unique personality. If you're an introvert and your leader(s) is an extrovert, the call isn't to become extroverted. We mimic their patterns and practices, not precisely how they're personality manifests in those things.

But this is a double-edged sword. The call for believers to imitate their leaders is also a call for leaders to live in a way that can and should be mimicked. Too many "leaders" build a following with a platform that allows them to live lives that aren't copy-worthy. Leaders shouldn't live above the means of their sheep. Leaders should be among the sheep,

living with the sheep, smelling like the sheep they've been charged to shepherd. Does that mean leaders can't be wealthy? Not at all. Wise management of money is a good thing. But the wisdom applied in managing money includes how it is flaunted. A shepherd with means does himself no favors by living at a standard above his flock's.

This passage isn't about money per se, but it's an appropriate tangent. Shepherds should live their lives in ways that the practice of their faith is accessible to the sheep they tend. Pastors are compelled by the Word and Spirit to use money in a way that is copy-worthy. But this applies with big or small wealth. Manage it, use it, save it, and invest it Biblically and thus cause your practice to be copy-worthy.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

Q THIS KIND OF IMITATION HAS FALLEN ON HARD TIMES, BOTH BY CORRUPT SHEPHERDS, AND PRIDEFUL SHEEP. WHAT MUST CHANGE FOR THIS IMITATION TO WORK?

The second line of thought that arises from the first begins with this. *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.* This flows from the author's admonition to imitate the faith of their leaders. These believing Jews had been following elders in their church who embraced this tenet. Keep following them. This Jesus, greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than the sacrifices, greater than the Temple was the same in the past. He was this great, as Noah built the ark, as Abraham packed up his family, even as Moses came down off Mount Sinai with the Law. He is that great in the present moment, so don't return to a belief that is lesser than what Jesus has fulfilled. And He'll be that great tomorrow and forever! This is who your leaders have believed in, so keep imitating their faith.

When the author said don't be led astray by strange and diverse teachings, he had his sights planted on the Judaizers. How do we know that? Because the second half of verse nine targeted the old priesthood. *For it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.* The law allowed them to eat from the sacrifices (Leviticus 6:24-26). The old sacrifices no longer benefit anyone. Rather, our hearts are to be strengthened by the grace of God, not sacrificial meat that benefits no one.

From here the author segued to one final plea. *Let us go outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured.* The only sacrifice that matters anymore was made by Jesus, outside the city, where His body was broken for you and me. The only sacrifice we eat is that of His body when we remember Him in the LORD's Supper. Therefore we continually offer up a sacrifice of praise and good works. The author says these are the sacrifices that please the LORD. It's the fruit of our lips in praise, and the works of our hands in action. Why do we get this so mixed up when the Word seems so clear? In our efforts to avoid a works-based salvation, many have stopped working altogether. No! There is work to do. Not to save us, but to demonstrate our salvation!

"¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:16

But don't stop at God-glorifying works, but offer praise Him praise that is worthy of His greatness!

"¹ Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout unto God with a voice of triumph." Psalm 47:1

This is what pleases the LORD's heart: joyful praise and God-glorifying works together as a living, breathing sacrifice each day (Romans 12:1).

Q WHAT MIGHT GOD-GLORIFYING WORKS AND JOYFUL PRAISE LOOK LIKE IN YOUR LIFE?

Verse 17 doubles down. Obey your leaders. Good leaders don't have to demand obedience. Rather, it's the natural response to Kingdom greatness. The greatest among you will be a servant (Matthew 23:11). It seems that men and women who serve well tend to become leaders. Not always, but often. Don't submit yourselves to any leader who isn't serving right alongside everyone else. Yes, leadership comes with its own unique responsibilities that requires time away from serving tables. But you will still find servant leaders serving tables at every opportunity they can afford.

Yet there's one final way you can honor your leaders.

"¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹ I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner." Hebrews 13:18-19

Pray for them. One of the greatest gifts elders and pastors can receive is the prayers of the people they shepherd. No compliment, no at-a-boy, nothing is more encouraging than them knowing that people are praying for them. There are people who say the words, *praying for you*, and there are people who text their pastors to let them know that they prayed for them this morning. There are those who pray generally, then there are those who pray specifically. Both are good. If you are giving thanks for your meal, and remember before the end, "Oh, and be our pastor, in Jesus' name, amen," that's awesome. But it's also good that there are some people who pray, "Lord Jesus, help my pastor be a better father today. Help Him be a better husband, and lead his household well so that he can be a better shepherd of Your flock." Because people pray specifically, it provides confidence in every area of ministry. Specificity in prayer is like a rifle shot. You can fire a shotgun at a hundred yard target and the spray may hit the target, but a rifle shot is the better choice.

The author is asking for prayer for something specific. He hopes that their prayers will make their reunion sooner. Apparently, the author is prevented from being with them for one reason or the other. He doesn't say what hinders their reunion, but he hopes that prayer will make it happen sooner.

This is a feather in the cap for Pauline authorship. It may well be that the author is in prison, and that correlates with what we know about Paul's

MAY THE GOD OF PEACE

This isn't merely a fluffy sense of well being. This is the peace obtained by Christ's blood between God and man (Romans 5:1). It's the peace that is mediated to us by our *risen* Savior. It's the peace granted to us by the rod and staff of our Great Shepherd. It's the peace that comes from being forgiven through the blood of a covenant that will never end.

Paul calls it, the peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). Do you have this kind of peace? It's peace in the middle of storms. It's not characterized by indifference, but instead, even though you care deeply about the outcome, you are at rest in your soul. That kind of rest comes from the LORD. You trust that He will prevail, so you do your diligence and leave the outcome to Him.

This is His peace.

Q IS YOUR LIFE CHARACTERIZED BY THIS KIND OF PEACE?

EQUIP YOU WITH EVERYTHING GOOD

This is one of the many reasons we can be at peace. He equips us for whatever we may face.

The New Testament has so much to say about the gifts that the LORD gives us by the Holy Spirit. James wrote that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights (James 1:17). Peter wrote that we've received everything we need to live godly lives (2 Peter 1:3-4). Yet with all this talk about gifts, it's easy to forget their purpose. That you may do His will. He has prepared good works for us (Ephesians 2:10) and we renew our minds so that we might know His will (Romans 12:2) and use His empowering gifts for those works.

Q ARE YOU ATTEMPTING TO DO HIS WORK AND NAVIGATE THE STORMS OF LIFE WITHOUT HIS GIFTS?

WORKING IN US THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

When we use His gifts to do His work, He works in us to bring about that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ. It is not us at work when we use His gifts for His work. It's Jesus through us (Galatians 2:20). In that light, the gifts we receive from the Holy Spirit should be understood through this framework. Paul calls spiritual gifts, manifestations of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7). The gifts of the Spirit aren't like gifts that we own once they're given. They are manifestations of the LORD in our lives. Viewed in that way, even our spiritual gifts are of Him, from Him, and to Him.

Q HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THAT YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE SUBJECT TO HOW WELL YOU CRUCIFY THE FLESH SO THAT JESUS MIGHT SHINE THROUGH YOU?

TO WHOM BE GLORY FOREVER AND EVER

If you haven't got it, hopefully you now see that it's all about Jesus. Because everything we do is of Him, through Him and to Him, none of the glory belongs to us, but all goes to Jesus (Romans 11:35).

After this wonderful doxology, the author made a final plea for his readers to obey what he wrote. Then he dropped Timothy's name and said he was released from prison and mentioned his hope to visit with Timothy. Then a final clue was dropped. The author was apparently in Italy where he was in contact with fellow believers who sent their greetings.

Maybe this is Paul. Who knows?

Grace be with all of you.

Q DOES THE OVERAL TRAJECTORY OF YOUR LIFE SEEM TO BE GIVING GLORY TO JESUS CHRIST OR TO YOURSELF?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Hopefully this study has been enriching. Anytime we study in-depth what we learn tends to become alive and applicable. As you read other parts of the Bible, your mind will connect the conceptual dots and you'll see and understand the Word in ways that you'll never unsee. The big picture gains more clarity and how it weaves its way throughout the whole Bible is more evident.

And big picture is that in every possible way, Jesus Christ is better. He is always greater. He is forever superior. The way the letter began was only amplified louder and louder as you kept going. Belief in Him, then, is the greatest priority. And that's one of the cornerstones of this letter: belief. Enduring in belief is how we enter the Father's promised rest.

Do you know whom you have believed in? Perhaps if we were to plant a flag on this letter, it would have that question embroidered on it. Remember the man who brought his son to Jesus for healing, and looked at Jesus and plainly said, "I believe. Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Don't think too harshly of the men and women who were tempted to return to the Old Covenant. Their struggle is also ours. We wrestle with unbelief just like they did. This message may have been to believing Jews, but it is for all of us. We all must endure in belief if we want to enter the Father's rest.

Our final exercise in this study will be this. On the next few pages, take note of how the LORD has transformed your faith as you've studied Hebrews. Write down the questions that you feel remain unanswered. Then bring those observations and questions with you for discussion in the group, or if you've been doing a solo study, to your pastor.

The journey continues. Take what you've learned and share.

Grace and peace.

